

Goldsmiths, University of London
The Department of Media and Communications

**Mediating Encamped Identities and Belongings:
An Ethnography of Everyday Karen Life
in Mae La Refugee Camp**

Charlotte Hill

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Charlotte Hill, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated. The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. Quotation from it is permitted, provided that full acknowledgement is made.

Signed:_____

Date: 30th September 2021

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Abstract

The image of a refugee camp is often portrayed as a suspended space of exception, an inhospitable environment where refugees live in limbo-like states disconnected from the rest of the world. Acknowledging the exceptionality of camps, I argue that a top-down institutional approach only illuminates half the story and neglects the multi-faceted spatial dynamics of everyday refugee life. Through an ethnographic lens that draws from two years of fieldwork and includes the voices of 40 participants, I explore the everyday identities and belongings of encamped Karen living in protracted displacement along the Thai-Myanmar border. By examining refugee presence in the 'lived' material space and the 'lived' mediated space, I attempt to unpack themes of stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness. To explore how offline life intertwines with online life, I take a socio-technical approach and ask: *how, if at all, encamped Karen articulate their everyday lives, identities, and sense of belonging within the material space of Mae La? To what extent are media technologies used by inhabitants and their role in expressing everyday identities and belongings? To what extent, if at all, do new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments interweave into everyday encamped life?* In the context of Mae La, I found that refugees live in many different spaces where multiple identities coexist and circulate simultaneously. Although I recognise Mae La's exceptionality, I observe that life is not only lived in a state of suspension but is rich with an abundance of stories, memories, contradictions, and ambiguity. Participants demonstrated resistance to their prolonged encampment through practices such as music, rituals, and selfies. Mae La is evolving, and contrary to the past, inhabitants with access to new media technologies and mediated spaces take control of their representation and offer an account of their lives.

Contents

Declaration of Authorship	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
List of Figures	vii
Acronyms	ix
Chapter 1	1
Introduction	1
Significance of Studying Encamped Karen in Mae La.....	6
Refugees and Refugee Camps in Thailand.....	9
Who are the Karen, and Why are they Encamped?.....	11
Outline of Chapters	16
Chapter 2	21
Suspended States and New Imaginings	21
Spaces and Places.....	22
Rights to Passage	24
The Refugee Camp: A Top-down Perspective	28
The Breakdown of Social Arrangement.....	29
The Refugee Camp: A Bottom-up Perspective	31
Politics, Diaspora, and Exile	40
Concluding Remarks	43
Chapter 3	45
A Sense of Being In and Going Beyond the Physical Camp	45
Co-Presence: ‘Being in’ a Mediated Environment.....	48
Mediating Intimacy at a Distance.....	50
Imagining Home: A Diasporic Consciousness.....	55
Doing Culture in Extraordinary Spaces	62
Music as Transnational Cultural Production	64
Music for a Revolution.....	67
Concluding Remarks	69
Chapter 4	71
Reflections on Fieldwork	71
Entering the Camp.....	73
Waiting at the Gate	74
Identifying Participants and Groups within the Fieldsite	74
Group One: I Came to the Camp for Safety.....	75

Group Two: I was Born or Brought Here as a Young Child.....	76
Group Three: I Came for Opportunities	77
Ethnographic Sensitivity	78
Consent and Anonymity: The Ethics of Naming	79
The Role of the Translator and Translation	81
Translation Limitations and Identifying Missed Information	82
Beyond the Interview	85
Digital Ethnography	87
Mapping Identities.....	89
Media Diaries.....	90
A Potato in a Rice Field: Positioning the Self in the Study.....	91
The Lure of Acceptance	95
Reflections on Power Dynamics within the Field	95
Chapter 5	98
A Camp of Contradictions	98
Over the Mountains, Under the Bridge.....	99
Mae Sot: A Melting Pot of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity.....	101
Going with the Flow	104
Mae La Refugee Camp:.....	106
A Temporary Settlement	106
Camp Operations and Structure.....	107
Law and Order	117
Camp Connectivity.....	119
No Intention of Return	124
The Heavy Scent of Fish Paste	125
Concluding remarks.....	128
Chapter 6	130
Performing Identities, Becoming Karen	130
Recording Identities: Multiple Ways to Leave Mae La	132
The Artists: Youth Resistance and Political Agency.....	144
Refugee (Pu Dah, 2020).....	144
We Need Unity (Hser, 2020).....	150
Revolution (Tempered Family, 2020)	154
The Outro.....	159
Chapter 7	162
The Rituals that Bind a Nation	162

Scene One: A Wake After Dinner	162
Affirmation of Stuckness	167
The Dead We Live with and the Living Lived Apart	168
Scene Two: Binding All Karen Together.....	172
Scene Three: I am Karen!.....	178
A Space of Resistance	180
Digitally Mediating Martyrs’ Day.....	183
Concluding Remarks	187
Chapter 8	191
In-between Spaces.....	191
A Space of Stuckness	192
Home-making: We Started Our Lives in Mae La	196
Being Together at a Distance.....	198
Shifting Identities and Multiple Homes.....	200
Wanting to Belong More	206
They Want Revolution.....	209
Concluding Comments.....	212
Chapter 9	216
Conclusion	216
Everyday Life in Multiple Spaces: Key Findings	218
Bibliography.....	226

List of Figures

Figure 1: Mae La Temporary Settlement.....	3
Figure 2: Map of Myanmar's ethnic groups	12
Figure 3: Seven Karen Brigades within Karen State.....	15
Figure 4: Map of Mae Sot, Mae Ramat, and Mae La in the mountains	30
Figure 5: Guard gate, Mae La Camp.....	73
Figure 6: Washing day	86
Figure 7: Bags of sand and water	86
Figure 8: Mae La fire, 2021	87
Figure 9: Two participants sharing their day.....	87
Figure 10: Attending a camp graduation from Goldsmiths via Messenger.....	88
Figure 11: Group identity activity.....	89
Figure 12: Individual identity map.....	89
Figure 13: Participant's media diary	90
Figure 14: Lunch with Karen community, Sheffield, UK.....	93
Figure 15: Curriculum planning meeting with Karen journalists' and film makers	93
Figure 16: Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, Mae La.....	94
Figure 17: Checkpoint between Tak and Mae Sot.....	100
Figure 18: Road to Mae Sot	101
Figure 19: Trading on the bank of the Moei River, Mae Sot	102
Figure 20: Farmland between Myanmar and Thailand.	102
Figure 21: Young Thai soldiers on the Bank on the Moei River, Mae Sot.....	103
Figure 23: Friendship Bridge and unofficial boat access	104
Figure 23: Boat between Karen State and Thailand	104
Figure 24: Checkpoint before Mae La	105
Figure 25: Mae La view from the road.....	106
Figure 26: Mae La Camp Zones, A, B, and C.....	111
Figure 27: Karen leadership structure. TBC, 2021	112
Figure 28: Ration allocation, TBC, 2019.....	114
Figure 29: Mobile phones for sale in the indoor market.....	122
Figure 30: Data packages for sale	122
Figure 31: Instrument used to call community meetings.....	123
Figure 32: Notice board for general news.	124
Figure 33: UNHCR map of Mae La	126
Figure 34: Early morning in Mae La Camp.....	130
Figure 35: Karen Frog Drum (Ferrars and Ferrars, 1901).....	132
Figure 36: Saw Ka Lu's studio.....	133
Figure 37: ut engelk, Ton Mooy. Photo by Dirk-Jan Visser, The New York Times.....	140
Figure 38: Recording studio	145
Figure 39: We Need Unity	151
Figure 40: We Need Unity.....	151
Figure 41: Opening scene, Revolution	157
Figure 42: Crushing rocks, Revolution	158
Figure 43: Screen shot from Revolution	158
Figure 44: Bamboo dance. Photographer: Ta Kul	170
Figure 45: Youth receiving holding sugarcane and rice.....	174
Figure 46: Youth receiving blessing from an elder, wrist-tying ceremony	175
Figure 47: Don dance performed at a Mae La school, Martyrs' Day.....	180
Figure 48: Martyrs' Day.....	181
Figure 49: Don dance uploaded to YouTube.....	182

Figure 50: Martyrs' Day Facebook page 183
Figure 51: KWO Martyrs' Day post..... 185
Figure 52: Images sent me when KNLA join protests..... 211
Figure 53: 5th June - sectioning off the zones in an attempt to control the spread of Covid-19. ... 214

Acronyms

- CSI – Centre for Social Impact
- DKBA – Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
- IDP – Internally Displaced Person
- IRC – International Rescue Committee
- ISA – Ideological State Apparatus
- KNLA – Karen National Liberation Army
- KNU – Karen National Union
- KRC – Karen Refugee Committee
- KSNG – Karen Student Network Group
- KWO – Karen Women’s Organisation
- MMDA – Multimodal Discourse Analysis
- Mol – Ministry of Interior
- NGO – Non-Government Organisation
- NLD – National League for Democracy
- RSA – Repressive State Apparatus
- TBC – The Border Consortium
- UN – United Nations
- UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Chapter 1

Introduction

Sitting against a wall, Sweety and I look out at the dusty school buildings. We watch as goats' nibble the small bushes surrounding the buildings while Naughty, the much-loved school dog, trots over to something worth exploring. Smiling, Sweety says: 'Before we had access to mobile phones and the Internet, it was really hard to see how other Karen celebrate being Karen. Now we have the Internet it's much easier to see'. As class finishes and students pour out of the uncomfortably hot classrooms, we are joined by others. Poe Blut sits down and asks if I play the piano; looking very unimpressed by my answer and lack of musical talent, he picks up his smartphone and proudly demonstrates how he is learning to play through an app he downloaded. 'In my village in Myanmar, my family had no electricity, no Internet. We had no idea what a mobile was until we got here', he says. Jumping into the conversation, Ku Hu asks if I am on Facebook and if we can be friends. She tells me she is learning Mandarin by speaking with a friend in China. These ordinary, often taken-for-granted moments of connecting to friends and learning new skills are not uncommon practices experienced by youths globally. However, the picture I paint here is set in Mae La, a refugee camp that has been in operation along the Thai-Myanmar border since 1984, and the voices of Sweety, Poe Blut, and Ku Hu come from a place of encampment and protracted displacement.

Before moving to Thailand 13 years ago, my initial impression of a refugee camp and encamped refugees was an image of hopelessness and stuckness (Hage, 2009a; Straughan et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2019), where inhabitants in protracted displacement are disconnected from their communities and the outside world. I lent significantly towards the notion that refugees live within inhospitable structures of control seen within an Agambenian theory of state of exception and bare life (Agamben, 2005, 1998). This image is often portrayed in the media, the 'humanitarian industry'¹, and academic literature. However, as I got to know the Karen, an ethnic minority from Myanmar, who had left camps along the Thai-Myanmar border and moved to the wider diaspora better and built relationships with inhabitants in Mae La, this image began to change. I started to observe the fluidity of movement in and around the camp, which led to questions about the everyday, ordinary lives of those who live a life in extraordinary circumstances. I noticed that in the context of Mae La, inhabitants are restricted, and there is a sense of being out-of-place (Said, 2000), yet this is only half the story.

To explore the diverse population of Karen inside the camp, I ask *how, if at all, do encamped Karen articulate their everyday lives, identities, and sense of belonging within the material space of Mae*

¹ For discussion on the humanitarian sector as 'industry' turn to Farah, 2020; Jones, 2015; Madianou, 2020, 2019a.

La? Although I noted that the Karen I initially interacted with transcended borders and boundaries in various ways, others articulated a sense of isolation, exclusion, and disconnect. This observation meant I needed to expand my original question and ask, *to what extent are media technologies used by inhabitants and what role do they play in mediating everyday identities?* The importance of studying technologies, new mediated spaces, and everyday life, as Martín-Barbero articulates so eloquently, is that,

technology refers not only to new machines but also to new ways of perception and new languages, to new sensibilities and discourses, to cultural mutations caused by the association of new means of production and new ways of communicating that turn knowledge into a direct, productive force (Martín-Barbero, 2006, p.285).

I was interested in exploring the nuances, practices, messiness, ordinariness, connections, separations, ambivalence, resistance, and agency experienced in everyday camp life. This meant I needed to consider both the social and the technical aspects of life (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985). In other words, it was equally significant to explore how offline life intertwines with online life. As Peteet illuminates:

It is no longer enough to conceptualize communities as expanding and contracting networks and to view identities as fluid. Rather, one must now proceed to locate the parameters of identities in ongoing historical frameworks of modalities of power that operate in and through the articulation of multiple sites, institutions, discursive formations, and social experiences and practices (Peteet, 1996, p.64).

Considering the complexity of these first questions and the challenging aspects of entering and conducting research in a refugee camp, it was important for this study to embrace an ethnographic focus in the attempt to avoid what Leurs and Smets refer to as 'sensationalist exceptionalism surrounding the technological fetishization of the smartphone carrying and selfie-taking refugees' (Leurs and Smets, 2018, p.8). Drawing from the advice of Miller and Slater, who state that rather than starting our investigations with the Internet and technologies, as they do not exist in isolation to offline worlds, we 'need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces' (Miller and Slater, [2000] 2020, p.5). In other words, it is intellectually beneficial to explore Internet spaces from a broader social, spatial, and temporal context (Georgiou, 2006; Leurs and Prabhakar, 2018).

My study takes place in Mae La Temporary Shelter (Figure 1), the largest of nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. I aim to explore the everyday lives and narratives of inhabitants who came to the camp before the 2015 so-called National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed in Myanmar. I will explore the inhabitants' presence in the 'lived' material spaces and 'lived' mediated spaces (Steuer, 1992; Twigt, 2019) in an attempt to capture the different levels of places and spaces encamped inhabitants of Mae La occupy. To understand these spaces and how identities and practices are mediated, I ask to *what extent, if at all,*



Figure 1: Opened in 1984. Due to Thailand not signing the Refugee Convention, Mae La is classified as Temporary Settlement.

new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments interweave into everyday encamped life, an area of research that is particularly underdeveloped in South East Asia.

In order to understand mediation, I first need to explain how I approach the media and the importance of studying the role it plays, if at all, in everyday life in Mae La. In this thesis, I will take a broad, all-encompassing definition of the media. I do not approach media as one entity, for example as TV, radio, WhatsApp, or international and local news. Within my definition, I will include technological devices, infrastructures, platforms, and content. I argue that media is a mediator and I approach it as a process of communication. In the article *There's No Media for Refugees*, Jack (2017, 2015) describes Mae La and other camps along the border as landscapes devoid of media where she observes 'the exclusion of refugees from the common world and subsequent omission of their voices from news coverage' (Jack, 2017, p.127). From the opening of this thesis, I paint a different picture where the youths are very much connected to 'the common world'. The importance of Jack's work and what I intend to explore is that something has shifted within six years of her initial research (Jack, 2015). With this in mind, I turn to Livingstone and Lievrouw, who state: 'No part of the world, no human activity, is untouched by the new media. Societies worldwide are being reshaped, for better or for worse, by changes in the global media and information environment' (Livingstone and Lievrouw, 2009, p.1). This suggests that we need to reconceptualise the camp and how encamped refugees articulate their everyday lives as they engage with media. To do this, I draw from the concept of mediation.

Mediation is a hotly debated concept (Couldry, 2005; Livingstone, 2009; Madianou, 2012; Madianou and Miller, 2013a; Martín-Barbero, 2006; Morley, 2017; Silverstone, 2005; Williams, 2007), and as Livingstone (2009) points out, as new concepts emerge there is often confusion over familiar terms. I refer to mediation in a more straightforward sense drawing on Silverstone, who emphasizes the mutual shaping of the social and the technological (media) and the process of social change that results from that. Mediation is,

fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded. Mediation, as a result, requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other. At the same time it requires a consideration of the social as in turn a mediator: institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption' (Silverstone, 2005, p.189).

I align myself with the approach that the social and the technological cannot be separated (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985). I intend on demonstrating how through mediation processes, tensions of stuckness, transcendence, bare life, ordinariness, and everyday life's complexities lived in different spaces are articulated. De Certeau invites us to approach everyday practices as "ways of operating" or doing things', that 'no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity' (de Certeau, 1984, xi). Before moving forward, it is worth pausing to briefly address how I approach these tensions.

Stuckness, or as Hage calls it, 'stuckedness', refers to 'a situation where a person suffers from both the absence of choices or alternatives to the situation they are in and an inability to grab such alternatives even if they present themselves' (Hage, 2009b, p.100). Stuckness is a 'way confinement is experienced, sensed and lived' (Jefferson et al., 2019, p.2). Jefferson et al. go on to point out that the 'experience of stuckness is not simply an expression of physical confinement and spatial closure but expresses the way people make sense of confining dynamics and practices' (*ibid*). Straughan et al. approach stuckness as 'a distinctive but under-explored form of waiting' (Straughan et al., 2020, p.637). Thus, I refer to stuckness as a profound state of immobility, suffering and absence (of something).

Transcendence is a means to move beyond confinement (in some way). I will explore how some encamped refugees find ways to transcend (go beyond) the camp through practices of education, music, rituals and traditions, and mediated communication, while others are stuck in their

confinement. I include the concept of agency when discussing transcendence and refer to it as an individual or groups capacity to make choices and participate. Within this capacity, they feel they are in control, empowered, and their participation has meaning (Bers, 2011; Jenkins, 2009).

Exploring bare life within the state of exception, I turn to Agamben's (2005, 1998) seminal theory. Within this framework, due to an emergency or threat to a state's sovereignty, individuals or groups are in a condition where legal orders are suspended, and they are metaphorically stripped bare of life. Bare life refers to 'a conception of life in which the sheer biological fact of life is given priority over the way a life is lived' (Buchanan, 2010), something I will expand on in Chapter 2. Although Agamben's language of the exception has dominated camp studies and literature, this research intends to acknowledge, yet move beyond, the state of exception where I focus my attention on the ordinariness experienced in Mae La.

Considering ordinariness, and as Das (2007) describes so eloquently, as a way to recover voice from violence, we must not look to the grand gestures but to the small, often taken-for-granted moments of everyday life. Das invites us to think about 'events as attached to the everyday [and] the everyday itself as eventful' (Das, 2007, p.8). She draws our attention to how the 'theoretical impulse is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than as a descent into it' (Das, 2007, p.7). A descent into the ordinary is articulated in my participants' resistance to their protracted displacement. For example, my participants do not express resistance through grand gestures such as hunger strikes or lip sewing protests found globally in other camps and asylum centres (Bargu, 2017; Rajan, 2019) but in the ordinary tactics of producing and consuming music or self-representing through what may be considered mundane selfies and video content uploaded to digitally mediated spaces such as YouTube, Tik Tok, or Facebook.

Furthermore, Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska argues that: 'Even during the most turbulent times, people try to lead an "ordinary life". However, the problem of living an ordinary life in a violent context remains under-researched' (Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska, 2014, p.399). Studying the everyday allows us to 'take the mundane seriously...It also means we have to think about the wider spectrum of life experiences from the despair and social damage to the ordinary triumphs of getting by' (Back, 2015, p.821). As I argue for a bottom-up research approach that draws from stories, memories, and refugee voices, thinking about the wider spectrum of encamped life is the essence of this study. Taking the mundane seriously allows us to explore the other half of the refugee story, a narrative so often overlooked or ignored. The themes of stuckness, transcendence, ordinariness, and bare life will be weaved throughout this thesis, what follows is why studying encamped Karen refugees is important.

Significance of Studying Encamped Karen in Mae La.

From missionary accounts (Bunker, 1902; Marshall, 1922) and British colonial reports (McCulloch, 1859; Smeaton, 1887) to more recent work that mainly focuses on Karen ethnicity and national identity (Cheesman, 2002; Fong, 2008; Gravers, 2004; Harriden, 2002a; Keyes, 1979; Rajah, 2002; South, 2011; Thawngmung, 2017) the Karen, as a group, have been researched widely. Researchers have based their studies on religion, education, and sites of repression and resistance in the camps along the border (Horstmann, 2011a; Oh and van der Stouwe, 2008; Olivius, 2017a; Sharples, 2017, 2018). Mae La has been a popular research site due to its proximity to the Thai border town of Mae Sot and its accessibility from the main road that leads North to South along the border. While these critical studies explore a certain kind of Karenness and their relationships internally, relationships with others, and the physical space of the camp, a question arises *how the everyday material presence of encamped Karen intertwine with their presence in mediated spaces, if at all?*

Since the pioneering works of Lisa Brooten (2003) and her study on global communication and Victoria Jack's (2015) research on communication as aid based in Mae La, camps along the border have evolved. Connection is due to Internet expansion provided by privately run telecommunication companies and access to new media technologies such as smartphones. Acknowledging the evolution of encampment and the role of new media technologies and mediated spaces is fundamentally missing from academic research on encamped Karen refugees and research on camps in the global south. As more encamped refugees find ways to bridge a connection to those beyond the camp gates, I return to the essential question of *how, if at all, do encamped Karen articulate their identities and a sense of belonging within the material space of Mae La and mediated environments?* I started this chapter by describing the connectivity of a group of young Karen and my changing impression of the fluidity around the camp. These observations call into question the implications of increased technological use, Internet connectivity, and movement for the camp inhabitants. It further invites exploration on the extent to which these practices and spaces are experienced.

To explore different practices and levels of spaces and how identities and belonging are constructed, we must first unpack the notion of *being in an environment* and the concept of presence. The term presence is used across many disciplines signifying many formal and informal meanings, which will be explored in more depth in Chapters 2 and 3. I draw from Steuer when I refer to presence in this thesis as having a *sense of being in an environment*, and the experience one has when in that environment. Steuer invites us to think beyond our material surroundings (Steuer, 1992, p.72), stating:

When perception is mediated by a communication technology, one is forced to perceive two separate environments simultaneously: the physical environment in which one is actually present, and the environment presented via the medium (Steuer, 1992, p.75).

Considering Steuer's statement, the 'lived' material (physical) space such as a refugee camp and a 'lived' mediated environment such as a virtual or imagined space like Facebook, Messenger, YouTube or even photography or music simultaneously, we can explore how they co-exist in the everyday and 'contribute to meaningful social and subjective relations' (Twigt, 2019, p.174).

These different spaces, we are reminded, are not mutually exclusive (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985). I refer to the concept of lived spaces as environments where social and cultural practices are carried out, where participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2009) develop, where experiences are created, felt, shared, and memories are made. I think of lived spaces as environments where relationships are built and maintained and where communities can live in the imagination (Anderson, 2006; Baldassar, 2008; Robertson et al., 2016; Wilding, 2012). Lived spaces are also where power is articulated, and inclusion and exclusion are experienced.

These spaces and how they are mediated are often researched from a position of refugees in motion as they move from one country to another (Alencar et al., 2019; Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015; Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2019; Diminescu, 2008; Leurs and Prabhakar, 2018; Leurs and Smets, 2018). Increased focus has been on how 'migrants have become increasingly active in mediating their needs and desires with the help of digital technologies, creating and challenging narratives about emplacement' (Smets et al., 2019, p.lviii). The media, Hegde argues, frames 'the very manner in which the contemporary realities of migration are articulated and publicized' (Hegde, 2016, p.2). She observes that 'media forms, communicative practices, and the nature of mediated connections have to be factored into current theorizations about migration' (*ibid*), which I would extend to include refugee encampment.

Within the field of media and migration, there has been a modest rise in work recognising the importance of studying refugees living in prolonged conditions of displacement in refugee camps and their technological and mediated practices (Cheesman, 2020; Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Greene, 2020; Jack, 2017; Macias, 2020; Smets, 2018; Sreenivasan et al., 2017; Twigt, 2019; Wall, 2020; Wall et al., 2017; Weitzberg et al., 2021). These voices make significant contributions to an under-represented population, yet, as Leurs and Smets observe: 'The dominant strand of scholarship on (media and) migration focuses on the Global North, and on Europe in particular' (Leurs and Smets, 2018, p.11). In agreement but without dismissing the critical questions and concerns raised by work centred on encamped refugees in Europe, I contend that we can learn a lot

by de-centralising and expanding the conversation beyond a western-centric European focus. I join the discussion by drawing from the everyday material and mediated practices of encamped refugees and their voices from the Thai-Myanmar border. 'Southeast Asian countries host significant numbers of forcibly displaced populations, both within countries and across borders' (Stange et al., 2019, p.249), yet little research has been carried out through an ethnographic lens from a socio-technical perspective.

Over the last few years, political tensions have risen inside Myanmar, with the *Tatmadaw* staging a successful coup in 2021, resulting in further violence against all civilians in the main cities and increased conflict between the ethnic groups in rural areas. This invoked an increase in IDPs and people moving across the Thai border in search of safety. Considering the contemporary relevance, I argue that there is still a lot that we can learn from the Karen, who have experienced decades of displacement and separation.

The importance of this thesis and engaging with voices that have been encamped for nearly 40 years has theoretical and practical implications. Refugee camps across Europe are relatively new, yet the inhabitants will face similar challenges as they wait for return or resettlement. Studying spaces such as Mae La and the multiple generations who live inside offers insight into how prolonged displacement and encampment impact vulnerable populations. It helps to unpack questions posed by scholars such as Gillespie et al., who argue there is a much-needed consideration on the 'increasingly important role of the digital in transforming refugee experiences and mobilities' (Gillespie et al., 2018, p.1) and Smets' (2018) invitation to explore the experiences of the connected refugee from a more empirical grounding.

Empirical research carried out in refugee camps is no easy task. As Harrell-Bond and Voutira reflect, accessing 'the 'refugee' as a *persona*, as a person...within spaces that are visible and identifiable, but largely inaccessible to researchers for a variety of reasons' (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007, p.283) has led to the refugee's voice becoming 'distorted and progressively inaudible' (*ibid*, p.295). The challenge to researching inside refugee camps, as Miller (2004) points out, is that 'those who are outsiders [...] cannot simply waltz in unannounced and start gathering data' (Miller, 2004, p.217). Miller (2004) is correct; access to and working with encamped refugees can be challenging. Only after years of living in Thailand and building relationships with the Karen community and gatekeepers have I been able to conduct an ethnographic study that articulates the depth and richness of life inside Mae La.

Research in Mae La did not come without challenges, which will be described in Chapter 4; however, to explore the inhabitants' lives, I draw from multiple ethnographic methods such as interviews,

observations, identity mapping, and media diaries. I analyse music uploaded to YouTube and images of everyday life that circulate on social media. I look back at cultural artefacts and draw from the diverse population. I am conscious to reflect on my position as a researcher within the research, often walking a precarious path between activist and academic. The methods implemented were based on the fundamental understanding and care of duty needed when working with traumatised communities who have been affected by civil war. I intend to demonstrate that no other approach would illuminate the richness of life described later in this thesis.

Refugees and Refugee Camps in Thailand

The camps along the border are classified as 'temporary' as Thailand is not a signatory of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and thus not bound to legally recognise the Karen refugees under a formal refugee national framework ("UNHCR: Global Appeal 2015 Thailand," 2015). However, Mae La has been in operation since 1984 and is a 'temporary permanent' fixture for multiple generations who currently live there. Although Thailand may not officially refer to those in the camps as refugees, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does ("UNHCR: Thailand," 2021). This is due to the forced displacement of tens of thousands of civilians from decades of civil war and violence (South, 2011). As South claimed in 2011: 'The ongoing armed conflict in Burma constitutes the longest-running civil war in the world' (South, 2011, p.6).

At the beginning of 2021, 'persons of concern' globally identified by the UNHCR reached a staggering 97.3 million people (UNHCR, 2021a). The UNHCR classifies 'persons of concern' as refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IPDs), and stateless persons (Smawfield, 2019). 'Some stateless persons are refugees and some refugees are stateless' (van Krieken, 1979); this is evident in Mae La, where some of my participants were stateless and registered under the UNHCR mandate as refugees while others were stateless but not registered. The UNHCR stresses that:

Statelessness is often combined with other forms of discrimination and human rights violations, and is a cause of displacement. Though most stateless people remain in the country of their birth, some leave and become migrants or refugees. Stateless persons who are refugees under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees are entitled to protection under that instrument. When an individual is both a refugee and stateless, both types of status should be explicitly recognized (UNHCR, 2021b).

Globally, 86% of people registered as refugees are 'hosted in low-and middle-income countries, where health systems are often overstretched' (UNHCR, 2021a). Turkey hosts the most significant number of refugees, with 3.7 million people, followed by Colombia (1.7 million), Pakistan (1.4 million),

and Uganda (1.4 million). The UNHCR observes that ‘war and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries’ (UNHCR, 2018). They state that two-thirds of all refugees under its mandate come from just five countries: Syria (6.7 million), Venezuela (4 million), Afghanistan (2.6 million), South Sudan (2.2 million), and Myanmar (1.1 million) (UNHCR, 2021a).

At times, the drivers of migration and the boundaries between persons of concern, those deemed migrants, involuntary migrants, and refugees, are complex and rarely clear cut (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018; Mesić, 1995; Petersen, 1958; Stein, 1981; Van Hear et al., 2018). Erdal and Oeppen observe that ‘most migrants’ experiences of the degree of volition in their migration decisions means they fall somewhere in the blurry middle of the forced–voluntary spectrum’ (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018, p.981). Smets asserts that: ‘The term refugee might be too broad to capture the many migration trajectories, lifeworlds and demographic realities of current-day refugees’ (Smets, 2018, p.3). As a legal and administrative process, the UNHCR categorises refugees within the parameters of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol:

Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (*The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Its 1967 Protocol*, 1951).

The UNHCR extends the refugee definition to include: Refugee (*mandate*), meaning a person who qualifies for protection provided by the UN, regardless of whether the person is in a country that is party to the 1951 Convention (IOM, 2019, p.170); Refugee (*prima facie*), meaning persons recognised as refugees based on objective criteria related to the circumstances in their country of origin (*ibid*, p.171); and Refugee (*Sur Place*) meaning a ‘person who was not a refugee when he or she left his or her country of origin, but who becomes a refugee at a later date’ (*ibid*, p.173). In agreement with Smets (2018) and Erdal and Oeppen (2018), I question whether these refugee definitions encapsulate the multi-faceted realities and motivations of why vulnerable people migrate and how they become encamped.

In the case of Mae La, the space is ambiguous due to the complex political and historical situation in Myanmar, the camp’s status in Thailand, and the diverse population in the camp who challenge the traditional definition of what it is to be a refugee. Considering this, I take a more nuanced approach to the term refugee in this thesis. I include vulnerable people who may have left Myanmar

due to perceived threat of violence, restricted political rights, and voice, or left due to restricted/lack of education and information access due to historical and ongoing conflict or threat of war.

It is worth pausing for a moment to unpack what I mean by voice. Over 30 years ago, Spivak famously asked, 'Can the subaltern speak?'. She concluded that voice remains with the dominant powers (Spivak, 1988). With the introduction of the Internet, I question whether Spivak's theory may be challenged? Voice and power, I argue, should be reframed to include marginalised groups in mediated spaces. Madianou et al. define voice as the 'ability to give an account of oneself and participate in social processes' (Madianou et al., 2015, p.3020). Cabañes describes voice as the 'capacity to speak and to be heard speaking about one's life and the social conditions in which one's life is embedded' (Cabañes, 2017, p.33). Jenkins (2009) highlights that participatory culture develop when there are relatively low barriers of civil engagement as experienced in mediated environments. Thus, I define voice as the ability to participate, speak, and be heard speaking about one's own life, history, and experiences.

Who are the Karen, and Why are they Encamped?

Just over 57,000,000 people live in Myanmar ("Burma," 2021). The constitution recognises 135 indigenous ethnic groups, the majority being Bama people² (68%) compared to 7% Karen (Chizom and Smith, 2007) (Figure 2). The Karen's total population has long been disputed. As the third-largest ethnic group after the Bama and Shan, it is estimated that the population ranges between three and six million (Human Rights Watch, 1998; Mendiolaza, 2018); however, as South points out, the size of the Karen is unknown as no reliable census has been taken since colonial times (South, 2011, p.10). The Karen are geographically dispersed throughout Myanmar and the diaspora. South contends that most Karen are 'scattered through the Yangon, Irrawaddy and Tenasserim Regions, eastern Bago Region and the Mon State' (South, 2011, p.10), illustrated in Figure 2.

The Karen are a diverse population reflected in the name, national struggle, dress, religion, and language. The term Karen is a shared reference to several ethnic groups (Gravers, 2004, p.45) who are dominated by the S'gaw (37.8%), Pwo (35.6%) and Pa-o (16.5%) and other smaller groups (Smith, 1991, p.460). Demonstrating the dominant foreign influence on Karen history, the British colonial administration was the first to classify the Karen into 16 language groups (Thawngmung, 2013, p.20). Cheeseman states: 'There is no single word across Karen languages to encapsulate the concept of Karen oneness. 'Karen' is itself an Anglicisation of the Burmese 'Kayin', the etymology

² To avoid confusion when discussing the Bama people, South states: "Burman' (or in the Burmese language Bama) designates members of the majority population; Burmese is a more general adjective for all citizens, the majority language and the country' (South, 2011, p.6). For clarity, I will use the term Bama when discussing the ethnic majority of Myanmar going forward.

of which is subject to dispute' (Cheesman, 2002, p.202). In 1989, the junta led State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) changed the country's name to Myanmar and the Karen State to the "exonym 'Kayin'. Thus Karen State became Kayin State' (South, 2011, p.6).

For some, the Karen imagined homeland is called *Kawthoolei*, a term established by the Karen National Union (KNU) in the late 1940s (Thawngmung, 2013, p.88). According to Gravers, *Kawthoolei* does not have a precise geographical area and is not viewed as an interconnecting land (Gravers, 2007, p.245). *Kawthoolei* has various meanings, as Thawngmung states, it can 'be directly translated into English as 'flower land' or 'land without evil' (Thawngmung, 2013, p.88). Like the name Karen, *Kawthoolei* is not used extensively by all who claim to be Karen. However, it remains a symbolic ethnic space whereby the 'cognitive model of *Kawthoolei* has continued to be an important element in the Karen nationalist struggle' (Gravers, 2007, p.252). We can firmly locate the national struggle within the Karen's colonial and missionary past, an area many scholars before me have provided in-depth studies on (Cheesman, 2002; Gravers, 2007, 2004; Hovemyr, 1989; Thawngmung, 2013). I intend to give a brief overview of the relationship between the Karen and foreign forces to help us further understand contemporary Karen identities and belonging.

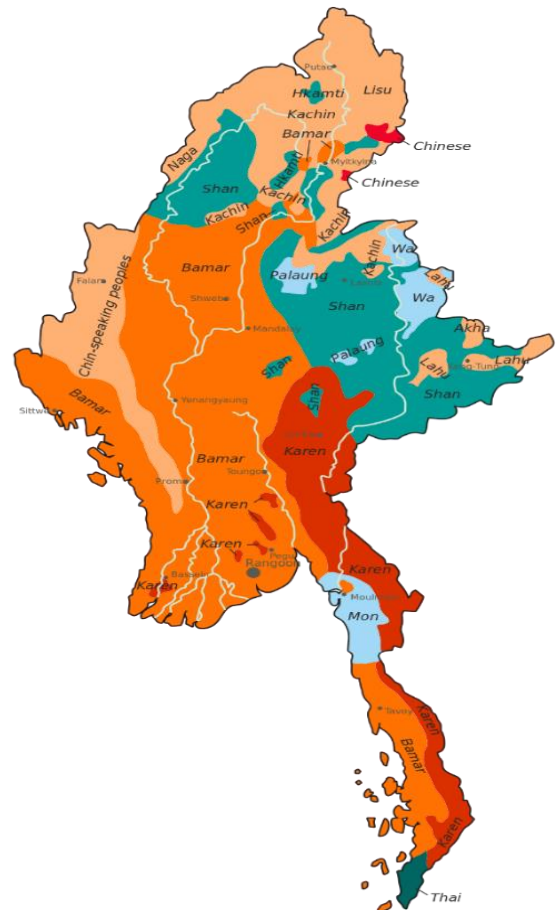


Figure 2: Map of Myanmar's ethnic groups and geographical location across the country. From the map, the Karen can be located along the Thai-Myanmar border and Irawaddy Delta region.

In the 19th century, the two Anglo-Burman wars resulted in the mass migration of people, particularly of Karen ethnicity, across the Thai border to seek safety from the increased violence against the civilian population (Hovemyr, 1989). The borders between Burma and Thailand were, according to Thongchai (1994), much more porous than some historians give credit. Thongchai identifies the overlapping frontiers and indistinct regions that predated Burma and Thailand's territorial sovereignty and modern borders, noting that in 1849 when the relationship between the Siamese and British administration in Burma changed, so did the Siamese attitude towards its borders (Thongchai, 1994, p.69-97). These borders may have been mapped on paper for 172 years; however, in practice, many of my participants remember living in the borderlands before the 90s and describing a fluid movement of people around the area.

Exploiting the hostile relationship between the Karen and the Bama, the British administration actively recruited young Karen as soldiers (Christie, 1998). The relationship between the British and the Karen elites developed which increased the spread of Christianity among the Karen communities (Schrock, 1970). In an era of colonialism, Crosthwaite, the Chief Commissioner of Burma, described how the missionaries inserted themselves into the community to the point of leading it as pastor and chief. He goes on to say that 'in those troubled times he [missionary pastor] organised them [Karen] under their catechists, taught them discipline and obedience, and made them useful and orderly members of society, industrious, self-respecting, and independent' (Crosthwaite, 1912, p.51). As uncomfortable as it is to read this account today, it demonstrates a recurring problem that still manifests in perceptions of contemporary Karen, that they are a homogenous population who are predominantly Christian. According to Thawngmung: 'The notion that all Karens share a common identity and destiny was a colonial phenomenon promoted by foreign missionaries and their chief beneficiaries, the S'gaw Karen Christian elites' (Thawngmung, 2013, p.22). When describing Myanmar's ethnic minorities in colonial times, Taylor highlights how 'it became the accepted conceptual shorthand to group this great range of geographically and/or linguistically contiguous peoples under broad ethnic labels' (Taylor, 1982, p.7-8). He states that it was thus normal to speak of the Karen and other ethnic minorities 'as if they were unified national groups with ancient historical antecedents' (*ibid*, p.8).

As a loyalist relationship developed between the British and the mainly S'gaw Karen Christian elites, the British relied on them for military support, especially in the pacification campaigns of 1885 (Christie, 1998, p.55-6). It suggests that the move to Christianity by some elite Karen may have been a strategic practice to gain favourable treatment from the colonisers. As Thawngmung points out, the relationship between the hill-tribe populations and the Bama varied greatly over time and place, with many Karen communities harbouring 'grim memories of intercommunal tension, often associated with brutality committed by individual Burman kings who set out to subjugate or enslave Karen hill tribes' (Thawngmung, 2013, p.21).

Tying the Karen Christians to the missionaries and British government was achieved in the colonial era through Karen folklore and legends, such as in the story of the 'Lost Book' or 'Golden Book'. The Karen legend describes how 'three brothers (Karen, Burman, and Han or European) were each given scripts. While the Burman and the Han kept theirs, the Karen brother left his, written on a hide, atop a stump while swiddening, and it was eaten by wild (or domesticated) animals' (Scott, 2009, p.222). This traditional oral story foretold the book (with similar teachings to the Bible) being returned to the Karen at the hands of the 'white brother'; when this happened, the Karen people prospered (Thawngmung, 2013, p.23). Although the story is told in various ways depending on the situation, it still plays a fundamental part in Christian Karen narratives and was told to me by a number of my

Christian participants in the camp. Similar to Malkki's (1995) experience with encamped Hutu refugees in Tanzania, mythico-histories are firmly embedded into the Christian Karen narrative and enforce moral learnings. More importantly, I would argue that stories such as the Golden Book highlight the unequal power dynamics between the Karen and their 'white brother'. In this case, while the Bama prosper, having kept hold of their book, the Karen, on the other hand, could only prosper once they were saved by their foreign brother.

According to Gravers (2004), Christianity became a cultural marker for the Karen elite, in opposition to the Buddhist Bama and a move that caused (and continues to cause) internal conflict between non-Christian Karen. As Harriden points out, the expression of Karen nationalism in the image of Christianity 'did not reflect the variety and complexity of Karen religious and political identification. The majority of Karens were Buddhists or Animists, and not all Karens were loyal to the British' (Harriden, 2002, p.88).

The Christian missionaries influence on shaping Karen politics was further seen in 1881, with the founding of the Karen National Association (KNA). This organisation 'mainly included the local Karen Baptist associations, but was seen as the beginning of Karen national unity by their American and English supporters' (Gravers, 2004, p.156). In 1942, the Karen Central Organisation (KCO) was established with the aim to work with the Bama to prevent further violence. Gravers (2004) accounts that a delegation from the KCO travelled to London to put forward a case for Karen nationalism and a Karen nation. However, after an unsuccessful visit, the KCO split in February 1947 and the Karen National Union (KNU) was founded (Gravers, 2004, p.156). It is worth pointing out that the structure and organisation of the KNU are in the vision of a nation-state where the governance is separated into distinct departments such as the Department of Culture, Education, Forestry, Foreign Affairs, Health, Transportation, and Finance, as well as a military wing Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

Highlighting the organisation's military power, the KNU has divided the Karen state into seven districts. These districts correspond to the KNLA brigades (Figure 3). The KNU claim that under the Karen Department of Defence, founded in 1956, they are organised into seven units consisting of five battalions. Each battalion is made up of four companies, which in turn comprises three platoons. The KNLA contends that the mission 'from its foundation through to the present day is solely as a self-defence force for the Karen people and the organisation, since without such a defence force the Karen would likely be eradicated' (KNU, 2018).

In the 1990s, the KNU lost most of its autonomy in the 'liberation zones' and were forced into the Thai borderlands. This meant an end to taxing the black market, cross border trading, and logging deals (South, 2011). 1994 saw another setback when religious conflict erupted and a group of Karen Buddhist soldiers, disillusioned by the predominantly Christian leadership of the KNU and KNLA, deserted to form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) (Brenner, 2018, p.87).



Figure 3: Seven Karen Brigades within Karen State bordering Thailand.

The DKBA's protest was in response to the KNU's long-term leader General Bo Mya who, in their view, favoured the Christian members of the party. The KNU was further debilitated in 1995 when the DKBA formed an alliance with the *Tatmadaw*. Together they attacked the KNU headquarters, an event known as 'The Fall of Manerplaw', resulting in further Karen civilians and soldiers crossing the border for the safety of the camps³.

Since gaining independence from the British administration, the conflict between the *Tatmadaw* and the different Karen armed groups has left thousands dead, and hundreds of thousands internally displaced, in temporary settlements (refugee camps) in Thailand and in the wider diaspora (Thawngmung, 2013, p.80-1). Over the years, the KNU/KNLA have splintered further, resulting in the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), Democratic Karen Benevolent Army-5 (DKBA), the Border Guard Force (previously part of the DKBA but now under the command and control of the *Tatmadaw*), KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC) and the Karen Peace Force (KPF) (Ashley South, 2009; Brenner, 2018; Chambers, 2019; Jolliffe, 2016).

Colonialism, the civil war, and internal conflict between the different armed groups have further implications for the Karen population. Many civilians were impacted by the lack of education, infrastructure, and access to information, particularly in the more isolated and rural areas of

³ Those interested in the Karen armed resistance movement are advised to read *Inside the Karen Insurgency: Explaining Conflict and Conciliation in Myanmar's Changing Borderlands* by David Brenner and *Burma's Longest War Anatomy of the Karen Conflict* by Ashley South.

Myanmar. This has meant that many young people have sought better education and opportunities by illegally crossing into Thailand and entering the camps (Oh, 2011), particularly Mae La, which is regarded as an education hub. Out of the seven Karen camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, Mae La is relatively well funded and provides education, health, and well-being programs. Aside from the educational opportunities, Mae La was connected to the Internet in 2008; this, I will argue, offers a portal for those who have access to further opportunities, escapism, and imagined futures.

Outline of Chapters

Following this introduction, Chapter 2, '*Suspended States and New Imaginings*', positions this thesis within the broader debates of stuckness and transcendence, physical mobility and immobility (Andersson, 2014; Biemann, 2008; Morley, 2017), and bare life and ordinariness for refugees and stateless people. I theorise physical movement and introduce shifting boundaries across different spaces. I explore how some have the privilege of mobility whilst others find themselves living in a limbo-like state or what Biemann (2008) calls living in off-social spaces, a condition of permanent non-belonging and state of exception. I raise a fundamental question: *If the refugee is destined for contained mobility such as encampment or permanent instability of place, likely never to reach their destination (Biemann, 2008), are they ever able to take control of their present presence so that they can imagine a future beyond their confinement?*

To explore this question, I take a nuanced approach to stuckness and agency. I acknowledge that Agamben's (2005, 1998) state of exception and bare life and Goffman's (1961) total institution theories are significant when discussing power, surveillance, and mechanisms of control from a top-down institutional position. However, I also recognise that these approaches only illuminate half the story and neglects the multi-faceted spatial dynamics of everyday refugee life. To unpack this further, I take the position that refugee spaces are complex terrains where the borders and boundaries surrounding them are porous and flexible.

I draw on multiple studies (Corbet, 2016; Fresia and Von Känel, 2016; Malkki, 1995; Olivius, 2017a; Schiltz et al., 2019; Sharples, 2018; Sigona, 2015a; Turner, 2016) that explore spaces within camps and the wider diaspora as dimensions of multiplicity consisting of myriad of stories, experiences, and mythico-histories (Malkki, 1995). In other words, I view the spaces the refugees occupy as having a multitude of complex layers that blend and clash simultaneously.

The concept of performance and performing identities articulated within these dynamic spaces invite consideration for the oft-taken-for-granted mundane everyday life practices. As with identity, performance is always in a state of evolution and in production. Chapter 2 discusses the importance

of performing identities and how certain occasions, rituals, and traditions enact illusions of fixity and common purpose (Edensor, 2002). A common purpose is found in 'patterns of practices'; as Turner (1992) illustrates, patterns of practices transmit meanings, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity among participating members. Therefore, performance and patterns of practices create and maintain individual and collective identities where new imaginations are articulated and worlds remade within the spaces the individual and collective occupy.

Complementing and expanding Chapter 2's discussion, Chapter 3, '*A Sense of Being In and Going Beyond the Physical Camp*' invites us to move beyond the material and consider mediation and mediated spaces. This chapter charts the role of new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments in the everyday lives of displaced people. Returning to the notion of presence and a *sense of being in an environment* (Steuer, 1992), I unpack the term further and its evolution from the material to mediated spaces. Drawing first from the works of Steuer (1992), MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999), Licoppe (2004), and Diminescu (2008), I argue that abstractly, we are no longer tethered to a geographical location and that even under the most challenging of circumstances, such as in the case of encamped refugees, people find innovative ways to stay connected and move.

Ascribing to the notion that offline and online life are not mutually exclusive, this chapter explores connection and how the everyday is mediated by technologies and experienced in mediated spaces. I focus on the concept of being out-of-place (Said, 2000) and how an acute sense of self is created, maintained, and articulated within the boundaries and exception of the camp, diaspora, and exile. Ordinarity and exception are explored through the practices of production and performance. I use music, rituals, traditions, family, and home as prime examples of how practices and performances transcend different spaces facilitated by media technologies.

To avoid being technologically deterministic, I recognise and discuss digital inequalities by drawing from the works of Sheller and Urry (2000), Latonero and Kift (2018), Cabalquinto (2018), Madianou (2019), and Twigg (2019). I argue for a socio-technical framework, emphasising that technologies are never neutral (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999, p.3). In line with the idea that our digitally interwoven world transcends micro and macro realms (Hjorth and Pink, 2014, p.40), I explore intimacy at a distance and how separated families and friends find new ways to move beyond their physical immobility to stay connected (Cabalquinto, 2018; Gómez Cruz and Thornham, 2015; Hjorth and Pink, 2014; Robertson et al., 2016; Wilding, 2012).

Chapter 4, '*Reflections on Fieldwork*', outlines the methodological route as I explain in detail the challenges of carrying out research within a refugee camp and the sensitivity needed when working

with vulnerable people. I emphasise in this chapter the importance of taking an ethnographic approach, the ethics and care of duty to my participants, and the tensions I experienced in the field. I gathered rich descriptions of life from 40 semi-structured interviews, which were both spontaneous and scheduled. As I built relationships with my participants, I visited them multiple times, following up on previous interviews or informal chats. I attended an Animist wake, various national days, and many school celebrations. I was invited to join families for lunch and dinner and enjoyed breakfast watching the sunrise over the Mae La mountain.

Although my fieldsite focused on Mae La, I was introduced by a Karen friend to the Karen community in Sheffield in the UK. I was invited to join their Martyrs' Day celebrations at a local church and attended a party at one community member's home. I have kept in contact with a number of the Karen in Sheffield over email and Facebook. When one of the younger members graduated from Sheffield University and visited Thailand, I hung out with her in Chiang Mai. We talked about her life in the camp, her experiences of moving across the world, and her connection back to Mae La. I found that many of the people in Sheffield came from Mae La and still have strong connections with friends and family in the camp. Although my experiences in Sheffield only feature briefly in this thesis, I would argue that my relationships and overall observations whilst I was there and from social media contribute significantly to a richer project. I have maintained close contact with many participants who left the camp over the years, which will be discussed in more detail in the conclusion chapter.

The empirical section unfolds over four chapters and explores multiple spaces. In Chapter 5, I start by asking what is a refugee camp and explore the institutional level to the everyday practices performed by its inhabitants. As an example of ordinariness, I draw from how music is woven into the lives of my participants in Chapter 6, while Chapter 7 describes scenes of how inhabitants transcend the mundane to the sacred. Finally, in Chapter 8, I explore the concept of display and to what degree do my participants really transcend the boundaries that confine them. I will weave the themes of stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness throughout each empirical chapter. What follows is a short summary of each chapter expanding on the above.

Chapter 5, '*A Camp of Contradictions*', starts by exploring the movement and flow of various people, from the privileged to the vulnerable, across different spaces. It introduces how Karen refugees navigate the material space of Mae La and how some transcend into spaces facilitated by media technologies and mediated communication practices; thus, simultaneously acknowledging presence in multiple environments. By describing the complicated workings of the camp, I argue in this chapter that Mae La is far from an isolated bounded system. It is a space of diversity, tensions, and ambivalence where borders and boundaries are porous and negotiable for some. Whereas, for others, the space reaffirms their stuckness and temporary-permanent immobility to move forward

and imagine a future beyond the camp gates. While this chapter takes us on a journey inside the everyday workings of the camp and the lives of those who live there, it also introduces us to the role of mediated environments and the impact mediated communication practices have had on inhabitants' identities and sense of belonging.

Chapter 6 demonstrates ordinariness through the concept of music. *'Performing Identities, Becoming Karen'* takes a closer look at the fluidity of boundaries from the position of artistic expression and cultural preservation in the form of music. I describe how music, to varying degrees, plays a crucial role in the lives of my participants and how through it, they have the potential to transcend their physical restrictions and immobility. I explore how music reaffirms social ties whilst reaching across borders to a wider imagined community (Anderson, 2006). I further explore the juxtaposition of how old systems are imagined alongside tensions and ambivalence. I first explore a recording studio in the camp and speak with the owner. I argue that the studio creates spaces of agency and we-consciousness for some who have access to it. I illustrate how musicians stay socially alive (Turner, 2016) within the camp through their artistic creativity, connection to others, and by imagining a future beyond the camp gates. I explore a concern by the elders that the youths are disconnected politically and culturally due to their immobility and separation from the Karen State. I finally observe how digitally mediated spaces such as YouTube transcend material boundaries and economic restrictions. Yet my participants still find that they are restricted within a space of exception and their status as refugee or stateless person.

Chapter 7, *'The Rituals that Bind a Nation'*, explores the flow, exchange, and evolution of rituals and traditions carried out in the camp. It explores the movement from social memory to modernity, where boundaries are crossed from the mundane to the sacred and back again. I describe symbolically powerful moments that reaffirms and excludes social ties and communal boundaries between different groups in the camp. This illuminates internal conflicts between groups and the diversity of the camp inhabitants.

This chapter is broken into three *scenes* where I explore patterns of performance and connectivity. In the first scene, *'A Wake After Dinner'*, I describe the Karen hospitality and attending an Animist wake. I explore how togetherness and unison are created by sharing food, music, singing, dancing, and chewing betel nut but only by those who understand the performance. In scene two, *'Binding All Karen Together'*, I explore the community ritual of wrist-tying. Here, I describe how the event has taken on new meaning for some, moving them across boundaries from the sacred to the nation where a more comprehensive community is imagined, and long-distance nationalism is articulated. The final scene, *'I am Karen'*, describes Martyrs' Day in the camp and how inhabitants articulate

resistance and political agency. I argue that we-consciousness and solidarity are performed, created from past traumatic experiences and mythico-histories (Malkki, 1995).

My final empirical chapter, *'In-between Spaces'*, provides further insight into the extent to which inhabitants of Mae La transcend boundaries or, in some cases, how they do not. Continuing to focus on stuckness and transcendence, bare life and ordinariness, Chapter 8 takes a closer look at the individual and how they interact and navigate material and mediated spaces. Returning to and extending the narrative thread, which started in Chapter 5, I discuss the material, symbolic, and technologically mediated ways identities are articulated and shaped. This chapter unpacks the intricacies and tensions of forced displacement. I ask *what becomes of space when place does not necessarily signify security and stability?* It explores the themes of mourning, loss, guilt, and sacrifice of leaving the 'motherland' and how these are mediated by communication technologies. It will focus on how some inhabitants have made Mae La their home, some outrightly rejected it, and others are left in a suspended state of in-betweenness.

Returning to my initial research questions laid out earlier in the introduction, Chapter 9 draws this thesis to a close by revisiting the essential findings and positions them within a larger global context. I reflect on the importance of ethnography and why taking a bottom-up socio-technical approach was the right choice when working within a challenging and sensitive fieldsite. This chapter aims to conclude the key findings and how they contribute to the wider understanding of encampment and everyday refugee lives.

Chapter 2

Suspended States and New Imaginings

Refugee camps have been described as complex spaces of exception (Agamben, 2005), designed to contain or detain those the state considers a threat to the national order. Governmental departments and relief agencies often implement top-down strategies of 'care, cure, and control' (Tuastad, 2017, p.2160) that depict refugees as one giant moving mass of people instead of recognising them as individuals (Dunn, 2016). Visual images of helpless refugees living in temporary accommodation flood the media, solidifying the spectator's expectations of hopelessness, helplessness, and bare life.

As the introduction to this thesis states, refugee camps and encamped refugees are often studied from a top-down institutional position, which I argue only presents half the story. I intend to explore the other half and offer insight into the everyday lives and narratives of encamped refugees living in protracted displacement in South East Asia. I will argue that encamped refugees do not live in just one space. Ascribing to the notion that refugees in camps live and move between multiple spaces, and to unpack the complexities of one of this thesis' main research questions of *how, if at all, do encamped Karen articulate their everyday lives, identities, and sense of belonging within the material space of Mae La?* I argue that a framework that unfolds around the tensions of four themes: stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness, is theoretically and practically helpful. While this chapter will focus on the materiality of space and the practices and tactics (de Certeau, 1984) refugees implement to make sense of their worlds, Chapter 3 will extend the discussion into mediated environments.

These themes, I propose, should not be considered mutually exclusive from each other but notions that knot together in various ways simultaneously. Thus, this chapter will explore the material aspects of stuckness (Agamben, 2005; Agier, 2017; Biemann, 2008; Downey, 2009; Finch, 2015; Hage, 2009b; Hirst and Thompson, 1995; Jefferson et al., 2019; Kluitenberg, 2011; Straughan et al., 2020) and transcendence (Bourdieu, 1986; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Dichev, 2006; Durkheim and Fields, 1912; Goffman, 1990; Malkki, 1995; Massey, 2013; Turner, 2002), bare life (Acocella and Turchi, 2020; Agamben, 2005, 1998; Agier, 2016; Corsellis and Vitale, 2005; Foucault, 1995; Goffman, 1961; Iazzolino, 2020; Martin, 2015; Mortland, 1987) and ordinariness (Billig, 1995; Corbet, 2016; Das, 2007; Fresia and Von Känel, 2016; Turner, 2016; Woroniecka-Krzyżanowska, 2014). The framework will unfold over four sections. The first section will unpack the concepts of spaces and places, which I extend in section two to include how different groups move through places and spaces. This is followed in section three by exploring camps from the state of exception and bare

life (Agamben, 2005, 1998), and finally, in section four, I will draw from literature that considers the everyday complexities of camp life.

Spaces and Places

In the empirical chapters, I will argue that refugees 'live' in multiple spaces where their identities and sense of belonging are articulated through various practices. To understand space, we must first differentiate it from place as it is often used synonymously. Giddens stresses that place is best conceptualised by the local, which 'refers to physical settings of social activity as situated geographically' (Giddens, 1990, p.18). In discussing pre-modern societies, Giddens observes how space and place interlace since social life was primarily dominated by localised activities (*ibid*). Modernity, he states, 'increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction' (*ibid*). Focusing on absence, Whaley (2018) argues that space should be considered not as an absence of presence but as the presence of absence. By shifting our thoughts in this way, we are able to unpack the lived experience and how,

boundaries are transformed from the discrete barriers of objective rationality to places of dynamic interfacing that distinguish (but do not define) one form from another whilst allowing for communication within, between, and beyond them (Whaley, 2018, p.12).

Boundary transformation and transcendence are significant to this thesis as I will explore the extent to which encamped refugees communicate within, between, and beyond them. As Tuan states: 'What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value' (Tuan, 1977, p.6). Thus, place is socially constructed over time, entrenched in personal and social meanings attached to a material structure or geographical location. Tuan goes on to argue that:

The ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place (Tuan, 2011, p.6).

Tuan's statement raises essential questions about identities and the relationships people have with space and place (and in relation to refugees, their displacement). Thus, *what becomes of space*

when the pause does not necessarily transform into a secure and stable place? This thesis will explore this essential question in the empirical chapters.

Lefebvre (1991) contends that the term space is used to speak about particular 'worlds' in which there are 'specialised spaces'. He observes that individuals and groups are 'confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next' (Lefebvre, 1991, p.8). Concerning this thesis, Lefebvre's significance is within his discussion of the everyday production of social space. He argues that 'social space 'incorporates' social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act' (*ibid*, p.33). To explore the social space of my participants, I will discuss both individual and collective actions and practices found in the mundane and the sacred.

Social actions by both individuals and collectives raise questions about the presence or existence of others. Here I draw from Massey, who asks that we think of space, not as a flat surface with which we pass over, but in conjunction with time, viewing it more as a multi-dynamic dimension consisting of 'myriad of stories...imbued with memories and events' (Massey, 2013, n.p). Comparing time with space, Massey elaborates:

If time is the dimension in which things happen one after the other, it's the dimension of succession, then space is the dimension of things being, existing at the same time: of simultaneity. It's the dimension of multiplicity...Now, what that means is that space is the dimension that presents us with the existence of the other (Massey, 2013, n.p).

Space, according to Massey, is more about social interactions and relationships we create and build and not about the physical geographical locality that is often associated with a place.

Like time, space also has an abstract dimension. When thinking in terms of multiplicity, connected, or disconnected by human relationships (Agier, 2016), we must also acknowledge the political power relations (Andersson 2014; Agier 2016; Biemman 2008) that also exist within it (and in extreme cases - spaces of exception). We should be critical of the power relations, particularly the unequal distribution of power some groups have over others and some places over other places (Massey, 2013). This is what Massey refers to as *power geometry*. Power geometry goes beyond who has mobility and who does not. Significance is with the 'power in relation to the flows and movement' (Massey, 1994, p.149). It is the notion of the privileged who have power over time, the exclusive right to economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and the privilege of movement (Agier, 2017), which Massey is arguing extends into space.

These privileges have been applied to examine the spatial organisation and pre-existing inequalities present in refugee camps. As Massey contends, some control, influence and define time-space in their image, while others who physically move are not ‘in charge of the process’ (Massey, 1994, p.149). An example of this is found in Iazzolino’s (2020) study on the reproduction of power differentials among Somali refugees in Kakuma Refugee camp in Kenya. Iazzolino’s work describes how some Somali clans leveraged their social networks, which consolidated their economic dominance over other inhabitants in the camp. This point is salient to my research as I explore the varying degrees of agency inhabitants of Mae La have over their spaces and how this affects, if at all, their identities, mobilities, stuckness, and ordinariness of everyday life.

Extending the discussion to time-space compression, Massey (1994) refers to technology development and its influence on spatial and temporal distance. Moving beyond a technologically deterministic argument, the significance lies within the politics of power time-space compression encompasses. Focusing on political power, Massey asks ‘whether our relative mobility and power over mobility and communication entrenches the spatial imprisonment of other groups’ (Massey, 1994, p.151). This point is poignant to the discussion of stuckness and transcendence. I will explore who in Mae La has power over their mobility and communication, how they have gained it, and why others are entrenched in stuckness and near bare life.

Considering the importance placed on our relative mobility and power over mobility, Ditcher (2006) invites us to explore the journey of experience whereby we consider the status and hierarchy of mobility within it. To fully understand movement and restrictions to it, Ditcher questions how different people travel and experience the journey across the same border or boundary, and whilst doing this, negotiate the space they currently occupy, thus calling into question the notion of the *rights to passage* (Agier, 2016; Biemann, 2008; Morley, 2017), which will be unpacked next.

Rights to Passage

Before exploring the refugee camp, it would be helpful to step back and acknowledge the different challenges refugees and other vulnerable people encounter when they are on the move, as Andersson illuminates: ‘The border is as tall as a fence and as deep as the sea, yet across it migrants and refugees keep coming’ (Andersson, 2014, p.1). In a world of increased interconnectivity and movement of commodities and information, Morley states that,

globalisation is a highly selective process that works by “linking up” that which can be deemed to generate economic value while simultaneously discarding places, people, companies, or territories that have become “devalued” (Morley, 2017, p.86).

The notion of 'linking up' has created 'new hubs', which in turn he says 'serves to bring some places closer together, it simultaneously makes other places, outside the network, seem further apart' (Morley, 2017, p.77). As boundaries shift to allow for further economic and technological development, it is at the borders and checkpoints where the domain of control and exception are exercised over human mobility and immobility, where some find themselves waiting, stuck in uncertainty, where for others they pass freely. At the border, the state maintains national control through regulation and population control. Hirst and Thompson observe, 'people are less mobile than money, goods or ideas, in a sense they remain 'nationalised', dependent on passports, visas, residence and labour qualifications' (Hirst and Thompson, 1995, p.409; 2009).

