IMPERCEPTIBLE NAKED-LIVES & ATROCITIES:
FORCIBLY DISPLACED PEOPLES &
THE THAI-BURMESE IN-BETWEEN SPACES

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Acknowledgements

When I was in the Burman-Karen war zones, in a gathering of forcibly displaced Karen, one of them asked me what made me decide to pursue this research. I responded to him that it had to do with one story and one incident.

The story began with my illiterate mother’s life-journey. When she was twelve, she migrated to Thailand with her “owner” boss after being sold to that family three years earlier by her fisher parents living in a seashore village of San Thou, in southeast China. Growing up listening to her stories of suffering, I had invariably felt anguished. But when I started to learn more about the forcibly displaced peoples along the Thai-Burmese border zones, I began to wonder why, as a Thai citizen, I knew almost nothing about them, and also why Thai society had rarely been concerned with the plight of at least one hundred thousand peoples living in a string of “camps” along the border zones and more than one million “illegal” laborers roaming in the country. The more I learnt about the tormenting stories of the forcibly displaced from Burma, the more my mother’s stories paled.

As a member of the first Thai-born generation of my Chinese family, I told the Karen interviewer that I had been familiar with a thing or two about being one of “the others” in a host society. Together with sixteen other siblings and three mothers, almost all of whom lived under the same roof for many years with material hardships and acute psychological complications, a big chunk of my life was spent as a “borderline” person in a highly status-conscious Thai society. I felt that it should not be far-fetched to say that I had something in common with these forcibly displaced peoples from Burma. Yet, being
one of only two of the seventeen siblings who finished a bachelor’s degree and the only one who had been lucky enough to pursue a doctoral degree, I admitted that I had become one of the privileged in Thai society. Nonetheless, I often thought that I could make some use of my education and help the peoples with whom I felt I had something in common. Theoretically put, I felt, and still feel, that my locus of enunciation should allow me to pursue and write a dissertation with very little lack of physiognomic sense in my study.

The incident that explains why I was pursuing this research came during my fieldwork when I was interviewing three Karen women from Burma who were then living in a northern province of Thailand. It turned out that one of them was born just two days before me. I came out of the interview with many questions and the most important one was: What would happen had I been born as a twin brother of hers? I might have already been dead. But surely I would not have been sitting there as a Ph.D. candidate interviewing her. From that moment on, I came to the conclusion that just because one could not have chosen where one was born, that does not mean that one cannot be treated with justice. So, I told the person who asked me that since you and other Karens had been treated unjustly, I felt the urge to do something. As a student of politics, I thus had attempted to understand the entanglements of the atrocious situations committed upon the forcibly displaced Karens with the aim of disseminating to, and engaging with, the Thai society, which I believed had to, and could, do many things to alleviate the violent situations – for the sake of both Thailand and the forcibly displaced peoples from Burma.
Nonetheless, given my humble background, the debts I have owed through the journey of conducting this research and completing this piece of writing is just a tip of an iceberg of debts that date back well before I began this dissertation. They are the debts to too many people who have supported or guided me to aspire, to pursue, and to finally finish my graduate study at the University of Hawai‘i. The list is too long to mention here. For those whom I do not name, I only hope that they understand how much I feel grateful for their assistance, encouragement, or advice. This is especially true for the many silenced Karen names that could not be included here for their own safety. It is a severe irony that with this study’s intention of making them perceptible, their names must be erased. Even though my erasure results from my fear of rendering their lives more vulnerable than they have already been, it is a shame and politically hard to bear. This shameful itself signifies the very reality of the state’s sovereign power and the possibilities of its inflicting atrocities upon human lives. Definitely, without my Karen informants the dissertation does not exist. I hope that it will not be long before I can publicly acknowledge all of their names and give all the credit they deserve for the finished product of this dissertation.

The best I can do at this point is to dedicate this piece of writing to them, as well as to my mother and my wife. While my mother gave and nourished my life, my wife sustains it. My mother’s endurance is exemplary while the wife’s tranquility is hard to match. The first person knows only language of love and patience while the second walks toward a life of ineffability. “Gods” know how much weight married life has put on both of them. As the only person in my family who has had an opportunity to pursue a doctoral degree, this dissertation is a manifestation of the fact that my mother and elder
siblings had sacrificed for too many years so that I can write this page today, while a couple of them still suffer unutterable conditions. My heartfelt expression of gratitude to them is forever inadequate.

I am also consistently aware that I would not have come this far had I not been fortunate to meet two mentors in my early college years, Chaiwat and Suwanna Satha-Anand. They cannot imagine the extent of their inspiration on the young man, which began the first days we met. I have since determined to invent myself to hopefully possess at least some fraction of their exemplary qualities: as academics, as teachers, and as persons. Their love for wisdom and knowledge, as well as their concerns for others' sufferings, have never been confined in the classroom.

Once I arrived in Hawai‘i, three teachers at the Philosophy Department were always supportive and were my guiding lights: Roger Ames, Mary and Jim Tiles. At the Political Science Department, one could not ask for a better mentor. Mike Shapiro has been and will always be an ocean of knowledge for me, wherein I often swam (and occasionally almost drowned) without seeing any shore. For now, I survive. Both my student life and this dissertation would not see the end of the tunnel had it not been for his unfailing support and openness, as a political theorist as well as a human being. Manfred Henningsen has done the most since I began my graduate study to keep me honest in my intellectual pursuit. With him, moreover, I always make sure that the issue of political agency is not erased from my research. Les Sponsel has trained me to be an effective anthropologist, one who will never forget to inquire about the ethical bearing of my research upon the situations of the peoples in “the field.” Sankaran Krishna opened a new world of postcolonial studies to me. It has been a world that has since fascinated me.
and enabled me to better understand the complexities of peoples’ sufferings in the “third world” from unfamiliar dimensions. I am aware, however, that I have not yet lived up to his challenges and the challenges of this body of knowledge. Nevi Soguk unconsciously yet charmingly called my attention to the “refugee” movements and international migration. I know that I am a beginner in this area, but I have been forever hooked to at least parts of this intellectual terrain. With all these fascinating combinations of a dissertation committee, one’s intellectual pursuit cannot help but be forcefully strengthened.

I also owe debts of gratitude to the following teachers both inside and outside Thailand. In Thailand, the rigor of academic pursuit and integrity of the following five teachers as well as the personal experiences I had with them have directly or indirectly shaped my career path and my decision to pursue this research: Ajarns Saneh Chamarik, Sombat Chantornwong, Chanvit Kasetsiri, Yos Santasombat and Chairat Charoensin-o- larin. Moreover, since my first year at Thammasat University, Ajarn Noranit Setthabutra has always been supportive toward my life and academic paths. Outside Thailand, Glenn Paige, Geoff White, Ming-Bao Yue, Phyllis Turnbull, Barbara Andaya, Ken Breazeale, Peter Hershock, Thongchai Winichakul, Kathy Ferguson, Jon Golberg-Hiller, Sandy Schram, George Kent, Martin Smith, Alexander Horstmann, and John Synott have, in one way or another, rendered their intellectual advice, care, or encouragement.

It is a great pleasure that I can be certain of the friendship I have cherished with my “comrades-in-arms,” who have not only been trusted friends, but at times have also been my teachers. Brian Richardson is the best friend a person could hope to have. He has always been there for me since my first years in Hawai‘i, in other words, his traces
are all over my graduate career. Jorge Fernandes’ determination to be a rigorous thinker is exemplary and contagious; he exercises his intellectual prowess upon my intellectual endeavor with ease, and often with a gesture of reminding rather than instructing. Without these two friends’ careful and critical attention to this dissertation, reading it could be a far more torturing experience than hopefully it is now. The remaining mistakes and problems, however, are mine. Noenoe Silva is a graceful big sister, whose warmth and care are unforgettable and whose enthusiasm for blending academic pursuit and services to indigenous peoples is what I fervently strive to emulate. My brief encounter in Minnesota with Adam Sitze turned out to be a lasting friendship. His hospitality to strangers, his ardent concerns for social problems and world peace, as well as the breadth and depth of his philosophical knowledge, have greatly inspired me and my study.

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Abstract

This study follows the becomingness of the Karens: as an indigenous people, as an ethnic nationality, as an ethnic minority, and as a forcibly displaced people. The questions that guide this dissertation are: What is it like to be forcibly displaced beings, taking flight in, following Walter Benjamin, the real state of exception? How can the Karens transgress those grave conditions, and at what costs? Why has protecting them from the wrongs done to them been, by and large, impossible? Why have their struggles and sufferings not been adequately perceived?

As political theory, the dissertation interweaves notions of violence, perceptibility, and protection. The study is also informed by the symbolic and experiential conditions of forcibly displaced Karens along the Thai-Burmese border zones. This study evinces four major issues: firstly, how Karens’ forms-of-life have been stripped off and their nakedness revealed by the Burmese and Thai nation-states; secondly, how their struggles and sufferings have been imperceptible because the Karens have been rendered as unqualified political subjects and because we – the peoples who have adequate juridical protections – view the world only from state-centric paradigms, and only hear a single voice, i.e., the univocity of statist discourses; thirdly, how the paradox of perceptibility, where the very power that has attempted to render the Karens’ sufferings imperceptible is, willingly or not, the same power that enables them to strengthen their form-of-life as a Karen nation; and, finally, how the forcibly displaced Karens’ quotidian lives have not confirmed the glories of the Appadurian ethnoscape. They are not parts of the subjectivities who can freely move in this world. On the
contrary, they have often been recognized as the parts that have no parts in the human community. They are "the exception" in motion whose lives have been under fire, dreaming passionately of becoming parts of the "general." They have dreamt to live such lives for more than half a century, ever since they officially started their "revolution" in 1948. One of the most important arguments, therefore, is that, as forcibly displaced peoples, the Karens are political subjects and not sheer facts of living.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception' in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to this fact. Then we will have the production of a real state of exception before us as a task.

Walter Benjamin, Theses on the Philosophy of History.\(^1\)

The events of September 11, 2001 shocked peoples around the world, especially people in the U.S. The events have generally been perceived as states of exception, which deviates from the normal course of events in the world community. We forget, however, that we have rarely attempted to take account of what Benjamin calls the real states of exception that have been pervasive for large numbers of peoples around the world. These states of exception have become the norm for many indigenous and stateless peoples. The quotidian fact of their daily lives is effectively a state of constant emergency.\(^2\)

While at present, there is relatively little warfare between sovereign states, countless lives have died and continued to die, and million others have been displaced in the struggles between states and numerous indigenous or stateless peoples. Many of these struggles are transversal sites of contestation: they traverse varieties of "boundaries," formulating new identities in the processes. A consequence of the

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1 Benjamin, 1968: 259. This translation follows Daniel Heller-Roazen's in Agamben, 1999a: 160.
2 The notion of the quotidian fact of daily life employed here is inspired by David Campbell's treatment of the "everyday life." Most specifically, everyday life is a "transversal site of contestations rather than a fixed level of analysis" (1996: 23). Referring to Richard K. Ashley's (1989: 270, 296-97) development of Michel Foucault's notion of transversal struggles (1983: 211-212), Campbell adds that it is transversal because it "cannot be reconciled to a Cartesian interpretation of space, with its insistence on absolute boundaries between inside and outside....[and] because the conflicts manifested there not only transverse all boundaries; they are about those boundaries, their erasure or inscription, and the identity formations to which they give rise" (1996: Ibid.). In this regard, Campbell's treatment of transversality accords well with Giorgio Agamben's notion of sovereign power, which is also the very impossibility of distinguishing between such philosophically distinct categories as, for example, outside and inside, law and violence (see more detailed treatment of Agamben in the next chapter).
struggles of indigenous and stateless peoples is the problematization of “boundaries” and of the very discourses that erase or inscribe their struggles. Many of these borderline peoples’ struggles, however, have not been perceptible and hence have not been accounted-for by the world at large: both their pasts and their presents have by and large not been recognized.

In geopolitical mappings of modern war, the notion of war is reserved only for combat between nation-states. This nonrecognition, however, does not come as a surprise. Bernard Nietschmann emphatically stated more than a decade ago that “media and academia are anchored in the state.” Their tendency is to consider “struggles against the state to be illegitimate or invisible…. [These struggles] are hidden from view because the fighting is against peoples and countries that are often not even on the map” (1987: 1). Not only does the geopolitical map of states represent the structure of approved sovereignties, it is also one of the primary forces determining recognized political subjectivity (Shapiro, 1994: 482). In effect, only those who live on the nation-state’ juridical map are qualified political subjects. The univocity of the statist discourses render unqualified political subjects both inaudible and invisible (Guha, 1996: 11). Moreover, certain events and actions are assigned to history by specific values and criteria, which Guha calls the “ideology of statism”: “the life of the state is all there is to history.” This ideology “authorizes the dominant values of the state to determine the criteria of the historic” (Guha, 1996: 1). This ideology becomes the common sense of our understanding of history, which has invariably disregarded many unqualified political subjects as outside “history.”
Consequently, those who have been living and struggling along the nation-states’ border zones have more often than not fallen between the cracks of human awareness. Many of the struggles by these unqualified political subjects, no matter how prolonged and bloody, never receive media attention because they are not on the juridical maps of the nation-state. These peoples’ states of exception, which do not comport with the homogenous continuum of the nation-state’s history, are simply invisible and inaudible. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us, as this study argues, to be open to other ways of perceiving the world, especially ones that are non-statist and, at times, discontinuous, in order to perceive catastrophes – the real states of exception – in human histories.

1. Atrocities inside Burma & the Karens

The new subject of history is nothing other than all the persons and groups who died mute, unnoticed, and unheard but whose voices continue to haunt history with their repressed presence.

Hayden White, “Foreword: Ranciere’s Revisionism.”

Situations inside Burma’s Territory: A Brief Overview

Experiences inside Burma/Myanmar have been harrowing. Like lives under fire elsewhere, peoples’ agonies under the Burmese dictatorship have not been adequately perceived and accounted-for by the world community. The Burmese nation-state has

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4 In this dissertation, I use “Burma” throughout except when intending to convey the present official recognition of the country. The change from Burma to Myanmar has not been accepted by the opposition and the use of the latter term has been politically charged (for different reasons for different usage, cf. e.g., Taylor, 2001: I n1; Steinberg, 2001: 41 n1; Collignon, 2001: 70 n1; Silverstein, 2001: 119 n1).

Regarding the term “Burma” employed in this study, there are three related terms that need clarification. First, “Burma” is a noun, referring to the country’s name. “Burman” is an adjective denoting an ethnic nationality living among varieties of other ethnic nationalities. And “Burmese” is another
become a militarized society controlled by successive military juntas since 1962, when General Ne Win first came to power through a coup d'état. Although the leaders of the junta have changed faces, the brutality of the military has not waned. The armed forces continue to commit a wide range of atrocities - especially in the context of its so-called "counter-insurgency" in contested areas - including forcible relocations, forced labor, torture, rape, and "extrajudicial" killings.\(^5\)

According to the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), there are 135 "national races" in the country. The junta claims that they are striving to "preserve and understand the culture and good traditions of the national races."\(^6\) However, the indigenous peoples and ethnic nationalities living in Burma's territory, which altogether comprise one third of Burma's population of about 48 million people, suffer disproportionately from the atrocities compared to the dominant ethnic Burmans.\(^7\) This is particularly true of members of ethnic nationalities who live in areas where their armed organizations are fighting against the Tatmadaw (the Burmese army). Because there are still at least three armed organizations - the KNU, KNPP, and SSA-South - fighting

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\(^5\) Following Giorgio Agamben, the next chapter will clarify why the notion of extrajudicial killing is not "extra" but part of the sovereign power.


Recent studies on indigenous peoples or ethnic nationalities are unsurprisingly rare due to the dangerous situations within the country and the fact that the junta rarely allows research to be conducted on such sensitive issues as ethnic nationalities. Martin Smith's works have been one among the very few (see, e.g., Smith, 1995, 1999).


Within the Burmese nation-state, the term "indigenous peoples" have to be separately deployed and cannot be used interchangeably with "ethnic nationalities" not only because not every indigenous peoples in this land have subjectified themselves as nations, but also because it is the latter term, not the former, that has normally been used by the governing bodies of ethnic nationalities to refer to themselves.
against the Tatmadaw in the eastern part of the country, the lives of the civilians living in
the Tenasserim Division and in the Shan, Mon, Karenni and Karen designated-states have
been exceedingly precarious. Through the infamous Four Cuts strategy, the Tatmadaw
maintain an increasingly large presence in these areas, particularly in the so-called
“black” or “brown” zones where ethnic armed soldiers are active. As the junta’s troops
move through the countryside and mountainous areas, they pass through farming villages
searching for troops of the ethnic oppositions and seeking intelligence about their
movements from the villagers. While on patrol, the Tatmadaw’s troops have been
reported to steal villagers’ livestock, rice, money, and personal possessions, to seize the
villagers for forced labor duty, to torture, and even to kill them for supposed links with
the ethnic armed soldiers. Looking at the Burmese nation-state as a whole, one,
therefore, becomes aware that countless lives have been lost within its territory. Even
General Saw Maung, former leader of the junta and the first chairman of the State Law
and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), estimated, in 1990, that the real numbers of
deaths since independence in 1948 “would reach as high as millions, I think. Indeed, it

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Looking at the Burmese juridical map, the followings are the areas of the three organizations’
operations, although some of their areas of control have been dwindling. The Karen National Union
(KNU) operates in the Karen State, the Tenasserim Division, and part of the Mon State, the Karenni
National Progressive Party (KNPP) in the Karenni State, and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-South) in
the southern Shan State. Along the Thai-Burmese border zones, the three are the most dominant governing
bodies of their peoples who do not comply to the junta’s rule.

The Burmese government announced that since 1989, it has agreed cease-fires with 17 armed
opposition organizations, most of whom were ethnically-based. These agreements, however, have not yet
led to any permanent political arrangements. Moreover, most cease-fire groups still maintain their armies
and weapons as well as their territories.

9 Known in Burmese as the Pya Ley Pya, the Four Cuts strategy was a so-called “counter-
insurgency program” that the Burmese Army (the Tatmadaw) designed in the mid-1960s to cut the four
main links – food, funds, intelligence and recruits – between ethnic nationalities’ soldiers, their families
and local villagers. The “Four Cuts” strategy will be articulated more in chapter 5.

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really is no good."\textsuperscript{10} The atrocities have been occurring for decades, and in spite of some recent positive developments in the country, the lives of indigenous peoples and ethnic nationalities continue to be devastated.\textsuperscript{11}

Conservative figures show that between 600,000 and 1,000,000 people had been forcibly displaced within Burma by the end of 2001. And among the fourteen Divisions/States of Burma’s local administration,\textsuperscript{12} the most recent and highest estimate of displacement was in the junta-designated Karen State: over 200,000 for the same year (USCR, 2002: 6, 115-17). Yet, before 2001, other ethnic nationalities along the Thai-Burmese border zones also suffered similar agonies. From March 1996 to 1998, the...

\textsuperscript{10} Working People’s Daily, Jan 10 1990 – quoted in Smith, 2001: 17; see also Smith, 1999: 100-1.

\textsuperscript{11} There have been several improvements in Burma since the end of 2000, which by and large have had very little effects on safety of indigenous peoples and ethnic nationalities living in rural and mountainous areas.

In January 2001 Ambassador Razali Ismail, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy to Burma, announced that the junta and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD, the party which won the 1990 general elections) have been meeting confidentially since October 2000. Moreover, apart from the Ambassador Razali Ismael, the Burmese government has permitted international delegations to visit: Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar and the International Labour Organization (ILO) High Level Team. Furthermore, the ILO has been able to set up an office in Rangoon. During that period, over 300 political prisoners have been released including Aung San Suu Kyi who was released from house arrest in May 2002 (see e.g., Amnesty International, 2002a; 2001a).

\textsuperscript{12} They are: Arakan State, Irrawaddy Division, Chin State, Kachin State, Karen State, Karenni State, Magwe Division, Mandalay Division, Mon State, Pegu Division, Rangoon Division, Sagaing Division, Sagaing Division, Shan State, and Tenasserim Division. The structure of local administration starts from village, to township, to district, to state/division, to the country.

Some of these divisions’ names, however, were changed in 1989: Arakan to Rakhine, Irrawaddy to Ayeyarwady, Karen to Kayin, Karenni to Kayah, Magwe to Magway, Pegu to Bago, Rangoon to Yangon, and Tenasserim to Tanintharyi.

Similar to my usage of Burma instead of Myanmar, this study follows names that had been used before the changes by the junta in 1989. Having no comments and understanding why the junta decided to change these names and others, I note here Stefan Collignon’s very interesting comment, albeit somewhat too generalized. He remarks that “the Burmese have a rather loose relation to names and change them easily, although such changes are not without cosmic significance. ...It is meant to cancel the past and start a fresh beginning.” Hence, the changes from Burma to Myanmar, from the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), were according to him, a result of the junta’s desire to “purify” their Karma, according to the latter’s understanding of Buddhism (2001: 70 n1 – my emphasis).
Tatmadaw forcibly relocated over 1,400 villages through 7,000 square miles in the central and southern Shan state. As a result, over 300,000 Shan civilians were ordered at gunpoint to move into strategic relocation sites, in order to cut off any alleged support for the Shan armed organization. \(^{13}\) Moreover, there were about 70,000 - 80,000 Karennis forcibly displaced in 1997 for the same reason and between 20,000 and 30,000 were pushed off their ancestral lands between 2000 and 2001. \(^{14}\) Although significant numbers of the dominant ethnic Burmans have also been forcibly relocated, it has been the people of ethnic nationalities and indigenous peoples, many of whom are rural or mountainous peoples, who constitute most of the forcibly displaced (USCR, 2002: 116; Amnesty International, 2001: 1).

Nonetheless, one must not be blinded by figures to the extent that the quotidian lives of these forcibly displaced peoples are not recognized, let alone their histories and voices. In this study, I will attempt to narrate the quotidian, a history, and voices of the forcibly displaced Karens. Theirs are voices that have endeavored to enunciate their becoming, to be part of the following “communities”: first, of the Burman kingdom of Ava; second, of the British Burma; third, of the Burmese nation-state; and lastly, of the human family.

In my attempt to narrate the Karens’ insistence into these communities, I invoke firstly, Jacques Ranciere’s conception of “the political,” which emphasizes relations of

\(^{13}\) The forced relocation intensified between 1997 and 1998, with people in new areas forced to move, and existing sites forced to relocate yet again. Vast areas of 11 rural townships have become depopulated “free-fire” zones (AHRC, 1999: 26; see a comprehensive report in The Dispossessed [SHRF, 1998]).

\(^{14}\) AHRC, 1999: 27, 80; Amnesty International, 2001: 5.
Along the Thai-Burmese border zones, there is another major ethnic nationality, the Mons; for their plight, see e.g., Lang, 2002.
“part-taking;” and, secondly, his notion of “political struggle,” which is about a special kind of counting. Ranciere warns us to be cognizant and cautious toward any counting that merely counts the numbers of bodies. Accordingly, the orders produced by various sovereign powers become contingent when the magnitude escapes ordinary measurement. Understanding politics in a Rancierian sense, one can envision an attempt to create an ethos of equality among political subjects, as politics “arises from a count of community ‘parts,’ which is always a false count, a double count, or a miscount” (1999: 6). Ranciere’s radical and egalitarian approach to “the political” provides a significant political frame in which to gain access to the forcibly displaced peoples’ almost complete lack of recognition and to recognize the wrongs inflicted upon them. In other words, some political subjects are unrecognized because they are perceived as the parts that have no parts in a certain community.

In this light, when one considers those who are labeled by the state as “internally displaced peoples,” “refugees,” or “stateless peoples,” one finds that these parts of humanity have more often than not been left out of the community. These peoples’ plight has been inadequately (ac)counted for. Their deaths have not been counted (adequately or otherwise). What is more, there is no established international mechanism to protect the “internally displaced peoples” for fear of infringing sovereignty of nation-states. As

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15 There is, however, the London Declaration of International Law Principles on Internally Displaced Persons approved by the International Law Association at its sixty-ninth conference in London (from July 25 to 28, 2000), prepared by the International Committee on Internally Displaced Persons. In contrast to the traditional focus on the care and maintenance of refugees as a responsibility of first-asylum, resettlement, and donor countries as well as of the United Nations and other international organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, the London Declaration addressed forced movement from the perspective of the responsibility of countries of origin (see, e.g., Lee, 2001). Whether this declaration or this shift in focus will be endorsed and/or applied by the United Nations remains to be seen. And once the endorsement and/or application happen, whether it will be materialized or not also remain to be seen.
this dissertation intends to disrupt the univocity of statist discourses, the term “forcibly
displaced peoples” will be deployed instead of such three state-constructed terms.

Analogously, no matter how loud they have screamed, a tremendous amount of
the forcibly displaced peoples inside the Burmese nation-state have been left silently
tortured, dead, and dissolving back to the soil they had hoped to be their homeland(s).
Many indigenous peoples or ethnic nationalities, therefore, have taken flight across the
Thai-Burmese state-boundary in search of sunlight, many of whom, however, have been
living in darkness on the Thai side. Among them are the Karens, an ethnic
nationality that has inhabited in the Thai-Burmese border zones long before the
creation of these two nation-states. In other words, they are one of those politically
unqualified and transversal subjects situating along nation-state’s boundaries.

The Karens’ Voices & Struggles

Before we have learned to deal with things in a given position, they have
already changed several times. Thus, we always perceived events too late,
and politics always needs to foresee, so to speak, the present.
Anne Robert Turgot, Oeuvres.

My study is a writing journey into the spaces of the forcibly displaced Karens
from within the Burmese nation-state. The term “Karen” was originally used by

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One still can inquire, however, whether it is too optimistic to ask for the countries of origin to bare
the responsibility. The case of Burma and Indonesia should suffice to argue that international juridical-
fabrics and procedures bare no fruit on the expenses of the forcibly displaced peoples.

16 The phrase “in searching of sunlight” is from Pim Koetsawang’s In Search of Sunlight: Burmese

(N12a,1).
outsiders, and its derivation is uncertain. The Karens were officially renamed by the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1989 as “Kayins,” a name that, according to Martin Smith, the Karen nationalist leaders have rejected “as strongly as they do the historic Burman term for their country, ‘Myanmar’” (1999: 37). Under the name Karen, there are three major groups: the Pwo, the Bwe, and the Sgaw (e.g., Marshall, 1922: 1).

In this study, I will employ the term “Karens.” However, my use of the term is not meant to signify the Karens as a “frozen” people. For inasmuch as identities are contingent on the performative, I deploy the term as a signifier of those who enunciate, perform, and reenact “Karen-ness.” In this, I wish to retain Gayatri Spivak’s notion that identities are strategically essentialized in encounters or political struggles (e.g., Spivak/Harasym, 1990: 11). Following Ranciere, such strategical essentializing of the Karens is an enactment of subjectification – the enunciative and performative acts attempting to render themselves perceptible and intelligible – with an intention to render themselves recognizable as qualified political subjects.

Accordingly, to understand the sufferings and struggles of the forcibly displaced Karens in the war zones of Burma, or inside and outside “temporary shelter areas” on the Thai side, it is critical that one understands how crucial it is for the Karens to re-enact

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18 There is a distinction between the Karens from Burma and those who have been living in Thailand without being forcibly displaced (at least as much as I am aware of). The latter are not the focus of this study.


In Father Sangermano’s document, one of the earliest descriptions (Silverstein, 1980: 15), and was written in the last quarter of the eighteen century, the Karens are called as “Carian” (Sangermano, 1966: 44). In Michael Symes’ book written afterwards, the Karens are written as “Carayners” or “Carianers” (1800: V.2: 108). Because the Karens are composed of more than 20 subgroups, the term “Pga K’Nyaw” which is a how the Sgaw Karen call themselves cannot be claimed to refer to the Karen peoples as a whole as Marshall suggests (1945: 2).
themselves as Karens. For many illiterate, forcibly displaced Karens, Karen dialect(s) are their only language, their only enunciative vehicle. After days, months, or years of running for their lives, for the civilians who have taken flight in the war zones, it is critical to be able to trust that they belong to a “community” somewhere, a community that they believe can help them. For the members of the Karen National Union (KNU), after more than half a century of fighting in the name of the Karen nationhood, it is crucial to be able to trust that the “community” is not nameless.

There are three main reasons for focusing on the Karens rather than other ethnic nationalities situated along the Thai-Burmese border zones: their size, their persistence, and the fact that most of the people in the “temporary shelter areas” on the Thai side are Karens.20 Within the territory of Burma/Myanmar, the Karens are the second largest ethnic nationality after the Burmans.21 The Karen National Union (KNU) is one of the last remaining armed resistance organizations and the longest-standing one in Burma. They have been fighting against the Burmese government since the official

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20 The other three ethnic nationalities are the Shans, the Karennis, and the Mons.

One could ask why size should matter and whether or not this would subscribe to the majority/minority logic of the nation-state. Following Ranciere, understanding the fate of an indigenous peoples/nations through size is the way to discuss “the political.” As Ranciere emphasizes, political struggle is about special kind of “counting” the parts of the community: not only the empirical count, but also, and more importantly, the counting of the “in addition,” a part of the no-part.

21 See e.g., Smith, 1994: 34; 1999: 30.

There is no reliable figure of the size of the Karen peoples; it depends on who conducted a survey and with what criteria and methods. For example, in the 1931 census conducted by the British, the total Karens was calculated, including the various related sub-groups such as Pao and Kayah, at 1,367,673. But during the Second World War, the Japanese conducted their own survey, they came up with a figure of 4.5 million. The difference, as Martin Smith states (1999: 30), in part, “can be attributed to British survey methods, which would have recorded many Buddhist Karens as Burmans, but it is also due to the sheer inaccessibility of many Karen-inhabited areas in the eastern mountains and the number of Burmese-speaking Karens in the Delta.” At the time of the 1988 democracy uprising, the Burmese government, under the one-party rule of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), recorded the Karen population to be less than two million, while leaders of the Karen National Union (KNU) estimated the “true” numbers of the Karens, in line with the growth in Burma population, at some seven million, including Pa-os (Taungthus), Kayans (Padaungs) and Karennis (Ibid.).
announcement of their revolution, as they called it, on January 31, 1949. Since that time, they have attempted to gain, originally, a separate country of the Karens and, later, an autonomous region for their Karen State under the Federal Union of Burma.

To offer a glimpse into the plight of the forcibly displaced Karens in the Thai-Burmese border zones, I invoke here the following story written by a twenty-one-year-old girl. She was one of my students in my Introduction to Politics class taught while I was conducting fieldwork in a “temporary shelter area” on the Thai side. Except for excluding the names of some places, following ethnographic etiquette, I maintain the text as original:

The hardest time in my life was when I was 18 years old. I was studied at...school [on the Thai side] with my two younger sisters. It was the year that I had to face many difficulties. In the end of our school year, because of the DKBA [Democratic Karen Buddhist Army], all of the students and teachers were very frightened. The situations was getting worser and worser until we had to go to sleep between the mountains. One of my younger sister was weak and she was very tired of climbing the mountain every evening. We studied in the day time and after our dinner, we went to the mountains to sleep there.

One day the situation at the school was very bad, because the...village is situated in the border of Thailand and Burma. Because of this reason, we had to close our school as fast as we could. Our headmistress told us that we had to go back to our families. So all of the teachers and students gathered and had a short meeting and said good-bye to each other. Because it was late in the afternoon, we couldn’t come back to the...camp [a temporary shelter area]. So we stayed at the village for one more night.

That night because of my youngest sister was very tired, we went to the village to sleep with our Thai teacher. Unfortunately, at 7 p.m., we had to run away from the village again because of the Burmese and the DKBA threatened. My sister was sick now and she couldn’t walk no longer. I carried her on my back and my friend also helped me. We had to walk one hour to reach the place where many villagers were hidden.

We slept there one night, early in the morning we came back to the village. And my Thai teacher told me that, we should go to the hospital. Then we set for the hospital immediately. She was unconscious on the way to the hospital and I was very worried. Then we arrived at the...hospital [in Thailand] and she was better again. She asked for water because she was thirsty. After 15 minutes later, she was dead. I couldn’t believe my eyes because it was like a trick for me. I cried bitterly for my poor sister. She didn’t have malaria nor anything else.
I didn't know what to do with her body and I felt very upset as I was torn apart from my body. Then we went back to the village to bury her. We waited for our relatives and my older sister. At that time, my mother was in Bangkok and my grandparents were also away from us. I felt very painful for myself and our poor lives. I couldn't do anything except crying.

It is the hardest time for me in my life. It happened on Feb. 1997.\footnote{She told me later on that her father died when she was seven years old. This girl's story not only represents to some extent the fates of other indigenous peoples or ethnic nationalities inside Burma/Myanmar's territory, but also signifies a basic tragedy of the forcibly displaced peoples in many parts of the world. According to the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR), as of December 31, 2001, refugees and asylum seekers worldwide are about 14,900,000, and at least 22 million people are so-called "internally displaced" (not to mention many others who do not fall under these two categories, e.g. in North Ireland and a few countries in South America, for instances). Of the latter figure, Burma has produced the seventh highest number (600,000-1,000,000) after Sudan (4,000,000), Colombia (2,450,0000), Angola (2,000,000-3,000,000), Congo-Kinshasa (2,000,000), Indonesia (1,400,000), and Afghanistan (1,000,000). The U.S. Committee for Refugees states further that, except for Colombia and Indonesia, the reliable estimate figures of the "internally displaced peoples" of the other five countries was not available (USCR, 2001: 2-3, 6).

The uncertainty of the figure of the "internally displaced peoples" worldwide is confirmed by the difference between the 2001's figure and the 2000's figure: the former is over 22 million people while the latter is over 20 million people. Of the latter figure, Burma has produced the fifth highest number (600,000-1,000,000) after Sudan (4,000,000), Angola (1,100,000-3,800,000), Colombia (2,100,0000), Congo-Kinshasa (1,800,000). Again, except for Colombia, the reliable estimate figures of the "internally displaced peoples" of the other four countries was not available.}

Stories such as this one have been imperceptible to those who live under adequate juridical protections. Others, however, have been perceived, but ignored. Inside Burma, the forcibly displaced Karens are living in danger zones, where the territorial sovereignty of the despotic state renders them imperceptible to the outside world. On the Thai side, they have often been regarded by the Thai society as aberrants whose lives are generally not qualified to be (ac)counted, whether they are living "legally" in a string of the "temporary shelter areas" or living "illegally" outside the shelters. Whether in Thailand or in Burma, the forcibly displaced Karens' voices are usually ignored.

This study explores the various implications of disregarding their voices, several of which I discuss here in this introduction to situate the plight of the forcibly displaced Karens and their imperceptibility. Recalling Aristotle's contentious distinction that
signifies the sign of the political nature of humans in Book I of the Politics, one disqualifies these forcibly displaced peoples as political subjects by dismissing their voices as mere noises (phone) as a sheer fact of being rather than as intelligible speech (logos), demonstrating recognition as political subjects. The relevance of this notion becomes clearer when we follow Giorgio Agamben’s reading of Aristotle’s De Interpretatione (16a3-9) that what is in the human voice (ta en te phone) that articulates the passage from the voice of the state of living to the logos is that “the voice articulates grammata, letters…the voice that can be written” (Agamben, 1993a: 8). Because many of these suffering voices – living in rural, jungle, or mountainous areas – are illiterate, their voices are therefore not considered to be part of the logos. The illiterate Karens are thus not political animals, but animals without qualified voices.

Written inscription, we know, has the power to tame the voice, to preserve the memories of a community, and to advance the community’s culturo-political processes. However, when the stories of suffering are written in the Karen language they reach a small reading public, many of whose members are themselves living in danger zones and have little access to the stories of other forcibly displaced Karens. Moreover, when those few who can write in languages that have larger audiences, e.g., English, they easily become unintelligible because the writers do not have adequate proficiency in English, like my student’s story and mine, and hence can be easily dismissed. The fact that her English proficiency was the best among all the forty-plus students in the class is ominous. It hints at dark clouds of silence covering those tormented bodies that have taken flight in the cursed border zones where the storms of atrocities rage. She cannot be regarded as a representative of either her peers or the majority of the forcibly displaced Karens fleeing
fighting both inside Burma and on the Thai soil. Hence, we have disregarded an inexhaustible number of stories because the writings are seemingly unintelligible. Unintelligibility notwithstanding, writing, as Ranciere states, is “a modality of the rapport between logos and aisthesis [recognizing], which, since Plato and Aristotle, has served to conceptualize the political animal” (Ranciere/Guenoun/Kavanagh, 2000: 11). We therefore have here one of the attempts of people to enunciate and construct themselves as qualified political subjects no matter how “distorted” such an enactment may be from the perspective of nation-state’s practices and its strategies of containment, which have persisted in disregarding them.

2. Aims of the Dissertation

Above all,...the analyst should inquire, or rather train his eye, to see whether he had really found a mysterious synthesis or is only dealing with an aggregate, a juxtaposition,...and to see how this all might be modified.

Goethe 24

For the important thing to the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection [Eingedenken]. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Benjamin, “On the Image of Proust.” 25

Beginning my fieldwork along the Thai-Burmese border zones in July 2000, I embarked on the journey, equipping myself with several theoretical strategies and conceptual tools. Among them, predominantly, were Giorgio Agamben’s conception of

In this light, in every three-to-four-hour class, and twice a week, I perhaps spent about half of the class time teaching “English” (i.e., my non-native English with a certain level of proficiency) simultaneously as teaching Introduction to Politics. It must also be noted that this class was one of a very few post-highschool education offered in the temporary shelter areas, which means that most people in there had no access to such “high” education.

Quoted in Benjamin, 1996a: 116.
the nexus between sovereign power and human life, anthropological methods of understanding state violence, refugees and displacement, and borderlands, and finally the discourse of cultural politics that articulates the heterogeneity and flux that characterize flows of people, capital, and culture proliferating along the border zones. I was hoping to be able to come to better terms with both the symbolic and material conditions of the disquieting elements that disrupt the jurisdictions, orders, and territorial integrity of the two nation-states. Having spent time in the Burmese-Karen war zones, camps for the so-called internally displaced peoples inside Burma, a “temporary shelter area” on the Thai side, and a borderland in the border zones, however, I came back with far more tormenting sentiments than I had developed when preparing for the journey. I found that I had underestimated the horror of the nation-state’s sovereign power.

Once I was back to “write up” my dissertation, I was forced by what I had experienced to alter the intertwinement of my conceptual foci. Originally, I attempted to discern theoretically the interlinkage of violence, space, and the political. Even though it was still crucial to explore the linkages among the three, they have become secondary. The conceptual priority has shifted to the interconnections of violence, perceptibility, and protection. To me, it was not only critical but also urgent to respond adequately to the following questions: What is it like to be a forcibly displaced being, fleeing the real state of exception? How can the Karens transgress that grave conditions and at what cost? What conditions hinder their abilities to do so? Why has protecting them from the wrong done to them, by and large, been impossible? Why have their struggles and sufferings not been adequately perceived? What are the crucial conditions that shape the invisibility

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of such atrocities? What prevents us from being aware of their plight? I will respond to these questions in the remaining pages of this study.

When the emphasis is on forcibly displaced peoples, it is clear that these questions cannot be answered by relying on the dominant state-centric theoretical frames, which, as this study argues, are themselves among the causes of the imperceptibility of these peoples' suffering. Moreover, in order to account for the plight of the forcibly displaced Karens, an apparatus of recognition must be constructed. It is an apparatus for enunciating their agonies. Hence, the study will have to articulate a conceptual reformulation together with, and be informed by, the narrations of the lifeworld of the forcibly displaced Karens along the border zones. What follows is, therefore, an attempt to interweave political theory, philosophy, anthropology, and history – an attempt that, in some ways, continues the journeys begun in other studies focusing on or relating to the crises of forcibly displaced peoples. It is thus crucial to blur different genres (cf. Geertz, 1983: 19-35) of various disciplines of the human sciences. This disciplinary transgression is critical because of the severity and urgency of the forcibly displaced Karens’ affliction and struggles, and of academics’ indifference toward the peoples’ plight, especially many of those who consider themselves as experts on Thai studies, Burmese studies, or the studies of indigenous peoples along the Thai-Burmese state-boundary. Such indifference, I contend, has resulted from disciplinary narrowness and/or loyalty.

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26 This expression belongs to Adam Sitze, for whom I feel grateful.

27 The list of the studies on the forcibly displaced peoples is humongous. The followings are some of the studies that inform or shape this study: e.g., Hyndman (2000), Lang (2002) Lee (2001), Malkki (1995), and Soguk (1999). Other works will be cited later in the following chapters.
With this orientation, the next chapter will seek to create a theoretical space for the forcibly displaced Karens by constructing the notion of “imperceptible-naked lives” as a part of my conceptual strategy, together with articulating the nexus of history and time in order to rethink history and to explore the forcibly displaced Karens’ ways of locating themselves in time. It is necessary to start with this elaborate theoretical construction before embarking on the journey in the remaining chapters. Such theoretical strategies enable one to fathom the forces that have rendered their lives gravely vulnerable and imperceptible as well as how they have qualified themselves as political subjects. In other words, the strategies offer ways to think, to tell their stories, and to understand how they enunciate and demonstrate their stories. Thence, the study will write a history of the Karens, which will be followed by an exploration of contemporary entanglements and dynamics by tracing the flight of the forcibly displaced Karens from the Burmese-Karen war zones to, and later on, through the Thai-Burmese state-boundary.

The ultimate aim of this research is an attempt to render the forcibly displaced Karens’ struggles and sufferings perceptible primarily by the practice of institutionalized academic research – by publicizing them and drawing attention to them. This, I hope, will result in more protection of their lives as politically qualified subjects. With such hope, this study will also show that, ironically, the very statist discourses and practices that have attempted to render these peoples imperceptible are themselves the ones that have, willingly or not, enabled them to be perceptible. Such is “the paradox of perceptibility.” My student’s story mentioned above exemplifies this paradox. For not only have the forcibly displaced Karens usually not been paid attention to by peoples

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28 The term human sciences employed here signifies the receding distance between the humanities and the social sciences.
with adequate juridical protections, they have also been put in a situation where they cannot “properly” and effectively enunciate their situations because they lack even basic education. Without a nation-state, they have insufficient access to education. The “proper” and intelligible language to voice the wrong done to them is, therefore, beyond their grasp – their status and situatedness renders them yet again imperceptible.