'Borders are opened only selectively, on the basis of specific socioeconomic criteria, but are increasingly closed to a majority of the world's population' (Kluitenberg, 2011, p.11), in turn 'producing new forms of mobility and immobility' (*ibid*), and 'far-reaching ethical and political implications' (*ibid*). Thus, the *rights to passage* for some, the privileged, are foregrounded in the image of their opposite, or as Agier states, 'the increased control of wandering populations' has seen a rise in categories that define 'on the one hand, a clean, healthy and visible world; on the other, the world's residual 'remnants', dark, diseased and invisible' (Agier, 2011, p.4).

Morley reminds us, borders and subsequent checkpoints are highly emotional places. For some, these spaces involve 'frustration, humiliation, and subjugation' (Morley, 2017, p.85). He goes on to point out the inequality between those who are 'subjected to passport checks of varying degrees of rigour while others enjoy the gratification of being "waived through"' (*ibid*), a scene I will describe in Chapter 5. For those who do not have the gratification of transcending these borders and boundaries easily, life is lived in a limbo-like, stuck state (Downing, 2016) 'contained within ever narrower limits, living as they do in the legal cracks of the global system' (Morley, 2017, p.79).

Contained mobility and management of movement with specific reference to refugees on the move is further discussed by Biemann, who illustrates that having left the 'boundless sea' the 'voyager' is placed in 'a condition of permanent not-belonging, of juridical non-existence' (Biemann, 2008, p.56). She beautifully illustrates stuckness when she argues that the voyager signifies:

The itinerant body, bound to string along a chain of territories, never reaching a final destination. Probing the protocols of access time and again, he moves through non-civil places, waits for status in off-social spaces, only to remain suspended in the post-humanist lapse. What used to be a state of temporary exemption – survival in the time-space of legal deferral – has turned into the prime mode of migratory subsistence. Connected but segregated, it forms the world system of contained mobility (Biemann, 2008, p.56).

Biemann raises fundamental questions about control, agency, and future imaginings in off-social spaces. Suppose refugees are destined for contained mobility, likely never to reach their destination. *Are they ever able to take control of their presence so that they can imagine a future beyond their stuckness or prolonged confinement?*

Describing a form of stuckness and life in limbo at the port of Patras, Agier (2016) observes life connected yet segregated. He compellingly writes about the juxtaposition of the privileged living in an affluent apartment building and their indifference to a scene of young Afghan men enduring the extreme ordeal of boarding lorries destined for Italy (Agier, 2016, p.1). The scene he depicts simultaneously embodies a connection and disconnect between actors. It is a scene of those who have and are accepted and those without who are not. He further highlights the hardening of borders worldwide (*ibid*, p.5) and uses the Afghan migrant to symbolise 'a new figure of foreigner, zigzagging between prohibitions' (*ibid*, p.2). Agier describes these foreigners as the 'undesirable' populations perceived to threaten the affluent western world.

The border, Agier insists, 'is a place, a situation, or a moment that ritualises the relationship to the other' (Agier, 2016, p.7). It is a space that organises life into categories; for some, it situates them in 'uncertainty of the moment and the immediate future, as well as the uncertainty of the gaze directed at them' (*ibid*, p.2). Positioning the unwelcome migrant as *other-subject*, Agier states, they become a 'factor of disturbance' for the nation-state or, as Malkki (1995, 1992) puts it, a threat to the national order. Describing the *other-subject* as a 'patri without identity, having lost this with their departure and exile' (Agier, 2016, p.6), Agier argues they represent the 'here and now' (*ibid*, p.4) at the border, yet are nameless. They are the wrong type of foreigner, after all. In this context, Agier says, by considering time and space, 'the borderland becomes a pole of reference for persons in movement who do not find a natural place within the societies or cities that they wish to reach' (Agier, 2016, p.8). Significantly, Biemann and Agier highlight that there is stuckness within mobility, and connection within segregation. With this in mind, I ask *to what extent are inhabitants of Mae La segregated and connected, and how is this articulated?*

Media hysteria, along with populist politicians and bureaucrats, promotes the image of the refugee as the other. The 'perennial outsider' (Andersson, 2014) arriving en masse threatens to invade western countries and destroy the very values these countries are conceptually built on, or at least this biased perspective against refugees will have us believe. The media, Witteborn adds,

become the accomplice in this game and create and reinforce perceptions of the Other sneaking in through unprotected border areas with the secrets of illness, suffering, and hope

for a good life in their bags, adding to criminalising the asylum discourse (Witteborn, 2011, p.1155).

What is not spoken about is that more refugees seek protection in the Global South than the media have us believe in the West. We are reminded, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, that Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees, with 3.7 million people, followed by Colombia (1.7 million), Pakistan (1.4 million), and Uganda (1.4 million) (UNHCR, 2021a). Relevant to this study is that in January 2021, the UN claimed that some 97,000 registered refugees live in nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, with an estimated 5000 further refugees living in Bangkok (“UNHCR: Thailand,” 2021). Similar to how refugees are portrayed in western society as a threat to its core values, in Thailand, populations, particularly from Myanmar, are considered the ‘absolute Other’ (Andersson, 2014), sneaking across the porous Thai-Myanmar border threatening Thainess and the three pillars of society⁴.

Demonstrating this threat, Chachavalpongpun writes: ‘The Burmese, ranging from enemies of the old capital, falling symbols of colonisation, and military state, represents the most ‘Un-Thai’ features, hence functions as a perfect negative identification to Thai identity’ (Chachavalpongpun, 2005, p.34). From Thai school textbooks to historically situated movies such as *Siyama: Village of Warriors* (Songsakul, 2008) and *Bang Rajan 2* (Jitnukul, 2010), the Bama or those deemed from Myanmar are depicted as the ‘other’ to Thailand’s selfhood. Thai national discourse portrays those from Myanmar as a threat to Thai values. Thus, a person from Myanmar is often viewed with suspicion and fear. Although characterised as ‘other’, migrants and refugees from Myanmar make up a large proportion of workers in what is known as ‘3-D jobs (dangerous, dirty, and difficult)’ (Pangsapa, 2015).

In 2019, the International Organization for Migration for the UN stated an estimated 3.9 million documented and undocumented migrant workers, mostly from neighbouring Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Viet Nam, were living and working in Thailand (IOM, 2019b). The report highlights as much as USD 10 billion formal and informal remittance flow between Thailand and the four neighbouring countries. Thus, the lines between migrants and refugees working in Thailand are blurred. As poverty and the continuous threat of violence in Myanmar push people to cross the border, and as rations in the camps are reduced, vulnerable people find themselves part of the production line of Thailand’s desire for economic development, an area I will discuss in Chapters 5 and 8. It would be worth at this point to move from populations in motion to

⁴ The three pillars of Thai society are the nation, religion, and monarchy. Historically, the three pillars are described as unifying forces that embody Thai uniqueness.

encamped people. The following section will move from refugees in motion to encampment and how the mechanism of power is maintained through debates focused on power, discipline, and exclusion.

The Refugee Camp: A Top-down Perspective

Locked doors, high walls, barbed wire fences and inhospitable terrain are characteristics of what Goffman (1961) calls a total institution, a place with limited social access to the outside world. Situating the total institution within modern western society, it is a space where an individual's control over their basic social arrangement is broken down and the mobility-limited, elements that have been compared to that of refugee camps (Acocella and Turchi, 2020; Mortland, 1987). Central to Goffman's concept is that life is conducted in the same place, under a single regime. Members of the institution are required to do the same thing simultaneously and are treated in the same way. Tightly scheduled activities are governed from above, fulfilling the 'official aim of the institution' (Goffman 1961, p.5-6).

Although there are many differences between Goffman's original thought and refugee camps, what is of interest to this thesis is the power dynamics and exclusion which inhabitants may face within the state of exception. The boundary between members and those in authority is often severely restricted, and control is achieved by excluding information and knowledge, especially concerning the member's ultimate future (Goffman 1961, p.9). Here Goffman describes institutes such as jails and asylums. However, there are parallels in the attributes described by the media, governmental and aid actors, and within academic literature written on refugee camps (Agamben, 1998; Agier, 2002; Corsellis and Vitale, 2005).

Like Goffman's argument and returning to the space of inclusion, exclusion, and the state of exception, I turn to Agamben and his focused thoughts on the Greek meaning for 'life'. Acknowledging that the Greeks had no single term for life (Agamben, 1998, p.1), he makes a distinction between *zoē* meaning 'living common to all living things (the body, reproductive life, the animal) and *bios* meaning the political life (the mind, political ideas, and participation). Agamben argues that the state 'system' constitutes who is included (*bios*) and excluded (*zoē*); thus, determining who is reduced to 'bare life'. When the state reduces an individual to bare life, they are metaphorically 'stripped bare', therefore excluded from and placed outside the legal and political framework. The state allows individuals *bios* until it deems them a threat, at which point they are then expelled.

Agamben contends that the state of exception is a mechanism used by the regime to expel individuals from the *bios*, such as revoking citizenship. By reducing the individual to bare life, the

state of exception excludes them from the legal and political framework and thus deprives them of the right to live. In other words, the juridical order is suspended, and the sovereign prevails. Agamben uses concentration camps in Nazi Germany as an example. By revoking the Jewish population of their citizenship (deeming them 'other'), they were denied legal and political rights, thus 'allowing' them to be killed.

Refugee camps, like border detention centres, jails, and asylums, purposely exclude groups from the wider society, which brings me to the concept of biopolitics. Foucault describes biopower as 'an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations' (Foucault, 1990, p.144). Expanding on Foucault's concept of biopower and biopolitics, Agamben posits that the idea of 'the camp - as the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception) - will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity' (Agamben, 1998, p.123). Biopolitics, thus, can be understood as political rationality whereby the body is considered an object that must be managed and monitored, an area I will discuss in Chapter 5 in relation to the omnipresence of the camp authorities, the camp infrastructure, rations, and movement of people.

Refugee camps are considered temporary 'specialised institutions' that manage populations that the state considers a threat to the social norm. The provisional status of camps often turns into more permanent spaces of containment. Mirroring Agamben, Agier states that refugee camps share similar characteristics: extraterritoriality, exception from customary laws and exclusion. 'They are spaces set apart, physically delimited, no man's lands that are often not shown on maps' (Agier, 2017, n.p). Relevant to the debates above, Agier illuminates that by 'herding' unwanted populations together, control is often maintained through laws governed separately from those enforced by the host country. He goes on to insist that '[t]he occupants of camps are side-lined legally and territorially, clearly marked as different, other, unable to be integrated' (Agier, 2017, n.p). Like the total institution, Agier acknowledges that for inhabitants, their future is uncertain and 'the most common outcome, however, is waiting' (*ibid*).

The Breakdown of Social Arrangement

As Agier (2017) highlights, refugee camps are often located in isolated areas. In the case of Mae La, the camp is situated in a valley within the Dawna Mountain range, a natural border that separates Myanmar from Thailand. Although located on the main road, it is 35 miles from Mae Sot, a large border town and 18 miles from the small town of Mae Ramat (Figure 4). According to Corsellis and Vitale, refugee camps are 'invariably established on marginal land, with little productive potential for agriculture or livestock; if the land was not marginal, the local population would probably be using it'

(Corsellis and Vitale, 2005, p.407). It is good to remember that refugee camps are, by intention, meant to be temporary. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the purpose implemented by governments and aid agencies is a system of 'care, cure, and control' (Tuastad, 2017, p.2160). I intend on demonstrating in the empirical chapters how and in what ways instability in the form of temporariness and isolation has affected some of my participants in Mae La.

Camps by design are a quick solution to humanitarian emergencies and are not intended to be long-term solutions. In practice, camps are often open for decades, resembling large towns or cities such as Al-Shati camp on the Gaza Strip opened in 1948 (population >87,000); Shagarab camp in Sudan opened in 1968 (population >66,000); and Dadaab

refugee complex (consisting of three camps: Dagahaley, Ifo, and Hagadera) opened in 1991 (population > 200,000). Observing Cooper's Camp in West Bengal, Finch (2015) describes the challenges to distinguish the refugee camp (dating from 1947) from other traditional Indian settlements due to its longevity and façade. Gone are the guards and checkpoints, refugee buildings and boundary fences. The residents of Cooper's Camp are stuck in limbo as many have not yet received Indian citizenship (Finch, 2015, p.53). This effectively places them in a space of exception as the inhabitants cannot leave the invisible boundary of the camp in fear of deportation. As they wait, they are stripped of their legal rights, such as voting and land ownership (Finch, 2015, p.53).

From the oldest open camp to the largest, I turn to Kutupalong refugee settlement in Cox's Bazar, where hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled over the border of Myanmar into Bangladesh in 2017. In a 13 square kilometre radius, it is estimated that over 600,000 people reside in the camp (UNHCR, 2021c). Like Thailand, it must be noted that Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor its 1967 Protocol. Catherine Stubberfield, the UNHCR Regional Spokesperson for Asia and the Pacific, states that even when a country is not a signatory to the convention, they are still 'obligated to customary international law, the principle of non-refoulement is binding on all states' (Son, 2021, n.p). Demonstrating how refugees are managed within the state of exception paradigm

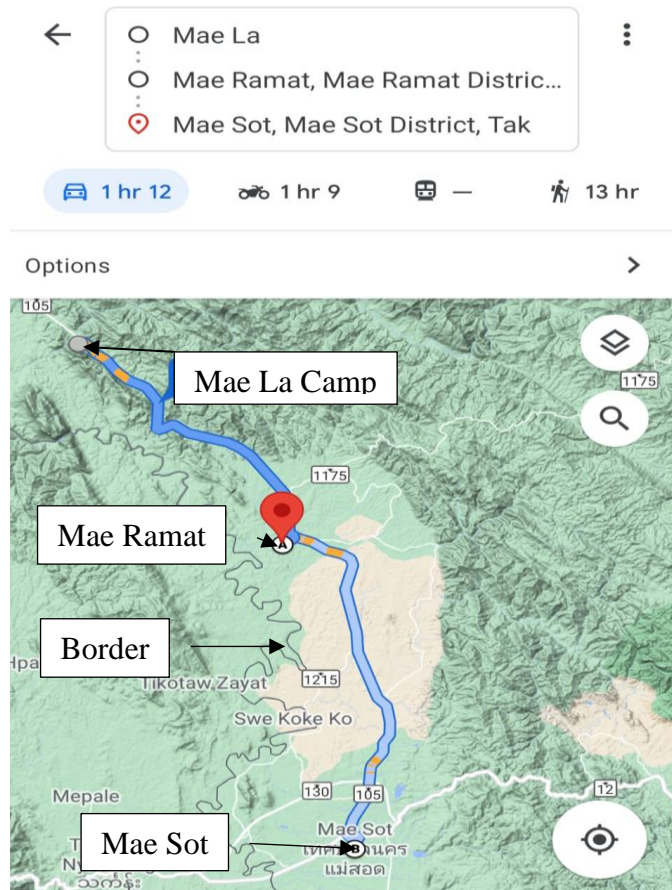


Figure 4: Map of Mae Sot, Mae Ramat, and Mae La in the mountains.

and the purposeful intention to isolate them from the host country, in 2020, the Government of Bangladesh (despite criticism from the UN) moved more than 18,000 Rohingya to Bhasan Char, an island 60km (37.5 miles) from the mainland (UNHCR, 2021d). Although not a focus of this study, the relocation of Rohingya to the island raises fundamental ethical questions on the treatment of refugees by states who are not party to the Refugee Convention and how these states interpret their obligations to 'customary international law'.

The *Tatmadaw*, particularly over the last 40 years, has forced hundreds of thousands of Karen civilians across the border into Thailand, making Mae La one of the longest-serving camps (opened in 1984). Strategically placing an individual in a suspended state is indicative of the temporary nature of refugee camps and the notion that humanitarian intervention provides protection and basic needs and nothing more. In 1984, the same year Mae La was opened, the UNHCR stated that: 'Refugee problems demand durable solutions' (Stein, 1986). These solutions fall under three main categories: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement to a third country. Although the UNHCR's primary purpose is to protect vulnerable populations, there are challenges to the durable solution policy. As de Lima Madureira and Jubilut (2016) describe, the main concern is that none of the durable solutions are protected within an international legal framework, meaning it is at the discretion of the host country to abide by the policy. Further highlighting the concerns when countries are not party to the convention, Son reports that the UNHCR has not had access to the 5000 refugees who have moved across the border into Thailand since the coup in February 2021 (Son, 2021). This demonstrates how easily refugees can fall through the legal cracks and how the state of exception implemented by a host country can leave many seeking protections in a suspended space of instability.

Even within a suspended space of instability and exception, we are confronted with human life and an indefinite multitude of spaces within which life lives. To present a nuanced approach, I turn to those who focus on encamped refugees' everyday individual life practices and actions.

The Refugee Camp: A Bottom-up Perspective

Reimagining refugee spaces as complex terrains, Turner (2016) acknowledges that refugee camps are dynamic spaces created as a means to control populations who threaten the national order of things (Malkki, 1992; Turner, 2016). Adopting a more nuanced flexible approach, Turner argues that camps are simultaneously spaces of inclusion and exclusion, noting: 'While being exceptional, the camp does not, however, produce bare life in an Agambenian sense. Life goes on in camps—albeit a life that is affected by the camp' (Turner, 2016, p.139). To understand camp life, I propose exploring the practices and tactics (de Certeau, 1984) found in the everyday. Focusing on individual life

practices and actions, de Certeau suggests reframing the everyday into strategies and tactics. Strategy refers to the disciplinary actions or mechanisms of control by the dominant power. In the case of Mae La, this would be the camp institution, such as restricting movement, surveillance and monitoring, and registration of people. Tactics, however, are the everyday practices or actions that the individual devises and implements to work with/in and against the dominant power.

This section will look more closely at the tactics used by individuals and groups. It will first explore practices of education as a tactic of ordinariness and hope. Secondly, it will discuss practices found in rituals, traditions, and performance as tactics to create solidarity and we-consciousness. Thirdly, it will explore the practices of future imaginings as a tactic of hope that keep encamped refugees socially alive (Turner, 2016) and finally, it will look at the practice of political activism as a tactic of resistance and agency. I propose that by exploring these practices, we may better understand how encamped refugees descend into the ordinary (Das, 2007). Describing how human beings living in the same space pose a danger and hope for each other, Das addresses the theme of social suffering, stating that by focusing on ordinary lives, 'the answer to these dangers is not some kind of an ascent into the transcendent but a descent into everyday life' (Das, 2007, p.15). It is in the ordinary everyday life that we can engage with more profound themes of how life is lived. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, it is not in the grand gestures or spectacle of resistance that Das finds interesting but in the stillness that one may enact to defiantly take control.

Refugee camps are not isolated bounded environments but complex spaces where multiple actors transcend the porous boundaries 'allowing goods, people, and ideas to move in and out' (Turner, 2016, p.141). When discussing the boundaries and supposed containment, Turner (2016) contends that living in the camp regardless of invisible lines and faceless authorities (Foucault, 1995, p.215), an inhabitant's life is marked and defined by their position as 'refugee'. A 'position that is simultaneously excluded from and included into host society, excluded spatially and legally while simultaneously being defined and contained by the surrounding society' (Turner, 2016, p.141). New dynamics are created, and old power structures are reinforced in the camp as 'social life, power relations, hierarchies and sociality are remoulded' (*ibid*, p.144).

Exploring the concept of how refugees react to and modify the place they live, creating new dynamic and social structures, Corbet (2016) focuses on two camps set in Haiti in 2010. The author found a sense of solidarity among the inhabitants of Canaan camp, an informal settlement set up by local people. Falling outside the aid agencies' radar and legal framework, Canaan was characterised as a supportive, self-sufficient community, achieved through local and often self-appointed committees. People were encouraged to plant crops, create markets, start small businesses, and build schools, illustrating how ordinariness is located within exceptional spaces through different practices and

tactics. Corbet highlights that as a result of being ignored by the aid agencies, the inhabitants of Canaan created a space of independence and dignity. From an outsider's perspective, Canaan seemed to be a space of 'apparent anarchy', yet it was a coherent way of life for the inhabitants, a 'community of condition' allowing everyday life to continue (Corbet, 2016, p.177).

Compared to Canaan, Corail camp was constructed according to a traditional humanitarian 'tool kit design' (Corbet, 2016, p.173). The tool kit design meant locating the camp far from the city, where management 'primarily only focused on the body's needs...gave its inhabitants the impression that they were being subjected to encampment by an external supervision rather than being assisted along the road to reconstruction' (Corbet, 2016, p.170). The camp's location meant the inhabitants were unable to work and were dependent on outside aid. Tension and discontentment rose within the camp leading to protests and the withdrawal of aid workers.

Corbet identified that Canaan camp was far from perfect. Committees that were meant to be representative were, in fact, self-appointed. The leaders gained 'respect' through 'sometimes violent control they exerted over their old territories', and it was the wealthiest who had stable jobs who lived well (Corbet, 2016, p.176-7). Similar findings surrounding social inequalities were reported by Madianou et al. (2015) in their study of the role of digital technologies in disaster relief. The authors found that more affluent participants could 'exploit some of the potentials of digital technologies to make their voices heard and bring attention to their problems, thus often improving their social positions' (Madianou et al., 2015, n.p). Madianou observed that: 'Rather than democratizing opportunities or creating a "level playing field," the web exacerbates social inequalities by heightening the life chances for the better off while leaving the poorer participants behind' (Madianou, 2015, p.9). Echoing these findings, Iazzolino (2020) explores the reproduction of power differentials among Somali refugees in Kakuma refugee camp. Similar to Corbet and Madianou et al., Iazzolino observes how some were able to leverage their social networks more effectively than others. This resulted in the economic dominance of some groups which in turn entrenched dependency of others.

Practising self-governance as a tactic of resistance and the articulation of agency is not always welcome. Olivius (2017) found two scenarios whilst interviewing humanitarian actors working in Karen camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. She observed that many aid workers and donors were 'suspicious' and critical of the Karen leadership structures and community-based governance due to their links with the KNU. The author states that 'when refugees do not conform to the image of passive victim void of agency, they are instead perceived as security threats and challenges' (Olivius, 2017, p.298). In other words, when the refugee is self-reliant and works independently of aid organisations, they threaten the national sovereignty or camp hierarchy.

Alternatively, there were those aid workers who embraced and encouraged the Karen refugee's resilience and recognised that: 'Living in a camp for twenty-five years, it's like having an indeterminate prison sentence...[a]nd the only way to manage with some semblance of sanity and some semblance of mental and emotional well-being is to have control over your own life' (Olivius, 2017, p.299). Olivius' research suggests that political activism and agency are in response to encampment and the hardship of living within a bounded space; to endure life in the camp, people collectively organise themselves intending to influence their present and future lives. Highlighting the camp as a complex space, she points out forced urbanisation, where thousands of people who previously lived in rural areas have been forced into a city like situation, has had the opposite effect to Agamben's state of exception as it facilitates communication among inhabitants giving rise to political participation and activism (Olivius, 2017, p.299). However, her statement about the camp as an indeterminate prison returns us to Goffman's notion of the total institution thus supporting the state of exception (Agamben, 2005). Considering these findings, I question whether *some groups in Mae La have more dominant voices?* I question *the conditions that give rise to a dominant voice that leads to inequalities?* Finally, I ask, *how do different spaces and practices affect identities in the camp?*

As Corbet's (2016) work discussed, demonstrating the ordinariness experienced in camps, schools, and community networks encompass the notion of new beginnings and offer a more nuanced perspective to Agamben's bare life. Painting a picture of ordinariness and hope through education, Fresia and Von Känel (2013) detail ten years of observations carried out in sub-Saharan refugee camps. They describe the image of the mundane, the everyday act of school children in uniform attending class. They invite the reader to witness this so that we might 'think of the camp as something more than merely a device of bare life and relegation that supposedly excludes refugees from any form of meaningful social existence' (Fresia and Von Känel, 2016, p.250).

Depicting an alternative interpretation to the miserable 'bare life' associated with refugee camps, Fresia and Von Känel argue that: 'At the crossroads of the proliferation of camps and the globalisation of schooling, refugee children embody at once the paradigmatic figure of the innocent victim and hopes for a better world' (Fresia and Von Känel, 2016, p.251). Acknowledging the political interplay between governments, humanitarian actors, and refugees themselves, the authors claim they have not entirely abandoned the concept of exceptionality. However, their intention, as is mine and others working within the field of media and migration and refugee studies (Greene, 2020; Smets, 2018; Twigt, 2018), is to move beyond social dissolution by drawing attention to the oft-overlooked nuances of everyday life within the refugee camp.

As refugees move from their place of origin into the camp, they bring rituals, traditions, memories, histories, and cultures that are weaved into their everyday life. These often overlooked or mundane practices of life are remoulded as they adapt to encampment. Traditions and rituals, often perceived as time-honoured, become embedded into the social process of identity formation and maintenance, creating symbolic meaning and understanding among each participating group member.

Ritual exchange is central to understanding a society when it transcends the sacred into everyday life and vice versa. While describing the daily life of an Australian aboriginal community, Durkheim observes that: 'The dispersed state in which the society finds itself makes life monotonous, slack, and humdrum' (Durkheim and Fields, [1912] 1995, p.217). The mundane shifts when the group comes together to perform a corroboree - a ceremonial dance. Durkheim makes a critical distinction between the mundane and the sacred by illuminating that we-consciousness is created through the congregation and the ritual of the dance, resulting in powerful stimulants that bring the group together. In a critique of Durkheim's theory, Couldry asks us to think about rituals and 'mediation beyond a functionalist framework' (Couldry, 2005, p.59). His objection with Durkheim lies in the 'unhistorical assumption, that 'ritual' including ritual in the media field, is simply a matter of preserving past forms such as religious ritual' (*ibid*, p.61), and thus, ignores 'the possibility... that new forms of ritual may be being generated' (*ibid*). Although Couldry opposes 'any form of essentialist thinking about society' (*ibid*), he advocates not abandoning Durkheim's social theory altogether but using it as a reference point.

Similarly, I argue against the notion that societies and communities are homogenous and rituals do not result in permanent unity and we-consciousness. There is, however, something to be said about how groups perform certain acts and practices, which constructs a sense of togetherness or sameness. In Chapter 7, I will describe how rituals, on the one hand, create a sense of solidarity; they also maintain boundaries and perpetuate underlying historical and contemporary divisions within the Karen.

According to Giddens, tightening the bond of a group happens through the construction of patterns, routine, and repetition. Giddens suggests, 'routine is integral both to the continuity of the personality of the agent...and to the institutions of society which are such only through their continued reproduction' (Giddens, 1984, p.60). The constructedness of rituals and traditions are further discussed by Hobsbawm and Ranger, who emphasized that traditions are 'invented', taken to mean,

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012, p.1).

From National Days to Independence Days, religious celebrations, and funerals, Turner argues that to analyse ritual symbols, one must first study them 'in a time series in relation to other "events," for symbols are essentially involved in social process' (Turner, 2002, p.20). Similar to Couldry, who argues that more attention is needed on ritual processes that 'stretch across multiple sites, indeed across social space as a whole' (Couldry, 2005, p.64), Turner states that he sees the performance of rituals as a 'phase in the social processes whereby groups became adjusted to internal changes and adapted to their external environment' (Turner, 2002, p.20). Thus, not homogenous in a Durkheim given sense but a social process of learnt practices and actions. This adjustment to internal change and how people adapt to their external environments is significant to this research. I propose to explore in Chapter 7, three scenes from events carried out in Mae La. These scenes from Mae La demonstrate the social processes of identity creation, maintenance, and articulation. As performance is significant to traditions, ritual exchange, and identity articulation, it is beneficial to pause for a moment and consider what is meant by performance.

Performance is a contested complex word similar to culture or community. As States points out: 'Even the attempt to investigate the nature of performance turns out to be something of a performance' (States, 1996, p.3). For example, focusing on gender, Butler claims that identity is 'instituted through a *stylised repetition of acts*' (Butler, 1988, p.519). Goffman takes on the world as a stage metaphor suggesting individuals shift identities from the front stage (front region) to backstage (back region) depending on the circumstance and performance required (Goffman, 1990, p.67-9). From a nationalist point of view, performance 'foregrounds identity as dynamic; as always in the process of production...Performance continually reconstitutes identity by rehearsing and transmitting meanings' (Edensor, 2002, p.69). What is relevant to this study is in the performance of identities within the three specific scenes in Chapter 7; by studying the process of adaption and repetition found in rituals and traditions, I hope to gain further understanding of encamped identities and everyday life. Thus, my approach is that the rituals and the social should not be viewed as mutually exclusive but part of the performed identity.

Focusing on the significance of events and their format, Edensor discusses how the structure of the event inscribes history on space (Edensor, 2002, p.73). Observing that: 'The 'correct' enactment of these rituals often achieves the illusion of fixity and common purpose' (*ibid*). Edensor is quick to point out that failure to achieve the 'proper performance' can result in criticism and exclusion. The correct enactment of rituals, or as Turner suggests, the 'patterns of practices', not only show how things are done within a society but by whom (Turner, 1992, p.299). They become fixed in the minds of the participating members and a 'window on the cultural dynamics by which people make and remake their worlds' (Bell, 2009, p.3).

Communal rituals where participating members make and remake their worlds, according to Geertz (1973), is interpretive. A meta-social commentary on social ideas, conventions, and hierarchies interprets the self's reading of the self's experience, or 'a story they tell themselves about themselves' (Geertz, 1973, p.448). These stories, similar to mythico-histories (Malkki, 1995) described as the process of recasting and reinterpreting narratives, are neither fact nor myth, but a social memory that bonds a group to each other are sustained through events and performance, and rituals and traditions. Contemporary society, according to Etzioni, faces a much more extensive choice, one where 'its members are challenged to examine which rituals they will adapt and which new rituals they will develop to protect the "sacred" from the profane' (Etzioni and Bloom, 2004, p.4). Performing rituals that draw from the past can indeed create a social memory that bonds a group, such as in the narrative of 'I am Karen', which I will unpack in Chapter 7. However, for an individual or group to stay socially alive, meaning is created from imagining a future beyond the camp boundaries and borders.

A tactic of imagining a life beyond the camp gates affords the refugee agency. It transcends their immediate stuckness, thus avoiding a superficial perspective that the refugees' lives are half lived (Downey, 2009). To compensate for their encampment, refugees use tactics to escape 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998). Tactics of escapism are located in how some find innovative ways to connect to the Internet or how parents see opportunities to send their children to school outside the camp (Chapter 5). Tactics of escapism are found in how some youths create music in one of Mae La's recording studios or how they engage with friends to develop vlogs that are uploaded to YouTube or Tik Tok (Chapter 6). As Vigh puts it, social navigation is a term that describes 'the action of moving tactically in relation to social forces that confine or seek to move you' (Vigh, 2009, p.97). Describing a situation that refers to 'motion within motion', Vigh argues that social navigation concerning future imaginings simultaneously keeps 'oneself free of immediate social dangers' while navigating 'one's life through an uncertain social environment, towards better possible futures and improved life chances' (*ibid*). I will describe in Chapter 6 how the youth of the camp create music as a tactic of resistance, ordinariness, social bonding, and a way to imagine a future outside the camp gates.

Moving towards better possible futures is only achieved, according to Bourdieu, by first taking control over our individual present before we can have power and control over our future (Bourdieu, 2000, p.211). Although not about refugee camps but essential nevertheless, Bourdieu discusses the experiences of unemployed Algerians in the 1960s and adolescents living in desolate housing estates in the 1990s (*ibid*, p.223):

The limiting-case experience of those who, like the subproletarians, are excluded from the ordinary (economic) world has the virtues of a kind of radical doubt: it forces one to raise the

question of the economic and social conditions, which make possible access to time as something so self-evident as to pass unnoticed (Bourdieu, 2000, p.224).

In other words, it is the individual with exclusive rights to economic, social, and cultural capital who has power over time. Therefore, this privileged position allows them to envision a future, a theme that I intend to explore along with the concept of network capital (Elliott and Urry, 2010). Network capital will be discussed further in Chapter 3; however, to define it briefly here, Elliott and Urry refer to network capital as 'a fundamental aspect of current social processes and lies at the core of generating novel experiences in distant places and with others at-a-distance' (Elliott and Urry, 2010, p.10). Menshikov et al. describe a particular type of social capital developed from information and communication technologies that accelerates and facilitates 'the development of globalisation process and processes of global resource sharing and redistribution' (Menshikov et al., 2017, p.585). Sheller defines it as 'a combination of capacities to be mobile' (Sheller, 2018, p.25) but points out inequalities such as the potential for elites to 'accumulate network capital while relegating others to situations of slow, encumbered, or vulnerable mobility' (p.26) which returns us to the concerns of Madianou et al. (2015) and Corbet (2016).

Exploring how camps are 'being re-imagined as spaces in which refugees can be empowered, educated, and prepared for a future in which they will no longer be supported' (Schiltz et al., 2019, p.41), Schiltz et al. draw from interviews conducted with young South Sudanese refugees living in a camp in Uganda. The authors found a significant shift in future imaginings over two years. Aspirations for a better life lay in the inhabitants' visions of education and divine power. At the start of the study, inhabitants saw education as a gateway to 'anywhere'. The camp initially represented peace and stability, offering open-ended possibilities. Education, coupled with a belief in God, meant that the inhabitants dreamt of a life beyond their present hardship. Toward the end of the study, Schiltz et al. noted that the inhabitants would 'oscillate between fantasy and surrender' (*ibid*, p.44). Due to aid withdrawal, everyday life became increasingly challenging, which initiated feelings of hopelessness and stuckness. It seemed that the longer the inhabitants resided in the camp, the more abstract their future imaginings became. I intend to demonstrate in the empirical chapters how protracted displacement and encampment affect different groups in Mae La and how some imagine a future outside the camp while others surrender or descend into further withdrawal and stuckness.

The final practice to consider is that of political activism as a tactic of resistance. Refugee camps simultaneously depoliticise inhabitants through the state of exception whilst opening a space that facilitates hyper-political interaction and engagement. As Riga et al., state, 'everyday life as the politicized Other, and as humanitarianism's depoliticized beneficiary, can constitute them [refugees] as political subjects' (Riga et al., 2020, p.709).

Arguing against approaching refugee camps from the notion of 'exception', Sanyal argues that refugee camps in the Global South 'do not conform to such neat and bounded geographies' (Sanyal, 2014, p.560). The space becomes political as the inhabitants mobilise and take up agency. Drawing from research carried out in Lebanon, Sanyal contends that the Palestinian camps are reminders to the international community of statelessness and exile (*ibid*, p.568), thus inherently positioning them politically.

Exploring camps through an ethnographic gaze, Sigona (2015a) invites those working within migration and refugee studies to 'de-exceptionalise the camp'. Focusing on the camp as a space of ambivalence where complex relationships produce and reproduce camp membership for the inhabitants, the author proposes the concept of 'campzanship'. Influenced by Foucault and his statement that 'space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (Sigona, 2015, p.4), Sigona's emphasis lies with the social, the spatial, and political aspects of the camp (*ibid*, p.11). He argues that rather than viewing the camp from the exception, it represents 'a social and political terrain where rights, entitlements and obligations are reshaped, bent, adjusted, neglected and activated by, and through, everyday interactions' (Sigona, 2015, n.p). He draws from his observations with Roma refugees in nomad camps in Italy and how the camps afforded 'spaces of everyday life, where social networks, affiliations and informal exchanges provide an alternative support mechanism' (*ibid*, p.12); a support system which was not available to the Roma outside the camps. Challenging the notion of the state of exception and bare life, Sigona suggests that Agamben does not provide a sufficient analytical tool to discuss the complexities of refugee camps, a position I align with but with some reservations. By de-exceptionalising the camp, we may neglect to present a nuanced picture of encampment and fall prey to only presenting one half of the story, something I am trying to avoid. Furthermore, we might ask whether de-exceptionalising the camp normalises encampment and the stories, memories, and trauma that is present within the exceptional space.

Adding further layers of complexity to the study of encampment is the question, *when does a temporary space become a permanent place?* Inhabitants of Mae La would not self-identify as a diasporic community, the camp, we are reminded, was never meant to be a permanent settlement. However, if we are to explore the questions above, and the multiple spaces refugees move within, it would be insightful to draw from the learnings of the diaspora. This, I argue, will help clarify how Mae La inhabitants create, maintain, and articulate their identities as they cross multiple borders and boundaries in the quest to connect to something familiar.

Politics, Diaspora, and Exile

Over the last 40 years, the term diaspora has increasingly become more fashionable (Baumann, 2000; Cohen, 2008) and so widespread, the concept has been diluted (Cohen, 1996; Turner, 2019). Contemporary studies focus on how and what displaced people identify with and how they construct meaning around the notions of home, home-making, and belonging from a distance. Similar to the Karen elites described in the introduction of this thesis, and reminding us that 'homeland' is a political construct, Brubaker argues that: 'A state becomes an external national "homeland" for "its" ethnic diaspora when political or cultural elites define ethnonational kin in other states as members of one and the same nation, claim that they "belong," in some sense, to the state' (Brubaker, 1995, p.110).

Observing that the 'diaspora is not a static concept', Turner contends that it cannot 'be reeled in and defined' easily (Turner, 2019, p.41). The question, Brah stresses, 'is not simply about who travels, but when, how, and under what circumstances?' (Brah, 1996, p.182). Contemporary literature highlights that diasporic communities are far from homogeneous, yet it is easy to slip into describing essentialist identities and romanticised narratives passed down from one generation to another (Eliassi, 2019; Malkki, 1995). Nevertheless, for many marginalised groups, it is politically beneficial for them to essentialise. Spivak (Spivak, [2012] 1988; Spivak, 1993) posits that during the struggle for equal rights or conflict, minority groups, nationalities, and ethnic groups mobilise based on shared characteristics of the said group, such as gender, cultural or political identities, to gain political recognition. An example of essentialising oneself, the term 'black' perfectly illustrates this point (Hall, 1996). Hall argues that as language is politically and culturally constructed, a term such as 'black' was coined to reference a shared experience of racism and marginalisation:

What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature. (Hall, 1996, p.445).

Hall states that referring to the term black was a way to unify and build an identity across ethnic and cultural differences between communities in response to critical theory based on white Eurocentric discourse and racism. Aspects relevant to this study include new politics of representation and the positioning of oneself against the other, a common theme throughout this thesis's empirical chapters. Hall argues that as representation shifts, so must the understanding of ethnicity. He determines that ethnicity is subjectively constructed from history, language, and culture and that 'representation is

possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time' (Hall, 1996, p.447).

Identity, Hall argues, is therefore not formed by the dominant discourse around the idea of sameness or unity but a juxtaposition of difference and exclusion. The significance is the 'relation to the other' and the very lack, which creates meaning. Hall reflects upon the work of Heath (Hall and Du Gay, 1996) and his writings on the 'suturing effect', meaning how actors are joined to a specific position or structure of meaning. He notes the importance that an actor must first be 'invested' in the position in which they can identify and that investment is far from one-sided. The significance here is in the investment some Karen have to a pan-Karen identity, an area I will explore particularly in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. Essentialising the diverse group under the term Karen is a strategic move for political recognition and a way to nationalise a population, as described in the introduction of this thesis. To avoid the trap of essentialism, Turner (2019) suggests recasting the exploration around the question of agency and diasporic discourse. The common connecting elements significant to this thesis lie within the construction of loss and longing, agency and meaning-making, described in Chapter 8.

The diaspora, Cohen describes, is 'imbued with emotionally laden meanings that are intertwined with the specific history and experiences of the population' (Cohen, 2019, p.2). Political engagement, reflective of a population's history and experience, according to Quinsaas, is 'not uncommon, it is expected' (Quinsaas, 2019, p.50). The difficulty when discussing the diaspora is separating emotions fuelled by the nation, nationalism, and memories of home(land) for those out-of-place (Said, 2000). Turner argues that the 'presumed loss of homeland, created in the diaspora imaginary is the glue that sticks communities together' (Turner, 2019, p.42). Quinsaas expands on this while observing that, in the 'discursive construction of collective identity, exiles and migrants often wrestle with charges of national disloyalty, which generate feelings of anxiety, bitterness and guilt' (Quinsaas, 2019, p.50), themes which will be looked at more closely in Chapter 8.

The crystallised sentiments of loss (Cohen, 2019, p.5) and guilt add complexity to the discussion of displacement and diaspora. The destination of exiles, Shain argues, regardless of distance from the homeland, 'are critical factors in mitigating or exacerbating the separation anxiety and the cost associated with the home regime's charges of national betrayal' (Shain, 2005, xx). Not only is there a fear of being forgotten in exile (Quinsaas, 2019; Shain, 2005) but also guilt for the 'suffering of the people for whom the political exiles always claimed to fight' for (Shain, 2005, xx).

The exiled, AkHtar illuminates, has the 'additional burden of the "survivor's guilt"' (AkHtar, 1999, p.127). Survivor's guilt can be defined as 'a concept associated with the interpersonal process of "surviving" harm while others do not' (Hutson et al., 2015, p.20). While the exiled (or survivor) lives

in relative safety, others perish or continue to live under the regime the exile originally fled. This, in turn, Akhtar (1999) observes, prevents nostalgic regression. In discussing the traumatic experiences of activists who fled Myanmar in the 90s, Gilbert and Cho state that 'little research has been done on the personal psychological toll' (Gilbert and Cho, 2014, p.226) of those in exile. However, the political movement and activism seem to thrive on the mythico-histories (Malkki, 1995) of 'heroes and sacrifice' (Gilbert and Cho, 2014, p.226), an area this thesis will explore specifically in Chapters 6 and 7. The burden of exile manifests in the 'ambiguity, and multi-layered complexity people have with space' (Cohen, 2019, p.7). The diasporic imaginary is a robust social construction framed across different generations and levels of individual or collective identities. Tölölyan illustrates, for example, how younger generations of displaced populations often view the homeland as their ancestors home and not theirs, yet they are still driven to secure its future (Tölölyan, 2019). While some perceive it as their ancestral home from a distance, others seek to reconnect, working 'to fit the past into their present' (Um, 2019, p.334). As Chew-Bose describes in her description of connecting to her parents' history:

What tethers me to my parents is the unspoken dialogue we share about how much of my character is built on the connection I feel to the world they were raised in but that I've only experienced through photos, visits, food. It's not mine and yet, I get it. First-generation kids, I've always thought, are the personification of déjà vu (Chew-Bose, 2017, p.160-1).

Moving across spaces is symbolically critical to the notion of multiplicity and raises questions about *how resettlement is different for refugees and those living in exile?* Homeland, Eliassi states, is one of the most intimate components of a person's life, 'even more so when it's taken away or in the imaginary' (Eliassi, 2019, p.124). Political opposition and powerlessness experienced by refugees contribute to long-distance nationalism and a collective sense of identity.

Long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1998, 1992) is described as 'a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographical locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral home' (Schiller, 2005, p.570). Long-distance nationalists 'are expected to maintain some kind of loyalty to the homeland' (Schiller, 2005, p.571) and support its struggle whichever way it requires. Long-distance nationalism was only made possible, Anderson (1998, 1992) argues, in the rise of capitalism and the age of print innovation. Moving across borders and oceans, print fuelled the creation of unstable imagined worlds in the minds of the separated (Anderson, 1998, p.62, 1992), producing imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). Print made way to radio, allowing a larger illiterate population to witness events, and become part of a collective. Subsequently, as Anderson predicted, technical development in mass media and communication practices will continue to have profound effects on the 'subjective experience of migration'

(Anderson, 1998, p.68) and in relation to this thesis, encamped refugees, which leads us to literature focused on mediated practices and Chapter 3.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has argued for a more nuanced approach to studying encampment. I contend that there is significance in studying camps from a top-down perspective, which discusses the space of exception; however, this only presents one side of the story. I have drawn from a body of work that argues that refugee camps are much richer than the bare life theory allows for. I have explored how different people move through multiple spaces, highlighting the *rights of passage* and how some move but are contained, while others have the privilege to move without concern. I have defined spaces and places and asked significant questions relating to insecurity and instability. When thinking of space, I have drawn from literature that describes stuckness within mobility, and connection within segregation. Space presents us with the existence of others; this can lead to a desire to connect, or, in the case of traumatic experiences, withdraw.

I explore how even within a suspended space of exception we are confronted with human life. To explore this life, I argue that we need to consider the messiness, ambivalence, and complexity of the everyday, which encompasses ordinariness and transcendence. Studying the refugee everyday life matters because it opens a space to perceive and challenge our ideas and discourses relating to the refugee experience. It allows reflection on new sensibilities and cultural changes, and how processes of communication shape the social and cultural environments of refugee camps and vice versa. Most importantly studying the refugee everyday life reframes the refugee as an individual with a history, a present, and a future. It opens a space of presence and visibility where the refugee can articulate their voice and where they can be heard.

By reframing the everyday within de Certeau's concept of tactics, we can unpack how encamped individuals and groups devise ways to work within and against different dominant powers. In the case of Mae La, these powers are located in various forms, such as 1) those who they have fled from (*Tatmadaw*), 2) those who encamp them (Thai government), 3) those who work and speak for them (KNU and Karen camp leadership), 4) those who are entrusted to care for them (NGOs), 5) those who offer both opportunities and separation (UNHCR), and 6) those who in the past have represented their image as refugees (the media, governments, and NGOs).

I have suggested that a framework that unfolds over the themes of stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness is helpful to understand how refugees in camps live and move between multiple spaces. This framework, along with exploring the practices and tactics of everyday life, I suggest will

help to unpack one of my main questions of *how, if at all, do encamped Karen articulate their everyday lives, identities, and sense of belonging within the material space of Mae La?*

Next, I turn to mediated spaces and affordances of new media technologies and mediated communication practices to expand this discussion. The following chapter will explore how we are forced to acknowledge different spaces simultaneously (Steuer, 1992): the material space of the camp and one found in mediated environments.

Chapter 3

A Sense of Being In and Going Beyond the Physical Camp

Rethinking the dynamics of space as complex and multi-layered, where stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness interlace into the encamped refugee's everyday life, this chapter transcends the material space and experience, and charts the role of new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments in the everyday lives of encamped refugees. Expanding the discussion on space, the aim of this chapter is to complement Chapter 2 by discussing how refugees navigate their spaces through mediated means. Thus, this chapter will help unpack the questions of *to what extent are media technologies used by Mae La inhabitants and what role they play in mediating everyday identities and a sense of belonging? To what extent, if at all, new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments are interwoven into everyday encamped experiences?*

I argue for a framework that simultaneously considers both power structures, securitisation, and restricted limbo-like status' (Agamben, 2005, 1998; Agier, 2017, 2002; Goffman, 1963, 1961), along with observing a space occupied with relationships, memories, ordinariness, and future imaginings (Corbet, 2016; Das, 2007; Fresia and Von Känel, 2016; Olivius, 2017a; Schiltz et al., 2019; Turner, 2016). In the case of Mae La, I frame the space not as a flat surface with which people pass over or are reduced to bare life but as a 'constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together' (Massey, 2013, 1994, p.154). Space, as Twigt argues, is 'an articulation of social relations with more than one location' (Twigt, 2019, p.173), a concept this study will explore in relation to the material notion of space and a mediated one. Considering this, it is intellectually beneficial to reframe mediated spaces as lived places (Twigt, 2019, p.172), as defined in the introduction to this thesis.

New media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments are not mutually exclusive from offline life (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985) but interweaving interactions and practices which 'are part and parcel of everyday life' (Miller, 2016; Twigt, 2019, p.172). I approach borders and boundaries that encamp refugees in this chapter as real and virtual, material, and symbolic.

Approaching space in this way raises four initial questions of exploration: Firstly, *how do my participants live, if at all, in mediated spaces?* Secondly, *do new mediated practices enable them to transcend material borders, or are they reaffirmed?* Thirdly, *how, if at all, do inhabitants of Mae La maintain social relations in online and offline arenas?* Finally, *to what extent have online spaces become interwoven into the everyday fabric of inhabitants' lives?*

As described in Chapter 2, significant literature is written on migration, physical movement, and flow of migrants and refugees within a European context (Agier, 2017; Andersson, 2014; Biemann, 2008; Ditchev, 2006; Morley, 2017). Similarly, in the field of forced migration, media, and communication, researchers have focused on mapping the contours of the connected migrants and refugees digital movements as they journey to the Global North (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2019; Diminescu, 2008; Gillespie et al., 2018; Latonero and Kift, 2018; Leurs and Prabhakar, 2018; Mattelart, 2019; Ponzanesi, 2019). As described in the introduction of this thesis, since 2017, there has been a modest rise in work carried out on the role technologies and mediated spaces play in encamped refugee experiences (Cheesman, 2020; Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Greene, 2020; Jack, 2017; Macias, 2020; Smets, 2018; Sreenivasan et al., 2017; Twigt, 2019; Wall, 2020; Wall et al., 2017). This ethnographic study intends to contribute to this emerging field by addressing questions surrounding encamped Karen refugees, their mediated practices, and their everyday lives living in a camp in South East Asia.

Similar to Leurs and Smets' (2018) concern that digital connectivity and forced migration is largely under-researched, as discussed in the introduction, Gillespie et al. note that most studies on forced migration are 'yet to consider the increasingly important role of the digital in transforming refugee experiences and mobilities' (Gillespie et al., 2018, p.1). Smets' (2018) call for a new approach further resonates with my study. He argues that 'current literature is predominantly media- and technology centered...Today, the study of migration has increasingly become a study of technologies' (Smets, 2018, p.1-2), which raises the question, *are digital technologies and mediated spaces transforming refugee experiences and mobilities, and if so, in which direction?*

Without shifting the attention away from current research focusing on either the lack of refugee connectivity and their precarious spaces or the work on empowerment through new media technologies, Smets asks for a more nuanced approach (*ibid*, p.2). He states that there is 'a much-needed empirical grounding to the notion of the connected refugee' (*ibid*, p.4), which 'allows for a more ethnographic and humane viewpoint in which the agency and subjectivity of the refugee is emphasised rather than her/his inescapable victimhood and despair' (*ibid*). In line with Smets, my concern is that by focusing on technologies, there is the potential for the voice of the refugee as an engaged and active actor to get lost. There is further potential for technological determinism (both optimistic and pessimistic) whereby researchers emphasise the role of new media technologies as the driving force for change without considering social and material practices.

As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis will take a socio-technical approach (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999) which will help unpack relationships between social, material, and technological practices and how they are interwoven into the everyday lives of encamped Karen. Emphasising that

technologies are never neutral; a pivotal aspect of the socio-technical paradigm is its architecture and the interaction between the design and the user. The architecture or 'affordances' (Baym, 2010; boyd, 2014; Bucher and Helmond, 2018; Madianou and Miller, 2013b) do not determine user behaviour but may enable certain types of interaction to occur whilst restricting other interactions (boyd, 2014). Recognising that affordances are not only the architecture or design features, I draw from Gibson (1979) and Nagy and Neff's (2015) concepts.

Gibson's theory invites us to think about what an environment offers an individual and how they interact with it. He recognizes that affordances are a combination of environmental and behavioural, conceptual and imagined, arguing that affordances are 'equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behaviour. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and the observer' (Gibson, 1979, p.129). Calling to attention the direction the term has taken in communication studies, Nagy and Neff argue that the 'phrase now fails to capture the complexity of the interactive' and suggests a more appropriate term of imagined affordances (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p.1). Wanting to develop a concept that considers the complexities of a socio-technical relationship, Nagy and Neff coin imagined affordances as a more flexible term that observes the relationship 'between users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers' (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p.5). By approaching affordances in this way, space is opened for a deeper engagement into the user's socio-technical relationship that can be applied to their everyday practices and imaginings.

In Chapter 2, we considered borders and boundaries as complex environments (Agier, 2016; Andersson, 2014; Hirst and Thompson, 1995; Kluitenberg, 2011; Morley, 2017); expanding on this, Mezzadra and Neilson describe them as porous and unstable where they articulate movement and rules, connection, and disconnection. Digital networks, they observe, have created '[n]ew boundaries of identity and communalism' (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013, p.97) as individuals are able to transcend their physical restrictions and connect to others at a distance.

Complementing Chapter 2, the framework for this chapter will unfold over four main sections. Section one, '*Co-presence: Being in a Mediated Environment*', looks at the evolution of presence and how the mediated space has evolved over the years. Section two, '*Mediating Intimacy at a Distance*', explores how separated families and communities deploy innovative ways to stay connected, creating a sense of *being with each other* within mediated environments at a distance. Section three, '*Imagining Home: A Diasporic Consciousness*', expands on the concept of *being with each other* to a sense of *belonging to each other*. Finally, section four, '*Doing Culture in Extraordinary Circumstances*', looks closely at how cultural production and practices are used as tactics to facilitate

mobility and a sense of solidarity. In an attempt to avoid being technologically deterministic, this chapter describes how technologies, mediated practices, and mediated spaces also reaffirm the themes of stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness.

Co-Presence: ‘Being in’ a Mediated Environment

Research around the connected migrant or refugee is increasingly documented with a specific focus on the concept of *mediated co-presence*. I approach mediated co-presence as how interpersonal relationships are articulated through new media technologies and mediated communication practices within different mediated environments (Madianou and Miller, 2013b; Shoemaker et al., 2019; Smets, 2018; Wall et al., 2019; Witteborn, 2018). I intend to further expand the debate by exploring *whether inhabitants of Mae La maintain mediated interpersonal relations and how, if at all, they are articulated in their material environment and mediated spaces?* To explore these questions, we must first return to Steuer (1992), as discussed in the introduction, and his approach to presence as having a sense of *being in an environment*. Although Steuer, in 1992, was not describing online spaces as we know them today but rather referring to electronically mediated environments, we can extrapolate his observation to include online spaces. Steuer’s position is fundamental to this study as it presents simultaneously two spaces: the material and the mediated.

Focusing on mediated communication, Thompson posits that ‘[m]ediated interaction is stretched over time and space’ (Thompson, 1994, p.35), highlighting that geographical locations do not bind participants in mediated interaction or communication. The author states that ‘the use of a technical medium...enables information or symbolic content to be transmitted to individuals who are remote in space, in time, or both’ (*ibid*). This concept of being remote in both space and time, released from geographical restrictions, is of interest to this study. Adding ‘mediated interaction’ as a fourth dimension to his interactional theory of communication, Thompson draws from Goffman’s (1990) notion of front and backstage regions. He describes a ‘turbulent new world of mediated visibility’ (Thompson, 2020, p.27) where the boundary between the public and private sphere is harder to control. Addressing concerns around presence, mediated communication practices, and control, I ask *whether presence is experienced in the camp in mediated forms or are inhabitants restricted to their immediate material environment?* I will argue that new media technologies and mediated communication practices enable information or symbolic content to reach those in the camp while also reaffirming my participants-controlled mobility and immobility, thus creating ambivalence among camp residents. I shall also argue that mediated spaces have affected the social fabric of the camp and its residents, but not all in the same way, and not for all inhabitants.

To help unpack these thoughts, I draw again from Steuer and his early example of telepresence. Steuer describes telepresence as an 'extent to which one feels present in the mediated environment, rather than in the immediate physical environment' (Steuer, 1992, p.76); thus, presence is the 'neutral perception', whereas telepresence is 'the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium' (*ibid*). Expanding on telepresence, Zhao argues that 'when individuals in separate locations have the capacity to be simultaneously telepresent at each other's site, telepresence is turned into telecopresence' (Zhao, 2003, p.447). Through mediated means, people remote from one another, as in this case of the connected refugee, can connect instantaneously.

Influencing more recent studies on the connected refugee, I turn to Diminescu and her influential work on the 'connected migrant' (Diminescu, 2008). Here she highlights the emergence of a social space of connected presence, stating that different communication practices have developed,

from simple 'conversational' methods where communication compensates for absence, to 'connected' modes where the services maintain a form of continuous presence in spite of the distance (Diminescu, 2008, p.570).

This, Diminescu (2008) states, has had a significant impact on the life of the migrant. One, which I argue, has also had implications on refugees' social dynamic and everyday lives in Mae La. Whilst acknowledging that Diminescu's work is insightful, Twigt is critical. She warns that Diminescu is too deterministic in her celebration of mobility and digital connectivity:

Not only are digital divides persisting, mapping into already existing inequalities. Structural social oppressions are reproduced in online spheres and mediated practices are deeply grounded in material realities (Twigt, 2019, p.173).

We can draw further critique of Diminescu's optimistic position by looking at the work of Madianou (2019b) and Latonero and Kift (2018). Focusing on 'coloniality of power', Madianou introduces us to the term technocolonialism, a concept she deems 'necessary because it pays equal attention to colonial legacies, datafication, and innovation as well as global capitalism and inequality' (Madianou, 2019b, p.11). The significance here is the attention to colonial legacies, something I consider when discussing the different groups of Karen in the camp. The importance of Madianou's work is that it moves away from a technologically deterministic perspective that new media technologies and mediated communication practices can solve the so-called refugee crisis in Europe. She argues for a closer look into how 'imperial formations' exploit the world's most vulnerable populations.

In the same way, Latonero and Kift also acknowledge the complex terrain refugees operate within. The authors state that refugees on the move come to rely on digital infrastructures, defined as '[s]ocial media, mobile apps, online maps, instant messaging, translation websites, wire money transfers, cell phone charging stations, and Wi-Fi hotspots' (Latonero and Kift, 2018, p.3). At the same time, they become increasingly vulnerable to exploitation both within their physical presence and within the digital space (Latonero, 2011; Latonero and Kift, 2018). Although the authors focus on refugees in motion, I would argue that the same principles and concerns are relevant to refugees in camps, something I intend on exploring in the empirical chapters.

Compensating for absence yet still present, Licoppe, for example, argues that co-present interactions and distant mediated communication exchanges have become so ingrained into the everyday that 'the boundaries between absence and presence' are blurred (Licoppe, 2004, p.135-6). Exploring how media connects and how this connectivity affects people, the importance of co-present interactions is the continuous sharing of experiences. However, *are all refugees experiencing the same presence within the different spaces or are some stuck while others transcend?* It is through the work of Steuer's (1992), Thompson (1995), Licoppe (2004), and Diminescu (2008) that we can start to trace the evolution of co-presence concerning mediated environments and how the change has impacted the way individuals maintain social relationships at a distance. As I will discuss in the empirical chapters, some camp residents have vast digital networks. With more access to connect to family back in Myanmar and in the broader global diaspora, it would be wise to draw from work focused on digital intimacy and how refugees practice it at a distance.

Mediating Intimacy at a Distance

As socio-cultural and socio-technical forces intertwine, separated communities deploy innovative ways to stay connected. New types of mobile populations are revolutionising transnational habitus and diaspora consciousness (Nedelcu, 2019). New media communication practices and mediated spaces afford the possibility of re-imagined homelands and a sense of being together at a distance, something I will explore in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. These spaces have created mediated intimacy at a distance. When discussing family with my participants, they often extended the notion to include close friends who they would refer to as aunty or sister, other times, they would refer to the Karen community as a family. Thus, I extend the concept of 'doing family' (1996) and 'displaying family' (2007) to include non-immediate relatives.

Instead of approaching family as a static structure, the diasporic or transnational family embodies the theorisation of the family as a 'set of practices' (Madianou, 2016; Morgan, 2011, 1996). As Madianou describes:

The deterritorialised nature of transnational families shifts our attention away from traditional definitions of family as a place-bound unit and crystallises its nature as constituted through a set of activities that acquire meaning under particular circumstances (Madianou, 2016, p.185).

The value in viewing the family as a set of practices, Morgan argues, is that it 'opens up the possibility of movement' (Morgan, 2011, p.6). In the notion of 'doing', the mundane, oft-taken for granted family activities are given meaning and fluidity, reminding us that 'family is a highly flexible' term (*ibid*, p.7) which often constitutes ordinariness. The importance of a sense of family, Morgan asserts, lies in the engagement with activities and practices, not in sentiment or obligation to the family (*ibid*, p.10). Closely associated with the concept of family is the idea of home. Holdsworth and Morgan identify three distinct spaces for exploration: 'practical', 'symbolic' and 'imaginary' (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005).

Holdsworth and Morgan state that the practical space focuses 'upon the more material, in the broadest sense of the word, aspects of domestic space' (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005, p.75). Practical space refers to a division of labour, discussions on where to live and the practicalities of proximity to amenities such as shops, schools and medical facilities (Morgan, 2011). In terms of the refugee, where to live is severely restricted and determined by the host country. Regarding amenities and access to them, encamped refugees have no control over them, or at least this is promoted within the image of a space of exception and bare life. In Chapter 5, I will discuss how the inhabitants of Mae La transcend the notion of exception by exploring the camp's infrastructure; however, this is always under the omnipresence of the camp authorities, which in turn contradicts the refugees' agency and transcendence.

The symbolic space refers to 'discourses about and representations of home and domestic space' (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005, p.75). Within this space, ideas of a 'proper' or 'real' family can be found and where contradictions and negotiations clash and blend (Morgan, 2011, p.75-6). The symbolic space will be explored in Chapter 7 and positioned around the themes of rituals and traditions. This chapter will explore how individuals performed their identities to fit in with the group's expectations and how inclusion and exclusion are created.

The imaginary space is where 'individual meanings are inscribed into domestic space' (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2005, p.75). It is where the home reaches beyond and into the imaginary, such as in the form of dreams, desires, and hopes for the future. Individual biographies and histories are shared in the imaginary space and merged into family practices (Morgan, 2011, p.76). The imaginary space and the sharing of histories and future hopes transcending inhabitants physical stuckness is woven into Chapters 6, 7, and 8 of this thesis.

The significance is that through performing family practices, all three spaces weave and interact with each other. Morgan reminds us that 'the spatial dimension of family practices is not confined to the place identified as home' (Morgan, 2011, p.77) but can transcend the material space, crossing borders and restricted boundaries, which returns us to the idea of mediated spaces as lived places. Morley asserts that the 'traditional ideas of home, homeland and nation have been destabilised, both by new patterns of physical mobility and migration' but more importantly by new communication technologies (Morley, 2000, p.2). Based on Morgan's work, Finch (2007) argues that family practices should not just be 'done' but 'seen to be done'. Finch defines the concept of display as:

The process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships (Finch, 2007, p.67).