Final clarifications and emphasis are necessary. In the first place, except for attempting to render the forcibly displaced Karens perceptible, this study possesses no pretense to imagine, to envision, and to be prescient of what the Karens should do. Recognized or not, they are political subjects, and they chart their own paths and futures. The dissertation’s major concern is therefore not about finding appropriate solution for the Karens, let alone finding universal answers for other forcibly displaced peoples. In the second place, this study’s ethnography is written with the central focus on atrocities committed upon civilians who have been taking flight in the Thai-Burmese border zones. It therefore pays more attention to the civilians living therein than to the “main” actors of political conflicts in these zones. Lastly, but definitely not the least, since I cannot speak either Burmese, Sgaw Karen, eastern Pwo Karen, or western Pwo Karen dialects, I am well aware that much was lost in translation. I had to often rely upon translators who spoke English, and, sometimes, upon those who spoke Thai.
Chapter 2 – Imperceptible Naked-Lives & Their Temporalities: Constructing a Theoretical Space to Account for the Forcibly Displaced Peoples

1. Theories Just Travel? & Theoretical Reformulations

Assume...that, as a result of specific historical circumstances, a theory or idea pertaining to those circumstances arises. What happen to it when, in different circumstances and for new reason, it is used again and, in still more different circumstances, again? What can this tell us about theory itself – its limits, its possibilities, its inherent problems – and what can it suggest to us about the relationship between theory and criticism, on the one hand, and society and culture on the other? The pertinence of these questions will be apparent at a time when theoretical activity seems both intense and eclectic, when the relationship between social reality and a dominant yet hermetic critical discourse seems hard to determine, and when,...it is futile to prescribe theoretical programs for contemporary criticism. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic.*

Theories have their own ways of traveling across historical periods and cultura-political contexts. Theoretical applicability and/or theoretical re-formulations are processes of understanding “oneself” and “others.” Every time there is an encounter, there are negotiations; and theories come to aid those in the engagement. To be sure, the negotiations are not always smooth; and theoretical understanding of both symbolic and material conditions helps ameliorate the negotiations, strengthens each interlocutor in the engagement, and also quickens new theoretical formations. The works of scholars from different contexts thus do not necessarily render them inappropriate in thinking through the lifeworld in “faraway lands.” On the contrary, travelling-theories can be enormously effective.

This chapter testifies to this understanding and to how crucial traveling-theories are in guiding this study. I employ such traveling-theories to formulate theoretical and conceptual strategies out of the harrowing experiences of the forcibly displaced Karens.

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In turn, I deploy the resulting theoretical and conceptual strategies to analyze and narrate those experiences in the Thai-Burmese border zones. Theories therefore travel upon a variety of conceptual and spatial terrains. For, as Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests, humans are always contaminated and nourished by one another (1997: 439).

Following the writings of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Ranciere, this chapter constructs the concept of “imperceptible naked-lives” as an apparatus of recognition to account for the agonies of the forcibly displaced Karens. Whereas the idea of “naked life” is Agamenian, “imperceptible” is formulated from Ranciere’s articulation of “the political.” Agamben’s concept of “naked life” illuminates the interlocking relations of sovereign power and human life, and hence enables me to discern the state terror inflicted upon the existence and bodies of the displaced Karens. Ranciere’s conception of “the political” allows one to understand that the struggles of forcibly displaced peoples – the practices of enunciating and/or demonstrating themselves as qualified political subjects – are the constructions of political spaces, even if they are labeled as illegitimate, and often “illegal,” by the state.

Moreover, grasping the quotidian lives of the forcibly displaced Karens requires that one also pays attention, firstly, to their temporal practices as they enact themselves as

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2 Although this study emerged out of the situations of the forcibly displaced Karens, the theoretical and conceptual strategies developed here can, to varying degrees, also be applicable to others forcibly displaced peoples in other border zones. This is because the Karens’ plight is by no means disconnected from that of many forcibly displaced peoples in other parts of the world, the peoples who have either been trapped inside many nation-states’ boundaries or have traversed across them. Thus, by deepening our understanding of the Karens’ situations, I hope that other forcibly displaced peoples’ conditions can also be mitigated.

3 In this dissertation, instead of using the term “bare life,” I follow the translation of Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Agamben, 2000b) and use “naked life” throughout, except with citing passages from Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life. This is, as Binetti and Casarino emphasize, because the term naked life translates the Italian nuda vita, which not only appears in the subtitle of Agamben’s Homo Sacer: il potere sovrano e la nuda vita, but also throughout his work (see “Translators’ Notes” in Agamben, 2000b: 143, n. 1).
political subjects, and, secondly, to the historical narratives of the dominant 
historiographies that have, for the most part, disqualified the Karens from being political 
subjects. It is here that Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “now-time” and his conception 
of history is indispensable. Inspired by such Benjaminian articulation, I will narrate 
some of the non-linear struggles of the forcibly displaced Karens out of their quotidian. 
Moreover, connecting Benjamin’s theoretico-philosophical treatment, which critiques the 
conventional nexus of time and history, with Ranajit Guha’s critique of the univocity of 
statist discourses, enables this study to effectively discern the temporalities of Karens’ 
struggles amidst the Thai and Burmese nation-state’s sovereign powers. In addition, such 
a connection helps clarify how the statist historiography has rendered forcibly displaced 
peoples in the Thai-Burmese border zones as peoples outside “history.” Lastly, the 
Benjamin-Guha link also opens up possibilities for further rigorous studies of non-statist 
historiography and temporalities, aspects of which are attempted in this dissertation. All 
these theoretical strategies, therefore, aim to challenge the theoretico-philosophical 
assumptions that naturalize the existing univocity of statist discourses and practices, 
together with their accounts of sovereign power.

In deploying these theoretical strategies, this study is able to create both political and temporal spaces for the forcibly displaced Karens. To be sure, these writers’ works 
are not only situated in different linguistic and discursive traditions, but their thoughts 
originate out of specific contexts distinct from those along the Thai-Burmese border 
zones. Yet, their ideas offer powerful insights into the lifeworld of the forcibly displaced 
Karens.
2. Agamben's "Naked Life": Its Theoretical Location and Topology

Agamben reconfigures the interlacement between sovereign power and human life in *Homo Sacer*, which he situates at the "hidden point of intersection" of two problematic models of power: traditional juridico-institution (the definition of sovereignty, the theory of the State) and Foucauldian biopolitics (1998: 6). The traditional approach to the problem of power is either exclusively based on juridical models ("What legitimates power?") or on institutional models ("What is the State?"). Throughout his work, Michel Foucault decisively abandoned this approach in favor of "an unprejudiced analysis of the concrete ways" in which "power penetrates subjects' very bodies and forms of life" (Ibid.: 5). Foucault's two interrelated faces of power are the studies of: (1) the political techniques (such as the science of the police) where the State "assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very center" and (2) the technologies of the self by which the processes of "subjectivization bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power" (Ibid. – see also Foucault, 1988a; 1988b). In other words, the first is the totalizing procedures of the State and the second is the techniques of subjective individualization.

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In this section two, only dates and pages will appear for further references to Agamben's works.

5 Interestingly, at the end of the book's introduction, Agamben notes that the book was conceived "as a response to the bloody mystification of a new planetary order; therefore had to reckon with problems – first of all that of the sacredness of life – which the author had not, in the beginning, foreseen." But soon, "it became clear that one cannot, in such an area, accept as a guarantee any of the notions that the social sciences (from jurisprudence to anthropology) thought they had defined or presupposed as evident, and that many of these notions demanded – in the urgency of catastrophe – to be revised without reserve" (1998: 12 – my emphasis).
But, as Agamben asks, what is the point of convergence between the two faces of power? Foucault contends that the modern "western" state has integrated them to an unprecedented degree – and Foucault speaks of a real "political 'double bind,' constituted by individualization and the simultaneous totalization of structures of modern power." For Agamben, to understand this point of intersection is critical because he thinks it is not possible to hold the two kinds of power apart anymore. As a result, the State’s political techniques and the humans’ subjective technologies are indistinguishable. For human life (more so in the "western" world that in other parts of the world) has been confronted with phenomena such as the power of the society of the spectacle that is everywhere transforming the political realm (Agamben, 1998: 6; cf. 2000b: 73-89). In other words, as Gilles Deleuze also contended, human societies have increasingly become societies of control (1995a; 1995b). Agamben therefore asserts that the production of

\[ \text{a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.} \]

In this case, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception. Placing biological life at the center of its calculations, the modern State therefore does nothing other than bring to light the secret tie uniting power and bare life, thereby reaffirming the bond...between modern power and the most immemorial of the arcana imperii [state secrets] (Agamben, 1998: 6 – emphasis original).

Agamben emphasizes that the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power must not be separated: sovereign power and human life are indistinguishable.

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6 1998: 5 – the quotation is from Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, Vol.4, (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 229-232. As Agamben points out, the point at which these two faces of power converges remains unclear in Foucault’s work, so much so that there has been a claim that Foucault would have consistently refused to elaborate a unitary theory of power (1998: Ibid.).

7 Agamben admits that the convergence between two faces of power is logically implicit in Foucault’s work, but it remains like a convergence to which a variety of lines of Foucault’s inquiry point toward yet never reach (1998: 6).
Naked Lives, Sovereign Power, and Violence

The originary relation of law to life is abandonment. The matchless potentiality of the nomos, its originary "force of law," is that it holds life in its ban by abandoning it. Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer.

We start our journey through human lives by evoking two kinds of life that constituted the first paradigm of the political realm: the Greek separation between zoe and bios. The former indicates the simple fact of living that is common to all living beings, naked life. The latter expresses the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group - i.e. qualified life, which Agamben also calls form-of-life. Not only is there always zoe (naked life) in every bios (form-of-life), but also, more importantly, as far as bios is concerned, it is never possible to separate zoe from it. Hence, bios is:

a life - human life - in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simple facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all power....That is why human beings - as beings of power who can do or not do, succeed or fail, lose themselves or find themselves - are the only beings for whom happiness is always at stake in their living, the only beings whose life is irremediably and painfully assigned to happiness. But this immediately constitutes the form-of-life as political life (Agamben, 2000a: 4 - emphasis original).

For every form-of-life, a political life, we see a life that can be empowered no matter how much it has been oppressed - a life with potentialities. A form-of-life is a life with

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8 1998: 29
9 1998: 1 - see also 2000b: ix-x; 2000a. However, as he points out, the opposition between zoe and bios in the modern languages has gradually disappeared from the lexicon; and where it is retained, e.g., in biology and zoology, it no longer indicates any substantial difference (2000a: 3).
10 2000a: 3-4. Hence, as Agamben states, Plato’s three kinds of life in the Philebus and Aristotle’s three kinds of life in the Nichomachean Ethics are all bios (1998: 1), all qualified lives or forms-of-life. In Nichomachean Ethics, for example, they are: the contemplative life of the philosopher (bios theoretikos), the life of pleasure (bios apolaustikos), and the political life (bios politikos).
11 In The Coming Community, Agamben then states his ethical stance:

The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear
power, a life entitled to happiness, to political participation, and to recognition. The famous Marxian separation between man and citizen, Agamben maintains, is superseded by the scission between naked life and all the “multifarious forms of life abstractly recodified as social-juridical identities (the voter, the worker, the journalist, the student,...the HIV-positive, the transvestite, the porno star, the elderly, the parent, the woman) that all rest on naked life” (Ibid.: 6-7). However, political power always founds itself – in the last instance – on the separation of a sphere of naked life from the context of the forms of life. It is naked life that constitutes the originary cell of the sovereign power; it is the “hidden foundation of sovereignty” (Ibid.: 5). Agamben’s complicated topology of the sovereign power therefore explains “the secret tie uniting [sovereign] power and bare life” (1998: 6). In effect, he maintains, biopolitics is at least as old as what he calls the sovereign exception.

Agamben’s project is unlike Michel Foucault’s. For Foucault, the inclusion of human’s natural life in the mechanism and calculations of power – biopolitics – was a modern project; this inclusion signifies western society’s “threshold of modernity.” Foucault writes in The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 that

what might be called a society’s “threshold of modernity” has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (Foucault: 1978: 143; see also 140-145).

that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible – there would be only tasks to be done. This does not mean, however, that humans are not, and do not have to be, something, that they are simply consigned to nothingness and therefore can freely decide whether to be or not to be, to adopt or not to adopt this or that destiny (nihilism and decisionism coincide at this point). There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: It is the simple fact of one’s own existence as possibility or potentiality. But precisely because of this things become complicated; precisely because of this ethics becomes effective (1993c: 43 – emphasis original).
For Foucault, therefore, the locus of modern form of power no longer lies in politics, but in biopolitics. And life, more than a condition for the existence of politics, becomes one of the primary objects of political power. For Agamben, on the contrary, the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power; and this original activity is the “originary inclusion of the living in the sphere of law,” which in turn results from what he describes as the sovereign’s decision of the exception (Agamben, 1998: 25-26). This decision of exception follows Carl Schmitt’s definition of the paradox of sovereignty: “[The] [s]overeign is he who decides on the state of exception” (Schmitt, 1985: 5). Agamben adds another dictum to Schmitt’s: “I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law [che non c’è un fouri legge]” (Agamben, 1998: 15). Agamben maintains further that this is the reason why Schmitt defines sovereignty as a “limit concept” of legal theory, and why the latter shows its structure through the theory of the exception.12

Agamben emphasizes that the decision of the sovereign is not “the expression of the will of a subject hierarchically superior to all others” (Ibid.). The decision of the state of exception does not decide whether or not a person or an act is licit or illicit, but what the law needs – that is, inscribing life from “outside” in the sphere of law in order to animate the law. Law is, therefore,

made of nothing but what it manages to capture inside itself through the inclusive exclusion of the exceptio: it nourishes itself on this exception and is a dead letter without it. In this sense, the law truly “has no existence in itself, but rather has its being in the very life of men” (1998: 27).

12 1999a: 161.

The English version of Schmitt’s Political Theology uses the term “borderline concept.” Schmitt articulates that a borderline concept is not a vague concept as usually understood in popular literature, but one “pertaining to the outermost sphere.” His definition of sovereignty, he continues, must therefore be related with “a borderline case and not with routine” (Schmitt, 1985: Ibid.).
Without (human) life, law is dead, becoming nothing at all. Law needs (human) life to breathe life into itself.

The sovereign decision “traces and from time to time renews this threshold of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion, nomos and physis, in which life is originarily expected in law. Its decision is the position of an undecidable” (Ibid.: 27; see also 1999a: 161-62). This threshold of undecidability is therefore the place of sovereignty. A zone of indistinction emerges through the logic of this paradox of sovereignty, the political dilemma par excellence. In pointing out the paradox of sovereignty, Agamben therefore illuminates the structure of law, locating its force in the possibility of the suspension of the rule and order such that a state of exception emerges — and the state of exception is never “the chaos that precedes legal order” (1999a: 162). The exception is truly, according to its etymological root, “taken outside (ex-capere), and not simply excluded” (1998:18). Borrowing from Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of ban, Agamben maintains that the relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned, “is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.” (Ibid.: 28). And in this indistinguishable sphere, there is no possibility of appeal (Panagia, 1999: 7). Hence, when the sovereign decides that some lives must end, that will be the end of those lives. In “Abandoned Being,” Jean-Luc Nancy writes:

The origin of “abandonment” is a putting at bandon. Bandon (bandum, band, bannen) is an order, a prescription, a decree, a permission, and the power that holds these freely at its disposal. To abandon is to remit, entrust, or turn over to such a sovereign power, and to remit, entrust, or turn over to its ban, that is, to its proclaiming, to its convening, and to its sentencing. ... The destitution of abandoned being is measured by the limitless severity of the law to which it finds itself exposed. Abandonment does not constitute a subpoena to present
oneself before this or that court of the law. It is a compulsion to appear absolutely under the law, under the law as such and in its totality (1993: 43-44).

In short: Naked life is a kind of life that has been caught in the relation of exception where the juridical orders refer to life and included it in themselves by suspending it; and hence humans encounter their nakedness and extreme vulnerability. Lives on whom laws are not suspended, on the contrary, are qualified lives. These qualified lives, however, are invariably fundamentally also naked.

To understand Agamben’s idea of the potential nakedness of human lives, we must discern how he elaborates his conception of modern sovereignty, the idea that also draws from Foucault, Schmitt, Benjamin as well as traces back to ancient Roman law. Agamben is inspired not only by Schmitt’s notions of the sovereign’s decision on the exception and the state of emergency, but also by Benjamin’s articulation of the exception, the state of exception which has become the rule\(^\text{13}\) – or, as Michael Hardt puts it, “the modern functioning of rule becomes a permanent state of exception” (Hardt & Dumm, 2000: 14). After linking the concept of the banned figure (or the excluded person) back as far as an ancient Roman law,\(^\text{14}\) Agamben then returns to Foucault:

\[\text{13} 1998: 12, 54-55 – see also 2000a: 6. In the eight thesis of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin writes:}\]

\[\text{The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to this fact. Then we will have the production of the real state of exception before us as a task (quoted in Agamben, 1998: 55).}\]

Here I follow Daniel Heller-Roazen’s translation in Homo Sacer; see Harry Zohn’s translation in Benjamin, 1968: 259.

\[\text{14 By tracing back to an obscure figure of archaic Roman law, Agamben calls this abandoned naked life homo sacer (sacred humans) “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (1998: 8). It is the Pompeius Festus’s preservation of the memory of a figure of archaic Roman law where the character of sacredness is tied to a human life for the first time:}\]

The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that “if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide.” That is why it is customary for a bad or
The Foucauldian thesis will...have to be corrected or, at least, completed, in the sense that what characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion zoe in the polis – which is, in itself, absolutely ancient – nor simply the fact that life as such becomes a principal object of the projections and calculations of State power. Instead the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoe, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction (Agamben, 1998: 9 – my emphasis).

Agamben maintains further that unlike Schmitt’s conception of sovereignty (whereby it is a power external to law), and unlike Hans Kelsen’s conception of sovereignty whereby it is the supreme rule of the juridical order, his is neither an exclusively political concept nor an exclusively juridical category (Ibid.: 28). His conception of sovereignty, which I suggest can be considered as an in-between concept, is the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it (Ibid.). Sovereign power is then the very impossibility of distinguishing between such philosophically distinct categories as outside and inside, state of nature and law, law and violence, law and life, bios and zoe; and exception and rule flow through one another to impure man to be called sacred (Pompeius Festus, On the Significance of Words, quoted in Ibid.: 71).

Unlike our general understanding, sacredness here does not mean holiness. In the Agambenian context, what defines the status of homo sacer is twofold (Ibid.: 82). First, it is the double exclusion of unsacrificeability to God and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed. Hence, he is approved neither by human nor by divine law. Second, it is the violence that he is exposed to – the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone can commit. It is the violence which is classified “neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death or as sacrilege” (Ibid.). Connecting between his notions of homo sacer and sovereign ban, Agamben then states that: Once brought back to his proper place beyond both penal law and sacrifice, homo sacer “presents the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban and preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted” (Ibid.: 83). And the sovereign sphere is the sphere in which “it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life...is the life that has been captured in this sphere” (Ibid.). In other words, as Nasser Hussain & Melissa Ptacek state, Agamben’s attempt here is to sever the concept of sacred from the notions of holiness, sacrifice, and religious experience, “revealing it as an originary political exercise – a setting apart.” If life is made sacred by setting it apart, they continue, “we can already see how such an activity would be linked to the idea of the sovereign exception, which is, after all, also a setting apart (“exception" comes from ex-capere – taken outside)” (Hussain & Ptacek, 2000: 4 of 12 – see more details of their treatment on pages 4-5 of 12).
the point of literal indistinction.” Nonetheless, the sovereign is “precisely the one who maintains the possibility of deciding on the two to the very degree that he renders them indistinguishable from each other” (Ibid.: 64 – my emphasis). A fascinating example is when Agamben refers to Franz Kafka’s Before the Law₁⁶ and Gerschom Scholem’s formula for the status of law in Kafka’s novel: the structure of the sovereign relation is “being in force without significance (Geltung ohne Bedeutung)”¹⁷ Naked life is that man from the country in Kafka’s Before the Law.

Sovereign power therefore encompasses the doubleness of “good” and “evil”, i.e., as well as protecting its subjects which is one of its raisons d’être, sovereignty is also a potential threat to its original nuclei, naked lives. The figure of the sovereign then can perform violence, when necessary, in order to get rid of a disquieting element both juridically, to maintain order for a society, and factually, for the stability of its existence. As Agamben states, in the sphere of sovereign power, no sharp distinction can be drawn between juridical and factual. Referring to Benjamin’s distinction between law-making and law-preserving violence in “Critique of Violence” (Benjamin, 1978: 287), Agamben emphasizes that the violence exercised in the state of exception “clearly neither preserves nor simply posits law,” but rather conserves the law in suspending the law and posits the law in excepting itself from the law (Agamben, 1998: 64; see also 63-67).

Agamben’s notion of naked life, therefore, has two crucial angles. The first angle refers to the quintessentially abandoned life through the sovereign exception. The second refers to the inevitability of life being threatened by the sovereign power. Whenever the sovereign threat is materialized the first angle of naked life emerges. As

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human beings under sovereign power, our lives could be threatened; and when that happens, we as bios are stripped and we as zoe reveal. This inevitability of life being threatened is the fact of life, as Agamben states by drawing from Benjamin, because the "state of exception" in which we live is the rule. In other words, Agamben maintains, it is because:

power no longer has today any form of legitimization other than emergency, and because power everywhere and continuously refers and appeals to emergency as well as laboring secretly to produce it. (How would we not think that a system that can no longer function at all except on the basis of emergency would not also be interested in preserving such an emergency at any price?) This is the case also and above all because naked life, which was the hidden foundation of sovereignty, has meanwhile become the dominant form of life everywhere. 18

The production of emergency by the sovereign has become clearer for people in the U.S. after September 11, 2001; this exemplifies the extraordinary violence of sovereignty in the west's late-modernity.

Although Agamben emphasizes the western notion of naked life, his emphasis on the state of emergency as the rule in late-modernity is applicable to what has happened in Burma. At least since 1948 when Burma simultaneously became independent and a nation-state, it is, for the most part, a country in a perpetual state of emergency, whereby the sovereign decision on the state of exception has been the rule. As I will discuss in detail in the latter part of this dissertation, my fieldwork conducted in the war zones and "camps" for the forcibly displaced Karens along the Thai-Burmese border zones confirms how crucial Agamben's works are in evincing the sovereign power over human lives and in revealing the harsh reality in those zones.

16 See the full text in "Threshold - Before the Law I" below.
18 2000a: 6 - my emphasis. See an example of Agamben's articulation of the "proximity and the almost constitutive exchange" between violence and right that characterizes the figure of the sovereign in "Sovereign Police," in 2000b: 103-7.
I am well aware that Agamben’s argument in *Homo Sacer* has engendered either a sense of what Thomas Dumm terms “terrifying passivity,” or what Michael Hardt calls “powerlessness” (Hardt/Dumm, 2000: 16). William Connolly also charges that Agamben’s analysis exacerbates a paradox of sovereignty that the latter “cannot imagine how to transcend;” and that his treatment of the conjunction of sovereignty, the sacred, and the biopolitics carries his readers to “an historical impasse” (Connolly, n.d.: 8).

For the purpose of this study, however, Agamben’s elaboration of the interlacement between sovereign power and human life is effective in enabling me to discern how various figures of sovereign power have ruled over naked life along the Thai-Burmese border zones, and how my form-of-life, as a Thai researcher pursuing a doctoral degree in a U.S.’s university, could *very easily* be ripped off due to my conducting fieldwork in those zones. Admittedly, understanding the atrocities and lives through Agambenian spectacles of naked life has, at times, rendered me passive towards the two nation-states’ sovereign power. Nonetheless, my partial passivity does not translate into an inability to appreciate a people’s spirit and courage manifested in their struggles for over five decades, if we start counting *just* when the Karens started their “revolution” in 1949. They have been devastatingly deprived of *potentialities* for good lives and/or *possibilities* for happiness. It is at this juncture that we now turn to Jacques Ranciere’s theorizing of “the political,” which enables us to clear, or at least to fathom, 20

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20 If we do not start counting from then, the plight of the Karens, other indigenous peoples and ethnic nationalities inside the area of what later known as Burma and Myanmar respectively could begin far back in time when the Burmans, directly or otherwise, pushed the Karens, among other groups, deeper into
political spaces for/of the forcibly displaced Karens. His notion of “the political” enables not only (them)-naked lives to demolish the invisible “iron cage” that imprison them, but also for (us)-naked lives to pay more attention to that invisible “iron cage” too – the “cage” that has obstructed us to perceive their plight. Ranciere names this invisible “iron cage” the partition of the sensible.

3. Ranciere’s “The Political”: Partition of the Sensible, _Disensus_, and Common-recognizing

If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths.

Jacques Ranciere, “Ten Theses on Politics.”

For Ranciere, the question of politics and democracy has always been at the heart of his investigations. His approach to “the political” is predominantly concerned with the operations of politics within a nation-state’s boundary. His writings range from a critical concern with the public/private distinction to an interweaving of “the people,” “democracy,” and “equality,” which deviates and disrupts general interweavings, including the Habermasian communicative rationality model. The vigor of Ranciere’s exploration, however, could be extended further to construct a theoretical space to

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21 It has been claimed by the Karen peoples that they started to inhibit parts of this land before the dominant Burmans came and later became hegemonic.

22 In discussing Ranciere, I rely heavily on the following writings: _Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy_ (1999); _Ten Theses on Politics_ (2001); “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization” (1992); as for interviews, they are: “Dissenting Words” (2000); and Jacques Ranciere: Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement” (2000).

In sections three and four, only dates and pages (or the numbers of the paragraphs) will appear for further references to Ranciere’s works, unless they are interviews.

23 2001: no. 23.
account for forcibly displaced peoples, whose sufferings and struggles transgress the identities contained by nation-states' territories.

Ranciere returns to the classical Greek world to formulate his approach to "the political." For him, politics is not the exercise of power and must not be thought of as a specific way of living. Everything about politics is contained in specific relationship of "part-taking" [avoir-part] (which in French means both a partaking and a partition): a mode of relation that involves a specific kind of subject and derives from a particular form of reason.24 This mode of relation disturbs, deviates from, and supplements the normal order of things (e.g., 2001: no. 18). It is this political relationship that allows one to think the possibility of a political subject(ivity) [le sujet politique], and not the other way around.25 Politics disappears the moment one undoes this knot of a subject and a relation, in which a political subject is defined by "its participation in contrarieties" (Ibid.: nos. 4-5). This anomalous relation is thus expressed in the nature of the political subjects who "are not social groups but rather forms of inscription of 'the (ac)count of the unaccounted-for' ... 'the part of those who have no-part'" – whether or not this part exists is the political issue (Ibid.: nos. 18-19). Ranciere's idea of the "unaccounted for" [l'hors-compte] refers to those who have no qualifications to part-take in the arche, no qualification for being taken into account. In the Greek context, the one who is "unaccounted-for" is the one who has no speech to be heard; they were the demos (Ibid.: nos. 12, 13).

23 See e.g., 1999: 55; 2000: 116. For Habermas, see e.g., 1984.
24 2001: no. 1, n3. Ranciere refers to Aristotle's the Politics, Book I: political rule, as the rule of equals, differ from all other kinds of rule; and Book III: a citizen is "he who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled" (Ibid.: 1; see Aristotle 1275 a22-34).
When politics is viewed as contained in a specific mode of relation of "part-taking," political struggle, Ranciere maintains, is about a special kind of "counting." And there are two contrasting ways of counting, one called the police, the other politics:

Political struggle is not a conflict between well-defined interest group; it is an opposition of logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways.... There are two ways of counting the parts of the community: The first only counts empirical parts - actual groups defined by differences in birth, by different functions, locations, and interests that constitute the social body. The second counts 'in addition' a part of the no-part. We will call the first police and the second politics (2001: no. 19; my emphasis).

These two contrasting ways of counting depend on general laws that define the form of part-taking. Ranciere terms these general laws the "partitions of the sensible" [le partage du sensible] - the laws that operate by first defining the modes of perception in which the forms of part-taking are inscribed (2001: no. 20). In other words, the partition of the sensible is the nemein (distribution, pasturing, management) upon which the nomoi (customs) of the community are founded - a cutting-up of the world and of worlding. It should be understood that there is a double-ness in the concept of the partition of the sensible: that which separates and excludes, on the one hand, and that which allows exclusive participation, on the other. Therefore, the partition of the sensible refers to the manner in which "a relation between a shared 'common' [un commun partage] and the distribution of exclusive parts is determined through the sensible" (Ibid.). And the sensible itself presupposes a partition between what is visible and invisible, what is audible and inaudible. Hence, not everything is supposed to be seen or heard. The presuppositions that designate what is perceptible themselves become customs in a community (in every sense of the term). The partition of the sensible always concerns

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According to Davide Panagia, the English term "political subject(ivity)" does not give an adequate sense of Ranciere's "le suj ect politique," which refers both to the idea of a political subject and to the "proper" subject of politics (Ibid., n2).
the things that a community regards as qualified "to be looked into," and the appropriate subjects to look into them, to judge and decide about them."\(^{26}\)

As a mode of the partition of the sensible, the Rancierian police is not a social function but a "symbolic constitution of the social"; its essence is neither repressive nor is it the Foucauldian notion of "control on life."\(^{27}\) The police’s essence, which is "at the heart of statist practice," is characterized by "the absence of a void or a supplement," always attempting the disappearance of politics "either by crudely denying it, or by subsuming that logic to its own" (2001: no. 21). The police, as a rule governing perceptibility, orders bodies, defines "the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying," and sees that those bodies are

assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise" (1999: 29).

Politics, on the other hand, disturbs this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of the no-part identified with the community as a whole. Hence, political litigiousness/struggle is that which brings politics into being by separating it from the

\(^{26}\) Ranciere/Guenoun/Kavanagh, 2000: 11-12.
Contrasting with Foucault, Ranciere maintains that his concept of the partition of the sensible is his way of translating and appropriating Foucault’s genealogical thought – ways of systematizing how things can be "visible, utterable, and capable of being thought" (Ibid.: 12). Ranciere states further that although his works could be expressed in terms closed to Foucault’s concept of *episteme*, they are different in some major aspects, especially those when he considers the genealogy of the concept of literature in his *La Parole mutte*, or the systems of art. Ranciere explains that whereas Foucault thinks in terms of "limits, closure, and exclusion," he thinks in terms of "internal division and transgression" (Ibid.). Hence, Foucault’s concept claim to establish what is thinkable or not for a particular era, whereas his is more sensitive to "crossing-over, repetitions, or anachronisms in historical experience." Also, to Ranciere, Foucault’s historicist’s partition between the thinkable and unthinkable "seems to...cover up the more basic partition concerning the very right to think" (Ibid.).

\(^{27}\) 2001: no. 20; Ranciere/Panagia, 2000: 124.
As Davide Panagia points out, Ranciere deploys essentialist language to articulate his approach to the political. Such deployment is exactly the point, and Panagia aptly puts it: "Politics is the practice of asserting one’s position that ruptures the logic of *arche;*" that is, it is "an event initiated by individuals or groups who insist that the ordered configuration of a position arrangement is wrong" (2001: no. 2).
police. In this regard, Ranciere’s notion of “the political” breaks with the consensual logic, which usually means the sharing of a common and nonlitigious experience; and the consensual logic’s essence is “the affirmation of the preconditions that determine political choice as objective and univocal” (Ranciere/Panagia 2000: 123).

The essence of politics is the manifestation of *dissensus*, Ranciere’s term for political argument or *dis-agreement*. Dis-agreement does not pertain to *words* alone, it generally bears on “the very situation in which speaking parties find themselves” (Ranciere, 1999: xi). *The principal function of politics is, therefore, to disclose the world of its subjects and its operations: to make visible that which had no reason to be seen, by lodging one world into another, constructing a paradoxical world that relates two separate worlds* (2001: nos. 21-2, 24). Such construction results from an *intervention* upon the visible and the sayable, from a *battle* about perceptible/sensible material, and from the *reconfiguration* of that which is given in the sensible – transforming a space for the appearance of a subject and “refiguring the space, of what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein.” The political argument is simultaneously the *demonstration* of a possible world. In such a world, “the argument could count as argument, addressed by a subject qualified to argue, upon an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he or she ‘normally’ has no reason to either see or hear” (Ibid.: no. 24).

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Phonic Animals vis-à-vis Logos Animals?:
Engaging the Socratic School, Common-recognizing, and Subjectification

One of the most important properties defining the partition of the sensible is, as Ranciere evinces, Aristotle’s definition of the sign of the political nature of humans in *The Politics* (1253 a9-17):

Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and she has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech. Speech is something different from voice, which is possessed by other animals also and used by them to express pain or pleasure; for their nature does indeed enable them not only to feel pleasure and pain but to communicate these feelings to each other. Speech, on the other hand serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust. For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, just and unjust, etc. It is the sharing of a common view is these matters that makes a household and a state (Aristotle, 1981: 60).

As an attribute defining the partition of the sensible, the Aristotelian sense of speech is “the articulate language appropriate for manifesting a community in the *aisthesis* [recognizing]” of the just and unjust, as opposed to the animal *phone* [sound, voice], appropriate only for expressing the feelings of pleasure and displeasure (Ranciere, 2001: no. 23). Yet, Ranciere argues that this distinction is not a given, as Aristotle emphasizes, on which politics is based. Rather, it is “one of the stakes of the very dispute that *institute politics*” (1999: 22; my emphasis). To maintain this distinction is to maintain the police partition of the sensible. To disrupt it, or deviate from it, is to set up a political scene, a political intervention. Ranciere contends that *logos* is never simply speech, but speech that is memorized, speech that deserves to be memorized, to be kept up as account: “the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just,” whereas some other emission is merely perceived as “a noise signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt” (Ibid.: 22, 23). And this very partition of which speech should be memorized opens spaces for political intervention.
Ranciere disagrees with the simple opposition between logical animals and phonic animals as portrayed in, for example, Plato’s accusations in Book VI of the *Republic*, against the “large and powerful animal” or the “mob of anonymous speaking beings” responding to words in the Athenian assembly – hence, a roar of cheers or a disapproving racket. Ranciere argues that it is in the democracy of this city-state where “democracy is the regime – the way of life – in which voice, which not only expresses but also procuresthe illusory feelings to pleasure and pain, usurps the privileges of the logos, which allows the just to be recognized and organized this realization in terms of community proportion” – it is a “litigious play that sets up the political stage” by constructing specific relations with the privilege of the *logos* (1999: 22, 26). In so doing the Athenian *demos* subjectify themselves as “the people.” In other words, they are giving themselves a name. Referring back to the context of Greek politics where *the people* were fully qualified to share the *polis* and to participate in the political deliberation – hence contributing to the setting-up of a contentious political community – without being either noble or rich, Ranciere states:

The mass of men without qualities identify with the community in the name of the wrong that is constantly being done to them by those whose position or qualities have the natural effect of propelling them into the nonexistence of those who have “no part in anything.” It is in the name of the wrong done them by the other parties that the people identify with the whole of the community. Whoever has no part – the poor of ancient times, the third estate, the modern proletariat – cannot in fact have any part other than all or nothing. On top of this, it is through the existence of this part of those who have no part, of this nothing that is all, that the community exists as a political community – that is, as divided by a fundamental dispute, by a dispute to do with the counting of the community’s parts.... (1999: 9).

Alluding to Plato’s and Aristotle’s views on the notion of the just *polis*, and to Plato’s deep animosity towards the Athenian democratic political community, Ranciere then maintains that the people are:

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the class of the wrong that harms the community and establishes it as a “community” of the just and the unjust.

So it is that scandalizing men of substance, the demos, that horde who have nothing, become the people, the political community of free Athenians, the community that speaks, is counted, and deliberates at the assembly... (Ibid.).

We are aware that Athenian democracy was exclusively for free male-citizens, and existed with a “natural” order of things where females, slaves, and resident foreigners were not heard and/or recognized as political subjects. When this and other orders of domination are disrupted by “the institution” of a part of those who have no part is when politics exists (Ibid.: 11). Social orders then become contingent when the magnitude escape ordinary measurement; the ethos of equality emerges: “the equality of anyone at all with anyone else” (Ibid.: 15).

Understanding politics in a Rancierian spirit, one better discerns peoples’ attempts to disrupt and/or supplement the normal order of things, the partition of sensible that separates language of sorrow from sound of pain. The people involved re-qualify their spaces of struggles to be seen as “the spaces of a community, of getting themselves to be seen or heard as speaking subjects (if only in the form of litigation)” – i.e., they become participants in a common *aisthesis* [common-recognizing], which

has consisted in making what was unseen visible; in getting what was only audible as noise to be heard as speech; in demonstrating to be a feeling of shared ‘good’ or ‘evil’ what had appeared merely as an expression of pleasure or pain (2001: no. 23).

Participating in a community in the Rancierian sense is a construction of a paradoxical world relating two separate worlds each with its own partition of the sensible. Hence, there is no specific locale for politics (i.e., exclusively located, e.g., in the public sphere, or presupposing a nation-state’s territory); and politics possesses no “natural” subjects. Political arguments/demonstrations are always momentary, their subjects are provisional: “political difference is always on the shore of its own disappearance” (2001: nos. 24-5).
Political subject is both how and what. As the how, it refers to “an enunciative and demonstrative capacity to reconfigure the relation between the visible and the sayable, the relation between words and bodies” (Ranciere/Panagia, 2000: 115). As the what, it is not a group of interests or ideas but the operator of a particular mode of subjectification and litigation through which politics has its existence (Ranciere: 2001: no. 25). By the “mode of subjectification,” Ranciere means “the production [of a subject] through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience.” A mode of subjectification hence does not create subjects from nothing; it creates them by transforming identities defined in the natural order of the allocation of functions and places into instances of experience of a dispute (1999: 35, 36). The political subjectification then is a dis-identification, a “removal from the naturalness of a place”; it opens up a subject space: where anyone can be counted because it is the space where those of no account are counted; “where a connection is made between having a part and having no part” – hence separating their vulnerable bodies from their ethos and from “the voice that supposed to express the soul of this ethos” (Ibid.: 36-7).

In studying the Karens, this study focuses on two contrasting partitions of the sensible: the police logic of the univocity of statist discourses and the disruptive political of the multivocity of non-statist discourses. Although shaped by and resulted from the former, the enunciative and demonstrative transversality of the forcibly displaced Karens reveals the latter. Though attempting to separate their vulnerable bodies from the univocity of statist discourses and also to subjectifying themselves as the Karen nation, their collective goal is to have their own state with certain level of autonomy under the
Federal Union of Burma. Such a goal subscribes to the state-centric paradigm, which thus echoes Ranciere’s statement that political difference is always on the shore of its own disappearance. However, it has been for more than half a century that the Karens have officially struggled with the Burmese nation-state, with little hope that they will achieve what they have hoped for solely by themselves. Although they may see the faraway shore, it is still immensely far away. However, when the day comes when the Karens achieve their goals, the statist discourses that have shaped the Burmese nation-state will no longer possess the same suppressive and eradicating strategies. The ethos of “common-recognizing” will permeate “Burma.”


As evinced in the section on Agamben, we are all fundamentally naked: as human beings under sovereign power, our lives could always be threatened. But unlike the forcibly displaced peoples – the “internally displaced peoples” and “refugees” – most citizens of nation-states are not forcibly displaced and are parts of a whole that can partake in ruling and being ruled (recalling Aristotle) as well as enjoy at least adequate levels of protection. In order to account for the forcibly displaced peoples’ sufferings, we need a concept that would deviate from the univocity of statist discourses and state-centric paradigm. It is a concept that both disrupts the perceptions produced by the police logic and provides the naked lives who are not forcibly displaced like us an ability to perceive that the forcibly displaced do possess a raison d’être (cf. Ranciere/Panagia, 2000: 124-25). That concept is “imperceptible naked-lives.”
I can assume that most of the readers of this dissertation will not be the naked lives who will have been forcibly displaced. Unlike the imperceptible naked-lives, however, we are perceptible; we are parts of the *demos* that outnumber the political subjects who have not been accounted-for; and almost all of our perceptions of reality are influenced by the statist police logic. It is crucial therefore to argue for the perceptibility of the forcibly displaced peoples. That is, we must put into contention “the objective status of what is ‘given’ and impose an examination and discussion of those things that were not ‘visible’” (Ibid.: 125) – creating new subjects, *imperceptible naked-lives*, and formulating new objects for investigation, *atrocities upon them*. Such creation of the new subjects deployed in this study has two goals. It is important first to construct an idea as a new subject to explore and, second, to employ such an idea to narrate the subjectification of the forcibly displaced Karens. While I pursue the first goal in this chapter, I will explore the Karen national subjectification that supplemented the Burmese public sphere in the nineteenth century in the next chapter.

To create a new subject, a scene must be constructed. It is a *scene of argumentation*, wherein we, the people whose lives have not been forcibly displaced from our homes, might recognize such a scene as a *world in common* (Ranciere/Panagia, 2000: 116), as a common-recognizing. As Ranciere states, in order to “enter into political exchange, it becomes necessary to invent the scene” upon which spoken words may be audible, in which objects may be visible, and individuals themselves may be recognized (Ibid.). To account for the parts that have no parts in a world in common, we need a “deployment of a specific scene of revelation” to give *equality* any effectiveness; we need to organize “a sensory space” so that the plight and struggles of more than 37 million forcibly displaced peoples become perceptible (cf. Ranciere, 1999: 25). It is the
following awareness that compels me to construct a new scene of argumentation. As citizens of nation-states, we have heard only a single *voice* all along – the univocity of the statist discourses. Moreover, we have seen or been constituted to visualize only a single statist topography. In other words, we have been entrapped by the partitions of the sensible constructed by state-centric paradigm.

Perhaps all is well, except for the fact that those imperceptible naked-lives worldwide have not been (adequately) accounted for. The discourses of territorial integrity and the dominant policy of non-interference in a member nation’s internal affairs in international organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN), for instance, have rendered us indifferent towards if not ignorant of those struggling subjectivities in unaccounted-for spaces, especially in the zones or countries under war or dictatorial regimes. By the end of the day, we go to bed comfortably tucking ourselves under warm blankets or in air-conditioned rooms with full stomachs, while millions of peoples are freezing when winter comes, are soaked or drowned under the rain, and are living without food when drought parches the land. “We slumber in the dream-space and dream-time of the hear-and-now” (Gilloch, 2002: 248).

To put it differently, a primary task of this study is to ask: how can the forcibly displaced peoples not be forgotten as members of the human community, existing on the same *common* stage as we are? To ask this question is to attempt to reconfigure a space of perceptibility for the members of the community of naked life. This is a legitimate

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29 See also e.g., Lang, 2002: 143-44; Silverstein, 2001. A member of an international relief organization puts it aptly

Whereas previously the refugees along the Thai-Burma border provided a convenient buffer against a traditional enemy,...they may now be seen as an embarrassment in the friendly relations between ASEAN members, and a barrier to trade and mutually beneficial commercial development (Alexander, 1999: 42).
question when one understands that politics, as Ranciere states, is primarily a conflict over “the existence of a common stage” and over “the existence and status of those present on it;” and that politics exists when

those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where there are and the world where they are not, the world where there is something “between” them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing (Ranciere, 1999: 26, 27).

When we understand politics as such, it becomes possible to push the argument further and to ask whether a community in question is just or not (cf. Ibid.: 9). To ask this question is to begin envisioning a human community where both perceptible and imperceptible naked-lives can belong to the common stage – hence, creating a quintessential political community.

At first glance, by pushing the argument further, we seemingly appeal to the universality of being human, i.e., to interrogate the notion of equality being enunciated, not the one under the state’s sovereignty, but the equality of human beings as such. Nonetheless, following Ranciere, it is not the humanness and equality as such for which the appeal aims, but what comes after each argumentation, demonstration, or enactment. Ranciere puts it forcefully:

When oppressed groups set out to cope with a wrong, they may appeal to Man or Human Being. But the universality is not in those concepts; it is in the way of demonstrating the consequences that follow from this... The logical schema of social protest, generally speaking, may be summed up as follows: Do we or do we not belong to the category of men or citizens or human beings, and what follows from this? The universality is not enclosed in citizen or human being; it is involved in the “what follows,” in its discursive and practical enactment (1992: 60).

This means that interrogating universality and equality is a means to construct an ethos of dissensus: “the political” par excellence. That is to say, although Ranciere emphasizes
that the sole principle of politics is equality (1999: 31), equality is not peculiar to politics and “in no way is itself political”:

All equality does is lend politics reality in the form of specific cases to inscribe, in the form of litigation, confirmation of the equality at the heart of the police order. What makes an action political is not its object or the place where it is carried out, but solely its form, the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute...

Nothing is political in itself for the political only happens by means of a principle that does not belong to it: equality…. Equality is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or a goal politics sets itself the task of attaining. It is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it (Ibid.: 31-2, 33).

To ask for equality, therefore, is to construct a political ethos. It is in such a Rancierian spirit that this study aims to appeal through both equality and the universality of humanness. Such appeal may develop through the mediation of particular categories (1992: 60). In other words, a particular category must be formulated in each instance of dis-agreement to disrupt the normal understanding about the oppressed, one that deviates from the “natural” orders of things.

Naming the forcibly displaced peoples as “imperceptible naked-lives” is therefore to force the terms “stateless peoples,” “internally displaced persons,” and “refugees” out of an obviousness that is grounded on varieties of the statist discourses, by questioning the relationship between they as the who and they as the what in the field of experience (cf. Ranciere, 1999: 36). The peoples named in these three categories are subjects of abandoned experience in the zones where possessing no juridical protections renders the “stateless peoples” terribly vulnerable, and the state’s sovereign power and territorial integrity render the existence of the lives of “internally displaced peoples” gravely precarious. Moreover, all these three categories neutralize the politicalness of these peoples’ subjectivities. An immense chasm then exists between those who are
acknowledged parts and those having no part in the world community (cf. Ibid.).

Furthermore, naming the forcibly displaced peoples as *imperceptible* naked-lives produces a reversal effect (it is an ironic strategy): rendering them *perceptible* outside the police’s logic of the state.

One could charge that Ranciere’s conception of “the political” is essentially disruptive. Yet, it is such disruption that provides political spaces for the *supposedly* “unqualified” political subjects – the unrecognized, the forgotten, the abandoned, and the forcibly displaced peoples. This is because politics comes about “solely through interruption, the initial twist that institutes politics as the deployment of a wrong or of a fundamental dispute” (1999: 13). Quilting together Agamben’s conception of sovereign power with the Rancierian strategy of perceptibility, the “imperceptible naked-lives” as a conceptual strategy therefore constructs political spaces in various fields of human experiences dominated by the police logic of the nation-state. Nonetheless, still missing in our attempt to provide political spaces for forcibly displaced peoples are non-statist temporal spaces that can render memories and temporal practices of these people recognizable. Analogously, such temporal spaces have to disrupt the hegemonic temporal practices that entails homogenous and linear continuum of time, and in so doing recognizes other times and fragmented experiences. The non-statist temporal spaces, therefore, requires an alternative conception of time that will live up to such disruptive task. With this orientation in mind, the rest of the chapter will now focus on some of Walter Benjamin’s and Ranajit Guha’s writings.
5. Towards the Temporal Spaces of Imperceptible Naked-lives: Benjamin’s “Now-time” & Guha’s “Univocity of Statist Discourse”

History & Time

Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to be elucidated. Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original talk of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to ‘change the world,’ but also – and above all – to ‘change time.’

Agamben, “Time and History,”

According to Agamben, western modern political thought has concentrated its attention on history without having elaborated a corresponding concept of time (1993b; cf. Lindroos, 1998: 48). Hence, it has recourse to a concept of time dominant in Western culture for centuries: “the vulgar representation of time as a precise and homogenous continuum.” For this study what interests us is the latter part of this “vulgar

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30 One of Benjamin’s main theoretico-philosophical concerns, throughout the forty-eight years of his life, was the nexus between the notions of history and time. Three main writings where this nexus predominantly occurs, as Michael Jennings points out (1987: 44), are: “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” (1966b/1916), “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian” (2002/1933), and the Theses on the Philosophy of History (1968/1939-40). However, this theme occurs also in other works, especially The Arcades Project (1999a/1927-40) – the dates after the slashes refer to the dates when the works were written in German. For further references to Benjamin’s works in section five, only dates and pages will appear.

In thinking and writing through Benjamin, apart from relying on the four writings, I also refer to other sources including the preparatory notes for the Theses and correspondences between Benjamin and his friends. A major problem with employing this second set of sources is the non-existence of my German. I therefore had to rely on other writers’ citations and translation, which surely can at times be problematic.

31 Agamben, 1993b: 91, my emphasis.
32 Agamben, 1993b: 91; cf. e.g., Lindroos, 1998: 84; Osborne, 1994: 86.

Citing Martin Heidegger’s remark, in Letters on Humanism, that “the Marxist concept of history is superior to any other historiography” (Agamben, 1993b: 103), Agamben maintains that even historical materialism has until now avoided to elaborate its corresponding concept of time.

In “Time and History” (Agamben, 1993b: 91-105), Agamben eruditely explores the concept of time in the history of western philosophy through some thinkers or traditions: for instance Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Christianity, Gnosticism, Nietzsche, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, and Benjamin in an exemplary abbreviation. In Agamben’s view, every time western modern thought has come to reconceptualize time, inevitably, it has had to begin with a critique of continuous, quantified time, the concept of time which has dominated the “Western culture for nearly two thousand years.” Such critique underlies both Benjamin’s
representation": time as a homogenous continuum – and thus neither heterogeneous, nor disrupted. Whereas the vulgar representation has for a long time shaped the univocity of statist discourses, it is the non-vulgar representation that would open the multivocity of non-statist strategies and practices.

This study explores some of the nation-state’s practices that result from the vulgar representation. Two of the most crucial results are: first, that such a representation of time legitimizes the linear continuum of the nation-state’s temporality, which in turn marginalizes or suppresses non-statist subjects’ times; and, second, that the representation gives birth to a dominantly continuous historiography, which orientates around the idea of the historical progress of the hegemons. This historiography invariably persists on silencing other subjectivities’ voices and genealogies manifested in discontinuous histories, for there have been evidences of discontinuity in human histories. Other temporalities have, therefore, been forgotten, especially ones that do not fit with the hegemons’ continuums. Nonetheless, because every voice is located at a certain moment of time, and is historical, it has always been problematic for the nation-state to disregard other voices, temporalities, and histories that are not parts of, or legitimizing, the nation-state and its continuum. The police logic (in Rancierian sense) of statist temporality thus hinders our understanding of the sufferings and struggles of the imperceptible naked-lives, the ways that these non-statist subjectivities grasp the past out of their hopes and passions, and construct their own temporalities. With the spirit of Ranciere’s notion of “the political,” therefore, it is not hard to discern how the vulgar representation of time

_theses on the philosophy of history_ and _heidegger’s being and time_. With this commonality of two disparate thinkers, Agamben believes, such dominant concept of time is on the wane (Ibid.: 102).

I would like to thank Cesare Casarino for recommending this article to me.
freezes politics; for disruption of continuity is a necessary condition to creating a political ethos and temporality for the imperceptible naked-lives.

To articulate a disruptive temporality and a critique of the vulgar representation, I have recourse to Benjamin’s notion of “now-time” and his conception of history. Benjamin’s historico-philosophical reflections offer a productive impetus to think of a concept of history for the imperceptible naked-lives. This is so, not least because these peoples have few moments and images from their past which can be quoted (in the Benjaminian sense of summoning up or invoking, rather than that of making a scholarly reference to some authority), since in what has been handed down they have been largely forgotten or oppressed as subjects (cf. Weigel, 1996: 77, 13). And to Benjamin, the subject of historical knowledge is “the struggling, oppressed class itself” (1968: 262 [XII]). Moreover, it is the present interests of “the oppressed,” the true subject of history, that set the terms of historical perspective. To be sure, following Marxism, the “oppressed,” in Benjamin’s works, are primarily referred to as the proletariat. This study of the forcibly displaced Karens extends the idea of the oppressed to also include imperceptible naked lives. After all, the latter have not only been the quintessential oppressed, but have also been the quintessential abandoned. Like the revolutionary working class, on whom Benjamin focuses in the Theses on the Philosophy of History, most of the imperceptible naked lives are, willingly or not, “nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren” (1968: 262 [XII]). It is

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33 For Benjamin, quotation is a way to work politically with images outside of the continuum of history (Weigel, 1996: 13); see also Agamben, 1999b:152 on citation/quotation.


35 See e.g., Benjamin, 1968, 262 (XII); 1999a: 364 (J77,1); 1999c: 217.
thus our onus to discern the imperceptible naked-lives’ time of the now in their struggles for survival.

**Cairo-logic, Now-time, and the Copernican revolution**

History is the object of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate. It quoted ancient Rome the way fashion quotes costumes of the past. Fashion has a good nose for the actual [das Aktuelle], no matter where it stirs in the thicket of the erstwhile; it is the tiger’s leap into the past.

This leap, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class has the command. The same leap under the open skies of history is the dialectical one that Marx conceived of as revolution.

Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History.*

It is necessary to state that before Benjamin, there were prior traditions that did not subscribe to the dominant concept of time as quantified and homogenously continuous. In the history of western philosophy, according to Agamben, they were Gnosticism, “that failed religion of the West” and Stoicism (Agamben, 1993b: 100-101). The Gnostics believed in the experience of interrupted, incoherent, and unhomogenous time; truth is “in the moment of abrupt interruption, when man, in a sudden act of consciousness, takes possession of his own condition of being resurrected” (Ibid.: 101). The Stoics postulated that the liberating experience of time springs from the actions and decisions of humans; the model is cairos – “the abrupt and sudden conjunction where decision grasps opportunity and life is fulfilled in the moment” (Ibid.: 101). *Cairo-logic*

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Hereafter, the numbers in parentheses after page numbers are numbers of the *Theses* or entries from the *Arcades Project*.

36 Benjamin, 1968: 263 (XIV), this translation follows that of Paul et al. in Weigel, 1996: 13.
is therefore contrary to the *chrono-logic*; it emphasizes breaks, ruptures, non-synchronized moments, and multiple temporal dimensions.\(^{37}\)

Corresponding to this *cairo-logic* is what Benjamin searches for – a “true” concept of history\(^{38}\) that would be analogous to the statement, “the state of exception’ in which we live is the rule,”\(^{39}\) thereby amplifying the present state of affairs of “the oppressed.” Moreover, “the generally accepted presentation of history,” according to Benjamin, not only “cherishes the production of continuity,” but also “values those elements of past events which were already exhausted in their consequences.”\(^{40}\) This accepted presentation of history, which recalcitrantly disregards dis-continuum, maintains for the most part a persistent silence concerning the “oppressed.” This accepted historiography invariably belongs to the victors or other hegemons. Benjamin therefore states, in the preparatory notes to the *Theses*, that “the continuum of history is that of the oppressors. While the notion of the continuum destroys everything, that of discontinuity is the basis of genuine tradition.”\(^{41}\) It is thus the epic element of the reified continuity of history, the “heritage,” that he renounces.

Benjamin’s concept of history is an “idiosyncratic” historical materialism\(^{42}\) which not only “blasts the epoch out of the reified ‘continuity of history,’” it also “explodes the

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\(^{39}\) Harry Zohn’s translation (Benjamin, 1968, 259 [VIII]) writes: “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.” Again, here I follow Heller-Roazen’s translation quoted in Agamben, 1999a: 160.


\(^{41}\) *GS*, I.3: 1236, quoted in Gilloch, 2002: 285 n104.

\(^{42}\) Benjamin’s historical materialism has usually been branded as “highly” or “remarkably idiosyncratic” (Jennings, 1987: 57; Steinberg, 1996: 91). Differences between the Benjaminian historical materialism and the orthodox historical materialism will be discussed below. For other views, consult, e.g.,
homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins— that is, with the present.” (1999a: 474 [N9a, 6]). Hence, instead of the empty, quantified instant, he situates a “time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit],” construed as “a Messianic cessation of happening” or “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past,” which “comprises that entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgment.” Instead of, conceptually, the historicist notion of the historical progress of humankind, and, contextually, the German social democratic notion of the historical progress of humankind, which “cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression” through a homogenous, empty time, Benjamin proposes the revolutionaries’ “awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode.” Against the traditional metaphysics which nullifies a present moment, he posits a present “which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop” (1968: 264 [XVI]). It is in the moment of the now-time that history encounters its non-linearity (ubergangslosigkeit). It is in the name of this “full time” of the present where, for him, “true” history can be constructed. Yet, at the moment of the now-time, history is politicized and politics attains primacy over history. Benjamin calls this temporal politicization “the Copernican revolution” in historical perception:

Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in “what has been,” and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this

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43 1968: 263 (XIV), 265 (XVII, XVIII). The idea of messianism, though important in Benjamin’s writings, is beyond the scope of this study to venture into detail. For those who are interested, consult e.g. Agamben, 1999a; Caygill, 1998: 149-52; McCole, 1993: passim; Weigel, 1996: passim.

44 1968: 263 (XIII, XV). Contextually, Benjamin was faced with the Nazi-Soviet pact. His last writing piece, The Theses, were a critique, as Agamben states, “of the causes behind the European Left’s disastrous failure after the First World War” (Agamben, 1993b: 102). Moreover, referring to Gershom Scholem, Tiedemann states that The Theses were written as a result of Benjamin’s shock of the Hitler-Stalin Pact.
ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal – the flash of awakened consciousness. Politics attains primacy over history.\textsuperscript{45}

This Copernican revolution is a shift towards the primacy of the present, which is the point of reference of historical knowledge for Benjamin. It is to pay attention to the present that is the actualization of the past. The historian’s task is thus to be aware that the present state of affairs carries with it the oft-imperceptible historical indexes, to be able to \textit{read} the present, and “to ignite the explosive materials that are latent in what has been.” In this way, Benjamin maintains, “to approach... ‘what has been’ means to treat it not historiographically, as heretofore, but politically, in political categories” (1999a: 392 [K2,3]). The temporal rupture between past and present in Benjamin’s conception of history forms a cairo-logic perspective that both characterizes an alternative view on history and “constructs a vivid image of the everyday experience”; moreover, such rupture implies “the creation of the present in action” (Lindroos, 1998: 13). One can also add to Kia Lindroos’ explication that it is the historian’s task to grasp the vivid images exploding in the present, ones that do not fit the hegemons’ homogenous continuum. Benjamin’s aim, as Lindroos contends, is also to emphasize the influence that an historical understanding has on individual and political action. The new concept of history formulates a connection between writing and understanding history, and also between the ideas of politics and action (Ibid.).

\textsuperscript{45} 1999a: 388-89 (K1,2); cf. also e.g., Lindroos, 1998: 12, 23.

The latter part of this fragment reveals psychoanalytical influences upon Benjamin’s theories of image and memory which is beyond the scope of this study and my present ability. It writes: “The facts become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us; to establish them in the affair of memory. Indeed, awakening is the great exemplar of memory: the occasion on which it is given us to remember what is closest, tritest, most obvious.... There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been: its advancement has the structure of awakening.” See Weigel, 1996, passim, for an excellent treatment of these issues; and see also e.g., McCole, 1993: 259-79; 287-95.
Benjaminian Historiography: Historians, Dangers, and "The Oppressed"

[For] the destructive momentum in materialist historiography is to be conceived as the reaction to a constellation of dangers, which threatens both the burden of tradition and those who receive it. It is this constellation of dangers which the materialist presentation of history comes to engage. In this constellation is comprised its actuality...

Benjamin, The Arcades Project.

There are three forms of historiography that Benjamin emphasizes in his writings: historicism, orthodox historical materialism, and his own brand of historical materialism. The first two presuppose the idea of homogenously continuous and empty temporality while his presupposes plurally disrupted and concrete temporalities. The empty-concrete contrariety stems from the location of the present experiences in relations to historical articulations. Temporal continuity and homogeneity of the first two historiographies discard or suppress disruptive elements and enigmatic temporalities: any aberrants that contaminate or destabilize the epic histories of the victors, in the case of historicism; any backwardness or pessimism that halt or undermine Marxist path toward the classless society. Consequently, not only does Benjamin’s historical materialism attack historicism, it also distances itself from orthodox historical materialism.

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46 1999a: 475 (N10a,2) – the word “for” in the parenthesis belongs to the translator of this English version.

47 Historicism was constructed between 1750 and 1850, emerging, as a problematic field of understanding history, to oppose the ‘imagined’ history, and instead introduced the history “as it was” (Lindroos, 1998: 55). Throughout the 1930s, historicism and the conception of history as progress move to the center of Benjamin’s attention. The historicism had developed, in the course of the nineteenth century, into a complex doctrine and spread beyond the discipline of history itself to become a core assumption of all the cultural and social sciences, particularly in Germany (McCole, 1993: 288). Benjamin’s critiques of the historicism and the nineteenth century are therefore intertwine. The critique of the nineteenth century is, as he writes for instance, “not of its mechanism and cult of machinery but of its narcotic historicism, its passion for masks, in which nevertheless lurks a signal of true historical existence” (1999a: 391 [K1a,6]).

48 Regarding Marxist revolutions, for instance, Benjamin provides an image in a preparatory note to the Theses on the Philosophy of History: “Marx said that revolutions are the locomotives of world
For Benjamin, there are three invalid axioms upon which the historicist vision is based:\textsuperscript{50} the claim to a “universal history” \textit{[Universalgeschichte]}; the claim that historical object is “something which permits itself to be recounted;”\textsuperscript{51} and the claim that historical “empathy” must be insisted upon. In effect, the past, for the historicist, is readily identifiable, comprehensive and clearly given; and there is a temporal stability to historical truth.\textsuperscript{52} The past therefore appears perfect: it is “finished, complete and free of contemporary impurities”; it is “readily and impartially open to narration”; and it consists in “uninterrupted improvement culminating in the enlightened present” (Gilloch, 2002: 225). The historicist therefore describes the past “the way it really was” by establishing “a causal connection between various moments in history” and sequencing them “like the beads of a rosary” according to a homogenous logic of continuum.\textsuperscript{53} Understood as a continuum characterized by evolution, advancement, and growth, the historicist’s history is a benign human progress. Benjamin therefore fervently attacks the historicism:

“Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time” (1968: 264 [XVII]). Hence, Gottfried history. But perhaps they are something quite different. Perhaps revolutions are the hand of humans species travelling in this train pulling the alarm brakes” (\textit{GS}, I.3: 1232, quoted in Steinberg, 1996: 92 n7).

\textsuperscript{49} Moreover, as the orthodox historical materialism inherits its conception of time as homogenous continuum from both Christian theology and German idealism (Jennings, 1987: 71 and passim; Lindroos, 1998: 34), Benjamin’s struggle for the “true’ concept of history” also focuses its critique to such meaning given to history by the nineteenth century German idealism (Lindroos, Ibid.: 31). Referring to a letter between Benjamin and Gershom Scholem on May 6, 1934, Lindroos states that Benjamin’s historical materialism is a form whereby the historical dimension removed from the Hegelian-Marxist concept, in so doing gives more freedom than he considered was practiced in his contemporary Marxism (Ibid.; for the letter, see Scholem, 1992: 109-12).

\textsuperscript{50} Gilloch, 2002: 224; see also Lindroos, 1998: 53-7.
\textsuperscript{52} See e.g. 1968: 256 (III), 257 (V, VI), 265(A).
\textsuperscript{53} 1968: 257 (VI), 265 (A).
Keller’s sentence “the truth will not run away from us” is countered by Benjamin’s “the true picture of the past flits by” (1968: 257 [V]). Instead of keeping with the idea of the “stability” of historical truth, Benjamin emphasized the singularity of historical moments.

Benjamin’s historiographical reflections possess both destructive and constructive moments (Gilloch, 2002: 224). First, they seek to critically engage with conventional historical practices and, specifically, to unveil the falsifications and phantasmagoria of historicism exemplified by Gottfried Keller and Leopold von Ranke.\(^5\) Second, they are concerned with the elaboration of a drastically new set of imperatives and techniques which provide for the genuine, materialist comprehension and representation of the past. These historiographical principles therefore powerfully bring together two of his most crucial and enduring motifs, as Graeme Gilloch puts them, “the continual ruination and reconfiguration of the past in the present – i.e., the concept of afterlife\(^5\) – and the techniques of imagistic construction and composition undertaken by the polytechnical engineer” (Ibid.).

Consequently, the past for Benjaminian historical materialism is ceaselessly constructed “in its after life” and its image becomes a wellspring of, and hub for, contemporary struggle and conflict. Hence, the Benjaminian past is invariably vulnerable, which in turn brings “the present into a critical state” (1999a: 471 [N7a,5]). In a Benjaminian sense, the work of an historian is not seen as the task of putting events in chronological order, but rather “presupposes or creates a particular perspective of

\(^{54}\) On Benjamin’s mentioning of Ranke, see e.g., 1968: 257 (VI).
specific historical events, which is possible to interpret in any moment anew” (Lindroos, 1998: 48). Therefore, unlike historicism’s empathy toward “the way it really was” and its victors, which Benjamin vehemently attacks,56 Benjamin’s conception of history has “making things present” (Vergegenwartigung) as its methodological principle (McCole, 1993: 290).

Since the work of Benjaminian historiography involves the renunciation of unity, totality, and the absolute, realizing the dangers embedded in temporally homogenous continuum is precisely what makes a rupture in the flow of the historical and political continuity of power possible.57 From Benjamin’s historico-philosophical perspective, history is a constellation of dangers (Gefahrenkonstellation) — “the ‘state of exception’ in which we live is the rule.”58 “The destructive or critical momentum of materialist historiography,” Benjamin writes, “is registered in that blasting of historical continuity with which the historical object first constitutes itself.” (1999a: 475 [N10a,1]). Since the

55 Benjamin writes, “historical ‘understanding’ is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife of that which is understood” (1999a: 460 [N2,3]).

56 See e.g., 1968 passim. The sentence “the way it really was” is from Ibid., 257 (VI); deploying the language of narcotic, Benjamin writes in another context: “The history that showed things “as they really were” was the strongest narcotic of the century” (1999a: 463 [N3,4]). For the historicists’ empathy toward the victor, see e.g., 1968, 258 (VII); for the idea of empathy as manifested in the (re)construction of a historical state of affairs, see e.g., 1999a: 470 (N7,6), 475 (N10a,1).


58 Cf. e.g., Jennings, 1987: 54-8.

Within the historical context in which Benjamin was writing, the notion of danger (Gefahr), referred in the sixth Thesis of the Theses concerned the concrete historical situations in the year 1939-1940. As Lindroos suggests, such concrete historical situations, for Benjamin, resulted from the ignoring of the actual moment simultaneously with retaining the vision of development or progress, which has been produced through the historical, scientific or economic structures since the era of Enlightenment (1998: 55). Moreover, the history of nineteenth century Germany for Benjamin was, following the Nietzschean characterization, the history of winners. Instead of continuing this canon, he therefore attempted to present history as a broader concept, which would also include the marginal and forgotten elements. This was followed by his personal experiences of exile and the temporal-political contingency of the Weimar republic.

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images of what have been are dependent on the preoccupations of an observer/reader, the "subject of historical cognition" (Weigel, Ibid.: 35), it is the task of Benjamin's historical materialists to capture and also actualize the moment of danger in a counter-action. It is the task of the historical materialist to recognize the need to act decisively for the "oppressed," including the abandoned, nameless, unremembered, and unmourned dead who, following the Benjaminian messianic language, must be redeemed. They are the multitudes who have been consigned by conventional historians to the oblivion of forgetting, except for being narrated as aberrants, debris, or detritus, among others, neither the "'state of exception' in which we live" nor their fractured tradition finds adequate expression. Hence, "the task of history," writes Benjamin, "is not only to grasp the tradition of the oppressed but also to support it"; and "to the process of rescue belongs the firm, seemingly brutal grasp." For this study, this means that the imperceptible naked-lives must be made perceptible, the sovereign power's ban shattered, and the forcibly displaced Karens' histories rewritten – thus amplifying the multivocity of non-statist subjectivities.

Lindroos, 1998: 55

GS, I.3: 1246 (quoted in Gilloch, 2002: 285 n102); 1999a: 473 [N9a, 3]).
Shattering the Univocity of Statist Discourses:
Re-writing the Imperceptible Naked-Karens' Histories

There are phrases in many languages..., which speak of historic events and historic deeds. These phrases enjoy the status of common sense and an understanding of their meaning by members of the respective speech communities is presupposed, without question. However, the crust of common sense begins to crumble as soon as one asks what precisely the adjective 'historic' is supposed to be doing in such expressions. Its function is of course to assign certain events and deeds to history. But who is it that nominates these for history in the first place? ...[I]n most cases the nominating authority is none other than an ideology for which the life of the state is all there is to history. It is this ideology, henceforth to be called statism, which is what authorize the dominant values of the state to determine the criteria of the historic.

Ranajit Guha, "The Small Voice of History."

Thus wrote Ranajit Guha in a small piece of a critique of the statist history and historiography that he set to dismantle. In connection to the Benjaminian historiography, I draw on Guha's criticism to not only critique the statist historicm of both the Thai and Burmese nation-states, but also for a practice of writing a history of the imperceptible naked-Karens, and hence providing them a historical space.

The common sense of history, Guha contends, is generally guided by a sort of statism which thematizes and evaluates the past for it. It is a tradition which goes back to the beginnings of modern historical thinking in the Italian Renaissance. The study of history served as a schooling in politics and government so crucial to the ruling elements of the fifteenth-century city-states, whether as citizens or monarchs. Moreover, the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe during the next three hundred years did almost nothing to weaken the pact between statism and historiography. He argues that it was, on the contrary, strengthened both by absolutism and republicanism to such an extent that by the

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nineteenth century, the study of history had become fully institutionalized in Western Europe. There are three important facets of such institutionalization (Ibid.: 2). First, the study of history became a kind of “normal science” in the Kuhnian sense, and integrated into the academic system with its own pedagogical practices as well as a profession devoted entirely to its dissemination by teaching and writing. What follows is that, secondly, the study of history acquired a place of its own in the ever more growing public space where “the hegemonic process often appealed to history in order to realize itself in the interaction between citizens and the state.” Hence, it was in the public sphere that the study of history found its customers – a reading public – “progeny of the printing technology and avid consumers of such of its products as catered to a new bourgeois taste for historical literature of all kinds.” Thirdly, it was this literature, which ranged from school manuals to historical novels, that helped institutionalize the writing of history “by constituting it into imaginative and discursive genres equipped with their distinctive canons and narratologies.” Such institutionalization of the study of history had, Guha asserts, the effect on the whole of “securing a stable base for statism within the academic disciplines and promoting hegemony” (Ibid.; cf. Chakrabarty, 1997).

Although Guha’s main concern is with India, the gist of his treatment regarding statis historiography is applicable to other cases as well. When it comes to the forcibly displaced Karens, statism in both Thai and Burmese historiographies has been the hegemonic understanding of history in the Thai-Burmese border zones; and the history of the world for both countries is a history of the state system (cf. Guha, Ibid.: 3). Alluding

62 Guha quotes Lauro Martines who refers to Machiavelli whose view was that “historical study and the study of statecraft should have been essentially the same” (Ibid.: 2; quoted from Martines, Power and Imagination: City-states in Renaissance Italy [Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1983], pp. 268-9).
to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History,” one can state that there is a peculiar way in which histories of non-state subjectivities, and other imperceptible naked-lives, tend to become variations on the statist master narratives (1997: 263). Chakrabarty articulates further in his plea that there are repressive strategies and practices that history, as a disciplined and institutionally regulated form of collective memory, assimilates to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity (Ibid.: 290, 287). As with naked lives, history becomes an essential foundation for the nation-state and for the crucial exclusions upon which such a political order depends.

The voices of the statist discourses sound most triumphant when their globalizing and unifying tendency is allowed to deal with the question of power in gross terms. It is a level of abstraction where all the many voices crying out and the many stories being told are assimilated to the hegemonic story of either Burmese or Thai nation-states (cf. Guha, 1996: 6). In other words, the nationalist discourse and statism of the two nation-states entwine, when it comes to response to forcibly displaced peoples who either have been considered disquiting elements or traversed across the nation-state’s boundaries. The forcibly displaced peoples’ struggles have therefore been overshadowed by the nation-state’s attempts to maintain its history, order, territorial integrity, and sovereignty by its educational, administrative, juricical, and military functions. Consequently, the inadequacy of statism for a historiography that provides historical spaces for imperceptible naked-lives follows from its tendency to forbid, for instance, the forcibly displaced Karens any interlocution between them and their past. That is, the commanding voice of the state has suppressed their voices, as it has suppressed other
imperceptible naked-lives' voices. The commanding voice of the state, whether that of
the Thai or Burmese nation-states, has presumed to nominate the historic for the forcibly
displaced Karens and other ethnic nationalities.

In effect, the two nation-states, with varying degrees, have left the Karens'
relations to their pasts with very diminutive choice. To write a history of the forcibly
displaced Karens is, therefore, to listen to and converse with their voices. Theirs are
sub-audible voices which have been “drowned in the noise of statist commands,” which is
why we have rarely heard them, or even heard of them.\textsuperscript{63} Guha states:

That is also why it is up to us to make the extra effort, develop the special skills and
above all cultivate the disposition to hear these voices and interact with them. For they
have many stoties to tell – stories which for their complexity are unequalled by statist
discourse and indeed opposed to its abstract and oversimplifying modes (1996: 3).

As a result, conversing between the imperceptible naked-lives and perceptible naked-
lives is a condition of solidarity, under sovereign power, which also serves, in its turn, as
the ground for a critique. It is a critique of the statist discourses and practices of “not-
listening”: “turning a deaf ear to, turning away from” (Ibid.: 9), and pushing them back
into the war zones and into imperceptibility again – a sovereign power’s push that has
casted a spell on them, abandoned them into the zones of 	extit{ahistorical}. The imperctible
naked-Karens’ voices speaking in pain are, therefore, pitted against the statist discourses,
a commanding noise in its inability to hear what the forcibly displaced peoples have been
saying for more than half a century.

Yet, as Guha states, the critique of statist discourses cannot by itself produce an
alternative historiography, which could only emerge by moving beyond conceptualization

\textsuperscript{63} This is because more often than not we have not heard the imperceptible naked-lives’ voices;
and when we do they might not sound intelligible and hence not recognizable.

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into the practice of re-writing history. It is a rewriting of history which is attentive to the “undertone of harassment” and the “note of pain” in the imperceptible naked-lives’ voices that will, firstly, “challenge the univocity of statist discourse” (1996: 11).

Secondly, as a re-writing of history which listens to the voices, it will therefore put the question of agency back into the narrative. In the third place, if the small voices of history get a hearing at all in some revised account, it will do so only by a certain degree of disorderliness: “interrupting the telling in the dominant version, breaking up its storyline and making a mess of its plot.” For the authority of that version is embedded in the structure of the narrative itself – “a structure informed in post-Enlightenment historiography... by a certain order of coherence and linearity,” upon which the univocity of statist discourses rely (Ibid.: 12).

To begin to study and speak of the forcibly displaced Karens, it is crucial to reformulate theoretical strategies, ones that provide a theoretical space to account for the forcibly displaced peoples. It must be a theoretical space that enables one to understand the political struggles of these peoples by first recognizing them as qualified political subjects. Moreover, learning about the plight of the Karens has informed me of how much their traditionally non-written cultures have enabled a variety of sovereign powers – ranging from kingdoms to global empires to nation-states – to disregard them as nonhumans: states of being outside histories. This study, therefore, has to narrate a history to let the international community be aware that the forcibly displaced Karens are peoples with histories, both personally and collectively. We now turn to such historical narrative.
Chapter 3 – Historical Karens & Their Subjectification: An Indigenous Nation, An Ethnic “Minority,” and the Forcibly Displaced Peoples

1. Writing a History of the Indigenous Karens: A Stuttering Narrative

History becomes possible only when the Word turns into words. Only verbatim traditions enable the historian to reconstruct the past. Only where words that were lost can be found again does the historiographer replace the storyteller. The historian’s home is on the island of writing. He furnishes its inhabitants with subject matter about the past. The past that can be seized is related to writing.

Beyond the island’s shores, memories do not become words. Where no words are left behind, the historian finds no foundations for his reconstructions. In the absence of words, artifacts are silent. We have often felt frustrated, but we accept that prehistory cannot be read. No bridge can be constructed to span this chasm.

Ivan Illich & Barry Sanders, ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind.

Research on “Indigenous Peoples” in the Burmese Nation-State

The term “indigenous peoples” is specifically employed here to signify the presence of varieties of peoples who have situated in the vast land later known as Thai and Burmese nation-states. Along the Thai-Burmese border zones, the four major groups of indigenous peoples – the Karens, Mons, Karennis, and Shans – have settled there before the creation of the two countries. The emphasis of prior arrival is essential in defining the indigenous-ness of a people. As Andrew Gray contends: “The concept of ‘prior’ is useful because it avoids speculative history as to who are the ‘original’ peoples of an area and instead concentrates on current patterns of colonialism.”

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1 Illich & Sanders 1988, p. 3.
2 For the problematics of employing this term see, for example, Bodley, 1999; Gray, 1995; Kingsbury, 1995; Smith, 1995.

Gray refers to a very interesting example happening to the Chakma of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, which is applicable to many other cases around the world regarding the claim to “indigenous-ness.” As he explains, with the emphasis of “original” peoples, only the Kuki would be considered as the indigenous peoples of the Hill Tracts. But with the emphasis of “prior” arrival, the eighteenth-century-arrival Chakma, after previous waves of Arakanese and Tripurans, would be considered
term “indigenous peoples” also enhances the characteristics and the extent to which
Thailand’s and Burma’s separate productions of spaces and lives have produced similar
effects – spaces filled with naked lives who are expellable or killed due to their lack of
adequate juridical protections and/or recognition. Moreover, in the case of Burma,
specifically, the statist partition of the sensible regarding the discourse of territorial
integrity has rendered the indigenous people’s nakedness imperceptible. All these effects
have, in a way, resulted from the geographical imaginary and the political “lawfulness”
that the Burmese junta has attempted to produce within its territory, without recognizing
the cultural geographies – non-state maps resulting from the practices of spaces and
identities – of indigenous others. The use of “indigenous peoples” helps, therefore,
emphasize the cartographical arbitrariness of Siam/Thailand and Burma/Myanmar. The
arbitrariness, backed by force, has become the “cartography of death events” and
atrocities. This arbitrariness has until today rendered the in-between spaces gravely
perilous.

From the time when the British Empire took control of the whole Kingdom of
Ava in 1885 until 1948, indigenous peoples in British Burma lived in all areas of the
kingdom, but were mainly concentrated in the regions surrounding the central Burman

The Commission is aware of the position of the Bangladesh government that the hill
people are not technically “indigenous” peoples. The Commission considers that they are
“indigenous” to the CHT, having been in settled occupation and control of the area prior to outside
assertions of political authority over the CHT and prior to the relatively recent patterns of outside
settlement in the area. (Gray, Ibid. – quoted from Life is not Ours: Land and Human Rights in the
Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. London: Calverts: 119)

More than five decades have passed since 1948 when Burma gained independence and simultaneously became a nation-state. However, the research on indigenous peoples inside the independent country has since been sparse. Martin Smith gives three reasons for this sparseness (1995: 222-30). In the first place, the state of continuing armed conflicts and its harrowing effects upon indigenous peoples, especially upon those in the very remote areas, have never ceased to exist. Logically connect to the tormenting effects thus is the fact that their hardships continue to be inadequately perceived and recognized by the outside world. Second, there is still the highly debilitating legacy of the British colonial governance's distortions of divide-and-rule strategy. Even after more than half a century has gone by, memories of antipathy between the dominant ethnic Burmans and other ethnic nationalities continue. These memories have invigorated animosity and fighting between them. It has been the civilians, however, who have suffered the most from the fighting, as will be witnessed later on in this study. The third reason for the lack of study has resulted from General Ne Win's policy of Burmanization and his xenophobic rule. Since his coup d'état in 1962, universities have been erratically open and closed, all too often. Many university

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5 This term is borrowed from Allen Feldman (1991: 65), yet the idea of the violence of cartographical practices and all the discourses accompanying it is influenced by Michael Shapiro (1997).

6 The British conquest of the Burman kingdom of Ava was accomplished after three Anglo-Burman wars – 1824-26, 1852-53, and 1885. The first war ended with the Treaty of Yandabu, concluded on February 24th, 1826. The kingdom ceded Assam, Arakan, and the coast of Tenasserim, including the portion of the province of Martaban east of the Salween River. The Burman king agreed to abstain from all interference in Kachar, Jyntia, and Manipur. The second war ended with the annexation of the province of Pegu or lower Burma, no treaty was signed. The remainder of the kingdom was annexed to the British Empire in 1885. During the last two wars many Karens served as scouts for and supported the British; this support of the Karens heightened the already intense animosity between the two peoples (Cady, 1958: 18, 67, 86-89, 116-21; Marshall, 1922: 127 n1; Silverstein, 1997: 168-69; and Scott, 1906: 190-95, 197-98, 204-5).

On November 28, 1885, Mandalay, the capital of the kingdom, fell and Thibaw the last Burman king and his two principal queens as well as their official escorts were taken immediately to Rangoon and
professors have been fired, departments, anthropology included, have been shut, and English language teaching for first graders discontinued. Most of these devastating policies continued after Ne Win left his powerful position in 1988 and another military junta succeeded him.

This chapter writes a history of the *becoming-ness* of “the Karens” in three aspects: a unified indigenous ethnic group, a Karen nation, and a minority. In the first place, the chapter aims to lay bare the instrumental discourses that essentialized the Karens as a unified indigenous ethnic group. In the second, it narrates both the event of Karen subjectification, in the Rancierian sense, and the conditions that enabled them to subjectify themselves as an ethnic nationality. Lastly, it situates the Karens in a larger picture among other ethnic nationalities after Burma gained independence and simultaneously became a nation-state in 1948. These three foci result from the main purpose of this chapter: to evince the close linkage between perceptibility, the political, and the atrocities upon an indigenous people.

Walter Mignolo points out that “Texo in Latin meant ‘to weave.’” And by transference, it was also used in the sense of “to interlace or to intertwine.” To write a text is thus to weave, to interlace various threads and render them intertwined. To write this historical chapter, in a way, is to interlace diverse historical warps and woof, weaving a literary fabric that is meant to protect the forcibly displaced Karens from their sheer fact of being (*zoe*) being revealed. For many of them have been treated as non-human without history, the same as they were treated before being baptized. With this

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thence to Madras (for a fascinating novel that depicts the exile of King Thibaw and his family to India, see Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* [2000]).

chapter, I intend to render them perceptible as a people with history, hence protecting them from having their forms-of-lives ripped off. In other words, writing a history is to provide an historical space. Yet, since we are writing a history of a people – from their becoming historical peoples back to their supposedly becoming ahistorical again as forcibly displaced peoples – we thus construct a continuity of a people. To write of a Karen nation is then to subscribe to an historiographical mode of homogenous continuum, opposed by Benjamin. Consequently, there is an incommensurability between writing the Rancierian mode of the Karen subjectification as a nation and the Benjaminian historiography.

Though written chronologically, the last two sections – becoming a nation and becoming a minority – interrupt the telling in the dominant version of “Burma’s history,” by interweaving a history of Burma as a nation-state with a history of ethnic nationalities. Not subscribing to Burma’s historical continuity, the narrative not only amplifies the entanglements between the nation-state and the varieties of peoples therein, but also shatters the order of coherence of Burma’s storyline. Although endorsing a nationalist history, this chapter deviates from the Burmese statist history. It also disrupts the dominant models of the hegemonic historiographies – whether of the Burmans or of the British – that have monopolized the telling of stories and memories of varieties of lives and subjectivities in the land called Burma. Such disruption will at times force the chapter’s narrative, as Guha aptly puts it, “to stutter in its articulation instead of delivering in an even flow of words” (1996: 12). With the chapter’s major aim of

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8 The Benjaminian historiography, however, will be most obvious in the narrative of the last chapter of this dissertation, especially when the chapter evokes the image of the Ratchaburi Hospital Siege near the Thai-Burmese state-boundary occurring on January 24-5, 2000.
foregrounding and centering on an history of the Karen indigenous peoples, it is
necessarily so.

A Typical Classification of the Karens

...the district of Toungoo was occupied by British troops early in 1853....

At that time nearly the whole of the Karen tribes on the mountains east of
Toungoo, that is, over an area of more than 2,000 square miles, were in a savage
state. The Burmese Government never had authority over any of the tribes living
more than a day's journey from the city and river.

In process of time, from the constant labour of...[American]...missionaries, many
thousands of the mountain Karens were instructed in Christianity, had abandoned
their savage mode of life and their cruel wars, and lived as Christian men and
women.... I have had ample opportunity personally of observing and of learning
from former cases as well as the present, what...[the missionaries]...have done for
the Karen mountaineers in the Toungoo district. They found them in a state of
savage barbarism. There are now twenty-five thousand of them either Christians,
or under Christian influence and teaching. They found them split up into tribes
and clans, warring against each other, and taking captives to sell as slaves.

Whatever the Gospel has been spread such acts no longer prevail. They have
ceased not only among Christian tribes, but also among the heathen tribes, except
those on the extreme border.... I assert, from long experience among similar
tribes, that such results could not be obtained by the Civil Administration, unaided
by missionary teaching.