The notions of performance and display will be applied in Chapters 6 and 8 in the broader context of the community. It would be wise to pause and review the innovative ways life is performed and displayed through a complex repertoire of images and narratives facilitated by new media technologies and in mediated spaces.

Hjorth and Pink (2014) argue that mobile devices create new visualities and socialities of place and place-making. Our digitally interwoven worlds transcend micro and macro realms (Hjorth and Pink, 2014, p.40). Memories and life journeys are documented in photographic and video form, then uploaded to mediated spaces where they are shared with distant others. Hjorth and Pink (2013) claim this engagement extends to the personal diary or postcard, which marks time and place for the user. Finding innovation within these mediated spaces, the authors compared the traditional postcard to 'checking-in' on Facebook. Photographic posts are designed to actively engage absent friends; a gesture they state goes beyond the geographical location into the social, emotional, and psychological sphere of mediated spaces.

Focusing on mobile phone photographs, Cabalquinto (2020) explores performance and expands on the theory of visual co-presence. Coined by Ito, intimate visual co-presence refers to 'the sharing of

an ongoing stream of viewpoint-specific photos with a handful of close friends or with an intimate other. The focus is on co-presence and viewpoint sharing rather than communication, publication, or archiving' (Ito, 2005, p.1). Cabalquinto draws from this and the concepts of 'display' meaning 'the fundamentally social nature of family practices, where the meaning of one's actions has to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others' (Finch, 2007, p.66) and 'doing family' (Morgan, 1996). Cabalquinto argues that mobile phone photographs contribute to a sense of family co-presence by enabling transnational family members to move across distant borders and boundaries where they perform and 'display familial roles, responsibilities, and values' (Cabalquinto, 2020, p.1619). Approaching photographs as another form of communication practice opens a space to explore how visual co-presence allows members to reclaim familiar roles and family life, an area I intend on exploring specifically in Chapters 7 and 8.

Frosh views the concept of the photograph as display from the position of the selfie and states that the 'selfie is the production of the mediated phatic body' (Frosh, 2015, p.1607). It is a 'visual vehicle' that encourages social communication between distant others, fundamental to everyday experiences and digital activities (p.1607-24). The selfie, he advocates, is a 'new phatic agent in the energy flows between bodily movement, sociable interactions, and media technologies' (p.1624). Gómez Cruz and Thornham further investigate the multi-faceted nature of selfies that they claim transcend a representational image (Gómez Cruz and Thornham, 2015). They argue that the selfie has more comprehensive socio-cultural practices which should consider the political, ideological, and cultural significance. The authors suggest that it is,

precisely through the staging, shooting, choosing, sharing, posting, commenting, liking through digital mediations that the performance of the image-self becomes meaningful not as a single image but as a complex process of practices that performatively construct the self through their normativity (Gómez Cruz and Thornham, 2015, p7-8).

Cabañes (2017) describes how photographic projects and exhibitions might facilitate mediated voices for marginalised groups. He argues that rich multimodal narratives anchored in photographs open a space to speak and be heard. Acknowledging the limitations, Cabañes claims that photographic projects cannot guarantee that what is being said will be heard. However, the importance lies within the space of opportunity (Cabañes, 2017). Significantly, we must be reminded not to over-simplify, be overly optimistic or deterministic about creative methods empowering nature (Buckingham, 2009, p.649) or as Georgiou (2018) observes, voice does not guarantee recognition (Georgiou, 2018, p.45).

Focusing on how Filipino workers in Melbourne restage festive family rituals through mediated methods such as uploading photographs to social media, Cabalquinto (2018) draws from Sheller and Urry (2000) when he discusses 'coerced mobility' and asymmetry. Drawing inspiration from the concept of network capital, Cabalquinto describes how 'ambivalent feelings emerge due to technological asymmetrical mobile intimacy' (Cabalquinto, 2018, p.38). As an evolution to social and economic capital, network capital affords 'the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate, which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit' (Elliott and Urry, 2010, p.59). Cabalquinto uses 'asymmetrical mobile intimacy' to describe mobile device use and the articulation of a 'diverse and often contradictory experience of intimacy at a distance' (Cabalquinto, 2018, p.38). He points out that participants have no choice but to use digital platforms to compensate for physical distance and absence (*ibid*, p.48). I assert that within the often precarious and volatile conditions of a refugee camp, we may observe low levels of network capital and coerced mobility more extensively, reaffirming the inhabitant's stuckness within the space of exception.

Acknowledging that not all transnational communities and families, especially diasporic refugee communities or those in exile, have the same access to new media technologies or the ability to experience and participate in practices of connected presence, I draw from the work of Robertson et al. (2016) and their research on resettled Karen refugees in Australia. The authors focus on the refugee family experience and how members navigate challenges for maintaining family togetherness in the diaspora. Their research explores how young Karen refugees 'actively produce an alternative mode of 'connected presence' based on subtle experiences of togetherness produced across long periods of forced separation' (p.220) in what they term as imaginary co-presence (*ibid*, p.221).

Influenced by the work of Urry (2000) and Zhao (2003), imaginary co-presence is realised when participants take up innovative digital media strategies. These strategies produce a feeling of togetherness or 'a *sense* of being with each other when physical and even mediated co-presence is impossible' (Robertson et al., 2016, p.220). The authors claim that their participants 'do not simply accept the disruptions of their families' (*ibid*, p.224) through long-distance separation; instead, they apply methods that enact their sense of belonging. For the Karen youths living in Melbourne, imaginary co-presence is created by taking 'digital images of themselves and their family members and repurpose them to create various imagined scenes and scenarios' (*ibid*, p.226). The new re-posed images are either kept as private keepsakes or shared on social media. The authors posit that the re-posed image aims not to 'pretend' that this meeting occurred, but to construct a form of co-presence that is expressive of the family imaginary' (*ibid*).

It would be helpful at this point to acknowledge the extensive transnational networks many of my participants, particularly the younger generation, have in the camp. It is of interest to this thesis *how presence, co-presence and if at all, mediated co-presence is articulated by encamped refugees?* Exploring the role of mediated communication practices and mediated spaces further provides insight into how refugees living in camps challenge the borders and boundaries that physically surround them. In other words, it may show how refugees inside camps transcend their geographical and material limitations and make meaning from a sense of being with others at a distance; however, it also may reaffirm their stuckness and separation.

This section has explored the various ways individuals mediate presence at a distance. I have extrapolated from work on transnational families, which will help unpack other types of transnational relations, such as the imagined community (Anderson, 2006). Although refugees remain physically restricted, there is the potential for them not to be exclusively tethered to a geographical location, meaning that their presence, if connected, can transcend virtually or digitally across multiple borders and boundaries, albeit often in an asymmetrical or coerced way. I highlight the practice of togetherness in a non-proximate and non-physical form, thus demonstrating how separation can be challenged, resisted, and transcended. The following section expands on a *sense of being with each other* to a *sense of belonging to each other*.

Imagining Home: A Diasporic Consciousness

Exploring mediated presence has provided an insight into how individuals who are separated from each other find new ways to maintain relationships and live together at a distance. The *sense of being with each other* extends to a *sense of belonging to each other*, creating a 'we-consciousness' (Shils, 2006) and collective solidarity, themes that arise in Chapters 6 and 7. It is essential to highlight that by reframing the concept of home and belonging to the imaginary or, as Douglas (1991) describes, as an abstract kind of space and not based on materiality, one may then live in many spaces that flow and clash simultaneously, as seen in Chapter 8. As architect Abudayyeh puts it:

A Syrian refugee living in a Jordanian camp, or an immigrant to the United States, will have multiple associations with place enabled by digital technology...They may live in a new environment, but they carry archival memories and images of their home with them on smart devices, and that will influence the way they interact with their physical space (Abudayyeh, 2019, n.p).

In this section, I will explore the concept of home, not as a fixed entity but one fluid in the minds of the individual and broader community. I look at a sense of belonging through the repertoire of

mediated spaces whilst demonstrating a complex terrain of inclusions and agency as well as exclusion and isolation. The importance of exploring home in relation to refugees is that they have been forced from their homes and live quite often in states of protracted displacement and instability.

Contextualising home as 'an abstract kind of space', Douglas (1991) argues that although the idea of home is always localisable (i.e., located in space), that space is not fixed. Clarifying her argument, she states, 'a home is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people who are living in that time and space, it has aesthetic and moral dimensions' (Douglas, 1991, p.289). Douglas suggests we move beyond the perception that home is bound to a geographical location and more to a 'realisation of ideas' (*ibid*, p.290) and an embryonic community; a concept I argue supports Massey's (2013) notion of a space of multiplicity made up of social relations which interweave into the everyday.

Douglas (1991) points out that having a shelter is different from having a home. She argues that the very ideas we carry 'inside our heads about our lives in space and time' (p.289) embodies home. I contend that Douglas' thoughts are even more relevant when discussing displaced people, camps, and exile as often all that is perceived that is left are ideas, memories, and histories when materiality is taken away. According to Morley and Robins: 'Places are no longer clear supports of our identity' (Morley and Robins, 2002, p.87). It is in this context that I turn to the concept of *Heimat*. Creating and maintaining a utopian community, the good life, bound together in the illusion of unity, rooted in a common past; *Heimat* 'is both a geographical place and mythic space, the locus of national dispute and collective identity' (Keane, 1997, p.81). It persists, as Doob contends that *Heimat* is the landscape,

we have experienced. That means one that has been fought over, menaced, filled with the history of families, towns, and villages. Our Heimat is the Heimat' of knights and heroes, of battles and victories, of legends and fairy tales. But more than all this, our Heimat is the land which has become fruitful through the sweat of our ancestors. For this Heimat our ancestors have fought and suffered, for this Heimat our fathers have died (Doob, 1964, p.196).

The representation of the past opens a space to revisit the subjective memory steeped in nostalgia, tradition, and a longing for wholeness. It is a past that has already disintegrated and become something new (Morley and Robins, 2002, p.89). Contemporary ideas of *Heimat* exist as 'a myth about the possibility of community in the face of fragmentation and alienation' (Applegate, 1990, p.19). The search for *Heimat* can be compared to a 'form of fundamentalism' (Morley and Robins, 2002, p.90), based on fear and exclusion of the other to protect the home's integrity. Focusing on spaces without places, Silverstone (1999) states:

Home has become, and can be sustained as, something virtual, as without location. A place without space, to compensate, maybe, for when we live in spaces that are not places. When we cannot go home (Silverstone, 1999, p.92).

Silverstone's argument calls into question, *when one cannot go home, what does home and belonging look and feel like when one is 'out-of-place'?* Influenced by Edward Said's memoir *Out-of-Place* (Said, 2000), Stuart Hall describes the characteristics of displacement and the sense of being out-of-place as 'there's no kind of automatic relationship to one's belonging' (Hall and Back, 2009, p.669). Through the 'traces' of life, memory, and history, belonging is forged (*ibid*) and home created.

Just as Silverstone (1999) and Hall (2009) observe, our experiences of home are further determined by everyday happenings and the material circumstances we encounter. It is how these experiences are remembered and recalled that transforms them into stories and myths, which takes home into a space without place. Reminiscent of the mythico-history (Malkki, 1995), Silverstone posits that 'stories of home run like veins through the social body' (Silverstone, 1999, p.92), an area I will explore in the empirical chapters. Similar to Anderson's (1998) discussion on how long-distance nationalism is created, Silverstone suggests, 'the media engage and frame our sense of home, and enable us to make the passage backwards and forwards, in time and space' (Silverstone, 1999, p.95).

To unpack this oscillation of movement, what follows draws from empirical work focused on everyday practices of meaning-making from a position of being out-of-place. I first turn to the research of Balakian and her study on Tibetan refugees encamped in a settlement in Nepal (Balakian, 2008). Reminiscent of the work carried out by Sharples (2017) along the Thai-Myanmar border, Balakian found that her participants defined themselves through the history of violence and subjugation (Balakian, 2008, p.125). Like Malkki's (1995) research on Hutu refugees in Tanzania, the Tibetans told and retold their stories in ways that reflected personal and collective memories, creating an 'acute sense of themselves in Nepal' (Balakian, 2008, p.125).

Balakian focused her study on the youth in a camp⁵, stating that: 'Tibetans in the Kailash Settlement imagined Tibet and Tibetan identity in ways possible only in exile, and that caused them to feel uniquely obligated and empowered to be agents of change for their national community' (Balakian, 2008, p.130). She found that participants used media to connect with and be informed on Tibetan national issues. Arguing that the acquired knowledge and reliance on media sources such as newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, and especially the Internet empowered the youth in ways that their 'computer illiterate parents and grandparents could not' (Balakian, 2008, p.131). Balakian posits

⁵ Mt. Kailash Tibetan Settlement is a fictional name to protect the identities of Balakian's participants.

that modern technological apparatuses enabled the Tibetan youth to form a global identity and belonging through the Internet:

The youth were able to be in regular contact with their sponsors in France, their siblings in India or the United States, and with a whole global network of Tibetans they had never seen or met, through chat rooms and information posted on web pages about Tibetan activities in Tibet, Nepal, and India; but also in London, New York, and San Francisco (Balakian, 2008, p.131).

The sense of being out-of-place whilst being with others created through mediated spaces signified the Tibetans' political struggle and connected them to the cultural events and social interactions of the Tibetan diaspora. Balakian argues that this all contributed to 'a primary means by which Tibetans were able to imagine and identify themselves as part of a community outside of their local situation in Nepal' (Balakian, 2008, p.141). Balakian demonstrates how the imagined community was only accessible to the young and not their technologically illiterate parents, concluding that new communication practices can also exclude and isolate individuals.

Wall et al. (2019) further observed exclusion and isolation in their work on Syrian refugees and their information practices. It was found that older refugees and women were more susceptible to what they call information precarity. They define information precarity as 'a condition where their access to information is unstable and thus potentially puts them at economic, political, and social risk that may result in them being exposed to violence' (Wall et al., 2019, p.505).

Exclusion and isolation from information were further reported by Jack in her study on refugees living in camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. In a study on the consequences of restricted access to news media and technologies among encamped Karen refugees, Jack argues that 'the potential role of news media as intermediaries between the camp and common public space is particularly crucial in such a context of exclusion' (Jack, 2017, p.128). Her study found that only a third of those interviewed had access to a battery-operated portable radio, with some stating they listen via their mobile phones. Residents had limited access to television, and when they did, it was mainly used to watch DVDs. Internet operated throughout the three camps she visited by privately run companies; however, Internet cafes were rarely visited by those interviewed due to high cost, illiteracy, and lack of technical knowledge. Print media such as newspapers and magazines were further limited (Jack, 2017, p.133-4).

Jack reports that 'a number of camp residents described efforts to speak with journalists about issues within the camps but said the camp authorities obstructed their efforts' (Jack, 2017, p.135). This

control by the governing body to restrict the camp residents' voice illuminates the mechanism of power discussed in Chapter 2, which, I would argue, affects an individual's or group's sense of self, identity, and sense of belonging. It further demonstrates how the mechanism of power extends its reach of control, a means of reaffirming material borders and boundaries by limiting access to information and mediated practices. I argue that although Jack's research is fundamental to understanding the Karen and their restricted media access, I contend that times have significantly changed since the research was conducted in 2015. I will demonstrate how new media technologies and mediated communication practices are firmly embedded into camp life, albeit to differing levels.

Turning to the research of Wilding, who, similarly to Balakian, found low-cost technologies provided young Karen refugees living in Australia the means to seek sources of information that contributed to the maintenance of ethnic identity in the diaspora (Wilding, 2012). As part of an audio-visual workshop, the participants created and produced digital stories and websites used in transnational communication and identity articulation. This creative use of mediated communication practices was a way for the Karen to 'negotiate their often-competing commitments to family, local community, transnational communities, ethnicity, and youth popular culture interests' (Wilding, 2012, p.502).

Wilding observed how fast the participants adapted their media engagement and found that new arrivals to Australia who had never heard of Facebook in the camps embraced it quickly, creating large networks of friends worldwide. She found that Facebook was a preferred mode of contact with their transnational peers, whereas email was redundant due to social media's visual and audio capabilities. Wilding's participants described their mediated spaces as actively producing, consuming, and exchanging photos and videos. Their new lives were documented by hundreds of photos and videos of life in Australia, all disseminated through Facebook to a vast digital community (Wilding, 2012, p.504).

With their new lives archived online, Wilding noted an enthusiasm to maintain Karen heritage using digital media. The author found that the participants took pride in taking photos and videos, particularly in traditional dress and at Karen events. When images of the camps along the Thai-Myanmar border were shared, they spoke of them with 'nostalgic fondness' (Wilding, 2012, p.505), reminiscing about their past lives and expressing shared solidarity to the Karen State. By participating on social media, Wilding's participants demonstrated a strong association with home and a sense of belonging (Wilding, 2012, p.508). To this group, the online environment contributed to a broader sense of collective involvement (*ibid*, p.507) whereby 'cyberspace and ICTs are important resources for enabling this simultaneous orientation towards past, present and future' (*ibid*, p.508) lives. The significance of Wilding's research is that it demonstrates how displaced Karen in the broader diaspora with access to mediated environments transcend multiple boundaries,

oscillating between past and present lives. Her work is vital to my own as it not only shows mobility between previous encamped lives and their current and future situations but also simultaneously demonstrates resistance to displacement through nostalgic fondness and solidarity through the act of archiving life and experiences. I wonder, however, whether Wilding's participants' solidarity was to the Karen State (a recognised geographical location in Myanmar) or to *Kawthoolei* (the Karen imagined nation), which is only recognised in the minds of some (Anderson, 2006, 1998, 1992), not all Karen, or to the camps from which they came from?

Green and Lockley provide further helpful insight into the communication practices of resettled Karen refugees, this time in the UK (Green and Lockley, 2012). Research carried out on a journalism training project in Sheffield found that participants engaged in a wide range of mediated communication practices and environments. From 'mobile and landline phones to technologies enabled by broadband Internet such as Voice Over Protocol (VOIP), Skype video, Facebook, email and Karen news and media-based websites' (p.10). While the authors outline motivations for keeping in touch, they also list the restrictions of newly established refugees. They found that the motivation to engage in mediated communication practices included maintaining family ties and village news, political campaigning, religious networking, organising financial arrangements, and finally, maintaining a sense of Karen ethnic identity and belonging.

However, like Wall et al. (2019), Green and Lockley also identified restrictions such as technology costs, technical illiteracy, and a lack of available communication channels to contacts in Myanmar and the camps (Green and Lockley, 2012, p.12). Their later work discusses the vulnerability of the community's communication channels, citing attacks from afar through surveillance and cyber conflict. The authors provide a prime example of information precarity (Wall et al., 2019), describing how the community was targeted through social media surveillance in what they characterise as an 'inverse reach' (Green and Lockley, 2014). Green and Lockley state that the community's participation online opened a space allowing:

The oppressors to reach out and touch the 'oppressed' through appropriating their channels of communication and using information gained through surveillance to attack them in specific ways which referenced aspects of the real conflict (*ibid*, p.519).

This attack exploited deep-seated fears and ignited traumatic memories demonstrating how new mediated communication practices and environments can become weaponised, reinforcing power dynamics, and strengthening boundaries of control. Although the authors could not identify the perpetrators of the attacks, it was suggested that they were carried out by the Burmese secret services or perhaps a renegade collection of acts by disaffected individuals (*ibid*, p.11). What is

significant about Green and Lockley's research is that it relates to the issue of what constitutes power, essential to acknowledge if we are to understand resistance.

The themes of refugee everyday experience, belonging, and resistance are explored further by Cho, who reports that ethnic groups from Myanmar now resettled in Auckland, New Zealand, use new media to maintain cultural, social, and political identities. Cho, a researcher, journalist, and Karen refugee originally from a camp along the Thai-Myanmar border, states that ethnic groups from Myanmar living in exile use new media to sustain 'bonds with the home country' (Cho, 2011, p.194). She claims it has 'fundamentally influenced the everyday living spaces of the Burmese diaspora community in Auckland' (*ibid*, p.207). Observing that her participants engage with the Internet in various ways depending on the purpose, Cho notes, listening to music and reading in their language articulated resistance to the perceived threat of the *Tatmadaw's* oppression and loss of indigenous language. Further identity articulation was identified through connectivity to political groups inside Myanmar and in the borderlands, claiming:

It appears that online media, which has a heavy emphasis on human rights stories, also leads to a feeling of victimhood among participants, even if they have not directly experienced persecution (Cho, 2011, p.207).

Wilding (2012), Green and Lockley (2014), and Cho's (2011) research and other work more generally carried out in the diaspora are significant as it would suggest that some Karen are creating identities that are unique to living in 'exile' and which are different to those back in Myanmar or the camps.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the life of a refugee is inherently political and can complicate their lived spaces due to the restrictions placed upon them. Inhabitants must navigate the different control mechanisms, borders, and boundaries while simultaneously making meaning from past and present practices and everyday experiences. The UNHCR states that an overlooked role in the lives of refugees are the 'artistic activities in camps in which refugees themselves have been actively engaged as initiators, participants and/or participatory audience members' (Andemicael, 2011, p.1). They state that artistic 'activities may provide useful tools for improving the quality of life for camp residents' (*ibid*). I argue that artistic activities and cultural production can also shed light on how refugees maintain and articulate a sense of belonging, identity, and resistance. In Chapters 6 and 7, I attempt to address this oversight. I explore and interpret through thick descriptions how cultural production is created and identities maintained. To demonstrate ordinariness found in the everyday and how refugees find ways to articulate self-representation, I narrow the scope of artistic activities to the production, consumption, and dissemination of music, which will be unpacked next.

Doing Culture in Extraordinary Spaces

I refer to cultural production as the constant and evolving production and reproduction of culture through cultural forms (real and imaginary), values, and shared understandings in the everyday lives of a society. Meaning is made through the practices of creating, producing, and disseminating literature, films, paintings, music, television programs, advertising, education, popular philosophy, religion, and other forms of entertainment and rituals such as festivals and celebrations (Bourdieu, 1983; Tyson, 2006, p.60).

A close examination of cultural production through this thesis' empirical findings will attempt to help us gain further insight into how my participants engage as initiators, participants, and participatory audience members. To understand different levels of stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness found in their everyday, I will explore *how, if at all, the interweaving of cultural production and mediated environments facilitates mobility beyond material borders and boundaries?* Although I argue that Mae La is bursting with various forms of cultural production, I will narrow my focus to music and the tactics of political agency, resistance, solidarity, and belonging. Exploring these themes calls into question *the infrastructural or structural constraints inside camps relevant to how culture is produced and maintained? How easy is it for refugees to 'actually' produce cultures such as in the form of music or other art?* To explore these themes, it would be helpful to draw first from Jenkins' (2009) theory of participatory culture.

Participatory culture is defined as 'a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations' (Jenkins, 2009, p.3). Significant to this research lies in the notion that the participant's voice and contribution matters and that there is a feeling of social connection and engagement with other members of the same community (*ibid*). An example of participatory culture is observed by Asthana and their work with Palestinian youths. Acknowledging refugees as political agents and camps as complicated spaces, Asthana examines how subactivism underpins life in camps. They state that 'for the Palestinian refugee youth [living in Dheisheh refugee camp in the West Bank], politics as subactivism underpins their daily routines, behaviors and actions, and in a crucial sense, then, life itself is political' (Asthana, 2017, p.106). Subactivism refers to:

A kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life. It is constituted by small-scale, often individual, decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured (Asthana, 2017, p.106).

Observing the challenges of physical movement around the West Bank as 'almost impossible' due to checkpoints and barriers, Asthana found that members of The Ibdāa Cultural Center - Ibdāa, in Arabic means 'to create something out of nothing' (Asthana, 2017, p.104) used mediated communication practices and environments as a way to connect with other Palestinian youth around the world and transcend local spatial restrictions. Using inexpensive new media technologies, the youths documented various events in the camp, such as protest marches, posting photos, and videos on social media sites such as Facebook (*ibid*, p.110).

Asthana's work provides further insight into how encamped inhabitants maintain relationships with others worldwide. It demonstrates how encamped refugees' participate and contribute to producing and disseminating self-representation. Observations of The Ibdāa Cultural Center's media initiatives and cultural production are relevant to my study as I intend on exploring recording studios and musical production inside Mae La in Chapter 6. Resistance, as Asthana outlines, is articulated through performative art such as dabke folk music and dance, as well as graffiti art, photography and short digital videos, all uploaded to social media and shared around the world (Asthana, 2017, p.104). It is argued that this form of resistance, facilitated through mediated practices, allows the Ibdāa's youth to 'transgress social and cultural boundaries' and 'question Israel's occupation of their land' (*ibid*, p.107). Not only is participatory culture present, but I would also argue that the very notion of being affiliated with a centre or club also affects how the youths perceive themselves and how they make meaning from campzanship (Sigona, 2015a), as discussed in Chapter 2.

After visiting Lajee Center in Aida Refugee Camp also in the West Bank, Norman argues that:

Youth media provide spaces for youth empowerment at the individual level and civic engagement at the community level, and offer alternative narratives to challenge dominant discourses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Norman, 2009, p.252).

Norman (2009) outlines the various forms of artistic initiatives taking place. From theatre to photography, music to film, he states that through production and performance, youth in the camps can express and address their fears, trauma and 'empower them to challenge present realities' which enables them 'to reach out beyond the limits of their own community' (Norman, 2009, p.256). While acknowledging the opportunities offered by artistic initiatives and media engagement, Norman simultaneously recognises the limitations associated, citing limited exposure and scope of distribution, returning us to the theme of stuckness within a space of exception.

Sharing narratives of everyday life through artistic activities and mediated practices is significant to meaning-making and identity articulation (Asthana, 2017; Balakian, 2008; Cabañes, 2017; Cho,

2011a; Wilding, 2012). These narratives suggest that they can provide a unique and meaningful connection to refugee experiences, their sense of identity, understanding, and recognition by others and themselves. Reflecting on the role of digital storytelling in its various forms and articulations, I draw from Sawhney, who argues that through writing, drawing, dance, and drama, Palestinian youths became cultural agents expressing themselves through poetics and imagination (Sawhney, 2009, p.302). Highlighting that Shu'fat refugee camp hosted the poorest segment of Palestinian refugees, the author observed that innovative after school workshops and youth clubs such as the Computer Clubhouse promoted creativity, a sense of ownership, and belonging. Furthermore, the youths' mediated communication practices through digital storytelling provided them with an 'immense sense of shared satisfaction, identity, and confidence, as well as recognition among their peers, family and community' (*ibid*, p.303).

What is apparent from the work of Asthana (2017), Norman (2009), and Sawhney (2009) is the significance clubhouses and centres play in managing and maintaining ethnic identity and shared solidarity. However, their work raises interesting questions in relation to my own study and the idea of shared and collective identities. I will explore in Chapters 6 and 7 how a sense of shared solidarity is created and maintained. I intend to demonstrate this through the ordinariness of music and how it transcends the mundane to the sacred in different ways.

Music as Transnational Cultural Production

The narration of everyday lives through artistic forms has the potential to be articulated in various ways; Baily and Collyer argue that song lyrics can be analysed in the same way as literature which in turn 'shed[s] light on the process of transnational cultural production' (Baily and Collyer, 2006, p.168). They state that music, unlike literature, is a more popular and accessible form of cultural production that can be shared with a broader audience. Acknowledging that music is more than just lyrical, Baily and Collyer claim:

Music has the power to evoke memories and capture emotions entirely separate from the lyrical content (or where lyrics are entirely absent) that we can all identify with, migrants and non-migrants alike. Musical forms may travel independently of migrants, in response to other factors in the broader commercial and cultural environment (Baily and Collyer, 2006, p.167).

Farzana observes how memories and emotions are evoked in the lives of the Rohingya through the cultural production of Tarana (poems and songs) (Farzana, 2011). Researching the Rohingya, a marginalised group forcefully displaced from Myanmar living on the banks and in the mountains of the Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh, Farzana claims that music and art are informal ways of

expressing resistance to persecution and a way to preserve cultural identity. Tarana is spoken art (a poetic performance focused on wordplay, intonation, and voice inflexion) and depicts a stateless life full of sorrow, frustration, and trauma.

Illustrating that Tarana is a 'perfect reflection' of refugee life in limbo, Farzana (2011) argues its significance is how it challenges the dominant discourse by asking the question 'why'. *Why are we persecuted? Why are we in exile? Why can't we return?* Preservation of cultural identity is maintained through oral transmission of the poems and songs. Tarana plays a vital role in the Rohingya lives as it is a medium for non-literate members to share their history and express their stateless frustrations. Travelling from past to present, river bank to mountain top, Tarana is a tactic to recall memories of home and a longing to return.

The Karen have a similar history with spoken art in Hta poetry, which is often sung. Storytelling is a common form of Karen communication. These stories articulated through Hta draw from direct experience, everyday life, poetic metaphors, and oral traditions (Cho, 2011b). Mischung describes Hta verses as 'the authentic speech of the remote 'ancestors of the olden days', the knowledge of which formed one of the most prominent markers of a person's identity (Mischung, 2003, p.30). 'Wrapped into a collective knowledge system' (Mellegård, 2018, n.p), the emergence of an exiled Hta memory connects the writer and the reader to an imagined past (Cho, 2013). In exile, homeland becomes a central theme in many Hta; Cho (2013) observes that group emotions are expressed through fantasies and sacrifices, and feelings of mourning for the loss and disconnection felt at a distance.

Connected to oppression is the feeling of guilt and shame; sacrifice, as Cho (2013) illustrates, is virtuous for those 'who cannot give sufficiently'. A life in exile is permeated with feelings of disloyalty, anxiety, bitterness, and guilt (Quinsaas, 2019, p.50). This raises the question of *to what extent does exile compound existing feelings of shame, disloyalty, and guilt as part of colonial legacies?* This will be explored in more detail in Chapter 8. Examples of bitterness and guilt are also located in Hta, written by poets such as Naw Sa Blut and Tee Noe. Translated by Cho (2013), Naw Sa Blut's Hta 'My fate and my *Kawthoolei*' describes *Kawthoolei* as a lost friend:

I beg you please
Wait for me with tears
Beautiful Kawthoolei of mine
I do promise you this time
I will definitely come back
The day when my plan is intact

(Naw Sa Blut Moo, 2013, translated by Cho)

Whereas Tee Noe, 'a leading voice in Karen diaspora' (Noe, 2014 translated by Cho), depicts in his Hta 'Resentful Refugee Life' the struggle and emotions felt in exile:

Missing mother terribly
I remember home
Wanting to return to my village
But I can't
Where I now live
Neither my country nor my village
Not a place for me to cultivate
With people I am not related to
Who do not own me
Let's see how long I can ignore
A feast of crows I eat everyday
(Noe, 2014, translated by Cho)

Further analysing the expression of belonging through patterns and narratives of music, Gonzales explores displacement and home in the case of Malian Kel Tamasheq (Tuareg) refugees in Burkina Faso, West Africa (Gonzales, 2017). She illustrates that home is a fluid concept not bound to a material place but an abstract notion created and articulated through music. Describing the act of remembering and forgetting, Gonzales states that '[w]hile being an escape from boredom and a leisure activity, music was also a remedy, a space of evasion, oscillating between remembering and forgetting an individual and collective past' (Gonzales, 2017, p.97). Music, it would seem, created a bridge between past and present life. Alternating between enjoyment and healing, forgetting and 'not thinking' (*ibid*, p.97-8) provided a safe space where people could escape to, where memories of past trauma did not surface. Music contributed to maintaining a sense of collective belonging and opened a space for new practices and identity articulation. Gonzales suggests that:

Through musical consumption, time conflates into the present through a conscious attempt to forget the past; it allows for the present to be absolute (by not remembering the past) and void (by not thinking)' (Gonzales, 2017, p.98).

Gonzales extends her contribution in the moments she touches on the dynamics of music and how new technologies and mediated environments interweave into the Tuareg refugee everyday lives. Tuareg music was shared and experienced in various ways. First, Gonzales describes a group

watching old videos of performances by one of the group members. The act of watching together meant they drew from collective memories and formed solidarity through (real or imaginary) experiences. The tactic of watching also allowed the individual to forget their present circumstances. Meaning was produced from the ordinariness of sitting together and watching a video. A second observation was how mediated environments and electronic devices helped bridge a generational divide. Traditional music was passed down, learned, and played by a new generation facilitated by a mediated environment.

Social media further influenced a broader musical taste. Youth engaged with West African and western music on the Internet and through satellite TV. Refugees, Gonzales noted, would additionally exchange music stored on computers or CDs. Informal resistance was described in the production of rap music. Re-framing Kel Tamasheq issues, Gonzales' participants would protest and denounce discrimination and treatment through rapping in their language and then sharing the raps on social media (Gonzales, 2017, p.105-6). Gonzales' research shows how new media technologies and mediated environments are subtly woven into the consumption, creation, and everyday infrastructure of the refugees' lives and how political agency is articulated. This reiterates the point that life and experience are shared through music and physical and mediated methods. Significance also lies in the choice of musical genre, which will be discussed next.

Music for a Revolution

Ethnomusicologists advocate for music's critical role in constructing individual and collective identities (Frith, 1996, pp. 49–158, 1996; Nettl, 1983; Russell, 2011; Slobin, 2012; Stokes, 2012; Waters and Philhour, 2019). As Frith illuminates: 'Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective' (Frith, 1996, p.110-1). He emphasises the point that, 'making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them' (*ibid*). Likewise, Russell states: 'Music can provide the framework and expression in which social organisation, beliefs, group identity, and historical memory can be formalised or confirmed' (Russell, 2011, p.303). Of course, not all music is political, however with a focus on group identity, historical memory, and a way of living ideas, it is beneficial to draw from the subversive sounds of resistance music, which leads us to hip-hop culture and rap music.

Often used interchangeably, Leach highlights that even among the most knowledgeable musicologists, there is confusion over the terms hip-hop and rap. The most commonly held view is that 'hip-hop is a cultural movement' and rap 'is one of its four primary elements' (Leach, 2008, p.10). Starting as a political and oppositional art form, it became the voice of Afro-Americans (Ben Moussa, 2019, p.1045) in the South Bronx, New York City, during the 1970s. These defiant political messages

fluidly crossed borders through mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996; Karim, 2003). More recently, through new mediated spaces such as YouTube and Facebook, marginalised groups embrace hip-hop culture worldwide and rap, a vehicle for political expression. Weems observes that ‘within the field of global youth studies, scholars have noted the central role of music in crossing ethnic and aesthetic borders, and music’s potential to create political change’ (Weems, 2014, p.118). Neal argues that hip-hop and rap represented an ‘art form that countered mainstream sensibilities and clearly could be construed as a mode of social resistance’ (Neal, 2004, p.373); however, it wasn’t originally overtly political (*ibid*). As Rap music evolved, it ‘spoke to the anguish that people of color faced [...and] was compelling because it connected words with reality for some’ (Oware, 2018, p.12). However, Rose argues that the realities and presence of women rappers ‘have been consistently ignored or marginalised’ (Rose, 1994, p.110),

Rose observes that when social and media critics engage with women rappers, ‘it is far easier to re-gender women rappers than to revise their own gender-coded analysis of rap music’ (Rose, 1994, p.111). The author argues that women rappers demonstrate multiple boundary crossings as they speak to each other, their fans, and other popular musicians and male rappers (*ibid*, p.113). The importance of women rap music is that women offer an ‘alternative vision of similar social conditions’ (*ibid*, p.117) to what their male counterparts face. Addressing similar aesthetic and cultural elements, raps written and performed by women ‘confront the tension between [...] vulnerability and control (*ibid*), something I will explore in Chapter 6.

Hip-hop culture and rap music, for example, in the Middle East and North Africa, have ‘been strongly associated with political activism and contestation that reached its climax in the wake and aftermath of what has been dubbed the “Arab Spring” (Ben Moussa, 2019, p.1046). Although Morocco generally escaped the violence, young Moroccan musicians adopted the genre to challenge the dominant socio-political discourse and structure, which ‘denies them basic needs such as employment and genuine civic participation’ (Ben Moussa, 2019, p.1061). Likewise, young Palestinians asserting their national identity are creating politically charged music. They use rap as a weapon of resistance against the conditions of the West Bank and Israeli oppression (Safieh, 2013, p.69).

As a ubiquitous word, Miller (1980) observes that when using the term ‘political’ to describe something, it is named equivocally. Nevertheless, *how do we define the term political, and how do we locate political participation?* Some will look at the political within institutional structures (Althusser, 2014), while others focus on political discourse and power relations (Foucault, 1995). Chapter 6 of this thesis explores music as a potential tactic of power (Back, 2016a; Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008), where participation in creating, disseminating, and performing may in itself be viewed

as political action giving producers and their audiences agency. As Back argues, 'music is politically important because it can challenge the way migration and identity is understood and offer alternative expressions of multicultural and belonging' (Back, 2016, p.185). Quoting Paul Gilroy, Back argues that: 'Music as a practice is a way of understanding culture as an unfolding living thing and a way of thinking about the possibility of what might be beyond our understanding and imagination' (Back, 2016b, n.p). My intention in Chapters 6 and 7 is to unpack this idea further and explore how music practices evolve.

Concluding Remarks

To answer this thesis' main research questions, I develop a framework that considers the tensions between stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness through different practices and tactics. I propose that a framework that considers these themes within material environments and mediated spaces will provide a richer understanding of the everyday lives of encamped refugees. It also presents the other side of the story, one that doesn't purely focus on the state of exception and bare life.

While Chapter 2 provided insight into how I will approach and answer the question of *how, if at all, do encamped Karen articulate their everyday lives, identities, and sense of belonging within the material space of Mae La?* Chapter 3 complemented Chapter 2 by drawing from studies that provide insight into how we might answer the questions of *to what extent are media technologies used by Mae La inhabitants and what role they play in mediating everyday identities and a sense of belonging? To what extent, if at all, new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments are interweaved into everyday encamped experiences?*

At the start of this chapter, four critical sub-questions were raised: firstly, *how do refugees live, if at all, in mediated spaces?* Secondly, *do new mediated practices enable encamped refugees to transcend material borders, or do new mediated practices reaffirm their physical stuckness?* Thirdly, *how, if at all, do refugees maintain social relations in online and offline arenas?* Finally, *to what extent have online spaces become interwoven into the everyday fabric of refugees' lives?* To help answer these questions, the framework for this chapter unfolded over four main sections. It started with the evolution of presence and how the mediated space has evolved over the years. It then explored how separated families and communities deploy innovative ways to stay connected, creating a sense of *being with each other* within mediated environments. Following this, the chapter expanded on the concept of *being with each other* to a sense of *belonging to each other*, and finally, it looked closely at how cultural production and practices are used as tactics to facilitate a sense of belonging and solidarity.

The importance of a structure that considers both material and mediated practices is that I intend on demonstrating how encamped refugees do not live in just one space (of exception) and that Mae La camp life is messy, complex, and often contradictory.

Chapter 4

Reflections on Fieldwork

I approach this study from a socio-technical (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999) ethnographic perspective to gain further insight into the often taken-for-granted small, overlooked practices of everyday lives of encamped refugees and the tensions between stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness. An ethnographic approach allowed for continuous reflection on the sensitive nature of my research whilst opening a space to build relationships slowly with Mae La inhabitants, in turn, gaining their trust so that they openly spoke about their experiences. The research required significant contact with my participants and their daily lives in, albeit restricted, circumstances. This helped me better understand how inhabitants live in exceptional situations and articulate their lives within physical and mediated spaces.

My engagement with displaced people in Thailand spans many years, which I will return to later; however, for this research, I visited Mae La in person regularly from 2017 to the end of 2019. During my time in the camp, I volunteered as a teacher at one of the colleges, attended graduations, house blessings, funerals, and accepted all invitations to eat with my participants and the wider community. I shopped in the local market, visited schools, got involved in special celebrations and 'hung out' with inhabitants as they went about their daily lives. When not physically in the camp, I continued to engage with my participants (those who, of course, had access) over Facebook and Messenger. Facebook, Messenger, and YouTube's mediated spaces were instrumental to my research in 2020-21 when the camp went into total lockdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Over 2020 and 2021, the camp has remained mostly a secure site, specifically restricting foreign visitors. Facebook and Messenger became the only way we could keep connected. However, it also reaffirmed ideas surrounding exclusion, isolation, and stuckness, discussed further in the empirical chapters.

To achieve theoretical and empirical triangulation, I carried out an ethnographic study that considered the camp as a dynamic dimension of multiplicity (Massey, 2013, 2005). To ensure the quality and integrity of this research with a particular focus on safeguarding my participants, an ethics review document was submitted to and approved by Goldsmiths, University of London. The research site and my participants are considered especially vulnerable due to trauma experienced from the civil war in Myanmar, their ongoing protracted displacement in Thailand, and some falling outside the UNHCR refugee mandate. This meant the ethics process of approval was particularly rigorous. Before commencing fieldwork, I formed an external board of advisors consisting of Karen academics, Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) members, and experts. When asked by the university ethics committee to provide further information about the potential risks my research posed to myself and

my participants, the local board members were especially helpful in advising over the situation. I was put in contact with a local South East Asian security expert who had worked in Mae La and with the KRC for many years. I also reached out to Victoria Jack, who, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, had conducted her PhD fieldwork on 'Communication as Aid' in Mae La in 2015. These contacts and their advice helped satisfy the ethics committees concerns and allowed me to move forward with the research in confidence. Following ethical procedures of care of duty to protect my participants' identities, I continuously reflected on anonymity throughout the four years. This presented me with further ethical concerns and questions, such as 'what's in a name?'. Anonymity and consent will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

To observe everyday spaces, I explore tensions between bare life and suspended states (Agamben, 2005, 1998; Agier, 2011; Corsellis and Vitale, 2005; Goffman, 1961; Iazzolino, 2020), stuckness (Biemann, 2008; Cabalquinto, 2018; Downing, 2016; Hage, 2009a; Hirst and Thompson, 1995; Jack, 2017; Jefferson et al., 2019; Kluitenberg, 2011; Morley, 2017; Straughan et al., 2020), transcendence (Cabañes, 2017; Casas-Cortés et al., 2015; Ditcher, 2006; Hjorth and Pink, 2014; Madianou, 2016; Massey, 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Steuer, 1992; Twigg, 2018), and ordinariness (Corbet, 2016; Das, 2007; Fresia and Von Känel, 2016; Madianou and Miller, 2013a; Morgan, 2011; Turner, 2016).

I explored the interwoven networks and practices of the community and how my participants, to varying degrees, negotiated regimes of power, cultural structures, geography, and mobility and immobility within the unique context of Mae La on the Thai-Myanmar border. Further to the questions presented in the introduction of this thesis and Chapters 2 and 3, I asked *how Mae La is a space of contradiction? How does living in the camp affect inhabitants' identity and sense of belonging, and how is this communicated? To what extent, if at all, are media technologies integrated into everyday life, and what role do they play in expressing identities? Moreover, I asked how mediated communication practices are linked to the articulation of identities? Finally, how do media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated spaces create, maintain, and disseminate the sense of being together and belonging to one another?*

Before exploring these questions, what follows is an in-depth account of how I approached this study. This chapter will unfold over five sections. Section one discusses how I gained entrance to the camp, how I waited at the different gates, and the moment I was denied access. Section two identifies my participants and sample group, followed by section three, where I discuss the importance of ethnography, why it is suitable for this field site and population, and ethical reflections on anonymity and consent. Section three will also provide a background into my relationships with my translators and the limitations of relying on translations. Section four will describe the methods used to gain

insight into my participants' lives, and finally, section five will reflect on the position of the researcher and power dynamics. Aside from the ethics review carried out before starting my fieldwork, I will weave ethical questions and concerns I have faced throughout the study into each section of this chapter.

Entering the Camp

Refugees as persons are subsumed under elaborate bureaucratic structures that 'control' them. A key feature of these structures of control is the exercise of power by individual actors who represent authority structures at different levels of the hierarchy and often perceive their role in life as saying 'no'.

(Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007, p.283)

Gaining access and entering Mae La was always challenging. From long waits at the gate (Figure 5) to denied entrance, the role of the omnipresent authorities such as the Camp Commander and the security guards, and the controlled restrictions on my physical mobility at the gate only reinforced my initial impression of entering a total institution. The many aid agencies that operate inside the camp apply for official camp passes from the Thai Ministry of Interior (Mol). Once



Figure 5: Guard gate, Mae La Camp. Guard gates are located all along the outer fence of Mae La. These gates are opened at 06:00 and closed at 18:00.

these are obtained, daily access is relatively easy. For those like myself who do not work for an agency, the task of gaining access is more complicated. Special access is arranged through a host within the camp, such as a school or church. The visitor submits their passport details to the host, who then fills out a request. This is given to the Thai Mol Camp Commander's office for approval. Without a camp pass, entry is never guaranteed. Even if you are assured you have permission, it is at the discretion of the Camp Commander, and once you reach the camp gates, visitors quickly learn to be flexible and patient.

Waiting at the Gate

I had become accustomed to waiting at the gate, even though I was usually the only foreigner entering at the time. It was customary to wait at least 20 minutes while my name was checked. However, my Karen hosts had warned me with stories of visitors making the long trip to the camp only to be denied entry and turned away with no explanation. In my case, it took several months of successful visits before my luck ran out and I experienced denied access.

When I finally experienced my first denied entrance, I had planned to stay for one week. I had prepared myself to go through the process of waiting for permission but was told not to worry as the gate I was entering through received many foreign visitors. I waited patiently in the car, and finally, after 15 minutes, the driver switched the engine off, and I was left wondering what the problem was. As people shook their heads and guards checked with the main office, it was revealed that my documents had not been approved, and I was not granted permission to enter. I asked if there was a possibility the Camp Commander could 'make an exception', but the guard suggested I try the following day. I did not want to lose face by being visibly upset or upset anyone else, so I arranged for transport back to a hotel and left quietly deflated. The following day, I was taken through the Camp Commander's gate and required to sign in for the first time officially. I was met by the Camp Commander's assistant, who checked my papers, and I was told that I was permitted to stay for only one day. He instructed me to go straight to the school I was visiting, not to take photos inside the camp, and to leave by 6 pm, where I was expected to sign out. I was also informed that my documents were not approved for the rest of the week, but I was welcome to try another time.

Throughout my fieldwork, I entered the camp through many different gates along the 5-mile stretch with varying degrees of formality and regulation. This allowed me to explore and observe the camp from different vantage points. Spending time sitting and waiting also allowed me to witness the movement and flow of people I once considered completely cut off. Furthermore, my experience entering the camp and the restrictions I faced encapsulates the power dynamics the authority actively projects to the outside world, reinforcing the framing of a bounded domain of control. This example demonstrates the importance of ethnography and participant observation as it challenges pre-conceived ideas and produces insight. I realised that my 'outsider's perception' was incomplete, and the complexity within the physical boundaries of the camp is far from fixed.

Identifying Participants and Groups within the Fieldsite

I initially thought when designing the research that I would carry out a snowball technique for selecting participants. After starting my fieldwork, I quickly realised that this was unnecessary as an ethnographic approach allowed me to build my own contacts and relationships, albeit in a much

slower manner. I carried out 40 semi-structured interviews, which lasted from 30 minutes to two and half hours. In most cases, the initial semi-structured interviews were followed up two or three times, each time expanding on the last and introducing new themes. Between 2017 and 2019, the more formal interviews were complemented with other informal conversations and times of 'hanging out'. Aside from the interviews and observations, I conducted a digital ethnography where I drew from images and music uploaded to social media, videos sent to me via Messenger, and conversations with participants via social media. I further drew from media diaries written by my younger participants and identity maps. Each method helped to shed light on the everyday practices of my encamped inhabitants. I extended the invitation to the older participants, however, most were reluctant to do it and so I focused on more formal interviews and informal chats over coffee.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the camp population is diverse and consists of 80.58% Karen, 9.60% Karenni, 3.2% Bama, and 6.62% other ethnic minorities from Myanmar. The camp is also religiously varied, with 48.6% Buddhist, 37.4% Christian, 13.5% Islam, 0.4% Animist, and 0.1% other (The Border Consortium, 2020). My intention was to speak with a broad population to avoid engaging with only one dominant voice. Considering this, my participants aged from 19-years-old to 70-years-old with a nearly equal male to female ratio. I spoke with S'gaw and Pwo speakers, who were either Christian, Buddhist, Animist, or Lehkai. All my participants had arrived before 2015, with some spending over 30 years living in Mae La.

As I became more familiar with the camp and my participants, I observed three Karen groups from the data. This is not to say Mae La is limited to three groups. I acknowledge that there are other minority populations, such as 13.5% Muslim. However, after speaking with my Muslim contacts about their cultural and social practices, the complexity of their historical journey to Myanmar, their relationship with the S'gaw and Pwo Karen and their languages (predominately Burmese speakers), I decided I would focus on the two largest Karen groups S'gaw and Pwo, which would provide a more manageable project. What follows is a brief description of the groups.

Group One: I Came to the Camp for Safety

The first group identified are those who fled the fighting, particularly at the height of the Four Cuts Campaign⁶ during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. They typically entered Mae La, having previously stayed in a smaller camp and then relocated when the camps consolidated in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since moving to Mae La, they claim they rarely leave, and if they do, it is for a short duration,

⁶ "Four Cuts" counter-insurgency strategy, in which the Burmese army has attempted to defeat armed ethnic groups by denying them access to food, funds, recruits, and information from other insurgent groups' (South, 2005, p.17)

usually to pick up work as day labourers, working in the fields or in construction. They do not typically have permits to leave the camp and risk arrest, exploitation, and deportation when they do so.

This group were above the age of 40-years-old and would describe themselves and others as elders. The elders are viewed in Karen society as having social authority, which comes from their social memory of Karen history, culture, and traditions. They shared a similar memory of life under the *Tatmadaw* in Myanmar, retelling stories of losing family members and their village to the war and being forced into labour. They recalled hardships growing up while living a simple life working on farms with no electricity or communication methods other than face-to-face or word of mouth.

Under the Junta regime of the 1980s, they remember growing up in rural areas with restrictions on the media and harsh censorship laws. This group never engaged with technologies or technical or digital mediated communication in Myanmar before coming to the camp. Although they may now own mobile phones, this group's digital networks are small, if not non-existent. They relied heavily on younger members of the family to help them connect with those outside the camp. Losing contact with friends and family who resettled was typical for this group, but the desire to stay in touch was still strong. Working with younger family members who were usually connected to those outside the camp via mobile phones, Facebook, and other social media had, to some extent, revitalised their once lost connections. Music experienced at church, in the temple, or at home played a large part in their lives and was a way to relax and escape their daily concerns. In total, I interviewed officially 16 participants in this group.

Group Two: I was Born or Brought Here as a Young Child

The second group was born in the camp, or they were brought in as young children under 10-years-old. At the time of the interviews (2018-2021), their ages ranged from 19 to late 30s, although most participants from this group were in their early 20s. This group claim they rarely leave the camp, and if they do, it is only for a short period and usually for temporary work. They have had access to the Internet since 2008 when the camp was connected; however, most claimed to have only recently bought smartphones in the last five years. Their digital networks and imagined communities were vast and connected to Myanmar and the global diaspora through Facebook and YouTube. This suggests that while members of this group rarely leave the camp, they were more virtually mobile than physically mobile.

This group often volunteered for positions within youth organisations or took part as speakers for special events such as Martyrs' Day or National Day. All the participants in this group were stateless, with only a few obtaining UN registered cards. These participants might not be registered with the

UN, but they were official camp residents, meaning they were registered with the Camp Commander's office and entitled to camp rations. In total, I interviewed 11 participants in this group.

Group Three: I Came for Opportunities

The final group to be identified were the newest arrivals in the camp. These participants had come from all over the Karen State, usually from villages or towns with limited educational opportunities and resources or were previously under *Tatmadaw* control. These inhabitants made up the vast number of unregistered residents living within the camp boundaries and thus did not have access to rations (rations will be discussed in Chapter 5). They relied on money earned from previously working in Myanmar, inside the camp, or remittance often sent by relatives living abroad. Growing up in Myanmar, they discussed the lack of opportunities and the need to better themselves, their village, and the Karen people. The younger participants in this group were passionate about education and, like group two, wanted to become leaders within their communities. However, if given the opportunity, they would rather find a scholarship and continue their study elsewhere in the world.

Like group one, they did not have access to technologies or mediated communication in Myanmar until 2015, when the NLD government was elected and adopted more democratic policies. Once settled into the camp, the younger inhabitants', like group two, embraced technologies and were enthusiastic about expanding their networks and connecting to Karen around the world. Nevertheless, they voiced problems with keeping in touch with those in Myanmar, especially family members in more remote villages. This group was mobile, leaving the camp often for a few months to return to the Karen State to visit family and travel. Many of these participants had a Myanmar ID card (this is not to be mistaken for a passport which no one had). Out of all three groups, they were the most physically and virtually mobile. In total, I interviewed 13 participants in this group.

It must be noted that my discussions and interactions with each group in the camp were not limited to 16 (group one), 11 (group two), and 13 (group three) inhabitants. Throughout the fieldwork, I engaged with many more inhabitants who have been instrumental in helping me unpack my research questions and provide insight into everyday life. I would also like to acknowledge that although these groups are beneficial in a theoretical sense, meaning they classify people into easily recognisable groups, groups are not homogenous in practice. There were many overlaps and messiness to where inhabitants fitted in and which group, they should be placed in. Considering this, the classifications are designed to give fundamental historical background and an overview, and should be approached with flexibility.

Ethnographic Sensitivity

The choice to conduct an ethnographic study that included in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observations, media diaries, identity maps, and online ethnography allowed me, to varying degrees, to be part of my participants' social world (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p.249), and enabled me to observe the complexities of the refugee camp and their lives. This approach further helped me avoid the extractive nature of other methods that are often based on one-off encounters. This section is separated into four parts. It will first highlight the importance of ethnography and why it is suitable for studying everyday encamped refugee lives. I will then turn to the question of anonymity and consent. This will be followed by describing the role of my translators. I will then describe translation limitations and missed information.

Before coming to Thailand, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, my perception of camp life, drawn from the dominant image of refugees constructed by camp authorities, the media, and academic literature, was that the inhabitants were *all* stuck in a state of limbo and exception, stripped bare (Agamben, 2005, 1998) of agency with little hope or future imaginings. It was not until spending extensive time with the inhabitants inside Mae La and Karen friends in Chiang Mai that I came to realise that my initial observations and perceptions were not entirely accurate and that the situation was far more complex than I had initially thought.

The value of ethnography is that it functions within a paradigm that focuses on inductive methods emphasising the participant's interpretation of their everyday world, which I view as 'subjective and socially created' (Anderson, 2017, p.384). Ethnography is described as 'the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities' (Brewer, 2000, p.6). I observed the mundane and often taken-for-granted everyday practices (Blaikie, 1993. p.179) that may shed further light on encamped identity articulation and a sense of belonging. In doing this, it was my intention to explore what 'people actually do, rather than what they say they do' (Beaulieu, 2017, p.35).

At the heart of this research is the everyday relationships encamped refugees have with negotiating their material and mediated landscapes and the relationships built within the spaces they occupy. It is the tensions between stuckness, transcendence, ordinary life, and bare life which this thesis is interested in exploring. I argue that it is a combination of the social space in which they live, their interactions, and practices that make up who they are; in other words, it is within spaces of multiplicity that identities and a sense of belonging are created, maintained, and articulated. Focusing on the smallest of nuances to the grander gestures, studying what people do through an ethnographic perspective allowed an insight into how individuals and groups carve out identities and make

meaning from their material, social, political and technical worlds. It allowed an investigation into the 'time signatures' that punctuate everyday lives so that we can explore the 'ordinary triumphs of getting by' (Back, 2015, p.821). I define time signatures as moments or junctures that underpin life. These moments allow us to explore 'the wider spectrum of life experiences' (Back, 2015, p.821).

An ethnographic approach permitted me to engage with refugees who fled the civil war in Myanmar sensitively and respectfully. When carrying out fieldwork, sensitivity and respect were always front and centre, as many of my inhabitants had lost family members, directly experienced physical and mental torture, and forced labour. This meant that not only was careful consideration over the phrasing and delivery of questions important, I constantly needed to respond to my participants' emotional reactions to my questions and my physical presence in their space. An example of this was in my method of delivery which included passive body language, including sitting back or leaning forward depending on the situation, which encouraged more discussion.

Furthermore, I reflected on my participant's movements, often avoiding intense eye contact as this is not practised in Karen culture. Knowing the Karen generally speak quietly, I would adapt my tone to gently or softly ask them to expand on areas, listening intently, acknowledging their answers by nodding and smiling. At first, these small actions may sound obvious; however, I would argue that they can often be overlooked and ignored when researchers are in the field. Another example included where we would meet and sit. We would all sit at the same level; if they sat on a chair, I would sit next to them on a chair; if they sat on the floor, I would do the same. Spacing was also crucial; I did not want to sit too close to crowd their personal space but not too far that distance became a problem. These methods allowed me to build better relationships with my participants whilst learning more about their culture. They are standard methods in ethnography research, but within the small details of the interaction, an ethnographer needs to be continuously evaluating and re-evaluating.

Consent and Anonymity: The Ethics of Naming

From the very beginning, I was open with all my participants about the nature and objectives of my research. Although each participant gave verbal consent, before commencing each 'formal' interview, I would explain my research again, who I was, and the study's objectives. I made clear that the participants could refrain from answering or withdraw from the interview or my study at any time. I chose verbal consent for various reasons. Many of my participants, especially the older inhabitants, were illiterate. Most had been farmers before coming to the camp and had only received primary education in Myanmar. A further challenge was to decide which Karen language to translate the consent form into (S'gaw or Pwo), each branch having various sub-variations and dialects.

Finally, I did not want to leave any trace of the interview, which may have resulted in potential risks to the participants. I was told that researchers, similar to journalists, are viewed with suspicion by the Thai authorities and previous research literature indicated that inhabitants were discouraged from talking to outsiders (Jack, 2015). I would argue that choosing to ask for verbal consent reduced exclusion and increased protection.

I explained that all names would be changed to protect identities. This presented me with an unexpected ethical challenge to do with ownership and agency. As Kelly points out:

Certainly, anonymised research imposes a burden of care on the researcher-writer to maintain a balance between anonymity and illumination; to give only enough circumstantial specifics as are required to decipher the meaning (but not the identity) of the site and its characters (Kelly, 2009, p.441).

My participants wanted me to use their real names on most occasions and questioned my motives for not using them. This was especially a concern for the younger generation, where visibility of their image and voice, particularly online, was important, as described in Chapters 6 and 7. As mentioned above, it was imperative that I protect my participants' identities whilst respecting that these were their stories and without losing the integrity of the research. I reflected on the questions: *what is in a name*, and *when all material objects have been forcefully taken away, what is left other than our names, stories, and memories?*

Gerver contends that 'even in extreme circumstances where identity exposure can create risks, there may be a case for allowing identity exposure and perhaps an obligation on the part of the researcher to publish a name if this is the strong wish of the interviewee' (Gerver, 2013, p.121). With this in mind, I turned to Gordon, who, similar to myself, faced concerns in the field about anonymity. Focusing on feminist values regarding voice and agency, Gordon argues that: 'As feminist research requires us to place women at the centre of the research process, women's own opinions about ethical concepts should also be of utmost importance' (Gordon, 2019, p.543). The benefit of anonymity for vulnerable women is that it can give them the power to speak and critique gender relationships and unequal power structures. 'Anonymity can encourage solidarity and greater understanding about women's experiences and amplify women's voices, but still maintain women's safety' (Gordon, 2019, p.544). However, according to Berkhout, using pseudonyms can also inadvertently silence participants as '*naming* can itself be an act of power' (Berkhout, 2013, p.30).

As researchers are bound by the guidelines of care of duty and institutional ethics reviews, anonymity is standard practice; however, I question the reflexivity of the act and how it might disempower rather than empower both the participant and the researcher. As Moore argues:

For much of history anonymity did not protect the vulnerable, but excluded women and others from authorship and ownership of their own words, erasing them from the archive, even from history, and in the process creating vulnerability through rendering people nameless (Moore, 2012, p.332).

A further complication comes when content is then uploaded to digitally mediated spaces. Reilly (2014) suggests that videos and comments uploaded such as YouTube or Facebook should be considered open text. However, he acknowledges care of duty and advises taking precautions when dealing with sensitive material. This, of course, returns us to the dilemma of naming and power.

I continue to reflect on the ethics of *naming and anonymity* and have felt uncomfortable with the idea that I have denied those who have experienced exclusion and persecution from owning their stories by telling them I would not use their name. To navigate this situation, I asked my participants to give me a nickname or a pseudonym they would like me to use, which seemed to satisfy most participants. When discussing artists creative work, for example, in Chapter 6, I used their online names. To add a further layer of identity protection, I chose to pixelate the faces of video material such as screenshots or any images of my participants.

As I air on the side of caution, I advocate that more discussion is needed on naming and anonymity, especially in the case where encamped refugees are finding innovative ways online to self-represent. Researchers are bound by institutional guidelines, bureaucratic obstacles, and ethics reviews where principles are set to protect all actors. When participants, particularly those deemed at vulnerable, even if they may not consider themselves vulnerable, reject the idea of anonymity, continuous reflection is needed on a case-to-case basis.

The Role of the Translator and Translation

As mentioned earlier, it was essential to listen to participants' verbal responses and note their non-verbal cues. Perceptual information gained through non-verbal communication was particularly significant when the interview was carried out in a Karen language and translated for me into English. This helped me make essential judgements, such as slowing down the discussion when the participant needed more time to think or tell their story, to cut the interview short if I felt the participant was in any way uncomfortable. I would actively throughout the interview evaluate the situation.

Examples of evaluation included when a participant would use one-word answers, shifting uncomfortably or looking to the door, silence or stating they have no idea (often they had an idea, they just did not want to give it at that time). These examples again may seem obvious or standard; however, I would argue that it is essential when in the field to remember the basics and continuously reflect on who the participants are and the objectives of duty of care.

As I have established, the Karen are linguistically very diverse. We are reminded that there are three main languages within the group: S'gaw, Pwo and Pa'o, each consisting of various dialects and variations. At first, I chose to learn S'gaw as my first assumption was that this was used more. However, I quickly realised that the predominately S'gaw speaking community were often Baptist Christian, educated, and the dominant voice represented in academic literature. I did not want to limit my interviews to S'gaw speakers, so I recruited two translators from inside the camp to help me.