A minute by the Chief Commissioner of British Burma, dated 1st May 1863.9

In a typical western ethnographic classification, there were more than twenty
subgroups of Karens with different dialects, in the land later known as the Burmese
nation-state, living in the delta region of the mouth of Irrawaddy, which is the inner part
of Burma, as well as in the hill region on the eastern part. According to John Cady,
among the three major groups of the Karens – i.e., the Pwo, Sgaw, and the Bwe – the Pwo
were the earliest Karen settlers who settled down in two separate areas. One group
situated themselves in the centers of the Mon (Talaing) powers in the areas around the

9 Quoted in McMahon, 1876: 175-76.
present-day cities of Thaton and Amherst located by the Gulf of Martaban, while the other settled down in the Bassein-Myaungmya areas of the delta region.¹⁰

The Sgaw they first settled in the watershed between the Sittang and Salween Rivers but were eventually dispersed, driven westward to the Irrawaddy Delta by the Burmans of the Pagan dynasty in the eleventh century. Those Sgaw who had situated themselves in the Shan plateaus also escaped the Burmans of the Pagan dynasty and moved southward to the mountainous region later known as Thai-Burmese border zones, extending as far south as Mergui. In the thirteenth century, the Shans pushed those who were still left in the Shan plateaus into the hills and southward down the Salween valleys (Cady, 1956: 826-30). Hence, as Marshall asserts, the Sgaw group was the most numerous and most widely scattered of the Karens. They were found all through the Irrawaddy Delta, from the vicinity of Prome southward, and from the Arakan coast eastward to the neighborhood of Lakong in Siam and southward to the lowest point of the British possessions. He states further that only one dialect, with slight variations, was used throughout the region of southern Toungoo Hills (Marshall, 1922:1).

As for the Bwe, they settled in the area lying east of Toungoo to the Karenni subdivision.¹¹ They were the only Karen group that never fell under Burman domination,

¹⁰ John F. Cady, 1956: 2: 826.
According to the Rev. Harry Marshall, the Pwo group comprised the Pwo themselves and the Taungthus (who called themselves the Pa-O). The Rev. Marshall’s ethnographic narrative, however, differs from that of Cady. For Marshall, the Pwo were found along the seacoast from Arakan to Mergui and were usually not seen more than fifty miles inland, except perhaps in Henzada. The Taungthus were found in a section of the Burma province running northward from Thaton into the Shan States beyond Taunggyi (Marshall, 1922: 1-3).

Those who take a look at the geopolitical map of Burma should will find that Amherst was later renamed Kyaikkami, Bassein became Pathein, Arakan renamed as Rakhine, Mergui became Beik, and Henzada was renamed as Hinthada. Moreover, Moulmein, the biggest city located between Thaton and Amherst, was also renamed as Mawlamyine; it is one of the most important seaports by the Andaman Sea.
and thus, according to Marshall, the area inhabited by them is the only one entitled to be
called Karen territory (1945:2; Silverstein, 1980: 16). Marshall states also that because
the areas where the Bwe were situated were very mountainous, one found the people
broke up into small tribes whose dialect, dress, and customs differed. Nine of these tribes
were enumerated in the 1911 Government census (Marshall, 1922: 3).

From the early histories of of the Karens until the 1950s, although many Karens
lived among the more dominant and aggressive Mons and Burmans, the close proximity
did not lead to assimilation (Cady, 1956: 828-32; cf. Silverstein, 1980: 16). Among the
three major groups of the Karens, the Pwo Karens of Amherst and Thaton districts (the
so-called “eastern Pwo”) and those of the Delta region (the so-called “western Pwo”)
were increasingly Burmanized (Cady, 1958: 368, n38; Marshall, 1922: 3). A subgroup
of the Pwo, the Taungthus or Pa-O, adopted the Theravada Buddhism of the Mons at and
early date (Cady, 1956: 828). The Sgaw occupied the bridge position between the plain
Karens, who were more or less Burmanized, and the more traditional groups living in the
mountains, like the Bwe, who largely remained so-called animists (1958: 368, n38; cf.
Marshall, 1922: 3).

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of the Indian Ocean. All these three cities are located not far from the Gulf of Martaban, which also was
later renamed as Mottama.

Learning the Karens’ “History(ies)”

Consider the generation of the fathers. They had no books; they had none to teach them anything; they had no teachers. Of the things in heaven and the things on earth, they knew nothing; but now, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the American teachers from the west have come and taught us, and we have obtained books in our own language. Then, when they instruct us, and explain to us the Holy Scripture, we ought every one of us, to seize on their instructions and retain them: for, had it not been for the teachers, we should have remained without books, in ignorance and darkness, to this day.

Let us then, in the strength of God, put forth strenuous efforts to acquire a knowledge of books; for should the teachers leave, we should be left as orphans. While they are with us, let us make every possible effort to study, so that we may understand for ourselves independently; and, should the teachers be no longer with us, that we may be able to instruct each other....

Sau Quala, the second Karen convert.12

This passage was written by the second baptized Karen, Sau Quola, who was regarded highly by the American missionaries for his exemplary evangelical efforts and compass in language “than perhaps any other Karen [sic]” (Mason, 1856: 134). It came from his article in Sgaw Karen published between 1842-1856 in the Morning Star, the first newspaper of the Burmans’ kingdom of Ava, and was translated and quoted in the Rev. Francis Mason’s article, “Sau Quala: the Second Karen Convert” (Ibid.). This passage exemplifies a notion that to know the Karens historically, especially their early historical times, necessarily means to know them as religious, Christianized people, with all that that evaluation assumes.

In attempting to understand the Karens’ history(ies), one must be aware of two issues. In the first place, having non-written cultures of the oral bard literature (e.g., Marshall, 1945: 37), the Karens were not in a position to inscriptively record their histories in their own language before the advent of the American missionaries. Those missionaries later helped reduce to writing two Karen dialects. Hence, to many loci of

12 Quoted in Mason, 1856: 134.

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enunciation, especially those of historians (whether state-sponsored or not), illiterate Karens’ accounts before the missionaries’ arrival were not considered as histories. Because history entails written account, those illiterate Karens’ stories were simply pre-historical.

The second issue to be aware of is that the earlier written histories of the Karens were inextricably linked to Karen Church history. As will be explored in more detail later in the chapter, for the first generations of the Karens, learning to be literate meant learning about Christianity from religious materials. Being a reading subject in their early times thus presupposed being a religious subjectivity; and discursive practices were impossible without religious practices. A British official attached to British Burma, for instance, wrote with the colonialist tone of civilizing discourse in a book published in 1876:

> It had never struck the Karens that...[their]...language, like that of the others, could be represented by signs, and when this was an accomplished fact, the effect on them was quite electrical.

> Tottering old men and aged matrons, as well as youths and maidens, whose pleasures were hitherto aimless and profitless, if not absolutely vicious, vied with each other in endeavouring to acquire even a smattering of learning, so as to be able to spell over the little Christian tracts which were first printed in their mother tongue. Actuated by such a spirit, their progress in the art of reading was marvelous, and the first literary ventures of the missionaries in the Karen language – devoured with enthusiasm by thousands – were eminently successful (McMahon, 1876: 74).

Moreover, the early generations of literate Karens were not in a position to record what they were doing and how they did it. They only knew why they did it: God’s calling. A passage from a book written by an American missionary about the mission work of the first baptized Karen – *The Karen Apostle or Memoir of Ko Thah Byu, the

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13 According to missionaries’ records regarding the Karens, there were some Karens who had already been familiar with the Burmese script, which was one of the reasons why the first missionary to devise the Karen alphabet chose the Burmese script for Karen written language – see more details in note.
First Karen Convert, with Notices Concerning His Nation – is suggestive of this reality regarding the first generation of literate Karens:

It would have been interesting to read the account of Ko Thah-byu’s [sic] wanderings in Pegu, and his attempts to go overland to Maulmain; but it is one of the evils of ignorance, that all her subjects must serve in silence, without the power to record the sufferings that her attendants, poverty and wretchedness, inflict. While the skillful hand of education often “gives to airy nothings a local habitation and a name,” the stern realities of humble life are left, like the untrodden forest, in all their native grandeur, without a hand to sketch them.¹⁴

Christianity liberated the Karens from their hardships. Missionaries were their saviours in the true sense of the term. A student of the first generation of the historical Karens, the period from the first baptism in 1828 onwards, therefore first encountered the written records of the missionaries and later on those of the British colonialists. To be sure, these records could at times be problematic, yet they could hardly be ignored.

It is contended here that without the nineteenth-century discourse and practices of ethnology, together with the civilizing discourse of Christianity, the Karens would not have existed as a unified national group – at least as early as the first half of that century. One always encounters, therefore, interlacing narratives of national tradition, Christianity, education, and civilization, all of which contributed to the discourse of Karens’ “national civilization” (e.g., Po, 1928: 58-65; Smeaton, 1887: 191-208).

In a land known as the Burman kingdom of Ava, a land with more than one hundred languages, the Karens were the first and foremost success story of the missionaries. Although this chapter will explore this success in detail, it is recognized at

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¹⁴ Mason, 1884: 79.

Two issues should be noted here. First, the spelling of Ko Thah Byu’s name in this book is not consistent. In the title of the book, for example, it is spelled as “Ko Thah Byu.” However, it is the former spelling that is generally employed in this book. Second, this book was published a few times (without clear record of its publishing): e.g., 1843, 1861, 1884, whereas the “first baptism” took place in 1828.
the outset that one of the Karens' internalized folktales was instrumental in their conversion to Christianity and in the successes of the British Empire's gazes and disciplinary practices upon them (cf. Harris, 1920: 153). The folktale has it that one day the Karens' "younger white brother" would bring the lost book back to them, the book that was "written" by Ywa. With that book, the brother would also set them free from those who had oppressed them. However, the Ywa folktale would not have been instrumental, and the reception of missionaries would not have been so welcoming, without the Karens' prior harrowing experiences of, and their other stories about, being treated atrociously by the hegemonic Burmans.

2. "No Better than Cattle": Becoming an Ethnic Group under Imperial Gazes

When Dr. Adoniram Judson, founder of the American Baptist Mission in Burma, had been in a country only a few years [ca. 1810s], he was traveling up the river to Ava, the capital of the country, when he caught a glimpse of a few shy men in baggy costumes slinking away into the jungles. He asked his boatmen who they were and learned that they were wild Karens. When he questioned further he was told that it was of no use for him to try to preach them for they were no better than cattle. They had no books, no laws, and no religion. Harry Marshall, "The Karens: An Element in the Melting Pot of Burma."15

Although the Rev. Harry Marshall stated in a small book published in 1945 that the Karens at that moment were the second most important ethnic group in British Burma, more than one hundred years earlier they had been labeled by their more powerful Burman neighbors as the "Wild Cattle of the Hills" (1945: 1). In the eyes of the dominant Burmans, the Karens had always been a mere fact of living (zoe), not a form-of-life (bios) that deserved recognition. Living supposedly unorganized in dense forests

The Rev. Judson and his wife arrived in Rangoon on June 13, 1813 (Judson, 1883: 74).
covering most of the Burman kingdom of the Alaungpaya Dynasty (1752-1885), the Burmans perceived the Karens as peoples without laws, books, or religion. Although they were lives without book traditions, the Karens had their own notions of law and religion, the latter of which was usually considered by outsiders as “animism.” Michael Symes, for instance, wrote in his *An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava*, first published in 1800, that the Karens “have traditional maxims of jurisprudence for their internal government, but are without any written laws: custom, with them, constitutes the law.” The Karens’ laws were orally-transmitted maxims, of which the village elders were guardians; and they had their own ways of associating and governing themselves both on the plains and in the hills. 16

From the early days until the present, the Karens have lived under various hegemonic powers: the Mons (or Talaings), the Burmans, the Shans, the Arakans, the Siamese, and the British. 17 The Karens were one of more than one hundred races who had lived or arrived in that land, later known as Burma and Thailand. They had arrived

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17 For a brief account of each hegemonic power, except the Siamese and the British, over these areas, see, e.g., Silverstein, 1980: 6-26. For the Siamese power over the Karens, see Renard, 1980.
prior to the dominant ethnic Burmans, who later became hegemonic over other peoples and established their first empire by the middle of the eleventh century (1044), the Pagan dynasty. The dynasty, however, fell in 1287. But the Burmans came back to rule again after gaining complete control over the Shans in the Upper Burma in 1604, and after destroying the Arakanese kingdom in the 1784-85 warfare (Silverstein, 1980: 18, 13).

One hundred years later, in 1885, the Burmans lost the whole kingdom to a more powerful and global hegemony, the British Empire, after three Anglo-Burman wars and became the easternmost province of British India until 1937, when it was separated from

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18 See e.g., Scott, 1906: 118; Silverstein, 1980: 10. Following Geoffrey E. Harvey, John S. Furnivall, and J. George Scott, Silverstein emphasizes: it is believed that the Mons migrated into this area preceding other peoples (Ibid., 14 n31). And following, Cady, Harvey, and Marshall (1945: 2), Silverstein maintains that the Karens originally came from what is now southern China during the sixth or seventh century (Silverstein, 1980: 15, n36) – yet, Marshall states that the Karens probably originated in China. As for the Burmans, Silverstein refers to D. George E. Hall’s approximate date of ninth to eleventh century and Gordon Luce’s of A.D. 839 for the first Burmans settling in the plains area of Upper Burma (Ibid.: 10, 11n).

From a theoretical standpoint of this dissertation, question concerning the theories of the “origin of the Karens,” is problematic. Yet, this question is an important issue that has always been stated by the Karens (e.g., KNU, 2000: 5; cf. Dun, 1980: 1-4, Lonsdale, n.d.: 5; Khin, 1999: 8). Here is another moment of incommensurability between the Karens’ nationalism that subscribes to the homogenous continuum historiography, on the one hand, and the Benjaminian historiography on the other.

For those who are interested in the issue of “origin of the Karens,” consult, for example, Marshall, 1922: 5-15; Keyes, 1979. Some writers take more decisive position stating that the Karens’ past and their migratory paths to where they now live remain unknown (Hayami & Darlington: 2000: 138); “[a]lthough ethnologists have advanced various theories, it is not known when the Karens first reached Burma, or where they came from, or why they came, or where they first settled” (Morrison, 1946: 14). On the contrary, at least one writer presents an exact date of the migratory path, a linear migratory path from their origin (Lonsdale, n.d.: 23):

i) B.C. 2617: Migration of the Karens from Mongolia
ii) B.C. 2013: Arrival of the Karens in East Turkistan
iii) B.C. 1866: Migration of the Karens from East Turkistan
iv) B.C. 1864: Arrival of the Karens in Tibet
v) B.C. 1388: Migration of the Karens form Tibet (The Karens settled down in Tibet for 476 years)
vi) B.C. 1385: Arrival of the Karens in Yunnan in China
vii) B.C. 1128: Migration of the first group from Yunnan to S.E. Asia
viii) B.C. 1125: Arrival of the first group Karens who entered S.E. Asia
ix) B.C. 741: Migration of the second group of the Karens from Yunnan to S.E. Asia
x) B.C. 759: The last arrival of the second group to enter S.E. Asia

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the British India (Silverstein, 1997: 173). British interest lay mainly in the profitable export of teak, rice, and to some extent ruby. The British also intended to control the eastern extreme of British India against the French in Vietnam. By 1890, the colonial administration was established and the Karens’ place in the Empire secured.

**Classifying Peoples, Administrating Colonial Polities**

The extensive territories which constitute the Burmese empire are not inhabited by one nation alone, but by many, differing essentially in language, manners, and customs. The principal of these are the Burmese [sic], who occupy the tract of land called the kingdom of Ava, which extends from the city of Pyi or Pron [Prome], in 19° north latitude, as far as 24°, and from 112° to 116° east longitude, from the meridian of the island of Ferro.

Father Sangermano, *A Description of the Burmese Empire.*

To narrate a history of the Karens as a history of a strictly distinct anthropological entity, however, is to miss the culturo-political complexities of lives in one of the most diversified areas of the world (cf. Smith, 1999: 30; Taylor, 1980: 7). Such a narrative gives an impression that all the peoples have been distinctly maintaining their identities without any identity negotiations and translations. This notion of strict distinctiveness result from the nineteenth century European discourses of anthropology and ethnology: racially classifying “the others” following a scientific taxonomy of racial differences on earth, especially in the “uncivilized” worlds, and hence reinforcing and, in many cases,

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19 Sangermano, 1966, p. 42.

The first edition of this book was published in 1833. Father Sangermano arrived in Burma in 1783 (1966: xxxiii). It is therefore very likely that this passage was written in that last quarter of the eighteenth century, which is a representative of the European practice of mapping the world and classifying peoples. (The passage is in chapter five, “Of the Inhabitants of the Burmese Empire” (Ibid.: 42-44) where one also finds another passage about the Karens which Josef Silverstein notes that it was considered to be one of the earliest descriptions of the Karens [Silverstein, 1980: 15].)

20 See, e.g., Bhabha, 1994: 28 and passim. The notion of cultural translation and negotiation will be discussed more in the last chapter. Anthropologist like F.K. Lehman (1967) and historian like Victor
constructing national and racial identity. In other words, it can be argued that the strictly
distinct ethnic groups in British Burma in the nineteenth century were essentialized by
the British Empire as part of the processes of administrating the easternmost province of
British India. Recalling Foucault, the Empire took British Burma through the threshold
of modernity through the practices of biopolitics. Recalling Agamben, the Empire
sovereign inscribed various groups of human lives into its frontier.

In *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*,
James Ryan evinces, among other things, the close connections between the nineteenth
century European discourse of ethnology and photography. For travelers, explorers, and
anthropologists, picture-taking helped secure, through the photographed bodies, the
classification of collective “uncivilized” others, without the necessity of recognizing their
individualities, let alone the names of those being photographed. As Ryan states, the
practice of photography in picturing “race” was closely tied to the increasing concern
with the accuracy of systems of human classification, which followed Charles Linnaeus’
*Systema Naturae*, published in 1735. The book’s focus on natural history transformed
European ways of viewing humans. It defined human races in taxonomic terms; a range
of criteria was elaborated based on various aspects of the human form, usually including
the shape of the head and the color of the skin (Ryan, 1997: 146). However, as David
Spurr clarifies, classification in the later eighteenth century not merely arranged the
visible, but it also performed “a circular analysis that related the visible to the invisible”
(1993: 63). In other words, the signs manifested on the natural beings confirm the

Lieberman (1978) have demonstrated the translations and negotiations of cultural identities of various
ethnic groups either before or after Burma became a nation-state in 1948.
internal character, hidden cause, and the functions of those beings. In human races, for example, such character, cause, and functions helped establish an identity as a group as much as a hierarchy between groups. There was more than one type of humans; and they were not equal.

In Charles Darwin’s *Journal of Researches into the Geology and National History of the Various Countries Visited by the H.M.S. Beagle*, published in 1839, a passage describing a group of Indians at Tierra del Fuego illustrates this point. Darwin finds the Fuegans “stunted in their growth, their hideous faces bedaubed with white paint, their skins filthy and greasy, their voices discordant, their gestures violent and without dignity” (1839: 235, quoted in Spurr, Ibid.: 63-4). Living without homes, sleeping on the wet ground, subsisting on simple diets of shellfish, berries, and fungi, riding on 250-year-old-technology canoes, and seemingly lacking government, Darwin moves from these visible signs and functions to their invisible character. He wondered whether the Fuegans would have an intellectual life: “How little can the higher power of the mind be brought into play? What is there for imagination to picture, for reason to compare, for judgement to decide upon?” (1839: Ibid.; quoted in Spurr, Ibid.: 64). Darwin then classifies the Fuegans at a lower state of being than peoples in any other part of the world.

In the nineteenth century Europeans’ eyes, the world must be mapped, peoples placed side by side, but each group’s functions and characters located them at different stages in the process of human advancement. At the top, and as the goal, were the Europeans. With Darwin, the principle of internal organic structure in natural history was transferred to the classification of humanity in two ways. The principle refers to

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21 Even in the first quarter of the twentieth century the practice of photographing and classifying
“moral or intellectual character in the human mind as well as to the social and political character of human society;” and the two subjects of valuations remained intimately connected inasmuch as the higher orders of technology and government reflect a greater capacity for reason and human feeling (Spurr, 1993: 64).

With books written by the likes of Linnaeus and Darwin, at least as early as this, the Europeans started to be concerned with the accuracy of human classification as well as the faith in the notion of inherent racial characteristics. The language and imagery of ‘race’ which was used variously as a measure of bodily difference and as a description of national identity occupied a central place within the Victorian culture. The constructed national orders of humans became a natural order of things in the colonial worlds.

Hence, the rise of the sciences of, first, ethnology and, later, anthropology in the nineteenth century “fixed the idea of ‘race’ as a natural category” with which “to differentiate and rank ‘types’ of humans, invariably placing the white, Anglo-Saxon male at the pinnacle of intellectual, moral and physical development.”22 Moreover, the interest in “race” was not only increasingly focused around the practices of the discourses of anthropology and ethnology, it also pervaded all manners of other scientific discourses, whose practices and concerns carried imperial import. Hence, nineteenth-century debates on human acclimatization, for instance, tied together varieties of interests within geography, anthropology, biology, and medicine.

Furthermore, the European discourse of ethnology also fits well with the civilizational discourse of Christianity. In fact, the two mutually contributed to each

indigenous peoples in British Burma was still common, see e.g., Marshall, 1922; Scott, 1906.

other; and, more importantly, they both contributed to the European project of colonization. For to colonize was not only to take hold of the land, to classify and administer the peoples therein, but also to seize the hearts and minds of “its wild inhabitants, rousing them from a state of nature that rendered them indistinguishable from their rude surroundings” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1988: 6). In other words, from the imperial gaze, the European colonization transformed many “uncivilized” indigenous peoples from a sheer fact of living to form a recognized form-of-life.

The European as well as the American citizens practiced these civilizational discourses. Hence, in the Burman kingdom of Ava, the Rev. Adoniram Judson, founder of the American Baptist Mission in Burma, wrote in his journal on April 22nd, 1827 of a hopeful inquirer who was a Karen man: “We hope that his mind, though exceedingly dark and ignorant, has begun to discern the excellency of the religion of Christ” (quoted in Mason, 1884: 3). Under the shadow of western colonization projects, explorers, traders, travelers, priests, the Queen’s servants, and soldiers all embarked on widespread trips to the “uncivilized” worlds. The interrelations of the mercenary and missionary spread out to rule the world as imperial sovereign powers – mapping places, classifying peoples, civilizing the savages, administrating the conquered polity, and demarcating the frontiers.

Rev. Edward Harris, another well-known American missionary to Burma, illustrates such interweaving in his article titled, “The conservation of a race as a missionary by-product” (Harris, 1920):

Burma is situated near the head of those spurs and lesser ranges which, beginning in the eastern part of the Himalayas, extend, fanlike, in a southeasterly direction, to the borders of the continent of Asia at Singapore and other points, and crop up beyond, in the partly submerged mountain islands of the Andamans and the East Indian Archipelago. Three of
these ranges pass through Burma itself, the Eastern, Middle, and Western Yomas. In the northern part of the country other ranges cross and intersect in such a way as to divide the face of the land into numerous little valleys (Ibid.: 149).

The narrative evinces a typical practice of delineating topographies and closely connecting to varieties of peoples living there. The narrative then moves to peoples’ immigration to the areas:

There have been several invasions of Burma by immigrants from China on the north, but these have not been like the early migrations of barbarian hordes into Europe, when the oncoming hosts surged in like a great flood. The mountain barriers have prevented that. Rather these invasions have been like a mere spill, the dashing of spray, a trickle over the passes of the mountains at numerous periods and at various intervals. Many of these waters lodged in little valleys here and there, and formed so many separate communities, sometimes only half a dozen small villages constituting a tribe, all with its own peculiar dialect. It is only those tribes which in some way push on or are thrust on to the more open country to the south that can ever become numerically important (Ibid.).

Then, the narrative starts to valorize the differences between ethnic groups through linguistic signifiers as well as reinforced them by the British Empire’s apparatus of census, as part of the mechanism of colonial administration:

No fewer than sixty-five indigenous languages and dialects are named in the Government census, and the list is by no means exhaustive. In olden times, these races and tribes were comparatively stable, but recently, with a strong government over the whole country, improved communications, and increased trade, nearly all of these races and dialects are in a state of flux. The tendency is for the smaller tribes to be swallowed up in the larger. The census indicates that of the sixty-five languages and dialects listed, no fewer than seventeen showed a decrease in number, three of these actually becoming extinct. Of the rest, fifteen have increased chiefly because they have only recently been brought into the area covered by the census operations, and eight are so small as to be negligible (Ibid.: 149-50; my emphasis).

Although acknowledging the flux and mobility of peoples after communications and transportation became more accessible, Harris was not aware, or at least did not acknowledge, that cultural negotiations and translations had always been omnipresent even before the advent of the Europeans. By relying on language as a sole signifier of distinct ethnic group, Harris employed a very problematic indicator of cultural identity, especially in the context of Burma. In the census of 1931, eleven years after Harris’
article was published, J.H. Green wrote a report included in the appendix of the census. Green disagreed with the method of racial classification that relies on linguistic distinction: "linguistic evidence...when used as the sole basis is liable to lead, and in the case of the races of Burma, has, I think, led to many errors in our racial classifications." He argues further that "some of the races or tribes change their language as often as they change their cloths." To be sure, Harris also mentions other distinctive characteristics of the Karens apart from language. The skin colour, for instance, of the Karens: 

are naturally lighter of skin than the Burmans, and it is said that most of the latter who are of fairer complexion than their fellows are descendants of Karen women who had been captured in some raid and held as slaves (Harris, Ibid.: 151).

With both language and skin colour as signifiers essentializing an ethnic group, Harris writes both about the ethnic groups’ numerical fluctuations:

Coming across a copy of the last Government census report of Burma not long since, I was greatly and happily surprised by what I learned. Formerly I had supposed that the Karens were a decadent race, or at least that they were losing their language and their distinguishing racial characteristics.... Not so very long since, -- in fact I think it was less than thirty years ago, but I have not the figures at hand, -- they [the Karens] stood fourth among the races of Burma in numerical importance, not only the Burmese [sic], but also the Talaings [Mons] and Shans taking precedence over them. Now, on the other hand, they stand second, the Talaings and Shans having been outdistanced. During the ten-year period covered by the census, while the population of the province as a whole increased from 10,490,624 to 12,115,217, or fifteen per cent, and the Burmese[sic] population from 7,437,363 to 8,317,842, or about twelve per cent, the number of persons actually speaking the different dialects of the Karens language rose from 881,290 to 1,067,363, as advance of the over twenty-one percent. Part of this increase has been due to the inclusion of dialects of tribes which were not formerly comprised in the census areas (Ibid.: 147-48; my emphasis).

It did not matter that the narrative was written by an American missionary and not by one of the British. Harris’ narrative illustrates the extent to which the nineteenth century European discourses and practices of anthropology, geography, and population control were hegemonic practices of constructing/accounting the world. It was the

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ordering of the world that had Her Majesty the Queen at the top with the help of her servants constantly gazing at topographies, classifying peoples, appropriating nature, and affirming the “White Man’s Burden.” Ethnic groups in the areas later known as Burma received the new regime of colonial rule with varying reactions. Some resisted colonialism outright while others welcomed it as a turn in their political favor. The Karens were a people whose livelihood had been transformed since the first baptism of their peoples (which will be narrated in details in the next section) and later on under the control of the British Empire, as Harris writes:

> with the advent the British all...[the Karens’ hardship]...was of course changed at once. Since then, the Karens have been protected in their pursuits, have enjoyed perfect liberty to go and come at their pleasure without fear of others, and have experienced such prosperity and ease as they had never known before (Harris, 1920: 151).

Although set as a colonial province of British India, British Burma would be administered separately from India. Creating strong central authorities backed by its judicial, administrative, and security apparatuses, the British administrative system mainly followed the dual system of governance employed by the Burman kings before them: direct rule over peoples of the plains and indirect rule over peoples of the hills. Before the advent of the British, the Burmans, Mons, and Arakanese were ruled directly in “Burma proper”; the Karens and other hill peoples were ruled indirectly in the “Frontier areas.” The eastern border with Siam was more or less demarcated, Assam

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24 This narrative follows David Spurr’s narrative structure in his *Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (1993). He devotes a chapter to each of twelve rhetorical modes, or ways of writing about non-Western peoples, e.g., surveillance: under western eyes; appropriation: inheriting the earth; aestheticization: savage beauties; classification: the order of nations; debasement: filth and defilement; negation: areas of darkness.

25 Silverstein, 1980: 23-4; and see pages 26-32 for the details of the British administrative system.
and Manipur were retained as parts of India, and the northern and northeastern frontiers with China roughly set. Unlike the case of Siam, colonial encounters did not create Burma as a sovereign nation. Rather, British Burma was a mosaic of peoples and places brought and/or constructed for the first time under an Empire. With the advent of the missionaries and the British Empire, lives in British Burma would not be the same. Let us now turn to the transformation of the Karens collective-selfhood from being an indigenous ethnic group into being a nation, a transformation that occurred after the colonial encounter.

According to Silverstein, geographically state, in the lower kingdom of Ava and parts of the upper, the Arakanese, the Mons, and the Karens had been the predominant ethnic groups apart from the Burmans. In the oval-shaped ring of hills and mountains adjoining the upper kingdom, the dominant group numerically had been Shans, Kachins, Chins, Karennis (Kayahs), and also the Karens, which controlled more than 95 per cent of the frontier area between them (Ibid.: 13, 17-8, 20).

26 A few years after the third Anglo-Burma war, the British Burma's boundary with its neighboring sovereignties was demarcated: with Siam in 1893; with France 1895; with China in 1900. Although the boundary with China northward remained unmarked, but because it was constituted by the watershed between the Salween and the N'maikha rivers, actual pillars were not needed (Scott, 1906: 206).

27 For the case of Siam, see, e.g., Thongchai, 1994.

The Oppressed, the Baptized, and A Nation

Eat fast, eat fast. The Burmans may come! 

If he comes by land, fear him. If he comes by sea, receive him. 

The book that Thra [teacher] Boardman saw was only in English, but the book that Headman Shwe Waing had was in Karen, and when it was read, it sounded in Karen. So the Karens who heard about it were overjoyed and wanted to know most about that one. Their thirst for it can never be fully satiated. They never tired of talking about it either. Just by listening to them, it appeared to be a great miracle. There might have been some people who did not remember the prophesies of their fore-fathers, and so the distance to the book seemed far for them and they were unable to proclaim in a loud voice saying, “Now we the Karens will be with their own God who will crush their arch-enemy that has persecuted them for ages.” Who can tell, but, as we know, it was a great joy and comfort for the Karens in the day of persecution. Those who had seen and heard the words from this book, wherever they went or stopped, they couldn’t stop talking about it and praising it. Even children, young ladies and women, talked about this book. If possible, they would steal a glance at the book at night when the owner was fast asleep, just to pacify and satisfy their immense excitement.

Thus wrote the Rev. T. Than Bya in the first book written by a Karen (Petry, Ibid.: 65-66) in Sgaw Karen. It is hard for non-Karen peoples to appreciate the Karens’ immense excitement evident in this passage unless they know that the Karens believed that “a younger white brother” would bring their lost book across the great waters, and would thereby set them free from all those who had oppressed them (e.g., Mason, 1843: ?; Marshall, 1922: 297-98). Before the advent of the missionaries and the British, living in what many Karens referred to as “the days of persecution” meant withdrawing from rivers and fleeing deeper into the jungles or higher up in the hills due to antagonistic

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28 That was how many Karen peoples admonished their children (Marshall, 1945: 2).

29 An old saying of the Karen elders, mentioned in Harris, 1920: 153. It should be noted here that the Rev. Edward Harris later had two published books of compilations of the Karens’ folklore: Karen Folklore (1936); The Rice Fairy: Karen Stories from Southeast Asia (1987)
Hence, he is one a few non-Karen experts on the Karen folklores.
encounters with the dominant Burmans.\textsuperscript{31} Among the indigenous peoples living in this land, the Karens, writes Silverstein, “suffered most at the hands of the Burmans and was afforded the least opportunity to intermarry and associate with them” (1980: 15). The violent encounters were often recorded by westerners that had arrived in these areas.

The discursive relations between the Burmans, the Karens, and the western-centered world began over two centuries ago. Father Sangermano, whose description is believed to be one of the earliest narratives of the Karens and was written in the last quarter of the eighteenth century,\textsuperscript{32} writes, for instance, of

...a good and peaceable people, who live dispersed through the forests of Pegu in small villages consisting of four or five houses.... Although residing in the midst of the Burmese [sic] and Peguans, they not only retained their own language, but even their dress, houses and everything else are distinguished from them... They are totally dependent upon the despotic government of the Burmese [sic].\textsuperscript{33}

In a letter dated February 18, 1847 and sent to a Bishop named Boucho in France, Plaisant, a French missionary in the forests, wrote about the Karens’ lives, their so-called “animist” beliefs and the traditional Burmese policy towards some Karen religious practices. Parts of the letter, summarized by Kennon Breazeale, read:

Before the British took possession of the country [1824-5], the Karens held their religious ceremonies in secret. The Burmese cruelly persecuted anyone who worshipped any god other than Gaudama [the Buddha’s name], and they even massacred their victims.

\textsuperscript{31} See e.g., Cady, 1956: V.2: 832-33; Marshall, 1945: 1; Symes, 1800, V. 2: 109.
\textsuperscript{32} Silverstein, 1980: 15. See also Michael Symes’ \textit{An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava} (1800, V. 2: 107-9) who mentions how he learnt so much from this priest (who had been deputed to Burma twenty years before him) including about the Karens, of whom Symes wrote as “Carayners” or “Carianers.”

According to Donald Smeaton, the Roman Catholics had arrived to the kingdom of Ava before the Protestants for many years, but did not pay attention to the Karens. Not until the first Anglo-Burman war (1824-1825) did the Karens begin to attract the missionaries’ attention (1887: 192).

\textsuperscript{33} Sangermano, 1966: 44; my emphasis. In the time of Father Sangermano, the Karens were called by westerners as “Carian.”
They always made the victims pay a heavy ransom if the latter did not wish to change their religion. According to some older Karens, the Karens were discovered many times while performing their ceremonies and they were taken before the governor at Faway, where they were caned and forced to ransom their lives with enough silver pieces to fill two coconuts.

Since the arrival of the British, these religious assemblies are hardly held any more among the Karens who live closest to the coast. Little by little, without losing their dogmatic traditions, most have mixed with the Burmese, adopting the Burmese superstitions...  

After the first Karen baptism in 1828, however, lives for the baptized Karens would not be the same. They gradually came to feel equal to the Burmans now that they had their own (read western) religion, which was the religion of those who would later (especially after 1885 and King Thibaw’s deposition) rule Burma and the Burmans. The collective sentiments of equality, confidence, and security were unprecedented in the history of the Karens; one major reason is that they had never felt united as a people (cf. Cady, 1958: 138, 368). Ethnically speaking, with more than twenty subgroups, it was not easy for the Karens to have such collective understanding as a people. As Donald Smeaton, an ardent admirer of the Karens, writes in his famous book, The Royal Karens of Burma:

Up to 1828 [the first baptism], they were, as a separate nation, unknown. They were looked upon as a mixed horde of aboriginal savages. No one had dreamt of their being a

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34 Letter, Plaisant to Bishop Boucho, 18 February 1847. In Annales de la Propagation de la Foi (Lyons), vol. 20 (1848), pp. 419-26. The quotation drawn from an email of my correspondence with Dr. Kennon Breazeale on August 7, 2002. I am very grateful to Dr. Breazeale for this quotation.

It must be noted here however that there is a disagreement on this view, which I have not always come across. Below is a passage written by a Karen, Saw Hanson Tadaw, who wrote an unpublished Master’s thesis at the University of London in 1958 titled The Karens of Burma: A Study in Human Geography:

Most of the Western scholars were under the impression that the Karens were severely oppressed by their superiors and that they were totally dependent upon the despotic government of the Burmans. Actually, under certain despotic Burman kings, the Karens were not particularly oppressed; the oppression they suffered, such as heavy taxation and forced labour, was general throughout the country, and affected the Burman[s] and Mon[s] population as well. It might be that in certain administrative areas, however, the local officers for personal gains would be more oppressive than the others (1961: 498).
united little people, with such a history and such capacities for national life as they have.\textsuperscript{35}

Even though the Christian Karens have always been the minority among the Karens population,\textsuperscript{36} it was the arrival of the Christian missionaries, primarily American Baptist missionaries, as well as the British colonialists, who played vital roles in the Karens' advancement toward western ideals of life. In the words of an exile Karen, the Karen peoples "were able to emerge from obscurity" (Khin, 1999: 2). A Burman historian once wrote that before the British arrival, Karens were administratively and culturally outside of the picture; after the arrival, Karens "emerge[d] from their jungle hideouts to form in time the nucleus of the first real indigenous minority group" (Kyaw Thet, 1956: 231). The Rev. Edward Harris concedes that without the Karens' remarkable preparedness to receive Christianity, the missionaries' effort, whatever their zeal and faithfulness, would have met with comparatively meager success (1920: 153).

\textsuperscript{35} Smeaton, 1887: 192; my emphasis. Interestingly, John F. Cady states that though Smeaton's book is biased in favor of the Karens, it "contains correct factual data" (1958: 130 n14).

\textsuperscript{36} See also Marshall, 1922: 3-4; Mason, 1856: 130; Po, 1928: 63. In the Rev. Harris' article, mentioned in the last section, he mentions about the census but does not give its date: the number of Christian Karens, was 130,271, which was less than twelve per cent of the entire Karen population (1920: 163). One can, however, question how the census operator could arrive at the whole number of the entire Karen population, let alone the basic question of the operational criteria employed to define Karen-ness.

In 1990, at the 175\textsuperscript{th} Judson Jubilee (December 13-16), Rangoon, Burma, the Pwo Karens had six Associations, 195 churches, and approximately 15,000 members, compared to the Sgaw's 17 Associations, 1,270 churches, and approximately 170,000 members in the country (Petry, 1993: 84). Jeffrey Petry notes that Baptist counted only baptized members of the church and not their families (Ibid.: n2).
It is not often given to witness such a remarkable development of national character as has taken place among the Karens under the influence of Christianity and good government. Forty—ay, thirty—years ago they were a despised, grovelling, timid people, held in open contempt by the Burmese [sic]. At the first sound of the gospel message they sprang to their feet as a sleeping army springs to the bugle-call. The dream of hundreds of years was fulfilled; the God who had cast them off for their faithlessness had come back to them; they felt themselves a nation once more. Their progress since then has been by leaps and bounds, all from an impetus within themselves, and with no direct aid of any kind from their rulers; and they bid fair soon to outstrip their Burmese conquerors in all the arts of peace.

Donald M. Smeaton, *The Royal Karens of Burma.*

The baptized Karens were overjoyed when they heard “the book,” read in (Sgaw) Karen, “sounded in Karen.” They did not want to learn the Bible in the Burmese language: “The Burmese language is not our language, and their ways are not our ways.”

Just four years after the first Karen man, Ko Thah Byu (a murderer-turned-evangelist), had been baptized on May 16, 1828 by the Rev. George D. Boardman in Tavoy (Marshall, 1922: 296), the reduction to writing of Sgaw dialect was completed. While Sgaw Karen writing system was adapted from the Burmese script by the Rev. Jonathan Wade in February 1832, the first books to appear in Pwo Karen appeared in

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37 Smeaton, 1887: 64.


Interestingly, as the Rev. Edward Harris notes, the Rev. Wade had devised the Karens alphabet before he knew how to speak any of the Karen dialects: “Those who are familiar with its ear-teasing consonants and its complicated system of vowel tones wonder how he did it. It stands to-day [sic] as a monument to his genius.” The way Wade reduced the Karen alphabet was by adapting the Burmese alphabet to the expression of Karen sounds, and produced a system of writing which is purely phonetic (Harris, 1920: 160-61).

To the question of why the Rev. Wade did not adapt from the Roman alphabet, the Rev. Harris avers that “some Karen sounds defy expression with Roman letters.” Moreover, it would be easy for the
1838, translated by the Rev. D. L. Brayton, the architect of Pwo Karen script. The development of education among the Karens helped proliferate the production of books written by missionaries and later by the Karens themselves, which replaced the oral bard literature (Marshall, 1945: 37). Printed in Sgaw Karen and starting in 1842, The Morning Star, the very first and longest running vernacular newspaper in Burma (and also the first in southeast Asia) was started in the town of Tavoy by the Rev. Francis Mason. Though disrupted briefly during the Second World War, it ran until it was forcibly closed down shortly after General Ne Win seized power in 1962 (Ibid.: 37-8; 1922: 310; Smith 1999: 44).

By 1843, or only eleven years after the introduction of the first Karen writing system, the list of books in the Sgaw Karen increased enormously: the complete New Testament, an Epitome of the Old Testament of 840 page, another Supplement to the Hymn Book of 128 page, and even a Child’s Book of 154 pages. In 1853, only twenty-five years after the first baptism of Ko Thah Byu, the entire Bible in Sgaw Karen, a literate Karens who had already been familiar with the Burmese script to learn Karens, and those who would start from Karen language study could also learn Burmese later, he asserts. Interestingly, he adds that to the average Karens, and for many generations to come, Burmese would be of far more value than English (Ibid.: 161). Apart from the reason of some Karens' familiarity with the Burmese script, according to Jeff Petry, the other one was that “more importantly” the same type could be used with the printing process already in operation for the Burmese literature by adding only three more characters. Petry maintains that although some Karens did not appreciate Wade’s decision of employing the Burmese alphabet (see also Harris, Ibid.: 161), most were very grateful for his services (Petry, 1993: 79-80).

40 Petry, 1993: 82.

However, in a revision of his doctoral dissertation, Karen Linguistic Studies: Description, Comparison, and Texts (1961: v), Robert B. Jones. Jr. states that it was Rev. Francis Mason who was the first to adapt Sgaw writing system to Pwo (or the Pho according to Jones).

Maung Shwe Wa et al. explain why Sgaw Karen was reduced into written script before Pwo Karen: “Since Sgaw Karen has no final consonants and every syllable ends in an open vowel sound, it proved easier to reduce to writing than Pwo with its nasals” (Wa et al., Ibid.: 312, quoted in Petry 1993: 80). Moreover, although Wade hastily adapted the script to Sgaw dialect and hoped to revise and improve the system after furlough, he did so well that little change was made later. In addition, the first printing in Sgaw Karen was a tract of six pages and a spelling-book of thirty-three pages, published in 1832 (Ibid.).
volume of 1,040 pages, was published. By that time the list of books available to Christian Karens included such items as a *Church History* of 468 pages, a *Catalogue of Plants*, a *Key to Astronomy*, and school text from *Infant’s Readers* to *Trigonometry*. The monumental *Karen Thesaurus* in four volumes had 3,243 pages. Moreover, in 1845, seventeen years after the first baptism, a Karen Theological Seminary was organized by the Rev. J.G. Binney at Moulmein, which was later moved to Rangoon and Insein. In 1875, the Baptist college at Rangoon, which later became the very famous Judson College (known as the “Karen College”), was established as a part of the Rangoon University (Marshall, 1922: 300; 1945: 36). More Karens came down from the hills, or came out of the jungles, to join the growing Christian communities (cf. Harris, 1920: 159).

Since the arrival of missionaries and the British colonialists, many baptized Karens became researchers (scientific or otherwise), physicians, university lecturers, high-ranking government officials, soldiers, or policemen. A few of these people were sent to continue their higher education at prestigious universities both in the U.S. and

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41 Wa et al., Ibid.: 313; quoted in Petry, 1993: 80. According to the Rev. Harris, it was the Rev. Francis Mason who translated the Bible into *Sgaw Karen* writing system (1920: 161).