I worked with the translators throughout my fieldwork, which allowed me to communicate with S'gaw and Pwo speakers. One of the translators was born in the camp, and the other, who was in their late 30s, had arrived when they were in their teens. Both translators were well connected and trusted in the community. When my participants saw them, it seemed they would relax, often sharing a joke regarding food or not visiting enough. I would discuss linguistic terms that might pose a problem (media, home, community), finding alternative ways to express the concepts while maintaining the sentiment. I also consulted my Karen language teacher in Chiang Mai, who advised on certain challenging words. Examples included unpacking the politically loaded words 'Burma' versus 'Myanmar' and the lack of a Karen word for 'media', which was often mistaken for meaning news.

I trained both translators on the premise and ethics of my research, specifically participant anonymity. As both translators lived in the camp, they needed to understand the importance of personal data protection and confidentiality. I explained the significance and obligation of protecting the participants and themselves from harmful consequences such as discrimination or intimidation from actors in power and social exclusion (avoid being seen as a spy). It was critical that neither the participants nor the translators felt exploited, which again raises questions on whether anonymity is always ethical?

Translation Limitations and Identifying Missed Information

I take the position that the essence of ethnographic research is in interpreting meaning, understanding what people say and do, and how they express themselves through different practices. Temple points out that 'translators are active producers in research rather than neutral conveyors of messages. In other words, researchers should not assume that there is one version of

a text to be agreed on by focusing solely on the “correct” choice of words’ (Temple, 2002, p.846). Assuming I may have missed valuable details during the translated conversations, I chose to send the recordings to different Karen translators outside the field. For example, Hay Moo Soe, a university graduate, translated and transcribed the full audio interviews. I would then compare them to my field notes and original interview translation. I would add side notes to the transcriptions; these included areas I needed to go back and unpack further with the participant the next time we met, brief observations or analysis of the situation, and any areas that needed further clarification from the first translator. This process, in effect, reconciled gaps in the data. Hay Moo Soe confirmed the reliability of the first translation. He would highlight any inconsistencies in the transcribed transcript, such as when the translators misunderstood my questions, identifying information that was not passed onto me, suggested areas I should have addressed or did not realise were crucial to the participant. The following highlights two prime examples of challenging situations and the importance of further translations.

The first example occurred when I interviewed an elder about his life. Stardagger talked at length about his feelings when he found out his wife was having an affair while he was working in Bangkok. He expressed his heartbreak over the situation and used specific words we do not have in English to convey his distress; however, this part of the interview was not passed on to me. My translator was too embarrassed to explain the details and did not think it was relevant to my research as Stardagger had deviated from the original question. This meant that I did not respond appropriately and instead came across as cold as I moved onto another question. When Hay Moo Soe pointed this out and explained the cultural nuances attached to the words the participant had used, I was able on my next trip to respectfully revisit what he had said. This also gave me an excellent opportunity to discuss with my translator how we might avoid this kind of situation in the future and why it was essential to be thorough. This not only increased the reliability of the data but also gave respect to the story being shared.

The second example illuminates the challenges (and ethical reflections) of engaging with participants who have experienced violence and the expression of explicit content. It seemed that this was one of the most challenging aspects of the fieldwork for both myself and my translators, and highlights the importance of being wholly present and emotionally engaged with the participant.

Sitting in a small shop on plastic chairs, I asked Paw Ler, a sixty-five-year-old woman, if she could describe her life before coming to the camp. Having lived in the camp for nearly 30 years, she slowly talked about her experience under the *Tatmadaw* regime and her daily struggles in Mae La. As she disclosed more details of violence she had witnessed and personally experienced, her story became increasingly upsetting for both myself and the translator. I found myself thinking, *how do I respond*

to this? When she came to a natural pause, I asked if she could speak to someone about her experiences and if she wanted to continue or talk about something else. Looking at me directly, she said that this was the first time she had told anyone about what had happened to her and that she wanted to tell her story. You see, although her story is unique to her, it is not uncommon for those who live in the camp. And whether this was the first time she had told her story or not, it highlighted how inhabitants wanted a space to talk about their past. Saw Soe Soe later tells me that trauma is an experience, a memory that family members, friends, and neighbours live with but rarely discuss, in some ways over time, it has been normalised with many stating 'we are used to this', 'this is normal for Karen' or 'that's just the way it was/is'.

Later, her son, a man in his forties who had been drinking alcohol, found us, and wanted to be interviewed as well. He was 10-years-old when he left Myanmar. The atmosphere of the interview changed, and tensions rose. Throughout his interview, he angrily shouted about how the *Tatmadaw* had treated *his family*, how their land had been taken away, and how his people had suffered. Pointing at me, he would turn to my translator and say, 'tell her, tell her what I said'. Seemingly upset with the situation, my translator started to withdraw and kept saying, 'he's drunk, he's drunk'. I reassured him that I understood this, but it was necessary to translate everything the son was saying.

Listening carefully, I asked further questions making sure I still engaged with Paw Ler while acknowledging her son's comments. At the end of the interview, I thanked them for sharing their stories and whether they had any questions for me. Before leaving, they shook my hand (which is not generally practised in Karen culture) and asked me about my life in Thailand. Now smiling and a lot calmer, the son thanked me for coming in Thai and left. I thanked Paw Ler and said that I looked forward to seeing her next time.

It was essential to acknowledge the two participants and the translator, who was born in the camp, and his reaction to the situation. Interestingly, this interaction highlighted how I needed to be aware of the multiple tensions present and the different actors involved. It was apparent that my translator struggled with what had been discussed, and the confrontational and tense atmosphere of this interview caused him anxiety. Initially, he was unwilling to engage with the drunk man, pretending not to hear him or just saying, 'he's drunk, he keeps repeating himself'. After the interview, I sat down with the translator to discuss the situation and see how he felt. I briefed him on the importance of translating everything so that the participant leaves feeling heard and not exploited, and how best to move forward and work together.

Beyond the Interview

According to Tedlock, in writing the ethnographic narrative, 'we encourage interactions in which each moment becomes two moments, history and memory, suspended in our consciousness' (Tedlock, 2018, p.1469). This meant that I blended observations where I passively listened and watched, and at times I actively participated in events and everyday practices. I am aware that these moments are constructions and interpretations of what I perceive to be everyday life in the camp. However, it is '[b]eing there seeing, hearing, and meditating; being here dreaming, remembering, and inscribing' (Tedlock, 2018, p.1469) which gives my work substance and importance. By participating in everyday activities, Van Maanen suggests that '[c]lose observation involves an attitude of assuming a relation that is as close as possible while retaining a hermeneutic alertness to situations that allows us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations' (Van Maanen, 1995, p.69). The commitment to studying the everyday experience through observations is deliberately unstructured, allowing the researcher to actively explore and verify what has been said by participants previously. As Delamont beautifully articulates, the intention is for the researcher to,

discover what 'their' people believe; what they do at work and in their leisure time; what makes them laugh, cry and rage; who they love, hate and fear; and how they choose their friends and endure their relations...This is done by living with the people being studied, watching them work and play, thinking carefully about what is seen, interpreting it and talking to the actors to check the emerging interpretations (Delamont, 2004, p.206).

As I watched, listened, and participated in activities, I produced knowledge from each moment. My regular visits and extended time in the camp meant that I was invited to dinner, where we would sit crossed legged on bamboo mats around low laying tables. We shared food from communal bowls; vegetable soup, crabs caught from the local stream the night before made into a curry and a considerable amount of rice took centre stage. On the walls of the houses hung A4 photocopies of family members' certificates and photographs, sleeping mats were rolled up and stored in a corner, and wet clothes hung from the windows (Figure 6). In the morning, charcoal provided by the camp authorities was used to make fires and boil water. Smoke filled the air and burned the throat; cockerels sang in the new day, and children washed from the local well before school. One morning after the water delivery truck had moved through, I spotted a woman picking up two dead chicks; unfortunately, they did not move quickly enough and were squashed into the mud.



Figure 6: Typical house made of bamboo. Although it is rainy season, clothes hang under the plastic covered roof. An orange satellite dish sits in front of the house. An electric meter attached the house to the right of the photo.

Further observations as I walked around the camp were how people tended to the varying sizes of garden/land around their houses, hammocks swung between pillars, and people gathered to chat in houses, shops, and communal spaces. However, participant observation is not ‘doing what those being observed do, but interacting with them while they do it’ (Delamont, 2004, p.206). A prime example of this will be discussed in Chapter 7 when I discuss ritual practices held in Mae La.



Figure 7: Bags of sand and water hang from every house as a fire extinguisher.

Small bags of sand and water hung from bamboo thatched houses to douse any accidental fires (Figure 7). In 2021, these bags were used to put out a fire in Zone A. 53 houses were burnt down when a kitchen fire

became unmanageable (Figure 8). The night of the fire, many of my participants sent me video footage of the scene as it unfolded. Thankfully no one was hurt, but many livestock were lost. The fire highlighted the importance of new media technologies and mediated spaces as my participants could disseminate information quickly to a wider audience. This brings me to the significance of digital or online ethnography and its relation to participant observation and how it helped me build further relationships in the camp.



Figure 8: Mae La fire, 2021

Digital Ethnography

Mediated communication practices and spaces such as Facebook and Messenger became instrumental in keeping connected to my participants, especially throughout 2020-21 when the pandemic forced the camp into lockdown. It was also a vital tactic in exploring music uploaded to YouTube and participatory cultures, as discussed in Chapter 6. As the intention of this study was to explore how offline and online spaces lace together, it was imperative to extend the ethnographic research to include digital ethnography. As Hine argues, when conducting an ethnographic study whereby participants are taking part in mediated communications and practices, it is 'self-evident that the ethnographer needs to take part in those mediated communications alongside whatever face-to-face interactions may occur, as well as taking note of any other forms of document and recording that circulate amongst participants' (Hine, 2015, p.3).

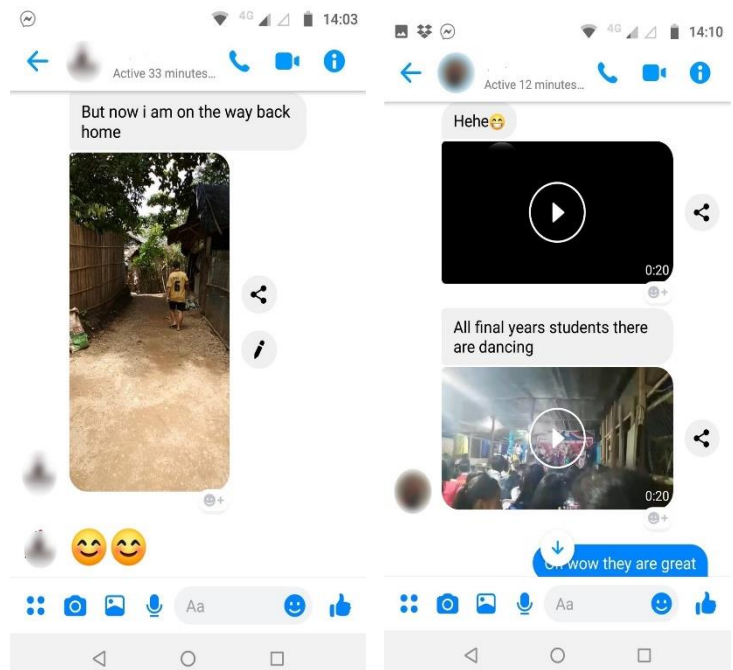


Figure 9: Two participants sharing their day. The first is taken as the participant walks home, the second, is a video of a morning assembly at a school I volunteered at.

Facebook Messenger, the preferred medium of contact for my participants, virtually transported me into the camp and, to some extent, allowed my participants to leave. Connected through video, I would often find my younger participants call unexpectedly to share their morning assemblies, dance and singing classes, or walk home (Figure 9). Since 2017, I have attended graduation in the camp whilst sitting in a corridor at Goldsmiths in London (Figure 10) and Martyrs' Day in my office in Chiang Mai. My interviews



Figure 10: Attending a camp graduation from Goldsmiths via Messenger. I was often found sitting outside the PhD room engaging with participants in the camp.

and participant observations are supplemented by participants sending me photos of themselves, articles they have read from the *Karen News*, and disturbing clips of murder and torture documenting human rights violations inside Myanmar. They tag me on their posts on Facebook and will call me through video messaging spontaneously. In other words, conversations I have had with participants in the camp continue over Facebook and Messenger, ideas are shared, and relationships are built and maintained from a distance. I learnt that the lived space extended, for some, to a digitally mediated space and that often-taken-for-granted online practices were significant in unpacking everyday connected lives.

Drawing from information from Facebook, Messenger or YouTube presented me with further ethical concerns. It also offered tremendous opportunities to explore user-generated content, rich in insightful information on the everyday lives of encamped people. Contextual challenges are located around the debate of public vs private data. It raises the question: *To what extent does the content producer reasonably expect to be observed online by strangers or have their information used for research?* This was particularly relevant in Chapter 6, when I explored music videos uploaded to YouTube. In Chapter 6, I chose a multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA) approach to study music, as it combines interviews, text and images, and the meanings conveyed therein. The benefit of using MMDA as a tool for analysing uploaded music to YouTube is that it can 'provide insight into the relation of the meanings of a community and its semiotic manifestations' (Kress, 2012, p.37). The limitation is the interpretive nature which is subjective.

Besides the face-to-face interviews and screenshots, I drew from the online comments and reactions to the songs. This presented me with further ethical concerns situated around privacy. Considering

the various challenges for every photograph, screenshot, message sent on Messenger, I contacted the content owner and asked permission to use it whilst explaining how it would be used. To comply with concerns around identity identification, I omitted their names and pixelated/blurred out any identifying details. For any comments left on the musician's YouTube channel, I paraphrased and took out any identifying information.

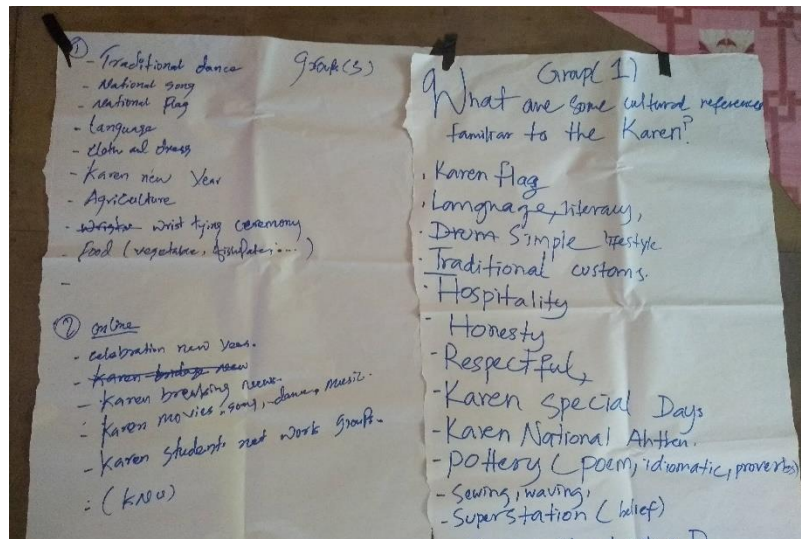


Figure 11: Group identity activity carried out on large pieces of paper.

Mapping Identities

As an extension to the interviews, observations, and digital ethnography, I wanted to dig deeper and understand more about how my participants viewed themselves at that moment, so I chose to carry out a mind mapping activity in groups (Figure 11) and individually (Figure 12). The activity had two benefits; the first was to encourage the participants to think about their identities on and offline; the second was a tool to help me draw out themes, thus complementing the interview and participant observation data.

I argue that mind mapping is a useful device for ethnographers as it allows the participant to think in more abstract terms in a creative and relaxed environment. Tattersall and Vernon claim that the fundamental concept behind the mind mapping technique in qualitative research is to allow the brain's thought process to make significant links between ideas. They state that '[t]he brain will

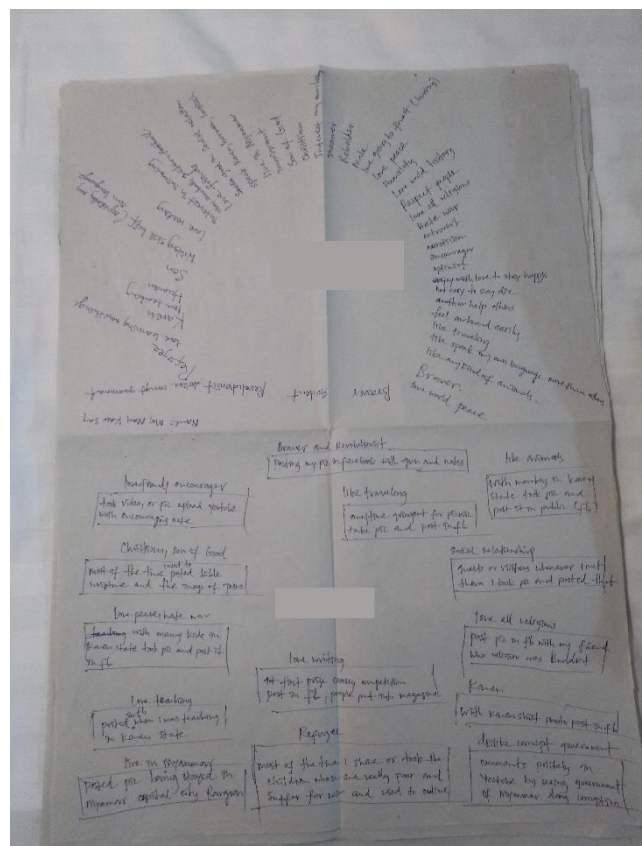


Figure 12: Individual identity map. The top map refers to the participant's identity online and the bottom offline.

then work more effectively by integrating and linking concepts, rather than in traditional lines, as in text' (Tattersall and Vernon, 2007, p.32).

An example of the mind mapping activity I did with the younger participants involved providing them with large pieces of blank paper and inviting them to get into small groups of three or four. In these groups, the intention was to share and discuss their ideas of what it is to be Karen. Once completed, we pinned the paper to the wall where all participants involved in the activity had a chance to view what other groups had written. We then discussed as a group, aspects of Karen life and uniqueness.

The second activity was to elicit from individuals their own perceived identities on and offline and how they engage with the concept of identity. As mind mapping was an unfamiliar concept to some participants, I first demonstrated how I perceived my own online and offline identities, and then I asked them to do the same. This technique successfully provided a creative and relaxed space for the participants to freely explore and map out their ideas. In response to the criticism that this method could be perceived as essentialist, reducing identity to a list, I would argue that it gave a snapshot of how my participants self-identified at that given moment. Although there was a risk that the group exercise may have produced a rather normative account of Karen identity that reinforced dominant and nationalist accounts, these accounts were still essential to unpack and not ignore. I would argue that the individual accounts captured, at that moment, one aspect of the individual's self-image and helped locate themes to explore further.

Media Diaries

I invited my participants to keep a media diary for a couple of weeks. Again, it was the younger generation or, the older participants who were comfortable with English who volunteered. Although this meant that many of my participants were excluded and reinforced stuckness, particularly within the older demographic, it did help me unpack the younger groups media practices and complemented the identity maps. The diaries were an insight into who the participants engaged with and highlighted everyday details. This is illustrated in Figure 13, where the

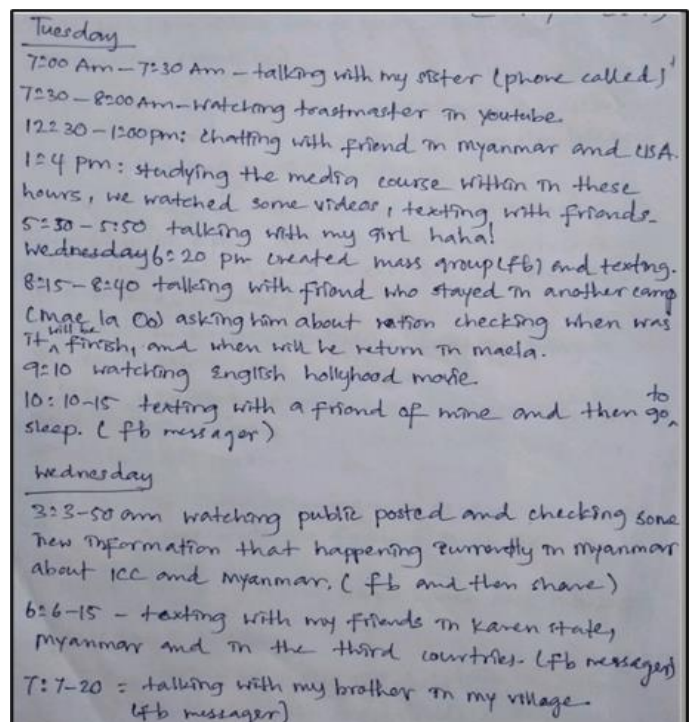


Figure 13: Participant's media diary.

participant asked a friend in a different camp about ration cuts and highlighted a private moment at 17:30 where they spoke 'with their girl'.

Diaries are used to document what the participant would often consider mundane, yet what I deemed rich in detail; they highlight everyday life's particulars. Wheeler and Reis argue that this well-established tradition is significant because 'the recurrent "little experiences" of everyday life fill most of our waking time and occupy the vast majority of our conscious attention. Moreover, these small events cannot be studied with ecological validity in the laboratory' (Wheeler and Reis, 1991, p.340). The emergence of technology has meant that video or audio diaries can now replace the traditional pen and paper method. This alternative method has immediate benefits, such as providing time or date stamps detailing when the entry was made. It also gives participants the freedom and flexibility to talk directly into the device. This is particularly useful for groups who are illiterate or find writing challenging.

I chose to use pen and paper diaries for this study for practical reasons (Figure 13). Not all my participants had access to a device with recording capabilities. When they did, a limitation was that often they would not have enough funds for data; this meant that sending or transferring files was challenging. Further restrictions included participant forgetfulness. As they were not in the habit of keeping a diary, they often forgot or would do it late at night and in a rush.

Participant observation, mind mapping, and media diaries braided together with a narrative that was not revealed or apparent in the interviews. I was able to weave together a better understanding as patterns and themes emerged, which I may have missed if I had only carried out interviews. It showed me the everyday nuances, the mundane interactions the participants took for granted, and how they perceived themselves. Ordinariness such as the time spent speaking or messaging a partner was revealed, how they viewed themselves as leaders or refugees at that moment, how far-reaching their connectivity was, and what they discussed with each other became known through applying different methods. It must be noted that the identity maps and media diaries were helpful as they confirmed what was said in the discussions; however, they were used as a supplement to other methods as they excluded many of my participants.

A Potato in a Rice Field: Positioning the Self in the Study

The idea of home, belonging, and identity has always fascinated me; it stems from not fully understanding a person's feeling to belong to a place. My father was in the military, and we moved every three years. From an early age, I can remember that we would pack up and move just as I was settling in somewhere. New locations, homes, and friends were the norm. I attended three

different schools between the ages of 13 and 16 in three different locations around the British Isles. Growing up in this environment meant that I was not 'rooted' in a place. I felt no attachment to it or the people left behind. When people ask me where 'home' in the UK is, I struggle with the concept, especially now, as a long-term resident in Thailand.

In 2008, after becoming disillusioned with London life and a career in Public Relations, I left for Thailand. With a small backpack and not much else, I headed for the mountains and the city of Chiang Mai. I had planned to only stay for a year; however, all best-laid plans take unexpected turns, and I find myself 13 years later still living in this city, not quite an insider, but not an outsider either. Chiang Mai is a diverse mix of traditional Lanna.⁷ A city infused with hill tribe culture of the Hmong, Lahu, Akha and Karen people that nestle in the surrounding mountains. Everyday life in Chiang Mai is influenced by a mix of cultures, from the food we eat to the language heard in the markets.

Working at an international university provided an opportunity to engage daily with students and teachers from Myanmar. Over the years, I established a social network of Karen, Thai, and Bama people with whom I interacted with socially both in-person and online. I was invited to attend PhD classes where students predominately came from Myanmar. I would sit in class with Burmese journalists, Karen educators, NGO workers, and exiled people in Thailand. Outside the classroom, we would go to local restaurants, or I would invite the group to my house for dinner; we would read each other's essays, offer suggestions, and question our approach to fieldwork, concepts, and theories. The rich discussions and support system was an invaluable resource and insight into the Karen culture and identities.

Through my connection with the university, I built a strong relationship with local academics and professionals, many of whom became gatekeepers to the camp or wider Karen community and whom I relied on. I was conscious that similar to translators, gatekeepers are also active producers of meaning and thus have their own agenda to help with information and/or access to the field site. As McFadyen and Rankin state, 'understanding the position, perspective, beliefs, and values of the gatekeeper is an important issue in research where the research is sensitive or the participants are vulnerable' (McFadyen and Rankin, 2017, p. 83).

A Global Karen National Development Society board member led me to start this project after lengthy discussions about the Karen diaspora and imagined community. I would attend local conferences

⁷ There is confusion about where Lanna or Lan Na came from and when it was first used; however, Lanna embodies the distinct difference between central Thailand and the mountainous north. Boasting its own language, 'Kham Mueang or Phasa Mueang', culture and cuisine, the Lanna Kingdom has a rich history influenced by hill tribes.

and talks and listen to people such as Dr Ashely South, a leading expert on Myanmar and who has published extensively on Karen issues. Ashley subsequently became a great friend and introduced me to leaders in the Karen community here in Chiang Mai and the UK. His introduction led me to visit the Karen community in Sheffield, some of whom came from Mae La. Through my visits and engagement with the Karen community in Sheffield (Figure 14), I was able to unpack how



Figure 14: Lunch with Karen community, Sheffield, UK

the Karen in the camps and the Karen in the diaspora maintain relationships and how distance and separation from family also reaffirm stuckness. Through social events, work, and everyday interactions, my Karen contacts helped me understand the nuances of their diverse culture.

Working at a Thai university allowed me, in 2016-17, to travel into Myanmar and work with the Karen on educational development projects through the university's Center for Social Impact (CSI). Through this centre, I participated in community outreach projects, engaged with NGOs working in the camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, took part in and ran CSI workshops, and attended refugee student graduation ceremonies and site visits.

This work led me to meet and become friends with the education coordinator for the Karen Refugee Committee in 2016, who is responsible for implementing Karen education programs in the camps along the border. Acknowledging that students lacked media literacy skills, he investigated ways to introduce media education into the camp curriculum. Having heard that I was teaching an 'introduction to media class' to international students, he asked me to help him



Figure 15: Curriculum planning meeting with Karen journalists' and film makers

teach in Mae La. For a media class to be successful, I asked if Karen media professionals could be involved. This led to meeting Karen journalists and professionals (Figure 15) who worked with us to create a curriculum. Once the curriculum was completed, we approached a college in the camp to pilot the course. The course, in 2021, is now in its third year and is popular among students who enjoy creating short films and learning to write articles. At first, this project was not part of my overall fieldwork strategy. The benefits of incorporating the course into my research meant that I could enter the camp regularly, gain trust from the community, and acquire a wealth of rich information through participant observation. As an extension to the classroom, we have a private Facebook page where students upload their work and share ideas.

My friendship and everyday interaction with the Karen education coordinator meant that I gained further insight in a non-academic environment. I would stay with him and his wife in the border town of Mae Sot and would visit them and their newborn child when in the area. We often travelled together from Chiang Mai to the border. The six-hour-long car journey (Figure 16) between Chiang Mai and Mae Sot meant I had a captive audience and an opportunity to discuss his work, life, and perspective on Mae La and the Karen.

Living in Chiang Mai has also meant that I have become friends with other long-term residents who work with the Karen, such as Michelle, a North American who runs a children's home in Chiang Mai. Her foundation works with schools along the border and inside the camps. Together we would travel to Mae La and visit schools. She introduced me to the camp leader whom she had known for many years. Being surrounded by experts and understanding the sensitivity of my research, I decided to approach a group of academics, NGO workers, and Karen Refugee Committee members living in Chiang Mai to act as further advisors. This group became particularly helpful when I

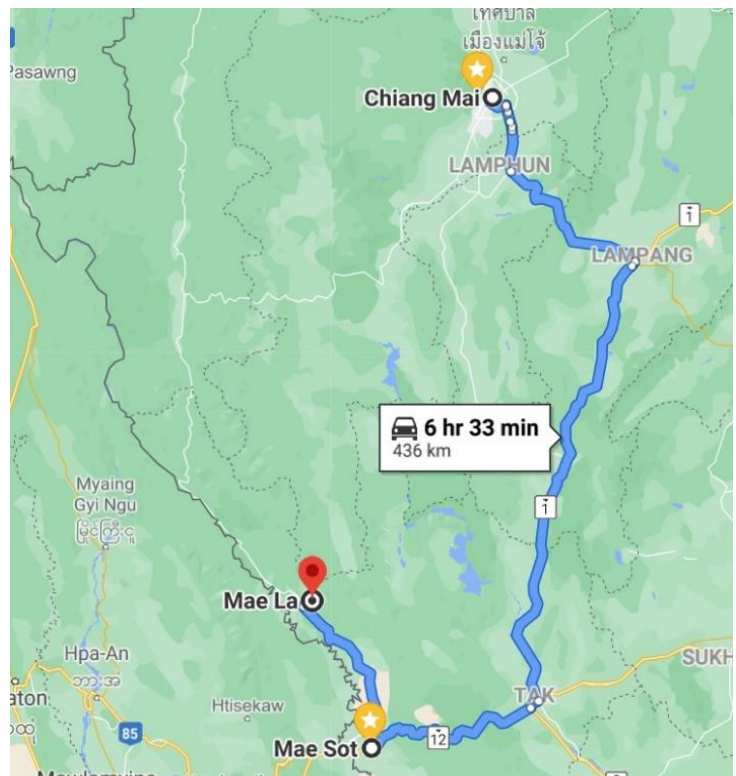


Figure 16: My journey from Chiang Mai to Mae Sot and then onto Mae La.

was writing the ethics review application at the start of my research. They further helped navigate the many challenging questions asked by the ethics review committee at Goldsmiths University.

The Lure of Acceptance

Considering my background, I am reflective of the relationships I have built with the Karen community and where I fit in as a researcher. This raises questions as *to what extent I am an insider?* I would argue I fall somewhere in between insider and outsider. I am more of an insider than someone who carries out research within the camps over a short period and has not built long-lasting relationships with the community. However, I am less of an insider than a local Karen studying their own communities. Acknowledging my role as a researcher has allowed me to think about my personal narrative and how it interweaves with my project.

When carrying out ethnographic research, one concern is the notion of 'over-rapport or going native' and 'lure of acceptance' (O'Reilly, 2009). O'Reilly posits that the concept of 'going native' can be defined as 'the tendency for some ethnographers to forget they are conducting research, to become fully-fledged members of the community under study, and perhaps never 'go home'' (O'Reilly, 2009, p.87). Although I can physically leave the camp and 'go home', my friendships continue outside of it, and with the aid of digital mediated communication practices and spaces, it is hard to 'switch off'. Going native is problematic as a term as some scholars have deemed it as 'a derogatory or offensive term, associated with the language and attitudes of colonial ethnography' (O'Reilly, 2009). Preferring the term 'over-rapport', O'Reilly proposes that researchers consider this term as a more contemporary view.

This finally brings me to the concept of the 'lure of acceptance' (O'Reilly, 2009, p.88). Here O'Reilly states that 'because the ethnographic position falls somewhere between distance and empathy, insider and stranger, it can often feel uncomfortable and the pull to be accepted can become very strong' (*ibid*, p.89-90). I have reflected on this throughout my fieldwork and have presented many challenges, such as not wanting to disclose my lack of religious beliefs in fear that the individual or community I am building a relationship with will disengage. In this instance, I have been reflective of my own biases, the judgement of others, and power dynamics in the field.

Reflections on Power Dynamics within the Field

Aside from the hierarchies compounded by my ethnicity as a white British woman, the status of PhD researcher, and my privilege of mobility, which I will discuss in Chapter 5, other Karen cultural aspects needed to be considered, which also demonstrated various power dynamics in the field. Over the years, I have taught a media course in the camp, which meant that I was introduced to many of my participants as *Tharamoo*, meaning teacher in S'gaw Karen or *Zalamoo* in Pwo Karen. This instantly put me at a research disadvantage as teachers in Karen society are elevated to an esteemed position.

To highlight, I will draw from an incident when I visited a school. I arrived one morning ready to meet my participants and was greeted by the principal, who had forgotten to tell me all classes were cancelled due to his birthday. This meant all my interviews were also cancelled, and instead, I was invited to attend a talent show in honour of the celebrations. 'Tharamoo Charlie, you will be our guest judge', he informed me. Before I could answer, I was escorted to the front of the hall where three other teachers were sitting, pens and paper placed in front of each chair. At this point, the principal seemed to enjoy playing the antagonist in front of the packed room. As the crowd booed him and cheered for the different acts, it gave me an insight into the ordinariness of school assemblies and how similar they are around the world.

After each performance finished, I accepted the microphone, where I gave my critique. On completion of the dance show, it was then the turn of the singers, and the review and scoring continued. When everyone had performed, I was required to give out prizes to the winners. On stage and in front of the whole school, I was presented with a beautiful blue Karen top which they insisted I try on and wear for the rest of the day. As I struggled clumsily into the top, I was touched by the gift and thankful they had got the correct size. At lunch, students came up to take photos and say they liked the top; these photos ended up on many social media pages and were sent to me through Messenger.

On the one hand, it could be viewed that being invited as a guest judge and the Karen top highlights my involvement and acceptance in the community, but on the other, it also placed me in a position of authority and guest, something I was hoping to avoid. A space of separation was further created between those I had planned to interview and the grade I gave them for their dance or singing efforts. However, I was able to turn the event into a benefit by using their dancing or singing as a good ice breaker at the start of the interview. Attending the talent show also gave me further insight into the daily activities of my younger participants and the wider school community.

Situating myself within the field of study was an ongoing process. Dowling suggests that this process 'involves being aware in the moment of what is influencing the researcher's internal and external responses while simultaneously being aware of the researcher's relationship to the research topic and the participants' (Dowling, 2006, p.8). Throughout the research design and data collection, I continued examining my personal relationships and how pre-existing knowledge of the Karen potentially affected the way I engaged with my study. I continually acknowledged, evaluated, and questioned the assumptions and pre-formed ideas I had. I processed the experience through writing fieldnotes and having conversations with my translators, language/culture teacher, local experts, and Karen friends.

The concept of who we are and the formation of identity through our experiences, the stories we create, and the spaces we occupy have driven this thesis forward. Through the friendships and contacts I have made during the 13 years of living in Chiang Mai, I have gained a more nuanced perspective on studying the Karen. I have walked a tightrope between researcher and activist where I often left the camp and cried as I made my way back to Chiang Mai. Mae La as a physical space was a challenging and rich field site that has meant there have been many contradictions and confusions over the last four years, these I intend to unpack and discuss in the empirical chapters next.

Chapter 5

A Camp of Contradictions

This chapter asks, *what is a refugee camp?* I argue that Mae La is a space of multiplicity, where stories, histories, relationships, and everyday activities and practices intertwine simultaneously. I view Mae La as a camp of contradiction, where inhabitants express stuckness within a limbo-like state, yet they negotiate multiple spaces and carve out new beginnings and opportunities. Mae La is a vast space with 34,318 inhabitants (UNHCR, 2020), who live within 454 acres (The Border Consortium, 2020). As a comparison, Mae Sot, the nearest city, where many of the NGOs and aid agencies that work along the border are based, is not much larger than Mae La, with a population of 44,563 people (WPR, 2021).

This chapter introduces how my participants navigate multiple spaces, including the material, digitally mediated, institutional, social, political, and educational. Rather than assuming the experiences of the Karen refugees, I observe everyday life and the tensions between stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness. Through interviews and participant observation, I describe a rich tapestry of everyday life. By exploring mundane, daily actions, practices, and interactions, I aim to further understand the movement and flow of various people across different spaces.

By exploring the different layers within the material space and how some inhabitants transcend into digitally mediated spaces, we are able to simultaneously unpack presence in different environments (Steuer, 1992). To complement the camp description, I draw from stories I encounter as I travel from the city I live in, Chiang Mai, to the camp. I observe the privilege of movement some experience while crossing borders and checkpoints, while others are stuck in what Biemann would call off-social spaces (Biemann, 2008). I shed light on the complicated workings of the camp and will argue that Mae La is far from an isolated bounded system where people are reduced to bare life (Agamben, 1998). Accepting the exceptionality of the camp, this chapter will present incidences of ordinariness that are found in everyday life; thus, by looking at access and restriction, mobility and immobility, inclusion and exclusion, I argue that the camp is a space of diversity filled with tensions and ambivalence.

This chapter will unfold over two main sections. The first will introduce the concept of mobility and immobility as I explore journeys across borders and checkpoints. The second will move inside the camp and unpack multiple lived spaces.

Over the Mountains, Under the Bridge

It is the end of May 2018 and the start of the rainy season. After three sweltering months under a hazy sky from seasonal agricultural burning, the air has finally cleared over the mountains of Chiang Mai, and the place I have called home for over a decade no longer feels like a hot, smoky convection oven. The parched land around the city has had its first taste of rain, and a gentle breeze welcomes the new leaves on the trees. The longed-for sound of thunder rumbles in the distance, beckoning the next storm. I pack my car and check directions, five hours, and 200+ miles to my destination. Over the next two years, the 200-mile journey across the mountains of northern Thailand will become my regular commute to Mae La refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border. This is not the first time I have made this journey to the temporary shelter of over 34,000 inhabitants, but it is the first time I drive it alone.

Heading out on the recently completed six-lane superhighway that rings the city, I pass the newest addition to Chiang Mai, a massive mall built by migrants (Karen, Shan, and Bama), which stands dominant on the cityscape. Flashing neon lights up a ginormous billboard, which advertises the latest movies, beauty products, and fashion from around the world; Marks and Spencer, H&M and Zara all housed under a roof of cooling air-conditioning. The highway and mall are examples of the vast expansion projects in Chiang Mai attracting the 'perennial outsider' (Andersson, 2014). These projects produce a space where migrants, many of whom will never achieve legal status in Thailand, become part of a system that excludes them from the broader society but needs them to achieve economic growth⁸. The expansion of Chiang Mai caters to the 'right kind of foreigner', the tourist and the emerging Thai middle class.

As the urban sprawl of Chiang Mai peters out, the scenery changes to quiet countryside. You can roughly gauge the affluence and significance of each town and village by observing the condition of their temple. Is the temple sparkling clean with recently polished mirrored tiles, or have the mythical naga serpents that descend the temple stairs lost some of their scales? Villagers gossip under street-side bungalows while kids play on pushbikes that are too big. In the neighbourhood family shop, rolls of crisp packets and single-serve laundry detergent hang from the ceiling. Noodle shops steam steel vats of broth, and roadside restaurants see boiled featherless chicken carcasses swing in glass displays next to crispy golden pork flanks on hooks. Driving further into the countryside, bamboo stalls on the side of the road sell whatever local produce was plucked that day; a blur of pineapples, pumpkins, and oranges fly by as I continue my journey to the border.

⁸ It was estimated in 2020 there were 81,299 migrant workers in Chiang Mai province. In 2019, it was reported that there were more than 400,000 migrant workers of various legal status working in the Tak district, which includes the city of Mae Sot (Thien, 2019).

The closer to the border, the tighter the security along the road becomes. You know when you are approaching a police checkpoint as the traffic slows to a standstill (Figure 17). In conjunction with surveillance and monitoring, the repressive state apparatus (Althusser, 2014) is implemented, a way for the Thai authorities to maintain order and discipline at these nodal points.



Figure 17: Checkpoint between Tak and Mae Sot. Each vehicle is checked and the driver asked where they are going.

Each car creeps forward, weaving through the obstacle of traffic cones, windows down for inspection. As I wait for my turn, I watch those travelling by pickup truck or bus drive off to the side for further investigation. Police searching for illegal migrants board the buses to check the passengers' paperwork. Those found without the correct documentation are removed. They line up in the shade, waiting to be processed, unsure of what will happen next. This management of movement reminds me of Biemann's sentiment of the boundless sea. Reflecting on how the unwanted voyager is placed in a condition of non-belonging, they 'wait for status in off-social spaces'(Biemann, 2008, p.56), connected but segregated, suspended and stuck, contained within their mobility. I wait, I watch, wondering where they are from, what they have been through, and where they hope to go.

When it is my turn, a smartly dressed police officer tells me in Thai to put down all my windows. He never removes his sunglasses or anti-pollution mask that covers most of his face, a strategic performance and ritual he has carried out thousands of times before. Another officer, like the first, looks in the back and prods the large bag I have on the seat. Satisfied I am not smuggling a person, they ask where I am going and wave me through without listening to my answer.

Putting the intimidating formalities of the checkpoints behind me, a privilege I possess, I continue the last slow, dusty leg of the journey stuck in single file behind pickup trucks and lorries (Figure 18) on the road that is being built by the unseen.

For those caught without the correct paperwork, the intimidating scene at the checkpoint continues; an example of what Morley (2017) describes as a highly emotional place, or as Kluitenberg reminds us, a space 'opened only selectively, on the basis of specific socioeconomic criteria, but are increasingly closed to a majority of the world's population' (Kluitenberg, 2011, p.11). As described in Chapter 2, it is at the borders and checkpoints where the domain of state control is exercised over human mobility. These spaces, however, are negotiable but only in as much as the state allows. For me, movement is effortless and bound primarily on the adventure; for others, mobility is wrapped in ever-narrower limits and survival. Finally, signs indicating the direction to the Myanmar border and the 'Friendship Bridge' come into sight, and I descend into the city of Mae Sot.



Figure 18: Road under construction. The road from Tak city to Mae Sot, through the mountains was under construction for much of my fieldwork.

Mae Sot: A Melting Pot of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity

Sharing the border with Myanmar, Mae Sot is a melting pot of ethnic and cultural diversity. Everyday life in the city is best observed from the open-air restaurants and teashops, which line the Moei River. After the long drive, I arranged to meet Saw Soe Soe, a Karen friend who grew up in Mae La. Working for a Karen organisation, Saw Soe Soe represents the refugee who was able to leave the camp through opportunities he gained, I would argue, through his Christian affiliation. As we settle down with a cold drink, we watch the traders on the banks sell cheap cigarettes and knock-off whiskey (Figure 19). These traders from Myanmar occupy their own limbo-like state. They watch as their goods move effortlessly, unlike themselves, between Thailand and Myanmar. They are present within the hustle and bustle of a busy trading zone, yet excluded and stuck, unable to fully integrate into Thai society.



Figure 19: Trading on the bank of the Moei River, Mae Sot. On one side of the barbed wire fence traders sit waiting for customers on the Thai side to reach over and buy their goods.

Semi-precious gems, dried fruit, and a mix of handwoven Karen and Thai shirts and skirts hang in the tightly packed corridors of the sweltering indoor market next to us. The wide variety of goods traded at the market reflects a vibrant border economy and the complicated confluence of ethnic groups that have always lived in the area regardless of political boundaries. While the Friendship Bridge has only existed since 1997 as a formal link, the Karen communities along the border have always straddled an ambiguous space between the two countries.

Between 1993 and 1995⁹, the conflict between the KNLA and *Tatmadaw* reached the Thai border. In response to the situation and threat to Thai national sovereignty, the Thai authorities exercised control through increased border security and military presence. Saw Soe Soe tells me that the Thai army responded by sending many troops to protect the area. The military presence symbolised the Thai government's power and a unified entity willing to implement violence to protect the political



Figure 20: Farmland between Myanmar and Thailand.

⁹ In the 1990s the KNU lost most of its autonomy in the 'liberation zones' and was forced into the Thai borderlands. This meant an end to taxing the black market, cross border trading and logging deals (South, 2011). As a reminder, 1994 saw another setback when a group of Buddhist soldiers disillusioned by the predominantly Christian leadership of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) deserted to form the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The DKBA's protest was in response to the KNU's long-term leader General Bo Mya who in their view favoured the Christian members of the party. The KNU were further debilitated in 1995 when the DKBA, which had formed an alliance with the Burmese army, attacked the KNU headquarters at Manerplaw – an event known as the The Fall of Manerplaw.

and social order. Since then, the land between the two countries is seen as a neutral space and is now occupied by Bama trying to farm it (Figure 20).

The rainy season hasn't quite reached Mae Sot yet. Stray dogs lie stretched out on the sun-drenched concrete, too hot to move. The traders ignore the Thai military still present in the area. Young Thai soldiers in army fatigues stare intently at their smartphones catching up on the newest Korean drama¹⁰ or chatting with locals (Figure 21). Their rifles resting on their laps, another sign of where the repressive state apparatus, albeit threat of, is performed and strategies of discipline maintained



Figure 21: Young Thai soldiers in conversation with a local on the Bank on the Moei River, Mae Sot.

(Althusser, 2014; de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1995). Just as the soldiers are ignored by the traders, they overlook the hustle and bustle around them. A brief respite from the heat comes from the Friendship Bridge overhead, the official border crossing, and immigration checkpoint. The bridge across the river is where people, cars, and trucks packed to the brim with goods wait patiently at border control and immigration.

The official movement across the bridge tells only part of the story. The real flow happens under the bridge that spans 20 or 30 meters across the slow current. As children play in the cool water, I notice that the river, in the dry season, is shallow enough to wade across in certain places. Only meters from where the soldiers are sitting, Karen and other ethnic minorities, who want to avoid getting wet, amble down the riverbanks. After paying 20 Baht (45p), they crowd onto passenger boats that ferry the 'unofficial' day-trippers to the other side (Figure 23 and Figure 23). The Thai and Myanmar immigration officers turn a blind eye to this unofficial access point, which bypasses the official border crossing above. Representing shifting boundaries and the in-between grey area, this space allows for economic development and produces new forms of mobility and immobility. The movement is permitted solely as it benefits those in control and does not threaten national sovereignty¹¹.

¹⁰ Since 2005, Korean or K-pop dramas have been very popular in Thai society (Chongkittavorn, 2019).

¹¹ It is estimated that there are upwards of 50 uncontrolled 'natural crossings' along the river (Dr Suwannachai, 2020).



Figure 23: Friendship Bridge the official way to cross between the two countries.



Figure 23: Unofficial passage by boat between Karen State and Thailand.

Going with the Flow

After watching the constant flow of people moving back and forth across the river, Saw Soe Soe describes the scene further downstream. The picture becomes increasingly complex, away from the border guards playing on their phones and immigration officers wielding all-powerful entrance stamps.

All along the river, similar boats to those seen near the Friendship Bridge carry mostly Karen people across from the Karen State. Their sole purpose is not to spend the day in Thailand but rather to make their way to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, or, significant to this thesis, Mae La. Once in the camp, inhabitants can access education, as mentioned in the introduction chapter, and other opportunities. Saw Soe Soe says that unlike those fleeing the war, many young people make the same journey for education, new beginnings, and a better life. Due to the lack of resources created by the country's ongoing conflict and slow development, a life lived in the villages is often severely restricted. It could be argued that life, for some, living in the Karen State is also a life lived in limbo and stuckness. The choice, or as I would argue, lack of choice, to make the often long and dangerous journey into Mae La means that they compromise their physical mobility in the short term in the hope for a better future. It also highlights the challenge in how a person affected by conflict is classified as a refugee, suggesting that the boundaries become increasingly blurred in a space such as Mae La.

I leave Saw Soe Soe on the river bank and head to my guesthouse for the night. The Picture Book guesthouse is a social enterprise dedicated to training marginalised youths on the border and is a favourite place for NGO workers and researchers to stay. I reflect on the diversity of Mae Sot and enterprises such as the Picture Book. I think about the children playing under the bridge, who one day may make their way to the camp for education or working as one of the thousands of migrants living in the cities of Thailand.

I message Saw Plaw Plaw, my contact in the camp, through his preferred means of communication, Facebook Messenger. He will act as my host for this trip and had submitted my documents to the Camp Commander's office the week before. He confirms that my papers, consisting of a copy of my passport and an application form, have been submitted, and I have permission to enter in the morning. He also reminds me to be flexible: 'Just go with whatever happens, you know things can change at the last minute', laughing emoji. I have learned living in Thailand for so long that things work very differently here than they do back in the UK; going with the flow and being flexible is the only sensible thing to do.

The following day, I leave the city limits of Mae Sot and the farmlands and paddy fields surrounding it and take the road to Mae La, which follows a river that weaves through the sparsely populated mountains. Military checkpoints are set up all along this stretch of road (Figure 24). Police officers are replaced by young army soldiers holding large rifles. They sit patiently on the side of the road in barrack-type huts surrounded



Figure 24: Last checkpoint before Mae La camp.

by sandbags and barbed wire. Slowing the traffic to one lane, razor wire coils across the road. *Songthaew's*¹² packed to the brim with people, produce, and animals stop in the checkpoint lay-by without question, again a performance all actors know well. Everyone in the *songthaew* unloads; they are expected to produce paperwork and identification of some sort. The guards used to seeing foreign aid workers heading to the camp wave me through. I am not stopped; I am not questioned.

¹² *Song* meaning two and *thaew* meaning row are trucks which have been adapted to carry people and are a traditional means of public transport across Thailand.

I continue until the first glimpse of the camp comes into view. From this vantage point, the camp with its wooden huts and leaf-covered roofs looks quaint against the imposing sheer mountains, which dominate the area (Figure 25). One could be forgiven for mistaking it for a traditional Thai village in the mountains when driving past. Most houses are constructed from natural materials; it is only on closer inspection that you see the barbed wire fence and security huts.

Mae La Refugee Camp:

A Temporary Settlement

Mae La has not always been a sprawling mass of tightly packed bamboo huts. The founder of The Border Consortium (TBC), Jack Dunford, spent three decades working inside the camp and describes the area as ‘there seemed to be no issue over land. The Thai authorities let them build camps that felt more like villages’ (Barron, 2004). As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, in the early 1980s, the attacks by the *Tatmadaw* on the Karen intensified. This resulted in an increase of Karen soldiers and civilians fleeing Myanmar and crossing the border.



Figure 25: View of Mae La camp from the road.

Mae La’s original population of 1,100 increased significantly after the fall of the KNU’s headquarters in Manerplaw in 1995. Witnessing the increased cross-border attacks on refugees on Thai soil, security measures were put in place, and camps were moved and consolidated. By April 1995, Mae La had grown to over 13,000 (The Border Consortium, 2020). Over the following years, more camps along the border were closed, and the residents moved into Mae La. In 2011, the population had reached 46,000 (The Border Consortium, 2011); in 2021, the UNHCR reported 15,904 registered refugees and a population of 18,414 unregistered, totalling 34,318 inhabitants (UNHCR, 2020).

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Mae La now stretches for five miles over 454 acres and has a diverse population. The camp and population are managed by three main parties: MoI, humanitarian agencies (International Rescue Committee (IRC) and The Border Consortium (TBC)), and Karen committees (Karen Refugee Committee, Karen and Karenni Women’s Organisations and the Karen and Karenni Youth Organisations). Although the camp is not party to the UN Refugee

Convention, the Thai government permits the UNHCR to implement protection activities. This includes facilitating access to the Thai legal system, work with partner organisations that address child, sexual, and gender-based violence, and collaborate with the Resettlement Support Center (RSC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and third countries' embassies on refugee resettlement (UNHCR, 2019). What follows is an overview of the management system and political activity in the camp.

Camp Operations and Structure

The Camp Commander (known as the *Palat* in Thai¹³) represents the MoI and Thai sovereign power and is responsible for Mae La. To maintain order at the gates, the Camp Commander's office employs a group called the *Or Sor*¹⁴, described by The Border Consortium in 2018 as 'a paramilitary group of volunteers from nearby communities who are hired as security personnel' (The Border Consortium, 2018, p.11). Their main task is to maintain order at the gates, check the paperwork of those leaving, and control individuals such as myself from entering without the correct permission.

All entrances to the camp along the road are opened at 06:30 and closed at 18:00, a strategy implemented to maintain control of movement. As I arrive at the gate, to my left is a guard hut with three or four *Or Sor*. This gate, unlike some of the smaller ones, is bustling. Semi-automatic motorbikes and scooters line up alongside each other in the small lay-by next to the security hut. *Songthaews* are flagged by an *Or Sor*; he checks the paperwork of those who want to leave and those returning. Once approved, people clamber into the back of the already overcrowded truck, an image that reminds me of the crowded boats carrying people across the river in Mae Sot. People shuffle to make room, bags are loaded, and the last few without seats hang from the vehicle's back. The driver, satisfied he cannot load anymore, drives off, and the *songthaew* disappears.

Order in this instance is maintained through the organisation of space at the gate. This is first achieved through the *Or Sor* and their performance as gatekeepers. Their presence represents the omnipresent surveillance and monitoring (Foucault, 1995) of the Camp Commander; the symbolic representation of the repressive state is exercised in their image. They represent the faceless gaze, the single perceived power in control of Mae La's bounded system. These are the 'authorities' encountered at the gates; wearing army fatigues, they give the impression that they are military personnel. However, I was told that they are locally hired village men; they do not carry weapons and have no other authority aside from checking people's paperwork, a stark contrast to the paramilitary description given earlier by TBC. A further contradiction, I would argue, comes with the

¹³ Also spelled *palad* in English.

¹⁴ In addition, spelt *aw saw* in English.

coexistent symbolic image of the *songthaew* and its representation of mobility and freedom to escape the confines of the camp and that of the *Or Sor* gatekeepers. It is, of course, unhelpful to assume that all inhabitants can leave and enter through these gates. Only those with economic capital can secure exit documentation at 200 Baht (£4.34 in 2021) and avoid conflict at the checkpoints along the road. I later ask Saw Plaw Plaw to explain how people can afford to leave. He informs me there is an 'informal gratuity' system in place:

When people talk about corruption, unless you are fighting for a utopian society, especially in a poor society, there will always be corruption. If you are totally against corruption, poor people will die. We will all die; we will not be able to survive. If you earn 100 Baht and you must pay 20 Baht under the table to be able to go out and make that 100 Baht, that is what you do; that is the way you survive as a poor person. If you do it all legally, where will people find the money? How will they pay the taxes? How will they be able to afford to live if it is all regulated? When it is all done under the table, you know you don't have to pay regularly. Maybe you only pay half the time because there is an understanding. That is how we survive.

It could be argued that Saw Plaw Plaw has 'normalised' the informal gratuity as the only way he can survive. However, this example helps unpack how encamped people navigate their spaces and to what degree their identities are shaped by their environment. On the one hand, he has been forced to give up control to the governing bodies who enforce the system, and he has no choice but to work within the grey space. On the other, he demonstrates an alternative perspective and tactic about working within off-social spaces described by Biemann (2008). I argue that similar to the movement of people across the Moei River described at the beginning of this chapter, informal gratuity represents further shifting boundaries within in-between spaces that create new forms of mobilities, yet reaffirms stuckness and immobility.

Back at the gate, I notice a market. A red and white barricade beam held down with a rope is manually operated; it is raised halfway, allowing people to duck underneath. I park my car near the motorbikes and approach the security hut. A group of young students, sent by Saw Plaw Plaw, waits patiently on the wall just inside the gate. As soon as they see me, they start to wave. Some of the more confident students approach and welcome me to the camp. Before I enter, I report to the *Or Sor*. Searching through the neatly stacked papers piled up on his wooden desk, he slowly flicks through each document looking for my name and passport copy. A small group of Karen gathers around the hut, eyes darting between the paperwork and myself: '*Ghaw luh a ghay. Na oh sue oh klay ah?*¹⁵ I say. They respond that they are fine. An IRC representative comes over to see what is going on.

¹⁵ Good morning, how are you? in S'gaw Karen.

When he sees I am waiting, he introduces himself as a former camp inhabitant and asks if I need help. 'Just waiting', I say. Smiling, he rolls his eyes and says, 'formalities'.

Aid agencies such as IRC and TBC have been instrumental in supporting the camps along the border. IRC, for example, has worked in Thailand since 1992 and claims to support the camps with food and water, health care and sanitation, protection for children and women, and education and legal assistance (IRC, 2021). The representative I met at the gate told me he worked as a mental health counsellor. He claims his job in the camp keeps him very busy. TBC, for example, has worked with refugees from Myanmar since 1984, when Mae La first opened. They are the primary food and shelter providers. TBC is supported by various international donors, such as UKaid, the European Commission, Global Affairs Canada, the Australian Government, as well as many Christian foundations.

In 1984, increased attacks on civilians in Myanmar saw thousands crossing the border. The Thai government, according to TBC, requested aid agencies 'working with the Indochina refugees to provide emergency assistance to the new arrivals...A number of Bangkok-based Christian agencies responded and formed a consortium which soon became the main provider of food and shelter' (TBC, 2021, n.p). TBC states they work through the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) who are the 'peak representatives of the refugees living in the camps...who coordinate assistance provided by NGOs, and liaise with the Royal Thai Government, the UN Refugee Agency, security personnel, visitors to the camps and others' (TBC, 2021b).

Horstmann (2011) points out that the KRC comprises of KNU-pastors, and although the Baptist church is not directly associated with the KNU, the leadership is Christian, and Christianity is preached within the KNU. The KNU, he goes on to say, has a strong presence and that the KRC,

emerged as a natural partner for the evangelical missionary networks that were directly involved in providing emergency welfare and assistance to the Karen people crossing the border. Moreover, the first refugee camps emerged from the villages of the KNU families. While the population of the camp has become more diverse, the Karen make up the large majority and churches and the Bible school are central institutions of cultural life in the camp (Horstmann, 2011a, p.89).

Horstmann's statement raises questions about the colonial and missionary legacy, asymmetrical power, and how cultural life and practices in the camp have been researched previously. Horstmann (2011) acknowledges that there is a bias towards the minority Christian population in the camp, observing that the Christians gain more access to humanitarian assistance and resettlement to third

countries, notably the US, which I would argue is a result of their education and literacy opportunities through the church. Horstmann's comments reflect how the colonial and missionary presence has transcended the past and the border and now has a firm grip on the camp administration. However, his comment regarding how churches and the Bible school are central institutions of cultural life in the camp indicates why a study such as my own is needed. I agree that these institutions are very much part of the dominant Christian S'gaw everyday narrative, but this only presents a segment of life in the camp. The majority of the camp population is Buddhist, which suggests more research that considers practices other than Christian is needed.

Returning to the scene at the gate, my paperwork is finally found to everyone's relief, including the *Or Sor*, and I can enter. He tells me not to take any photos around the market and that I must leave by 18:00. Although I would exit the camp by this time on my day trips, there were other times this was more flexible, for example, entering on a Saturday¹⁶ (to attend graduation) or staying overnight at one of the colleges.

There are essential performances to acknowledge in this scene. The first is in the performance of formality. As the IRC representative gestures by his eye roll, the rigid ritual of checking documents and the prolonged wait under the watchful eye of all actors may depict his annoyance, criticism, or contempt for a situation he has encountered numerous times before. This ritualistic performance by the 'gatekeepers' is not just for my benefit and a way to maintain the perception of a total institution to outsiders, but also a strategy of controlling (de Certeau, 1984) the Karen inhabitants watching it unfold. The uncertainty of the situation creates a 'moment that ritualises the relationship to the other' (Agier, 2016, p.2), placing the *Or Sor*, myself, and the Karen present, into categories and hierarchy.

Significantly, this scene also shows how inhabitants are not always stuck in a suspended state. The IRC representative signifies an inhabitant who has managed, through various tactics (de Certeau, 1984), such as education, to transcend the camp boundaries by seeking employment opportunities. He has broken free from the stuckness of the camp and created a space where he can move between his old life and new. He demonstrates how some can achieve control over their lives and build a future beyond the gates. Although he may inspire others to seek out opportunities, for those without economic or social capital (and in some cases, without the 'correct' religious affiliation), the performance at the entrance reinforces their position and emphasises their immobility to move. This example further helps us answer *whether the encamped refugee can ever take control of their present so that they can imagine a future beyond their confinement?*

¹⁶ The camp gates are usually closed on a Saturday and Sunday.

To explore the fundamental question of *how new media technologies are used and what role they play in expressing everyday identities?* We finally turn to the request by the *Or Sor* to not take photographs, a strategy, I would argue, by the authorities to maintain control over the image of the camp and how outsiders interact with the space. A quick Internet search brings up numerous Mae La articles, photos, and videos that challenge the authority's control over how the inhabitants are represented and how they self-represent to the outside world. Since the introduction of the Internet, inhabitants have the potential to archive everyday life in the camp from their perspective. New media technologies such as smartphones and digitally mediated spaces have disrupted power relations by opening spaces where encamped refugees can document the camp realities. I contend that these tactics provide them with further presence and visibility in virtual spaces, which gives them agency and voice on how they self-represent. It could be argued that agency is further expressed by the Karen camp committees, who, under the watchful eye of the Camp Commander's office, coordinate the day-to-day running of Mae La. According to TBC, the refugee-led administrative and management team provide the primary link between the camp inhabitants and non-government organisations, the UNHCR and Mol, and bear the extensive work of coordinating the day-to-day running of Mae La and its services.



Figure 26: Mae La Camp is separated into three Zones, A, B, and C. Highlighted is the original settlement, now part of Zone C.

Mae La is split into three zones (A, B, C) that are further divided into smaller sections (Figure 26). Each zone is administered by a zone leader. Each zone leader has a team of sectional leaders. The sectional leaders are responsible for enforcing camp regulations, supporting the local community, and maintaining order within their section. All zone and sectional leaders report to the elected camp

leader. Aside from the camp, zone, and sectional leaders, the camp's day-to-day running is supported by a network of Karen administrators, as Figure 27 demonstrates.

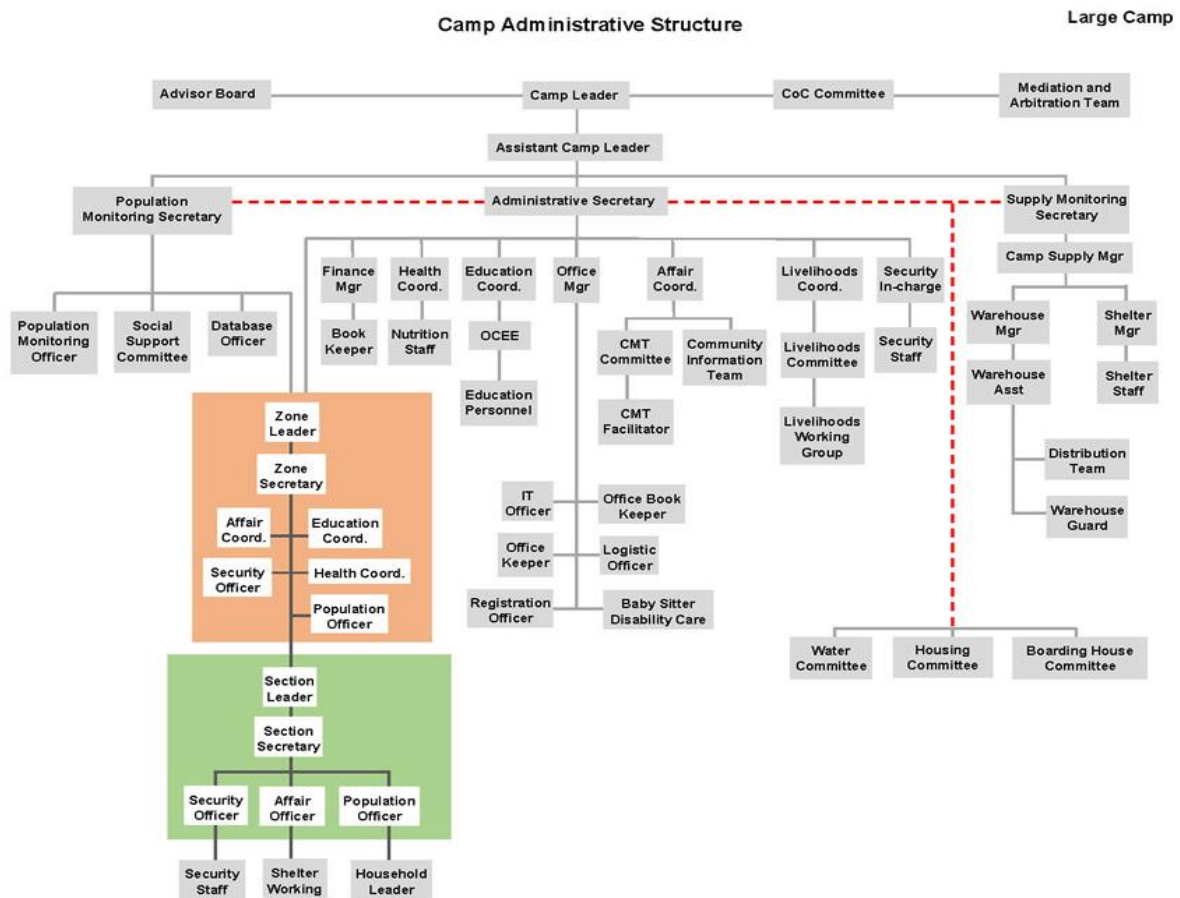


Figure 27: Karen leadership structure. The Border Consortium, 2021

Camp elections determine who is voted in as camp leader and other administrative positions. I was told that this is decided by the camp population. I initially thought that power relations and hierarchies were remoulded in this space, creating new dynamics; however, on reflection, I would argue that they reinforce old power relations held by the Christian S'gaw male elite. On the surface, it would seem the camp elections create 'campzanship' (Sigona, 2015a). New beginnings are imagined and realised through education, access to resources, and health care within this space, further challenging the refugee/bare life concept. The Karen refugees have created a political framework *inside* the camp, producing political membership and agency. I was told that everyone is encouraged to vote; however, according to the following individual reports, political agency is not exercised to the same extent¹⁷.

¹⁷ Further exploration of political agency and mobilisation will continue in Chapters 6 and 7.

In 2018, Stardagger (58-years-old) was considered in his community as an elder and had lived in camps along the border for more than 30 years. He told me that he has had to leave the camp within this time and work illegally in Bangkok to earn extra money for his family. Stardagger embodies the illegal immigrant, the absolute other, who works in off-social spaces (Biemann, 2008). He physically moves from the camp to Bangkok, yet his mobility is contained. His movement benefits the government and organisations that rely on those Agier calls (2017) 'undesirables' to work in construction and help the city's economic development. Yet, he is what Andersson (2014) refers to as the 'perennial outsider'; he is present physically, but his presence is a fleeting moment on the cityscape, the same city his hands built. He is unseen by those who have the privilege of belonging and who are invited to stay. Yet, within the camp space, he embodies authority and leadership within his community.

Stardagger claims he was voted in by the community to be a sectional leader; however, he is unsure why he was elected, stating he has only basic education. Regardless of the reason, he takes this job very seriously: 'Many organisations come into the camp. I have to supervise and make sure everything goes smoothly'. When asked what he likes to do to relax, he returns to describing his position and daily tasks: 'I check data relating to my work and prepare the monthly report. I check names and check if someone is still here or if they have already left for a third country'. Even though he is in a position of authority within his section, he says he lives and struggles like everyone else and highlights his stuckness: 'We survive with what we have. I sometimes go outside the camp to make some money, but I can't go outside often'.

Stardagger's sense of identity seems to derive from his position as a sectional leader and the everyday interactions he has with his colleagues, community, and the organisations that visit the camp. He creates meaning from the responsibilities of supervising camp guests and the mundane, ordinary daily tasks of report writing, where he focuses his time on checking data and reporting it to the camp hierarchy. However, he articulates ambivalence on how or why he was voted in to do the job and seemed embarrassed he had been given the role considering his educational background.

Furthermore, there is a juxtaposition of freedom of movement between spaces expressed between Stardagger and the visiting organisations. Power relations and privileged mobility are articulated on two levels. The first is illustrated by the guests' ability to cross boundaries entering and exiting the camp. When Stardagger leaves the camp, he is forced to do so due to a reduction in rations. He crosses the material boundary, albeit in a coerced way out of necessity. From November 2013, refugees living in seven camps along the border received reduced rations due to funding cuts from international aid agencies (The Border Consortium, 2018b). Since the nationwide ceasefire in 2015, threats to rations have increased as agencies redirect funds. Food is distributed depending on the

need within the camp. A classification system is in place that identifies those who are ‘most vulnerable, vulnerable, standard or self-reliant (the latter category accounted for just 1% of households in 2016)’ (The Border Consortium, 2018b). In 2019, rations were distributed by TBC as follows (Figure 28):

TBC Food Basket							
Food Item	6 Months to under 5 years		5 Years to 17 years		Adult		
	Self-reliant/ Standard/ Vulnerable	Most vulnerable	Self-reliant/ Standard/ Vulnerable	Most vulnerable	Standard	Vulnerable	Most vulnerable
Total kcal	(1,042 kcal)	(1,161 kcal)	(1,691 kcal)	(2,111 kcal)	(1,319 kcal)	(1,556 kcal)	(1,976 kcal)
Rice	6 kg	7 kg	11 kg	13.5 kg	9 kg	11 kg	13.5 kg
Vegetable Oil	0.5 L		0.5 L	1 L	0.5 L	0.5 L	1 L
Yellow Split Peas	0.5 kg		1 kg		1 kg		
Yellow Split Peas (No Fishpaste)	0.6 kg		1.2 kg		1.2 kg		
Fishpaste	0.5 kg		0.5 kg		0.5 kg		
AsiaREMix	1 kg		1 kg		0 kg		
Iodized Salt	167 g		167 g		167 g		
Charcoal	Standard and Self-Reliance household = 15 kg 1st person/+ 5kg per each additional. Vulnerable and Most vulnerable household = 20 kg 1st person/+5kg per each additional.						

Figure 28: Ration allocation. The Border Consortium, 2019

Power relations are further expressed within the politics and power dynamics articulated between Stardagger’s relationship with the organisations providing aid and his daily struggle to survive. On both levels, we can turn to what Massey (2005) calls power-geometry, where the ‘uneven ways in which different individuals and groups are positioned within networks of flows and interactions’ (Gregory, 2009, p.576). Even with Stardagger’s position as a leader and the social mobility he has gained, he is bound by a system that only allows him to transcend the camp boundary to the *outside* periodically and often without permission. In other words, Stardagger has authority and mobility, but only as much as his role *within* the camp allows. Power relations are further articulated in the material aid flowing into the camp, which Stardagger relies upon, but claims are insufficient. The network of flow is further limited to the material space of the camp and his face-to-face interactions with the organisations. He tells me his family has a smartphone, but it’s his wife’s, and he doesn’t know how to use it, suggesting that he has very little presence beyond his material environment. Stardagger’s future imaginings are limited due to the boundaries of his situation, such as his limited mediated presence and freedom to work outside the camp.

Saw Wah, a man in his 20s, has a young family and other priorities beyond politics; unlike Stardagger, Saw Wah is focused on leaving the camp and starting a new life in a third country. He

came to the camp as a child and was told that his family would resettle in the US at the end of 2019¹⁸. When asked if he had ever voted, he claims: 'No, I'm just not very interested in it'. Saw Wah says the rest of his family doesn't vote either because they want to live a simple life. To this family, it's not essential who runs the camp as long as they can survive. It could be argued that Saw Wah and his family have rejected the politics of the camp, yet their everyday lives are bound by the decisions made by those in charge. South (2011) reminds us that the harsh reality of day-to-day survival is the main priority for most Karen; politics is a secondary thought and concern evident in Saw Wah's description.

By not voting, Saw Wah has excluded himself from having a political voice or being represented. However, he is far from being outside the political realm. His position is inherently political when he claimed refugee status. As he waits for resettlement and his eventual arrival and presence in a new country, he is a stark reminder to the international community of the plight of the refugee, contained mobility, and management of movement.

Unlike Stardagger, Saw Wah envisions his life outside the camp and not part of the Mae La long-term community. Although he has spent most of his life in the camp and is still waiting for resettlement, Mae La is a temporary solution; his future imaginings go beyond his restricted mobility through his application to resettle and the promise of a life in the US. Saw Wah's advantage over Stardagger must be noted. Saw Wah is technologically literate, so much so that he teaches IT at a local Mae La school. Although his physical stuckness is reaffirmed by his prolonged wait for resettlement, his future imaginings of life outside the camp have transcended and are kept alive by his technological skills and his digital mediated presence. As we are reminded in Chapters 2 and 3, life as a resettled refugee is complex, and questions arise as to whether the imagined future filled with freedom and opportunities is what Saw Wah will find when he eventually relocates, or whether the guilt of leaving those in the camp behind will contribute to tensions between the different spaces.

The final example comes from Anna, who arrived in the camp aged 6-years-old. In her early 20s, Anna had the opportunity to resettle in Canada. She represents an individual with the privilege of moving between different spaces but articulates ambivalence and tension in her description.

Anna is in a unique position. A few years ago, she returned to Mae La, aged 36, to help teach at the school her father founded. She said she had never been asked to vote; although Anna felt it was important, she had a voice. Anna tells me that her sister and mother did not vote either, but she assumes her late father had. He was well known in the camp and had come from a revolutionary

¹⁸ In May 2021, Saw Wah is still waiting to resettle.

family in Myanmar, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 8. I asked her if voting was important, to which she replied: 'Of course! I want to give my voice. I want a leader who will speak for our camp, the education of our children, speak up against violence, stand with us and love and support the environment'. Her lack of voting rights may also be due to her status within the camp. Having officially left, she is no longer a registered inhabitant or included within the political system. Yet, her continuous return to the camp and her involvement in the everyday activities places her in an in-between space of belonging and not belonging, as an insider and outsider.

Anna's mobility and time spent in Canada have affected how she views life as a Karen woman. I ask her how she felt not voting: 'I have no answer because I don't understand why we don't vote. Without a vote, I have no voice'. I questioned if there was a strong patriarchal tradition in Karen culture: 'Yes, women always come second', she said. Although Anna does not vote, she claims that the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) works hard to give women in the camp agency. In 2021, KWO has over 72,000 members. Their goal is to promote 'women's leadership, gender sensitivity and community ownership' (KWO, 2021). Hoffman et al. describe tactics in a 'third space' where encamped Karen women express their resistance to a system not designed for them. The authors observe:

Karen women centered their narratives within the systems and structures they negotiated through their migration course and within the refugee camp. Within both individual and collective courses of becoming, women described the ways through which they honored inherited culture while simultaneously reconstructing and adapting identities as Karen women. (Hoffman et al., 2017, p.1361)

Significantly, Anne demonstrates a unique position as she has experienced both the restricted bounded environment of the camp growing up and not voting as a woman¹⁹ and a life of relative freedom in Canada. She tells me that having spent '729 days' in Canada, she became Canadian, which gave her voting rights. Anna has experienced opportunities in Canada which she wouldn't have had in the camp; this raises interesting questions about why someone would choose to return? The answer could lie in her connection to the space as one of the first families to arrive in Mae La. It could be due to her Baptist upbringing and the desire to fulfil her father's legacy at the Christian school he built. I would argue that Anna's S'gaw Christian privilege has benefited her as she is educated and was able to resettle, but on the other hand, it has also kept her firmly tied to the camp, reaffirming stuckness and contained mobility.

¹⁹ Although Anna, her mother and sister did not vote, this does not apply to all women in the camp – I was told by one participant that his mother votes, although this was due to his father being in the Karen State.

Anna touches on the hierarchy in the camp, which leads to a further question: *are the political positions filled only by elder male inhabitants or do the youths in the camp articulate political agency somehow?* I would argue that the youths demonstrate political agency in many forms, just not in the traditional sense. This will be explored in more depth in Chapters 6 and 7. Many of my participants' articulate varying degrees of political involvement and agency. They all engage with camp politics to some extent, even if they claim not to, such as attending certain events like Refugee Day or Karen Revolution Day. They are inherently political by the nature of the refugee status and relation to Mae La. Identities are bound in the experiences of the camp and shaped by mobility and stuckness. Before we move on, it is worth reflecting on the multiple spaces presented in this section. I have described spaces of politics, hierarchies and formalities, spaces that reaffirm the past colonial and missionary influence, spaces where voices are heard and where they are silenced. I have explored spaces of physical movement and of stuckness, spaces of asymmetry, and spaces of opportunities and future imaginings.

Law and Order

Those who break the camp laws (domestic violence, stealing, and gang fighting) are placed in one of the many 'detention centres' administered by the Karen leadership located in the different zones. According to the camp's Mediation for Dispute Resolutions Guideline (MDRG), cases are trialled by the camp justice office. All civil issues are directly dealt with by the camp justice, operated by an independent body chaired by the Karen head of justice. The detention centres are conducted under the Karen camp security. McConnachie states that the Karen leadership and legal system in the camps along the Thai-Myanmar border are 'trusted community-led systems' which have 'taken the primary role in maintaining stability and security' (McConnachie, 2014, p.103). However, this view is not held by all managing actors. While Banki and Lang observe that the camps are run by the Karen leadership with 'relative efficiency and success' (Banki and Lang, 2008, p.66), Olivius (2017) claims that the administration has been met with scepticism and hostility, stating that:

When refugee behaviour does not conform to images of them as passive victims to be acted upon by external actors, aid agencies and host governments instead come to perceive them as threats and to question the authenticity of their claims to protection and assistance (Olivius, 2017b, p.183).

McConnachie highlights that the Mol does little in internally policing in the camps. When leaders seek engagement and help from the Thai justice system, they were told: 'This is your community, this is your case' and 'not to be creating so many problems on our soil' (McConnachie, 2014, p.103). This raises two critical points; the first is within the statement that, 'in many parts of the world legal

systems beyond the state *are* the legal system' (*ibid*, p.104). I would argue this supports the conclusion of Corbet (2016), who states that when refugees modify the place they live and take up agency, they create a space of solidarity characterised by a self-sufficient community; this is evident in Mae La and within the legal and political system that has been created by the Karen, for the Karen. It further supports Ong's (2006) notion that the confluences of global flows have affected citizenship, which should be reframed and considered beyond the legal obligations and status, this will be discussed later in Chapters 6 and 7.

The second significant point is the position of the Karen community on 'Thai soil'. The delegation of power, McConnachie points out, is 'done partly on ideological grounds — "these are not our people"' (McConnachie, 2014, p.104), locating the refugee as other to the Thai selfhood. Yet, severe criminal cases are referred directly to the Thai authorities. This suggests that although the inhabitants are excluded from Thai society, they are also bound by the Thai legal system.

When inhabitants are detained in the camp, it is often for lesser crimes. One of my closest relationships was with a young man who lost his parents at age 10 and later came into the camp for education. Hero, at the time of this incident, was 22. I got to know him well as I would stay at the house he shared with a teacher and other students. One day, concerned I had not seen him, I sent a message through Messenger. He responded that he had 'spent the day in jail'. It transpired that he had been caught riding four people to a motorbike by the camp security whilst transporting papayas to a college fundraiser. With arms full of fruit, the four young men were stopped by the Karen camp security and reprimanded for dangerous driving on the way to the football ground. Not only did he lose a day sitting in a hot, locked wooden shed with his friends, but they were also fined 500 Baht (£13), which they had planned to spend at the fundraiser.

Hero's story indicates, and similar to that described by Sigona (2015), is that the inhabitants are *citizens* of the camp, bound by laws and regulations that protect them and other inhabitants in their everyday life. The appropriate use of power in reprimanding Hero and his friends for dangerous driving by the internal security force demonstrates the control and implementation of regulations, demonstrating a system of order organised internally by the Karen. The elected camp leader, the security forces, the detention centres, and MDRG functioned as a unified entity, ostensibly maintaining discipline and order within the camp boundaries. Yet, these institutions are still bound by the Thai system with which they must function. Hero's story also sheds light on everyday life in the camp; the seemingly ordinariness of four young men preparing to raise money for their college, heading to a football ground, which is used, not only for sport but also other community activities and the relationships between the four men, security personal, and the space they occupy, binds them

together. Hero also demonstrates that even when he is physically stuck in jail, he can communicate with those who are not. This brings me to camp connectivity which will be discussed next.

Camp Connectivity

Since 2008, the residents have had access to mobile phones and privately-run Internet services (The Border Consortium, 2020); a year later²⁰, the camp was connected to the main electricity grid. Illustrating the disparity in economic capital, I was told by a few participants that they have owned mobiles since as early as 2001. For example, Anna describes the challenges she faced when she first got her pink phone; laughing, she says, in 2001: 'To get a signal, we had to hang it from string and then stand on a chair. If you moved a little bit, it wouldn't work'. She tells me that the camp leader gave it to her as a birthday present, suggesting that Anna had social, economic, and network capital from an early age:

Because my parents' room had enough phones hanging, I went to the school library to hang mine. My cousin's an alcoholic. He stole that pink phone and sold it to someone for 300 Baht. I eventually got it back though.

She goes on to describe how the arrival of mobile phones affected life in the camp:

It was so exciting to get a mobile phone, although you couldn't do anything but call. People would bring their mobiles to church, and it would ring while people were preaching. It was really funny because I would call my mum and say, "mum, what are you doing?" She would answer, "I'm in church", "You're in church and answering my call??" "Everyone is doing it!" she would say. It was chaos during services, so we were told not to bring them. In the beginning, everyone wanted to show off, "I got mine, I got mine too!"

Aside from answering calls in church, Anna believes that introducing the mobile and subsequent smartphones into the camp has significantly affected the community. Highlighting her family's economic status, she remembers her family had a small TV and reminisces about her neighbours coming over to watch something together. Now that her neighbours have their own smartphones, 'nobody comes over anymore'. In her opinion, before the introduction of smartphones and the Internet, there was a stronger sense of community, belonging, and togetherness: 'We would do things together, cook and eat together, and then we would sit and sing very loudly together. It was so much fun'.

²⁰ Before 2009, many families and institutions such as churches and schools relied on generators.

Observing how the camp's social environment has changed over the years, Anna describes the tension between the ideal image of the past, an ordinariness of friends and family hanging out, and an isolating present filled with technologies and mediated spaces. She states, 'comparing before and now, there is hardly any unity. There is no unity. Well, I can't say no unity; there is some sense of belonging to this group but not very much'. Anna is seemingly articulating a dystopian view that new media technologies and mediated practices have opened a space for people in the camp to be more individualistic.

This position echoes the technological deterministic debates of scholars, which of course can be utopian or dystopian, such as McLuhan (1964), who famously coined the term the medium is the message, and Turkle (2017), who argues that 'we are changed as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face' (Turkle, 2017, p.11). New media researchers in the social sciences, as Lievrouw and Livingstone observe, 'are virtually united in rejecting accounts in which technological innovation is the cause and society is the effect' (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006, p.4). As mentioned previously, I align with those who take the middle ground and thus turn to a socio-technical approach (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). As Baym states, from this perspective, 'the consequences of technologies arise from a mix of "affordances" - the social capabilities technological qualities enable- and the unexpected and emergent ways that people make use of those affordances' (Baym, 2015, p.44). I would argue that an individual has choices yet these are shaped by the mutual processes of both the social and the technical. The importance of studying the social and the technical is that when technologies are embedded so deeply into the everyday, thus becoming taken-for-granted, mundane, or ordinary, we risk becoming unreflective, or the range of available choices may be constrained or limited (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006, p.5). However, Anna's view is also held by others in the camp, such as Ta Kul.

Whilst the Internet has provided individual families separated by the war the potential to reconnect, particularly in digitally mediated spaces, Ta Kul claims it has destroyed the community feel in the camp. He tells me that there would be an announcement that a movie would be shown in a public area on special days. People would come together with picnics, sit on plastic mats, and watch together. 'They would show it all night', he said, as 'there isn't much to do, people would come together. They don't have it now as people have Internet connection and watch YouTube instead'.

Anna remembers that the movie nights were more regular, stating they were held three to four nights a week at one point. She claims that although her parents wouldn't let her attend as they were held in the marketplace at night, her friends would go and report back to her the next day: 'I looked forward to hearing about the new movies they had watched', she said. In her friend's description of the movies, Anna was transported into a fantasy world of adventures that transcended the camp

boundaries. She would enthusiastically sit with her friends as they retold movie narratives that captivated her imagination like traditional storytelling. These stories connected Anna to her friends and other cultures and people she had never encountered but felt bonded to. As Patey states: 'Stories have a transformative power to allow us to see the world in a different way than we do if we just encounter it on our own. Stories are an entry point to understanding a different experience of the world' (Patey, 2016).

In a similar way to the role Italian television played in the Albanian migration to Italy (Mai, 2013), it is possible that Anna's future desire and eagerness to resettle in Canada was influenced by the moments spent listening and discussing the stories from the film nights with her friends. Mai states: 'Driven by economic necessity to be sure, but lured by images of success provided by the imaginary world of television, Albanians had flocked to the country that fuelled their hopes and desires' (Mai, 2013, p.95). It was apparent that the hopes and desires of the younger Karen were influenced by what they experienced on Facebook and other social media spaces. I was told by a number of participants that they wanted to resettle because they had seen their friends in the US, Australia, and Norway posting about their lives. Images of freedom of movement, attending university, and going to parties flooded their imagination whilst reaffirming their stuckness.

From parishioners bringing mobile phones to church to introducing the Internet, Anna and Ta Kul are concerned that the Karen in the camp are becoming more individualistic, a similar anxiety and fear found in other parts of the world, especially when it comes to education (Alhumaid, 2019; Carter et al., 2017; Denoël et al., 2017; Purcell et al., 2013). This anxiety is extended to how Anna perceives technology as the source of her students failed exams. Halfway through our conversation, Anna's phone rings: 'Sorry about that, I am getting a lot of calls from parents checking up on their children'. It turns out that Anna is in possession of a dozen mobile phones which she is 'looking after' while the students in her care study for an exam: 'They cannot control themselves, so I have all their phones, I must turn them on in case there is an emergency with their parents'. For the next two weeks, her students have the option to give up their phones so that they can focus on studying. She tells me that the students performed terribly in previous exams: 'We have a few dorms, each has about 26 to 27 students, and none passed their midterm! They are doing poorly at school because they are addicted to their phones', she proclaims. She states that she understands the problem because she too was obsessed with her phone and digitally mediated spaces such as Facebook and YouTube: 'As soon as the students get up, they post pictures and then wait for their friends to comment and like. On our feed, there is continuous news, it never stops'.

Alternatively, Anna also acknowledges that these spaces help the students to connect to those outside the camp. She observes that the students project their encamped identities by discussing

their lives in posts and uploading photos, an area which I will explore further in later chapters. The students actively promote encamped life, where other Karen worldwide respond with solidarity comments, often reflecting on their own time in the camp. Digitally mediated spaces such as Facebook provides a portal for participatory culture to develop (Jenkins, 2009). It would seem that the younger generation are not viewing their engagement as individualistic but a new form of collectiveness, just one that is far further reaching than their current material environment allows.

Daily life becomes more apparent as I walk through the interconnecting paths of the camp. Beyond the market, open-faced wooden huts display mobile phones and Internet packages. Privately Thai-run telecommunication companies such as DTAC, AIS, and True Move advertise their services. Signs promoting one-day, seven-day and 30-day Internet packages (Figure 29 and Figure 30) line the shop walls like windows that promise escape, but only of the digital kind, and only to those who can afford it.



Figure 29: Mobile phones for sale in the indoor market.

I noticed that within the first few weeks of my initial visits to the camp, my popularity on Facebook had risen dramatically. I had suddenly gained numerous 'friend' requests from students studying at one of the colleges I would visit. My Messenger inbox was full of inhabitants I had not met in person introducing themselves. I could tell when a class at the college had finished. I would receive an influx of messages asking what I was doing, how my study was going and when I would visit next. More importantly, I looked forward to them giving me an update on their lives. Pausing for a moment, I reflect on the significance of ethnography and how it facilitates relationships and a deeper understanding of the research. I was the subject of being 'invited' into the students' online community and space where exchanging information occurs. I would argue that I was operating as an individual part of a collective

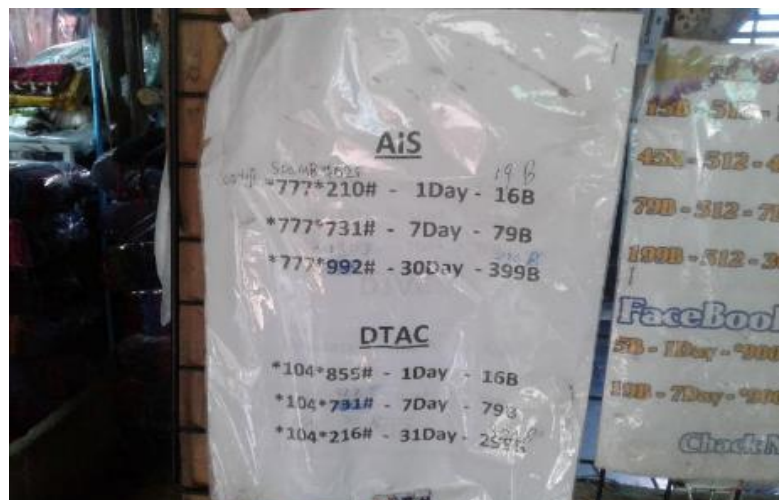


Figure 30: Mobile data packages for sale offered by AIS or Dtac.

whole through interactive online participation. Interestingly, similar to waiting physically at the camp's gates, being part of this community allowed me to be involved in their digital and material spaces.

I was told by several inhabitants that they had free Internet and assumed they were talking about Free Basics. As Madianou points out, Free Basics claims to 'give "free" Internet to poor populations, when in fact it only gives access to a bare bones version of Facebook's walled garden, which includes a few handpicked apps' (Madianou, 2019b, p.3). I had recently attended a wake at Mornar's house, a scene described in Chapter 7, and noticed many people video chatting with family members through Messenger; I asked him to explain how people in the camp could afford what seemed expensive Internet packages:

OK, in Thailand, if we buy a SIM card, they will give you a promotion. The SIM-only allows us to use or play Facebook or Messenger, but we cannot Google. There is a hack you can use to get free Internet. We download an Injector; it's an application. Sometimes it will be free for four or five days or a week, and then we must download it again. Once the date expires, we need to download a new one. We download the application and then check on someone's Facebook page for further directions; we then download something else and get free Internet.

Confusing as it sounds, Mornar claims it works and that many inhabitants, with an emphasis on the younger generation, connect to others outside the camp in this way. Mornar's desire and weekly endeavour to connect asks us to rethink the dynamics of space and encamped refugee connection. It shows the complexity of how the younger inhabitants navigate their environments and starts to answer the questions of *how, if at all, do inhabitants of Mae La maintain social relations in online and offline arenas and to what extent have online spaces and the desire to connect become interwoven into the everyday fabric of inhabitants' lives?*



Figure 31: Instrument made of bamboo used to call community meetings.

Although inhabitants such as Mornar seek out digital connections, it, in turn, seems to have isolated others. I was told by older participants that they could not contact those who had left because they either did not have access to the Internet or didn't know how to use it. The traditional messenger service between Myanmar and the camp, where messages would be passed on either by written letters or, more commonly, word-of-mouth, seemed to have slowed down or stopped. Instead, the

elders relied on community gatherings whereby inhabitants are called to a meeting in the local public area by someone banging loudly on a piece of bamboo (Figure 31). Other means of camp communication are found in the many posters positioned around the camp promoting workshops, resettlement information, as well as general news (Figure 32). Of course, written information presents challenges for a community linguistically diverse as the Karen.

It is in the different examples mentioned above that we might turn to the concept of time-space compression. Although we could argue there is a collapse of temporal and spatial boundaries for inhabitants like Mornar, the ‘shrinking’ of the world through technological innovations and mediated communication practices have left many of the elders isolated. This is exacerbated further when young men such as Saw Wah, mentioned earlier, who has vast technical knowledge, leave the camp, and resettle. We will revisit this theme throughout future chapters.

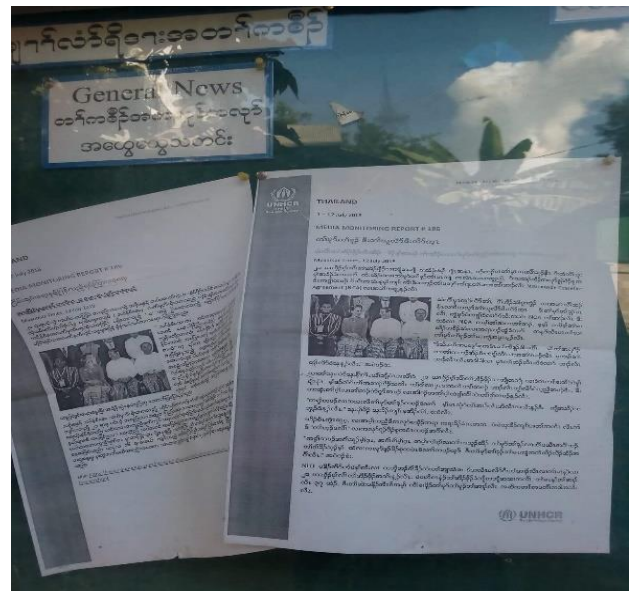


Figure 32: Notice board for general news.

No Intention of Return

When I was not staying inside the camp during my fieldwork, I usually arrived at the main gate around 08:30. On one particular day, I was invited to a college to attend their morning assembly and was asked to come at seven. To my surprise, the area outside the gate was bustling with parents and small children dressed in Thai school uniforms; a scene I had not experienced before, but according to Saw Soe Soe, happens every day throughout the week. Hordes of children pushing and pulling each other clambered into the back of the waiting *songthaews*. Once packed, the safety gates to the trucks were locked and off they went. I asked the *Or Sor* what was going on and where were they going. He responded: ‘Off to study at a local Thai school down the road’. Saw Soe Soe later explains that most of those who send their children to local Thai schools are from the Muslim community living in the camp; as we are reminded, there is a 13.5% Muslim population²¹. He claims:

²¹ Some identify themselves as “Karen Muslims” or “K’Nyaw Thoo” Black Karen, they ‘closely associate themselves with the wider Karen struggle for recognition and justice...’ “The majority of Muslim residents in the camp use “Muslim” as their ethnicity and, when confronted with a need to identify themselves in ethnic terms prefer to call themselves Karen”. Generally, the main influx of this sector entered the camps from the late 1980s to the early 2000s’ (Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2010).

They have no intention of returning to Burma. As the schools inside the camp are not regulated, and the MoI cannot introduce formal education, they choose to send their children to Thai schools; it's a way for them to integrate into the Thai community.

The claim that some have no intention of returning was supported further in conversation with a young Muslim lady I became friends with. She tells me that although there are several Muslim school options inside the camp, the parents want their children to become Thai citizens. The tactic of sending them to a local school outside the camp where they would learn Thai was to aim for a better future.

Saw Soe Soe emphasises that to relieve the demand on the schools inside the camp, the Camp Commander allows the mass exodus each morning to happen. The scene of the children leaving further illustrates the ordinariness created in Mae La. The setting of parents waiting patiently chatting with neighbours while their children board the school bus or, in this instance, the school *songthaew* paints a picture seen at school gates around the world, one similarly discussed by Fresia and Von Känel (2016) in Chapter 2. The mundane, everyday action of children in their school uniforms attending class gives the parents agency over their children's future. They can envision a better life through their children, one of potential that will finally integrate the family, to some extent, into the local society.

The Heavy Scent of Fish Paste

Early morning markets in Thailand seem to share very similar characteristics; Mae La's Monday morning fresh market is no different and is the first thing you see when entering zone B²². The heavy scent of fish paste, meat, and fried food engulf the air while traders from inside and outside the camp lay their goods on plastic tarps on the floor. The area is a mass of people greeting each other and inspecting the morning produce. Walking through the market, I am careful not to step on anything or anyone. I notice a fish who manages to escape its bucket; it makes a valiant attempt at freedom only to be cracked on the head with the nearest large rock.

Motorbike taxis, the only form of public transport and vehicle within the camp that can navigate the labyrinth of uneven paths and terrain away from the main roads, wait patiently for customers²³. I asked Saw Plaw Plaw where the people on the motorbikes go: 'Oh, they aren't going anywhere', he responds, a sad reminder that even with transport, perception is that all the paths lead to gates and fences. I later ask Ta Kul how people can afford motorbikes. He tells me the money is usually sent

²² Refer to Figure 26 for a map of Mae La and zones.

²³ Figure 33 illustrates the main roads, tracks, and paths of zone B.

from family members who have resettled. I wonder if the camp has a bank? Laughing, he says, 'No banks here. I don't have a bank account. I just get money through my friends who have a Thai ID'. An example, I would argue, of how the camp, with its schools, shops, and hospital, does not cover all needs. To combat this issue, over the years, small financial carrier services have developed in the camp. For Ta Kul to receive money, arrangements are made with a 'broker', usually a Thai Karen who has the privilege to move between Mae La and Mae Sot. He tells me for every 10,000 Baht (£215) received, the broker takes 200 Baht for the service. By all accounts, banking online or cryptocurrency had not yet reached the camp, or at least not with the people I spoke with.

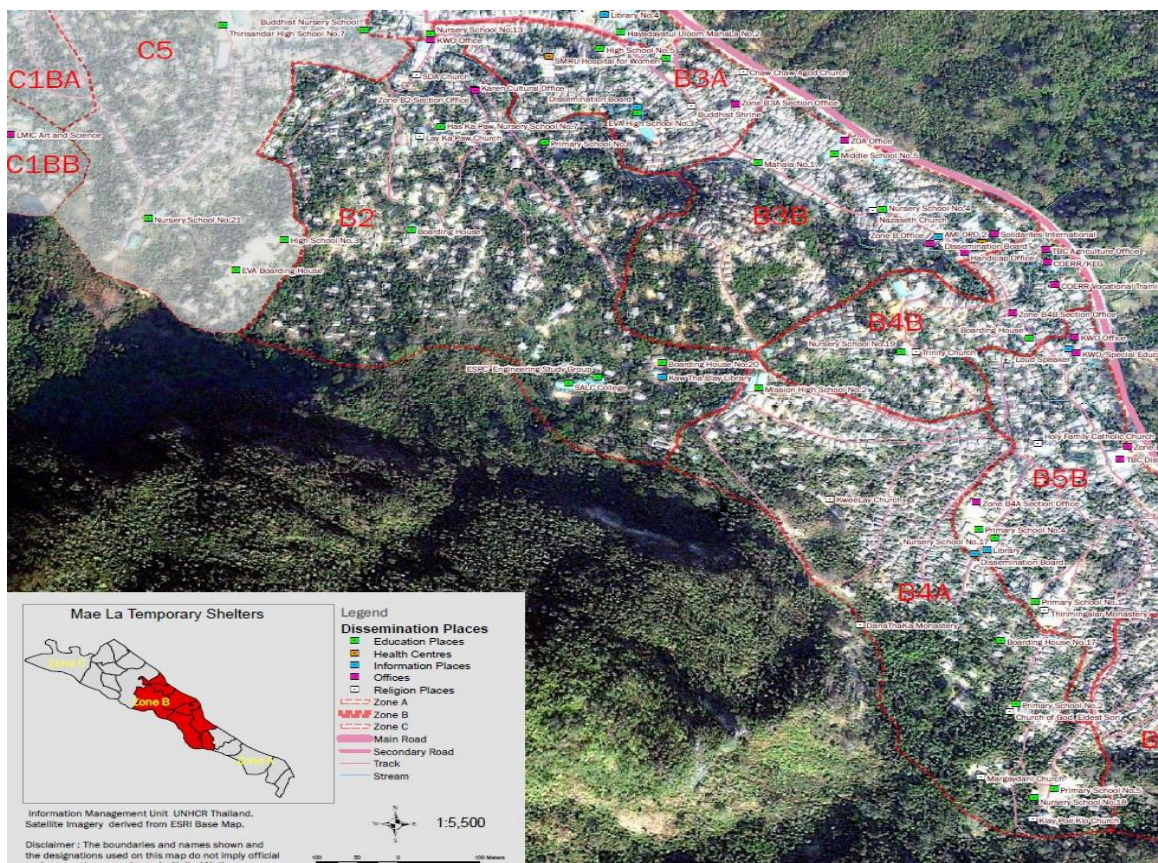


Figure 33: UNHCR map of Zone B, Mae La. Red lines indicate the different section within the zone.

I was told that without an ID card, it would be near impossible for them to get a bank account, online or otherwise. One of my young participants demonstrated the lack of access to formal banking or understanding of the system who, after seeing a 'free' management and leadership course online, sent me a message asking for my credit card details. When I asked him if he was asking me for money, he responded that he wasn't, he only required a number so he could start the course, and as he didn't have one, he wanted to borrow mine. Not only was he unfamiliar with how a four-week 'free trial' worked, but he also had no understanding of the significance of a credit card and how it functioned.

Similar to Corbet's (2016) observations in Canaan camp, as discussed in Chapter 2, inhabitants of Mae La have created various business opportunities from selling fresh produce to the taxi service that complements the market. As a cash society, they have navigated and transcended a formal banking system they are outside of by using their connections. However, they are still reliant on the physical mobility of people and money flowing over the camp boundaries to survive. Evidence shows that their mobility is further restricted by the lack of financial knowledge and understanding of digital money flows but also a lack of formal identification.

Although none of my participants had any knowledge of blockchain technologies being used in the camp, the UN's ID2020 alliance, a joint venture between industry and humanitarian innovations in mobile technology, implemented a pilot project in Mae La. Biometric data collected through iris scans were used to generate a private key. This authenticated the individual and provided medical hospital staff with medical records (WHO.int, 2019). Concerns with personal data being recorded was articulated to me by Three Arrows, an elder in his 70s. Three Arrows was tortured by the *Tatmadaw*. He expresses great concern that his personal information was recorded when he registered with the UNHCR resettlement program in 2005. He tells me that if the camp closes and he is forced to return to Myanmar, he fears his life will be in danger as he believes the UNHCR works with the 'Burmese government'. Although the UN promotes the benefits of digital IDs, others are concerned about the potentially serious risks (Iazzolino, 2021; Jacobsen, 2017, 2015; Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty, 2020; Shoemaker et al., 2019). Madianou, for example, highlights concern around bias, data safeguards, data-sharing practices, and ethics. She argues that 'the biometric assemblage accentuates asymmetries between refugees and humanitarian agencies and ultimately entrenches inequalities in a global context' (Madianou, 2019c, p.581). It is without doubt that these asymmetries and the refugees concerns need to be unpacked in much more detail if the UN's ID2020 is to be rolled out to the thousands of inhabitants of Mae La.

Returning to the scene at the market, for those who have experienced wet markets across South East Asia, this market is an image of ordinariness, similar to the one described earlier of the children leaving for school. It is the embodiment of a social space, where networks are nurtured and affiliations made. Information is passed on through informal gatherings, providing an alternative support mechanism and collective solidarity among those sharing the same space. The cultural significance and context of wet markets, according to Grant, lie in the 'important social space where neighbours catch up and learn about various food chain supply issues and town gossip' (Grant, 2021, p.182).

Watson (2009) draws our attention to the performance and theatrical aspects of market life. Inspired by Goffman (1990, 1982), Watson observes that different forms of communication are played out in

the social space of the market that is mutually accepted by all actors. The casual social interaction and ambience between traders and consumers, traders and traders, and consumers and consumers create a festival-like atmosphere and pleasurable experience (Watson, 2009, p.1585). Mele et al. take a more nuanced approach to urban markets, arguing, on the one hand, markets have the potential to 'diminish social isolation, enhance community ties, increase overall residential well-being and satisfaction' (Mele et al., 2015, p.104), but on the other, as they are social constructs, they may 'reinforce social tensions', especially in highly diverse communities. Although social tensions may be reinforced by observing everyday life, from the weekly morning market to the permanent indoor market, shops, restaurants, schools, hospital, football grounds, houses, paths and roads, churches and temples, the social structures in the camp also reaffirm ordinariness which is far from bare life.

Concluding remarks

I started this chapter with a question, *what is a refugee camp?* I have argued that inhabitants articulate experiences within multiple lived spaces in the context of Mae La and its material boundaries. I started by describing the different journeys people experience moving across borders and boundaries. I reflected on the concept of mobility and how the journey is often taken for granted for the privileged, such as myself. For my participants, checkpoints and borders are hostile spaces filled with emotions and uncertainties. They move as the perennial outsider (Andersson, 2014), yet their presence is essential for Thailand's economic growth. As I move into Mae Sot city, I explore the melting pot of cultures and ethnicities and compare the similarities to Mae La. I describe how traders on the river banks are stuck in their own limbo-like state as they watch their goods freely move. I observe the formal movement over the Friendship Bridge and the informal flow of people under it. I argue that as long as this flow benefits the local economy and is not a threat to the national sovereignty, the dominant powers such as the local authorities (Thai government and military) turn a blind eye to the movement.

I describe how young people, in their own state of stuckness in Myanmar, make the often-dangerous journey to Mae La for education. They give up their physical freedom for the dream of a better life, one achieved through education and knowledge. I highlight the shifting boundaries and blurred lines between who is considered a refugee and who is not, thus, returning us to the notion articulated in the introduction of this thesis that a more flexible approach to defining refugees is appropriate for this study.

As I get closer to Mae La, I observe how the space changes as I encounter more checkpoints, surveillance, and monitoring, indicating exceptionality. Section two further expresses a shifting space in how the camp has expanded over the years and how the population has grown and diversified.

Similar to Mae Sot, Mae La is culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse. This diversity interweaves in the everyday happenings of camp life, where it flows and clashes, articulating richness and tensions. I unpack the different actors that occupy the camp space and the levels of hierarchy. I draw attention to the asymmetrical power relations and the colonial and missionary legacy present in 2021.

I witnessed the camp gates opening and closing and the omnipresence of the Thai authorities who manage the space. Ritualistic practices and performances are used as strategies of control; however, this control has been challenged with new media technologies and mediated practices, resulting in tactics of resistance. In the past, the authorities had control of the image and representation of the camp and the inhabitants. In 2021, social media is flooded with photos and posts describing everyday camp life affording the refugees' visibility over their voice, image, and self-representation. The implication of this is that the power shifts and the subaltern can speak.

Tensions between stuckness, ordinariness, and transcendence are demonstrated in the image of the parents and children at the gates, which argues against bare life. A family's current stuckness is expressed in the movement restriction of the parents, yet it is a scene of ordinariness as they chat with others and wait for the children to be picked up by the school bus. Ordinariness is further articulated in the school uniforms, bags full of books, and the playful nature of children as they pull and tug at each other. Transcendence is seen in the imagined future and the desire to integrate into the host country, Thailand. Moving away from the gates, I describe camp politics and how old power dynamics such as gender or Christian/other are reaffirmed. I argue that Mae La is a space where multiple identities exist and circulate simultaneously.

I introduced how mobile phones and mediated spaces have interlaced, to varying degrees, into everyday life. The ordinariness expressed through the fears of failed exams and being addicted to technology and social media is an anxiety common worldwide. For those who have access to media, a level of imagination is achieved (Appadurai, 1996). This, however, has come at a cost to those without access as geographical links to the outside world have collapsed.

So, *what is a refugee camp?* In the context of Mae La, it is a rich space of multiplicity, where identities are articulated in a multitude of ways. To unpack how identities and a sense of belonging are expressed further, the following chapter will focus on music as a practice and tactic that constitutes everyday life.

Chapter 6

Performing Identities, Becoming Karen

Dancing through open windows, it filled the room. The beat dragged me from heavy slumber. I lay disorientated. The silence of the night broken. As blurry eyes adjust to the darkened room, I look at the clock on my phone; it's 4.30 am. Stepping out of the room into the smoky air, I shout over the music to Hero, who is already awake and studying by torchlight from his mobile phone. 'Where is this music coming from?' I question. He nods in the direction of the hill, 'it's from the Buddhist temple', he says. 'Why so early?' I ask. Smiling, he shrugs, seemingly unconcerned about how disproportionately loud and upbeat the music seems at such an early hour.



Figure 34: Early morning in Mae La Camp. Waking up to the view of the mountain and the mist/smoke that surrounds it.

As the sun rose over the mountain (Figure 34), the music stopped. In its place, cockerels took up the choir. Cooking pots of rice bubbled and popped over kitchen fires while the smoke burned my eyes and back of my throat. Drinking my coffee, I ask Saw Pway if he also heard the music, 'monks preach according to different festivals or events', he says. 'It was very early', I proclaim. Pausing for a moment, he says, 'morning is considered a graceful time. We are like a newborn person because yesterday is gone. It is like we start a new life. We need to leave behind all the suffering which happened to us yesterday'. I ask him how he felt about hearing the music, 'in the morning, we feel

comfortable hearing the sweet words from the preaching, it makes us feel we shouldn't do anything wrong and that we should live a peaceful life for a new day'.

Despite repressive aspects of encamped life, such as the fences, surveillance, and restriction of movement described in Chapter 5, the inhabitants demonstrate elements of creative resistance. Mae La is bursting with artistic expression and cultural preservation. The vivid presence of music underpins daily life, which was evident in each visit I made. However, as previously stated in Chapter 3, an overlooked role in the lives of refugees is the 'artistic activities in camps in which refugees themselves have been actively engaged as initiators, participants and/or participatory audience members' (Andemicael, 2011, p.1). This chapter explores the importance of artistic activities and meaning-making in the everyday lives of refugees in Mae La. It will address the elders concern that the youths in the camp have lost interest and are disconnected from their history, heritage, and Karen politics. This chapter unfolds over two sections. The first section explores the everyday workings of a recording studio inside the camp and the theme of 'leaving Mae La'. The second section will focus on the artists and unpack narratives of youth resistance and political agency, unity, and solidarity. I would like to start by reflecting on how music, performance, and ordinariness interweaves into the everyday lives of my participants and is a tactic of resistance to their prolonged encampment and uncertain future.

Ethnomusicologists have advocated for the critical role music plays in the construction of individual and collective identities. As Frith illuminates: 'Music seems to be a key to identity because it offers, so intensely, a sense of both self and others, of the subjective in the collective' (Frith, 1996, p.110-1). He says, 'making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them' (*ibid*). In a similar vein, Russell states: 'Music can provide the framework and expression in which social organisation, beliefs, group identities and historical memory can be formalised or confirmed' (Russell, 2011, p.303). While others narrow the scope to refugees, claim that 'music not only reflects wider social and cultural processes but can also provide a means for creating, interacting with, and controlling' populations (Baily, 1999, p.10).

I argue that you cannot explore contemporary Karen music and engagement without acknowledging the colonial and missionary influence. In 1922, anthropologist Harry Ignatius Marshall described traditional Karen music as having 'a quality of sadness' (Marshall, 1922, n.p). Describing the different instruments such as the *klo* (the Karen bronze frog drum (Figure 35), the *kweh* (a water buffalo horn), the *tana* and *jew's-harp* (harps made from wood) and *ta ruu* (a bamboo flute)²⁴, he claims that, 'with

²⁴ For further insight into Karen musical instruments see (Saw Htoo, 2009, p12), (Uchida and Catlin, 2011, p.567) and (J. Chance, 2008). Spellings of instruments vary across sources.

the acceptance of Christianity, the Karen have almost entirely dropped their own music for that of the West (Marshall, 1922, n.p).

The colonial and missionary legacy has created overtones of ethnic homogenous views. As Cheesman posits: 'The creation of a modern pan-Karen identity can be attributed primarily to a specific historical process' (Cheesman, 2002, p.204), that of a 'combined colonial-missionary enterprise' (*ibid*). With the advent of British colonial rule and their 'malicious divide-and-rule policies' (*ibid*, p.217), we are

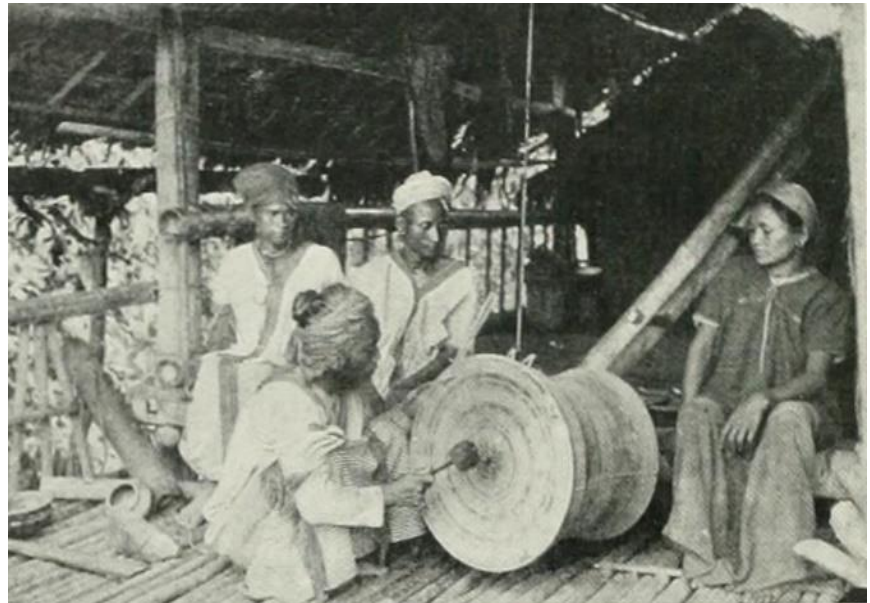


Figure 35: Karen Frog Drum (Ferrars and Ferrars, 1901)

reminded that the Christian elite Karen were often elevated into leadership positions. This meant that they had more opportunities for education and the English language; thus, they were more visible and accessible to foreign researchers and scholars.

Saw Htoo supports that 'the Karen music was influenced and enriched by diverse musical practices' (Saw Htoo, 2009, p.6) of the South East Asian region, including various religions and geographical locations and cultures. Uchida and Catlin observe that after 1945, popular music from the United States meant that Karen youths mixed 'texts from traditional Karen legends to compose new music in popular styles' (Uchida and Catlin, 2011, p.567). It has been suggested (Chance, 2008; Saw Htoo, 2009; Uchida and Catlin, 2011) that as an everyday expression of identities, music for the Karen provides not only religious meaning but also a tool to educate about social norms, reflect on life and history through storytelling and is used in various ceremonial contexts as will be discussed in Chapter 7. Karen songs and dance often mirror everyday life, such as rice harvesting or the action of two lovers calling out over the mountains, separated by circumstance and distance. Karen music expresses everyday life in all its simplicity, ordinariness, and complexity.

Recording Identities: Multiple Ways to Leave Mae La

In amongst an abundance of flowers and shrubs, we sit around a concrete table under the shade of a large tree. The tranquillity of Saw Ka Lu's fenced garden seems a million miles away from the oft-challenging environment of the camp, yet his house and garden are in the middle of zone B. Since

2008, Saw Ka Lu and his musician brother have provided a safe space for artistic expression. Starting from humble beginnings, the brothers have grown a successful recording studio and business within the camp. They could not afford a 'mic or accessories' in the early days, so they borrowed from a local church. By fixing an old mixer and covering their bamboo walls with a blanket, they started to record music for fun, 'people actually liked what we were doing, and with their support, we were able to build a better studio', he says. Saw Ka Lu and his brother are examples of how individuals through the commodification of music have remained socially alive by building a business that enables them to imagine and create a meaningful future for themselves and others, specifically the camp's youth. The brothers have capitalised on their local networks, their affiliation with the church, and their skills to secure financial capital and, to some extent, stability.

The studio in 2021 is now soundproof and split into two rooms. The first, a control room featuring computers, a mixing deck, keyboards, and an L-shaped sofa to 'hang out on'; from the photos uploaded to the studio's Facebook page, the sofa is well used by artists and the studio cat (Figure 36). A window allows for those in the



Figure 36: Saw Ka Lu's studio

control room to communicate with the singers in the vocal booth. On the back wall of the booth, behind the mics and headphones, hangs the Karen flag. Symbolising unity and nationalism, the flag consists of three colours, red for bravery, white for purity or sincerity, and blue for honesty (The Karen Organization of Minnesota, 2017). In the top right-hand corner of the flag, a rising sun streams nine rays of light, marking the nine regions the Karen claim as Karen territory. Positioned above the sun sits the traditional Karen bronze frog drum.

Most of Saw Ka Lu's clients are Karen, stating that 60% live inside Mae La. The other 40% are Thai-Karen from neighbouring villages and Karen in the diaspora who collaborate with artists inside the camp. In 2018, he states that he has seen a reduction of women singers coming to the studio: 'Perhaps it's due to the trend in music, nowadays it's mostly hip-hop and rap', he reasons. Saw Ka Lu says he prefers to communicate face-to-face with his clients so that he can read their songs first-hand. He tells me that the studio increased in popularity after the Internet became more affordable in the camp. His new clients see the potential visibility that comes from social media. Claiming that

before 2010²⁵, artists focused on rock and slow love songs, in 2020, he has observed a change. He notes that around 50% of his artists now prefer rap. The difference, he says, is access to media, mostly YouTube. Not only does it provide encamped Karen with a platform to be seen, but they are also exposed to different musical influences. He states that as the youth (his main clientele) and camp environment evolves, so does their taste in music.

Pausing for a moment to reflect on Saw Ka Lu's points, it would first seem that the music produced in his studio is gendered. However, since first speaking with him in 2018, there has been a rise in encamped Karen women singers. One break-through rap artists is Pu Dah who in 2020 released her music on YouTube from the camp, this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Saw Ka Lu claims that youths want to sing about romance like many young people worldwide. However, his artists often receive more support and attention from a wider audience when they sing about nationalism. Reviewing the songs produced in his studio shows that love songs, whether rapped or sung, receive less attention than those focused on the nation. I argue that there is ambivalence between *wanting to sing* about romance and *the need for* financial support. Nationalist songs mean more visibility for the artist but are also a tactic of resistance to the *Tatmadaw*, authorities (often Karen leadership and elders), and their ongoing encampment.

If we accept that Karen songs focused on nationalism and self-determination gain more attention, we may also recognise the articulation of long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1992; Schiller, 2005) and citizenship as practice (Ong, 2006). We are reminded that long-distance nationalism is described as 'a set of identity claims and practices' (Schiller, 2005, p.570). Belonging to the Karen ancestral home of *Kawthoolei* exists in the realm of the imagination and is articulated in other art forms such as in Hta poetry. The emotions expressed in both the nationalist music produced in Saw Ka Lu's studio and in Hta poetry, especially in the diaspora and exile, have similarities. Both articulate diasporic consciousnesses of wanting to return home, sentiments of loss, anxiety, and anger. Like Hta poetry, which is usually performed by elders, the youth engage in hip-hop and rap to articulate resistance, a tactic of disaffected, disenfranchised, angry youths worldwide. One of my students in the camp proclaimed: 'Rap is the new Karen poetry' and it is a way to quickly reach a global Karen audience.

Music further highlights that national border's for long-distant nationalists 'are not thought to delimit membership in the nation. The members of the nation may live anywhere around the globe and even hold citizenship in other states' (Schiller, 2005, p.571). If we ascribe to the notion that citizenship can go beyond legal obligations and refer to 'how individuals participate in practices and collectives'

²⁵ Mobile phone coverage was formally introduced in 2008, the camp was connected to the main electricity grid in 2009.

(Burgess and Green, 2009, p.77), and how these practices 'challenge and expose the limits of a territorialized view of citizenship' (Hegde, 2016, LOC 856), then we can explore the emergence of new Karen political spaces. Spaces that go beyond the expected traditional practices the elders may be used to and address their concerns the youths are disconnected. This brings us to Saw Ka Lu's second point regarding access to media and, specifically, YouTube.

Saw Ka Lu claims that the Internet has profoundly affected those who have access to it, contending that it is 'the only way they can get out of the camp'. We might first observe the juxtaposition between being stuck in the camp and how, through digital mediated environments such as YouTube, Saw Ka Lu's clients can navigate the precarity of their immediate physical immobility, as discussed in Chapter 5, one that transcends the boundaries which restrict them. An example we can observe is that the youths, similar to those in camps in the West Bank, as discussed in Chapter 3, are physically and geographically restricted, however by using new media technologies and mediated environments as a tactic (de Certeau, 1984), Saw Ka Lu's clients can move beyond the material camp boundaries into a space which allows freedom of creative expression, voice, and mobility. Social and cultural practices are carried out within this lived space, and a participatory culture develops (Jenkins, 2009). Reminding us that lived spaces are environments where relationships are built and maintained, experiences are created, felt, shared, and where memories are made, the youths who create music can collaborate and connect to an imagined community that spans well beyond the five-mile radius of the camp. This brings us to Saw Ka Lu's third point relating to collaboration.

Saw Ka Lu tells me that it costs between 800 THB and 2000 THB to produce a song in his studio, the equivalent of £20 to £50 in 2020. He acknowledges that 'it would be impossible' for artists in the camp to 'save up' and spend their money producing music when rations are cut each year²⁶. Artists in the camp, he says, rely on outside help from family and friends who have resettled in a third country. Alternatively, many of his clients inside Mae La collaborate with other young musician friends in the US, Canada, Australia, and Norway. This provides us with further insight into the multiple layers of boundary-crossing and togetherness from a distance. Firstly, dependence on outside help to finance their projects reaffirms the camp artists situation of stuckness and immobility. Second, it highlights the relationship and the power dynamics between those who have successfully made it physically out and those who remain. The power lies with the youths in the diaspora who are willing to finance the projects. Saw Ka Lu argues that it further benefits the diasporic youths as producing music in the US or Australia is expensive. His studio makes it possible as it is much

²⁶ As an example, a teacher can expect to receive a monthly salary of 3000 THB. This, of course, depends on the school and donors/resources available.

cheaper, and he can virtually transport those outside the camp who are thousands of miles away into Mae La.

Visibility, as mentioned earlier, seems to play a significant role in why artists in the camp produce music. Wanting to know more, I ask Saw Ka Lu whether he thinks there is a strong desire to be seen and listened to beyond the confines of the camp? 'Yes, of course', he says, 'it makes me smile to hear artists say, if they have their own country, they will already be known as a top singer'. This suggests that the artists in the camp understand the significant role mediated communication practices and digitally mediated spaces play in disseminating their music and elevating them to success; to be well known is a way to virtually leave the camp, empower, and imagine a future. It also shows the ordinariness of youth life and desires in Mae La in how they envision fame just like other non-encamped youths around the world.

Visibility is also vital to Saw Ka Lu. He explains that as more Karen engage with Facebook and YouTube, they have become increasingly connected, which means his business will grow, 'social media spreads information really fast, so they get to know me better'. In this context, visibility through digitally mediated environments is instrumental for small business owners such as Saw Ka Lu to succeed. Without social media visibility and outside support, the studio's success would be limited to the confines of the camp.

As we have established, access to YouTube affords possibilities for *some* inhabitants; Saw Ka Lu states not only are his clients able to access new music for entertainment or inspiration, but some have started their own YouTube channels and gain income from advertising. Asking how this is possible and if they have bank accounts, like Ta Kul's response in Chapter 5, Saw Ka Lu laughs, 'they always find a way here. They have a friend, who has a friend, who has a Bangkok Bank account. The money comes into this friend's account, and this friend sends it to someone who transfers the money physically here'.

Returning to Leurs and Smets (2018) and Gillespie et al. (2018), the increasingly important role of digital connectivity in the everyday lives of refugees has remained largely uncharted. I maintain that the network described above is an example of the profound effect digital connectivity has had on those with access. However, digital connectivity is unhelpful for those outside the formal system if it is not accompanied by a physical network of family and friends moving physically across borders and boundaries. In this instance, the inhabitant's position within the camp, as a refugee, has excluded them from the wider Thai society and formal system, preventing them from obtaining a Bangkok Bank account. Yet, they disrupt the social order and create new dynamics through their personal networks and physical and digital infrastructures, a tactic, I would argue, of resistance to

encampment and statelessness. In other words, they have navigated the social space and, in turn, shifted the boundaries to make way for personal economic development. This brings us back to Saw Ka Lu's previous statement that 'the only way they can get out of the camp' is through their creative practices, networks, connectivity, and mediated spaces. The emphasis here is on how, through creative labour, the youths can 'leave' the camp. By disseminating their music on sites such as YouTube and Spotify, which will be discussed later in this chapter, there is the potential to transcend the material boundaries, opening a space for participation, visibility, and financial reward.

As we move inside the studio, I ask Saw Ka Lu if his taste in music has changed and what the older generation likes to listen to? He responds that it's hard when there is a musical gap between ages, 'older people like slow songs, cha-cha songs with good lyrics, easy to listen to'. Then, expanding on what he means by good lyrics, he says:

I think this applies to the whole world, not just Karen. When people listen to music, we really like good lyrics too, but when we listen to music we want to relax, instead of making something serious, because we have been stressed for a long time, so when listening to music, we want to like make things go easy, instead of complicated.