42 Wa et al., Ibid.: 313; quoted in Petry, 1993: 80-1. However, according to the Rev. Harris, there were five “thick volumes” of the *Karen Thesaurus* (Harris, 1920: 161).

Moreover, there were translations into *Sgaw Karen* later of the *Arabian Nights*, Banyan’s *Pilgrims’ Progress* and many other short stories and pamphlets. Almost all vernacular newspapers and monthly periodicals were managed by the Karens (Marshall, 1922: 310).

43 Under the British rule, Karens made up a majority of the indigenous military forces down to 1940 (Cady, 1958: 141 n56). The first Union of Burma’s commander-in-chief of the army and of the police forces was General Smith Dun, a Karen. But his tenure was short-lived because of the confrontations between the Burmese government and the Karen National Union (KNU). He was removed from his command on February 1, 1949. His *Memoirs of the Four-foot Colonel* (1980) is well known among students of the histories of the Karens or Burma on the eve of its independence.
England. These Karen leaders of their respective fields, together with the proliferation of written materials, both in Sgaw and Pwo Karens, were the impetus for the Karens to enact and reenact their collective identities together with the far-away Karens in the kingdom of Ava, constructing the Karen nationhood. Recalling a main thrust of Benedict Anderson’s seminal work (1991), through the creation of a reading public, the Karen began to imagine their community as a nation.

In a culturally complex kingdom of Ava, many indigenous peoples, with no book traditions and structures of sociability resulting from civilizational discourses, had often been exploited, oppressed, destroyed, and/or left at the margins if they were worthless, Christianity therefore provided these peoples with literacy and education, health care and expanded western-like social organizations. Hence, for the baptized Karens, the advent of the “younger white brother” meant spiritual, social, and material advancement – one that would soon surpass that of most Burmans. The progress of the Karens following western ideals of life was so impressive that some westerners inside British Burma made remarks that arguably heightened the Burmans’ collective animosity toward the Karens, as documented in Donald Smeatons’ *The Royal Karens of Burma*:

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44 To name just a very few prominent Karens from the past to the present.

Dr. T. Than Bya, whose passage we started this section with, was probably one of the earliest individuals, if not the very first person, from Burma to acquire a higher western academic degree. He was sent aboard by the American Baptist Mission to study at the University of Rochester, New York. He was a founder and the first President of the Karen National Association (Khin, 1999: 6; Petry, 1993:90).

Dr. San C. Po, widely regarded as “father” of the Karen nation, a physician by training and a graduate from an American medical college, was appointed in 1916 and serving for several years in the Legislative Council of British Burma, being the first member of the Karens to be thus honoured (Cady, 1958: 141; Marshall, 1922: 310; Smith, 1999: 51).

Saw Ba U Gyi, who later became the first president of the Karen National Union, the governing body fighting for, first, a separate country for the Karens, later, a certain level of autonomy for the Karen State.
I have heard it said by an officer of great experience in Burma and a keen observer, “The Burma cannot stand before the Karen[sic]. The Karen[sic] and the native of India will divide Burma between them.... Strange, indeed, it would be if in the distant future the Karen[sic] should become the master and the Burman[sic] the servant, and if, as was predicted fifty years ago by an eminent missionary on his death-bed, “The Burmese[sic] should receive eternal life at the hands of those who were once their slaves.” (1887: 202-3)

Jeff Petry aptly puts it: “Once converted, the mobility begins, physically, psychologically, and socially. One’s cosmology is redefined” (1993: 63). It would not be long for political advancement to be the Karens’ aspiration, not only as individuals, but also as a nation – to paraphrase Ranciere, becoming a part with some parts in the “community” called Burma.

A colonizing religion like Christianity was recognized differently by the Burmans and the Karens: the former felt threatened and oppressed deeper, the latter liberated. The “superior” Burman elite started to view the so-call “Karens’ advancement” with suspicion, envy, and animosity.

One village of nearly a thousand inhabitants worshipped God...for some time, unknown to the Burmans; but, when the latter learned the fact, they sent an armed force to destroy the village. Some of the Karens inquired of their leader if they should fight. “No,” replied the chief: “it is inconsistent with the worship of our God to fight. We will cast ourselves upon his protection.” They then opened their gates, brought forth their weapons of defense, and laid them at the feet of their enemies. Thus defenseless, they were immediately slain by their cruel oppressors, the Burmans.... This record seems incredible; and yet in the year 1851, -- even so late a date at that, -- the Burmese viceroy

Nowadays, one of the most, if not the most, important surgeons in Burma is Dr. Simon Tha, a staunch Karen Nationalist who found a way to work under the SLORC/SPDC and to remain active on both medical and cultural work for the Karens inside reachable areas from Rangoon, the capital of Burma.


In the Rev. Francis Mason’s book about the first baptized Karen, The Karen Apostle or Memoir of Ko Thah Byu, he states that in 1837, or just nine year after Ko Thah Byu’s baptism:

...the Burmese government had become alarmed at the fact of so many Karens having embraced a foreign religion. The Christians were oppressed, fined, imprisoned, and annoyed in every conceivable manner. Every petty Burmese officer felt himself called upon to manifest his loyalty and his attachment to the institutions of his country by persecuting the Karens Christians (1884: 80).
of Rangoon told Mr. Kincaid ["the hero missionary"] that he would instantly *shoot the first Karen whom he found that could read.*

Admittedly, the fact that this is a representative writing of many similar instances written by other missionaries does not silence the observation that it was natural for missionaries to always paint negative pictures on the Burmans and their rulers, kings or military juntas (see e.g., James, 2002). The missionaries did not succeed in converting most Burmans who were Buddhist. Also, the Karens were the missionaries’ success story, hence the shepherds must protect their sheep and their turf. However, one should locate this kind of story alongside other stories of atrocious conduct by the Burmans’ functionaries. The Karens have stories of their own sufferings before and after the advent of American missionaries and the Europeans, as well as after independence up until nowadays. After that, one cannot help but starting to be cognizant of such overwhelming stories of atrocities in the land under the hegemonic Burmans, especially when one attempts to understand the situations from indigenous peoples’ points of views, which unfortunately have been sparse.

For many baptized Karens, Christianity was a sheer miracle. Civilizing discourses such as those connected to the nineteenth century Christianity, Enlightenment, and Empire worked differently for different peoples. One could argue that the baptized Karens were double-colonized, but one must also acknowledge the transformation of the Karens from being imperceptible indigenous peoples to becoming parts of larger communities, firstly the Burmese Kingdom, and then the British Empire. Before entering the two communities, many “heathen” and illiterate hill-Karens were not considered

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equally as humans. It would be very challenging to argue against W.C.B Purser, when he wrote in the early twentieth century:

Christianity has transformed the Karens beyond all recognition. It has not only given them a literature and education; it has changed a multitude of mutually hostile tribes into a united and compact people. The Karens are now a nation with national hopes and aspirations, and with ... the nucleus of an organization that will in time bind together the widely scattered members of the race (1911: 165).

Leaving the forest where both the Burman and British sovereign powers had not always been able to inscribe them, “as a nation, they were now referred to and included as part of the sovereignty’s juridical fabrics. From then on, their memories started to be accounted-for, until one day when the figures of sovereign power would pronounce the state of exception on them, and abandon them: firstly to the status of naked lives, and, as time went by, to be imperceptible again.

The Karen National Association: Nationhood, Language, and “the Political”

In 1880, a representative of the British Queen was to visit one of the most important cities of the Ava kingdom, Rangoon.48 It must be noted that by that time, Burma was not yet totally under the British rule. It would take about five more years for King Thibaw to be dethroned and Mandalay, the capital, taken by the British Empire. By that time, however, various Karen communities had started to establish themselves in this city and other areas of the Burmans’ kingdom of Ava. Yet the Karens were not properly included in the reception ceremony. Initially, their representatives were given a far-off

47 See e.g., the minutes by the Chief Commissioner of British Burma, dated May 1, 1863, quoted in McMahon, 1876: 175.
allotted space, without roofing and facilities, along the road where the viceroy would pass through. No invitation to the only viceroy’s welcoming party was extended to the Karens. However, after some visits to several concerned government-officials, the Karen leaders were given a good spot and an invitation, as they had desired.

The Rev. T. Than Bya’s writing evinces the Karens leaders’ adequate understanding of the importance of the Karens becoming perceptible as a nation. During the conversation between his group and the Township Officer, a person in his group said “in this country there are only two major races: Burmese and Karen. If you place the Burmese as the first one, you should place the Karen as the second one. And, if you place the Burmese in the second place, then you should place the Karen in the first place.” The result of this meeting was a good space and an invitation to attend the party. The next day, The Rangoon Gazette newspaper announced that when the viceroy came to the ceremony, the Karens as well as other ethnicities would be present. When one of the Karen leaders read about this, he repeatedly declared with exultation, saying: “Now, now, now! The name of our Karen people is known among the multitudes, the crowds, the nations!” (Than Bya, n.d., in Petry, 1993: 121) – they were now publicly given spaces. More than that, a couple of days later, the Governor of Rangoon also asked the Karen leaders to give an accurate number of the Karen population in the Rangoon area because the records his office possessed had been incorrect. To this, the leaders reported a figure of 400,000 (Ibid.: 122). One could state that once a nation existed, it had to be counted properly.

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49 Ibid.: 121. In this article, however, the Rev. T. Than Bya does not pluralize the term “Karen” and does not distinguish between the term “Burmese” and “Burmans.”
Here is a celebratory account by the Rev. T. Than Bya when the important day came:

When the great day came, all we Karen people, young and old, dressed in our Karen costumes and walked to the place. And O! it was a great, great, great moment, because all those living on both sides of the street came out – the Burmese, Shan, British, Indian – they rushed down from their houses and admired the Karen people.

And when the great man arrived at the pandol, the British soldier in front of the Karen pandol blew his trumpet and a Karen man began to play his harp, and the Karen multitude began to sing. The great man asked the British troops to stop their bands, because he wanted to listen to the Karen choir. When the song ended, and the great man’s car was still at rest, Ku Loo Nee [a Karen leader] went and handed him the welcoming letter. The great man said, “Yes, I accept it.” And he bowed to the Karen multitude, and the Karen multitude bowed back to him, with smiles. And the great man continued on his way.

The following day in the newspaper the names of the Karen and Burmese who were given permission to be at the party were reported...[and thus,] by the end of 1880, the Karen people were recognized in newspapers and by the representative of the Queen. And it was really something for the Karen elders to think about profoundly (Ibid.).

The arrival of the viceroy resulted in the Karens subjectifying themselves amidst the police’s logic of perceptibility in the Burman public sphere under the not yet complete rule of the British Empire, reconfiguring the given field of experience.

After this defining event, the baptized Karen leaders began to ponder that the Karens had not been adequately self-reliant in their Christian communities, but had instead let foreign missionaries carried on too much of a workload; had not been chosen to work in administrative positions; and had not become involved in political activities. Therefore, in 1881, fifty-three years after the “first baptism,” the first Karen association was established: the Karen National Association (“Daw k’lu” – meaning literally “the whole race”). The association, which later became a powerful entity in Burmese politics, was to represent and promote the advancement of the Karens as a whole.⁵⁰ From now on,

⁵⁰See e.g., Po. 1928; Marshall, 1922: 311; Cady, 1958: 99ff; Smith, 1999: 45ff
they would be aware of perceptibility and recognition, unlike their imperceptible ancestors in the fields, forests, or hills.

Even though the foreign missionaries failed to convert most Burmans (whoever either Buddhists or Animists), they succeeded immensely with the Karens. The baptized Karens who became a very vocal and visible “minority” have therefore come to represent their entire nation (Christian or otherwise) to the outside world. Written in 1945, about 117 years after the “first baptism” in 1828, the Rev. Harry Marshall wrote:

Very few races or tribes of people have made greater progress in a century and a quarter than have the Karens in Burma. When we think of their wild state, their unhealthy ways, their lack of knowledge, their fear of strangers and their hesitancy in changing their old accepted ways, their primitive agriculture and crude villages, we can hardly realized that some of the refined, educated, well-dress and cultured people that we have known come from such unlikely ancestry. The “wild cattle of the hills” have indeed turned out to be what they called themselves, Pg K’ Nyaw, which actually means “men” (1945: 35; cf. Mignolo, 2000: 284).

The Karens echoed Marshall’s employment of the colonizing language and civilizing discourse, in which progress is linear and teleological, yet with great political astuteness.

It was in the so-called manifesto, as Donald Smeaton labelled it (1887: 226), from one of the unidentified leaders of the Karen National Association (mentioned above) that the nexus between written language, “the political,” and nationhood can be seen as internalized by the Christian Karens. This is most obvious when the text of the so-called manifesto elaborates the advantage of Christian Karens over “heathen” Karens and the fact that the latter had been left untouched:

This segregation of the Christian Karens split the Karen race into two sections, the heathen and the Christian. The former, with no means of educating themselves – the written language being not theirs, the white Book sealed to them – uncared for by the State, as their voice could not be heard, are no better off than in the days of Burmese [sic] rule, because of their ignorance. On the other hand, the latter, with his village school, his newspaper the Morning Star, the Association of the Churches, the Home Mission
Societies, the Missionary Conventions, the High Schools, is prepared to start in life with every advantage.\(^{51}\)

As Walter D. Mignolo states in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, bringing civilization to so-called barbarians means *different things* from different loci of enunciation, i.e., from different positions of speaking, which enable the speaking subjects to change or maintain systems of values and beliefs (1995: 39, 5). And it seems to be a commonplace for missionaries from either the so-called “New World” or the Burman kingdom of Ava that the “lack of letters is equated with a lack of civilization” (Ibid.: 43). Some reasons why being civilized means to have a written language is because written inscription has a power to tame the voice, to preserve the memories of a community, and to advance the community’s socio-cultural processes. The propensity of written language to unify and interrelate peoples is greater than spoken language. Through its grammar, for instance, written language can systematize, control, and unify the variety of “wild” voices. Once unified, *peoples* become *a people – a nation*; and the unity of language is every nation’s dream (Mignolo, 2000: 76). All of these reasons enable one to discern a nexus between written language and power via colonization (Mignolo, 1995); and thus it is justifiable, from the missionaries’ loci of enunciation, that people with writing dominate and rule peoples from an oral civilization (cf. Mignolo, Ibid.: 29-43, 127). In other words, the nexus of languages (*read* written languages), peoples, and knowledges is understood in terms of a chronological hierarchy rather than a series of spatial differences – i.e., denying coevalness (Mignolo, 2000: 283; 1995: 126ff).

\(^{51}\) Smeaton, 1887: 222; my emphasis. The text of the “manifesto” was quoted literally by the Financial Commissioner Donald MacKenzie Smeaton, an admirer and ardent supporter of the Karens, in his famous book *The Royal Karens of Burma* (1887). It is very possible that the “manifesto” printed in this book was written between 1880-1887 because the idea of the Association had not taken place until after the 1880’s visit of the viceroy, as stated by the Rev. T. Than Bya (printed in Petry, 1993: 123-24).

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From the Christian perspective, the Karens had voices, but they needed letters. The civilized Karens then became humans when they became a people of the Book with books. As Christianity disciplined the Karens’ “wild” souls, letters and their grammars both structured language and shaped (if not controlled) the Karens’ intellect. For instance, their “animism,” which had shaped their cosmologies and relations with their biotic communities no longer had a place in the Christianizing discourses. Among other things, it was just illogical to speak about spirits that are simultaneously corporeal and incorporeal. Nonetheless, being Christianized for the Karens need not be disadvantageous. There is a double-ness here: first, being Christianized and colonized; and second, exploiting the Christianization and colonization to secure an equality with the Burmans by making themselves perceptible. The term “Karens” then contains two kinds of signification: the pre-baptized “Karens” refers to the objectified Karens as peoples of nature and wildness, whereas the post-baptized “Karens” refers to the subjectivizing Karens as peoples of convention and discipline. Most likely, the pre-baptized were haunted by the past of violent encounters with the hegemonic Burmans, while the latter were full of hope for the future when they could take a stance against the Burmans.

Unlike the demos in the Greek polis, who could attend the Greek public sphere, the Karens’ and many other indigenous peoples’ lives without letter in the kingdom of Ava had no political stage to voice their agonies, if their voices were heard at all. To be recognized by the arke, the hegemony of the Burmans, they needed both audibility and visibility. It is true, as Agamben states that, “a thing is [a] subject because of the fact of being in language” (1998: 21). But not every kind of language works. This is because,
recalling Ranciere, there are tensions between *logos* and *phone*, as two of the most important attributes defining the partition of the sensible. That is to say, only language that makes a people perceptible is effective; only language that makes subjectification perceptible is effectual – which is the political *par excellence* in the Rancierian sense. Being humans of letter, therefore, enabled the Karens’ subjectification as a people, turning their voices into speeches demonstrating a shared recognition rather than just cries expressing a state of being.

Consequently, it was not enough for either the *Sgaw* Karen, the *Pwo* Karen, the *Bwe* Karen, or any other Karens to have their spoken language as long as their spoken dialects were without written language. The arrival of the colonialists and missionaries then came as a package: religion (for the “lost Book”), written script, and the power to dehegemonize and equalize with the Burmans. Yet, in the land that was known as the Burman kingdom of Ava, later as British Burma, and finally as the Burmese nation-state, the interlacement of perceptibility, the political, and atrocities upon indigenous peoples could not be discerned solely on the *logos-phone* tensions. Once the Burmese *nation-state* was created in 1948, these peoples have been inscribed by the nation-state’s sovereign power as “ethnic minorities.” Many of their histories as nations were disregarded. After the dissolution of the global power British Empire, the violence inflicted upon ethnic nationalities by the Burmese sovereign power gradually escalated and continues until today.
4. Imperceptible “Minorities”;
Burmese Nation-State vis-à-vis Ethnic Nationalities

As the great democracy uprising of 1988 showed, Burma remains a volatile country. Bubbling beneath the surface of the political crisis at the center in Rangoon are crucial ethnic questions that one day will need to be addressed if peace is ever to be found for this deeply troubled land. Many citizens argue that the eventual solution to these problems will come only through free discussion, study, and investigation. But for the moment it is unlikely that any other country in Asia has allowed less self-examination or research on the subject of indigenous peoples.


This last section will provide a brief historical narrative of “Burma,” firstly, as a province of British India from the period shortly before the World War II and, secondly, as an independent nation-state from 1948 onward. Intended as an historical background for the exploration of the forcibly displaced Karens’ conditions, the narrative covers the passage of the province out of the British Empire’s shadow to become a country that has re-entrenched its darkness over indigenous peoples/nations.

The Fall of the British Empire, the Burmans, and Ethnic Nationalities: Before and After World War II

The British power over its Burmese possessions started to wane with World War II and the invasion of the province by imperial Japan’s troops. The Japanese army’s entrance into the colony in 1942 was assisted by the “Thirty Comrades,” a group of Burman nationalists that had developed from a Burmese pro-independence “Thakins,”

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52 Because this section focuses only on ethnic nationalities or indigenous peoples who had inhabited this land before the arrival of the Burmans, it does not mention the Indians and Chinese, many of whom mostly migrated to British Burma after the British had taken control of the Burmese kingdom of Ava.

53 Smith, 1995: 222.

54 For more details of the histories of the land later known as the Burmese nation-state from the periods around the World War II until the present, consult, e.g., Cady, 1958; Callahan, 1996; Lintner, 1999; Naing Aung, 2000; Seng Raw, 2001; Silverstein, 1977, 1980, 1990, 1997; Smith 1995, 1999, 2001;
which in turn had organized themselves to fight the British colonialists as early as the 1930s. The first “indigenous” Burman army since the end of the third Anglo-Burman war in 1885 (Silverstein, 1997: 173), these nationalists established the Burma Independence Army, led by Thakin Aung San, and supported Japan on the understanding that Burma would achieve independence once the British had been vanquished. However, doubts about the trustworthiness or viability of the Japanese promise led the Burma Independence Army to shift sides. By the end of the war, British Burma remained under the British control. While the Burmans saw the war as the dawn of a drive for independence, ethnic nationalities like the Karens, Chins, Kachins contributed crucial support to the Allies throughout the war, hence raising their status within the colonial administration and simultaneously exposing themselves to techniques of modern warfare.

World War II also gravely intensified modern ethnic nationalism, which had its legacy, for some ethnic nationalities such as the Karens, far back in time. While the British had made the Burmans inferior by expatriating their monarch to India and by colonial rule, many ethnic nationalities’ members, who had endured the subjugation under the Burman kings and their subjects, had been variably relieved by the British. The Burma Independence Army’s initial cooperation with Japan thus also resulted in vengeance against those who had assisted the ruling of British Burma, especially the Karens. In the months following the end of World War II then many Karen villages were burnt down (e.g., Dun, 1980: 69; Smith, 1999: 117). The Karens retaliated and there

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55 The term Thakin had been the word for “lord” or “master” generally used in Upper part of Burma province for addressing Englishmen until the term was used by the pro-independent students movement to address each other. The students used it as a symbol of youthful defiance of the Empire rule.
were many casualties on both sides until Japanese troops intervened and stopped the bloodshed (Silverstein, 1997: 174; cf. 183). Even though World War II concurrently produced, regenerated, and deepened ethnic tensions between the Burmans and indigenous peoples/nations, as early as 1943, the Burma Independence Army's leaders had decided to fight against the Japanese and they then sent a strong signal to the Karens to join them, which the latter did until the end of the war. Nonetheless, this Burman-Karen sense of cooperation could not prevail over the deep-rooted sense of animosity between the two. World War II hence restored to the Burmans their political primacy and their sense of pride – they played a role in ending British rule in 1942 and in expelling the Japanese forces in 1945 (Silverstein, Ibid.).

A Nation-State vis-à-vis Ethnic Nationalities: Independence, Conflicts, and Desolation

After World War II, Burma's civilian democratic leaders sincerely desired to create a state that would freely unite the majority Burmans with indigenous minorities [sic]. They envisaged a federation based on the principles of equality, mutual respect, and trust. Working in haste and under great pressure, these leaders wrote a flawed constitution. However, the problems that followed Burma's independence in January 1948 were not the result of faulty draftsmanship alone; they were rooted in the country's ethnic history, misperceptions of what various groups wanted, competing visions of how to translate principles into laws, and lack of trust in political processes to resolve differences. Josef Silverstein, "Fifty Years of Failure in Burma."

After the war, the movement for a separate Karen homeland, Kawthoolei, developed alongside the movement for the independence of Burma. In addition, a series of problems regarding the "Frontier Areas," where some ethnic nationalities resided, soon and affirmation of the national code that the Burmans themselves must be masters of their own country (see e.g., Cady, 1958: 375-78).

erupted. The historic Panglong Agreement was signed on February 12, 1947, between the Shans, the Kachins, the Chins and the Burmese leaders. The agreement addressed all of the hill ethnic nationalities’ concerns, except their rights to secede. The fact that the Karens and other ethnic nationalities did not participate and sign the agreement undermined the Burmese affirmation that an all-inclusive foundation for the future Burma was secured (Silverstein, 1997: 177).

When Burma gained independence and simultaneously became a nation-state in 1948, questions over autonomy for ethnic-nationality inhabited areas remained unsettled. Following independence, Burma experienced a period of parliamentary democracy, but within a short time ethnic nationalities became disenchanted, and began to take up arms against the Burmese government. Within months, ethnonationalist and communist movements pervaded Burma. The 1947 independence constitution, which established the Union of Burma, was a “quasi-federal” one which appeared to recognize claims to autonomy of key ethnic nationalities and made provision for “union states” to be established to accommodate the aspirations of ethnic nationalities. However, the actual constitutional arrangements limited the powers of union states, making them little more than administrative arms of the central government (Tinker, 1961: 28).

Part of the scheme of creating the Union of Burma in 1948 was the governance of the “Frontier Areas” surrounding the central plain, “Burma Proper.”

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58 General Aung San, who headed a controversial government during the transitional period, was assassinated along with his cabinet members in 1947, just before the British withdrew a year later.


60 The constitution stipulates that the Burmans, the Mons, and the Arakanese would reside in the “Burma Proper” (or “Ministerial Burma” as had been called in 1935). For the Karens, no matter where
However because the “Frontier Areas” had no autonomy from the center; and contentions, which arose soon after independence. The outburst of armed organizations based either on ethnicity or ideology is a critical element in the history of the post-colonial Burmese nation-state. Ethnic Rakhine and Mujahid nationalists in the Arakan State resorted to arms in 1947, before the British departure. The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) went underground in March 1948, and the Karen National Union (KNU) in January 1949. Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, other ethnic nationalities, including the Mons, the Paos, the Chins, and the Karennis, all took up arms. The Burma army, or Tatmadaw, was thus born into the role of subduing the disunity of a country which had never been unified.\(^{61}\)

All through the 1950s, Burma’s army’s power steadily increased, while political inroads to settling the country’s many conflicts were few and led nowhere. In 1958, a military-led caretaker government assumed control, led by General Ne Win, one of the Thirty Comrades. In March 1962, while the Kachin and the Shan separatist movements gained momentum in the northeast, Ne Win again seized power, this time in a complete military coup, formed a Revolutionary Council, and brought to an end the short-lived era of parliamentary democracy (Smith, 1995: 222-23; Silverstein, 1997: 186-87).

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One of the Revolutionary Council’s first acts was to terminate the loose federalist structure of the 1948 Constitution and replace it with a centralized system of security administrative councils comprised of military, administrative, and police officers (Silverstein, Ibid.). Under Ne Win’s rule, the Tatmadaw developed a political identity as the sole guardian of Burma’s unity against internal enemies, and as the savior of the country’s integrity. He also adopted a clear-cut twofold strategy to remedy all the country’s ills (Silverstein, 1977: 93). The first strategy was to build a centralized one-party system of administration radiating from Rangoon into the ethnic-nationality states. This function fell to the Burma Socialist Programme Party, which was established in 1962 and controlled by the military leaders, and which nationalized agriculture and industry and turned Burma into, by and large, a closed country. Hence, after the 1962 coup, Burma increasingly isolated itself from the rest of the world through its “Burmese Way to Socialism.” The period between 1962 and 1988 was Ne Win’s experiment with his disastrous twenty-six-year “Burmese Way to Socialism.” He eventually took the country to the brink of social and economic collapse. The second strategy to pay full attention to defeating all armed resistant organizations in the countryside. Scorched earth policies were implemented to ruthlessly crush all political and ethnic oppositions, especially after the failed peace talk between the two sides in 1963 (e.g., BERG, 1998: 22).

The Burma Socialist Programme Party then legalized itself in 1974 through a new constitution, thus legally continued its single-party control of the country. The constitution set up nominally autonomous “states” for the seven main non-Burman nationalities, carefully balanced by seven “divisions” within “Burma proper” or, as it
seen by the non-Burmans, seven Burman states. According to the constitution, the Union of Burma is, therefore, comprised of seven Divisions and seven ethnic-nationality States, which were named after the Shan, the Karenni, the Karen, the Mon, the Chin, the Kachin, and the Rakhine ethnic nationalities. Although this constitution did convey the broad agreement concerning the ethno-political framework of Burma, it in no way fulfilled the ethnic nationalities’ demands with regard to demarcation of powers (BERG, 1998: 20; see also Silverstein, 1997: 188-89). Hence, on the ethnic nationalities’ fronts, resistance continued. For instance, large areas of Burma along the Thai-Burmese border zones were controlled not by the Burmese government but by the armed ethnic forces, the largest of which was the Karen National Union (KNU).

Under these circumstances, the Tatmadaw expanded a counter-insurgency program called "Four Cuts" strategy. Known in Burmese as the Pya Ley Pya, it was the strategy that the Tatmadaw designed in the mid-1960s to cut the four main links – food, finances, intelligence and recruits – between ethnic nationalities’ soldiers, their families, local villagers, and local communities. Although hardly innovative, the strategy proved to be a greatly effective approach to combat ethnic nationalities’ armies (BERG, 1998: 22). With international criticism in recent years, however, the junta had denied its existence, but its use has been well documented over the years and has, in fact, often been

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62 In complying to the demands of the Mons and the Arakanese, the Burmese government removed their areas from the "Burma Proper" and named as state; moreover, the Chin Special Division was reconstituted as a state as well (Silverstein, 1997: 188).

63 For the most part, this phenomenon worked well for the Thai government, as ethnic nationalities’ armies provided buffer zones between Thailand and the Burmese government, and between the former and the Communist Party of Burma. Thai armed forces at the time had been preoccupied to a large extent by its fight with the Communist Party of Thailand in remote areas throughout the country.
praised in public speeches by leading army officers.64 This strategy has served the 
Tatmadaw well in undermining any mutual support the ethnic nationalities’ troops have 
had with their people.

The brutality of this campaign heightened further resistance and substantialized 
the belief that the Tatmadaw was intent on genocide, making total autonomy of ethnic 
nationalities the only secure political destiny during that time (AHRC, 1999: 13-14).
Moreover, one of the most crucial ingredients of Ne Win’s rule from 1962 to 1988, and 
some of which continued until today, was the Burmanization of all fabrics of the socio-
cultural lives in the country. Hence, many ethnic nationalities have been deprived of 
their economic, social and cultural rights on a large scale. For example, the teaching of 
ethnic nationalities’ languages has almost never been permitted in the government school 
system (Amnesty International, 2001a: 5).

The early 1980s was the transitional period on the border territories. Until then, 
ethnic armies had maintained superior military capabilities and continued to enjoy de 
facto governmental control in the border territories (the “liberated areas”) which they 
held. After that, they began to face the junta’s counterinsurgency operations of greater 
intensity that would, over the following years, weaken the ethnic nationalities’ forces, 
drive them out of their strongholds, and diminish their funds from lucrative “black” 
market border economy (trade and taxes). The junta aimed to establish their military

Martin Smith suggests that this strategy is hardly unique to Burma; it owes much to the “new 
village” tactics deployed by the British forces, under Sir Robert Thompson’s leadership, to defeat the Communist Parry of Malaysia. This “new village” tactics was similar in concept to the “strategic hamlet” program the United States deployed, with Thompson’s advice, in the Indo-China warfare; both of them were criticized for their gross abuses of human rights. See more details and the deployment of the Four Cuts strategy in Smith, 1999: 258-62 and passim.
presence right along the Thai-Burmese state-boundary (Lang, 2002: 43). In the dry season of 1983-84, for example, the Tatmadaw launched its most intensive counterinsurgency operations in southeastern Burma to date. It was resolved not to retreat with the coming monsoon season: amidst difficulties, it systematically attacked the areas and ethnic nationalities’ civilians, whose lives have since become under the permanent state of emergency. Making frequent trips through KNU-controlled territory to document and carry out interview for his benchmark book, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, from 1982 onwards, Martin Smith describes the scene of the state of emergency along the Thai-Burmese state-boundary:

The Amnesty International in May 1988... report documented the extrajudicial executions of 60 Karen villagers and 200 other cases of ill-treatment, rape and torture, but this was just the tip of the iceberg. In the same period, similar allegations were made by other NDF (National Democratic Front) members in the Kachin, Kayah and Shan States, but only the evidence in the Paan-Hlaingbwe districts of Karen State was graphically seen. By 1988, after five years’ constant military harassment, the scene along a 70-mile stretch of the Dawna Range was one of devastation. Dozens of villages had been burnt down, crops confiscated and fields destroyed. Several thousand villagers had moved into new ‘strategic villages on the plains to the west, while over 20,000 Karen refugees had crossed into Thailand (Smith, 1999: 397-98).

Even though Ne Win’s scorched earth policies had attempted to crush all political and ethnic oppositions since his control of power in 1962, by the time the Burma Socialist Programme Party collapsed in 1988, some twenty ethnic armed resistant groups remained active in more than one-third of the country, controlling vast rural and mountainous areas, especially in the ethnic-nationality states. In 1988, with Burma facing economic

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See more details of the integration of the Burmans, who were against the military junta after the 1988-massacre in big cities, and ethnic nationalities in jungles in, e.g., Smith, Ibid., 1994, 1999; Naing Aung, 2000. Naing Aung’s book is a compilation of records and documents since 1948 to 1996 regarding various attempts to establish united fronts among ethnic nationalities. Some of the documents were collected from minutes of various meeting of the National Democratic Front, which was formed on May 10th, 1976.
ruin, Ne Win retired from his leading role in national politics. In August many people took to the streets calling for greater reform, and by so doing provoking a horrible military response. Thousands of demonstrators, including students and workers, were killed or fled to the frontier areas. A junta of hard line military officers staged a coup, reasserting the army's hegemony. In September 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) replaced the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) and its pretensions to both socialism and quasi-civilian rule. Despite holding a promised election in 1990, the military refused to relinquish power to an elected parliament, persecuted its rivals, especially the National League for Democracy (NLD), and maintained tight control on all political dissents.

The 1990s saw the Tatmadaw expanded, modernized, and began to open the nation's economy to foreign capital. Armed-resistant armies, however, continued from the time of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) through the State Law and Order Restoration Council's (SLORC) era. For instance, the Karen revolution, which broke out near Rangoon in 1949, had gradually drifted eastward to the Thai-Burmese border zones. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) maintained control over the highlands in northern Burma. Meanwhile, the adjacent Shan State was home to ethnic nationalist movements, drug warlords and the once-powerful Communist Party of Burma. The State Law and Order Restoration Council's (SLORC) determination to quash Burma's insurgency saw a series of political and military successes throughout the 1990s. When the current incarnation of the military government came to power in September 1988, it initiated a new policy of attempting to negotiate cease-fires with armed ethnic
nationalities. It concluded cease-fire agreements with several opposition groups and won significant military victories, especially along the Thai-Burmese border zones.

All through the 1990s the Tatmadaw expanded both in size and expenditure. In 1989-90 the army stood at 175,000 men, but doubled to 350,000 in 1995-96 and to more than 400,000 men by the end of the decade (AHRC, 1999: 14; U.S. Department of State, 2001: 1). According to the U.S. Department of State, the junta has increased its troops' presence throughout the country, especially in ethnic nationalities' areas from which the Tatmadaw were not excluded by cease-fire agreement. In the same period, the civil service grew by only six percent. Indeed, a 1997 estimate put one in every 32 eligible people in the military. The government's target was 475,000 troops in active service, which would be larger than the US active army and one of the biggest standing armies in the world. The American Embassy estimated defense spending to be at least half of total government expenditure, at 8-10% of recorded GDP. On November 15, 1997, the

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66 AHRC, 1999: 14 (double check).
This number however must be treated with caution because a certain amount of troops were conscripted or abducted. The latter cases happened, at times, right in big cities like Rangoon (on streets or in markets) as was the case with a couple of defected Burmese soldiers I interviewed both in the war zones and in a "refugee camp" on the Thai side. In 1997, moreover, the Burmese government started a self-sufficiency program for the armed troops, hence troops have had to rely on looting or extortion from local rural or mountainous villagers (e.g. Amnesty International, 2002b: 2).


The information compiled by the American Embassy in Burma cited in the AHRC's Voice of the Hungry Nation (Ibid.: 14-15) also states that between 1988-89, the years when SLORC was formed, Burma spent 1.8 billion kyat (Burma's currency unit) on defense, constituting 22.9% of recorded government spending, equivalent to 2.3% of recorded GDP. By comparison, from 1993 to 1996 defense constituted about 40% of government spending. The government reported that in 1995-96 for every kyat spent on development in frontier areas more than 26 kyat went to the Tatmadaw. Beyond this ample amount of the national budget, the Tatmadaw receives goods and services of uncalculated value:

The Ministry of Defense receives but does not pay for about one-fifth of Burma's centrally generated electricity. The Defense Ministry also purchases large amounts of fuel far below market prices. In FY [fiscal year] 95/96, the Defense ministry purchased at least 12 million gallons of fuel, at about 20 kyat per gallon for diesel and 25 kyat per gallon for gasoline, for which the
State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) renamed itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), but politically no constructive change to the governance and the hardships of varieties of peoples living therein, especially in ethnic-conflict areas, has harrowingly remained the same.

Throughout the rules of all the Burmese juntas’ incarnations – from the BSPP, to the SLORC, and to the SPDC – many ethnic nationalities have also been persecuted on the basis of their religion. The religion of most Burmans is Theravada Buddhism, but others religions in this land include: the so-called animist, Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism (cf. Smith, 1995: 221-22). Over 90% of the members of the Chin ethnic nationality, for instance, are Christians. According to Amnesty International (2001a: 4), the Chins have provided evidence that the authorities are trying to force them to convert to Theravada Buddhism. Church-burning, harassment and detention of pastors, and preferential treatment for local Buddhist civilians have all been reported in the Chin State. The Rohingyas, or Muslims who live in the northern Rakhine State, have also been persecuted on account of their religion. In 1991 and 1992 some 250,000 of them fled to Bangladesh to escape forced labor and relocation, rape, and killings at the hands of the Burmese military. Like many other indigenous peoples or members of ethnic nationalities, the Rohingyas do not have Burmese citizenship. But unlike many others,

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market prices were about ten times higher. In addition, a substantial share of the GOB’s [Government of Burma] declining real expenditures on health is said by health industry experts to be used to provide medical services to military personnel, and is not included in the defense budget. The Defense Ministry also receives large amounts of rice at a steep discount from the market price...

The AHRC notes further that the American Embassy’s statistics are not official, but are a compilation of embassy, Burma government and World Bank/IMF figures. The embassy’s report lists the flaws elemental in all statistical data on Burma, including a general flaw of all data, exchange rate misrepresentation, withholding of defense-related imports and overstatement of international debt service payments.

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the Rohingyas are not considered by the Burmese authorities as one of the 135 "national races" and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) maintains that they are in fact Bengali migrants from Bangladesh who have come to the Rakhine State to seek employment. Such withdrawal of recognition of the Rohingyas began when General Ne Win seized power in 1962 and amended the 1948 citizenship law to disregard them as citizens of Burma (Silverstein, 1997: 181, 190-91).

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) claims that since 1989 until 2002, some seventeen cease-fires have been agreed (Amnesty International, 2002b: 2). These agreements, however, have not yet led to more permanent political arrangements and some cease-fire groups still maintain their armies and weapons as well as their own territories, which vary in size. Currently, three main groups continue to fight the Burmese government: the Karen National Union (KNU) in the Karen State, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) in the Karenni State, and the Shan State Army-South (SSA-South) in the southeastern Shan State (Ibid.). The KNU is also present in the Tenasserim Division along with small armed groups from the Mon ethnic nationality.68

The ethnic conflicts in Burma share with contemporary wars in other places the fact that the vast majority of the casualties are civilians rather than combatants. Burma’s various ethnic-based armed groups no longer control any significant territory, but they operate in mobile units around the countryside, occasionally visiting a village. Some of

68 The New Mon State Party (NMSP) agreed a cease-fire with the then State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in June 1995; however since that time several breakaway and other splinter Mon groups have engaged in skirmishes with the Burmese army (Amnesty International, 2001a: 5 n7).

There are also other small armed groups, especially those who have allied with the Tatmadaw, operating in some other parts of the country e.g., the Karenni National People’s Liberation Front (KNPLF) in the Karenni State, The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), The Karen Peace Army (KPA) in Dooplaya District of the Karen State (see Ball & Lang, 2001).
them ask the villagers for rice, while others have also acted as medics or, at times, traveled with mobile clinics, e.g., the KNU’s troops. Shan, Karenni, Mon and Karen civilians are targeted for punishment by the Tatmadaw’s troops because of their ethnicities and their presumed support for armed soldiers operating near their villages (Amnesty International, 2001a: 5). The vast majority of these people, who bear the brunt of the armed conflict, are subsistence rice farmers living in small settlements or swidden farmers living in hill areas.

Despite decades of armed resistance, the Tatmadaw remains in firm control of Burma’s political and economic scene, and has increased its control all over the country. The Tatmadaw has maintained its leading role in Burma’s government, not adequately affected by increasing international concern for human rights and political freedom. The forty-eight million people in the Burmese nation-state still have very few legal options for political opposition, a situation that did not changed after since the release of Noble laureate Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest in May 2002.

The Karens & Other Ethnic Nationalities: Not Minorities

Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views.
Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation.
Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State.
Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.

“People’s Desire” A propaganda campaign begun in 1996 of the SLORC

At present, the ethnic nationalities comprise approximately one third of the Burmese nation-state’s population of forty-eight million people. They live in all areas of
the country, but are mainly concentrated in the seven states that surround the central Burman plain, some exceptions of which include the Karnes, many of whom have lived outside the designated Karen State at least since the era of the Burman kingdom of Ava. On the eastern front of Burma bordering Thailand, some areas are still controlled territories of the armed organizations of the Karens, the Mons, the Karennis, and the Shans. Ethnographically speaking, members of these ethnic nationalities span the Thai and Burmese state-boundary, which was demarcated during the colonial time. After the creation of Thailand and Burma as nation-states, however, they were inscribed by the two figures of sovereign power, becoming “ethnic minorities” within states identified by other national identities.

Apart from the Karens, some other indigenous peoples later also became nations after colonial encounters (e.g., Cady, 1958) and not just minorities. In fact, many of them never considered themselves to be minorities. These indigenous peoples have been recalcitrant to the concept of minority which “belongs to the narrative of state forms” (Shapiro, 2001: 137). As Etienne Balibar puts it: “The very existence of minorities, together with their more or less inferior status, was a state construct, a strict correlate of the nation-form” (1995: 53). One must not forget that the dominant ethnic Burmans are also another ethnic nationality on this land; like other ethnic nationalities in this country, they by no means are one homogenous ethnic nationality.

Empirically, as Martin Smith states in a paper first written between 1989-1990, “the literature produced by the Karens, the Karennis, the Kachins, for the past forty years consistently confirm that they have always seen themselves as much more than minorities. The term they prefer is nationalities” (1995: 237). In an official booklet
entitled *The Karens and their Struggle for Independence*, for example, the Government of Kawthoolei alleges that "throughout history the Burmese[sic] have been practicing annihilation, absorption, and assimilation (3 As) to the Karens.... The Karens are much more than a national minority. We are a nation."69

Large ethnic groups such as the Mons, the Shans, the Karens, and the Kachins generally regard their situations as "comparable to that of the nationalities of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and India, and not as forgotten ‘tribal’ peoples living on the edge of Burman culture and society" (Smith, 1995: 237). The Arakan Independence Organization (AIO), for example, describes the so-called “ethnic-minority regions” in Burma as “Hidden Colonies,” a situation it equates with that of “the Kurds of the Middle East and the Eritreans and Tigreans in Africa.” All indigenous peoples, the AIO claims, "are regarded as part of the larger, historically recognized nations in the postcolonial

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69 The Govt. of Kawthoolei, *The Karens and their Struggle for Independence*, (No place: KNU Publishing, 1984), pp. 2-3; quoted in Smith, 1999: 36; cf. Karen National Union, 2000: 4-5. It must be noted here, however, that between the 1984 and 2000 versions, there are two important differences: (1) title change, from *The Karens and their Struggle for Independence* to *The Karens and their Struggle for Freedom*; (2) the 1984’s version was published by the Government of Kawthoolei, whereas the 2000’s version by the Karen National Union.