Although highlighting the ordinariness of how different generations around the world engage with music, Saw Ka Lu refers to inhabitants who live in a 'stressed' state due to their previous experiences in Myanmar, civil war, and their continued temporary permanent situation of stuckness. Within the camp, they continue to live in a constant condition of uncertainty about their future, thus reaffirming the boundaries and limbo-like state they live in. Like Gonzales' participants discussed in Chapter 3, I suggest that music for the older generation of Mae La is a 'remedy, a space of evasion' (Gonzales, 2017) for them to escape and forget past trauma, emphasising and extending the thread of 'leaving the camp' through multiple spaces.

An example of this is in my conversation with Law Eh Paw, who came to the camp when she was 28-years-old. Now a lady in her 50s, she tells me her husband died a few years ago. Law Eh Paw says that she loves to listen to music and does it primarily through her phone or CD. She prefers to listen to hymns: 'Sometimes when I'm alone and *feel lonely* and when my siblings are not near me, listening to these songs comfort me. *I don't overthink anymore*'. Separated by the war, Law Eh Paw's siblings have resettled in a third country while others still live in Myanmar. She has no way of contacting her brother in Myanmar and has no idea if he is still alive or not. Hymns fill the void yet also reaffirm separation and her stuckness as she listens explicitly when she is lonely. Law Eh Paw claims she does not like new songs. Referring to rap, she says they 'talk too much' and the lyrics are 'not beautiful'. Signifying how music was used as a tactic to escape the horrors of war, she goes

on to say that her father would write his own songs. They would bring the family peace, and she would fall asleep to the sound of his voice. His songs were ‘meaningful and gave us courage’, she says.

Music and spirituality are closely intertwined in the lives of many of my older participants. Karen popular music, according to Chummuangpak, is dominated by the Christian Karen, who are predominately S’gaw speaking (Chummuangpak, 2014, p.5). Chummuangpak suggests that the Christian elite Karen have had far more opportunities than other denominations. Specifically speaking, the ‘Christian Karen music makers on the Thai border and in Australia, as well as other countries, have benefitted substantially from material and other support provided by their churches and fellow Christians (both Karen and foreign)’ (Chummuangpak, 2014, p.6). This is evident in my conversations with Saw Ka Lu, who initially gained support for his recording studio by borrowing from the local church. Drawing from Meyer, I refer to religion ‘as a *generalizing concept* through which certain practices, ideas and things—e.g. with regard to the mediation of a sense of a ‘beyond’—can be grouped and compared’ (Meyer, 2020, p.2).

Saw Ka Lu claim’s that he is not supported directly by the camp’s churches or bible schools; however, there is evidence of religious projects being recorded in the studios²⁷ and disseminated to villages along the border and Myanmar. Here I turn to a conversation with a teacher who works at a bible school in Mae La. Kaw Koh, a highly religious Baptist Karen nationalist who envisions himself as a future Karen leader. He is an example of an inhabitant who is physically and virtually mobile, having entered the camp at 17-years-old where he registered with the UNHCR. Whilst living in Mae La and through his Christian contacts, he received a scholarship at 36-years-old from a Thai university to study for a PhD. Moving between the camp and the north of Thailand, I spend the afternoon talking to him at his university in Chiang Mai.

In a classroom, under the heavy glare of fluorescent lighting, our conversation turns to music and its significance on his everyday life. He claims to listen to traditional folk songs because they embody the Karen culture. Kaw Koh states that cultural artefacts such as the basket, blanket, or woven bag featured in more traditional music inspire him. He says music is essential to his everyday life because it is a way to ‘praise God, glorify God, and worship God’. He records Christian music and messages in one of the studios in the camp, then he disseminates to other camps and villages along the border.

Kaw Koh says he uses a device and platform called MegaVoice (“MegaVoice: Solar Audio Bibles,” n.d.). Describing it as a small handheld radio, he says he can spread the word of God to people all

²⁷ There are currently three recording studios in Mae La.

over the world. Giving an example, he says: 'Let's say we go to a village, most of the villagers can't read, they can't write, but they can listen. So, we can record a message, which they can listen to at home'. What is significant about MegaVoice is its audio cloud and language capability. The website claims that the platform has 'a searchable database of thousands of Scripture audio files' played on the solar devices; I find S'gaw, Eastern Pwo and Northern Pwo available. To further share his message, he states he is working on a new project called 'how to bring peace to the world':

Currently, so many groups talk about peace, but the reality is, society is becoming worse. So, I record sermons and upload them to YouTube. Every morning when you wake up and hear this message, you will feel very pleased, be happy, and wake up feeling peace and joy in the community.

First, it must be acknowledged that Kaw Koh is unique in his mobility. He is a refugee who has benefited from his religious affiliation, which has provided physical movement that transcends the camp boundaries. He moves between the camp, Chiang Mai, and other villages and camps along the border. He is also mobile in voice and message. He can spread the word of God physically in person and in a digitally mediated space, therefore living in two separate but interweaving environments.

Secondly, Kaw Koh utilises technology, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments such as MegaVoice and YouTube to develop significant networks and maintain a connection to an imagined community. We could argue that Kaw Koh promotes a certain kind of Karen identity more in line with the S'gaw Christian elites ideology, an identity that has caused significant internal tensions between the Christian and Buddhist Karen that started within the space of Western imperial outreach.

Religion, Hoover argues, 'continues as a significant cultural dimension of meaning practice' (Hoover, 2011, p.610) in which 'culture is constructed through the representation and circulation of symbols, values and truth claims' (*ibid*). The representation, circulation, and reach of Kaw Koh's Christian message to a large geographically dispersed group is only possible through technologies and mediated communication practices. Kaw Koh's practices are examples of 'how the media serve as instruments of meaning in circulation among cultures, movements and organizations' (Hoover, 2011, p.611). The affordances of MegaVoice are ideal for Kaw Koh and the circulation of a Christian Karen identity to an audience who are illiterate and vulnerable. It could be argued that the camp, as a hyper-political space, is facilitating fundamental Christian beliefs and a certain kind of Karen-ness.

However, as discussed in Chapter 5, the majority of Mae La's inhabitants are Buddhist, and they too are using technological devices such as SoundBox's to maintain a Buddhist identity within the camp. Mornar tells me his mother, Ta Taw, has a SoundBox in which she listens to Buddhist sermons and monk chants. He describes it as 'a radio, but not a radio'. This SoundBox has Bluetooth and microSD card capabilities. Mornar says he downloads sermons and monk chants for his mother, who listens first thing in the morning and again at 6 pm. When we are alone, Ta Taw tells me, 'when I'm in trouble, I listen to Buddhist sermons and pray for my son', she says that when Mornar is sick,²⁸ she listens to calm herself. This returns us to the conversation I had with Saw Pway at the beginning of this chapter about how Buddhist music soothes the soul.

As Ta Taw turns on her SoundBox at 6 pm, she connects to an imagined community of Buddhist Karen who share her values, experience, and faith. Like Law Eh Paw, as discussed earlier, Ta Taw uses the sermons and monk chants to escape her troubles and find peace within her restricted mobility. In the same way, the Christian Karen missionaries are disseminating their message, the Buddhists are doing the same but with a smaller reach within the camp boundaries.

The quest for spirituality through technologies is critically important to emphasise. Illustrating the conceptualisation of religion as mediation, Meyer draws our attention to the statue of *ut engelke* (The Little Angel) at the cathedral Sint Jan in 's-Hertogenbosch in Brabant (Meyer, 2020, p.4-5) (Figure 37). Meyer argues that 'the little angel not only holds a phone and receives phone calls but, by its angelic nature, also claims to mediate divine presence, just as a phone connects people who are at some distance from each other' (Meyer, 2020, p.5). The statue and mobile phone represent the presence of an imagined community and the divine, devices such as smartphones, CDs, MegaVoice and Soundbox and the practice of listening to music achieve similar outcomes for encamped Karen. However, it must be noted that although Ta Taw and Law Eh Paw support the



Figure 37: *ut engelke*, Ton Mooy. Photo by Dirk-Jan Visser, The New York Times.

²⁸ Throughout Mornar's life he has suffered from mental health problems.

notion of presence in multiple spaces, they also articulate levels of stuckness as they rely on younger family members to help them achieve transcendence.

Spiritual messages of courage, survival, and hope, comfort and transport Law Eh Paw and Ta Taw to a safe space of calm and connect them to the divine. As McNally argues: 'Sung hymns are musical expressions, ritualized remembering's that bring into being something more immediate, more visceral: a shared sound-vision of that idealized community' (McNally, 2002, p.204). Music provides inhabitants such as Law Eh Paw and Ta Taw relief from loneliness, boredom, anxiety, and their 'temporary permanent' status in Mae La. It also ritualises their memories of an idealized peaceful community. Supporting this further, I reflect on my conversation with Thra Par Do, who observes that music is 'a mental outlet for many'. It provides a space where people can come together, celebrate, and express themselves. For Thra Par Do, music for older Karen 'is the way their spirituality lives. But many young people will not agree. It is a symbol of temporary, uncertainty, unpredictable change, and consciousness'. Thra Par Do has highlighted that, unlike the elders, the youths engage with and produce music as political agents, challenging their current temporary yet permanent situation. They have moved beyond survival and spirituality and now demand justice and visibility.

Expressing life through music beyond the camp boundaries argues against the superficial perspective that refugee lives are half lived (Downey, 2009). Drawing from Turner, who states that 'life is lived only in preparation for another—hopefully fuller—life in the future' (Turner, 2016, p.145), I contend that this imagined future, evident in the music created inside the camp, is also about the present, and the everyday struggles and concerns, loves and losses of the youth. I ask Saw Ka Lu why the studio is so popular with the camp youths? Articulating his view on the securitization of the camp, he tells me:

Since we are mostly isolated and in lockdown, kids here usually find escape through drugs or make social bonds through smoking and drinking. After discovering they can find escapism and friends in music, they try to earn, save, and become more responsible so that they can pay for their songs.

Saw Ka Lu's reason provides insight into the social challenges encamped youths face living in Mae La. In 2010, according to the UNHCR: 'The camps [along the Thai-Burmese border] are overcrowded and becoming even more so. Frustration levels within the camps are high. Rape, domestic violence, and substance abuse occur frequently' (Matthews, 2010). Seven years later, in 2017, it was reported that there was a concerning rise in suicides in Mae La. Saw Honest, the Karen camp leader, equated the rise to alcohol and drug addiction (Naing, 2017). Al Jazeera ran a story in 2019 stating that ration

cuts have compounded the internal problems of living in Mae La, leading to increased domestic violence and substance abuse (Carroll, 2019).

Several of my participants articulated that the reduction of rations and daily struggles of being encamped had affected family life. One of my younger female participants opened up about her parents' relationship and how her abusive father was now living in a different house as he would spend what little money her mother would make on alcohol. Teachers in Mae La expressed concern for children who were forced to drop out of school to find jobs. They equated gang fighting and drug-taking with a lack of opportunity, where youths are helpless to their situation. Although I argue the studio is much more than a place that produces music, similar to The Ibdoo Cultural Center and Lajee Center in the West bank, as discussed in Chapter 3, where it provides a safe space of belonging, a kind of membership and empowerment, and escapism, this is only felt by a small number of inhabitants.

On the one hand, the studio facilitates agency at a group level and creates we-consciousness where the youths form strong social and political bonds. On the other, it reaffirms stuckness and, to varying levels, how bare life is experienced for others in the camp. While some youths take up agency, where possibilities and potentialities empower, others feel just as hopeless, turning to gangs to find commonality and a sense of solidarity.

Saw Ka Lu tells me that the youths who come to the studio still prefer to sing in Karen languages, adapting a little to English influences by adding some 'easy' words into the chorus. Like the exiled Karen in New Zealand, as Cho (2011) discussed in Chapter 3, by choosing to sing in a Karen language, the youths in the camp demonstrate a form of resistance and subactivism (Asthana, 2017) towards the continued perceived oppression from Burmanization and the threat of language loss. Reminding ourselves that subactivism is a 'kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life' (Asthana, 2017, p.106), I was told on several occasions that it was only once living in the camp my participants felt they were *allowed to be Karen*.

Learning to be Karen was illustrated in a conversation I had with Ka Hu, who reminds me that while living under the *Tatmadaw* regime, she did not understand what 'being Karen' meant: 'I don't know anything about what Karen are doing, for example, the tradition of weaving. I should know it as I am Karen. I feel a little disappointed in myself'. She says that although she lived in the Karen State, they didn't learn about Karen history: 'We study in Burmese school and learned only Burmese history. Here we are free from Burmese control'.

Stardagger also expressed a similar experience and feeling to Ka Hu. He grew up in a *Tatmadaw* controlled area and only learned the Burmese language and history. It wasn't until he entered the camp that he learnt S'gaw Karen: 'I didn't know Karen initially, but I learnt how to read and write Karen from my friends'. The camp, it would seem, has provided a space where inhabitants have produced a certain kind of Karen-ness of circumstance created from displacement, persecution, self and other, but also from what would seem a dominant S'gaw influence.

This further supports the camp as a space of hyper-politicization (Turner, 2016, p.145), similar to Malkki's (1995) observations with the Hutu, as discussed in chapter 2. There is, however, a significant difference to Malkki's work, the hyper-politicization created in Mae La is being disseminated and maintained by new media technologies and digitally mediated environments facilitated by the stories told within musical performances. Music and access to the Internet have meant that the youths who visit the studio can disseminate a form of Karen-ness created and maintained in the camp to the wider Karen diaspora. Another example, I argue, is how some youths are taking on the position of gatekeepers and information and cultural carriers. As Cho (2011) points out, the Karen in Auckland have formed collective solidarity with a wider global community by listening to Karen music and reading in their language. The Internet, she states, is used to maintain ties with those in Myanmar and in the borderlands (such as Mae La), which in turn keeps 'them up-to-date' sustaining 'their identity and actions as activists' (Cho, 2011, p.207).

This section has discussed the theme and multiple layers of 'leaving the camp'. I have explored how encamped refugees virtually leave to make money through their creative practices by posting on sites such as YouTube. The potential visibility achieved in digitally mediated spaces highlights multiple boundary crossings. It has helped Saw Ka Lu's small business grow, and artists gain income from their YouTube channels, but it also illuminates the ordinariness of teenage dreams, dreams of becoming famous regardless of where you are located or your status as a refugee. However, the economic benefits are limited unless the individual has a physical network that can transfer the money to them in the camp as they are still outside the formal financial system.

Music and religion for the elders is a way for them to escape and manage their trauma. It is a way for their spirit to transcend their physical body so that they can find peace and calm beyond the camp gates. Finally, Saw Ka Lu articulates the theme of leaving through his success as a small business owner. He has remained socially alive by connecting to those in the camp and those living in a third country, affording him the possibilities and future imaginings of a life outside his encampment. To understand more about the lives of those who make music in Saw Ka Lu's studio, I now turn to the artists and unpack their motivations for creating music and how they articulate their identities in different spaces.

The Artists: Youth Resistance and Political Agency

Exploring how life traces, memory, and history shapes identity performance and how artists are tied to the camp to varying degrees, I now turn to three examples, *Refugee*, *We Need Unity*, and *Revolution*.

Refugee (Pu Dah, 2020)

As boundaries are crossed and hip-hop culture and rap are embraced, marginalised groups such as encamped refugees re-imagine and express their everyday experiences in their own image and style. Life in Palestinian refugee camps, for example, has become 'an explicit theme in Palestinian cultural expression' (Puig, 2020, p.289), explicitly articulated through rap music. Ettijah is the first and only active all-woman Palestinian rap group (MadameRap, 2019). Originating from Dheisheh camp¹, a 'temporary settlement' in the west bank, the group rap about their daily challenges such as 'the occupation, the night invasions, checkpoints, women's rights, traditions and restrictions that women have to face' (Nadeen Odeh interview, MadameRap, 2019, n.p).

In 2013, young Syrian women taking part in the Youth Movement of Damascus program in Kilis refugee camp in Turkey¹ rap about their daily struggles of encampment. 'Rap is an art. We hear stories outside on the street, and we convert them into rap' (Woman rap artist interviewed by UNHCR, 2013, n.p). The artist goes on to state: 'Doing this gives power and energy for all of us who perform it' (*ibid*). Rapping for Women in Conflict was a collaboration between Oxfam and five women rap artists from Yemen, Jordan, and Egypt. Celebrating International Women's Day, Oxfam brought the artists together to produce a song about women's rights. The artists visited a Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon to gain inspiration for their music, where they spoke with encamped women about their experiences and memories. Amani Yahya, Yemen's first women rap artist, contends: 'We are writing a song about women living in conflict. The message we are trying to show is that women are not just teachers or a cooking machine, she can do something, she can be a leader, she can be whatever she wants' (Amani Yahya interview, Kealey, 2016, n.p). Yahya says that her dream is to have her song in every house and 'be the voice of girls who can't stand for themselves' (*ibid*). Women rap artists become cultural carriers (Oware, 2018b; Yuval-Davis et al., 1989), often working within patriarchal structures (Tyree and Jones, 2015), they negotiate multiple boundaries (Rose, 1990) as they articulate their life traces, memories, and history through the medium of rap music.

Although women participation may have decreased in Saw Ka Lu's studio, in 2020, one of the most successful breakthrough Karen artists was Pu Dah, a 23-year-old teacher, single mother, and encamped refugee. As I watched Pu Dah wax lyrical on YouTube about her life in the camp, I contacted Saw Ka Lu on Facebook and asked him if he thought she would be interested in speaking

with me: 'I can introduce you; she comes to my studio to record her music' (Figure 38). Demonstrating presence in multiple spaces, within a few minutes, the 400 km's and half dozen checkpoints with armed soldiers and razor wire fences that separated us disappeared, and we became 'friends' on Facebook.



Figure 38: Pu Dah recording in Saw Ka Lu's studio. She uploads photos and music to her Facebook, YouTube, and Tik Tok pages.

People Call Me a Refugee

Pu Dah was born in Mae La to parents who had fled the civil war in Myanmar, making the camp all she has known. As Thailand is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, I would argue that Pu Dah finds herself in a precarious space as she is not a refugee in the traditional sense defined by the UNHCR. Growing up, 'I didn't know I was a refugee', she tells me, yet, she is bound to the classification and life of a stateless person, having been born into this system of temporariness and non-belonging. The reality of her position set in as she saw friends and family start to leave through the UN resettlement program. 'When I was a kid, we had a band. We could only sing back then. We did not know how to rap. We were very happy, but now we all are apart since many have been resettled' (Pu Dah, 2021a). Not being aware of her exceptional circumstance was further articulated in her song *Refugee* (Pu Dah, 2020), where she describes her stuckness and how others perceive her:

Since I was kid and till now
I have never left this place
I live here, eat here and grew up here
People call me a refugee.

Returning to the visual images of helpless refugees living in temporary accommodation flood the media, solidifying the spectator's expectations of hopelessness, helplessness, and bare life (Agamben, 1998). Rather than witnessing refugees as individuals, they are often portrayed as one giant moving mass of people (Dunn, 2016). Located in Pu Dah's statement, "people call me a refugee" is where she expresses how she is represented by others and not perhaps how she self-represents. Describing further how her stuckness is reinforced by the lack of a 'formal ID', Pu Dah raps:

I can only identify myself by my household card
When others can identify themselves with their ID
People look at me and laugh
I act like nothing happened
But it hurts deep inside

Although suffering from the absence of friends, inability to leave the camp, and lack of formal identification, I would argue that Pu Dah demonstrates resistance, mobility, and transcendence by taking her life and music online where she is able to connect seamlessly to a global community. However, her mobility facilitated by new media technologies and her transcendence into digitally mediated spaces could be considered 'coerced mobility' (Cabalquinto, 2018; Sheller and Urry, 2000), where she has no other choice but to go online.

Pu Dah's lyrics articulate her identity as a refugee and a juxtaposition between bare life and an imagined future. She describes the challenges she faces in the camp and how it affects her identity. With few opportunities, she states the future for a refugee is "set in darkness"; however, the song's second part expresses hope:

Will never ever give up
We have big hopes for the future
One day, we gonna fly high
Will never give up, never ever give up early.
Even if we are refugees, we have to move forward.

Furthermore, the message in *Refugee* demonstrates resistance to her encampment as she self-represents. Pu Dah is no longer represented by governments or aid agencies who had control over the refugee image before the Internet was introduced in the camp in 2008. She has the freedom to upload content to her YouTube channel (as of September 2021, this channel had 13.7k subscribers) and Tik Tok (>12k followers).

Mediated Co-Presence and Visibility

The ordinariness of her 'lived' presence in a digitally mediated space was articulated when she reveals in a podcast interview that her latest song is a duet with a friend who lives in another country. To both herself and the interviewer, there was no surprise. The only remark was that they have yet to film the music video. The ordinary practice of connecting to a friend at a distance is exceptionalised when one of the interlocutors is encamped. It is only through the use of new media technologies and access to the Internet that Pu Dah and her friend have been able to collaborate with each other at a distance. Research around the connected encamped refugee is increasingly documented with a specific focus on the concept of mediated co-presence. As a reminder, I approach mediated co-presence as articulating interpersonal relationships through new media technologies and mediated communication practices within different mediated environments (Madianou and Miller, 2013; Shoemaker et al., 2019; Smets, 2018; Wall et al., 2019; Witteborn, 2018).

The resettlement program has meant that the Karen are now spread globally. New media technologies and mediated spaces have afforded opportunities for new online communities to develop. I would argue that Pu Dah's music extends beyond her encampment and the camp boundaries as she reaches a global audience. We are reminded that, Saw Ka Lu says he smiles when an artist expresses their desire to be a famous Karen singer; he states that music and the Internet are the only way many of his artists can leave the camp. In the digitally mediated space, visibility and spreadability (Baym, 2010; boyd, 2014; Bucher and Helmond, 2018; Madianou and Miller, 2013) have facilitated an environment where artists such as Pu Dah are able to express her voice and be heard.

Cabañes describes voice as the 'capacity to speak and to be heard speaking about one's life and the social conditions in which one's life is embedded' (Cabañes, 2017, p.33). Jenkins (2009) highlights that a participatory culture develops when there are relatively low barriers of civil engagement as experienced in mediated environments. Thus, I define voice as the ability to participate, speak, and be heard speaking about one's own life, history, and experiences. Of course, there is no guarantee that what is said will be received in the intended way or heard. I would argue that to be well known is a way for artists such as Pu Dah to virtually leave the camp and feel empowered, and allow for an imagined future outside the camp boundaries. It also shows common ambition for fame and the desire to become more than the places they are from.

Increased online visibility and presence can, however, have detrimental effects on vulnerable populations. Thompson observes a 'turbulent new world of mediated visibility' (Thompson, 2020, p.27) where the boundary between the public and private sphere is harder to control. However, visibility within digitally mediated spaces for youths such as Pu Dah has meant opportunities beyond

her restricted physical presence in the camp and position in the community, such as earning money from her content and speaking about subjects that otherwise might be taboo.

Visibility has further afforded monetary benefits. Youths such as Pu Dah are finding innovative ways to make money. She raps about the lack of opportunities in the camp; however, she tells me she earns a small amount from the content she uploads, particularly to YouTube, which helps her survive. Pu Dah states that even though she can earn money online, she cannot apply for a bank account without a formal ID so she cannot access the money. To navigate this, like many others in the camp, Pu Dah relies on the informal banking system where she depends on someone with a bank account to physically hand her what she earns. She may be a star online, but her stuckness and, to some degree, bare life are reaffirmed as well.

Watching from Above: Challenging the Leadership Through Participatory Culture

Pu Dah's presence in the lived, digitally mediated space has opened up an environment where she may challenge the traditional power structures and leadership, something she may not feel comfortable doing in the physical space of the camp. In *Before Our Regrets Are Too Late* (Pu Dah and KJ, 2021), Pu Dah and KJ draw from the Karen past to discuss their concerns for the future:

To the current leaders
Please listen to this
Even now, we still have to witness
Our people being tortured and mourning

'Please listen to this', is not a plea to the *Tatmadaw*, who the KNU and its military wing, the KNLA, have been fighting for decades but a message directed at the Karen leadership; a perspective that many Karen may hesitate to voice:

We stand against our enemies and stand for justice
But you are standing and watching from above and doing nothing
Please tell me the truth
Are you only working for yourself?
It is because we do not have unity
We do not have freedom
Our leaders are not united
We cannot get back to our country

I would argue that the medium of music empowers a single young mother to make these accusations while new technologies provide the means to disseminate them. Actively producing politically charged music from within the camp and uploading it to YouTube has opened a space where participatory culture has the potential to develop (Jenkins, 2009) and demonstrates how Pu Dah moves between offline and online life. As she reaches out to her audience, there are parallels with Anderson's imagined community. Although describing the nation, Anderson famously stated: 'members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members...yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 2006, p.6). Similar to how print capitalism allowed for a common discourse to develop, artists such as Pu Dah connect to a global audience who share her concerns for their future, only this time they are able to speak directly to each other. Her followers respond with validating support such as 'This song is on point' and 'The meaning of this song is deeper than the sea'.

Pu Dah equates her success to the participatory culture on YouTube. In June 2020, the YouTube channel Karen 1 TV launched a hip-hop contest where viewers voted for their favourite track. The battle was competitive, with submissions coming from the camps, Myanmar, and the wider diaspora. I first came across Pu Dah in mid-2021 when Ka Hu sent me a WhatsApp message with a link to Pu Dah's song *Refugee*. Ka Hu, excited she had finally found a women artist she could relate to, proclaims: 'She's just like me!' The online competition, it could be argued, challenged the traditional male-dominant structure as the digitally mediated space provided the power for Karen women to vote equally with men, as long, of course, as they had access to new media technology such as a smartphone and the Internet. Within the material space of Mae La, we are reminded that inhabitants are able to vote for their Karen leaders, but it is usually the head of the house (generally male) that represents the whole family. Pu Dah's submission received over 73,000 votes and over 600 comments; the online competition provided an equal voice to vote and, in some ways, democratised a system that perhaps ignores female voices, as Anna in Chapter 5 reminds us, 'women always come second'.

More Than Her Refugee Status

The offline space of the studio and the online space of YouTube not only affords visibility but, as mentioned previously, voice and self-representation. 'I used to sing about love, no one back then knew who I was, then I started rapping and won the competition with a rap about being a refugee, now people start to know me. I was really surprised I won. I guess people could relate to my lyrics'. She tells me that she wants her audience to see that they can also express themselves through rap and not be afraid of what others will think. 'Rap was not considered a thing that Karen women should do. It's associated with gangs and not appropriate for Karen women', she says. However, she continues to show resistance to Karen gender and cultural boundaries as she explores her life traces,

memories, and history through her music: 'I love hip-hop. When I rap, I feel I can express my feelings deeper. Through rap, we can show our emotions, and every single word feels stronger'.

Unlike the media image of a refugee, Pu Dah's identity is more than her limbo-like suspended state. In the songs *Dark Heart* (Doh Gang, 2021) and *Doh* (Pu Dah, 2021b), Pu Dah collaborates with her all-women group Doh Gang. The women rap about their ordinary lives of breaking someone's heart (*Dark Heart*) and the importance of friendship (*Doh*). They further express ordinariness experienced by young people the world over, with lines that bounce with the beat like 'If mum doesn't phone us, we don't go home'. Here we are reminded of the everyday mundane aspects of life that are so often ignored in research yet describe common relationships we can all relate to.

We Need Unity (Hser, 2020)

Before coming to the camp in 2015, Hser had never used a mobile phone and had very little understanding or experience with any media or technology. Over rice, chicken, and soup, he tells me that coming to the camp has opened his world to new experiences and inspirations such as YouTube and Facebook. Having witnessed family tragedy directly from the civil war, Hser says that music makes him 'happier', stating that 'sometimes as humans we face problems, so if I sing, I feel more relaxed and comfortable'. You notice Hser because he is always singing; before class, he sings; studying with friends in the afternoon with his books spread across the bamboo floor, he sings; preparing the fire for the evening meal, he sings. Although it is evident when spending time with Hser, he gets lost in a song. He is also an individual who has remained socially alive as he imagines a better future for himself and the Karen through his music and the music he engages with.

Hser has composed a song, produced it in Saw Ka Lu's studio, made a music video (shot and edited by a friend), and uploaded it to YouTube. He claims he prefers slower music, yet his new track is an upbeat rock anthem about unity. Hser prefers to sing about God and the nation, and often you can hear him playing around with melodies he made up on the spot.

Similar to most Karen music videos, cultural signs are evident in Hser's music video (Figure 39), which argues against the notion that the Karen youths have become disconnected from their culture and politics. It opens with him standing on scrubland with the familiar Mae La camp mountain and river behind him, wearing faded black jeans and a red and white Karen top. A final



Figure 39: *We Need Unity*. Hser is wearing a traditional Karen jacket.

scene of significance is him sitting against a rock, the Karen flag attached to a bamboo pole flies above him against a bright blue sky (Figure 40). He tells me he usually sings about unity; his inspiration is the current political situation:

I composed this song by myself. My feeling is for the Karen people to stay together and work. *The Karen people want freedom; we want freedom. We need freedom. The only way we will win is through unity. I love to sing about unity and motivate the Karen people...Even if you are overseas. Even if we are under the Burmese military, we will be very powerful if we unite as one, and the war will be no more. We will be strong.*

Hser echoes the dominant discourse and position of the KNU in his music. Over the last 70 years, we must remember that the KNU has advocated for unity among the diverse population as a politically motivated strategy for self-determination. As Hall determines, 'representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history' (Hall, 1996,



Figure 40: *We Need Unity*. Hser sits against the Karen flag at the peak of the Mae La mountain.

p.447); the history of persecution, victimhood and the struggle for freedom is successfully ingrained into the Karen discourse, as described in Pu Dah's song *Refugee* and Hser's *We Need Unity*.

Returning to Hser's music video, it could be interpreted that the familiar image of the camp mountain, river and scrubland signifies historical displacement and encampment. Positioned along with the choice of clothes and flag (Figure 40), these symbols are deeply coded within the Karen history of

conflict, persecution, and self-determination. It could also be argued that Hser's song is a reminder to those who have resettled not to forget the thousands of people still stuck in the camps. Finally, Hser's identity as a refugee is inherently political, where the camp and his previous experience before coming to Mae La have shaped his desire to speak about unity; however, he also describes his frustrations about Karen politics.

To explore the situation's complexity, I return to the 'suturing effect' (Hall and Du Gay, 1996), as discussed in Chapter 2. Hser on several occasions spoke about his discontentment with the KNU and the direction the political party has taken in leading the Karen in recent years; however, it could be argued that although Hser vocally states his disillusion, he is in fact 'invested' in the KNU's long-standing political ideology structured around the themes of unity and sameness. Yet sameness is not the significant factor in maintaining solidarity and loyalty here; how can it be when the Karen as a group is so different? Instead, it is the 'relation to the other' (Hall, 1996, p.222) and the juxtaposition of difference from the Bama and not from each other which creates meaning for Hser.

This juxtaposition to the other and the difference internally experienced by the Karen brings us to the concept of stigma and how we engage with others and our environment. Goffman argues that 'when one member of the category happens to come into contact with another, both may be disposed to modify their treatment of each other by virtue of believing that they each belong to the same "group"' (Goffman, 1963). This is evident in my continued conversation with Hser. I ask him why he doesn't sing in English. He first says it's because he doesn't feel comfortable singing in a different language, even though he speaks English to a high level. He then says, '*I express my feelings to the Karen people, that is why I sing in Karen. It was my purpose to wear a Karen top because I am Karen. I sing in the Karen language to motivate the Karen people, so we must wear Karen clothes*'.

Hser is, however, only expressing his feelings verbally to S'gaw Karen. He is neglecting to identify the diversity in Karen languages by stating he *sings in Karen*, where in fact, he only sings in one of the many languages spoken by the group. Ka Hu says that the Karen languages are divided into Christian S'gaw Karen and Buddhist Pwo Karen, which has resulted in decades of tensions. Yet for Hser, this does not matter as he expects himself and other Karen to modify their performance to belong. This is done through familiar coded artefacts and the narrative discourse of 'I am Karen', which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. To help me understand his song better, Hser translates a section:

All over the world,
Karen people all around the world,
We have to unite our blood,

We have to unite together,
We do not need to separate.

Hser, I argue, expresses a primordial view (Geertz, 1993; Shils, 1957; van den Berghe, 1978). Saw Ka Lu states that this primordial view stems from the desire for revolution and change but also in the narrative that all Karen are family. Unlike Hser, who has witnessed violence by the *Tatmadaw* in his village in Myanmar, Saw Ka Lu makes it clear that, unlike the older generation, many of the youths, having been born in the camp have never lived in Myanmar or witnessed war:

I know that the young people have never been to war or anything like it, they were born here and know nothing about war, yet they still want a revolution. *I don't know why, but it's in their blood.* Whenever they sing, I think it's *influenced by the community* because it is a refugee area. It's mostly about war, and I believe most Karen want to have real freedom, land, and their own identity. Because even though we are living in the camp, and it feels like it's really free, it's not. We can't own anything. You don't have any rights. So, yeah, that's the reason I would say. That's why they want to have their own peaceful land where they will rule themselves and travel where they want.

Saw Ka Lu articulates a diasporic consciousness where those in exile and out-of-place struggle with the tensions of national loyalty and a longing for *Heimat*. Hser's music and Saw Ka Lu's statement further helps us unpack how those in exile mobilise. As discussed previously, strategic essentialism has played a prominent role in the assimilation, and 'grouping' of the Karen by the KNU for political gain; i.e., by uniting as one against the other, solidarity and a sense of belonging is created, evident in the term 'I am Karen'. Supporting this argument, Harriden states that: 'Karen identity as espoused by KNU leaders is singular and exclusive, with an emphasis on pan-Karen solidarity in opposition to other ethnocultural, politico-ideological, and religious movements' (Harriden, 2002, p.86). This representation of Karen identity, she argues 'fails to recognize Karen diversity. Weaknesses that have revealed themselves periodically throughout the Karen nationalist movement's history are as much the result of intra-ethnic conflict as conflict between Karens and non-Karens' (*ibid*). At the core, Hser's personal story with losing his parents in the conflict, a pan-Karen discourse created by the KNU, his status as an encamped person, and his physical immobility have shaped his perception of Karen identity, in his mind, created a certain kind of Karen-ness.

Asking him to describe further his influences, Hser states that he has seen 'a lot of *Karen people fighting one another*. I don't want to see these things. There is no energy, no strength because we fight one another, and we will *disappear*'. Hser's concern of disappearing was echoed on several occasions by participants who relayed a story of the *Tatmadaw* General Shwe Maung who in 1997

apparently walked over the Karen flag and declared: 'In 20 years, you will only be able to find Karen people in a museum'. I contend that Hser is demonstrating political agency and resistance to this threat, to his uncertain future, and the future of the Karen. A response to the threat to Karen sovereignty is further articulated in the song *Revolution* by Tempered Family, which I will discuss next.

Revolution (Tempered Family, 2020)

Released in August 2020, *Revolution* has been viewed, as of April 2021, over 310,000 times. Tempered Family consists of seven members, and as the name suggests, their music combines powerful, angry tones with lyrics calling for resistance, togetherness, forgiveness, and unity. Describing the meaning behind the name, Real 9ine states: 'The Karen are a family, and this is expressed in our name, we are all the same, we are one family'.

Real 9ine was born in Mae Ra Moe refugee camp and moved to Mae La when he was five. Similar to the IRC representative in Chapter 5, Real 9ine has found a way out of the camp and now moves between two spaces. After finishing school in the camp, he had the opportunity through an NGO to study at a migrant school in the Thai border town of Mae Sot. In 2021 and at the age of 25, he lives and studies at a university in the north of Thailand. He understands how fortunate he is to have had the opportunity to leave the camp but says that his formative years growing up in the camps shaped his ideas and still returns to produce songs in Saw Ka Lu's studio. Although Real 9ine can produce his work outside the camp, he illuminates that Mae La is an artistic sanctuary that fuels his creative political freedom. He is allowed to *be Karen*, stating that he can speak his own language, join cultural events and traditions and wear Karen clothes. Believing there are many ways to show resistance and a political voice, he states:

I totally disagree that the youths are not political. Politics is not just about sitting around a table or holding a gun. We can start a revolution through our music. We are musical revolutionists. We can inspire people in our own way.

Real 9ine, however, has no intention of becoming a politician or a soldier. Instead, through the medium of rap, YouTube, and Spotify, he believes he can share his message faster, suggesting political participation extends his physical presence and transcends borders. Here he highlights how participatory cultures develop in digitally mediated spaces; he can produce personally meaningful media and contribute to a broader discussion on the future of the Karen people. Reminding ourselves that participatory culture is defined as 'a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations' (Jenkins, 2009, p.3).

The importance lies in the perception that Tempered Family's voice and contribution matter and feel a social connection and engagement with others who share their message.

Connection to the broader diaspora is essential: 'We can be political in a unique way. Rap gains us more attention, and YouTube help's spread our message faster. Our fans are all over the world'. The artists can speak directly to their global audience in the comments section. The followers leave validating messages such as 'this is epic' and 'love from the USA'. The more Tempered Family produce and upload, the more engagement they have with fans who, over time, expect more political contributions from the group. As boyd points out, 'social media alters and amplifies social situations...they help create new social dynamics' (boyd, 2014, p.13).

Tempered Family are creating a new social and political dynamic away from the traditional political scene. One which reaches and is heard by a vast number of young Karen within Myanmar, in the camps, and the wider diaspora. They are also creating a new form of citizenship through the flows of transnational shared Karen practices, interests, identities, and concerns. Hegde observes how undocumented migrant activists are 'demanding recognition and asserting their presence through the performance of innovative and resistant modes of citizenship' (Hegde, 2016, LOC 877). As Ong states, there are mutations in citizenship beyond the traditional national terrain or an Agambenian perspective. The space of these new global assemblages become the 'site for political mobilisations by diverse groups in motion', thereby 'moving beyond the citizenship-versus-statelessness model' (Ong, 2006, p.499).

The validating comments on their channel in Karen, Thai, and English indicate how important this song is to Karen youths and show the music's visibility and spreadability and how long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1992) and citizenship are articulated. We are reminded that long-distance nationalism is described as 'a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographical locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral home' (Schiller, 2005, p.570). Long-distance nationalists 'are expected to maintain some kind of loyalty to the homeland' (Schiller, 2005, p.571) and support its struggle whichever way it requires. As Cho asserts, the young Karen in Auckland have formed collective solidarity with a wider global community by listening to Karen music and reading in their languages. The Internet and social media, she states, is used to maintain ties with those in Myanmar and the borderlands - in camps such as Mae La - which in turn, keeps 'them up-to-date' sustaining 'their identity and actions as activists' (2011, p.207).

Revolution is significant. It is a prime example of how the youths are mixing traditional Karen symbolism with modern beats: 'I don't think the older generation fully listen to our lyrics. We express ourselves a lot through music; we tell many stories', Real 9ine tells me. This returns us to Law Eh Paw, the elder who claims she does not like new songs as they 'talk too much' and the lyrics are 'not

beautiful'. However, *Revolution* recites seven decades of civil war, draws from the past, and asks, 'when will my people be united?'

Tempered Family call to attention the historical tradition of '*Pru Kalar*'. A ritual based in animism where the spirit or '*k'las*' is called back to prevent it from wandering too far or being consumed by evil spirits (Marshall, 1922, n.p). In contemporary times, calling back the spirit has become an annual event in the form of the wrist-tying ceremony, as described in Chapter 7. Explaining the importance of *Pru Kalar*, Real 9ine posits: 'We are asking Karen, wherever you are, come back and tie yourselves together. We need to remember our ancestors and traditions, and not only look to the modern'. Real 9ine is demonstrating how YouTube provides a space where tradition and modernity meet and where culture evolves. He is not asking Karen to physically come back but to meet and participate in solidarity by acknowledging the past within digitally mediated spaces.

Demonstrating how rituals and Karen symbolism are used to create solidarity and belonging, significant Karen national signs are used, such as the flag and the Kwekabaw mountain. Steeped in Karen folklore, Kwekabaw, the Mountain of Sorrow, signifies *Kawthoolei*. To reinforce these national signs, there is a juxtaposition between the rap about revolutionary leader Saw Ba U Gyi and their disillusionment with the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) – an agreement between the Myanmar government, *Tatmadaw* and KNU:

Hold on to Saw Ba U Gyi's principles
We signed the NCA. We are not to be beheaded
We need genuine peace
We will govern our own country and people
We will decide our destiny, build peace, and understand each other
Then we will fight off the evil military regime.

We are reminded that Saw Ba U Gyi is seen by many Karen as '*the face of the Karen rebellion*' (Hornig, 2019). His four guiding principles, recited at national events, were often quoted to me by the youths. However, there were just as many who expressed frustration and disappointment with Karen leadership and vision, such as Hser, for example, and Skywhite, a 21-year-old student, who tells me that she is 'really sad' to hear that her leaders are working closely with the Bama and is concerned for her future. The Karen future was a recurrent theme expressed by the youths and in the songs. Tempered Family look to the past when they rap about their future:

We died once; will we die over again?
Learn from the past and build the foundation of peace

Pah Wah Khee said, “if we know that we are Karen, we will be given our country”
Be united, be united, my people, Karen people.

Pah Wah Khee translates as Mr. White Bone and refers to the *Tatmadaw*, who implied that once the Karen form a united union and stop fighting between themselves, they will own their land and gain independence.



Figure 41: Opening scene, *Revolution*. Members of the group where bulletproof vest against a background that could be symbolic of the Karen flag.

In the accompanying music video, the opening sequence shows the group wearing bulletproof vests (Figure 41) symbolising the ongoing Karen military conflict with the *Tatmadaw*. As the music starts and the group call for a Karen revolution, one artist wears full military combat uniform while crushing rocks on the side of the road with a large hammer. This 10-second clip depicts the need for *Kawthoolei* to develop and build a robust infrastructure. In addition, it alludes to the Karen history of slavery, where civilians were forced into labour by the *Tatmadaw* and how Karen society and peace have been crushed under a dominating force (Figure 42).



Figure 42: Crushing rocks, Revolution. Representing Karen history, forced labour, and a need for future development.

In a later scene, these rocks are weaponised by the group. Reminiscent of Palestinian stone-throwing or the David and Goliath fable, this image, on the one hand, symbolises the disparity in power the *Tatmadaw* has held in Myanmar over the ethnic minorities for decades. On the other, it represents an image of repression as an image of rebellion and resistance (Figure 43).



Figure 43: Weaponizing rocks.

According to Entwistle: 'Operating on the boundary between self and other, [dress] is the interface between the individual and the social world, the meeting place of the private and the public' (Entwistle, 2015, p.7). As an assertion of Karen citizenship and national identity, the group wears traditional Karen shirts and army fatigues. Allman illuminates that fashion is 'an incisive political

language capable of unifying, differentiating, challenging, contesting and dominating' (Allman, 2004, p.1). Under the *Tatmadaw's* regime and the Burmanization of the country, we are reminded that ethnic minorities were prohibited from speaking their languages or practising their cultures. I argue that this articulates how resistance, politics, and long-distance nationalism are characterised and performed within the unifying collective action of wearing both the Karen shirt, the army fatigues, and singing in Karen. It also further supports the KNU's ideological approach of solidarity and sameness. As South (2009) points out, the KNU have for decades promoted a pan-Karen identity in terms of dress, dialect, and custom. This is reinforced in the lyrics:

Love our heritage

Love our culture

Love our language

Hold on to them, my people, my Karen people.

With such a diverse and divided population, questions arise again about which heritage, culture or language Tempered Family refers to? However, I argue that rap's subversive nature and rebellious creativity help us unpack how young Karen articulate political agency and mobilisation, such as in *Refugee and Revolution*. I advocate that music, and in the case of *Revolution*, have provided a space for new Karen rebels to articulate long-distance nationalism and citizenship. Through politically charged lyrics created in the camp, youths such as the members of Tempered Family blend Karen languages, cultural symbols, and rituals and traditions with rap; the results are new rebel anthems that speak of Karen revolution and belonging, persecution and oppression.

The Outro

Fairfield states: 'The participatory affordance of music enables an important social space in which the self and the collective become linked through somatic and aural engagement' (Fairfield, 2019, p.471). Considering this, I illustrate further boundary-crossings by focusing on two critical concerns. Firstly, the overlooked role artistic activities play in encamped refugee lives and how they actively engage as initiators and participants. Secondly, it further addresses the elders concern that the Karen youths are disconnected politically and culturally.

Addressing these concerns, I argue that Saw Ka Lu's recording studio provides artists with a sanctuary to explore and express identities situated around tensions of living and leaving Mae La. Helping to unpack the notion of presence in multiple spaces, the studio, on the one hand, affords a physically safe space where encamped youths can come together and bond. On the other, it

provides a space where those outside the camp can feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Mae La and the people they have left behind.

Reflecting on how music and performance interweave into the everyday lives of the studio owner and the artists, I have explored how politics, unity, and revolution play a significant role in shaping youth identities. Compare this to the elders, who seem to seek solace in music to escape and forget; the younger generation draws from the elders' stories and experiences, recasting them in their own image and understandings. Music, it would seem, is a way for the youths and elders to transcend the camp gates, just in different ways. For inhabitants such as Law Eh Paw and Ta Taw, transcendence happens individually where music is experienced in the private realm. Music and religion, for them, is comforting and how their spirit lives on within their restricted physical presence.

While Hser and Real 9ine are calling to mobilise a we-consciousness and sense of belonging to a unified Karen group, Pu Dah is breaking gender norms and inspiring young Karen women to express themselves through creative practices. This reveals that the dominant power within Karen society in the camp lies with the patriarchy and supports Anna's comments in Chapter 5. However, as Pu Dah demonstrates, Karen women have a voice and are participating in political and social discussion, just in different spaces. Digitally mediated spaces, in this case, YouTube, facilitate this engagement creating an environment where participatory culture can develop. Within this space, the youths can perform their political agency, disseminate their message to a vast community, and directly engage in matters that precisely concern and affect them.

Although varying degrees of movement are described in this chapter, immobility and potential isolation were also acknowledged. Mobility and stuckness, it would seem, comes from an individual's network capital and their connectivity to others in the camp. Without a physical connection to the church and donors, Saw Ka Lu would have struggled to set up his business. Without a digital connection to the broader diasporic community, the encamped youths would not be able to afford the studio fees to produce their music. Significantly, it is a combination of material and digital practices that some rely on to capitalise on financial opportunities, while others rely on to stay socially and spiritually alive. I contend that digitally mediated spaces such as YouTube transform Karen youths' political experiences and mobility. It is important to juxtapose this to bare life as it emphasises the lack of citizenship and political participation from within the physical camp. As a result, the youths articulate political agency and connectivity to their culture and their imagined future as they transcend the camp through multiple lived spaces.

The following chapter, *Rituals that Bind a Nation*, will continue to explore performance in more detail by focusing on the flow, exchange, and evolution of how rituals and traditions are mediated in the camp and across multiple spaces.

Chapter 7

The Rituals that Bind a Nation

In Chapter 6, I discussed how practices of creating and disseminating music was a way to leave the camp and a tactic to articulate resistance and political agency. Evident in my observations, music interweaves with other practices such as rituals and traditions in the everyday lives of Mae La inhabitants. In this chapter, I ask *what are the roles of rituals in everyday encamped life? What happens in the mediation of these rituals and ceremonies? What behaviours are expected and allowed?*

Continuing to explore the everyday lives of encamped refugees and the themes of stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness, this chapter will unfold over three events or what I call scenes. The first scene takes place at a three-day Animist wake. Here I discuss how individual and family identities are articulated around the sacred and the dead, and how tensions are articulated between different cultural and religious practices. The second scene focuses on the community level, which occurs at the annual Wrist-tying ceremony. I illustrate how rituals adapt and change and how the sacred has, for some, moved from a religious to a nationalist identity over time. This national identity in scene two leads to the annual Martyrs' Day. In scene three, I will explore how a certain kind of Karen-ness, based on long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1992; Schiller, 2005), is created, maintained, and disseminated to an imagined community (Anderson, 2006). Whereas the other two scenes highlight tensions between different Karen groups, there is very little contestation of difference here in this scene as the event reinforces collective solidarity and common identity. Together, these scenes describe the continuous process and evolution of identity formation, and maintenance and the tensions and faultlines between individuals and groups in the context of Mae La camp.

Scene One: A Wake After Dinner

One evening in 2018, Ta Kul invited me to dinner at his house. Aside from the large rice bowl, several smaller dishes of vegetables with garlic, two different curries, a soup, and a fish he had prepared and cooked himself were laid out on a mat on the bamboo floor. Over the years of working and building relationships with the Karen, I have noticed that food and the ritual of eating together are embedded in their hospitality and culture. When greeting people, a typical performance of polite repetition is in the customary question, *Aw mee wee lee ar*, meaning "Have you finished eating?" (Ashin Moonieinda, 2010, p.25). Ta Kul warns me that when a visitor arrives in a village, it is common for each household to prepare food for the guest. The visitor, in turn, calls at each house and must

eat with the host. Laughing, he jokes about how uncomfortably full people feel but to refuse is to show disrespect, so 'the guest just keeps on eating'. At the end of our meal, Ta Kul informed me that the evening was not over and that we would be going to a party at Mornar's house. Eager to join, I followed him and a few others through the tightly packed houses in the dark. I could hear live music playing from outside a house and people singing at the top of their voices. Climbing over the mountain of flip flops and shoes, we entered and went up the wooden stairs. The room was filled with people of all ages sitting on the bamboo floor eating, chatting, and chewing betel nut.

In one corner of the room was a large group of youths sitting in a circle. Reminding me of what Anna had described in Chapter 5 about the past and how neighbours would come together, a couple played guitars while the others sang as loud as they could in what seemed to be a call and response format. Welcoming us, Mornar's mother Ta Taw and auntie teasingly asked if I was married. Looking mortified, Mornar ignored them and quickly moved our group to the other side of the room. Minding not to step on anyone, I noticed that this was not just a party but a celebration of life and death. Mornar's uncle was lying dead and stretched out on the floor. He was covered to the neck with a white sheet. Flowers, food, and people surrounded his body. An elder sat on his own mat next to him, his shirt open, his chest covered with long beaded necklaces; his mat marked the boundary of authority between the respected elder and all the other guests. As the elder smiled to welcome us to sit down, what teeth remained were stained dark brown from a lifetime of chewing betel nut. I pause this scene for a moment to observe the 'tangible intermediaries' (Durkheim and Fields, 1912) and performances within this first opening story. Reminding us that tangible intermediaries in this aspect are defined as anything that makes the group aware of itself. They act and react to each other, such as dance, music, or an item that brings the group together.

Firstly, togetherness and unison were created through the congregation of the community sitting together, chatting, and chewing betel nut on the bamboo floor. The custom of betel nut chewing, or more accurately the areca nut, has a long history in South East Asia. As early as the eleventh century, 'the royal use of betel in South East Asia is described in written records which provide a rich source of details about the protocol of sharing a quid with a king and the use of betel in royal ceremonies' (Rooney, 1995, p.1), an example of crossing boundaries from the mundane to the sacred and sacred to the mundane. Firmly embedded into South East Asian tradition, Rooney observes that similar to westerners drinking coffee together, betel nut is chewed for social affability. It is, however, a powerful link to supernatural forces which affords its sacred presence in the rites of Animist worship:

Both the nut and the leaf are used symbolically in all ceremonies related to the rites of passage. According to ancient belief, all spirits whether good or evil must be dealt with and

controlled through rituals. Offerings of betel are made to satisfy, win over, or thank good spirits and to exorcise evil ones (Rooney, 1995, p.2-8).

Illustrating that presently and historically, the chewing of betel nut demonstrates how boundaries are crossed from the mundane everyday individual action into the sacred space of the wake. Collective meaning is created from the tangible intermediary of chewing together and the ritual exchange of sharing and passing around the basket. At that moment, the active participants are homogenised in their actions. Secondly, meaning is created in the youth's intimate connection. I will illustrate in more detail later that this connection is an example of an 'exceptionally powerful stimulant' (Durkheim and Fields, 1912, p.217), as defined in Chapter 2, that expressed a collective emotion. Finally, the correct enactment or patterns of practice is seen in the performance of the elder sitting next to the body and juxtaposition of the youths singing together. Through the appropriate enactment and rehearsed performances, the participating actors in this scene all understood their place in the group and the role they must carry out; instead of being out-of-place (Said, 2000), they are at that moment in-place.

Throughout the evening, baskets of betel nut, Coca-Cola, and chocolate biscuits were passed around the room. Mornar explained that his uncle had been unwell for a long time and that he had died that day. As his uncle was an Animist, the celebrations would continue for the next three days; this was to keep the family company and, more importantly, guide his uncle's spirit to the next world. I was later told that these celebrations can last much longer, but they usually are much shorter in the camp due to health and safety regulations. Restricting the ceremony to only three days helps unpack a question posed in Chapter 2, *are infrastructural or structural constraints inside camps relevant to cultural production and maintenance?* In this case, I argue that the lack of space does not affect the ceremony's production; however, it does restrict how long the ceremony is experienced.

The music continued throughout the night without stopping. When one teenager became tired of singing, they were immediately replaced by another. We may ask at this point *how does this practice reaffirm individual identity?* I would argue that the intimacy of music and how each participant, although performing as a collective, interprets and mourns the situation in their own way. Animist and Buddhist wakes are a familiar scene across South East Asia. When describing a wake in a traditional Karen village in Myanmar, and similar to the one I encountered in Mae La, Falla observes that,

when a person dies, the family and friends gather at the house to make as much noisy music as they can, all night, to drive the newly liberated spirit off and ensure that it doesn't hover about the village, bringing ill-luck (Falla, 1991, p.327).

Reaffirming social ties and communal boundaries, the ritual of gathering at a funeral or wake, whether in a traditional village in Myanmar or a refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border, seemingly illustrates 'symbolically powerful moments in the constitution of individual and collective identities' (Balkan, 2015, p.120). This tradition is not an uncommon spectacle among communities worldwide (Cannell, 1999; Ó Briain, 2018); however, wakes where participants create 'noisy music' play a much more significant social role in articulating identities, especially for Karen youths. Traditionally, it seems that funerals and wakes are often the one few social occasions when Karen youths openly court (Falla, 1991, p.327), with the ritual of music playing a central role. A further example, I argue, where the youths can perform individual identities within a communal space. As Paw Lay Pah reminisces:

When someone died, instead of getting sad, we teenagers felt the opposite. We were happy because we knew we would get to sing and stay close together for many evenings. It was the time that teenagers were most intimate (Paw Lay Pah, 1990, p.50).

Supporting this, Falla illuminates that: 'Music at funerals, therefore, contained romantic overtones, with teenagers holding flirtatious verse capping contests to the accompaniment of harps' (Falla, 1991, p.327). Observing how each participant understood the expectations of the evening and the pattern of the performance, I noted how the collective emotion expressed by the youths (as they sing at the tops of their voices) created solidarity and belonging to each other. If we take the position that the youths are not naturally bound together and relationships are not automatic, as argued by Hall (Hall and Back, 2009, p.669), this performance demonstrates how collective representation and we-consciousness are created and maintained.

As musical tastes change, the wake in Mae La saw Falla's harp replaced by guitars, yet the ritual patterns seemed nevertheless the same. In agreement with Falla's observations, Fink describes Karen funerals' as a social high point in the romantic lives and courtship of the community's youths. She states that Pwo Karen youths 'refer to going to a funeral as *li may tay* or 'going to sing' (Fink, 2004, p.96), claiming that: 'At the same time, the singing of courtship songs reaffirms the insistence of life even in the face of death' (*ibid*). I contend that this performance reflects the broader social and cultural processes of everyday encamped Karen life and highlights two different movements.

Firstly, the performance of singing signifies the movement from this life to the next, where the material boundaries of the camp are left behind, and the spirit is liberated from mortal restrictions by the youths' emotional exchange. Secondly, the wake provided the opportunity for the youths to be physically together, whereas singing, music, and performance afforded the space to bond and imagine future intimate possibilities. The social event gave licence to intermingle between the sexes

in a way not usually possible. As described in Chapter 5, space is limited in the context of the camp, and multiple generations live under one roof in a communal area; being alone and intimate is often challenging.

As an example of intimacy challenges, Ta Kul, tells me he has just got engaged. I asked him where he takes his fiancé out on dates in the camp; pausing for a moment, he replies that there is nowhere to go, 'we just visit each other at our houses, but it's not a date because all our family are there'. Previously the youths would attend a wake to socialise and flirt, but this was under the direct supervision of the community elders and family members. As more youths have access to smartphones and the Internet, social media has added a new dimension. It has allowed a space for the youths to connect and be intimate in private, changing the dynamics of their relationships and their agency over them. Wang observed similar intimate practices in her study on social media in industrial China. Highlighting that there is no Chinese word for privacy (Wang, 2016, p.121), she observes how young Chinese turned to social media sites such as QQ and WeChat to perform intimacy within private and public spaces. Wang argues that the 'essence of privacy is not about whether there is a public gaze or not, but more about whether individuals feel they have control of personal issues and are comfortable in a given situation' (*ibid* p.124).

For my own participants, evidence of intimacy was seen in their media diaries. Early in the morning or late at night, the younger participants wrote that they would contact friends and partners through Messenger; examples include '06:00: text with friends in Karen State (FB Messenger)', '5:30: talk with my girl ha-ha'. These examples suggest that the younger generation are finding new ways to navigate the restricted, cramped physical space of the camp by taking their relationships online. It further helps us unpack how mediated practices enable inhabitants to transcend their physical boundaries and build and maintain ordinary relationships; in this case, the youths may not be speaking with someone else outside the camp, but a loved one a few houses down.

Online spaces further articulate how individuals are taking control of their daily schedules and relationships. Not only are they creating new ways to navigate intimacy, but they choose what ways to exercise that navigation, such as talking to their partner, texting friends, and participating in online events. Although the youths are still restricted to the physical boundary of the camp, those with digital mediated access have the freedom to utilize daily time and how they choose to spend that free time. The significance lies in the notion of 'choice' and the freedom of choice. Of course, it would be unhelpful to assert that this choice is not restricted in any way; however, I argue that identities are being created within at least the illusion of choice.

Affirmation of Stuckness

As more people arrived at the house and filled in the spaces, outside plastic mats were laid, light bulbs attached to long cords of wire were erected between the houses, and people of all ages started playing games. Cannell describes a similar pattern of events in Bicol in the Philippines. Observing that most Filipinos die at home, she states that when foreseen, death means that ‘telegrams will be sent immediately to summon home children working in Manila, or other close relatives who are not at home’ (Cannell, 1999, p.141). The significant difference in Mae La was that there was no ‘summoning home’ of distant children to the temporary settlement; travelling to and from the camp is challenging for those who do not have the required documentation. Furthermore, many families are separated through the resettlement program and live thousands of miles away. As friends and family sat on the bamboo floor eating and singing together, their physical stuckness in the camp was reaffirmed by the physical absence of family members and friends who have repatriated or resettled in a third country. This absence resonates with the sentiment of Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias (2008), who observe that the border goes beyond the razor wire fence as it multiplies and fractalizes.

Mornar’s uncle’s death was a harsh reminder that many will never leave the camp. In conversation with the older inhabitants, a few expressed their desire to return to *Kawthoolei* but had the expectation of dying on borrowed soil. Three Arrows wanted to make it clear that no Karen he knew wanted to live and die in the camp, yet this was the fate of many who have lived in Mae La for nearly 40 years; an example that further solidifies the inhabitant’s permanent limbo-like state and acceptance that their future is bound within the camp borders. It also raises an important question: *what happens when you die out-of-place?* As Claassen describes: ‘Exile is a condition in which the protagonist is no longer living, or able to live, in the land of his birth (Claassen, 1996, p.571). He says that exile and death are closely related, often portrayed as the ‘virtual equivalent to death’ (*ibid*). This portrait is how Anna, in Chapter 8, describes her father’s relationship with the camp and *Kawthoolei* before he died.

In *Dying in a New Country*, Wyndham (2008) describes a personal anecdote of a family member dying in exile. Reminiscent of how my older Karen view their future as a wait for their ultimate return to a free *Kawthoolei*, the reality for Wyndham’s grandmother was that they would never return to their ‘homeland’:

Miami was to be her [grandmother’s] temporary resting place, awaiting the time when things in Cuba “improved”, and we could transport her remains to their rightful place...It was never a question of “if” but of “when”. As it happened, we returned, and she stayed’ (Wyndham, 2008, p.275).

For an ageing population, the prospect of dying in Mae La camp confronts the past's narratives and memories with their permanent limbo-like present. Yet, for some, such as Mehm Thwin²⁹, dying in exile depicts freedom and liberation. Mehm Thwin fled Myanmar when he was targeted by the *Tatmadaw*. He worked as a doctor at Mae La hospital for many years and views dying in exile differently:

For me, we may die outside our homeland, but we die in spiritual freedom. Over there [Myanmar], we are in the hands of our enemy. We die under oppression where we are forced to surrender. In the camp, yes, we die in a foreign land but die with spiritual freedom, and we die with dignity, not in the hands of our historical enemy.

It is essential to pause for a moment and reflect on an individual's state of mind and how this affects identity. For Mehm Thwin, the idea and belief of spiritual freedom afford him a portal to hope for new beginnings that are not physical, something that many others in the camp seem challenged to achieve and an area that will be discussed more in Chapter 8. Describing a different form of mobility and freedom, unlike the emotions of guilt, loss, and disconnect expressed in Hta poetry, described in Chapter 3, Mehm Thwin's spirit transcends his 'enemies' and historical oppression, opening him up to a space of possibilities.

The Dead We Live with and the Living Lived Apart

Addressing Gillespie's concern that studies on forced migration are 'yet to consider the increasingly important role of the digital in transforming refugee experiences and mobilities' (Gillespie et al., 2018, p.1), for the participants at the wake who had access to new media technologies such as smartphones and mediated environments such as Facebook, the physical absence of friends and family was replaced by a mediated co-presence. As a reminder, a mediated co-presence, as discussed in Chapter 3, is when interpersonal relationships are articulated through the use of new media technologies and mediated communication practices within different mediated environments (Madianou and Miller, 2013b; Shoemaker et al., 2019; Smets, 2018; Wall et al., 2019; Witteborn, 2018). If we ascribe to the concept that presence refers to 'having the sense of being in an environment' (Steuer, 1992), that might not be one's immediate physical surrounding, then new media technologies and communication practices at the wake bring together two different environments simultaneously; the material and the mediated space.

Throughout the evening, selfies and videos were taken with the uncle. Other guests video chatted, bringing friends and relatives who had resettled in the wider diaspora into the camp. An example, I

²⁹ My participant says he chose a Mon name Mehm Thwin for personal reasons.

would argue, of how separated families use new media technologies and mediated practices as a tactic to transcend material restrictions and challenges of entering and exiting the camp, as described in Chapter 5. Highlighted by Twigt in Chapter 3, space is 'an articulation of social relations with more than one location' (Twigt, 2019, p.173). Reframing mediated spaces as lived places allow for the assemblage of interweaving interactions and relationships to exist. This is especially the case in situations of forced separation where the physical restriction of togetherness is limited. The wake provides an insight into the connected refugee's communication practices which are not restricted by or to a material location. These practices compensate for the absence of friends and family members, which maintained 'a form of continuous presence in spite of the distance' (Diminescu, 2008, p.570). However, it also shows how the youth have become gatekeepers to facilitating relationships. As discussed earlier and in Chapter 5, the elders have not embraced these digital communication practices as readily as the younger generation. Suggesting that the youth, who have access, live in multiple spaces, whereas the elders predominately live only in the material space.

A mediated co-presence to family and friends who have been resettled is further achieved through face-to-face live chats and the uploading of selfies and videos, status updates, and the comments that followed on individual participants' Facebook pages. To be clear, I am not arguing here that new media technologies or social media are changing the traditional rituals of mourning. The difference is in how mediated practices and spaces shape the way encamped refugees and separated families *experience* the events.

As we say goodbye to Mornar and Ta Taw, Ta Kul describes his fiancé's grandmothers' wake. Like Mornar's uncle's ceremony, it went on for three days where people feasted on chicken and rice, chocolate biscuits and Coca-Cola. Betel nut was chewed while young family members and friends sung songs that celebrated life. Ta Kul, a Baptist Christian, said he noticed that people at this Buddhist wake were really having fun: 'I also learned how Karen people practice different things. They see it more of a celebration of life, not really something to be sad about', he said. Although welcomed, Ta Kul being Baptist, was 'out-of-place' at both ceremonies. The patterns, routine, and repetition of the ceremony were learnt and understood by the Animist and Buddhist Karen community members, creating a certain kind of Karen identity, one with Ta Kul as an observer; and thus, I argue that events such as wakes and the rituals demonstrate the range of Karen identities.

Mae La, I contend, brings together a more diverse array of Karen identities that might not organically occur in a village or town in the Karen state. I am not suggesting that these places are homogeneous, where everyone is either Buddhist, Animist or Christian but that the camp may be seen as a nodal point of diversity; that identities in the camp stretch further than the often dominant collective

discourse and identity portrayed in the image of the KNU³⁰ and where tensions bubble between groups. Wakes, as described above, argue against this collective Karen identity as the Christians who attended the event, such as Ta Kul, are outside of the collective knowledge and rules.

Sharing a photograph, he took at the wake (Figure 44), Ta Kul claims the 'bamboo dance and singing reduced stress and brought people together'. I argue that, like the youths at the previous wake, the format of the correct enactment of the dance ensured cohesion and common purpose for those who understood the rules. MacLachlan states that 'over the last few decades they [the bamboo and Don dance] have become one of the most important ways that Karen people experience and demonstrate Karen-ness, to themselves



Figure 44: Bamboo dance taken by Ta Kul at a wake.

and to the world' (MacLachlan, 2014, p.59). Performances such as the bamboo dance 'are particularly effective at fostering a sense of shared identity because they impose on the participants a number of habits' (MacLachlan, 2014, p.60) and associations with daily life. 'In the case of the bamboo dance, dancers must manipulate a prop that represents a kitchen tool used daily in Karen homes' (*ibid*), another example of the transcendence from the ordinary to the sacred.

Why this study is different to MacLachlan's research is the observation that new media technologies have provided a space to document and share this activity. New media technologies and mediated communication practices afford the sharing of the event with others in the diaspora who were not present, further providing a space for mediated co-presence. Devices such as smartphones facilitate and accelerate Karen social practices to the wider imagined community, again emphasizing how the rituals are experienced by the refugees. Supporting this, although not in the specific context of refugees, Arnold et al. discuss moving grief from the private realm to a mediated space:

Digital memorials on websites and social media sites often extend the social interactions between mourners indefinitely and certainly well beyond the funeral. This continues the commemoration of the dead and thus continues relations between the dead and the living,

³⁰ Karen National Union.

and shifts these relations from acts of private contemplation and intimate expression to public declarations (Arnold et al., 2018, p.4).

Without the aid of mediated environments and digital networks, communities such as the Karen who are involuntarily separated would have limited communication space with each other outside the camp gates, restricting them to the material space, thus reaffirming distance, separation, and stuckness. As Wellman states: 'Complex social networks have always existed...technological developments have afforded their emergence as a dominant form of social organization' (Wellman, 2002, p.11), thus mediated spaces have the potential to connect with new generations who were born outside the Karen State and camps along the border. In addition, sharing social practices such as the bamboo dance in these spaces instils belonging and creates a sense of Karen cultural identity.

To summarise this scene, the wake illustrates symbolically powerful moments which reaffirm social ties and communal boundaries based around the sacred. Tangible intermediaries (Durkheim and Fields, 1912) and performances demonstrated through sharing food, music, singing, dancing, and chewing betel nut created togetherness and unison between the participants. Each participant understood their individual role, the expectations of the event and the patterns to the performance. It also reaffirmed difference and out-of-place for some Karen participants, such as Ta Kul, who was outside the circle of ritual understanding and exchange.

I argued that the performance of singing signified a more comprehensive social and cultural process, especially for the youths. The wake opened a space of opportunity for togetherness, whereas singing and music provided future imagined opportunities. Yet, the youths can be most private within the mediated space, showing a shift in relationship maintenance, intimacy, and individual identity.

The death of Mornar's uncle illustrated the transcendence from the mundane into the sacred, where one can leave the temporary material state of the camp into a permanent sacred space. There was evidence of ambivalence to dying in exile. Many of the older inhabitants communicated an acceptance that they will only leave the permanent limbo-like state of the camp through death, for others dying in exile represented spiritual freedom and liberation from what they viewed as *Tatmadaw* continued oppression.

The physical stuckness of those in the camp was further reaffirmed by the absence of friends and family who had resettled or repatriated. This absence helped identify two separate environments; the immediate material space and a mediated one. It was clear that relationships were not restricted by or to a physical location for some refugees, and that mobility was realised using new media technology, mediated communication practices, and environments such as Facebook Messenger.

This provided a bridge between the separated into a space of mediated co-presence, bringing those outside the camp in. In addition, social media provided a means to document the cultural practices of the wake, such as the bamboo dance and disseminated it to absentees and the wider imagined community.

I argued that new technologies, mediated communication practices and environments do not change the actual ritual. Instead, there is a revitalization of the culture. I contend that these practices do, however, change how the participants, with access, *experience* the traditions and rituals; a more robust example of this will be discussed in a later scene in this chapter concerning my visit to the Karen community in Sheffield, UK. Moving on from the sacred individual and family unit, the following scene will explore how rituals adapt and change to the community, and how over time, representation of the sacred can move from its origins in religion to nationalist identities.

Scene Two: Binding All Karen Together

Come back, come back! An elder cry's just before tying a white thread around the wrist of a young Karen and completing the prayer. Similar to Baci, a ritual of tying a white string around someone's wrist to preserve good luck and fortune held in Thailand, Laos and other South East Asian countries, the annual wrist-tying ceremony is generally regarded as firmly embedded in Karen culture, which pre-dates Christian and Buddhist influences.

Ceremonial food and symbolic items fill bamboo trays as young men dressed in blue and white and young women dressed in red and white sit opposite each other at long tables. Others dressed in red, white, and blue (the national flag colours) line up to receive the blessing from the elders. Traditional items used in everyday life such as various sized weaved baskets, bamboo containers, and a drum with the Karen flag printed on it sits on display. Traditional music is played over a loudspeaker.

The annual wrist-tying ceremony takes place in August and is practised in Karen villages and towns in Myanmar, refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, and resettled communities in the broader global diaspora. Originally, as Marshall describes, the ritual was performed by Animists to ward off evil 'in order to prevent any wandering shades or "*k'las*" [soul] from being consumed' (Marshall, 1922, n.p). In the past, the tradition was performed by participants for various reasons, such as in sickness or as a symbolic ritual to propitiate spirits (MacLachlan, 2012, p.470); in contemporary times, it has become an annual community event. The prayer spoken can change slightly, yet it follows the same pattern and theme of the *k'las*, returning to the body from wherever the *k'las* is wandering. Examples of the prayer include:

Come back, come back home.

If you live in a tree or on a mountain,

In a field, on a bamboo tree, in the wood, in the forest,

Wherever you stay, come back, and live with your brothers and sisters and mother and father and uncles and aunties and grandparents.

Come back, come back!

(Htoo, Pu Klah Doh. n.d. in MacLachlan, 2012, p.471)

Observing how each member interacts with each other, I ask Ka Hu, a 20-year-old Buddhist Karen, what the words belonging and community means to her:

Belonging means heart. I would not let anybody take my heart away. It can also mean giving. People belong to people, not a place. People belong to people because people need love, life, safety, happiness, peace. We need others. Community is to communicate. It means living together with cooperation; community is unity. To become one community, we need communication and the interests of people. When they are interested in living together, it's like cooperation. When there is cooperation, it's like unity.

Ka Hu's reflection contradicts the concerns that the community is becoming more individualistic, a concern expressed by Anna and Ta Kul in Chapter 5. Prayers calling members home, the clothes representing the nation worn together as a sign of strength, and traditional items are used to create and maintain unity and belonging in the community. Looking at the tray laid out before us, I ask Ka Hu what the items mean. Pointing to the different objects, she says that each item has a symbolic meaning:

Sugarcane represents good ethics, morals, and progress. Bananas represent discipline and loyalty. Sticky rice expresses solidarity. Rice shaped into balls stand for being united. The white threads protect the person from bad luck and evil spirits, and water means peace which cleanses our body and mind.

Ka Hu tells me that in ancient times, her ancestors lived in the jungle in fear. They believed their spirits would run away from them and so they would call them back, whilst tying a white thread around their wrists (Figure 45) and on the wrists of their children to prevent the spirit from disappearing: 'It means the person and their spirit would stay together and could live free from fear'.



Figure 45: Youth receiving blessings as the white thread is wrapped around their wrist. Woman is holding sugarcane and rice.

Like sharing food and chewing betel nut in the first scene at the wake, these items are symbolically significant. It elicits from the participants a shared meaning and connection, which each is taught to understand. The sharing of food is resistant to mediated spaces because of its tangible nature. I may have argued that social media may change how inhabitants experience rituals; however, where it falls short is in the actual moments found in the material presence of *being in the environment*, in other words, the missed moments that come with taste, feel, and smell.

Although the ritual originated from Animist beliefs, I was told by several of my younger participants - both Christian and Buddhist - that wrist-tying has nothing to do with religion but more about belonging and solidarity to a larger community (Figure 46). Sweety, a Christian Karen, insists it has gone beyond Animism: 'It's about the nation. It is about 'knowing our self and that we are Karen and to know our relatives'. In this sense, Sweety isn't referring to her immediate blood relatives but to know a wider Karen imagined community (Anderson, 2006) to whom she calls her brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. Saw Win, a 25-year-old Christian, agrees, arguing for unity and belonging, he states:

Wrist-tying ceremony symbolises Karen from North, South, East, and West to reunite and welcome their spirits back to the Karen people. It is not about religions; it is all about the people worldwide who know that I am a Karen.

As the Karen are spread globally, the elders perform this ritual to connect and remind the youths that they are united. These rituals allow the elders to share and control a common Karen narrative and practice long-distance nationalism. However, it is the youths who are disseminating the message through their photos and social media activity. As Schiller describes, long-distance nationalists, in

this case, demonstrated first by the Karen elders, 'are expected to maintain some kind of loyalty to the homeland' (Schiller, 2005, p.571) and support its struggle whichever way it requires. In a sense, wrist-tying is a way for the elders to perform their support from afar and in the imagination of those separated. Answering an earlier question, for youths like Sweety, the call for action within the prayers and the ritual exchange, once based in the sacred, seems to be interpreted as a call for solidarity and identification with the Karen struggle for independence. It also shows how, in this case, the younger generation mobilise and demonstrate agency through their long-distance nationalist images. Similar to Chapter 6, the youths are able to transcend the physical presence and leave the camp.

In theory, Ka Hu agrees with Sweety and Saw Win that the event represents something more than religion, stating that she saw the performance of sharing the items and wrist-tying as a way to transcend difference. However, she is conflicted in practice, pointing out that she would only attend the event with her Buddhist friends at the Buddhist temple. She understood that: 'Before Christianity and Buddhism were introduced, *the ritual was for all the Karen people* and not based on religion. However, today Christians do not practise the ritual, but they can join if they want to'. This suggests that the doctrine of unity and sameness is contested in practice and highlights underlying tensions between my Christian and Buddhist participants. Although Sweety insists they are the same, Ka Hu has reservations.



Figure 46: Youth receiving blessing from an elder, wrist-tying ceremony

Further ambivalence occurs when speaking to Thra Pa Do, an older Christian Karen who teaches in the camp. Thra Pa Do takes a more reflective approach to the ceremony. He says that he enjoys it but: 'The majority of Christians here find it difficult to join'. Nevertheless, he claims that some

Christians are open-minded like himself, believing that the ceremony is more about 'cultural heritage and an open opportunity to celebrate by all, regardless of religion'.

The importance of visibility and ethnic recognition was a theme that reoccurred in many conversations I had with the youths. Connecting to others outside Mae La is much easier for those with access to the Internet and new media technology. Sweety claims that before the camp was connected to the Internet in 2008, it was difficult to see how others celebrated 'being Karen'. Significance lies in the afforded visibility and affirmation mediated practices and spaces have opened for encamped refugees. Wrapped in Sweety's and Saw Win's statements are two observations; the first is that digitally mediated spaces are windows for encamped refugees to witness how other Karen are celebrating. This window empowers and validates the individual that they are performing the same/similar acts as other Karen who are separated by distance. In the process of mediation, they draw from their own personal and social memories and build certain nationalist relationships virtually with others. As Misztal contends:

Although memory is a faculty of individual minds, remembering is social in origin and influenced by dominant discourses. In other words, while it is the individual who remembers, remembering is more than a personal act as even the most personal memories are embedded in social context and shaped by social factors that make social remembering possible, such as language, rituals and celebration practices (Misztal, 2010, p.27).

The process of mediation further demonstrates the emergence of new political spaces and how citizenship is re-imagined. The global flow of Karen images encourages Sweety and Saw Win further to mobilise and participate, thus creating a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009). The second is in the notion of 'Becoming Karen'. The construction of a Karen identity is firmly based on identifying with the 'I am Karen' narrative. Drawing from previous conversations with Stardagger and Ka Hu, who articulated that it wasn't until entering the camp that they 'learned' how to be Karen, I reframe 'being Karen' with the social process of 'becoming Karen'. An area I will unpack in more detail in scene three.

Supporting the notion that wrist-tying has transcended the sacred, Ka Hu shows me a song uploaded to YouTube. Singing in Pwo Karen and accompanied by traditional instruments, the video cuts to scenes depicting life in the camp and the wrist-tying event. 'This song talks about loving your people and nation, and understanding your tradition and culture', she says. 'People will come and destroy our nation or our culture, so we all have to unite together'. Describing further, Ka Hu tells me that Karen people easily trust others, which has been a problem historically. She is referring to the stories told by the elders about how the Karen have been 'tricked' by the Bama people over land and

business and how some still equate the *Tatmadaw* with the Bama people. Similar to Malkki's (1995) observations with the Hutu, the mythico-histories the Karen retell and recast are neither fact nor myth but part of the social memory that presents the Karen as innocent and good against the Bama³¹, who they believe are tricksters and bad. She says that to avoid being tricked again, the song sings about how,

we must clearly understand the history of our nation, tradition, and language. During this occasion, [wrist-tying ceremony] people living far away in the cities and villages must come back to celebrate our wrist-tying ceremony together.

As Sweety and Ka Hu highlight, the ritualization performed through music and the participatory affordance supported by mediated environments has enabled a social space to exist beyond Mae La. Social ties are literally enacted through the physical tying of the thread; solidarity and a we-consciousness are maintained through the set practices carried out on the same day but in different locations around the world by the imagined community. Everyday ordinary food items such as sticky rice, bananas and sugarcane transcend into powerful stimulants that carry symbolic meaning and representation. Thus, supporting the argument made earlier that this event and the rituals involved have, for some, evolved into practices of nation-building, national identity maintenance and boundary-crossing. Yet, I would argue that although some participants claim the ceremony is for all Karen and each group uses the same items, there is still evidence that there are divisions and boundaries between the Christians and Buddhists in the camp and a differing interpretation to what the ceremony signifies.

Drawing several scenes to a close, it was observed that symbolic items of everyday use are embedded into the rituals of the event, which transcend the ordinary mundane into the sacred. Significantly, there is evidence that the event has transgressed further, crossing boundaries of religious exchange to one that represents nation-building, unity, and long-distance nationalism, particularly for some Karen youths. This contemporary perception is bound with complexity, tensions, and ambivalence about whether the event represents religion, nation, cultural heritage, or all the above?

New media technologies and mediated environments provide a space for reflection, participation, witnessing, learning, and mediated co-presence for some of my participants. It allowed them to envision an imagined community beyond their stuckness in the material space. It opened a space

³¹ Although my participants could differentiate between the *Tatmadaw* and the Bama, many still seemed to harbour mistrust towards the Bama people.

where connections are made, and relationships are created and maintained with other Karen in the diaspora and in Myanmar.

With different interpretations of the wrist-tying event, the youths document the practices by uploading videos and photographs. I question *whether the ceremony has changed at all over the years? Has it become more significant or better attended after the circulation of images and videos on social media, and has social media changed the way the events are experienced?* According to Ka Hu, the way the ceremony is performed is the same as it was before; the only difference she can see now is that the meaning has changed and how people experience it in mediated spaces. She says that she has seen an increase in attendance over the years. This, Ka Hu says, is due to the many reminders on Facebook, 'my friends will post photos of themselves preparing for the ceremony, I'm like, oh yeah, I must attend'. As the rituals are mediated and documented, I argue that there is a shift in power over self-representation and representation of the event. This shift in authority is reminiscent in the observations of Bedouin youths by Abu-Lughod, who noted that as the youths embraced 'new technologies of public culture' such as tape recorders and television, they formed a resistance to their elders and the old forms of Bedouin cultural identity (Abu-Lughod, 1989, p.11). Although the Karen youths draw heavily from the elders' guidance, evident in Chapter 6, they also demonstrate resistance to the notion that they are not politically engaged. Although the authorities (Camp Commander's office and *Or Sor*), described in Chapter 5, have tried to control the image of the camp and people, the youths are actively opposing them through their mediating practices.

The final scene will expand on the idea of nation-building, long-distance nationalism, and national consciousness by exploring how learnt practices create a certain kind of solidarity and belonging. I will look at how, through repetition, reproduction, and interpretation of history, or as Geertz puts it, the stories people tell themselves about themselves are articulated through celebrated national events, in this case, Karen Martyrs' Day.

Scene Three: I am Karen!

Martyrs' Day is an annual event in August where the Karen celebrate their ancestors who fought for their freedom and the soldiers who continue to fight for *Kawthoolei*. *Kawthoolei*, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, is the imaginary ancestral homeland of the Karen people and firmly fixed in the minds of the most political Karen. When speaking to some of my participants, the notion of *Kawthoolei* seemed to extend into antiquity. However, the name is contested, with many suggesting it is much more contemporary. As Keenan claims, *Kawthoolei* was created by the nationalist leader Saw Ba U Gyi in 1949 and subsequently adopted into the Karen political narrative by the S'gaw Karen elite (Keenan, 2008). In this scene, I will unpack practices designed to bring a diverse group together. I will explore symbols of resistance, narratives used to insight unity, institutions that

facilitate political expression, and digitally mediated spaces that expand and support the material practices.

Commemorated annually and across the Karen State and wider diaspora, Martyrs' Day marks the first Karen national leader, Saw Ba U Gyi, who was killed on August 12th, 1950, by the *Tatmadaw* ("Karen Martyrs' Day," 2020). Existing for many in the realm of the imagination, Horstmann argues that: 'While the physical space of a Karen homeland, the *Kawthoolei*, has been gradually lost, the spiritual idea of a 'homeland' is still alive' (Horstmann, 2011, p.255). I argue, along with others (Cheesman, 2002; South, 2017), that the KNU has strategically used *Kawthoolei* as a unifying concept that reinforces a particular kind of national Karen identity through rituals performed at events, such as Martyrs' Day. I found, however, that there is concern among the elders that the youths in the camp have lost interest and are disconnected from their history, heritage, and, significantly, Karen politics. With one stating:

On special Karen days, they watch what is happening live on their small screens or see the Karen media cover internal events [in the Karen State], but I see a disconnect because they are not there. They don't take it seriously. They don't see and respect their national heroes. There is no feeling at all.

This raises questions about how, if at all, are national events celebrated in the context of the camp, how, if at all, do they build and maintain a national identity, and finally, are the youths disconnected from Karen politics?

Edensor argues, national(ist) ceremonies are 'played out to legitimate the power, historical grandeur, military might, legal process, and institutional apparatus of the nation-state' (Edensor, 2002, p.73). I argue that it is 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012) such as dance performances and speeches that build and maintain unity, image-making, and a sense of collective national belonging and identity among the Karen who attend the event in the camp. In agreement with Sharples (2017), the shared experiences of persecution and displacement bind this diverse group together and a common narrative of 'I am Karen'. It is within the patterns of practice such as the performed speeches and the coming together where this shared experience exemplifies representation and meaning; as Hall determines, 'representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history' (Hall et al., 1996, p.447). Representation is made within the retelling of the stories of attack throughout Karen history and the repetition of KNU ideology and united image of Karen-ness. What is significant about this scene is that it is performed in the context of a bounded and restricted environment where Martyrs' Day is prohibited in the camp public space. Interestingly,

the authorities turn a blind eye to the event as long as it is held in an institution like a school, college, or church; this will be discussed next.

A Space of Resistance

I was invited in 2018 by Saw Plaw Plaw to attend their planned Martyrs' Day celebration. The college hall was packed with students, families, and neighbours who throughout the morning listened to speakers describing historical and personal accounts of attacks by the *Tatmadaw* and the importance of fighting for a united *Kawthoolei*. In between the speeches, groups performed the traditional *Don* dance, students sang folk songs accompanied by traditional Karen instruments, and at lunch, nationalist rock music played over prominent speakers on either side of the hall.

As the day unfolded, participants performed the set practices expected from the yearly tradition, with music playing a significant role. The juxtaposition of the *Don* dance (Figure 47), folk music and national rock music bridged the traditional with the modern, creating a space embedded with cultural and historical codes, which supported the messages in the speeches.



Figure 47: Don dance performed at a Mae La school on Martyrs' Day.

The Pwo Karen originally danced the *Don*, which meant 'in agreement with each other', reinforcing community values and beliefs. The *Don* consists of various dances led by a dance leader called a *Don Koh*. However, the dance has significantly evolved over the years. The dance now symbolises

strength, unity, and national pride in contemporary times, influenced by decades of civil war, forced migration, family separation, and KNU political ideology. MacLachlan states: ‘The dances are rehearsed and performed in order to inculcate a sense of Karen identity in the participants, most of whom have never seen Karen State’ (MacLachlan, 2014, p.58). She goes on to say that dances such as the *Don* and bamboo dance create and maintain a certain kind of Karen-ness: ‘These dances – which involve singing in Karen languages, playing traditional Karen instruments, wearing Karen dress, and enacting gestures that symbolize village life in Burma—allow Karen young people to practice the habits of “Karen-ness”’ (*ibid*).

Reflecting on the concern that the youths have lost interest in Karen history, heritage, and Karen politics, I ask Saw Win why he thought the day was necessary: ‘I want to celebrate Martyrs’ Day because most of our leaders and our people have sacrificed themselves for our country. They sacrificed a lot. This is why it is most important for us to remember and celebrate’. Elaborating further, Ku Thay, a 49-year-old primary school teacher, states:

It is a celebration of the Karen people; we should preserve it. Some people say we shouldn’t preserve it. If we don’t keep it alive, we cannot stand together. Some have let go and joined them [the Bama]. So, we should preserve our values. Not all but some of it. We, the Karen people, we are from Myanmar. We cannot heighten our culture and traditions above them [the Bama]. Every time we heighten our culture a little bit, they push us down. They try to push us around. That’s why we need to preserve our celebrations.

The argument expressed by Saw Win and Ku Thay was shared by all my participants but particularly emphasised by the youths (Figure 48). Sweety, as we remember, entered the camp with her parents when she was only 6-years-old, having fled Yangon. My initial interview with Sweety was in early 2018; instantly, I got the impression



Figure 48: I join Martyrs’ Day celebrations.

she was a highly driven 19-year-old who claimed to rarely leave the camp. Sweety spends her spare time attending college, music and dance practice, and trains when she can as a Karen police officer, which she does all within the camp boundaries. Sitting with her mother between two giant speakers, she passionately shouts over the music: ‘I have to attend special Karen days. As I am Karen, I must go! I am Karen, and if I do not go and celebrate, who will go and celebrate my day? I am very

interested in the Army, soldiers, police, so it is important for me'. The expression of 'I am Karen, so I must' was a typical response and seemed to be part of the Karen youth narrative as to why they participate in the speeches, dances, and music. This, I contend, represents a long-distance nationalism, a we-consciousness, and an imagined Karen community ingrained in the Karen narrative. Like the wrist-tying event, for those who have access to new media technology, mediated communication practices, and digitally mediated spaces, it is easier to see how others perform the same practices on the same day. This brings us back to Sweety's statement in the opening of this thesis. A further example was confirmed when I attended a similar celebration in Sheffield, UK, a year later.

Arriving early at the event in Sheffield, I noted that a group of young children aged around seven were preparing for their dance performance. On the screen above them, YouTube played the dance they were learning. I was told by one of the adults that it was essential to the community that the children maintain their cultural heritage, but unfortunately, *it was the adults who had forgotten* the exact dance moves and so relied on uploaded videos from the Karen State and inside the camps to now teach the children in Sheffield. For this community, mediated environments such as YouTube (Figure 49) provided a source of information, which contributed to the maintenance of ethnic identity in the diaspora for both adults and children.

Illustrating the crossing of material boundaries into space affords the sharing and reproduction of ethnic and cultural heritage, and a certain kind of long-distance Karen-ness exemplified in Figure 49. Clips of the Don dance have been uploaded from Bolton and Bury in the UK, an undisclosed location possibly in the Karen State, and Tennessee in the USA. This digitally mediated space addresses Ku Thay's concern about 'heightening' their culture and preserving Karen celebrations whilst reinforcing the 'I am/we are Karen' ideology.

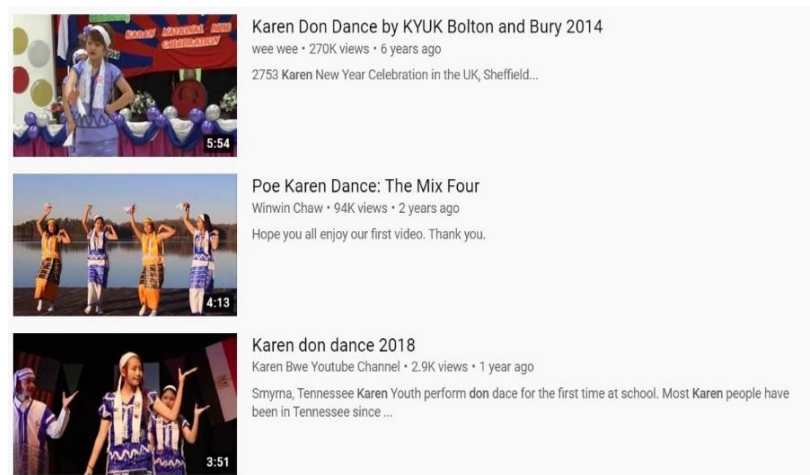


Figure 49: Don dance performed by different Karen across the world uploaded to YouTube.

Although the camp authorities have banned events such as Martyrs' Day in public spaces, the college in Mae La is a hub of political activity and resistance. It has become a social space that reinforces nationalistic ideologies through holding events such as Martyrs' Day. These ideologies

expressed throughout the day were supported by cultural markers, markers that all the participants understood. The positioning of the self (the Karen) against the other (*the Tatmadaw*) was evident in the descriptions about why inhabitants celebrate. As different guests took to the stage, they retold historical battles and reinforced the nationalist institution of *Kawthoolei* and of the KNU's first president Saw Ba U Gyi's guiding 'Principles of the Revolution': 1. Surrender is out of the question, 2. The recognition of the Karen State must be completed, 3. We shall retain our arms, and finally 4. We shall decide our own political destiny.

The speeches strengthened a pan-Karen nationalism and reinforced the mythico-histories (Malkki, 1995) the Karen tell themselves. The 'format of the event inscribes history on space' (Edensor, 2002, p.73); in this case, the history is bound in persecution and displacement, wrapped up in the rhetoric of the fallen soldier and 'I am Karen' discourse.

Digitally Mediating Martyrs' Day

Digitally mediated spaces such as Facebook and mediated communication practices have allowed the realization of both an imagined and actual community, legitimising the KNU authority through connectivity and social media networks (Figure 50).

As mentioned in Chapter 5, Facebook seemed to be the preferred platform among my participants due to its accessibility and ease of information dissemination. For example, Facebook pages set up for Martyrs' Day provide news articles and information from Karen media groups. Videos and photographs of soldiers in uniforms are uploaded to support the events and project unity



Figure 50: Special Martyrs' Day Facebook pages are set up each year.

among the group and the outside world. However, we return to an elder's conflict and belief that the youths of the camp are disconnected culturally and politically. Although the elder's comment provided an alternative point of view, a belief that highlights the importance of a physical presence over a digital mediated one and argues against 'the increasingly important role of the digital in transforming refugee experiences and mobilities' (Gillespie et al., 2018, p.1), I wonder if the elders,

as evident in Chapter 6, are not engaging with how the youths are demonstrating their political agency.

I argue that the youths in the camp take Martyrs' Day seriously and articulate their political identities in various ways. These expressions can be found in the examples in scene two, Sweety and Saw Win's passionate declaration of 'I am Karen', in the supportive comments and images uploaded to a group and personal Facebook pages, but more evidently in the music the youths produce and consume, as discussed in Chapter 6. Furthermore, I would contend that it is possible to view Mae La as an epicentre facilitating nationalistic sentiment. Paradoxically, it is here, in a temporary settlement, that the Karen are protected to perform Karen-ness through events, rituals, music, and education. As Horstmann states, 'the refugee camps had provided the basis for a revitalization of Karen nationalist education and everyday nationalism in the context of human rights discourse' (Horstmann, 2015, p.50). Sentiments of loss and mourning for *Kawthoolei* are compounded in protracted displacement, as will be discussed in Chapter 8.

There is, however, support for the elders' position and the importance of physical presence. Saw Soe Soe tells me that although holding Martyrs' Day in the camp is a sign of resistance to the ongoing fight for independence, it is not the same as experiencing the event on Karen soil in the Karen State. Martyrs' Day, according to Saw Soe Soe, is more than a performance that can be shared online. He alludes to a primordial position about 'the feeling you get when you are on Karen soil'. When people watch the events in a digitally mediated space, they 'do not feel the fallen soldiers or see those in uniform who are still fighting on the frontline', he says. In Saw Soe Soe's opinion, a digital mediated experience cannot replace physical presence. I question where Saw Soe Soe envisions Karen soil. As seen in Figure 2, the Karen are widely dispersed across Myanmar and *Kawthoolei's* geographical location is contested.

I further question how many Karen youths living in Myanmar (before the 2021 coup) have experienced first-hand conflict, violence, or whether their experience, as with the youths in the camp, has come from the elders' memories and recollections or is it from images the youths have seen in digitally mediated spaces? Garden-Hansen et al. ask a poignant question, what is memory and should it be reframed around 'the act and time of recollection itself, so when we routinely speak of memory we actually mean *remembering* – a function, a process, an act?' (Garde-Hansen et al., 2009, p.2). As Ka Hu in the previous section was reminded to attend wrist-tying day, the accessibility, transferability, and circulation of digital content functions as a memory bank and challenges the youths to remember and bear witness to the Karen historical past.

I reflect on whether Saw Soe Soe’s position is embedded in the diaspora imaginary imbued with emotions of guilt, shame, and loss. As Quinsaat (2019) reminds us in Chapter 2, those out-of-place and living in exile often wrestle with tensions of national disloyalty and anxiety. Perhaps the feeling of loss is alleviated within the articulation of the powerful primordial sentiment seen in Saw Soe Soes ‘feeling on Karen soil’ and in the youths discourse of ‘I am Karen’. Observing how nationalist discourses become powerful once constructed, as a social force, this sentiment drives national ideology and the continuous search and defence of a *Heimat*, an area I will explore in Chapter 8. The construction of nationalism is further articulated through the act of the good citizen.

In 2012, the KNU Congress amended its constitution to increase women’s political participation in Karen affairs (Israelsen, 2019; Jolliffe, 2016). Although not technically a KNU department, the KWO ‘receives special rights under the KNU Constitution to have representatives in every village [in the Karen State] and at every administrative level’ (Jolliffe, 2016, p.5). As mentioned in Chapter 5, the women’s community-based organisation ‘empowers women so they have the capacity and power to solve their own problems and participate in decision-making that will affect their lives’ (KWO, 2021). Although the KWO has in the past criticised the KNU’s political strategies (“Karen News,” 2014), I argue that it embodies a Karen institution that uses social media as a way to strengthen the ‘spirit of the nation’ in the image of the KNU’s overall political goals (Figure 51) while also feminizing the cause.



Figure 51: KWO Martyrs’ Day post reminding all Karen people to be good citizens.

Within this short message posted to the KWO Facebook page, feminization is grounded in the concept of the female as a good citizen, one that Anna (Chapter 5) claimed to come second to the Karen patriarchy and one that Pu Dah is challenging (Chapter 6). Similar to Van Esterik’s discussion on how Thai women carry the “burden of signifying Thainess.” (Van Esterik, 2000, p.5), I argue that this post is reminding its 72,000 female members they must behave in a certain way by *renewing* their *love of Kawthoolei* whilst participating in the liberation of the Karen people.

A good citizen and an illustration of feminizing the nation is located when women become 'cultural carriers' within societies. Their role as mothers, teachers, and socialisers reproduce the ideologies of the state where they 'may be required to transmit the rich heritage of ethnic symbols and ways of life to the other members of the ethnic group, especially the young' (Yuval-Davis et al., 1989, p.9).

Drawing from the post above, cultural carriers and teaching the ways of life are in the KWO's message to the female imagined community, one that includes Anna, Sweetie, and Ka Hu, for example, to behave and perform in a certain way. It first immerses its members into an emotional and moral space where they feel or are aware of other community members. Madianou observes how 'Facebook can become an absorbing social space' (Madianou, 2016, p.194) where ambient co-presence affords the 'peripheral awareness of significant others, but also of wider social circles' (*ibid*), this awareness, she says, is heightened in times of crisis. Vico's study on Serbian's in London found through a consent flow of messages and images on social media, her participants maintained and strengthened their relationships and emotional ties to others (Vico, 2019). Similarly, Zhao found that culturally prescribed obligations persisted through the constant digital flow of information and emotions for transnational Chinese students (Zhao, 2019, p.50). The author argues that a peripheral awareness of togetherness 'significantly mediates Chinese international students' everyday relations with their family members in China' (*ibid*, p.39). The emotional and moral space constructed by the KWO reminds its members to renew their love and spirit for the nation and their obligations to the Karen people.

Secondly, there is an undertone of self and other in asking the audience to unite to fulfil the Karen political agenda, one which demands autonomy. According to Yuval-Davis and Anthias, although women's roles in national liberation struggles vary, women generally take up a supportive and nurturing position. I would argue that the KWO is the connector or caretaker of *Kawthoolei's* imagined future as it reaches out to the Karen women who are involuntarily separated. Their message is coded in national ideology and a certain kind of Karen-ness which they disseminate freely to their female audience through social media. The affordances of social media allow for the wide dissemination of the KWO message, and as Bhabha states, 'positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life' (Bhabha, 1990, p.3).

Further points of significance are found in the language choice of the message. When I asked Ka Hu if a Pwo Karen would be able to understand the S'gaw documents attached to the statement, she claimed:

The written language is different. I think most Pwo speakers cannot read it, but there may be a few who can. S'gaw Karen has a different written language. They call it Buddhist Karen language [Pwo] and Christian Karen language [S'gaw]³². For me, I can't read any of these.

Ka Hu reminds me she cannot read S'gaw or Pwo as she was born in a *Tatmadaw* controlled area, meaning she was only allowed to learn to read and write in Burmese at school. She learnt how to read English in Mae La. Saw Soe Soe further points out that if the Karen went to a Karen school, regardless of if they were S'gaw or Pwo, they would have followed a KNU curriculum and studied in S'gaw. He says that many rural Karen do not attend school, and thus literacy levels in any language are low, meaning they would not have access to the KWO statement posted on Facebook. Furthermore, many rural villages are still without the Internet, which means access to information is restricted.

Alternatively, it could be argued that the message was only meant to reach a certain kind of Karen, the educated individual who reads English and who has access to the Internet. On the other hand, strategically writing the main message in English may not be an attempt to exclude Karen non-English speakers or even Karen non-S'gaw speakers because these community members may not have been the target audience. Instead, it may have been a political move aimed at a global audience (donors, western supporters, governments, and NGOs who support KWO activities) in an effort for political recognition and acknowledgement of the continued struggle. As Malkki observed with encamped Hutu: 'Insisting on one's liminality and displacement as a refugee was also to have a legitimate claim to the attention of "international opinion" and to international assistance' (Malkki, 1992, p.36).

To conclude this scene, special events such as Martyrs' Day have been used by the KNU to strategically mobilize a diverse and globally separated group. Resistance, sacrifice, and unity are found in the symbolism of the fallen soldier. The narrative 'I am Karen' is reinforced by the speeches, music, and dance performed in schools and churches. These practices are then digitally mediated, strengthening the national message and construction of a unified people. It is here, within events such as Martyrs' Day, held in Mae La, that I observed little contestation.

Concluding Remarks

Focusing on how encamped refugees formulate and articulate their identities through the performance of rituals and traditions, this chapter has explored the continuous process and evolution of identity formation, performance, and maintenance in the context of Mae La. I observe how

³² I will expand on the concept of religion further in Chapter 8.

symbolically powerful moments form identities that establish social ties, communal boundaries, and contestation.

Starting with an Animist wake, I argued that togetherness and unison were created through the congregation of the family sitting together, chatting, and chewing betel nut. I described how each participant at the wake understood their individual role, the expectations of the ceremony, and the patterns of the performance. Those who had learnt these patterns were, I considered, in-place, whereas those such as the Christian Karen were out-of-place, demonstrating contestation between the different religious groups. This, I contend, reaffirms difference while highlighting the multitude of Karen identities.

The performance of singing signified a broader social and cultural process. The wake opened a physical space for the youths as an opportunity to be together, the singing and music provided future imaginings and possibilities. It is, however, in the digitally mediated space where we see a shift in power dynamics. Not only can the youths find a private space to be intimate, but they also became the gatekeepers of information. Social media affordances enable participants to connect to a wider audience outside the camp gates, something the elder generation struggled with. As a result, information and news flow directly from the youth to the elders rather than from the elders to the youth, which is not uncommon when elders are technologically illiterate.

I observed that there was ambivalence to dying in exile. For some, dying in the camp was a harsh reminder of their temporary 'permanent' stuckness, that they were living on borrowed soil with little expectations of returning to *Kawthoolei*. For others, the prospect of death in exile represented spiritual freedom and liberation from a repressive regime in Myanmar. However, the significance for an ageing population is that death confronts the narratives and memories of the past and current situation for the individual.

The passing of a loved one further highlighted the physical absence of friends and family, another consequence of encamped everyday life. There was evidence that this physical absence was replaced by a mediated presence, where family and friends outside the camp in Myanmar and the wider diaspora attended the wake virtually. I noted the vital role new media technologies and digital mediated communication practices had on bringing those outside the camp in, allowing them a *sense of being in an environment* (Steuer, 1992). I argued that the wake provided insight into the connected refugee's individual and family communication practices, which does not restrict them to the material space and the narrative of refugees as isolated, hopeless people. An important point is that this connectivity does not change the actual ritual but shapes how the participants experience it.

Scene two explored how the sacred can move from its origins in religion and the community to a nationalist identity, for some, over time. Everyday items are embedded into the annual wrist-tying ceremony, demonstrating the transcendence from the mundane to the sacred. Originally described as an Animist ceremony to call back a wandering “*k’las*” [spirit]. The ceremony for some, particularly the youths, has taken on a new meaning in contemporary times. However, this new perception is bound with complexity and ambivalence. On the one hand, the ceremony represented togetherness, unity, belonging, and long-distance nationalism (Anderson, 1992; Schiller, 2005). On the other, it highlighted the continuous division and difference between the two largest religious groups in the camp - the Christians and Buddhists.

I observed how new media technologies and digitally mediated environments provided a space of reflection, participation, witnessing, learning, cultural heightening, and digital mediated presence for some of my participants. Significantly, after 2008 and the introduction of the Internet across the camp at a more affordable price, those with access to smartphones could envision an imagined community (Anderson, 2006) beyond the camp gates. Similar to the observations on how the youths at the wake became the gatekeepers of information, I argued that mediated spaces allowed those with access the mobility to become transmitters of culture and heritage. Interpreting the ceremony in the youths’ own image, they document the ritual practices by uploading and sharing content whilst communicating to the broader diasporic community.

The final scene focused on creating and maintaining a nationalist identity in the form of Martyrs’ Day. This scene, I observed, had little contestation and was an event that, in the context of Mae La, both Christian and Buddhist participated in. I argued that the KNU has used Martyrs’ Day to strategically mobilize a diverse and vastly separated population. The event’s format solidified the individual’s expectations of the day and each participant’s role. A collective national belonging and identity were bound in the shared experiences of persecution and displacement, all articulated through speeches, music, and dance. Significantly, a we-consciousness was present in the collective narrative of ‘I am Karen’. The repetition of ‘I am Karen’ was critical to the camp youths, yet they found it challenging to articulate what ‘I am Karen’ meant in favour of a primordial position within a feeling or a knowing.

Long-distance nationalism was identified in the collective celebration of the day around the world. Similar to both the wake and wrist-tying Day, Martyrs’ Day allowed for the realisation of an imagined community. The rituals that consolidate imagined communities inevitably exclude those who do not align with or perform in a certain way. As described in Chapter 1, Karen history has been punctuated with tensions between the Christians and Buddhists, where rituals and traditions have bonded some and distanced others; a strategy, I would argue, by the colonial powers to control the masses.

I argued that Facebook pages were created as a strategy to support the physical events and to project unity to the broader Karen community. I claimed that the KWO created an emotional and moral space and used their platform to mobilize and promote a certain kind of Karen-ness, one of the good citizen and one that feminized the nation. Although Facebook pages were vehicles for promoting unity and belonging, I question how they could isolate and exclude some community members. Isolation and exclusions were evident in 1. My older participants, who were media and technologically illiterate, 2. Those who were not supported by family in the diaspora and thus could not afford a mobile phone, and 3. Those who were either illiterate or who could not read S'gaw Karen.

Finally, identities were performed and articulated in the transgression from the ordinary to the sacred and back again. While the rules, beliefs, and rituals still relate to the sacred, values have seemingly changed, particularly for the youth. New media technology, mediated communication practices and mediated spaces have allowed a shift in multiple boundaries. There has been a shift in the concept of presence and living in two different environments. There has been a shift in who possesses power and agency and who disseminates cultural cues and ritual practices. There has been a shift as to who is privy to information and communication and who is excluded and further isolated.

Significantly, this chapter further contributes to the idea that refugee camps can foster a vibrant community that celebrates the Karens cultural complexity. It argues that, in the case of Mae La, camps are far from stagnant places of isolation. However, I question whether it is more than that and what role it plays for the diaspora? Not only was the camp a portal for those affected by conflict to pass through onto what some may consider a better life in the US or UK, for example, but it is also a reminder of the continuous struggle for independence and a hub that fosters nationalism and the I' am Karen narrative.

My final empirical chapter, *'In-between Spaces'*, affords further insight into the extent to which my participants in Mae La live within multiples spaces. The following chapter will explore the themes of belonging, relationships, and home by taking a closer look at how individuals interact and navigate the material and mediated spaces they live in. The aim is to return to and extend the narrative thread of material, symbolic, and technologically mediated ways identities are articulated and shaped.

Chapter 8

In-between Spaces

I do not have a place to call home. I was not born in, nor did I grow up in a particular place.

Saw Soe Soe

Expanding on the narrative thread that started in Chapter 5, this chapter will focus on the material, symbolic, and technologically mediated ways identities are articulated and shaped. To do this, I return to Steuer (1992) and the notions of presence and a *sense of being in an environment*. By considering two separate, but interwoven spaces: the 'lived' material space of Mae La refugee camp and a 'lived' mediated one, we can further explore patterns of practice that transmit meaning and create a sense of belonging and its opposite, isolation.

Previous chapters in this thesis have explored the spaces encamped inhabitants of Mae La move within as multifaceted, laden with often ambivalent emotions, stories, histories, experiences, and a strong sense of nationalism. This chapter returns to Tuan's (1977) statement on space and place and asks *what becomes of space when the pause does not necessarily transform into a secure and stable place?* Moreover, I reflect on the central question of *to what extent media technologies are used and what role they play in expressing everyday identities? How, if at all, are mediated communication practices and spaces linked to identity creation, maintenance, and articulation?*

This chapter will unfold over three sections. The first will focus on the narratives of inhabitants who continue to wait in limbo and a state of stuckness yet have no nostalgic memory or intention to return to Myanmar. Section two, in comparison, draws from the lives of those who view the camp as a space of new beginnings and opportunities, of stability and safety. The final section will illustrate the emotions of protracted displacement and longing to belong more to a nation and community firmly set in the imagination.

This chapter will attempt to show that although the inhabitants in Mae La fit into the easily recognisable classifications described in my methods chapter, the demographic classifications do not highlight media and mediation patterns which supports my argument that everyday encamped life, identities, and belonging are mediated in various unpredictable ways. As a reminder, in Chapter 4, I initially identified three groups. Group one were those who fled the war at the height of the Four Cuts Campaign, group two were born in the camp or were brought in as young children, and group three came for educational opportunities before 2015.

A Space of Stuckness

For many older Karen in the camp, their relationship with space is dictated by their history and experience in Myanmar. Myanmar represented a place of violence, insecurity, and oppression for all my participants. Everyone I spoke to who lived in Myanmar under the *Tatmadaw* regime recounted traumatic memories of having their villages burnt down and extended periods of hiding in the jungle until the *Tatmadaw* soldiers left the area. The fear of return was compounded further in February 2021 on news of the coup d'état. For participants such as Stardagger, Paw Ler, Thet, and Ku Thay, who left Myanmar in their early 20s and 30s, the psychological toll is evident in how the memories of the past haunt their present, restricting and rendering them immobile to the thought of return or future imaginings outside the camp boundaries. Space, as a dimension of multiplicity, as described by Massey (2013), presents them with the existence of the other and reaffirms their own stuckness. The other and their presence relates to their ultimate displacement and how Mae La has become, for these refugees, 'a condition of permanent not-belonging', an 'off-social space' (Biemann, 2008, p.56) where they remain in body and mind in a suspended state of limbo.

Myanmar, as a space, does not depict openness and freedom in a Tuanian sense, but persecution, forced labour, and trauma; thus, their present encampment is a constant reminder of their experiences and collective histories. Many of my participants who came to the camp in their 20s have a feeling of loss and isolation: Mae La embodies their stuckness and continuous temporary permanent status. Helping us unpack the question of what becomes of space when the pause does not necessarily transform into a secure and stable place, Eliassi invites us to consider how home and where one 'belongs' are some of the most intimate elements of a person's life. They become even more significant when these elements are forcefully taken away or are in the imaginary (Eliassi, 2019, p.124). I return to Ku Thay, a typical example of a refugee who articulates the crystallisation of loss and being out-of-place and Thet, who in her late 40s, is still seeking stability and security.

Ku Thay, who in 2021 was in his 50s, describes a sense of dislocation and out-of-placeness from both Myanmar and Mae La. Since coming to the camp, he has built a life for himself as a primary school teacher and raised a family, yet he articulates an ambivalent sense of belonging. He tells me: 'Wherever I am is my home because I have nothing left'. The civil war in Myanmar and the Karen collective history makes it hard to describe where home is or what it looks like to him: 'It's hard to make Myanmar our home. I came here, and I do my best. I guess here is my home', he says with a sigh. Ku Thay's statement speaks more widely about how a refugee's protracted displacement and the uncertainty of place contribute to the search for a sense of self and belonging when the perception is that there is nothing left. Recounting a similar memory, Thet tells me that she didn't really understand what was happening as a teenager but had to leave 'because we couldn't take it

anymore'. Although Mae La has brought relative safety to Thet and Ku Thay's everyday life, it is located within a space of temporality and uncertainty. From the large sign outside the gates to the rations they collect, as described in Chapter 5, they are often reminded that the camp is not meant to be their final destination. As Ahmed describes: 'It is not simply that the subject does not belong anywhere' (Ahmed, 1999, p.330), but significance lies in the lack of privilege to belong without question.

Myanmar, for Ku Thay, did not automatically translate into belonging and a safe space. It was also an in-between space filled with mistrust and often danger. This illustrates that multiple identities are being articulated and rejects the notion that refugees' attachment to the 'motherland' and a desire to return are 'natural' givens (Al-Rasheed, 1994; Boer, 2015; Jansen and Löfving, 2007). At first, we might interpret Ku Thay's statement relating to home and belonging only from the perspective of a physical location and materiality; however, we are reminded by Hall (2009) that belonging is forged in the 'traces' of life, memory, and history. Ku Thay's articulation of having nothing left opens a space for reflection on how the traces of life in exile and protracted displacement may strip bare (Agamben, 2005, 1998) an inhabitant's vision of themselves and an imagined future outside the camp gates. Unlike Mehm Thwin, discussed in Chapter 7, Ku Thay does not view exile as freedom and liberation. On the contrary, the camp is an extension of oppression where he is forced to continuously surrender to an uncertain space.

Ku Thay articulates that not only has his material possessions been taken away but also his dignity and agency. He expresses this previously in Chapter 7 when he describes the juxtaposition between the importance of cultural production and the challenges of maintaining it and an individual's dignity due to the Burmanization campaign. Returning to Olivius' observation, as described in Chapter 2, that life in the camps along the border are like an indeterminate prison sentence, it is evident in our conversations that their protracted encampment and lack of control over their futures contribute to mental and emotional health issues.

According to Hynie, who states: 'The risks for developing mental disorders...are greater for members of groups with less access to power, material resources and policymaking as a result of broader social, political, and economic factors that sustain inequalities' (Hynie, 2018, p.299). Demonstrating how confinement affects the younger generation, Mornar states that when he leaves the camp without permission, he is torn between feelings of relief and fear: 'I feel refreshed, but I am scared of the authorities like the police or soldiers. I feel unsafe. Whether they catch me or not, I feel nervous and scared of them and sometimes feel mentally ill'. Mornar's insufficiency to govern his own destiny and fear of violence if caught illegally outside the camp gates contributes to his mental state.

Interestingly, both Mornar and Ku Thay are respected members of the community holding status as teachers. However, years of confinement have rendered them mentally immobile to envision life outside the camp. As they both rarely leave the camp in fear of being caught outside, like Stardagger in Chapter 5, their social standing and authority are limited to their immediate material space.

For Thet, the lack of opportunities for her family reaffirms stuckness: 'Here, there is nothing more for them after they finish school. No opportunity for further improvement'. She says that because she struggles to provide for her family, her children 'feel small'. Life in exile for Thet and her children has created and shaped an identity built on a feeling of social exclusion. The psychological impact on her children creates further tensions and boundaries around how they envision future opportunities and a life outside the camp. Thet articulates her lack of agency and how economic capital, reduction of rations, as described in Chapter 5, and the pressures to provide for her family can further isolate inhabitants from others in the camp.

Moreover, Thet never acknowledged that others in the camp, such as Real 9ine, Anna, Saw Soe Soe and the IRC representative, as described in previous chapters, have carved out lives for themselves outside the camp. It could be argued that their lives do not impact hers and that her stuckness and everyday survival are all she thinks about. This reflects the inequalities in Mae La and who moves within spaces of opportunities and who doesn't. I noted that although the school I taught at was promoted as secular, the Christian students who showed potential and interest in becoming a teacher were given opportunities by Christian donors to attend further education outside the school. This was, of course, not always the case as Mornar, a Buddhist, was offered additional opportunities described later in this chapter.

For Ku Thay, Thet, and Stardagger, there is no nostalgic discussion or sentimental recollection of *Kawthoolei*, the 'motherland'. Their protracted displacement has contributed to a sense of being out-of-place and temporality, which prohibits them from claiming a space to belong to or connecting to a place. Unlike Sweetie, Saw Win, Hser, and Real 9ine, in Chapters 6 and 7, Ku Thay, Thet, and Stardagger do not articulate long-distance nationalism, although they express a set of identity claims based on the Karen's historical persecution and victimhood. Wilding et al. state that 'pain and distress are mediated or moderated by the capacity to connect with digital media' (Wilding et al., 2020, p.641). In the case of Ku Thay, Thet, and Stardagger have limited mediated presence. Their pain of leaving Myanmar and having everything taken away are not moderated by their connections to others outside the camp at a distance. Instead, they articulate hopelessness and stuckness, and to varying levels, bare life.

In Chapters 6 and 7, it was observed that an individual's mobility came from their physical connection to others in the camp and their network capital. Although Ku Thay is physically connected through his involvement with the school and the local community, his immobility and perceived isolation may come from the lack of network capital and mediated presence. He claims to have a mobile phone, but it is broken. He tells me that as teachers they are paid very little, so he can't afford to buy a new one. This has meant that he now finds it challenging to speak with his family in Myanmar. The last time he spoke with his brother was in 2018, when Myanmar experienced severe flooding. He used his sister-in-law's mobile phone, but the connection was poor, and he couldn't hear them properly. He also tells me he started a computer class but decided not to attend after a few sessions; he tells me that 'it wasn't very interesting, and I forgot what to do each time'. He also, at one point, had a DVD player and screen, where he and his wife would watch music videos and Korean soap operas, but that too is broken. Wilding et al. observe that:

The imagery and information that is accessed on digital devices throughout the day, every day, ensure that people feel connected to and part of the culture of origin and home country within which their family practices make sense (Wilding et al., 2020, p.649).

Wilding et al.'s statement invites us to ask questions about what happens when the connection to the culture of origin and family is limited. Ku Thay represents the encamped inhabitant who only lives in the camp's material space. Like Stardagger, Ku Thay's social relationships are limited to his physical locality, relying on others to pass on information or connecting him to family members outside the camp. Both Stardagger and Ku Thay express a lack of intimacy at a distance facilitated by insufficient funds to replace new media technology, leaving them feeling frustrated and disconnected. This highlights 'the realities of distance and the persistent inequalities in global economies and politics that prevent more frequent physical and digital co-presence (Wilding et al., 2020, p.641).

I would argue that the 'lived' materiality of Mae La refugee camp has had a much more significant effect on some inhabitants than a 'lived' mediated space that may provide them with the possibilities of connection at a distance and future opportunities. In Chapter 5, Mornar's desire and weekly endeavour to connect asked us to rethink the dynamics of space, mobility, and encamped refugee connection. In mid-2019, I returned to visit Mornar and was told by his mother, Ta Taw, that he had been offered an exciting opportunity to leave the camp and work with an internationally recognised NGO in their youth program. The opportunity meant that he must live in a compound near Mae Sot and attend workshops every day. However, Ta Taw was incredibly worried about her son's mental state and overall health as he had called her claiming he was unwell.

Mornar told Ta Taw that he was suffering from dengue fever³³ and wasn't allowed to leave the NGO compound. On receiving this information, Ta Taw asked me to speak with him on the phone and produces an old Nokia mobile. Speaking briefly to Mornar, she passes it to me. He tells me he is unwell, and although the NGO had said they would take him to the hospital, he wanted to return to the camp to recover. Mornar confesses that he has not been entirely honest with his family and that he was allowed to leave but was ashamed because he wanted to return to the camp.

This complex situation emphasises Mornar's perpetual suspended state and reliance on the camp as his safe space. The tension came from the honour the opportunity brought to his family and a chance to better his life with that of wanting to return to the place he knows best. Even though the NGO offered to take Mornar to Mae Sot hospital, which would have made for a quicker recovery, his conditioning and life experience in the camp meant that his desire to return to the safety of Mae La and his family was more powerful than an opportunity for a better future outside the gates. I contacted Mornar at the end of 2019 on Messenger to see whether he had returned to Mae Sot and the youth program. He tells me he is still in the camp and has no intention of leaving in the near future. Mornar's narrative suggests that the role of the digital, even when the participant is connected, does not transform refugee experiences and mobilities as the material space has made a much larger imprint on their lives. This desire or need to return to the camp was evident in several participant stories, which I will explore next.

Home-making: We Started Our Lives in Mae La

We return to Anna's story, as she is an example of a refugee with physical and mediated mobility who keeps returning to the camp. As a part-time Mae La inhabitant who, with her sister and mother, resettled in Canada in her early 20s, she returns to Mae La for long periods to visit friends and work as a teacher. She tells me that she rarely visits the Karen State but on occasions has gone to see her husband, who lives in the jungle. As we are reminded, Anna was born in Yangon and clearly remembers the demonstrations of 8888, the pro-democracy protests and violence that peaked in August 1988. Before escalating violence in the city, she describes the demonstrations as 'so beautiful, very peaceful, and very colourful'. She remembers watching the protests from her school: 'The Burmese nurses wore white tops and red longyi. The school teachers wore green longyi. They were all demonstrating against injustice and the military'. By 1989, Anna's parents, well-known in the Karen Christian community and who had connections to the KNLA, feared for their lives and left the city under darkness; they told no one they were going. Anna was eight when they left. Reminiscing about when she arrived in the camp, she says:

³³ Dengue fever is a tropical disease spread by mosquitos. Dengue is endemic in Thailand with peak transmission in the rainy season between April and December (IAMAT, 2019).

We started our lives here. We saw the older people cut down the cotton fields and build small houses. My mom always said: “We're going to start our new life here; we're going to enjoy it here”. So, although it's written in front of the refugee camp “Temporary Shelter” and they consider us displaced people, it is always in our heart that this is kind of our home.

Anna's mother, Moe, saw the camp as a new beginning where home is based on what Douglas (1991) would call a realisation of ideas, meaning the ideas of a new life Moe carried in her head about her life and passed on to Anna is what signified home. By re-imagining the refugee space in contrast to Yangon, the camp represented security of identity, safety, future opportunities, and home away from military oppression, violence, and injustice seen in the city. As Turner states, refugee camps ‘abruptly disrupt any pre-given social order’ (Turner, 2016, p.144), where old structures no longer exist, and new identities are possible. Like Moe, Ta Taw expressed similar feelings towards her new encamped life. She recalls her violent upheaval of leaving her village in the Karen State and the trauma of her husband's death when the *Tatmadaw* attacked them. The camp, for Ta Taw, represents security and stability, comfort and opportunities, something she says she didn't have in the Karen State.

Like Moe, Ta Taw alludes to Mae La as a space where her children have received medical treatment at the camp hospital and where they could go to school. Over the years, she has gotten to know the space better and endowed it with value. This, she says, has enabled her children and grandchildren a better future than the one she would have been able to provide them in her village in Myanmar. Similar to Ku Thay and Thet, Ta Taw claims she has not left the camp since 2006: ‘I dare not go outside’, she says. Even though she is stateless with no legal documents, she believes Mae La provides something Myanmar could not -safety. However, she also acknowledges contradictions: ‘In Myanmar, you can go places, but it's not safe. In here, it's safe, but you can't go anywhere’. It seems that for Ta Taw, safety, albeit restricted and encamped, is more desirable than the prospect of openness and the threat of space in Myanmar. In a way, Ta Taw's current freedom of physical movement is sacrificed for the camp's perceived opportunities and what it will provide the younger members of her family. Her mobility lies in her imagination and her dreams for a better future. Unfortunately, as described earlier in this chapter, her son Mornar's prolonged encampment has profoundly affected how he interacts with space beyond the camp gates and has possibly contributed to his mental health issues.

For Anna, Moe, and Ta Taw, a new life and meaning were built at the time from nothing. Anna and Moe arrived before the camps along the border were consolidated, and the population in Mae La was small. Anna saw first-hand how the land was cleared and her community was built. She reminisces about how the area was surrounded by jungle, where animals would come and drink in

the river that separates zone C from current day zone A: 'We saw wild animals, like monkeys, and a small tiger drink from the water here'. As the camp population grew and resources became sparse, the animals disappeared: 'But you know, the Karen, they killed them. They killed and ate them'. It is in the material space of Mae La, where Anna, previously a stateless person, is bound to others such as Ku Thay, Thet, and Stardagger. Instead of articulating hopelessness and stuckness, Anna and Moe believed the camp would help them restart their lives for the better, even if the sign 'temporary settlement' outside the camp told them otherwise.