One could ask how the leadership of the Karens distinguishes between “independence” and “freedom.” In a letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim, dated October 1, 1981, it becomes clear that the notion of independence in the 1984 version does not literally means an independence of a nation-state; rather it means a certain level of autonomy under a federal system. This is because, although the subject line of the letter also reads “The Struggle of the Karen People for Independence,” the letter states clearly:

The basis programme of the Karen Revolution is not only to establish an independent Karen State with full political, economical and cultural rights to all the people of the State, but to establish a New Federal Union, headed by the NDF [National Democratic Front], comprising of the states of the nationalities on the basis of equality and self-determination for all the nationalities in the country (1981: 5).

It seems to be the case that after the fall of the supreme headquarter at Manerplaw in January 1995: (1) the leadership of the Karens stopped emphasizing on “independence,” hence changing from "independence" to "freedom;" (2) they seemed to make a special connection between having a government and spatial occupation. Unfortunately, I was not aware of these differences when I was conducting fieldwork, hence did not inquire the KNU’s leaders.
world, as though these nations have always been something absolute, yet historically, culturally, and geographically it is something [the Arakanese] do not necessarily feel” (quoted in Ibid.). In other words, Burma, Thailand, Bangladesh, China, India, *inter alia*, are not absolute political entities and have not been so from the past to the present. These countries were created at certain times, whereas many indigenous peoples/nations have been situated in these areas well before the creation of these countries.

According to Smith, some nationalist groups have recently begun to use the expression of the “Fourth World” to describe their plight; however, most nationalist leaders, especially from “such ancient civilizations as the Mons and Shans, reject the idea of realigning their struggles with very different ethnic groups like the Amazonian Indians or the Australian Aborigines” (Smith, 1995: 237). As we know, nonetheless, this strategy is very problematic. According to the mappamundi invented by the Babylonians and later adopted by the Romans and medieval Christian, there were only three worlds. Asia was the first, Europe was the second, and Africa was the third. In this Old World scheme, the Americas became the fourth, thus the “New World” (Brotherston, 1992: 1). The fact that the Americas were constituted as the Fourth World/New World precluded interest in the study of its antiquities.⁷⁰ As Michael Shapiro writes:

> Civilization had existed there with huge populations for millenia, yet there was no attempt to learn their history. This inattention was overdetermined by the European assumption that these peoples had no historical texts. Their literary media – writing in forms such as knotted ropes and pictorial narratives – did not conform to genres Europeans recognized as texts.... Their histories have been marginalized since the time of the contact (1994:490).

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⁷⁰ Having said that, it must also be stated that when the term “antiquity” is used in a large sense, one cannot forget that the third U.S President, Thomas Jefferson, among others, pioneered in archaeology to discover the so-called prehistory – i.e., antiquities. (This information about Jefferson is derived from a conversation with Dr. Leslie E. Sponsel on March 20, 2003, but the mistakes from misinterpreting of the term “antiquity” that might occur, remain mine.)
In the context of the mainland region of so-called “Southeast Asia,” Smith
reminds us that we must seriously examine these indigenous peoples’ claims. After all,
among the peoples once considered as “tribal” peoples in this region, it is the Karens and
the Kachins who “have come closer to their dream[s] of creating independent nation-
states.” Referring to his fieldwork in Burma in the 1980s, Smith reminds and forcefully
argues (in the paper written between 1989-1990) that ethnic nationalities therein are not
bandits as often portrayed (cf. KNU, 2000: 4). Moreover, from the starting point of
General Newin’s “Burmese Way to Socialism” in 1962 onward, almost all of the state’s
institutions have either been short-lived or problematically “lawful:”

What has always been most striking on visits to the “liberated areas” of insurgent groups
such as the Karens, Karennis, Mons, Shans, and Rakhines is how they kept alive, inside
Ne Wins’ monolithic Burma, a clear sense of their ethnic identity and purpose. Across
Burma they have maintained their own armies, schools, hospitals, and administrative
systems, and life in their villages and camps is punctuated with a full litany of colorful
nationalist days and celebrations. This is not something “bandits” do. It needs, therefore,
to be added that with the exception of the Tatmadaw there are no “legal” organizations in
Burma today [1989-1990] with political traditions more than five years old. By contrast,
the outlawed KNU has continued its struggle since 1947, the New Mon State Party since

However, the situations in the “liberated zones” have been transformed tremendously
since the uprising/massacre of 1988 and, as already mentioned, most of the ethnic
nationalities have signed cease-fires with the Burmese junta. “Liberated zones,” from the
perspective of the Burmese junta have been transformed to legalized zones: the sovereign
power of the Burmese government has been more entrenched, their jurisdictions have
been more secure. At least in the Karen “liberated zones,” and especially after the fall of
its supreme headquarter at Manerplaw in January 1995, the Karens’ sentiments have
become gloomier and they have been on the defensive. They have been attempting to
survive the so-called “counter-insurgency” of the “lawful” figure of sovereign power – violence abounds.

January 31, 2000, the cerebration of the Karen Revolutionary Day at a “temporary” district headquarter where I visited was not so colorful as when Smith had witnessed in the KNU’s controlled areas during the 1980s. There were almost no traces of the KNU’s mighty past before the fall of Manerplaw. “Liberated zones” have been transformed to be more of the spaces of emergency, especially for the Karen civilians forcibly displaced therein.

Before we embark on the journey through the lives of the imperceptible naked-Karens in the war zones, however, let us first engage the methodological assumptions of “the study of man,” of anthropology, to which the discussion will now turn.
Chapter 4 – Looking through the Eyes of the Karen “Others”:
Conducting Fieldwork in the Thai-Burmese In-between Spaces

The ethnographer, like the artist, is engaged in a special kind of vision quest through which a specific interpretation of the human condition, an entire sensibility, is forged. Our medium, our canvas, is “the field,” a place both proximate and intimate (because we have lived some part of our lives there) as well as forever distant and unknowably “other” (because our own destinies lie elsewhere). In the act of “writing culture,” what emerges is always a highly subjective, partial, and fragmentary – but also deeply felt and personal – record of human lives based on eyewitness and testimony. The act of witnessing is what lends our work its moral (at times its almost theological) character. So-called participant observation has a way of drawing the ethnographer into spaces of human life where she or he might really prefer not to go at all and once there doesn’t know how to get out except through writing, which draws others there as well, making them party to the act of witnessing.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Death Without Weeping.¹

1. Why This Fieldwork?:
Three Topics of Anthropology & the “In-between Spaces”

“Decha, please erase parts of your clips that have me in them,” Saw Htoo said solemnly. He was a soldier-turned-missionary who led our team into deep jungles and frontlines of Burma.

“Why is that, Saw Htoo?” I asked apprehensively.

“Well, I just talked to my friends and they agreed that we could not trust you because you walked too well to be an academic.”

This anecdote happened after the first two days of my trip into the war zones between the KNU and the Tatmadaw. The first two days had already tested me with the highest mountain of the entire trip – about 4,200 feet, the equivalent of a 400-story-building. Had I not prepared myself for the trip, I would have ended up becoming an “academic,” failing to keep up with the team, which comprised medics, missionaries, and teachers. Since the trip took place in winter, it was terribly cold for a Bangkokian and a graduate student from the University of Hawai‘i like myself. For some nights, we slept

¹ Scheper-Hughes, 1992: xii.
on hammocks; for a few meals, we ate just like the displaced Karens – a lot of rice with dry leaves or chopped banana-trunk soup. I could not complain, for I was lucky enough to be safe for some time with something to eat in the spaces where threats from malaria, typhoid, dysentery, anemia, liver and kidney problems abound. 2 And my journal continues:

“You don’t fit any molds, Decha,” Saw Htoo continued after I had erased the clips. “You are probably the first Thai in the last thirty to forty years to have walked this deep into this area. We have never seen any academic who would want to come in here with us. And as you know we have to be very cautious.”

“Yes, I understand very well, Saw Htoo. I would not be here if I just wanted to finished my Ph.D. I could just stay in Hawai’i and spend time reading books from the library and finishing it. I would not have had to hike across those mountains.” I paused for a moment and continued: “There were moments during the hike when I had to stand still for I could not move my legs. My muscles were badly strained; and I was terribly hungry because I had not had lunch. There were times when I asked myself, ‘What the hell am I doing here?’ In the last two days, we walked and walked; when we stopped it was only for a short time and we treated the villagers, gave them Bibles and medicine and some stationary for school children... then we moved on. So, I asked myself again, ‘What am I doing here? I cannot work at all.’ For me, I need at least a couple of hours to slowly talk and interview the villagers.” I paused again and looked at Saw Htoo’s face, who was listening attentively to me all along. I continued. “You know, I came in here because I believe in justice, but I’ve kept asking myself, ‘Have I done justice, by coming in here, to my mother and my wife? What if I got killed, have I done enough justice to them?’ I don’t have to be here, If not because I am one of those people who have to feel what they write; who believe that their academic pursuit also has a political function of activism; and who understand that the journey into here is a journey within themselves, too – a journey to hopefully see themselves better.”

Obviously, having been calm for some time, it was very hard for me to hide my frustration; perhaps, partly it was because I believed that this man in front of me was an understanding guy who would be willing to listen – it turned out that my gut feeling was right.

“From now on, if anyone of my friends gives you a hard time, just let me know and I will take care of the matter. I will make sure that you can work.... Hey, by the way, we are going to play soccer with the villagers; why don’t you join us?” Saw Htoo ended our conversation nicely.

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2 I still do not quite understand why anemia was also a common disease of forcibly displaced peoples in the war zones (cf. Naw Rebecca, 1989: 31).
From that moment on, he and I developed a very good fellowship; partly because he was a very charismatic leader for that dangerous mission and that kind of terrain, who took such great care of everyone. The rest of the trip was a pleasure, among friends, yet unforgettable harrowing.

As a student of political science and anthropology, the importance of my journey into the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces was because, as Martin Smith powerfully states;

any journey into the ethnic-minority [sic] regions of Burma would confirm that the last fifty years have wrought enormous changes on traditional societies in Burma. These, however, much to the ethnic-minority [sic] population's detriment, remain largely unrecorded. ³

Moreover, it was a journey to better understand myself as a person and as a political subject. To look into the eyes of Karen “others” then, is, for me, to be. As Mikhail Bakhtin states:

To be means to be for the other, and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is all and always on the boundary; looking within himself, he looks in the eyes of the other or through the eyes of the other.... I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other; finding the other in me (in mutual reflection and perception).... I receive my name from the other, and this name exists for the other (quoted in Todorov, 1984: 96 – my emphasis; cf. Bakhtin, 1984: 287-88).

To conduct this fieldwork in the Thai-Burmese border zones, I constructed a method that interwove three keys topics of anthropology: the anthropology of borders (e.g., Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Horstmann, 2002), the anthropology of state terror (e.g., Sluka, 2000; Nordstorm & Robben, 1995; Taussig 1987), and the ethnographic research on displacement and refugees (e.g., Malkki, 1995). Corresponding to the constructed methodology is my articulation of a notion of “in-between spaces” to capture the unique characteristics of the Thai-Burmese border zones. I deploy such a notion to disrupt the

conceptual framework of the state-centric paradigm, thereby problematizing the Thai-Burmese state-boundary and opening up spaces for non-statist agents. This notion deviates from the statist cartography that demarcates the Thai-Burmese border zones, which stretches a thin line for 2,401 kilometers (about 1,500 miles).

Anthropology of Borders: The Philosophical and Cultural In-between Spaces

As both affirmations and locations of the dominant geopolitical discourse, state-boundaries create both conflict and violent representations, determining those who do and do not belong. These processes of identity formation “privilege the nation-state as the venue for political contest and change” (Hyndman, 2000: 27). Like other imperceptible naked-lives situated along the Thai-Burmese border zones, the Karens’ transversality is thus a threat to the territorial integrity of both Thailand and Burma (cf. Rajah, 1990; Nagengast, 1994: 118), as well as to their respective national narratives – their “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991). The processes of demarcating Thailand and Burma territory have established the two nation-states, and simultaneously designated the Karens, as well as other ethnic nationalities and indigenous peoples situated along the border zones, as unqualified forms-of-life. Through this inclusive exclusion, these peoples have been abandoned by the two sovereignties. They have been rendered into naked lives devoid of any possibility of appeal. As unqualified political subjects, the journey and theoretical construction to account for the imperceptible naked-Karens and others even more critical.


Until now, there are still disputes between Thailand and its neighboring counties regarding the boundary it shares with them. Apart from the situations of the Karens, which will be discussed below, the
Karens have been excluded from the statist politics, their histories and memories have, by
and large, been discounted, and their voices, bodies, and actions have been made
imperceptible. Also, their enunciation and demonstration are not intelligible because
they do not comply with the juridical grammar of the nation-state, which is an aspect of
the statist partition of the sensible. In other words, the forcibly displaced Karens’ loci of
enunciation are ungrammatical.

Inspired by Agamben, this study contends that the idea of the Thai-Burmese state-
boundary is problematic. In the Agambenian topology of sovereign power, borderlands
are zones of irreducible indistinction between the outside and the inside of sovereignty’s
jurisdiction – between violence and law, law and life. In these spaces, exception and rule
flow through one another to the point of literal indistinction. It is in this light that the
philosophical dimension of the notion of “in-between spaces” enables us to fathom the
problematics of the concept of state-boundary as well as to discern the entanglements in
the border zones.

The anthropological treatment of borders enhanced my ability to grasp such
entanglements. The anthropology of border zones studies borders as means to understand
nations and states, the relations between the two, and how a variety of peoples therein
experience, symbolically and materially, the nation and the state in their everyday
quotidian lives along the borders (e.g., Donnan & Wilson, 1999). Moreover, borderlands
are spaces where a diverse array of forces and flows entwine: boundary-traversing
peoples, cultures, and capital disrupt the nation-states’ territorial integrity and their
details of disqualifying other ethnic nationalities situated in the border zones – e.g., the Mons, the Shans,
and the Karennis – though will be sporadically mentioned are beyond the scope of this study.

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sovereignties. Border zones thus not only symbolize nation-states’ powers and their limits, but also engender conflicts and accommodation. As spaces filled with cultural actions, they are zones of unique cultural translations and negotiations (Bhabha, 1994: 38; cf. Clifford, 1997). All these features, therefore, highlight cultural aspects of the Thai-Burmese “in-between spaces” where peoples traversed.

**Ethnographic Research on Displacement and Refugees & The Political In-between Spaces**

This anthropological methodology addresses the effects of territorial or spatial displacement upon the quotidian lives of forcibly displaced peoples. It pays attention to the becomingness of the displaced. I employ this methodology to discern both the torment and cultural transformation amidst danger of the forcibly displaced Karens, by following some earlier research on displacement and “refugees.” For instance, Liisa Malkki argues that “refugees” see themselves as a nation in exile and some of them consider their situatedness to be “positive, productive status and...a profoundly meaningful historical identity.”

Likewise, in my study of the displaced Karens, I ask: If there is something that can be regarded as the Karens’ collective self-understanding of their situations, how has their transformation from being “internally displaced peoples” to being “peoples fleeing fighting” on the Thai side affected that understanding?

In attempting to discern the forcibly displaced Karens’ situatedness, it is critical to problematize a conception of forcibly displaced peoples as universal “victims” (cf. Allen & Turton, 1996: 9). Such is a view held by the international community and particularly

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5 See e.g., Malkki, 1995, 1997; the quotation is from 1997: 227; cf. also Preis 1997.
by many international relief organizations. When one focuses on the displaced Karens’ signs of impoverishment and injury, more often than not, one ignores these peoples as unqualified political subjects. With this attitude, the forcibly displaced Karens become entities without histories, a view that both strips them of their pasts and silences their presents. Even though many Karens have been displaced from their “homeland” and many still have lost their lives, their identities as a people have not been simply lost, they have been reconfigured. Although the displaced Karens today are not in the strong positions that their ancestors were when, for instance, the latter demanded to be perceived in the Burmese public sphere under the semi-rule of the British Empire in the nineteenth-century, many of today’s displaced Karens have been struggling relentlessly to survive and to be perceived as a nation again. I will narrate some of these struggles in so far as the narrative will not jeopardize their struggles and their safety, making them even more vulnerable.

Weaving together the transformational processes of displacement with the entanglements of a variety of forces and flows in the border zones, one is in a better position to recognize the political dimensions of the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces. Specifically, this study is inspired by the Rancierian conception of the political. The in-between spaces are spaces of a meeting among the heterogenous, where the politics acts on the police. Expressed theoretically, the heterogenous meet “in the places and with the words that are common to both [the politics and the police], even if it means reshaping those places and changing the status of those words” (Ranciere, 1999: 32, 33). Hence, after reconfiguring the in-between spaces by conceptually neutralizing them from the police’s logic, and after deviating from the following common terms that are anti-
political yet reflect the police’s logic – terms such as “stateless peoples,” “internally displaced persons,” and “refugees” – the study moves in two ways. First, it installs the term “forcibly displaced peoples” as a way to deviate and distance itself from the police logic of the univocity of statist discourses. Second, it deploys the term “imperceptible naked-lives” to conceptually disrupt the statist univocity and to open conceptual spaces for non-statist multivocity. Moreover, discerning attempts by the forcibly displaced Karens to name themselves, to participate in the stage of the common world, this study highlights the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces as spaces of political subjectification, which produce a heterogeneity that was not given “in the police constitution of the community, a multiple whose count poses itself as contradictory in terms of police logic” (Ibid.: 36). Nonetheless, the sovereign power over various subjectivities in its territory often results in the state committing terror upon peoples’ bodies and lives. The anthropological study of state terror then becomes imperative for this dissertation to fathom the situatedness of the forcibly displaced Karens.

**Anthropology of State Terror & The In-between Spaces of Terror**

The last anthropological approach that this study employs investigates the extent and characteristics of state violence, which are the operating procedures to suppress or eradicate dissenting voices or nations. As a result of these processes of control, cultures

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6 Jeffrey A. Sluka (2000: 11, 22-24) states that among the well over 10,000 anthropologists worldwide, only a few dozen have chosen to study state terror. Members of these small groups of people have also been both direct and indirect victims of state terror and death squads; many have been threatened, and at least four have been killed “on the job.”

_Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla and Indonesian anthropologist George Aditjondro “both live under the threat of state-sanctioned assassination if they return to their countries from exile” (Ibid.: 24)_

Four anthropologists, Sluka maintains, have been killed for speaking and writing against terror. In 1982,
of terror emerge and flourish (Taussig, 1987: 242). The culture of terror creates permanent, massive, and systematic threats, uses of violence and intimidation by the state, such as repression, torture, rape, and killing to those who oppose the political status quo (Ibid.; cf. Sluka 1995). This dissertation studies terror from the memories and loci of enunciation of survivors. It investigates the ways in which cultures of borderlands enhance or hinder cultures of terror, and the extent to which both cultural elements affect the forcibly displaced Karens.

Within the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces, both the Burmese and Thai state’s functionaries have committed atrocities upon the Karens and other forcibly displaced peoples. Although the multifaceted state terror is a state construction, its effects upon the lifeworlds of a variety of peoples in the in-between zones have been far-reaching and beyond the two countries’ territories. The wounds and tormenting memories that the forcibly displaced unwillingly carry with them while traversing the Thai-Burmese state-boundary transcend the Thailand’s and Burma’s territorial sovereignties and their containment strategies. Moreover, all the following human conditions of the forcibly displaced that they have lost surpass the two nation-state’s jurisdictions and the latter’s capabilities to heal: the peoples’ abilities to be materially self-reliant, the spiritual attachments to the lands for many of the displaced, and the senses of pride as humans. Regretfully, there is inadequate recognition for the forcibly displaced to begin with.

South African Ruth First was killed by a mail bomb in her office, generally believed to have been sent by South African secret service agents. In 1984, Melanesian Arnold Ap was tortured and killed in West Papua by the Indonesian army, and his body dumped into the sea from a helicopter. In 1989, South African David Webster was shot dead from the back of a speeding van of a pro-apartheid death squad while out walking his dogs. In 1990, Guatemalan Myrna Mack was brutally murdered, stabbed twenty-seven times by a then unknown assassin, in the street as she left her research office in Guatemala City. The killer turned out to be a soldier, and her death has been linked to the army and other high officials in Guatemala. These examples
From the Thai statist perspective, for instance, the voices of the forcibly displaced from Burma, expressing the atrocities they have experienced, are generally regarded as voices of the Others, the aberrants – the unqualified political subjects. Even if these voices are sometimes listened to, many survivors have become speechless.7

By connecting the anthropological studies of atrocities and their effects on the displaced Karens’ collective selfhood within Thai-Burmese border zones, the resulting methodological approach helps me to reconfigure the relationships between space, identity/temporality, and culture amidst state terror. Because this research combines philosophy, political theory, and critical comparative politics with in-depth ethnographic research, the study aims to provide some new dimensions to these three anthropological approaches.8

2. An “Anthropologist’s” Awareness?: Conducting Fieldwork in Dangerous Zones

One evening, almost sunset, our team crossed a beautiful river on a makeshift bamboo bridge. The whole surrounding was embraced by the winter sky of a deep jungle, an atmosphere that conjured restful feelings in our fatigued bodies. After a whole day of strenuous walk, up and down a few mountains, I was more than ready to rest in a village on the other side of the river. The look of the area, the feel of the air, and the coldness soothed me. Yet, I felt oddly lonely...

After reaching the other side of the river, all of a sudden I was encountered by a group of, as I was told later, 94 lives, 25 families spreading along the river. Leaving their homes located deeper inside Burma, they were on their way to the Thai-Burmese state-should suffice to evince how studying terror could turn out not only terrorizing a practitioner, but also taking his life.

7 Cf. e.g., Daniel, 1996, chapter 6 for the speechlessness of those who survived traumatic experiences of violence.

8 As far as I am aware, there is no published study in either English or Thai that combines these three anthropological approaches and focuses on atrocities committed against forcibly displaced peoples along the borders of Thailand and Burma. In Thai, there are only two books that study ethnic nationalities from Burma along the Thai-Burmese border zones, and they employ different approaches (Pornpimon, 1999; Somchoke, 1997).
boundary. When we met, most of them were preparing their dinners. Having been travelling for more than 2 weeks in the war zones, I knew what they would eat because I had had them for a few meals—a lot of rice with soup either of dry leaves or chopped banana-trunk. Since I had stayed in this village for a couple of days before heading deeper into the jungles, I remembered how cold it could get; and for them to sleep by the river, it was even colder. Worse still, there were a few months old babies and many others were young or sick or old—malaria, dysentery, and countless other diseases were the rules not the exceptions. My heart sank; my eyes welled up with tears.

The next morning, I found myself walking and climbing, along with them, the highest mountain in this area that is more than 4,200 feet. On the way downhill, it was an almost unmoving line of displaced persons down the steep path—a scene I can never forget.

This entry in my diary occurred on a day in my eleven-month fieldwork, conducted between July 2000 and June 2001 in Thailand, Burma, and the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces. In order to discern the quotidian lives of the forcibly displaced Karens affected by state terror, it was critical for me to conduct academic research—in the sense of having the system of educational institution guarantees and deploying such institutionalized methodologies—in dangerous sites where my life as a researcher was intertwined with those of my “subjects.” Obviously, it was my choice to take a journey in such danger zones and hence confirming Arjun Appadurai’s distinction between “the voluntarily displaced anthropologist” and “the involuntarily localized ‘other’” (1988). Voluntariness notwithstanding, within these spaces of emergency, I was in danger as much as my Karen informants. Yet, as an “outside” researcher, I can say for certain that I was lucky not to have to write, for months or years, and with similar torturing feelings, a journal like the one I just quoted from. Then to think again, had I lived there much longer, no entry could perhaps have been written in my diary because the time for keeping a diary could be considered as too much of a luxury. Although academic
researchers are usually the ones with citizenship and juridical protection – perceptible as opposed to imperceptible naked-lives – both parties’ “nakedness” at times is manifested equally in the dangerous zones.

Conducting fieldwork in the Thai-Burmese dangerous zones had become both urgent and crucial for me for at least two reasons. First, with extensive reports of atrocities committed by the Burmese junta,\(^\text{10}\) no academic research has been conducted within the war zones of Burma/Myanmar. Focusing on the Mons’ “refugees” in Thailand, Hazel Lang’s important study – *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand* (2002) – is the first academic work (in the genre of so-called “refugee studies”) that pays attention to Thailand’s western front. However, it does not include ethnographic details from the dangerous zones. Fortunately, there have been some exemplary journalistic research and historical accounts from the zones inside Burma, especially Martin Smith’s benchmark, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, conducted largely in the years 1982-1990. The other works that must be mentioned here belong to Jonathan Falla (1991) and Bertil Lintner (1990).

The second reason why I had to conduct research in the Burmese war zones is precisely because my study focuses on the quotidian lives of the forcibly displaced

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9 This by no means prioritize the academic practice over others, e.g., journalistic practice. Rather, it is to both emphasize and problematize the very power relations of academic institutions in producing and disseminating knowledge.

10 There have been many publications and some internet Web sites. See, for example, report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation in Myanmar to the United Nations Commission of Human Rights: [http://www.unhchr.ch/htmlfmenu4/chrrep/6497.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/htmlfmenu4/chrrep/6497.htm); Open Society Institute: [http://www.soros.org/burma.html](http://www.soros.org/burma.html); The Karen Human Rights Group: [http://www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org)

Apart from normal annual reports by the Amnesty International, the US’s State Department, see, for example, *Burma Ethnic Research Group*, 1998; *Karen Human Rights Group*, 1998; *Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People*, 2000a; Tun, 1997; *Images Asia and BurmaNet*, 1997; and annual
Karens, whose plight and struggles have not been adequately perceived and recognized by the dominant forms of perception, and hence have largely been unaccounted-for. And there are no other alternatives except going in there. The fact that the state-centric paradigm has for the most part ignored transversal subjectivities of the forcibly displaced, the Karens included, made me a restless political science student (to the extent that it was terribly hard for me to continue pursuing research that could be carried on in libraries). Although it is important to be aware that the numbers of the forcibly displaced all over the world remain horrendously high, the more critical goal of this dissertation is not to determine the exact figures, which can never be known. Rather, the goal is to explore and fathom the entanglements of key elements that have hindered the (almost) impossibility of the forcibly displaced from being (ac)counted, by beginning with understanding their experiential conditions. Then, one must also attempt to identify the possibility of the displaced being (ac)counted by the world community, which has been problematically influenced by the univocity of statist discourses. Hence, between the two state-constructed discourses of “refugees” and “internally displaced peoples,” the latter is the more extreme form of displacement because of their being “inside” the nation-state jurisdictions. As far as the plight of the forcibly displaced in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces is concerned, there has not been any academic research that has explored and elucidated the entanglements that have hindered the human community from being accountable to the wrongs visited upon these peoples.

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publication by the Human Rights Documentation Unit of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (e.g., NCGUB: 1998; 1999; 2000).
Research from the dangerous zones, therefore, challenges readers to pay urgent attention to the Benjaminian sense of the real states of exception in the world. In other words, in opposition to Appadurai’s emphasis on “a world of people on the move,” I propose that one must not linger or loiter in this line of thinking if one is concerned about the struggles and sufferings of forcibly displaced peoples. With Appadurai’s coinage of the term “ethnoscape” – i.e., a landscape of varieties of subjectivities who signify the shifting world of people on the move, hence disrupting the nation-state’s territorial sovereignty – a question arises: who are these peoples? The answer is that they are people in general. On the contrary, my emphasis is on a specific people who cannot participate and exploit the transnational public sphere. Worse still, they might be victimized, in one way or another, by such a public sphere, such an “imagined world.”

Hence, one must be aware of the stark differences between the movements of forcibly displaced people and people in general – peoples with no citizenship and a country’s citizens, peoples under fire and peoples under peace, peoples with almost nothing to eat and peoples who eat until they vomit – between imperceptible and perceptible naked-lives.

One can, therefore, ask: Who can exploit the technoscapes and mediascapes when they do not even have electricity; or the financescapes when they do not have money to spend; or the ideoscapes when they do not even know how to read? For instance, there are tremendous differences between those who are running for their lives in war zones

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11 The notion of being victimized here is different from what I mentioned in the earlier section when I problematize the general conception that many international relief agencies have toward forcibly displaced peoples as victims without agency. Among other things, even with agency, the forcibly displaced are not in a position to deal with transnational public sphere because they have no adequate juridical protection and the fact that such public sphere is a stage of engagement predominantly for citizenry.
and diasporic nationalists who send money from the U.S. and Europe to insurgent or resistant organizations in India. Moreover, as important as Appadurai’s articulations of "post-national imaginary," "mobile sovereignties," and hence "sovereignty without territoriality" are (1996a; 1996b), his treatment of sovereignty has not paid much attention to sovereign power. Giorgio Agamben thus becomes crucial, not only as a theorist of the nexus between sovereign power and naked life, but also as a corrective to those who do not adequately theorize sovereignty.

Therefore, when Appadurai explores the emergence of the notion of sovereignty without territory, he does not take account of what a figure of sovereign power can do to the imperceptible naked-lives. It is here that this study runs into an aporia: emphasizing the importance of sovereign protection while simultaneously problematizing and disrupting the univocity of the statist discourses. Sovereignty not only controls and threatens human lives, but it also embraces them: providing protection and services. In this light, the flights for safer areas in war zones of many forcibly displaced – where crossing high mountains with almost nothing to eat, devastated by sickness, and having to carry a four-month baby next to her breasts with almost the last breath – mean life or death. All of these happen, to quote Appadurai again, "in a world of people on the move."

In the war zones, one would think of varieties of governmental services that are needed: basic food, running water, health care, transportation, to name just a few. Sovereignty has two faces: the good and the evil, the protective and the threatening, or the "care for life" and the "threatening of life." Perceptibility presupposes and entails a certain kind of sovereign power: be it intelligible language (e.g., Aristotelian distinction
of *logos* and *phone*), community, nation, state, religion, among others. For perceptibility implies not only *what* is being perceived, but also being perceived by *whom*?

Being forcibly displaced peoples *on the move*, the forcibly displaced Karens' strategies for survival and struggles have been precarious and limited. Hence, their transversal struggles are unlike those of peoples with citizenship. Their ability to exploit the *translocalities* (Appadurai, 1996a; 1996b) along the borders of Thailand and Burma, for example, have become contingent, to say the best, and at times very precarious. The fact that many struggles cannot be mentioned here, lest my Karen informants will be in even more danger, exemplifies both Thailand's and Burma's sovereign power to threaten their lives – and, perhaps, mine.

Unlike the way Appadurai downplays the aspirations for territorial sovereignty of "most cases of counternationalism, secession, supranationalism, or ethnic revival on a large scale" (1996a: 21), the Karen peoples' aspiration is to return to a Karen land under the Federal Union of Burma. They want to return or remain in the land they call *Kawthoolei*, which means "pleasant," "plentiful" and "peaceful." Hence, the land of *Kawthoolei* is "a land free of all evils, famine, misery and strife" (Karen National Union, 2000: 5). Let us now turn to visit the Karens in their *Kawthoolei*, when it was under fire.
Chapter 5 – Displacement, Separation, and Loss: 
Lives in the Burman-Karen War Zones

The Tatmadaw targeted civilians first, then the KNU. They are systematically starving villagers to break their links with the KNU. The Tatmadaw forced us to relocate in February 2000... I want to tell you that so many people are suffering inside; 
A thirty-seven-year-old Baptist Karen man.

In this chapter, our journey through the lives of the forcibly displaced peoples inside Burma, especially those of the Karens, will be in the war zones. The forcibly displaced Karens have been taking flight therein as a result of the fightings between the Tatmadaw and its allies, on the one hand, and the Karen National Union’s troops on the other. I will articulate two issues in this chapter: firstly, the junta’s spatial practices and their atrocious affects upon a variety of lives in the battle zones, and, secondly, the memories of some forcibly displaced Karens on their harrowing experiences of displacement, separation, and the loss of loved ones. Theirs are unrecorded histories. As an attempt to lay bare the lifeworlds of the forcibly displaced peoples “inside” a nation-state, this chapter aims to make perceptible that which has been impeceptible due to the very statist discourse of territorial integrity.

1 Because I intend to present a comprehensive narrative of a variety of atrocities in the war zones, I thus have to incorporate information from secondary sources to my own ethnography. This is because of the fact that my journey to the war zones last only about three weeks. The major secondary sources include testimonies given to, interviews by, and the first-hand experiences of members of some of the following human rights groups or relief agencies: Amnesty International, Burma Ethnic Research Group, Christians Concerned For Burma, Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People, Free Burma Rangers, and People’s Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarization in Burma.

1. Controlled Areas & Contested Areas

Starting a Journey into the War Zones

Borders breed uneven geographies of power and status. Crossing them in the name of humanitarian assistance is a political act, one that is more available to the governments of donor countries than to those who receive humanitarian assistance.

Jennifer Hyndman, Managing Displacement.

Traversing the Thai-Burmese state-boundary during the winter season of the year 2001, I was allowed to join the Free Burma Rangers, a group of medics, teachers, and church workers, and embarked on a three-week trip into the war zones of the designated Karen State. The purpose of the trip was to take medicine, educational supplies, and Bibles into those zones to meet some immediate needs of the forcibly displaced peoples. The team intended to cure the sick and victims of land mines and shrapnel, to uplift the spirit of the forcibly displaced (Christians or otherwise), and to give the stationery to children whose education was intermittently possible after every forced displacement.

Our path was at times not far from the outposts or military camps of the junta’s troops. Along the ways up and down the mountains and often passing through thick forest on

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3 Hyndman, 2000: 1.
4 The team was led by a Baptist missionary, but the team’s purpose was to take the relief to treat and give to all forcibly displaced peoples regardless of, in their own words, “race, religion or political affiliation” (Free Burma Rangers, 1999: 8), which means including the Burmans and Burmese soldier defector(s).

On Sunday 28 July 2002 on BBC Two at 19:15 (BST), the BBC documentary’s “The Forgotten War” was broadcasted. It was the “Free Burma Rangers” who took the BBC’s “Correspondent” team into the war zones to film this documentary (read more in Smith, 2002). The decision to take the BBC with them was significant. For it can produce paradoxical effects. On the one hand, the hardships of the forcibly displaced peoples have become more perceptible to the outside world (one can read comments from around the world at the BBC’s website). On the other, future work of the Free Burma Rangers could be jeopardized and the displaced peoples’ plight worsened because of this exposure, especially from the
“main roads,” from time to time we caught sights of remnants of houses (read huts) burnt to the ground. I wondered to myself, how much blood was shed and tears rolled down with those huts destroyed by fire? I would later hear some harrowing and haunting stories relating to remnants like those.

We passed through areas controlled by the KNU. I was told by some local KNU leaders that in the past, when the KNU was able to control more areas along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces and the situations were somewhat peaceful, many rural and mountainous Karens would have had little contact with the local leaders, others even concerned less who were governing them. From the perspectives of some villagers, however, there have been some contacts between the sovereign power of the KNU and villagers. There have been some forms of taxation by the KNU in the areas they control; and the KNU have provided basic education and medical treatments, among others, to the villagers. Nonetheless, judging from the areas that the KNU have controlled especially after losing its headquarter at Manerplaw in 1995 (e.g., BERG, 1998: 99), KNU’s taxation upon villagers must have decreased a great deal.

The local Karens, many of whom are Animists, had lived in the remote areas – jungles or mountains – for most if not all of their lives, and had very strong attachment to Thai state’s more restrictions along its boundary as well as tighter controls of the SPDC, who have refused all along that there are no forcibly displaced peoples inside Burma (see e.g., CIDKP, 2000b: 3).

5 At first, I was very much surprised to learn that walkways on paddy fields, inside deep forests, among others, were called “main roads” used to travel (albeit not always safe) between villages or towns in the mountainous areas of Burma. By and large, people either traveled by feet or by elephants on these “main roads.”

6 See e.g., an account of a forcibly displaced person’s testimony given to the People’s Tribunal on Food and Scarcity and Militarization in Burma, in Voice of the Hungry Nation (AHRC, 1999: 103). This book, published by the Asian Human Rights Commission (hereafter AHRC), presents findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the tribunal whose findings relied on witnesses’ testimonies conducted in April 1999.
their natural surroundings like other indigenous peoples. Nature is their lifeline, materially and spiritually, hence rural, jungle, or mountainous cultures and economies have emerged and have been disrupted by the state of ethnic strife beginning, in many areas, even before Burma’s independence in 1948 (cf. e.g., BERG, 1998: 7-45; Smith, 1999).

In many areas of the Burmese nation-state, there has been very little peaceful time since the country’s independence. After the Burmese junta overcame the Communist Party of Burma in 1989, they started to mobilize a full effort to subdue armed opposition groups along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces. Thus, it was necessary for the villagers to be alert to news concerning the movements of the junta’s troops; and the villagers then sought for more protections by the local KNU. Once these local Karens became forcibly displaced, food and emergency relief was critical. Obviously, these crises, whereby the villagers have themselves become the “battlefield” (Lang, 2002: 182), have resulted from, what many ethnic nationalists argue as, a civil war, but the junta does not use this term; they moreover prefer to label ethnic nationalities’ armies as “illegal armed groups” (e.g., AHRC, 1999: 16). On the contrary, ethnic resistance movements consider their fights and struggles as revolutions. Their common aim is a Federal Union of Burma whereby all ethnic nationalities are justly treated, and share the governance.

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7 See e.g., KNU, 2000. Hence, the KNU calls their resistant areas “revolutionary areas” (KNU, Ibid.: 11). Some Karens (KNU members or otherwise) whom I met both in Burma and along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces stated clearly that they were not insurgents, some even added further that they were revolutionaries. As Martin Smith states, most armed opposition groups reject the terms “insurgent” and “rebel” as pejorative, implying their struggles as unlawful (1999: 89 n), which is insidiously problematic for a dictatorship nation-state to claim the lawfulness.

I therefore do not use the term “insurgent” for the Karens, which even in Smith’s usage (to imply “the intention to overthrow a government or seize power by armed means” [Ibid.]) would no longer be
Shaping Civilians' Odyssey of Forced Displacement: The KNU versus the Junta's Practices of Space

Human displacement does not occur in neutral spaces, reducible to particular places and void of political meaning. Histories of conflict and antagonistic but spatially contingent relations of power are often what force people to move from their homes in the first place. Equally, histories of domination and uneven geographies of power influence shape the directions in which displaced people move.

Jennifer Hyndman, Managing Displacement. 8

A space is never neutral. It is always a part of contests over control. A political space is always produced and controlled by sovereign power, no matter how contested such control would be. Likewise, in the Burma’s war zones, one would at first glance find oneself walking in a junta-produced area or an ethnic armed organization’s area. Specifically, in the junta-designated Karen State, either the Tatmadaw or its allies (e.g., the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army) control the space; if not, one would find oneself in the KNU-controlled area. Hence, it seems that the forcibly displaced peoples were under the “protection” of the KNU or the Burmese state. The two controlled-areas, however, have always been contested. From the Burmese state’s practice of space, these contested areas are designated in different colours according to the intensity of fighting with the ethnic nationalities’ troops, from black, to brown, to white, with the aim to finally whiten all the areas. As Martin Smith writes:

The map of Burma was divided into a vast chessboard under the Tatmadaw’s six (later nine) regional military commands and shaded in three colours: black for entirely insurgent-controlled areas; brown for areas both sides still disputed; and white “free”. The idea was that each insurgent-coloured area would be cleared, one by one,
until the whole map of Burma was white. For the black “hard-core” areas and brown “guerrilla” zones a standard set of tactics was developed which, after a little refinement, has remained little changed till today (1999: 259).

The junta also calls the “black” areas the “free-fire” zones, where troops can shoot anyone on sight without the need to determine identity, which was one of the causes of death of the relatives of the “refugee” interviewed by Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2001a: 13). This whole zonal categorization, however, is misleading because there have been atrocities committed by the junta’s functionaries in every kind of zone, although in theory this state’s practice of space is intended to win the hearts and minds of the local peoples. This zonal categorization, together with the Four Cuts operations, are military strategies that have resulted in indigenous peoples – be they rural villagers, peasants, or hill peoples – being forcibly relocated, so as to isolate the ethnic nationalities’ troops from the peoples, and to finally gain political, economic, and social control over the contested areas.

In the Karen-Burmese war zones that I was visiting, it was the KNU who had been losing most of its areas of control and communication routes in the jungle. The

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9 Smith, 1999: 259; BERG, 1998: 23; see more details of the procedure of these military strategies in Smith, Ibid.: 258-62 and passim.

The Four Cuts strategy was first deployed on New Year’s Day 1968 in the delta region of Irrawaddy division, especially at Bassein, Pyapon, Henzada and Myaungmya. According to the Burmese Ethnic Research Group (BERG), majority of the peoples in these areas at that time were the Karens; perhaps half of the total Karens in the whole Burmese nation-state lived in these areas during that time (1998: 23). From 1968 to 1974, the KNU troops had to retreat from the delta region eastward passing the Pegu Yoma and finally joined their eastern troops into the area later became the “Karen State” according to the 1974 Constitution (see a detailed account of the fighting during that period in Smith 1999: 263-67; see also BERG, Ibid).

From then on the Four Cuts strategy would be carried on in the Karen State in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces, starting in the dry season, in December 1974 in Taungoo, Nyaunglebin, Thaton, Papun, Pa-an, Moulmein, and Tenasserim areas (BERG, Ibid.; see a genealogy of the Four Cuts operations and their effects on local peoples from 1974-97 in Ibid.: 23ff).
junta's Four Cuts strategy was atrociously effective.\textsuperscript{10} It has always been the case that the junta's troops have attempted onslaughts on ethnic nationalities' controlled-areas during the dry seasons, roughly between mid-November and the beginning of May. Yet, it has been the civilians who have had to bear the horrendous brunt of the attacks by hiding in the jungles with little or no food during the rainy seasons.

Arbitrary and severe atrocities have claimed a multitude of lives. Families, and communities have been scattering throughout the jungles. The attacks of 1994/95 and 1997 inflicted the most serious damage and casualties on the Karens' side since their retreat to the Karen State in 1974.\textsuperscript{11} On January 27, 1995, the KNU lost Manerplaw, its headquarter adjacent to the Thai-Burmese state-boundary. They lost the headquarter after losing many of their "brothers" who called themselves the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army and who had turned to side with the junta and had helped the latter stormed Manerplaw.\textsuperscript{12} Such loss of the controlled-areas and communication routes has resulted in many Karen villagers leaving their lands and trying to survive. Some have been able to escape from the SPDC-controlled areas, but others could not.

\textsuperscript{10} See e.g., CIDKP, 2000b: 2; BERG, 1998: 98 – Fig. 12.