There is, however, tension in what she describes. Anna first observes the protests of 8888 in Myanmar from a child's perspective. The past allows her to revisit these nostalgic memories fixed in the aesthetics that draw from remembering beautiful colours and peaceful protests, a stark contrast to the violent suppression experienced by the pro-democracy protesters (Mehm Thwin) and the descriptions given by my older participants (Paw Ler, Ta Taw), as discussed in previous chapters. Although Anna recalls this time fondly, she also articulates her confusion as a child on why she was forced to pack her things and leave at night: 'If anyone asked, we were told to tell people we were going on a picnic. We were often told off, "Shhh, don't say that, don't do that". We asked my aunts and my mum, "Are we coming back?" and they said, "Shhh, we are going for a picnic!'. As Kabir points out,

both the moment of departure and the moment of arrival retain immense emotional significance and commemorative potential as nodes where the histories of individuals, families and communities intersect with larger historical processes' (Kabir, 2019, p.72).

The moment of departure was exciting and confusing. The moment of arrival presented new beginnings but also a life potentially out-of-place and in exile. Anna also indicates how life in the camp changed as the population increased, as described in the introduction to this thesis and in Chapter 5. From a small community to one, in January 2021, that stands at over 34,000 people; Anna describes the strain the new population had, particularly on the natural environment and how her original image of the camp was lost.

Being Together at a Distance

Anna highlights the complexity of intimate relationships at a distance and the challenges of doing intimacy across borders. She tells me that her husband, Poe Wah, lives in the Karen State: 'Poe Wah has no papers, has no Thai ID, and no Burma ID, but he has a UN number. However, he doesn't want to resettle'. She says he loves the simple life and describes the challenges she faces when she visits:

He likes it there. He is so happy in the jungle. I went a few times to his village. Poe Wah is a different person. He's not very happy here [in the camp], but he is so happy in Karen State. He loves it there. When I first went there, it was a challenge because there is no toilet. We took tissue with us to the jungle and a stick. When the pigs came, I would say, "WAIT, WAIT!"

Interested in how they maintain a relationship, I expected Anna to describe a mediated presence and a sense of togetherness through new media technologies and mediated communication practices. Unlike my younger participants, described in Chapter 7, who actively practice intimacy in the private realm of a mediated space, Anna and Poe Wah do not display intimacy in this way. Poe Wah lives in an area controlled by the *Tatmadaw*. The village has one phone, and they only get a signal when the *Tatmadaw* turns on the Wi-Fi tower on the hill. When it is turned on, they can call in and out; when it is turned off, the village is cut off from the rest of the world: 'That is how we communicate. I think he called me around our wedding anniversary once. And he called me when I went to follow up on my diabetes. He only calls me around important days'. Significantly, Anna has described how the *Tatmadaw's* power over mobility extends from the physical to the mediated. They control the geographical territory and the digital infrastructure, thus, controlling how separated families display togetherness and intimacy.

How then does the relationship work? 'The answer is', she pauses for a moment, '...it just works like that. I really don't know', she says. 'I hope and pray that he will change his mind and come to Canada someday'. Throughout our conversation, Anna articulates emotional experiences of absence. As Baldassar states, 'the effective (emotional) use of technologies often serves to "collapse" distance and render people virtually co-present' (Baldassar, 2008, p.255). In the case of Anna and Poe Wah, it would seem that technologies such as mobile phones are rarely used to 'collapse' distance as they are unable to access mediated spaces; rather Anna makes the long and often challenging physical journey to visit him.

Instead of a virtual co-presence, I argue that Anna's is an imagined co-presence afforded by her hopes and prayers of one day being together. It further demonstrates how digital technologies do not always play a significant role in transforming refugee experiences and mobilities (Gillespie et al., 2018, p.1), although this is partly due to access issues. In this case, 'doing family' (Morgan, 1996) is still carried out physically and in the imagination. Anna goes on to say that a refugee life is a life normalised by separation. Significance, it would seem, lies within the normalisation of extraordinary circumstances and the hope that things will get better. In the discursive social and political construction of identities in the diaspora, individuals such as Anna wrestle with normalising external and internal complexities, most of which she has little agency over.

Shifting Identities and Multiple Homes

Anna articulates how identities are constructed and fluid when she states: 'I am more Karen in Canada. But I am more Karen in Mae La rather than somewhere else. I'm more Canadian sometimes. When I'm being more liberal, I'm being more Canadian. Maybe I am making it very complicated!'. Laughing, Anna says: 'My identity is chaos now'. Her 'chaotic' identities, as she describes them, illustrates how identities undergo a constant transformation, are never static, and are relational through experiences and context. We must also remind ourselves that Anna is not a typical Mae La inhabitant or resettled refugee, as on her return, she chooses to spend extended periods working and living in the camp, yet she can leave at any time.

Drawing from Hall, who states: 'Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us' (Hall, 1990, p.6). Considering Hall's statement, the different nodal points in Anna's life and the practices within each construct a complex identity in motion. Working through the intricacies of identities out-of-place (Said, 2000), and a typical finding in diaspora studies (Can, 2007; Eliassi, 2019; Hall, 2017; Said, 2000), Anna continues:

I grew up as a Karen in Burma. Then I grew up as a *Karen Karen* among only Karen people in a refugee camp. Then I went to Canada. When I return to Mae La, people don't consider me a full Karen. They consider me a Karen who has been in Canada. And so, when I go to Canada, they introduce me as somebody who works in Mae La camp.

This returns us to Hall's description of the diaspora as 'far away enough to experience the sense of exile and loss, close enough to understand the enigma of an always-postponed 'arrival'' (Chen and Morley, 2006, p.492). Significantly, Anna articulates the emotional challenges refugees face when they resettle. Throughout our conversation, she has expressed continuous movement of arrivals and departures, departures and arrivals. Pausing for a moment, we might challenge the notion that Anna is in exile. Although she articulates her fear of returning to Myanmar due to the ongoing political situation, her privileged mobility across multiple borders and boundaries questions who is deemed exiled and who is not. I would argue that for Anna, it is more about a sense of exile experienced and the emotion felt in the loss of separated family and community and the absence of a space to belong. However, it also highlights the complexities of exile and how it is non-binary; as with the refugee concept, the boundaries between who is in exile are also blurred.

Like Anna, Swedish-Kurdish writer Mustafa Can (2006) describes his ambivalent feelings of living between two places:

I still feel more Eastern than Western, regardless of how long I live in Sweden, how much and fast I am spinning in the tumble of integration. Wherever I find myself, I feel more Kurdish than Swedish, East before West... These contradictions are meeting inside me... 'home' and 'away' are hammering in my head and increasing my feelings of guilt for not being able to choose a home (Can, 2007, p.247; translated in Eliassi, 2019, p.122-3).

I reflect on what draws Anna back to Mae La. Earlier, Anna described Mae La camp as home. It was where she first felt safe and was told by her mother that life would start again, yet there is ambivalence as to where she truly feels more Karen or belongs. Anna enjoys the freedom of being a Canadian citizen and the privilege of movement her passport allows. She, of course, through her connections, can enter the camp easily, but, as mentioned earlier, Anna is also able to leave and return to Canada when she wants. Stating she is more liberal in Canada suggests that she is not tied to traditional conventions of being a Karen woman or her religious duties of being a Christian S'gaw Karen in the camp.

Moving between Mae La and Canada, Anna now questions her place in Karen society and where she fits in. The ambivalence is in the juxtaposition of the good citizen. On the one hand, it could be argued that Anna does not carry the burden of signifying the good Karen citizen, as described in Chapter 7. However, on the other, she cannot avoid becoming a cultural carrier (Karen and Canadian) within the different societies she moves between. Telling a similar transformative situation, Eliassi, observes that young Kurdish women in the diaspora defy 'those parts of the cultural order of Kurdish society that underpin patriarchy, strict social codes and gender oppression' (Eliassi, 2019, p.123).

Anna also alludes to still being out-of-place in Canada. The distance from Mae La has meant she sometimes heightens her performance of 'being Karen' and shifts identities depending on the circumstance (Goffman, 1990). There is tension, pulling her between two places. Two places provided physical safety but complicated the sense of belonging and how others perceive her. Some inhabitants in the camp articulated mistrust of those who have left, either believing they may be spies for the Myanmar government or that they have forgotten their Karen 'roots' and do not relate to or realise the actual struggle that those still in the camp face daily. Anna has further found herself on the outside of the camp political community. As described in Chapter 5, she no longer has the right to vote in camp politics. Even though she continues to take an interest in the everyday concerns of camp life, she is excluded from having an official voice and previously expressed frustration on not being heard and isolated from camp politics. Sighing, she looks at me, trying to work out where she belongs; she says:

I was here [Mae La] for 17 years before I went to Canada. But I was in Canada for eight years, so I missed eight years here. I don't know a lot about what happened here during the eight years I was away. I am more Karen here [in Mae La]...It's very complicated. I don't even know sometimes. I feel that I am more Karen in certain places...Because I grew up here. A part of me is here.

Once Anna had 'settled' into her new life in Canada, she left behind the camp, friends, and family for eight years. In her statement above, Anna implies she lost touch with what was happening on a day-to-day basis suggesting she had limited mediated presence with those she left behind. In her 2015 study of 'communication as aid', Jack reminds us that although the camp has been connected since 2008, mobile phones were not widespread in Mae La. This was one of the reasons Anna lost contact; however, she highlights that many people were leaving at that time, and once in Canada, as a young person, everyday life 'gets in the way'. However, she observed how others who had resettled and had returned to visit friends and family had maintained relationships through mediated practices.

Anna claims that it is common for people who return to take pictures of, and selfies with, objects in the camp such as houses and then post them on Facebook: 'We will comment something like: "Oh I remember that!"'. However, unlike her own relationship with her husband, she reflects on Facebook and Messenger's importance on the community: 'Facebook and Messenger have brought us back to our memories, to the connection, they connect us back'. Unpacking the complexity of the refugee selfie, Literat aptly observes that: 'When taking and sharing a selfie, one makes the deliberate choice "to be seen", and moreover to be seen in a particular way: the way one wants to be seen' (Literat, 2017, p.5).

Similar to how video messaging and photographs were used at the wakes and events described in Chapter 7, and how music is produced and uploaded to YouTube in Chapter 6, I would argue that a combination of selfies and photographs of everyday life and objects in the camp, uploaded to a digitally mediated space contribute to two empowering elements. Firstly, they are a way to virtually enter and leave the material boundaries of the camp when physical movement is restricted. Suppose we ascribe to the notion that selfies and photographs embody visual co-presence (Cabalquinto, 2020) and are a 'visual vehicle' that encourages social communication (Frosh, 2015, p.1624). We can then unpack how these visual vehicles in association with a mediated space allow inhabitants and visitors to the camp to connect and maintain relationships at a distance. As Anna alludes, when she is not in the camp and sees friends posting images on Facebook from Mae La, it transports her back and connects her to family and friends she left behind. For those outside the camp, selfies and photographs 'display familial roles, responsibilities, and values' (Cabalquinto, 2020, p.1619),

reinforcing the diaspora consciousness where they are reminded of their past and expected loyalty to those they have left behind.

The importance of photographs and selfies taken inside the camp lies in the notion that they carry meaning associated with family, history, and a collective experience. In addition, the ordinary, often taken-for-granted image of a house or object in the camp affords the possibility to re-imagine family life and home; in other words, it is a way that individuals and groups 'do' family life (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1996). I argue that the need for 'displaying family' (Finch, 2007) becomes more intense for refugees who have been separated by conflict and resettlement programs. Displaying family and home-making were also seen when I visited my participants' homes. Ta Kul, for example, had set up in the corner of the communal area a small bookshelf where he displayed his books and personal objects. We had just attended a house warming party where all his family, apart from his mother, could attend. While a photograph was being taken of everyone together, Ta Kul reassured me that his mother would not be 'left out' and that they would 'add her in later'. This photo, once edited to include his mother's image would be made into a poster and printed on vinyl, which they would hang on the wall. Other family homes displayed similar images. One home I visited displayed a full wall of A4 posters of family, Jesus, and natural landscapes. Ta Taw's home was small, cosy, and welcoming. Her main room was dominated by her large TV and Buddhist altar; the floor covered with her grandchild's toys.

It is both in taking and uploading the photograph and/or selfie to a mediated space and the comments that follow, or printing photos and images and displaying them in communal areas that re-establish membership to the family (Finch, 2007, p.72) or community. Thus, the concept of displaying family can be extended to displaying community. In Chapter 7, I explored the performance within different scenes. Within each scene, the participating members understood their roles and how to 'perform' those roles. Finch, however, makes a distinction between performance and display, stating that 'performance implies face-to-face interaction, whereas what I am calling 'display' is broader than that' (Finch, 2007, p.77). She argues that performance is far too restrictive to encapsulate all the elements of family life and interaction. Finch makes a clear difference between actor and audience, where the significance lies in how, within the concept of display, identities shift simultaneously, and individuals become actor and audience.

Can refugees separated by conflict and the resettlement program maintain relationships at a distance if members are unable to find ways to display family? Previously, I argued that 'displaying family' becomes more intense due to refugee separation and encampment. Earlier in this chapter, Ku Thay and Stardagger articulated stuckness due to restricted access to new media technologies and mediated communication practices. Ku Thay was only able to speak to his family briefly on the

phone and expressed frustration and isolation. Others, such as Ta Taw, remain socially alive due to a combination of her physical networks and social bonds inside the camp and her mediated presence. Ta Taw claims she is supported by younger family members or others to help her connect to those beyond the camp gates. She says that the Nokia phone allowed her the freedom to call her mother in Myanmar. She relies on her phone to only make calls, such as contacting Mornar when he was outside the camp. Ta Taw tells me she now gets excited to speak face-to-face with family and friends in other camps and countries through Facebook Messenger, such as at the wake described in Chapter 7, a digitally mediated experience Ku Thay and Thet lack.

Like Ku Thay and Thet, Ta Taw claims to be technologically illiterate: 'I use my youngest son's Facebook. I communicate with other people through his account. I can't use Facebook on my own', and as discussed in Chapter 6, she depends upon Mornar to download Buddhist sermons and monk chants and upload them to her Soundbox. Of course, there is no guarantee that those with access to technologies and mediated communication practices use them successfully to feel connected and bonded to others. However, I would argue that the assemblage of technology, mediated communication practices, and Ta Taw's social, physical networks are interwoven into the fabric of her everyday life, which all amount to a richer social life. From her large TV to her Soundbox, her Nokia phone, to her son's Facebook account, she actively stays, as Turner (2016) would describe, socially alive. In other words, she can imagine a meaningful future for herself and her family by drawing from a combination of networks (physical and mediated) and using multiple technologies in her home that build and maintain relationships from a distance.

The second practice is demanding '*to be seen*' (Marwick, 2012) and for the audience to bear witness. As Sweetie stated in Chapter 7, before the camp was connected to the Internet, it was difficult to see how others performed or displayed 'being Karen' and for those on the outside to reconnect to those in the camp. Browsing people's social media accounts has become an ordinary, everyday practice of social surveillance (Marwick, 2012, p.389). Content such as photographs uploaded elicits certain kinds of reactions; as Anna states, when she sees an image posted, her memory is jogged, and she is transported back into the camp.

Selfies and photographs visually communicate to a diasporic audience that the camps along the border still exist. They are deliberate, staged, and disseminate life in Mae La so as not to be forgotten. In a study on 'symbolic bordering', Chouliaraki approaches the 'selfie as a meaningful trace of the self, moving across connected environments' (Chouliaraki, 2017, p.81). Although the author focuses on refugees as they arrive in Europe, the learnings are relevant to my own study. Chouliaraki observes that selfies as celebration articulate 'extreme emotions upon arrival', a tactic of mobile witnessing and visual proof of the refugee's presence and claim of 'I am here', 'this is me'.

Within this representation, the selfie signifies not only survival but also hope. The remediation of the celebration selfie, Chouliarki argues, 'relies on estrangement, on turning the ordinary act of selfie-taking into extraordinary' (*ibid*, p.85).

The demand *to be seen* and for the audience to bear witness leads to voice and participatory culture. As Anna mentions in Chapter 5, her students post regularly about their encamped lives. This facilitates cross-boundary solidarity with others outside the camp. We can see this further in Chapters 6 and 7, where the youths articulate long-distance nationalism through images of events and songs uploaded to YouTube.

The demand *to be seen* is also present in everyday photos posted by my participants, such as Sweety, who says that she uploads images of her carrying out her after-school job cutting bamboo because she wants people to understand she is 'hardworking and can do the same jobs men can do'. In a similar way, Hegde (2016) describes the multimodal storytelling of DREAM activists as a tactic to construct a visible public identity; Sweety speaks through her selfies as a political agent but more significantly of life in the camp and controls how she is represented not as a refugee or even as a Karen woman but as a young person with an after-school job.

Transcending the material camp into the lived mediated space of, in Sweety's case, Facebook, she participates in articulating social and cultural practices where she can directly talk to her audience and, in return, they can speak to her. A repertoire of images uploaded to social media act as moments creating an everlasting memory. As Hjorth and Pink observe, our digitally interwoven worlds transcend the micro and macro realms and act as extensions to the personal diary (Hjorth and Pink, 2014, p.40). In this sense, Sweety is documenting and sharing her everyday life with her 1500+ 'friends', a community that lives mainly on Facebook as the majority of them, she says, reside in Myanmar and the wider diaspora.

For participatory culture to work, the member must feel that their voice and contribution matter and that there is a feeling of social connection and engagement with others who share in the community values; this is what gives members agency and empowerment. Agency and empowerment, Literat argues, derive from 'the nature of the selfie as intentional authorship and self-representation' (Literat, 2017, p.6). The refugee selfie not only claims ownership of the material space but also ownership as visual agents with physical and mediated presence. The importance of being seen is illuminated further by Frosh, who states the authorship of the selfie, 'says not only "see this, here, now," but also "see me showing you me"' (Frosh, 2015, p.1610). It points to the 'performance of a communicative action rather than to an object, and is a trace of that performance' (*ibid*), a performance which further argues against refugees reduced to bare life.

Of course, there is no guarantee that Sweety's voice will be heard or even received well by a global or diasporic audience. As Chouliarki (2017), Risam (2018), and Ponzanesi (2018) point out, images of refugees taking selfies circulating in western media have contributed to an anxiety culture that has 'sparked heated debates on whether these refugees are worthy of aid and support' (Ponzanesi, 2018, p.2). These migrant-related selfies, Risam argues, are 'often accompanied by news articles that reflect suspicion, lack of sympathy, and, at times, antipathy for migrants, become the focus of attention' (Risam, 2018, p.70). As encamped refugees use selfies and photos of ordinary everyday life as a tactic of self-representation and control, there is a potentiality that their presence may be erased as they do not fit into the 'comfortable' western image of bare life.

The 'see me showing you me' is intentionally uploaded for a Karen audience to engage with from a distance. As Anna points out, she will comment on posts, which also drives a nostalgic memory of life and belonging in the camp, which Ku Thay, Thet, and Stardagger find challenging due to their lack of technological devices and mediated presence. Like the music and videos described in Chapter 6, selfies go beyond functioning as solely an image of self-representation. They both are used as critical practices to maintain social ties with the wider diasporic community. Gómez Cruz and Thornham rethink the selfie as 'visual chats' located in mediated communication practices (Gómez Cruz and Thornham, 2015, p.5). Through the production and engagement of the image, refugees such as Anna and her neighbours continue to 'chat' and maintain a mediated presence regardless of location and distance. Alternatively, refugees such as Ku Thay, Thet, and Stardagger continue to experience isolation, exclusion, and stuckness.

So far, this chapter has explored fundamental questions about the relationships refugees have with space and each other, through but also without technologies. It has looked at the extent inhabitants of Mae La are able to transcend borders and boundaries. Inhabitants such as Ku Thay and Stardagger have a different relationship to space than Anna, Moe, and Ta Taw. Although Moe believed that the camp is where they could start again, Pa felt differently. Returning to the question of what becomes of space when the pause does not necessarily transform into a secure and stable place, I turn to Pa's story and how the uncertain and often dangerous space of the Karen State continued to have an emotional draw throughout his life.

Wanting to Belong More

Pa came from a well-known Karen revolutionist family, and in contrast to his wife's reaction and acceptance of her new life in the camp, Anna observed Pa's struggle with guilt and shame of leaving Myanmar. Anna states that he 'had a big heart for the Karen revolution. I think he longed to belong more. Pa wanted to be in *Kawthoolei*. He wanted to be in a Karen land and find our own identity in

our Karen land'. As Shain points out, those in exile often show 'so-called regret' from leaving the homeland. Their protracted displacement erodes their vision of return, and 'as a result, the exiles' self-confidence may suffer a psychological setback, their militancy may decrease, and their bitterness and internal divisiveness may grow more intense' (Shain, 2005, p.151). In the case of Pa, his bitterness and militancy increased, and his desire for a united Karen intensified.

Articulating emotions of mourning and loss, Pa experienced a profound struggle with his encampment and separation from *Kawthoolei*. This manifested in the guilt of leaving the revolution and 'his' people behind and his ultimate exile and death in Mae La. Claassen reminds us that exile is 'a condition in which the protagonist is no longer living, or able to live, in the land of his birth' (Claassen, 1996, p.571). Cho observes interconnected themes of guilt and sacrifice in the Karen diaspora. When displaced Karen, such as Pa, are unable to make or perceived to make sufficient sacrifices to the homeland or to the nation, the result is often feelings of guilt, shame, and disconnect (Cho, 2013).

Boccagni and Baldassar (2015) invite us to explore and question emotional experiences that underpin cross-border ties and practices. Focusing on the revolution of new communication technologies, the authors remind us that,

emotional lives are no longer conducted solely in proximity, but are increasingly performed, practiced and displayed in a variety of situated and simultaneous interactions, including across distance and space and over time (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015, p.74).

Emotional lives practised and displayed are no longer tethered to a physical location, evident in the photographs and selfies discussed earlier in this chapter and the music created in the camp addressed in Chapter 6. These examples support the notion of emotions on the move (Wilding et al., 2020) and how encamped refugee identities are articulated across multiple spaces. Further examples are found in more traditional forms of cultural production, such as in Hta poetry, as discussed in previous chapters. Pa's out-of-placeness and longing to belong more are clearly shared and articulated by others in the wider diaspora. Traditional ways Hta was expressed was through face-to-face interactions. In more contemporary times, this poetry is written and uploaded to websites. For example, Tee Noe, a Karen refugee, resettled in Australia, describes a 'disenchanted shame' and bitterness of exile in his poem *Resentful Refugee Life* (Noe, 2014). In *My Fate and My Kawthoolei*, Naw Sa Blut Moo depicts *Kawthoolei* as a long-lost intimate friend who she promises to return to one day:

I beg you, please

Wait for me with tears
Beautiful *Kawthoolei* of mine
(Naw Sa Blut Moo in Cho, 2013).

As Anna describes her father's pain and prolonged anxiety of living in the camp, we witness a juxtaposition of tensions between leaving Yangon for the physical protection of Mae La and his mental construction of home wrapped in guilt, shame, and longing to find his place where he belongs. Drawing once more from Boccagni and Baldassar, who states that the migration process, and in Pa's case, enforced migration is 'a powerful catalyser of change in emotional life – one that may make it physically and symbolically "out of place"' (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015, p.74). The authors remind us that: 'As people move away from home - or indeed, between 'homes' - emotions themselves are on the move' (*ibid*). I would argue that this is ever more intense for those who have been forced to leave and find themselves in a prolonged and potentially endless wait.

Earlier in this chapter, I described how there was no nostalgic discussion of *Kawthoolei* with Ku Thay or Stardagger; however, it would seem that throughout Pa's history, representation and meaning was defined and constructed *within* the notion of a free *Kawthoolei* and the fight for autonomy. The significant difference, it seems, between Pa and the others is that Pa came from a revolutionist family and as such, we may look to Myanmar's colonial past and Karen-British relationship to help us understand his struggle in exile more clearly.

Murphy argues that the 'British imposition of notions of territorial sovereignty, and the importation of a politics of ethnicity and religiosity' (Murphy, 2013, p.66) were the ultimate factors in post-independence conflict and displacement. Pa's exiled consciousness may lie in the British notion of territorial sovereignty and the promise of the right to self-determination. When Burma, as it was called at the time, gained independence, the 'recurrent narrative throughout KNU propaganda was the British 'betrayal' of the Karen' (Murphy, 2013, p.71). This 'betrayal' as Murphy argues 'of an elite S'gaw minority was indeed the proximate cause of the KNU uprising and the ensuing six decades of conflict and displacement' (Murphy, 2013, p.71). This may shed further light on why Pa, according to Anna, 'longed to belong more'. In his mind, territorial sovereignty was stolen by both the British and the *Tatmadaw* regime. His patriotic mission, guilt, and shame may stem from his own struggle of betraying the Karen cause by leaving the country and his detachment from the day-to-day suffering of those left behind³⁴. Although this narrative was not passed down from Pa to Anna, these emotions were evident in other young inhabitants born in the camp, such as Wasiklo.

³⁴ Unfortunately, Pa passed away a few years before this interview with Anna took place.

They Want Revolution

Returning to Saw Ka Lu's statement in Chapter 6: 'I know that the young people have never been to war or anything like it, they were born here and know nothing about war, yet they still want a revolution'. Wasiklo is an example of someone who dreams of 'the motherland' in a similar way to Pa. *Kawthoolei* is a place where there is no torture and where the Karen can govern themselves. The only difference is, he was born in Mae La. He insists: 'I never consider Mae La as my home. We have been here for many years, but I never consider it as my home'. However, in practice, after getting to know Wasiklo better, he behaves and interacts with the space differently from what he says. He elaborates by saying: 'Mae La is everyone's home, so many groups come and stay here. Some people grew up here, and they consider it as their village or place'. Wasiklo claims to feel 'uncomfortable' when he sees people who have resettled visiting the camp, such as Anna or those who come and take photos of their old houses: 'They don't ask about their village or their parent's village [in the Karen State]. They don't visit, they come and stay here [the camp] and then go back to the third country'.

In early 2018, Wasiklo tells me he rarely leaves the camp and had only visited the Karen State a few times. He has limited contact with his father, who lives across the border and is a KNLA soldier. Demonstrating tension and ambivalence due to his protracted displacement, Wasiklo first articulated an inability to imagine a future outside the camp gates. By labelling himself as a refugee and expressing the hopelessness and despair he and other refugees face, at first, it seemed he was unable to move beyond his state of 'stuckness'. He represents the young Karen who searches for ethnic self-determination and a nation-state. He rejects the camp as a space of safety and opportunity, viewing it as a temporary place where he is physically held before he can 'return' to his place of origin.

For Wasiklo, his imagined future and his 'sense of place' is firmly rooted in the *Heimat* of *Kawthoolei*. Doob describes the *Heimat* landscape as 'one that has been fought over, menaced, filled with the history of families, towns, and villages. Our *Heimat* is the *Heimat* of knights and heroes, of battles and victories, of legends and fairy tales' (Doob, 1964, p.196). Wasiklo's statelessness reminds him of his ancestors' sacrifice and suffering and a dream not realised. His desire for sameness and community, we must remember, is created, maintained, and imagined from within the boundaries of the camp; all constructed from his physical immobility, education, his participation in rituals and traditions, his religion, the music he listens to, his social media engagement and network capital, and the mythico-histories (Malkki, 1995) he adopts into his own narrative and identities. As Brubaker observes, a national "homeland" for "its" ethnic diaspora only exists when political or cultural elites define ethnonational kinship and belonging (Brubaker, 1995, p.110). As we have seen in previous

chapters, the KNU's carefully crafted national pan-identity maintained by overlapping institutions and actors, such as Pa, beholds more for the young, a spiritual home rather than a material one.

Drawing from Quinsast's (2019) work on the diaspora as a social movement, Wasiklo's sustained performance of a particular national identity, one based on the image created by the KNU, also 'counters the fear of being forgotten and the guilt of becoming too content in a host country' (Quinsaat, 2019, p.50). For Wasiklo, togetherness and unity are not with the 'many groups' of mostly Karen who inhabit Mae La but with those in *Kawthoolei*, his imagined community (Anderson, 2006). He takes issue with inhabitants such as Anna, who moves between countries or Moe and Ta Taw, who claim the camp as home. He goes further by stating Mae La is everyone's home; thus, no one's home. This suggests Wasiklo envisions *Kawthoolei* as a homogenous place where all Karen are the same, a position indicative again of the KNU's pan-Karen ideology and perhaps synonymous with his own political activism within the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG).

A pan-Karen identity can primarily be attributed to a 'colonial-missionary enterprise' (Cheesman, 2002, p.203) and the introduction of print material. Cheesman asserts historically: 'Karen leaders understood that, to be seen as a civilised nation in their own right, they needed to have both literature and history' (Cheesman, 2002, p.213). This, *to be seen as a civilised nation*, was, of course, fashioned in the image of the colonial oppressors that created the pan-Karen identity in the first place.

In contemporary times, the dissemination of a pan-national identity is still achieved through traditional methods embedded in rituals and rehearsed events, as we have witnessed in other chapters. However, to reach new audiences and maintain old ones, it is perhaps not the Karen political elder elites turning to digitally mediated spaces and using the affordances of Facebook and YouTube to broadcast their messages but the digitally and technologically literate youths that are enforcing the message. As discussed in Chapter 7, institutions such as the KWO continue to use their Facebook platform to spread the 'spirit of the nation' and the image of the good Karen citizen. KSNG's mission is to prepare Karen youths to become leaders and fight oppression from the *Tatmadaw* regime. Their Facebook pages and online radio program updates members about: 'The current situation in Kawthoolei' ("Kawthoolei Today," 2021) while providing information about what the youths are doing in the different camps along the border. Wasiklo draws from this information, which seems to influence how he navigates both the camp space and an imagined one beyond Mae La's boundaries.

In 2021, Wasiklo's national imaginings and the community he desperately wants to be part of intensified. His mediated presence is connected to others by a repertoire of visual images and footage protesting the coup d'état across Myanmar and increased reporting on conflict within the

Karen State. Ubiquitous social media has become a powerful communication tool contributing to ‘a continuous renewal of the cultural and political landmarks of the diaspora’s imaginary’ (Nedelcu, 2019, p.244). Social practices such as taking photographs, uploading them to social media sites or sending and receiving them in Messenger engenders a connection back to the photo’s origin (Abebe, 2019, p.61) while revitalising loyalties from a distance. An example of this was in the distribution of images on Sunday, 21st February 2021 (Figure 52).

As Myanmar faces Internet blackouts and the military junta restricts Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger, citizens inside the country turn to VPNs and encrypted messenger services to distribute information about the protests. As a result, photographs emerged of the KNLA and other Karen organisations joining the demonstrations in Myawaddy (the border town opposite Mae Sot) (Figure 52). Spreading fast through the vast digital diasporic community, the images open a space for reflection, demanding the exiled audience bear witness to the events unfolding while asking them how they relate to the event, place, and people.

Bearing witness and how the audience relates to their visual co-presence adds further complexity, generating feelings of anxiety and guilt as well as a sense of belonging and unity for those outside the country. This feeling of ambivalence intensifies, especially when the images circulating are of young soldiers of similar age to Wasiklo, Mornar, and Sweety.

When I first met Wasiklo, he claimed he wanted to be a soldier. Over the years, however, this changed. Although he still claims to reject the camp as his home, he wants to focus on his education which he is getting inside the camp with the hope of eventually gaining a scholarship to study abroad. A move that will challenge his criticism of those who leave Mae La for a third country.

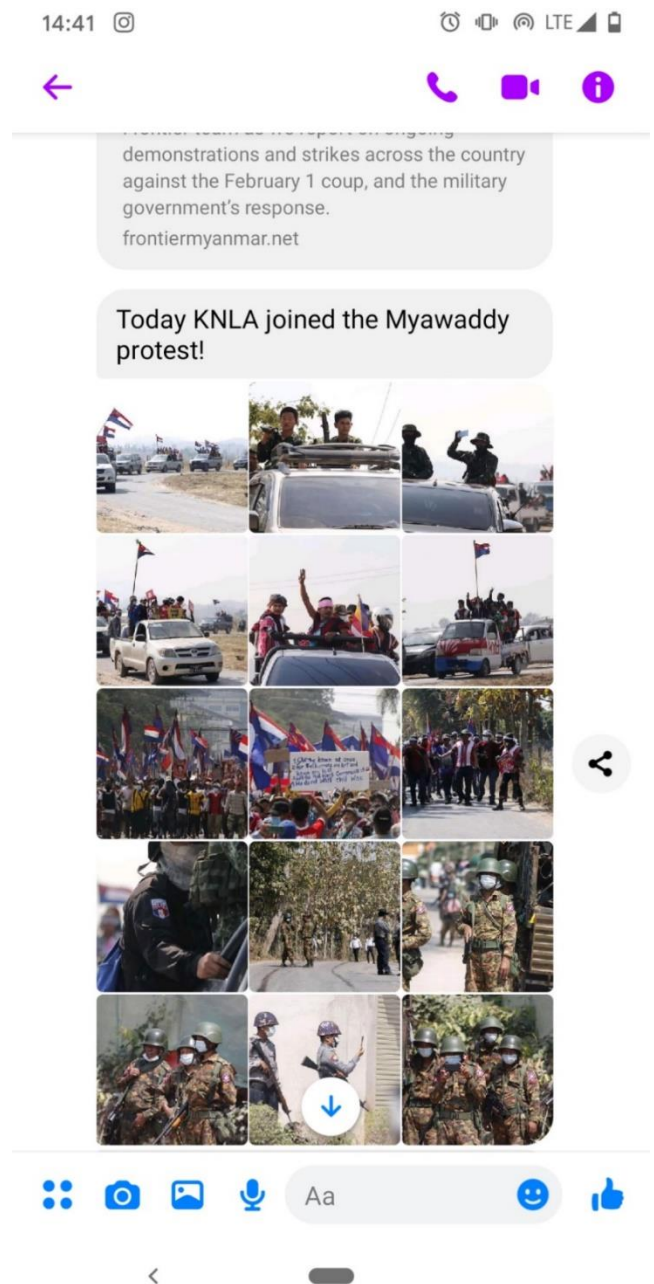


Figure 52: Images sent me when KNLA join protests

Wasiklo's lived spaces (physically in the camp and in the digitally mediated one) have created interwoven tensions and ambivalence. He performs his national responsibility, loyalty, and political alliance through KSNG activities and participating in special days. He posts on Facebook, which, similarly to KWOs page, becomes a moral and emotional space for him to engage with other like-minded 'friends'. Yet, he is torn between these practices and a desire to pursue a better life through higher education in another country. Wasiklo's narrative sheds further light on the intricacies, ambivalence, tensions of relationships and belongings, and how inhabitants of Mae La navigate the different spaces they occupy.

Concluding Comments

This chapter has focused on the role media technologies play in the everyday lives of encamped refugees. It looks at different patterns of mediation, and while some transcend their material and virtual boundaries, others withdraw and descend into stuckness.

Drawing from the voices in the first group, it would seem that they have almost an inexistent media infrastructure. This raises the question of *even if they did, would it make a difference to how they view themselves, their situation, and their future imaginings?* Of course, this is a challenging question to answer; however, on reflection, I would argue that this group are in a kind of mental state near resignation. The psychological toll of protracted encampment and their past trauma in Myanmar has rendered Stardagger, Paw Ler, Thet, and Ku Thay unable to imagine a successful future outside the camp gates. Space for these participants presented them with the existence of the other, bound in memories of their oppression and victimhood. It seems that they remain in body and mind in a suspended state of limbo and stuckness. Ku Thay represents the refugee who believes that not only has his material belongings been taken away, but also his dignity and his future.

At first, we might equate their stuckness to a lack of technological and mediated communication practices. All participants in this group had described how their restricted access to mediated communication mainly was to do with financial constraints. However, digitally connected refugees such as Mornar demonstrated that even when individuals are connected, this does not always transform their experiences and mobilities as the material space has made a much larger imprint on their lives. Alternatively, the camp space for Mornar's mother Ta Taw is endowed with value and represented a new start, offering opportunities for her children. For Ta Taw, albeit restricted and encamped, safety is more desirable than the prospect of openness and the threat of space in Myanmar. We can also apply this to Mornar, who, having been given an opportunity to leave the camp, is conditioned to return and rely on its boundaries. I argue that Mornar's prolonged

encampment has profoundly affected how he interacts with space beyond the camp gates and his ultimate reluctance to leave.

Furthermore, Stardagger, Paw Ler, Thet, and Ku Thay articulated no nostalgia for wanting to return to Myanmar. Although Three Arrow's in a previous chapter stated that he did not know anyone who did not want to go back, these participants argue against the discourse of a primordial identity and reject the notion that refugees' attachment to the 'motherland' and a desire to return is 'naturally' given. There is a difference, of course, between not wanting to go back to Myanmar and wanting to stay in Mae La, which none of these participants wanted to do either.

For others such as Anna and Moe, the camp's moment of arrival presented new beginnings and life potentially out-of-place and in exile. Within Anna's story, we can unpack further the complexity of intimate relationships at a distance and the challenges of 'doing intimacy' across borders. Although Anna is a connected refugee and unique in her privileged mobility, technology, mediated communication practices, and mediated spaces are useless if Poe Wah is unable to connect. Significantly, Anna and her husband's relationship lies more in an imagined co-presence afforded by her hopes and prayers of one day being together. Like Mornar, it further demonstrates how media technologies do not always significantly transform refugee experiences and mobilities.

Anna is an example of how identities are constructed, fluid, and move across spaces, arguing further against the discourse of a primordial Karen identity. Anna's mobility also highlights the complexities of exile and how it is non-binary. As I assert in the introduction chapter of this thesis, as with the concept of the refugee, the boundaries between who is in exile and who is not is also blurred. Opportunities gained from living in the camp has meant that Anna's mobility has released her from the traditionally bounded conventions of a Karen woman. Although I have argued that she is still a cultural carrier, the distance from Mae La has meant she sometimes heightens her performance of 'being Karen' and shifts identities depending on the circumstance. She articulates a tension where she is pulled between two places. Mae La and Canada have provided physical safety but complicated the sense of belonging and how others perceive her and how she perceives herself.

I observed that the need for 'displaying family' (Finch, 2007) becomes more intense for encamped refugees who have been separated by conflict and resettlement programs. Adding to the complexity and contradicting an earlier argument, it seems that, for some inhabitants, the assemblage of technology, mediated communication practices, and social and physical networks are interwoven into the fabric of the inhabitant's everyday lives, which amounted to a richer social life. An example given was in the practice of taking photographs and selfies with objects or people in the camp. Displaying family and articulating life and community in Mae La benefited from digitally mediated

spaces where my participants felt that they were being seen and heard. Like the music videos on YouTube discussed in Chapter 6, images were uploaded and acted like vehicles to transport encamped inhabitants out of Mae La and bring in others from outside. In Sweety's case, by transcending the material camp into the lived mediated space, Facebook was a way for her to articulate social and cultural practices.

I would also argue that the media played a significant role in keeping families in the diaspora up-to-date with what was happening in the camp under the Covid-19 lockdown, which would have been near impossible before 2008. As mentioned previously, the camp had gone into 'lockdown' in 2020; however, on the 5th June 2021, reports posted on Facebook and private messages circulated that an inhabitant who had left and entered the camp unofficially had brought Covid in (Figure 53). A number of my participants contacted me angry and frustrated that their physical restrictions were being even more limited. Messages were left on inhabitants Facebook feeds concerned for those inside the camp and asking what was being done. Before 2008, the camp authorities (Thai and Karen leadership) could control the dissemination of camp information being released. Due to the affordances of new media, such as visibility and spreadability, anyone with a camera phone and access to the Internet can control the information and image of camp life.



Figure 53: 5th June 2021: Sectioning off the zones in an attempt to control the spread of Covid-19.

Although Anna, Moe, and Ta Taw endowed the camp space with values, others rejected it, longing to belong elsewhere. Inhabitants such as Pa and Wasiklo struggle with guilt, shame, and anger at

their displacement. It would seem for these participants the camp has fostered sentiments of bitterness and militancy. This sentiment, it may be suggested, is reinforced by the circulation of images produced in Myanmar, the Facebook pages such as those created for Martyrs' Day (Chapter 7), the national music produced in the camp and uploaded to social media (Chapter 6), and their mediated co-presence with those outside the camp. It would seem that throughout Pa's history, representation and meaning was defined and constructed *within* the notion of a free *Kawthoolei* and the fight for autonomy. This sentiment is felt by younger inhabitants who, unlike Pa, never experienced life in Myanmar under the *Tatmadaw* regime. The sense of belonging for these participants has rendered them stuck in the emotions of guilt and loss. Although Pa never returned to the Karen State, Wasiklo did for a short period in 2020. His desire to study further was granted through his KSNG connections, where in 2021, he received a scholarship to study at a migrant school in Mae Sot. He maintains that through education, he will be able to help his community better.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the everyday lives of encamped Karen refugees living in protracted displacement along the Thai-Myanmar border. Through an ethnographic lens, I examined how offline life intertwines with online life. To gain insight into the diverse population of Karen inside Mae La, this thesis asked how, if at all, *encamped Karen articulate their everyday lives, identities, and sense of belonging within the material space of Mae La? To what extent are media technologies used by inhabitants, and what role do they play in mediating everyday identities? To what extent, if at all, new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments interweave into everyday encamped life?*

Expanding on the concept of 'lived' spaces (Steuer, 1992; Twigt, 2019), I explored encamped Karen refugee presence and focused on the themes of stuckness, transcendence, bare life, and ordinariness. My intention was to draw from a range of refugee voices to gain further knowledge about encamped life and how it is articulated in offline and online spaces, an area of research that is so far underdeveloped, especially in South East Asia. I have attempted to address several research concerns relating to the usages, experiences, and implications of digital connectivity (Leurs and Smets, 2018, p.2), and further reflected on whether the digital plays an important role in transforming refugee experiences and mobilities (Gillespie et al., 2018). I looked at how refugees are actively engaged as initiators, participants and participatory audience members (Andemicael, 2011). Finally, I accepted the invitation to explore connected refugees from a more empirical grounding (Smets, 2018) and expand the understanding and conversation of encampment by de-centralising and going beyond a western-centric European focus.

Since starting this project in 2017, there has been a modest rise in work acknowledging the importance of studying refugees living in prolonged conditions of displacement in refugee camps and their technological and social practices (Cheesman, 2020; Dahya and Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Greene, 2020; Jack, 2017; Macias, 2020; Smets, 2018; Sreenivasan et al., 2017; Twigt, 2019; Wall, 2020; Wall et al., 2017; Weitzberg et al., 2021). Through a socio-technical (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999) and ethnographic approach, I contribute further to these voices and research on media and migration, refugee encampment, culture and communication studies, and provide insight and reflection into practical methodologies and practices to working with vulnerable populations.

I would argue that the importance of my ethnographic study lies in the knowledge gained from the ordinary yet significant details of everyday camp life such as going to the market, school and family life, and meeting friends and forming relationships. I was able to conduct this study due to my long-term residency in South East Asia, my vast experience and relationships with the Karen community in Thailand, Myanmar, and the UK, and my extended periods working as a teacher and researcher in Mae La camp. I return to Miller's (2004) statement that 'those who are outsiders [...] cannot simply waltz in unannounced and start gathering data' (Miller, 2004, p.217). Miller is correct. From bureaucratic obstacles to gaining the population's trust to the constant ethical reflections, researching refugee camps and refugees as outsiders is incredibly challenging. Yet as we witness an increase in vulnerable populations, for example, seen in Myanmar and Afghanistan in 2021, I argue that more work must be conducted inside camps and from an ethnographic perspective so that we may understand the refugee, not as one moving or waiting mass but as individuals, as a *persona*, as a person (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007), with a past, present, and more importantly, a future.

Intellectual growth, for me, comes not only from the grand theories discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, such as the state of exception and bare life, imagined communities, long-distance nationalism, and mediated presence but is found in the continuous practice of engaging with the community and how these theories can be applied to everyday life. I would argue that the relationships I have built over the years have meant I was able to engage with the larger community of Mae La, shop at the local markets, attend wakes and parties, experience early mornings when the camp bursts into life and late nights when the camp falls silent; an experience quite different to other researchers who, in the past, have been separated from the main camp and restricted to a small section of zone C³⁵, been bound by the parameters of working with an NGO, or chaperoned by a camp authority. Although my movements were, to some extent, limited, my regular presence in the camp meant I experienced the freedom to engage and observe the richness of everyday life. Within the richness, I acknowledge the exceptionality of encampment and have found, in the context of Mae La, that inhabitants move and occupy multiple spaces and articulate a multitude of different identities and belongings simultaneously.

³⁵ The bible school in zone C receives many foreign visitors who are allowed to stay at the school but not allowed to cross the river that separates a section of zone C from zones A, B, and C.

Everyday Life in Multiple Spaces: Key Findings

Those best able to define, explain and promote an understanding of the parameters which govern their lives are the refugees themselves.

(Zetter, 1988, p.6).

In Chapter 1, I acknowledge Agamben's (2005, 1998) seminal theory and the exceptionality of refugee camps. However, I argue that although appropriating Agamben's theory is indeed very tempting, it only considers half the story and approaches camps from a top-down theoretical perspective. In practice and in context to Mae La, it neglects everyday life's multifaceted spatial dynamics, movement, and ordinariness in camps that I had observed, such as described in the opening of this thesis. Therefore, I argue for a more nuanced approach that considers not only the mechanisms of power but also the often taken-for-granted everyday activities and practices that inhabitants implement to demonstrate resistance to their encampment and prolonged limbo-like state. This resistance is seen particularly in the practices of music production (Chapter 6) and rejecting the camp as home (Chapter 8) but also in the ordinariness seen in the market (Chapter 5) and the desire for self-representation and visibility (Chapters 6 and 7).

I theorise physical mobility and immobility and introduce shifting boundaries across different spaces in Chapter 2. I apply this theory at the beginning of Chapter 5, as I reflect on a landscape punctuated with hostile and off-social spaces. Although I would agree that borders and boundaries are opened selectively and are increasingly closed to most (Kluitenberg, 2011), I describe throughout the empirical chapters, but particularly in Chapter 5, the porosity of borders and boundaries, of course, as long as the flow benefits the dominant actors (government, military, border guards, locals) and doesn't threaten the national sovereignty. In Chapter 2, I draw from Agamben's state of exception to unpack the concept of bare life and explore the mechanisms of control from a top-down institutional position. In line with a more nuanced approach, I look to studies that explore camps as dimensions of multiplicity (Massey, 2013) where encamped refugees articulate resistance and agency through different practices. Chapter 3 complements the studies presented in Chapter 2 and evolves the narrative thread from the material to digitally mediated spaces. The literature presented in this chapter helped unpack how encamped refugees move and live in the virtual world, how they connect and maintain relationships at a distance, and highlights how asymmetrical power relations are created between those who have access and those who do not.

Chapters 5-8 explore how the material, symbolic, and technologically mediated ways encamped Karen refugee identities and a sense of belonging are articulated and shaped. The chapters build around the argument that the inhabitants of Mae La, in opposition to the image portrayed in the

media or by governments and NGO's, have multiple identities that coexist and circulate in different lived spaces. Within these spaces, the inhabitants express different levels of resistance to their situation, which I often observed in the subtle moments of their encamped life.

Significantly, I found that it is not enough to just understand encampment from a bottom-up perspective. To understand refugee life, we must also consider the exceptionality of the refugee experience and the absolute centrality of the role of media in their lives. I argue that everyday life is inherently mediated. From the desire to communicate in a more general sense to the social and cultural consequences and changes to camp life over time, it is impossible to understand life without exploring the active processes of mediation. Mediation is both social and technical; online life is laced together with offline life. As Silverstone argues, mediation is a 'transformative process in which the meaningfulness and value of things are constructed' (Silverstone, 2002, p.761). Meaning and value are also constructed within exceptional circumstances such as refugee camps through various inhabitant practices. Encamped refugees actively seek ways to connect, as seen with the youths forming intimate bonds in the physical space of the recording studio (Chapter 6) or in the digitally mediated space of Facebook Messenger (Chapter 7).

However, by exploring how technologically enabled processes of communication afford intimacy, visibility and, to some extent, escapism from the camp (Chapters 6 and 7), we can also unpack how some are bound primarily to live in the physical space only (Chapters 5 and 8). There is evidence, for example, in the case of Mornar, that even when an inhabitant has access to new media technologies, they are stuck in the confines of their circumstance. This supports the notion that the way encamped life and Mae La are mediated depends on individual circumstances, histories, social orders, and power dynamics.

Previous literature has suggested de-exceptionalising the camp (Sigona, 2015a), which I would caution against. By de-exceptionalising, we run the risk of normalising the refugee experience. Although I have argued that encamped refugees demonstrate ordinariness, their situation is exceptional. Instead, I would suggest that it is intellectually beneficial to acknowledge the exceptionality of the camp. By doing this, we can start to unpack how inhabitants work within and against the exception. We might then re-imagine the camp as an environment encompassing many different spaces that coexist and clash simultaneously. Thinking of Mae La in this way presents us with a juxtaposition between the mechanisms of power consisting of the omnipresent authorities, surveillance, and restricted mobility (Chapter 5), with scenes of children leaving for school (Chapter 5), escapism (leaving the camp) through music production and consumption (Chapter 6), through events such as wakes and national days (Chapter 7), and home-making (Chapter 8).

What, I argue, we are witnessing, in the case of Mae La, is how refugee camps evolve. I posit that Mae La continues to develop and that development is due to the media and the varying levels of new media technology engagement. In 2015, Jack presented her research on Mae La, describing a space of relative isolation (Chapter 3). It was a place where inhabitants were disconnected from information and discouraged from speaking about their concerns with visitors. Jack observed that communicating with others outside the camp gates was a daily struggle, and mobility was severely restricted (Jack, 2017, 2015). In contrast, I found that access to media has created spaces where inhabitants can self-represent, where practices of intimacy, long-distance nationalism, and imagined futures are articulated.

Of course, and as previously mentioned earlier, it is unhelpful to argue that all inhabitants experience the same spaces in the same way. As I described in Chapters 5-8, there is still the issue of accessibility and availability, and even when participants do have access, this does not *always* positively transform refugee experiences. I would argue that exploring the role of new media technologies and mediated spaces within camps draws our attention to the asymmetrical power relations and how some inhabitants can move across borders and boundaries, while others descend further into their stuckness, signifying, to some extent, bare life. As the chapters unfold, we come to understand Mae La as a rich space of multiplicity where social life clashes with different power relations. I start to unpack the tensions and faultlines that appear between different groups, such as the Christians and Buddhists in Chapter 7 and highlight that although in previous studies, refugee camps have been described as spaces where new power dynamics are remoulded, in the context of Mae La, I argue that old powers are reaffirmed.

Moving on from the broad exploration of ordinariness and exception in the camp in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 focuses on the ordinariness of music and how it affords an important social and individual space where the self and the collective become intertwined. As Clarke et al. state: 'Music pervades everyday life: in homes, on trains and planes, in cars and shops, at births and deaths, at weddings and war, in concert halls, clubs, stadiums, and fields' (Clarke et al., 2010, p.1). I would add refugee camps to Clarke's list. Music in the context of Mae La camp is omnipresent and no different to an ordinary practice outside the camp described above by Clarke et al. Considering this, I attempt to address the UNHCR's concern that an overlooked area in research is how encamped refugees are active artists and engaged audiences. I found that first, the recording studio space works on multiple levels; it encourages artistic expression and provides the youths with a safe environment to build and maintain bonding relationships. Yet, the studio and music also facilitate movement and collaboration between those in the diaspora and the encamped artists.

It was argued that the Internet and music were the only way some inhabitants could leave the camp. I found that the artists and some elders were able to transcend their restricted physical lives to participate and 'live' in a mediated space through their music. This led to a space of participatory culture where artists felt they contributed to the political discussion and where their fans could talk directly to them. I found that the youths draw from historical events, elder stories, and everyday camp life. They re-imagine Hta poetry in their own image and disseminate their messages to a broader audience through platforms such as YouTube and Spotify. The choice of themes and acts of singing in rap constitutes creative resistance and resilience to the dominant powers. Their music demonstrates opposition to the *Tatmadaw*, who they continue to describe as their enemy. They show resistance to their encampment, not necessarily aimed at the Thai government or even the Camp Commander but to their prolonged encampment and lack of power to control their future. They articulate resistance to the elders, leaders, and the hierarchal Karen social structure. Pu Dah further expresses opposition to the male-dominated musical space where she describes her experiences as a young single mother who is stateless.

Digitally mediated spaces facilitate the expression of voice and afford visibility. It is a space where an active participatory culture has developed (Jenkins, 2009) and where mediated presence is experienced. Ascribing to the concept that connection can transcend the physical, I contend that there is a juxtaposition between Anderson's (2006) imagined communities and how print capitalism was implicated in creating and maintaining long-distance nationalism and national imaginaries (Anderson, 1992; Schiller, 2005). I further contend that new media technologies and mediated spaces affords young Karen to disseminate a certain kind of national identity expressed through the genre of rap. Although digital connectivity has transformed the youth's visibility (Chapters 6, 7, and 8), it has not always transformed the material conditions of their lives. This was evident in how some youths make money from their YouTube channels, but they could not access the funds due to their statelessness. Without formal ID, they were unable to open a bank account. This meant they had to rely on a physical network of friends and family who moved in and out of the camp to give them their money. Their stuckness was exacerbated in 2020-21 when all the camps along the border went into lockdown. Official and unofficial movement of goods, people, and money in and out of the camp was suspended, highlighting that they may move and live in spaces such as YouTube and Facebook but the influence on their material condition is much more complicated.

I observed that for the older generation, sacred music is where their spirituality lives and is an escapism from their past trauma and their prolonged displacement (Chapters 6 and 7). Christian and Buddhist music, for example, fills the void of separation from family members yet also reaffirms their separation and stuckness as it is often listened to explicitly when inhabitants are lonely. Religious music in the camp further highlights the colonial legacy and polarity between the Christian and

Buddhist inhabitants. The colonial legacy, as described in Chapter 1, is evident in the Christian projects recorded in the studios and disseminated to villages along the border and in Myanmar, how it is embedded into popular songs about Karen unity, and how initial Christian support helped the studio owners, for example, start their businesses. 'Music marks and orchestrates the ways in which people experience the world together' (Clarke et al., 2010, p.1), but it also illustrates the presence and tensions of different individual identities inside the camp and how meaning is created through the presence of the other.

I continue to explore the faultlines and polarity between the Christian and Buddhist inhabitants in Chapter 7. Here, I focus on the shared experiences and divisions among the diverse population in the camp by examining them from within the practices of traditions and rituals. Attention is given to a sense of movement, of multiple identities flowing and conflicting in which they are expressed in different ways, in turn, allowing for various degrees of contestation. I capture three scenes that further demonstrate the richness of life in the camp and the multiple spaces inhabitants occupy. Chapter 7 asks, *what are the practices and normative performances expected within each scene and what role technologies and mediated spaces play in articulating these practices and performances?*

Reaffirming social ties and communal boundaries, scene one describes the ritual of gathering at an Animist wake. Like scene two, this scene seemingly illustrates symbolically powerful moments between the participants who understood the ceremony's patterns, routine, and repetition. A we-consciousness was created through the congregation of this community sitting together, chatting, singing, and chewing betel nut, a familiar scene across South East Asia. The chewing of betel nut and the continuous singing performed by the youths illuminates how boundaries are crossed from the mundane and ordinary to sacred spaces. Yet these actions and spaces articulate the division between the Christian attendees who found themselves outside of the normative performances, reaffirming and reenforcing the faultlines discussed in previous chapters. These faultlines are further described in scene two at the wrist-tying event. Although the young Christian Karen insisted that the event was shared and experienced in the same way by all, in practice, others such as the older Christian Karen and the Buddhist Karen acknowledged boundaries separating the groups.

Physical stuckness in Mae La was reaffirmed by the physical absence of family members and friends who live outside the camp. For those who have access to new media technologies such as smartphones and mediated environments such as Facebook, the physical absence of friends and family was replaced by a mediated co-presence. Particularly evident at the wake, friends and family were virtually brought into the event through Facebook messenger live chat, an example of mediated mobility transcending the physical restrictions and challenges of entering and exiting Mae La. I argue

that reframing mediated spaces as lived places allows for the assemblage of interweaving interactions, relationships, and identities to coexist. I state that without the aid of technology, mediated environments, and digital networks, encamped communities such as those in Mae La would have limited communication space with each other outside the camp gates, restricting them to the material environment, thus reaffirming distance and separation. However, the absence of friends and family at these events and their mediated communication reaffirms the inhabitants' stuckness and forced separation from each other.

In scene three, I argue that Martyrs' Day is a much larger event that speaks to a broader audience and the realities of violent memories bring a diverse group together. At this event, I argue, we can observe a collective identity transcend boundaries of difference and trauma. I argue that to understand the multiple tensions and faultlines that exist in contemporary Karen society, we must look to the colonial and missionary past and how the Karen came to be seen as one ethnic group. We can observe very little contestation of difference within this scene at Martyrs' Day as the event reinforces the collective solidarity and common constructed identity – an identity formed in the image of the KNU. It would seem that in the context of Mae La, Martyrs' Day is a strategy that brings Christian, Buddhists, and Animists together as they draw from a collective memory of the past under a violent *Tatmadaw* regime. In line with Anderson's long-distance nationalism, Martyrs' Day and the rituals performed at these events (mediated or not) are common strategies in creating a certain kind of nationalism and sense of belonging; however, this does not imply the unity is permanent. As I describe elsewhere (Chapters 7 and 8), contestation is common, punctuated by these unifying rituals.

The notions of presence and a sense of being in an environment (Steuer, 1992) is further considered in Chapter 8. This chapter draws from the narratives articulated from a space of stuckness, from a space of new beginnings and opportunities, and from a space of national belonging firmly set in the imagination. I explore further competing tensions individuals feel in the camp and how they interact and navigate their material and mediated spaces. I ask *in what ways, if at all, do technologies mediate these spaces?* I observed that some of my participants have almost a non-existent personal technological or digital infrastructure, which begs the question *if they did, would it make a difference to their everyday lives and how they perceive their situation?* It seemed that something profound was going on, in which their protracted displacement had severely affected their mental capacity to imagine a future beyond the camp gates. Although they articulated ordinary lives such as teaching at a local primary school and having a family, they seemed to almost surrender to their stuckness.

I compared those I observed in this state of near bare life with others. In the case of Mornar, who had been offered multiple opportunities outside Mae La and, to some extent, Anna, who was now a

Canadian citizen, although both were very digitally connected, they demonstrated reliance on the camp and found it challenging to 'leave'. Of course, both were connected to the camp through friends and family; however, it could be argued that they had been conditioned by the years of living inside, the events and rituals, the mythico-histories (Malkki, 1995), and continuous 'I am Karen' narrative to 'remain'. This, I argued, illustrates a poignant example of how technologies and digital infrastructures will never be able to address such mental conditioning to a situation and a form of bare life in some situations. Although there are some individuals where new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated spaces would perhaps not make a difference to their experiences in the camp, there were others who it certainly did.

I argue in Chapter 8 that a combination of selfies and photographs of everyday life and objects in the camp uploaded to a digitally mediated space contribute to empowering some inhabitants. First, they provide a form of mobility to virtually enter and leave the camp when physical movement is restricted. The second is the possibility to re-imagine and 'display' (Finch, 2007) family life. I observe that the need to display family becomes more intense for encamped refugees separated by conflict and resettlement programs. This observation, I would argue, contributes to the discussion on transnational family relationship maintenance as it unpacks the discussion on forced migration and how it is managed by the individuals on an individual everyday basis. Thirdly, it is a way to *be seen* and to *be heard*. As mentioned earlier, digitally mediated spaces facilitate participatory cultures where encamped refugees, like the artists in Chapter 6, have a space to speak directly about their lives in Mae La; thus, they take control of their image and life in their protracted displacement.

Articulating emotions of mourning and loss, some inhabitants experienced a profound struggle with their encampment and separation from *Kawthoolei*. I would argue that a pattern that distinguishes these participants is not due to their media engagement but more to do with their commitment to the national struggle and their investment in the KNU ideology. The mental construction of home wrapped in guilt, shame, and longing to find a place where these inhabitants belong without question was evident in the older generation and some youth born in the camp. For some, their identities, imagined future, and 'sense of place' are firmly rooted in the *Heimat* of *Kawthoolei*. These participants' in the camp have not withdrawn or made the camp their own but hold on to the image of an imagined homeland where they will one day return. These examples support the notion of emotions on the move (Wilding et al., 2020) and the argument of how encamped refugee identities are articulated across multiple spaces, not just the camp but the imagined homeland of *Kawthoolei* as well as the global diaspora.

Exploring the camp through an ethnographic lens meant I was able to observe in this thesis the mundane and often taken-for-granted everyday moments of a camp, the ordinariness of life

inhabitants of Mae La have experienced for nearly 40 years. My time was spent building relationships with my participants, which helped me gain a deeper understanding of what they do and not what they say they do. I paid close attention to engaging with a multi-generational demographic from different linguistic and religious backgrounds throughout the fieldwork, which I would argue is missing from research on the Karen. By taking a more nuanced approach, this study's direction and the themes discussed, such as mobility and immobility, belonging and being out-of-place, home and exile, separation, and connections, were determined by the diverse community and the participants I engaged with. This perspective helped me question some of the dominant approaches discussed in Chapter 2, which considers camps as isolated spaces and perceives refugees as only living in a permanent yet invisible space of bare life. I contribute to the emerging voices in media, migration, and refugee studies who acknowledge the exceptionality of the encamped refugee situation but challenge the notion that refugees surrender to the situation.

I have traced the multiple places and spaces encamped refugees live in, from the material camp to the symbolic imagined homeland, from the virtual to the diaspora. I asked, *as inhabitants escape or transcend Mae La, where do they go? What are the different places and spaces they move within? How are they articulating their identities and a sense of belonging within these spaces? What role, if at all, do new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and mediated spaces play in articulating identities?* I found that new media technologies, mediated communication practices, and social and physical networks interweave into the fabric of an individual's everyday ordinary life. I acknowledge that multiple identities coexist and circulate, and meaning is made from many different practices that are often overlooked in research due to their ordinariness. I argue that Mae La and its inhabitants do not stand still; the camp is evolving, and this is due to the media and the active processes of mediation. I emphasise the significance of centring this work on the voices of inhabitants of Mae La. Finally, the thesis opened a space to engage with inhabitants, not as research objects but as active individuals who have important things to say.

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