\textsuperscript{11} See, e.g., CIDKP, 1999: 3.

I was told by a KNU’s leader that they stopped conducting \textit{positional guerrilla warfare}, especially after the fall of its headquarter, Manerplaw, which meant that their military operations were still active, albeit in a totally different form (from an interview conducted in October 2000); see also Surath, 2000.

According to David Eubank of the Christians Concerned For Burma, an organization that has, for a long time, been very actively working on helping the forcibly displaced peoples from Burma, the year 2002 has been the severest onslaught against ethnic nationalities because it continued throughout the wet season (Rogers, 2002: 12).

\textsuperscript{12} Because this study focuses more on the general Karens than the leaders, the issue of the politics of disintegration within the KNU is beyond the scope of this dissertation.
2. At a KNU’s Temporary District Headquarter

If we start counting from the official day of what the Karens call, the Karen Revolution on January 31, 1949, it has been a few generations of fighting, hiding, and taking flight in the jungles. Everyone I met during my three weeks in the war zones had been forcibly displaced. Everyone I interviewed in the war zones had at least one relative who could not endure their sickness, which came to them so easily but hardly ever left them, for many, until they died. Almost everyone I communicated had lost at least one member of their family. It became clear to me that senses of loss and separation were the rules of life in the war zones. Generally, most of my informants remembered clearly the dead and how they died, but some showed conspicuous signs of indifference to the dead and/or their deaths; some even referred to them with laughter – the act of which I still remember vividly, but have never fathomed.

For the forcibly displaced Karens that I encountered, it was the KNU who has been taking care of them, with the help of some international non-governmental organizations. In a temporary district headquarter of the KNU where our team stayed (the “permanent” one was overrun so they had had to flee to a neighboring district), a temporary, thatch-roofed, primary school was set up in the jungle (cf. CIDKP, 2000B: 3, Naw Rebecca, 1989). Most students I met stayed there without their parents, many of whom were living, fleeing, or dying in other war zones. They might not meet each other again. Two to three students stayed together under a shed (enough to protect from the wind but not the coldness). The KNU officials provided them with education, food, and
safety – sufficient to get by for some time, but no one knew for how long.\textsuperscript{13} Before I went there, they had already moved this temporary headquarter a few times.

I spent a few days at this temporary headquarter. It was another unforgettable opportunity to spend time with the forcibly displaced Karens, to participate in a celebration of the Karen Revolutionary Day, and to interview various groups of the Karens, which ranged from frontline soldiers to former soldiers, to persons who lost at least one member of their family, to children, and to some KNU district leaders. It must be stated here, however, that only one of the Karens I interviewed during my trip to the war zones saw the killing scenes that they narrated to me. This is understandable, for most of the people who witnessed those events did not survive to tell us their stories.

One of my interviewees, who was shot but the bullet did not kill him, pretended to die and lay still on the ground. The following is a story of a forcibly displaced Karen I choose to narrate here. It belongs to a young man who decided to be a KNU’s soldier to revenge the deaths of his aunt and niece.

\textit{A Frontline Soldier.}\textsuperscript{14} Asked why he wanted to be a soldier, he said: “the SPDC [the ruling group in Burma] persecuted my relatives, my people, my nation.” He was a young man, twenty-six years of age. At the age of seventeen, he joined the Karen National Liberation Army (the armed wing of the KNU), right after finishing the highest level of high school education in Burma, in a town far away. Coming back home and finding that two of his beloved persons had been executed a year ago, in 1990, by the

\textsuperscript{13} For a brief overview of the Education system provided by the KNU in mountainous areas and/or jungles (and some schools are located in the war zones), see, e.g., Maat & Taloung: 2000: 12-18. According to the Karen Educational Department, there are at present 363 primary, 18 middle, and 4 high schools still operating in the designated Karen State, teaching over 17,000 students, with 778 teachers.

\textsuperscript{14} The interview was conducted in January 2001.
Tatmadaw’s soldiers, he unhesitatingly fulfilled his youthful desire of becoming a soldier. He believed that the most critical problems of the Karen peoples are security, freedom, knowing about the Karen history, and possessing more political knowledge.

The story of the death of his beloveds was related to him by one of his relatives and by the KNU soldiers who witnessed the tragic scene afterwards. The moment of learning the death of his beloved ones was the life-changing moment for him. He said, he was “sad and angry.” At that moment, he fervently felt he had to “to protect his relatives, his people, and his nation.” He accentuated that there was no other way, under the circumstances then and now, for the security of his people, except for him to become a soldier. He averred further that he always wanted to kill the Burmese soldiers and that he could not remember how many lives he had taken, but he asserted that he never wanted to kill the civilian Burmans. His calmness and clear voice during our interview made me certain that in front of me was a resolute young man.

The Tatmadaw’s troops killed his aunt, thirty-five years of age and his younger cousin, a two-month-old girl. The troops came to the vicinity of his village during the harvest time. But instead of passing through, they went to the paddy fields of the villagers’ huts; and one of them happened to be his aunt’s paddy and abode. There were six members of the family staying inside the hut at the time: the aunt, her husband, who was also shot when he fled, the girl and her three siblings: a ten-year-old boy, an eight-year-old boy, and a five-year-old girl. The soldiers surrounded the hut and then started shooting. All the members jumped down from the hut. The aunt herself was holding the baby girl and was shot in the leg. When she could not move, one of the soldiers carrying a sickle slit her throat. The soldiers destroyed and burnt the paddy fields and the
villagers’ huts, extorting some chickens, pigs, and... human lives. They buried the aunty with the baby who was still alive, and took off.

During the event, the other four members of the family ran away. The three oldest members went together and, in the same day, met their friends in the jungle, who fed them and helped take care of the husband's wound. The five-year-old girl, however, ran away alone and found herself hiding alone in the bushes for three days without food.

During the time when this family and other villagers were hiding, the group always sent someone to gauge the situation in the village, which included looking for landmines that might have been planted in the vicinity, before temporary coming out of the hiding places in the jungle. After hiding in there for one month and after they were certain that the situation was safe, the villagers went back to the village but found no food. Their animals had also run away. They collected whatever they could carry and left the village. My interviewee said that some KNU’s soldiers went back to the remnant of the auntie’s hut and unearthed her and the baby’s bodies.

3. Varieties of Atrocities in the War Zones: Forcing, Torturing, and Killing Zones

Pa Eh Mo was cooking in her hut on the outskirts of our hiding place. The Tatmadaw assumed it was the KNU and shot into the hut. She was cooking beside the fire and was hit on the cheek and back... Her husband was with me at the time she was shot so he escaped... We all heard the shooting, but we didn’t dare to go there immediately, we went the next day. It was very sad to see the cooking pot still on the fire, with the dead baby beside it. A thirty-seven-year-old Baptist Karen.¹⁵

The Tatmadaw’s Four Cuts strategy has affected the civilians’ lives in four key ways.¹⁶ Food and crops have been destroyed and/or materials have been expropriated;
some of them have been forced to hide or take flight; others have been forcibly relocated, put to forced-labor, and tortured; and, lastly, many still have been killed. Nonetheless, all these four forms have not always been separated. They are related and some of them happen one after another, forming a series of atrocities. Sorrowfully, civilians — and ethnic nationalities much more than the dominant Burmans — are the ones who have always been horrifically hit by the blows of these Tatmadaw’s atrocious operations:

“Karen civilians, particularly those in ‘black’ areas, are considered as enemies by the Tatmadaw and suffer disproportionally compared to the KNU troops,” wrote Amnesty International in one of their reports (2001a: 15).

Food and Crops Destruction, Material Expropriations. Making a sweeping claim that food is supplied to ethnic armed soldiers, the Tatmadaw’s troops destroy food and/or burn the crops before they can be harvested. The junta’s functionaries, therefore, starve everyone, civilians, and ethnic armed troops alike. Moreover, what little and miscellaneous belongings that villagers have, they are expropriated, unrelentingly, excessively, and at times capriciously. The extortion includes, but is in no way limited to, money, liquor, construction materials, utensils, and whatever food and livestock that have not been destroyed. These expropriations occur more severely if the villagers stay in a forced relocation village under close control. According to one testimony:

...when the rice crop is almost due, they still have to give taxes or food to the Burma army and DKBA [Democratic Karen Buddhist Army] soldiers in ever increasing quantities, and so they experience hunger. At that time of year [sic] most people are not eating regular meals of rice, but are eating rice porridge, perhaps only once per day, with a few bamboo shoots.17

16 See also e.g., AHRC, 1999: 59-62; BERG, 1998: 27-64.
17 AHRC, 1999: 103.

When I was teaching in a “temporary shelter area” on the Thai side, one day, a student of mine came to talk to me calmly and soberly. He said he had got a few letters from his parents, who had still
Worse still, villagers occasionally have to be responsible for the activities of ethnic armed soldiers in their area by paying fines: "the military promises economic ruin for any village tolerating guerrilla action" (AHRC, 1999: 62). According to interviews conducted by the Amnesty International in early 2002 with some forcibly displaced peoples on the Thai side, there have been arbitrary fees for many things that the Tatmadaw's troops force local peoples to pay, either, in cash or labor. They are, for instances, "porter fees" (instead of being a porter), "security fees" (to support the army or militia), "sports fees" or "festival fees" (for special occasions), "rice taxes" (to give, or to sell to the Tatmadaw's troops below market price, in fixed amounts regardless of yields). In short, anything that the Tatmadaw and its allies can claim and seize (Amnesty International, 2002b: 7-8). Amnesty International adds, moreover, that the situations have worsened since 1996/97 when the Tatmadaw reportedly started a self-sufficiency program: there have been orders issued to local military commanders instructing troops to provide food for themselves (2001a: 5; 2002b: 2). Subsequently, troops began confiscating land farmed for generations by ethnic civilians, and forcing these farmers to cultivate their confiscated land to provide food for the military. Villagers' hardships abound.

*Hide or Flight.* Generally, when there is a village raid by the Tatmadaw and/or its allies, villagers escape for fear of death or other atrocities. Those who can escape are lived inside the designated Karen State, stating that the DKBA had wanted him to come back from Thailand and be its soldier. They believed he was working for the KNU. They threatened that if he would not come back, the parents would have to pay a "fee" by giving them a buffalo and periodically in the future they would have to pay again if he would still not come back. I asked why his parents would not come to Thailand and stay in the "shelter area" with him. He said they had a farm and some cattle. When asked whether their lives would be threatened, he thought they would be o.k., but would lose some
regarded as enemies by the junta's troops (CIDKP, 2000B: 2). If the raid is temporary or the troops are passing by, some villagers choose to hide in nearby jungles or in their village. A forty-nine-year-old Buddhist Karen said that “while she and her family were in hiding they did not dare light a fire for fear of being discovered, and that they moved secretly from one place to the other” (Amnesty International, 2001a: 16). Usually, the villagers’ familiarity with the terrains, hunting conditions, and edible plants enable them to live on despite, in many cases, losing most or all of their belongings. Some of these displaced peoples return to their houses after reckoning that the junta's soldiers have left only to encounter what they had hoped to escape. 18 Some displaced persons dare to hide in a very small group and far away from others. Though more secretive, they might miss any medic teams. No matter how big or small each group is, hiding in the forest means exposing themselves to a variety of sickness, e.g., malaria, dysentery, and other kinds of danger in tropical forests including dangerous and/or poisonous animals (cf. CIDKP Southern, 2000: 7), let alone the fact that the medic teams have not always been able to come in the war zones. Once they come in, they cannot cover the sizable territories and treat many patients. 19

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18 I was told by some informants in the war zones that many families had “safe houses” for storing food supply in the deep forest, where they could use when the junta's troops came to their villages. This practice of building safe houses signifies how the dark cloud of state of emergency became the normalcy of the quotidian fact of their everyday lives. The interviews were conducted in January 2001.

Below is an account that portrays a moment of frantic packing and moving belongings to a safe house from a student of mine when I was teaching in a “temporary shelter area” on the Thai side. The students were asked to write a short essay on a question: “When was the hardest time in your life?” This student wrote a brief recollection of an episode of his jungle life that I quote in verbatim, except for deleting the District Headquarters’ name. I must emphasize that his English is better than almost all Karens in his area because he not only finished high school, but also was trained for months, in English, in Chiang Mai city in Thailand on issues related to environment. When we met in the war zone, he was a teacher in
Other villagers, however, choose to take flight away from the village. As mentioned, many ethnic villagers living in the war zones are either Animists or still, by and large, attached to their agriculturally encapsulated forms of lives amidst a few decades of the state of strife in the Burmese nation-state. Displacement has taken a tremendous toll on them, as exemplified, for instance, in the situation of an Animist displaced family quoted in the Voice of the Hungry Nation:

When the villagers fled, they couldn’t take very much food with them. They fed what they had to the children, and the adults fasted. They went and secretly grabbed food now

The hardest time in my life was when the SPDC troops occupied our... District Headquarter. It was in middle of October 2000. It was the harvest time, so everyone in my house was in the farm. I was the only one who stayed in the house and looked after the house. Suddenly I got the news that the SPDC troops were very close to our village. It was not so far. It was take about two hours by walk. When I got this news it was also about 6:30 pm. It became very dark.

Then I started to collect everything in the house and took it to the safe house that we made in the forest. I had to do this alone. I was take me about the whole night. I think everybody is busy that night not only me.

In the morning my brother came back to me and helped me. When we finished everything we went down to the road where we have to go. I saw everyone had a heavy load on their back. In this case you only have to think about food (rice) when you run to the jungle.

So I think this is the hardest time in my life I hope.

See e.g., CIDKP, 2000b: 3.

In 2001, a leader of the Free Burma Rangers told me that the group tried to organize a relief team once a year to each of the seven districts in the Karen State (the conversation took place in January 2001).

The Committee for the Internally Displaced Karens’ (CIDKP) secretary-general, Saw Hla Henry, said in July 2002 that his organization arranged twenty-two mobile medical clinics into the war zones. The activity was funded by the Operation Northern Light (Norway), Friends for Asia (Germany) and Christian Freedom International (CFI) (Rogers, 2002: 8).

As can be imagined, and from my own experience and interviews with others who have been involved with helping the forcibly displaced in the war zones, there have been tremendous obstacles for constantly organizing mobile medic teams. These obstacles range from Thai government’s restrictions and Burmese troops’ control of the areas along their state-boundary, to the intensity of the fighting between the Burmese troops and those of ethnic nationalities, to the severe weather like monsoon and flooding, and to the lack of funding. Very impressively, the issue of personnel has not been a problem. There have been a handful of people among the ethnic nationalities themselves who have been willing to risk their lives to go in the war zones, where they themselves once were forcibly displaced. These people have been trained to be medics (and, for some, to be dentists as well) and go inside – all of these because of their great concerns for the grave situations in the war zones.
and then. One woman gave birth during this time, but the child died, due to the conditions in the forest. These villagers have had to hide out there for five months, the entire rainy season. Most are animists whose religion stipulates that any place destroyed by fire cannot be rebuilt for three years.  

As Animists, they have a lot of religious observances regarding their practices of space. The Tatmadaw troops’ burning of their abodes and farms, therefore, force the villagers to inevitably move from their natural surroundings, from where it is hard for them to detach the strong spiritual attachment. Prevalent displacement has thus caused grave severance to their subsistent lives by cutting them from both their material and spiritual sustenance.

Forced Relocation, Forced Labor, and Torture.  

These three forms of atrocities often entwine. Villagers who cannot escape are usually forced to move or relocate to other sites. When the Tatmadaw’s troops decide to forcibly relocate the whole village, obviously the situation turn ugly for the ethnic peoples. The relocation orders come in writing or by a military officer’ visit. Villagers are forced to group up in the center of

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21 The recorded practice of forcibly relocation in the modern history of Burma dates back to the 1970s. According to the Burma Ethnic Research Group (BERG), mass displacement of the civilians in Kawthoolei, the Karen land, began with the advent of the Four Cut strategy in December 1974, following the flight of the KNU’s troops from the delta and Pegu Yomas (BERG, 1998: 27). According to the People’s Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarization in Burma, the eastern Pegu Yoma mountains have encountered strategic relocation for nearly three decades; the major ones began in the 1970s - hill villagers were forcibly moved close to army posts under numerous restrictions prohibiting any travel out of the relocation site (AHRC, 1999: 60). In 1974, the Tatmadaw forced the Karen villagers to move to the valley floor where they could be surveilled and controlled. There was however no preparation by the Burmese army in the receiving areas for the forcibly displaced. Hence, many people died due to lack of health care (BERG, 1998: 27).

The BERG adds further that by 1975, there were some 50,000 forcibly displaced peoples in Mutraw district alone; and more than 8,000 traversed the Salween river, during the same time, to reach the Thai side at the point known as Pa Daeng, where the Karens called this first “refugee camp” Aye Lay Loo. However, over the next three to four years many of the forcibly displaced returned to the Burma side of the Thai-Burmese state-boundary, which was the pattern in most of the northern districts of Kawthoolei during that time (BERG, Ibid.: 28). Nonetheless, according to the Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarization in Burma, in 1979, one hundred displaced persons were crossing the Thai-Burmese state-boundary from the
their villages, or to stay by other villages, which sometimes means with peoples of other religions, languages, or even ethnicities. In some incidents, they are ordered to group up by a roadside where there is no village, or in some barren lands where there is no water sources (e.g., CIDKP Southern, 2000: 6). Once in the relocation site, villagers are surveilled and controlled, as a testimony states:

The area is being watched intently by the Burma army and DKBA, so if people want to go out of the village to their fields then they have to get a pass and can not stay out for a long time. Passes are issued daily for 5 kyat [Burmese currency], allowing travel from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. People cannot carry rice out of the village or they are accused of taking it to the KNU (AHRC, 1999: 103).

Forced relocation is not confined to any one region; it happens wherever and whenever the Tatmadaw and its allies, like the DKBA, face the threat of armed resistance. In the state of war within a country ruled by a dictatorship regime, it should not come as a surprise to hear a functionary enunciate with a voice of the hegemon. “This is a military rule...you stay where we tell you to stay,” said the Second Strategic Command officer, Colonel Aung Naing Tun, to a meeting of Karen village leaders at Thandaung, Papun Township, Karen State, in 1995.22

For the Animist villagers, forced relocation and the Tatmadaw’s normal practice of arson not only disrupts their farming, but also gravely harms their already sparse food supply, some of which must be spared for “taxation” or “fee” or “fine” to the sovereign powers – especially to the Tatmadaw’s and its allies’ troops. For instance, if fields are damaged prior to the appropriate date when the Animist villagers must prepare them for harvest, then they will no longer use them, as was confirmed by a twenty-six-year-old

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female teacher in her testimony to the People’s Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarization in Burma:

In 1995, four villages were ordered to relocate to Kwee Lay,...K'wah Htah, Lah Kyoe Khol, Su Khi, and Ta Meh Khi. Many people failed to relocate as they were instructed, so that Burma [sic] army came and burned their lands. For the rest of that year, they ceased their work and refused to grow rice. Although they had rice left over, they had to give it to the Burma army, KNU, and DKBA (AHRC, 1999: 103).

Perhaps the most common atrocities inflicted upon members of ethnic nationalities are forced labor. Although the junta’s practice of forced labor is a universal practice upon all ethnic nationalities including the Burmans, the ethnic civilians have been routinely seized by the junta’s troops, much more regularly than the ethnic Burmans (Amnesty International, 2001a: 6). Amnesty International has been documenting the Tatmadaw’s practice of forced labor and confirms that such atrocities against civilians of ethnic nationalities has been pervasive. One 66-year-old man reported that he had been forced to work intermittently for the Tatmadaw for the past 50 years, the last time was in February 2002 (Amnesty International, 2002a).

There are two broad types of forced labor: the first is portering, which entails carrying heavy loads for the military over rough terrain for days or weeks at a time. The second type involves work on construction projects such as roads, railways, and dams. Men, women, and children are all taken for labor duties, and almost never paid for their work.

Portering is generally more arduous, as civilians must work for days or even weeks at a time and are kept as virtual prisoners. Prior to the early 1990s, forced labor primarily took the form of portering for the army, who used porters in their so-called “counterinsurgency” activities as they patrolled the countryside and villages or engaged
in battles with armed opposition organizations. In spite of cease-fires between the junta and some ethnic armed organizations, the practice of forced portering continues, primarily in areas where there are ongoing-armed struggles. A testimony given, in 1997, to the People’s Tribunal on Food Scarcity and Militarization in Burma by a twenty-eight-year-old Karen man illustrates this distressing reality:

People are called to serve five-day and seven-day rotations as porters, and the soldiers also arbitrarily detain people to work for them…. Long-term labor is the worst. It’s not for one day, one week or one month – you just disappear and that’s that. You don’t get told anything about what’s planned for you. To get exempted you have to pay from 100 kyat for a day to 5,000 kyat for long-term duties. One house usually is called upon for labor three or four times per year. To exempt a village from relocation costs 30,000 kyat. Some villages have been ordered to move twice in one year (AHRC, 1999: 101)

Paying 100 kyat per day was even more than many daily-wage earners get paid, which was about 80 kyat per day, as was told by the same person who gave this testimony. He had worked with an elder person of the village whom had helped people facing starvation resulting from taxation, forced labor, forced relocation, especially during the Tatmadaw’s operations in the dry seasons (Ibid.).

Beginning in the early 1990s, the Tatmadaw began to vastly increase its size and range throughout the country. One of the features of this militarization was the construction of infrastructure projects throughout the country, including roads, dams, railway lines, and military barracks. One must not forget that road construction, as part of the junta’s “development projects,” together with logging concession have enabled the Tatmadaw’s troops to later conduct military operations more effectively in the ethnic nationalities’ controlled-areas.23 Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been forced to work on those projects without pay. Children sometimes work on construction sites if
their parents are ill or are busy working on their farms. There have also been reports that some women forced-laborers who were serving in the military camps were raped by the junta’s soldiers, as was the case with a woman I interviewed in a “refugee” camp on the Thai side. She later gave birth to a boy.24

Peoples who have been forcibly relocated have lost their farms, their livelihoods, and their ancestral rootedness to their land. Moreover, the result of incessant forced labor has often been that many ethnic nationalities can no longer earn their living as farmers because they are too busy working for the military to attend to their fields.25 To be sure, the junta claimed that they had outlawed forced labor, but their orders to stop forced labor are not always adhered to. The junta issued “Order Supplementing Order No 1/99” on October 27, 2000, forbidding all Burmese civilian and military authorities from employing forced labor and providing for punishments should they be convicted of doing so. The horrible practice of forced labor, however, has not essentially improved. According to the Amnesty International, who interviewed the forcibly displaced peoples


24 The interview was conducted in March 2001; see also Amnesty International, 2001c: 4

25 To refer to a statist international juridical-fabric, i.e., the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, states: Article 1, part 2 states *inter alia: “In no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence.”* Hence, lives in the war zones for many ethnic nationalities, therefore, mean that they are denied not only civil and political rights, but also economic, social, and cultural rights.

A fifty-year-old Buddhist Karen man who himself had been seized in October 2000 for one month by the Tatmadaw for forced labor, and who later successfully escaped, was furious when asked by Amnesty International whether he had been paid for his labor by the Tatmadaw or not. He said, “How can you ask this question? I worked hard and was never paid – that’s why I left. I almost died” (Amnesty International, 2001a: 16).
on the Thai side in February 2001, force labor is still active and alive, and its pattern remained in actual fact the same as in earlier years.\textsuperscript{26}

As atrocious practices that have taken place for decades, torture and other forms of cruel treatment in the war zones generally take place in the context of forced relocation and forced labor.\textsuperscript{27} Force and threat of force is commonly used to coerce members of ethnic nationalities to comply with military orders. Various forms of torture have occurred in various settings, for instance, beating of porters or other forced laborers unable to keep up with the military orders; raping of women or girls ordered to work in military camps or construction projects. Worse still, as Amnesty International has received reports, many women were sexually assaulted and killed afterwards, as the case with a Karen girl in 1998:

...a 12-year-old girl, Naw Po Thu...who was taken with two other people to act as guides for troops, was allegedly raped by a major and managed to escape, but was captured and raped again and then shot dead. The major gave the girl's family compensation for her death, which consisted of one sack of rice, one measure of sugar, one tine of condensed milk, and 100 kyat...\textsuperscript{28}

For the Tatmadaw's military officer who raped her, that material compensation was how much the girl's life worth.

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\textsuperscript{26} Amnesty International also contends that according to the interviews they conducted with forcibly displaced peoples from Burma on the Thai side between February and March 2002, forced labor was still regularly mentioned as a serious problem, especially near the Tatmadaw's installations (2002b: 7).

\textsuperscript{27} See e.g., Amnesty International, 2001b.

According to Amnesty International, there have also been reports of ethnic nationalities' troops committing atrocities towards civilians (e.g., 2001a: 19-20). Or, leaders of ethnic armed organizations summarily executed their own people (e.g., Smith, 1999: 290).

\textsuperscript{28} Amnesty International, 2001b: 4.

In September 2000, $1 was worth 380 kyats in the black market. As of February 2003, the Burmese currency has depreciated down to about half of the value in 2000.
Killing. Apart from other forms of atrocities, killing is also a rule of the front lines. There are many “causes” of the killings that have taken place in the war zones: the villagers are suspected of supporting the ethnic armed groups; the passing-by Tatmadaw’s troops do not get information about the enemy from the villagers; or the hiding or forcibly relocated villagers come to their home to secretly farm or replenish whatever is left in their huts, if the huts are still there. Some of the war zones are regarded by the Tatmadaw as “black zones,” hence they are the “free fire” zones. In these zones, the junta’s troops shoot the displaced villagers on sight, or kill them after capturing them. Such were the haphazard orders of the junta’s troops who also follow the “search and destroy” policy. The policy is a military operation to search and destroy everything they see including people. With this policy, many hiding villagers have been killed because they were regarded as “rebels” or “rebels supporters.” Moreover, the Tatmadaw’s troops also set up mines on some paths, usually after noticing the traces of village access of the hiding people to nearby villages to replenish their needs — not to mention widespread deployment of landmine in the designated “black zones.”

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29 In May 2000, a group of 73 Shan and other ethnic groups, living in the same vicinity, were reportedly shot dead in retaliation for an offensive by the Shan resistance against the Burmese army (Amnesty International, 2001a: 5-6).


To be precise, land mines have been one of the most used and effective weaponry for both the SPDC and the KNU’s troops, which means that the mines could be deadly for anyone venturing in the war zones. During the trip I went with the Free Burma Rangers in 2001, at times, everyone would be ordered to walk in line and follow the person in front of her. Sometimes, this happened in seemingly very innocuous areas.

I admit that I did not adequately examine how often displaced peoples were killed by the mines planted by the KNU, instead of those done by the SPDC. Relying on both a study published in 2000 and the information gathered from interview with the “refugees” on the Thai side in February 2001, Amnesty International notes that the deployment of landmines has greatly increased, not to mention unmarked and uncleared minefields, by both the SPDC and the KNU (Amnesty International, 2001a: 17-9).
therefore perilous for the villagers to wander when they can never be certain whether the
junta’ troops are still around or their anti-personnel landmines have been laid around the
village.

Amnesty International labels such deliberate and unlawful killings carried out by
order of a government official, or with the government’s complicity, or acquiescence, as
“extrajudicial executions”. These killings often result when security forces use force that
is disproportionate to any presumed threat, although the authorities may claim that this
use of force was legitimate. This kind of killing, Amnesty International continues, differs
from the judicial imposition of the death penalty and other justifiable killings (Amnesty
International, 2001a: 6). According to an international juridical fabric, the UN Basic
Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officers and the Code
of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, the justifiable executions are: killing by the
security forces in self-defense; deaths resulting from the use of reasonable force in law
enforcement when firearms are used in accordance with international instruments (Ibid.).

But Amnesty International does not understand the interlocking relation between
sovereign power and human life as elaborated by Agamben. The extrajudicial executions
are precisely what the figure of sovereign power does: killing without any appeal.

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From various conversations I had with the KNU’s soldiers during my whole fieldwork, however, I
was confirmed that the KNU’s change to new strategy of “non-positional guerrilla warfare” still enabled
them to help the forcibly displaced villagers. Though the KNU’s army has dwindled, the squads
(sometimes less than a squad, which comprises ten soldiers) operating in the war zones could still help the
displaced because of the troops’ dispersion. Moreover, the soldiers had been trained to both fight and
temporarily helped the sick. My understanding, therefore, is that although landmines recognize no
ethnicities, the intention of fighting is obvious: wiping out others (that of the SPDC) or protecting one’s
nation (that of the KNU). Some of the KNU’s soldiers stated it clearly that they remained fighting because
they would rather die than be controlled by the junta. Both the KNU’s leaders and soldiers often told me
that they fought to defense themselves and their nation. Having spent a short period of time in the war
zones, I came to understand what it was like to live without a weapon in there, especially if: one has to live
there because one believes that one has no where to go or because one has decided that one would rather
die in one’s “homeland” rather than leave it; one is still haunted by the memories of the death of one’s
Legitimation is not, it cannot be, the issue. Sovereign power, again, is the indistinguishability between, among others, life and law, violence and life. Within its territory, the sovereign power (through its apparatuses) can decide that some lives are not worth living. When that happens, death is the only possibility.\(^{31}\)

4. Taking Flight to the Thai-Burmese State-Boundary: One-way Trip?

Nowadays, there are still many forcibly displaced Karens drifting around in the jungles and mountains, traversing one frontline after another, to avoid the Tatmadaw’s troops or their allies, with limited belongings or necessities they can carry. When the rice that they have brought with them runs out, they survive on animals, some edible plants’ roots, and vegetation that they can find on their way as food and medicine — not everyone has knowledge of herbal medicine, however. During my time traveling with the relief team, I often witnessed that many displaced Karens took their flights with their very small babies and their elders, while they themselves were very sick.

One time, when we were trekking up the highest mountain of this trip, along with about one hundred displaced people, I took a rest and sat down about half way up to the top. Then came a mother with (as she told me later) a four-month-old baby by her breast. With a small pack of cloths behind her back and carrying a walking stick, she slowly and beloveds because of “the enemy” (as will be narrated below). A frontline soldier told me that “Without this, I would be dead,” and lifted a submachine gun toward me.

\(^{31}\) In this light, it should be noted also that most appeals to human rights have not adequately recognized that the discourse of human rights already implies the univocity of statist discourses. Specifically, as Agamben strikingly contends by tracing back to the French Declaration of the Right of Man and Citizen, of 1789, every person’s claim to human rights is a citizen’s claim not a human being’s claim. Hence, the sovereign power of a nation-state is already implied within the discourse of human rights (1998: 126-35).
tiringly moved each foot, which was tightly tied by a piece or rag. Without knowing the Karen language, I gave her an inviting gesture to sit and rest with us; she gave me an intensely exhausted look and shook her head. I asked my Karen friend to inquire her why. She replied that if she had sat down, she would not have been able to get up and move on. By that time, I had already witnessed and been told that such was a common symptom for displaced women with a child. This was also not the first encounter of mine with mothers who gave birth to a baby and gradually lost her ability to walk – in the war zones.32

Is it possible that, as Marianne Forro states, “to some people the very ‘state of movement’ is being ‘at home’” (quoted in Tabori, 1972: 37)? I doubt that it is the case here. In another village that we traversed, there was a school that had almost a hundred students and eight teachers. One of the teachers, when asked for reasons for not fleeing to “temporary shelter areas” on the Thai side, said: “we intend to stay free amidst dangers rather than live a secure life without freedom.”

Apart from freedom, there have been other reasons why many displaced Karens have not fled to the Thai side. First, as mentioned earlier, many Karen villagers are Animists whose sense of rootedness to the land and the spirits of the land tie them to their lands.33 Second, for many villagers, being mountainous or deep-jungle farmers without education and any points of references on lives outside the forests, it is hard for them to imagine how their lives could be in the “camps” of another country, as it were. Third, some of these villagers have heard from other villagers who had returned from Thailand because they could not bare life without farming any longer. Because the Thai

government had not allowed them to farm, they could not earn any income; and some of them had not gotten good treatment in the “camp” that they had stayed.

However, once the situations in their ancestral areas become too grave to bear, these villagers would start taking flight to the Thai side. For many of them, this option is a last resort, as written in an editorial of the *Internally Displaced Peoples News*:

Karen[s]...generally cross the border into Thailand as a last resort, but they try to find other means of survival first in their own country. Whenever armed clashes or search and kill activities occur inside those territories, the fleeing people who are seeking for safer places automatically try to take refuge in Thai territory (CIDKP, 2000B: 3).

To be sure, the paths of the forcibly displaced Karens are not always linear: i.e., becoming the forcibly displaced, attempting to traverse the so-called Thai-Burmese boundary, and finally arriving at one of the “camps” and hence ending their tormenting journeys. Two examples can illustrate this point. The first one belongs to a lady I met at the temporary district headquarter; hers is a story of loss and odyssey. The second is that of a family whom I met on the way, as they were heading back to their village, and were ready to confront any worse situations.

*A Mourning Lady, A Lady “on the Move.”*34 She was a thirty-two-year-old woman whose husband was killed by a landmine that was planted by a Tatmadaw’s soldier near the village, after they had stormed and found no one in there. Her husband went back home to replenish some food after hiding in an adjacent jungle. While he was gone, a mine exploded. She heard the explosion and, after her husband had not returned to the hiding place, began to worry that her husband might have gotten killed. She said that she became terribly worried about her and her small children’s futures at that moment. In the morning of the next day, some villagers went to the spot where the mine

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34This was also confirmed by a conversation with a KNU leader in December, 2001.
was planted and found her husband's dead body. “I felt heartbroken and cried badly when seeing his body,” she uttered. “My husband's eyes did not close, one of the legs was torn apart from the body, and his hands held up something like dirt,” she continued as tears welled up her sad eyes. “I asked myself what I would do with my future, now that I had lived away from my relatives. I did not know how to take care of myself,” she added stutteringly. When asked if she had had a gun and a Burmese soldier was sitting with us without a gun, would she have shot him? She said, “Yes! Because he is an enemy. They are in the same army although he did not kill my husband.”

After almost nine years of marriage, he left her with a couple-month-old girl and a five-year-old boy, who had had chronic diarrhea, and, as was translated, a lot of “worm in the stomach.” Before arriving at this KNU temporary district headquarter two months earlier, she had been weak and, at times, felt very exhausting. Now, she felt strong and her boy started to feel better because there were a couple of medics there and there was food, as she put it, “rice, salt, monosodium glutamate, and once in a while some pork or chicken.” Her boy started to go to school; and she would like to attend a medic training herself so that she could take care of her children. “But” she said, “I have no education.”

One could remember that the Karens’ struggles officially had started twenty years before she was born, which means that her life exemplifies many others on the land called Burma. When we met, her odyssey had already taken her to more than ten locations since she was very young, before ending up at the temporary district headquarter. Loss and separation had always been her companions.35 For most of the

34 The interview was conducted in January 2001.
35 In a compilation book on Karen folktales, The Rice Fairy (1987), compiled by the Rev. Edward N. Harris, the main characters of almost all the tales are orphans.
places she was staying, it was a concern for either food, sickness, or security that kept her and her family moving.

One of the locations was a "refugee camp" called Pa Leh, on the Thai side, where one of her sisters died because of diarrhea. Her family arrived at the camp not long after the camp had been set up in 1976. There were a few thousands of peoples in the camp, where the conditions were horrendously dreadful. As far as she could remember, there were hundreds of peoples becoming sick because of diarrhea. She maintained that "I heard of a couple of persons' death or witnessed either Christian or Buddhist funerals every day." Her family finally left the "camp" and embarked on a long journey back to Burma's territory again, after everyone in her family had gotten ill very often. Most of their material processions (e.g., ring, old coins) were gone because they had to buy food, while not having any means to earn income. She recalled that she was about eleven years of age when they stayed at the next location and were staying there for about six years without any attack by the Tatmadaw's troops. "Until one day, they came and my family had to flee again," she declared.

The following is one of the paths of her odyssey since she was born (the names of the villages except for Pa Leh are pseudonyms), included here to illustrate the rough amount of time it takes to travel between them, by the standard of local peoples' walking:

- **Ler Wah** -> (4-hour walk) **Mu Kee** -> (4-hour walk) **Ler Shu Koh**
- (3-4-day walk) **Pa Leh** ("refugee camp") -> (one-week-walk)
- **Kui Lah** -> (4-hour walk) **Pe Ya Sher Der** -> (1.5-hour walk) **Ko**

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36 A district KNU's leader told me of this exact date. As well as working as a district head of the Department of Information and Organization, he has been keeping some records and had written some historical accounts on the Karens, in Karen language, for years.
Tha -> (2.5-hour walk) Po Ho Der -> (1-day walk) Ta Keh Pu -> (4-hour walk) Koh Khee

It was hard for her to remember exactly how long she had stayed at each location. With my interpreters’ help, I doubled check her path of flight one more time; they were not the same. After an interview of about three hours, I decided to stop rest she might be upset or annoyed.

*Ready to Die, But Not in a “Camp.”* 37 On our way back to the Thai-Burmese state-boundary, at one point, we were resting by a stream over which a big tree-trunk was laid as a bridge. All of a sudden, a small boy was cautiously walking on that “bridge.” A small girl, a little older, followed him. She also had a very young sibling on her back. The girl’s hand was caught and guided from behind by her father, who had had to put his wife down from his back, on a big rock before crossing the “bridge.” The scene of the children walking across the stream in a deep forest reminded me of *Willow*, a Hollywood film that came out in the late 1980s, portraying an adventure of dwarfs in the deep jungles. 38

All of the children I met during that afternoon looked extremely exhausted. After drinking my mineral water their eyes became freshened, even sparkled. At that moment, that they looked like many Thai poor children, judging from their clothes, but at least being Thai poor children means having citizenship – supposedly adequate juridical

37 The conversation took place in January 2001.

38 In the film, Willow Ufgood leaves his village to carry a special baby to safety. He is supported by a swashbuckling warrior. His quest, however, is plagued by danger as the Powers of Darkness scheme to destroy the child, who was destined to bring everlasting peace and freedom to the land. The boy, who crossed the bridge first, reminded me of Willow.
protections. It is in this involuntary memory\textsuperscript{39} of mine that they would be transforming themselves from being imperceptible naked-lives to just being naked lives.

After they had rested, we chatted. They were one of the five families who had been passing us in the opposite direction, leaving a “camp” on the Thai side back to the war zones – the only group of such kind that we encountered during my whole trip in the war zones. Altogether, this family had seven members. There was a husband, a wife, a nine-year old girl, with a youngest brother of about nine month on her back, a seven-years-old boy, and a four-year-old boy, who was in a basket on the back of the husband’s brother. The children were not skinny but looked too tiny for their ages. The wife had lost her ability to walk after giving birth to the third child, who also could not walk. She had been on her husband’s back for the past four to five days traversing one mountain after another.

Asked by my Karen friend why they returned, the husband replied that his wife did not want to stay in the “camp” anymore since she had not been happy there. The family felt confined; they loved to do farming and were not allowed to cultivate in or nearby the “camp.” They decided to return to their home and paddy fields, which the Tatmadaw’s troops had looted and burned down, and to hide in the jungle. When we asked what they would do if the junta’s soldiers would find them, one of them said, “we will run away.” When we pushed further and asked what if they could not hide or run, the husband stated quietly but firmly, “we will fight till we die!” Their paths could indeed be circular: returning back to homes. I only hoped that they would not return to their “home-lands” too quickly because the Tatmadaw’s troops take their lives.

\textsuperscript{39} Recalling Benjamin’s reading of Proust (Benjamin, 1999b).
May 2002, while I was writing this dissertation, I came across news from the
Bangkok Post that some villages along the Thai-Burmese border zones, “within” the
Burmese territory, were burnt down and people had to flee their homes. After I double
checked with friends, who still worked along the border zones and confirmed that some
of the villages I used to visit were parts of those burnt down, I could not help but ask
myself whether I had been capitalizing on the Karens’ sufferings, having been accepted
or invited to present different parts of my dissertation at various places, including Yale,
Cornell, University of Minnesota, and in South Korea. And the news also reminded me
of some tragic scenes on television after September 11, 2001: people in New York city
carrying pictures of their loved ones searching for the latter’s missing bodies, with hope
and agonies. How familiar the feelings between those of New Yorkers and those of my
Karen informants, yet also how dejectedly unsimilar? How come some lives are so
precious, while others seem to have the existence, which (not who) are utterly
meaningless?

The forcibly displaced peoples left their homes because of the junta’s atrocities.
On the way, they have maintained their lives with sparsely little food, but with
unimaginable sickness. They have been moving, to encounter yet even more hunger,
sickness and fear. There were a few times when we suddenly encountered groups of
forcibly displaced peoples; and the medic teams started their treatments right in the
jungles. After that, both the relief team and the relieved had to move on to avoid the
Tatmadaw’s patrols. We knew our fate because we would finally return to the Thai territory, but we did not know theirs – at times, to think about it was too painful.
...before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country who begs for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot admit the man at the moment. The man, on reflection, asks if he will be allowed, then, to enter later. “It is possible,” answers the doorkeeper, “but not at this moment.” Since the door leading into the Law stands open as usual and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the man bends down to peer through the entrance. When the doorkeeper sees that, he laughs and says: “If you are so strongly tempted, try to get in without my permission. But note that I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other. And the sight of the third man is already more than even I can stand.”

These are difficulties which the man from the country has not expected to meet, the Law, he thinks, should be accessible to every man and at all times, but when he look more closely at the doorkeeper in his furred robe, with his huge, pointed nose and long, thin, Tartar beard, he decides that he had better wait until he gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at the side of the door. There he sits waiting for days and years. He makes many attempts to be allowed in and wears the doorkeeper with this importunity. The doorkeeper often engages him in brief conversation, asking him about his home and about other matters, but the questions are put quite impersonally, as great men put questions, and always conclude with the statement that the man cannot be allowed to enter yet.

The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, parts with all he has, however valuable, in the hope of bribing the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts it all, saying, however, as he takes each gift: “I take this only to keep you feeling that you have left something undone.” During all these long years the man watches the doorkeeper almost incessantly. He forgets about the other doorkeepers, and this one seems to him the only barrier between himself and the Law. In the first years he curses his evil fate aloud; later, as he grows old, he only mutters to himself. He grows childish, and since in his prolonged study of the doorkeeper he has learned to know even the fleas in his fur collar, he begs the very fleas to help him and to persuade the doorkeeper to change his mind. Finally his eyes grow dim and he does not know whether the world is really darkening around him or whether his eyes are only deceiving him. But in the darkness he can now perceive a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the door of the Law.

Now his life is drawing to a close. Before he dies, all that he has experienced during the whole time of this sojourn condenses in his mind into one question, which he has never yet put to the doorkeeper. He beckons the doorkeeper, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend far down to hear him, for the difference in size between them has increased very much to the man’s disadvantage. “What do you want to know now?” asks the doorkeeper, “you are insatiable.” “Everyone strives to attain the Law,” answers the man, “how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?” The doorkeeper perceives that the man is nearing his end and his hearing is failing, so he bellows in his ear: “No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended for you. I am now going to shut it” (Kafka, 1984: 213-15).
Chapter 6 – Flight to Thailand’s “Door”:
Out of Gun-pointing Zones, Into the Zones of Finger-Pointing

... it occurred to me that the Burmese expression for refugee is dukkha-the, "one who has to bear dukkha, suffering”. In that sense, none of us can avoid knowing what it is to be a refugee. The refuge we all seek is protection from forces which wrench us away from the security and comfort, physical and mental, which give dignity and meaning to human existence. Aung San Suu Kyi, “Toward a True Refuge”

Following the forcibly displaced peoples’ flight from Burma, this chapter explores some of the statist discourses and practices that have been the “barriers” obstructing these peoples’ movement through Thailand’s “door.” Specifically, in the spirit of Kafka’s “Before the law,” this chapter looks at the situations of the peoples from the figures of sovereign power’s perspective, unlike the last chapter’s emphasis on the peoples’ situatedness and loci of enunciation. Amidst the encounter between Thailand and the international regime of refugee laws, i.e., between national sovereignty and international sovereignty, this chapter’s narrative, therefore, evinces the entanglements of three elements: a nation-state, the international protection regime, and the forcibly displaced peoples. As a demonstrative genealogy that foregrounds the statist discourse, the chapter’s narrative must maintain, if only temporarily, the homogenously continuous historiography of the Thai state and the international protection regime.

What this chapter aims to demonstrate is threefold. Firstly, after what has been said and done, the forcibly displaced from Burma will always be imperceptible as long as a nation-state like Thailand refuses to recognize their plight and receive them under its protection. Secondly, as powerful as the international protection regime may be, by the end of the day, it is the national sovereign power that sets the policy for protecting
forcibly displaced peoples. After all, without the univocity of statist discourses, the regime of international protection does not have life. Lastly, although the mandate and practices of an intergovernmental protection-apparatus like the UNHCR are honorable, the institution is not self-directive and it can never be. Thus, the forcibly displaced peoples' plight remains grim. In the final analysis, it seems like no one feels responsible for their sufferings. We are entrapped, confined, and blinded by the statist partitions of the sensible.

1. Thailand & the "Others"

To understand Thailand’s reactions to forcibly displaced peoples, it is necessary to narrate a short genealogy of its relations with the "others," both as a body politic called the kingdom of Siam and as a nation-state called Thailand. For this, I turn to a recent announcement of the prestigious Fulbright grants for U.S. researchers or students wishing to produce knowledge or study within Thailand’s territory.

The Fulbright's website states that topics dealing with "hill tribe issues and refugees along the borders" are "non-recommended fields of study." For a nation-state like Thailand, where arguably cultures of insecurities have been shaped by the very state-centric discourses and practices of security themselves, the Fulbright's announcement did not come as a surprise. Since 1782, when the present Chakri Dynasty was established, the kingdom has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to ward off,

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1 Suu Kyi, 1993: 13.
2 According to the Fulbright's "Country Summary for Graduate Study and Research Abroad in 2003/2004," applications will be considered from graduating seniors, well-qualified M.A. and Ph.D. candidates for degree or nondegree study at Thai institutions, and/or independent graduate-level research in all fields of study (see http://www.iie.org/Template.cfm?template=/programs/fulbright/us/summ0103.htm [accessed March 30, 2003]).
negotiate, assimilate, or suppress "the others" who have always been considered its threats. The kingdom largely escaped nineteenth century European colonialism, later succeeded in centralizing its body politics, subsequently assimilated varieties of indigenous peoples, and finally subdued the Communist Party of Thailand in the 1980s with comparatively less bloodshed than other countries in the region. The "hill tribes" and the "refugees" are the latest "others" considered threats that reflect recent signs of the kingdom's insecurities. From the Thai nation-state's perspective, the first is the "others" within whereas the so-called "refugees" are the "others" without.

The issue of the "others" from Burma has become even more sensitive to Thailand's security policy after a series of, from the latter's perspective, "disquieting" events, some of which turned into tragedies. Each event by itself, however, has rarely been examined by Thai academics (let alone foreign academics), most of whom are too loyal to the statist discourses and practices to comprehend the events from the multivocity of non-statist discourses.\(^4\) Not until another incident later erupted did some Thai academics pronounce their views, only to hear most of them reconfirm the univocity of statist discourses.\(^5\)

\(^3\) The usage of the notion of cultures of insecurity follows Jutta Weldes et al (1999).

\(^4\) Among the very few treatments of some of these events is, for instance, an English article by a prominent peace researcher in Thailand, Chaiwat Satha-Anand, who mentions the Ratchaburi Siege through the discourse of forgiveness (Chaiwat, 2000).

\(^5\) It must be noted that the political dimension regarding the issues of ethnic nationalities and forcibly displaced peoples from Burma has by and large been a big chasm in the Thai academic circle. The exceptions are writings or studies of non-political scientist such as Charnvit Kasetsiri (e.g., 2000), Pompimon Trichot (e.g., 1999), Somchoke Sawasdiruk (1997) whose writings, though state-centric, have been attempting to provide spaces for the struggles and plight of these peoples. If the idea of disseminating (hence shaping) political views to the general public is narrowed down to only that done by political scientists, then most Thai political scientists who have given their "academic views" on the issues of the forcibly displaced peoples' struggles and plight to the Thai national news media (and there are just few of them) are those who endorse the Thai state's security discourses. One therefore can imagine how little and
The first event occurred on October 1-2, 1999, when a group of five Burmese students calling themselves the Vigorous Burmese Students Warriors stormed the Burmese embassy in Bangkok and took hundreds of staff as hostages. Negotiations took place between the Thai government and the students. After having the Deputy to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and another high ranking Thai bureaucrat in place of the embassy’s staff as their hostages, the students were finally flew by a helicopter to Thailand’s “door,” where they disappeared into the mountainous terrain. Sympathizing with the democratic struggles, especially since the massacres in Burma’s big cities on August 8, 1988 (8/8/88), the international community praised the Thai government for its handling of the siege – except the military regime in Burma, which was immensely troubled by what later known as the “Bangkok Solution.”

The second event took place on January 24-25, 2000, when ten people stormed a regional hospital and took nearly eight hundred people therein as hostages in Ratchaburi, a province along Thailand’s “door.” The group was composed of troops from a Karen splinter group called God’s Army, together with some Burmese students, (two of whom also joined the group that had seized the Burmese embassy in October 1999). This time all ten were executed by the Thai government within twenty-four hours of the siege beginning. One day after the execution, although there were no negative responses from the international community, Burma was the only country that came out to praise Thai government’s decisive handling of the incident.

well-rounded Thai society understands the lifeworlds of ethnic nationalities in Burma, especially the harrowing experiences of the forcibly displaced peoples situated in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces.

6 “Chop wikrit tuaprakan Ratchaburi,” Matichon.
7 “Two guerrillas took part in embassy siege”, Bangkok Post.
8 “Phama yok niu hai thai,” Matichon; “Chop wikrit tuaprakan Ratchaburi,” Matichon.
Squadron Leader Prasong Soonsiri, the Adviser on Security Affairs to Thailand’s Prime Minister, was a crucial decision-maker in the incident. At the time he said: “The Ratchaburi case could not be handled in the same way as the embassy siege. . . . It is an obvious challenge to state authority. If they get away with it again, there will be a third and a fourth time” (quoted in Wassana & Yuwadee, 2000). Unfortunately, he was wrong, there would be a third and, perhaps, a fourth case, as far as “the others” from Burma were concerned.

About ten months later, on November 23, 2000, there came the third event. This time, it took place in Samut Songkram, a province adjacent to Bangkok, where the large fishing industry hires a lot of “illegal” laborers from Burma. Seven prisoners at the provincial prison took the warden and his staff as hostages and escaped from the prison, after killing a chaplain, and headed to “the door.” After twenty-two hours of negotiations during a long drive to the Thai-Burmese border zones, the hostage takers entered a killing zone at about 7:35 a.m. and thousands of rounds of ammunition were shot into the station-wagon for almost five minutes by the Thai commandoes.

9 None is certain about their ethnicity(ies). In fact, up to this point, the Thai society and government were not even care what ethnicity(ies) they were, they were all branded as “Burmese trouble makers.”

10 There was another event that could be counted as the fourth event, except for the fact that after about eight months have passed (as of February 6, 2003) since the execution, the Thai authorities have not been certain about the armed men’s identities, let alone arresting them. The event occurred about 7:30 a.m. on June 5, 2002. A school bus carrying 26 students aged 12-17 to school was attacked in a remote area of Ratchaburi (the same province that the hospital siege took place) by three armed men, wearing military-style camouflage uniforms, who were believed by the Thai authorities to have crossed the “door” from Burma. After the shooting, the three passed “the door” and disappeared into the mountainous and forest terrains on the Burma’s side. Altogether three students died and twelve were injured (see e.g., “Editorial: Stop This Slaughter of Young innocents” Bangkok Post; Post Reporters, 2002; Sunan, 2002).

Although one cannot pin down at this point whether the killing had anything to do with the “others” from Burma or not, this tragedy exemplifies the porosity of the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces where it is very possible for a variety of subjectivities to traverse through Thailand’s “door.”
After this series of event, the country’s attitudes towards the “others” from Burma have been decidedly uneasy, to say the least. The Thai government stated in 2002 that “refugee camps” under Thailand’s jurisdiction along the Thai-Burmese state-boundary will gradually be closed after this series of, as a news report put it, “violent incidents involving refugee political activists.”

Nonetheless, the history of the Thai nation-state’s relations with peoples taking flight across state-boundaries away from violence dates back to the 1970s. The kingdom officially began taking care of the forcibly displaced peoples from the Indochinese states of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam beginning in 1974, and from Burma in the 1984. Those forcibly displaced peoples, however, have not been recognized as refugees according to the international juridical fabrics. For Thailand has not acceded to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol. Neither has the country indicated its plan to be their signatories. In strictly formal juridical terms, as Hazel Lang writes, “legal refugee protection, and even the term ‘refugee,’ does not exist in Thailand” (Lang, 2002: 92).

Turning from the juridical sphere to the linguistic sphere (both of which, however, deeply entwine), the literal translation of the term “refugees” is phu liphai and is much

11 “UN agency seeks to base staff along Myanmar border,” Agence France Presse (AFP).

12 Since 1974, according to Kachadpai Burasapatana, a former Thailand’s secretary-general of the National Security Council, the country has hosted more than 1.3 million asylum seekers and displaced persons, mainly from Indochina and later on from Burma (2000: 2; see also Netnaps & Rogge, 1987: 269-81).

According to a UNHCR’s document, in September 1975, the Royal Thai Government requested UNHCR’s assistance to help it take care of the forcibly displaced peoples from Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Since then, more than 1.3 million refugees and displaced persons have arrived, of whom more than 705,000 departed for resettlement in third countries, and 576,000 voluntarily or spontaneously returned home (this figure includes both departures from camps and reported deaths). The documents adds
less used in Thai colloquial language than *phu opphayop*, which literally means “migrants.” Moreover, *phu liphai* is not used in the Royal Thai Government’s official documents because the government has its own classifications. It will be evinced in the latter parts of this chapter that such lack of usage and classifications by the government result from the Thai nation-state’s practices towards the displaced peoples from neighboring countries with the aim to maintain its sovereignty by not succumbing to the sovereign power of the international protection regime.

One of the best places to view Thailand’s stance toward the issue of displaced persons from Burma has been the statements enunciated by heads of the Thai delegation at the annual Sessions of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the UNHCR, held in Geneva in October of each year. The Sessions are venues where committee members present the situations of protection in their countries, and in particular the situations that will have a large amount of effects upon the work of the UNHCR in the following year. In the case of Thailand, it has been reiterated at these venues, for

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13 Moreover, the word “*phu opphayop*” is also used to mean “displaced person,” whose meaning in Thai literally is “*phu phlatthin*.” A clear example is the Thai name of a department called “Operations Center for Displaced Persons” within the Ministry of Interior: *Samnakngan sun damnoenkan kieokap phu opphayop*. The Thai name of the department does not use “*phu phlatthin*.”

All these ambiguities do not appear only in official naming, it also appears in dictionaries. English-Thai and Thai-English dictionaries tend to give loose meanings to the term “refugee”: ranging from refugees (*phu liphai*), displaced peoples (*phu phlatthin*) (Tianchai, 1994: 1294), to migrants (*phu opphayop*) (Domnern & Sathienpong, 1996: 332, 561; Sathienpong is a Fellow of the Royal Institute on philosophy and religion studies).

14 Although it is beyond the scope of this study, it is observed here that Thailand’s gestures on this issue is analogous with the way the kingdom encountered the European colonial powers in the nineteenth century: bending and negotiating with hegemonic wind like reed, not withstanding it like oak. The reasons for taking this stance are, again, beyond this dissertation.

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example, during 1997-2000 that the kingdom continues to see repatriation and prevention as the best solutions for the displaced peoples who are ethnic nationalities: "repatriation represents the durable and viable solution for these displaced persons;...the best solution to the refugee problem is the prevention or termination of the root causes which force the people to flee and become refugees." And the best solution for the group that the Thai government categorizes as "Burmese students" is resettlement to a third country (Kachadpai, 2000: 5).

2. Inscribing the Forcibly Displaced Peoples: Genealogy of Displaced Peoples from Burma & Thailand’s Classifications

In the Agambenian sense, Thailand’s “Regulations Concerning Displaced Persons from Neighboring Countries,” issued by the Ministry of Interior on April 8, 1954 and the 1979 Immigration Act, are the two juridical fabrics that an immigrant encounters when traversing through the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces into Thailand’s territory. The in-

15 Although the UNHCR High Commissioner receives policy directives from the UN General Assembly and the U.N.’s the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and although the Executive Committee is not a governing body, the Committee’s twofold task and relations toward the High Commissioner is crucial. First, it advises the High Commissioner in the exercise of his functions in the field of international protection, which today this advisory capacity have extended to any aspect of the Commissioner’s work. Second, it approves the Commissioner’s assistance programs. With these two tasks, the Executive Committee’s Conclusions on international protection represent an important body of opinion on detailed aspects. Such representation means that the statement presented by the head of each country’s delegation reflects the gist of the country’s concerns and problems they have encountered in the past year. And the delegations want to voice their concerns to the international community through the international protection regime epitomized in these annual sessions (see more details about the Executive Committee in “Background on the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme,” http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.html?id=3b4f09fafa&bl=EXCOM&page=exec [accessed March 30, 2003]).

16 Kachadpai, 1999: 3; see also Krit, 1997: 2-3; Boonsak, 1998: no. 23; Kachadpai, 1999: 3-4; Kachadpai, 2000: 4-5. The statements during these four years were acquired while I was conducting my fieldwork in Thailand and left in June 2001; and I have not yet obtained the statements of 2001 and 2002.
between spaces are mountainous, rugged, isolated, and densely forested; they were
demarcated along two main divisions, north and south of the confluence of the Salween
and Thaungyin (or Moei in Thai)\textsuperscript{18} rivers. In some areas, the two rivers are the Thai-
Burmese state-boundary. There are many “doorways” where peoples can traverse across
the two countries’ state-boundary, especially during the dry seasons when the some part
of the Moei river is very shallow. Arriving along Thailand’s “doorways” or “gates,” the
forcibly displaced peoples from Burma can choose to be “before the law” or proceed
through those unpolicied “gates.” The difference is that the life of those who choose to be
before the law would be inscribed into Thai laws, whereas those who pass through the
“doorways” are beyond the law – at least until they are caught.

From an international relief worker’s perspective, even with the Ministry of
Interior’s 1954 Regulation and the 1979 Immigration Act just mentioned, the Thai
government has preferred to contingently deal with the “refugee” issue on the basis of
discretionary policy decisions, rather than being bound by either international law or
specific national law. The Immigration Act contains no reference to refugees, and \textit{no}
permanent legal mechanism is in place for making a determination if an individual
qualifies for protection as a “refugee.” Hence, the Thai state-apparatuses have been
avoiding using the terms “refugee” or “asylum-seeker” (Alexander, 1999: 40), except in

\textsuperscript{17}This is the third Immigration Act in the history of the kingdom. The first act was stipulated in
1950 and the second in 1954 (MOI, 1999b). The fourth act which was stipulated in 1980 was an addition
to the 1979 act (see in e.g., MOI, 1999c: 108-9).

\textsuperscript{18}Three points should be noted here. First, unlike Salween which is a Burmese language and is
used for this river both in Burma and Thailand, Thaungyin/Moei is not. Moreover, in another common
rendering, the river is spelled as Moi. Second, the Salween was later renamed by the junta as Thanlwin.
Third, because I have not been able to settle down which rendering is more appropriate both in terms of
linguistics, history, and politics, I will use Moei throughout in this study. Secondly, while I was conducting
fieldwork, it did not occur to me to pay attention to names of these two rivers in Karen language, whichever
dialects, hence the Karen names for the two rivers will be solicited in the future.
the international venues like the annual Sessions of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the UNHCR. The generic term for Indochinese and others arriving in Thailand were recognized as “displaced persons” (Lang, 2002: 92) and all are prima facie “illegal immigrants,” unless they arrived before March 9, 1976.19 The official designation in law of “displaced persons” relates back to Clause 3 of the 1954 Regulation, which defines a “displaced person” as someone “who escapes from dangers due to an uprising, fighting or war, and enters in breach of the Immigration Act.”20 At first glance, this definition clearly fits with the 1951/1967 UN refugee juridical fabrics, but the reason why Thailand has not acceded to the refugee instruments will be discussed in the next section. Genealogically, the forcibly displaced peoples have been classified by the kingdom into three major groups: Burmese-national displaced peoples, peoples fleeing fighting, and “illegal” economic immigrants.21

Burmese-national displaced peoples: Officially designated as such, these peoples had fled to Thailand before March 9, 1976, and have lived along the bordering provinces

19 Kachadpai, 1997: 68.
On March 9, 1976, there was an announcement from Thailand’s Ministry of Interior titled “Prohibiting Burmese National Aliens from Migrating into the Thai Kingdom” (MOI, 1976). The announcement states that it was for the humanitarian reason that the kingdom had allowed Burmese nationals to temporarily take refuge in its bordering provinces adjacent to Burma until the situations return to normal; and when that time comes, those people must return back to their country. The announcement continues that since, at that moment, the situations inside Burma had already returned to normal, there was no reason for more migration into the kingdom. Hence, from that day on whoever enters the kingdom in that manner would be prosecuted on account of illegally entry to the country (Ibid.).


21 Kachadpai, 1997; MOI, 1999a: 2.
These two books however have different classifications. Arguably, it has to do with the purposes of the classification: either as a response to “outside” threats on the one hand, or for the purpose of governmentalizing practices, containment strategies and maintaining “internal” order, on the other. The first purpose belongs to Kachadpai’s book (whose thirty-seven years as a bureaucrat was working at the National Security Council), whereas the second belong to the Ministry of Interior’s book.
of Thailand; some of them had even come before 1957. These people are, for example, the Shans, the Mons, the Karens, the Laotians, the Tais, and the Nepalis. According to the record of Thailand's Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior, as of 1986, there were about 47,000 people under this category (Kachadpai, 1997: 67; cf. Lang, 2002: 83 n5). The Thai government allowed these peoples to temporarily stay in and wait to be pushed out of the country. In reality, however, the temporary stay has became an unlimited stay (Kachadpai, 1997: 80), and these peoples have been allowed to work in some occupations and their progenies have had access to education, as if the government would not push them out. They nonetheless have not been granted citizenship. In contrast, those who arrived in Thailand after March 9, 1976, they therefore are "illegal immigrants" and must be "decisively blocked and pushed out [of the country]" and officials would "capture and strictly conduct legal proceedings to every single one [of them]."  

*Peoples fleeing fighting:* Even though the Thai government had issued the Ministry of Interior's announcement on March 9, 1976, stemming the flow of the forcibly displaced peoples from Burma, in reality, there had always been dry-season annual attacks that drove small numbers of ethnic peoples to cross the Thai-Burmese state-boundary and take refuge in Thailand. These peoples, however, returned to their villages when the rainy season began and the fighting ceased. The Thai government usually allowed these peoples to set up temporary shelters while the danger persisted (Alexander, 22 Kachadpai, 1997: 68. The Ministry of Interior classified the post-1976-arrival as "illegal immigrants from Burma" (MOI, 1999a: 2).

It was in the dry season of 1983-84 (Lang: Ibid.: 83) that the Tatmadaw was able to mobilize troops to crush the ethnic nationalities' armies along the Thai-Burmese border zones and start to set up permanent bases there. Hence, many forcibly displaced peoples were not able to return when rainy season came. The year 1984 therefore marked the birth of a string of semi-permanent “camps” being set up in Thailand’s Tak province first by the Karens and subsequently for the Karennis and Mons in 1989 and 1990 respectively (Lang, 2002: 81-99). Many of the fleeing ethnic peoples have since then been living on the Thai side of the Thai-Burmese state-boundary.

The 1988 massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in Burma’s big cities, such as Rangoon and Mandalay, also resulted in large numbers of peoples fleeing to the Thai-Burmese border zones, many of whom were the dominant ethnic Burmans from those big cities (e.g., Alexander, 1999: 40; Lang, Ibid.: 101 n1). The Thai government allowed these new waves of forcibly displaced peoples to live in small camps, usually closed to the groups that had come before 1988. Simplicity, self-sufficiency, and self-management were the keys: these peoples planned, built, and administered the camp communities by themselves (Alexander, Ibid.: 39; Lang, Ibid.: 84, 91).

Unlike the displaced peoples from Indochina that arrived in the 1970s, however, the Thai government did not want to “put the world spotlight on Burmese refugees” – low profile was the norm (Alexander, Ibid.: 39). It was the armies of ethnic nationalities who provided security to these communities of displaced peoples, while a number of international NGOs working in Thailand which comprised the Burma Border Consortium supported the displaced peoples materially, educationally, and medically (Ibid.; Lang, Ibid.: 84). The UNHCR had no role in all these. Not until fourteen years later was the
UNHCR allowed by the Thai government to have any presence along the border zones. Hence, since 1998, despite its non-accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention, however, Thailand has allowed the UNHRC more roles in five aspects: witnessing the process of admission; assisting the Thai authorities in registration; assisting the Thai authorities on the relocation of temporary shelter areas; providing complementary assistance in existing temporary shelter areas; and assisting the displaced peoples from Burma for their safe return. As of March 2002, about 128,000 of the peoples in this category have officially been living in “camps” along the Thai-Burmese border zones. From the perspective of the international protection regime, by defining the forcibly displaced peoples from Burma only on the conditions of their “fleeing from fighting,” Thailand has refused, from time to time, to provide first asylum to new arrivals who have not fled directly from fighting, but have taken flight from the effects of war inside Burma – as has been evinced in the last chapter of how horrendous such effects of war have been upon the forcibly displaced peoples.

“Illegal” economic immigrants: This third group comprises those who have escaped Burma to be laborers in Thailand. They are the Burmans and other ethnic nationalities who have escaped from economic hardship or have been smuggled into Thailand for better employment opportunities. There is no official figure for this group, but the former Secretary-General of Thailand’s NSC, Kachadpai Burusapatana, estimated that there were at least 500,000 in Thailand in 1997 (Kachadpai, 1997: 9). Recently, newspaper report and international organizations estimate that there are between 1-1.5 million “illegal” laborers in the kingdom (e.g., Amnesty International, 2002b: 36). In

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August 2001, the Thai government established a new registration system for migrant workers from neighboring countries. Amnesty International reports that there were 560,000 workers subsequently registered, some of whom renewed their registration again in March 2002, majority of whom came from Burma. By registering, migrant workers are, in principle, exempt from arrest and deportation by the Thai authorities, unless they are found without registration card. These peoples have either been working in low-paying jobs (all the three “D’s” – dirty, dangerous, and difficult), or looking for work all over Thailand.

All three categories of the forcibly displaced peoples do not have adequate juridical protections, especially those who decide to traverse through Thailand’s “door,” instead of deciding to be inscribed “before the law.” Hence, while the inscribed displaced peoples are trapped at the “door,” the other group has more freedom to roam Thailand, yet almost without any protection. It is argued here, however, that the three categories need not be absolutely separated – especially the peoples fleeing fighting and the “illegal” economic immigrants – as the Thai nation-states classifies them. In reality, many displaced peoples from Burma can be “peoples fleeing fighting” and “‘illegal’ economic immigrants” at the same time. From the statist perspective, all the three categories signify both security and humanitarian problems. Behind these two problems

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25 See e.g., Amnesty International, 2002b: 36.


lie a set of entanglements produced by the confrontations between the international
protection regime and the Thai nation-state's sovereign power. They are the
entanglements that shape the fate of the forcibly displaced peoples.

3. Being the Forcibly Displaced Peoples in Thailand:
A Nation-State vis-à-vis an International Protection Regime

*International Juridical Fabrics, the UNHCR, and Preventive Protection*\(^{27}\)

Humanitarian assistance at the end of the millennium is synonymous with
neither protection, in the legal sense, nor solutions to displacement. In the
absence of "an organizing script and a defining drama" for post-Cold War
gopoliticals, aid for refugees and other displaced people is an ad hoc political
tool inspired primarily by the donor governments of this aid. Humanitarian
assistance, which has come to mean much more than the protections
guaranteed by the conventions, is appropriately named because increasingly it
is delivered in war zones. Refugees still represent a sizable recipient group
for international assistance, but their political significance has waned
considerably since the end of Cold War conflict, Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement.*\(^{28}\)

International juridical fabrics for "refugees" is composed mainly of the 1951
Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status
the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. All these instruments
institutionalize and enforce the UN Declaration for Human Rights, which declares that a
person has "the rights to leave" and return to her or his own country and "the right to
asylum."\(^{29}\) Three of the most important legal notions therefore are: non-refoulement,
asylum, and international protection.\(^{30}\)

\(^{27}\) When discussing about the UNHCR's work at the global scale, my narrative is heavily
influenced by Hyndman (2000).


\(^{29}\) Articles 13.2 and 14 of the UN Declaration for Human Rights outline these rights. Article 15
states that "(1) Everyone has the right to a nationality; (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his

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As we are aware, humanitarian law and refugee law draw clear distinctions between the rights and entitlements of the “internally displaced persons” (IDPs) and those of “refugees.” Yet, this distinction has been challenged due to the reality that only peripheral differences of time and space exist between the two groups of peoples. The UNHCR policy makers remarked that the two are often “qualitatively part of the same group, divided artificially by a political border” (Hyndman, 2000: 5; my emphasis).

When it comes to the forcibly displaced peoples stranded within nation-states’ territories — and there were more than 22 million by the end of 2001 (USRC, 2002: 6) — those artificial states’ boundaries have obstructed the UNHCR’s work immensely. The legitimacy of international borders has therefore been questioned by organizations that manage displacement.  

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**Non-refoulement Principle** is a principle of international law that requires that no nation-state shall return a refugee in any manner to a territory where her or his life or freedom may be endangered. This principle also encompasses the notion of non-rejection at the state-boundary.

Based on the principle of non-refoulement and characterized by the enjoyment of internationally recognized refugee rights (and generally accorded without limit of time), *asylum* refers to protection granted by a nation-state on its territory. According to the Article 14(1) of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.”

**International protection** refers to mandate of the international protection regime to provide to refugees individually or as a group because the nation-state of origin is incapable or disinclined to protect these people’s basic rights and physical security. This principle aims to guarantee that refugees’ rights are respected and that a solution is established to their problem.

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30 In the “Forward” to a UNHCR document addressing the harrowing experiences of the forcibly displaced peoples abandoned in the danger zones, Leonardo Franco, the former director of UNHCR’s
From its conception in 1950, the UNHCR, together with the international protection and assistance regime have transformed a great deal.\textsuperscript{32} For instance, the disjuncture between the Statute of the UNHCR (1950)\textsuperscript{33} and the 1951 Convention mandate – whether to focus on groups or individuals – were solved by the so-called "policy of good offices" of the UNHCR. However, this policy was later criticized because, among other things, it can only occur where and for as long as governments invite the UNHCR to assist (Hyndman, 2000: 10-1). Related mechanisms (e.g. all the Conventions together with the Cartagena Declaration)\textsuperscript{34} evolved until the post-Cold War strategies of containment were adopted – i.e., attempting to prevent the forcibly displaced

International Protection notes that peoples who have been forcibly displaced inside nation-states' territories, on the "other" side of the borderlines:

have been called "refugees in all but name." Casualties of armed conflict, targets of ethnic or religious persecution or victims of a breakdown of law and order. They have been driven out of their homes but they have not sought, or they have not succeeded in reaching, safety in another country. Millions of internally displaced persons throughout the world live scattered in the jungle, huddled in camps or hiding in the anonymity of urban slums. Their masses cover the dark side of the world refugee problem.

Because they have not crossed an international boundary, the internally displaced have no access to the international protection mechanisms designed for refugees....UNHCR increasingly finds it operationally untenable – as well as morally objectionable – to consider only the more visible facet of a situation of coerced displacement....No two humanitarian crises are ever the same, and a global approach to such complex situations requires, if anything, finer tools of analysis and a larger arsenal of flexible responses (UNHCR, 1994: Forward: 1-2)

As Jennifer Hyndman observes, despite the unnecessarily militarized language ("arsenal"), the statement, albeit with no new ideas, offers a timely commanding and commiserating plea (2000: 20).

\textsuperscript{32} See e.g., UNHCR, 2000; and for a brief overview see e.g., Hyndman, 2000: 8-14.

\textsuperscript{33} For the "Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees" (G.A. res. 428 (v) of 14 December 1950) see e.g., UNHCR, Thailand, n.d.: 1-8.

\textsuperscript{34} As a regional approach to recognizing and improving upon the inadequacy of the 1951 Refugee Convention's definition of refugee, the Cartagena Declaration was adopted by ten Latin America nations in 1984 in order to address the forced migration of peoples fleeing generalized violence and oppression in Central America. The Declaration's definition of refugee includes claims based on internal conflicts and massive violations of human rights and the idea of group designation. Unlike the 1969 Organization for African Unity (OAU) Convention, however, the Declaration's extent of protection does not extend to include peoples fleeing disturbances of public order that affect only one part of a given country; neither is it legally binding (Hyndman, 2000: 13-4).
peoples from leaving their countries of origin. Called *preventive protection*, this
opposing discourse of managing forced migration was part of a paradigm shift in refugee
policy occurring in the early 1990s, and was originally defined by the UNHCR as:

The establishment or undertaking of specific activities inside the country of origin so that
people no longer feel compelled to cross borders in search of protection and assistance. In
this sense, for instance, action on behalf of the internally displaced can be defined as
preventive protection, although the primary motive may be to address a genuine gap in
protection rather than to avert outflow. Preventive protection in this sense may also
include the establishment of “safety zones” or safe areas” inside the country of origin
where protection may be sought. It relates therefore to protection of nationals in their
own country.\(^{35}\)

In other words, the shift has been from the discourses that emphasize the “right to leave”
and the “right to asylum,” on the one hand, to the latest “right to remain” on the other.
Preventive protection may be replaced by politicized discourses of border crossings and
safe areas, but these discourses share basic concept. Not only are state-boundaries
negotiated, but the discourses have also given rise to another set of political spaces and
management practices for the forcibly displaced peoples – the in-between spaces are
materialized.

However, the preventive protection has been attacked as the strategy of containing
the forcibly displaced peoples away from the borders of charitable donor countries in the
so-called “first world.” With the Operation Provide Comfort in Iraq in the fall of 1991,
where the UNHCR was called upon to assist the internally displaced Kurds, a turning
point in managing of displaced persons took place, and continued on to the situations in
former Yugoslavia. As a senior manager of the UNHCR stated: “Look at the mix of
people...nobody really sat down to say ‘refugees,’ ‘displaced persons,’ ‘war victims’; it

\(^{35}\) UNHCR, *Report of the UNHCR Working Group on International Protection* (Geneva, July 6,
doesn’t matter….they need protection and assistance. The UNHCR is there, they’re equipped to do it.” With the operation in Iraq, the definition of refugees at the UNHCR no longer presupposed an act of crossing a state-boundary; the UNHCR’s involvements have been more in the war zones, assisting peoples in order to stop them from crossing nation-states’ boundaries. Hence, in the case of the former Yugoslavia, the same senior manager of the UNHCR commented on Croatian borders and the confusion that recognition of such borders engendered:

"[T]here were a lot of people displaced within these borders, and then persons displaced across borders that nobody recognized; and then you had persons displaced within borders that nobody recognized; and then you had persons who weren’t displaced at all, but were sitting being shelled to death in Sarajevo, and all of these people fell under the action of UNHCR, and nobody really cared. It’s a big change from these years of the 1980s (quoted in Hyndman, 2000: 19)."

Along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces, however, the preventive protection strategy by the UNHCR have not taken place. For the forcibly displaced Karens, as illustrated in the last chapter, material assistance has been conducted by missionaries supported by individual donors and a few international non-governmental organizations (religious or otherwise). There has also been some temporary protection and assistance arranged by the KNU – a non-statist and “illegal” governing body of ethnic nationalists. On October 4, 1999 in Geneva, Kachadpai Burusapatana, the then Secretary-General of Thailand’s National Security Council, Head of the Thai Delegation at the 50th Session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the UNHCR, urged that:

UNHCR should engage more with the Myanmar authorities with a view to preventing the outflow and obtaining UNHCR’s assistance role inside Myanmar, particularly in providing reintegration assistance to the returnees. UNHCR should also redouble her effort in providing more protection to the internally-displaced persons in the country of origin. My delegation believe[s] that the more we protect the internally-displaced persons, the more we prevent them from becoming refugees or externally displaced.

36 Quoted in Hyndman, 2000: 18, see also 17-8, 2.
persons. In this regard, I would like to request UNHCR to work on offensive strategy rather than defensive one in order to bring about a tangible outcome in solving the question of Myanmar displaced persons in Thailand. 37

Thailand has always been pushing for the UNHCR to take an aggressive role in persuading Rangoon to take back the forcibly displaced peoples (see also e.g., Yuwadee, 2000). The goal of Thailand has always been obvious: release the burden of taking care of more than 120,000 forcibly displaced peoples from her shoulder. 38 Yet, it is not within the UNHCR's prerogative to fulfill Thailand's desire.

Since the end of the Cold War, the UNHCR’s material assistance and temporary protection have both shifted in geopolitics and taken the place of the legal protection of the state-based international juridical fabrics, which have in turn been restraining the UNHCR’s operations. With the world facing more uprootedness and forcibly

37 Kachadpai, 1999: 4; emphasis original, but my italics.

One thing was clear, like other displaced persons concerned-parties, the secretary-general had already been aware of UNHCR’s preventive protection by then. But what he did not want to acknowledge, and to some extent could not, was that for the Burmese authorities to prevent the outflow of forcibly displaced peoples means either complete dictatorship or the birth of democracy. With the former scenario, the outflow of the forcibly displaced peoples will not happen until one of the followings takes place: 1) complete forced relocation within Burma’s territory; 2) complete crush of ethnic armed resistant groups. Understandably, no matter which scenario, transversal subjectivities were never in his equation.

38 Although there has not been any practice of preventive protection in Burma’s territory, in October 2002, the UNHCR sought permission from the junta to base its staff along its border with Thailand in order to take care of the repatriated displaced peoples. According to the news report, the UNHCR’s representative stated also that there had been positive talks on the repatriation issue in early October 2002 between officials from Burma and Thailand ("UN agency seeks to base staff along Myanmar border," Agence France Presse [AFP]).

As observations must be made in response to this kind of approach by the UNHCR, as far as one can gather from a news report. The representative’s acknowledgement of the talk on repatriation issue between the two governments, though understandably very state-centric, erases the ethnic complex out of the political landscape of repatriation. Unless there is another secret agreement between the UNHCR and ethnic nationalities forces in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces that allows the UNHCR to safely operate in the contested zones, such acknowledgement implies the Burmese junta’s clean sweep of all the ethnic “disquieting elements” in the spaces. Without also acknowledging this ethnic complex and what the repatriation entails, any attempts of repatriation are unrealistic, to say the least – they become depoliticized attempts that disregard the politics of ethnic struggles and sufferings in the Thai-Burmese border zones.
displacement in the first decade after the end of the Cold War than when it started, cross-boundary crisis management has become more global in scope, urgent in speed, and demanding in expenses. The UNHCR has gained more responsibilities and become more powerful. The organization’s work has been shaped more by the donor governments’ targets of crisis sites and exigencies across state-boundaries, without adequately clear principles, despite its official mandate. Increasingly, the UNHCR has therefore become more politicized:

UNHCR is funded primarily on a voluntary basis by donor governments, which often designate the use and location of their donations. Funding patterns thus provide some direction for humanitarian action, but operating principles and consistent consultation processes prior to response remain ill defined. UNHCR has acknowledged both the adaptation of its operation to meet the exigencies of current political crises and the dilemma in which it finds itself given the tremendous shift in geopolitics after the demise of the bipolar state system (Hyndman, 2000: 5).

With such donor-dominating directives, one cannot help but wonder about a country like Burma/Myanmar, a country which has been witnessing civil war for at least five decades and resulting in struggles and sufferings of ethnic nationalities, including the dominant Burmans.

As of November 13, 2002, the engagement with the junta by the UN Secretary-General’s envoy, Mr. Razli Ismail, had not progressed much. On the contrary, he has been somewhat demoralized. Mr. Ismail mentioned that he might resign since there had

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39 The 1990s were the world’s first post-Cold War decade and, as Bill Frelick, the USCR policy director, put it, “to the surprise of many, the end to the Cold War triggered more instability rather than less. That’s reflected in the enormous number of people who fled their homes during the decade because they feared for their lives.” He continues, “[I]t was a disappointing decade, and a sad beginning to the new millennium for tens of millions of people who fear death if they dare to return home.” As Frelick reports, the number of people forced from their homes by violence and repression stood at more than 35 million at the end of 1999, compared to the fewer than 29 million uprooted people in 1990. The most dramatic increase occurred in the size of the world’s “internally displaced peoples.” At least 21 million people were “internally displaced” at the end of the decade, compared to about 13-14 million when the decade began (USCR 2000).

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been no constructive progress in term of dialogue between the junta and the National League for Democracy. Yet, if the remark of a former UNHCR High Commissioner (1990-2000), Ms. Sadago Ogata, is any indication, the failures to assist forcibly displaced peoples in grave situations are not the sole responsibility of the UNHCR. In an interview, Ms. Sadago Ogata once stated: “Human misery became one of the main issues of international politics.” Humanitarian action, she said, “became a fig leaf for political and military inaction.” In Bosnia, “the international community eventually took punitive action against the Serbs, but it was very haphazard, an artificial war that only added to the human displacement. It was the same pattern in the early stages of the Kosovo emergency.” The international response to the killing in Rwanda, she said, “was even more tepid in comparison,” and the “basic lesson to be drawn from this experience is that when emergencies are very close to the doors of the big powers, they will do more.” (quoted in Olson, 2000: 4; my emphasis). One can also add to Ms. Ogata’s statement that when the world powers’ interests are at stake, they will do more.

Burma as a nation-state had closed itself from the outside world for twenty-six years, from 1962 until the massacre in 1988 which woke the world up to pay attention to peoples’ harrowing experiences inside the country. It was understandable that by 1988 the world had learnt to live without Burma. The bloodbath in 1988 called the international community to pay attention to the dictatorial regime and its oppression upon the peoples inside the country, which outsiders usually think of only as the Burmans’ well-being. Yet, 1988 was only a tip of the iceberg. At least one-third of the people therein are other ethnic nationalities distinct from the dominant Burmans. One wonders

40 *Krungthep Turakit*, November 13, 2002. The news, however, does not mention the necessary
why only the plight of a dominant group is perceptible, while other smaller voices are not heard and their sufferings are not recognized.

When it comes to the situations of the forcibly displaced peoples inside Burma, a question then arises: to what extent have donor governments paid attention to them? The rest of the chapter will be devoted to explore some issues or problems connected to Thailand’s encounters with other actors elemental to the discourse of the international refugee regime, e.g., the UNHCR, and donor countries. Such exploration will enable us to easier discern, what I propose to call “the entanglements of failure” resulting from such discourse – they are the entanglements that have rendered the fate of the forcibly displaced Karens harrowingly depressing.

**Thailand versus the International Refugee Regime:**
*Protecting the Threshold of Its Sovereignty*

We should not let the situation on the western border which has been dragging on for the past 15 years to become a never ending story for Thailand. Traditional humanitarian principle of first asylum country must be shared by the international community.

Kachadpai Burusapatana, Thailand’s Secretary-General of the National Security Council, “Statement at the 50th Session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of UNHCR,”

From the kingdom’s perspective the refugee discourse signifies the sense of permanence of the “others” to finally be part of the Thai imagined community. For example, article 34 of the 1951 Convention states: “The Contracting States shall as far as

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41 In this regard, when one pays attention to what the Thai delegation said to the Sessions of the Executive Committee of the Programme of UNHCR every October at Geneva, especially between 1997-2000, one finds the same theme of the burden Thailand has shouldered.

possible facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees" – that is, to facilitate the others into becoming both parts of the Thai nationhood and the Thai nation-state. Having gone through anti-Communist discourses during the Cold War period (both within and without the country) and later becoming a country of first asylum to millions of the forcibly displaced peoples from the Indochinese states and later from Burma, Thailand has been far less than enthusiastic to accede to the Convention and its Protocol. Moreover, the burden of such hosting produced a significant degree of "refugee fatigue" (Lang, 2002: 98) in the kingdom.

Thailand's Department of International Organizations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a handout "An Accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention" (2000) explaining two sets of reasons why the kingdom has not acceded to the juridical fabric and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. They are the issue of the instruments' principles, on the one hand, and the legal conflicts between those instruments and the Thai legal fabrics, on the other. Regarding the principle issue, Thailand views the accession as undermining its sovereignty and the country's ways of managing displaced peoples from neighboring nation-states. In addition, the kingdom's law concerning aliens does not accord to aliens the same treatment as it accords to the Thai nationals, including economic and political rights, let alone toward forcibly displaced peoples, as stipulated by the Convention's articles 4 and 7 (1), 18. Regarding the legal conflicts, the Department's handout states that among the forty-six articles of the Convention, twenty-nine of them correspond to the principle of humanitarian non-
discrimination in Thai laws, eleven are in conflict, and the rest are ambiguous, which they are usually clarified by the higher policy level of the Thai government.43

Consequently, Thailand has both not acceded to the UN refugee instruments and resisted formal recognition of the forcibly displaced peoples as "refugees." Post-1979 Indochinese and the displaced from Burma have, therefore, officially been regarded as "illegal immigrants." Although sanctuaries have been granted and protections have been attempted to these peoples, there were cross-boundary attacks on those "camps" and nearby villages by the Tatmadaw's ally, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Association, which often resulted in devastating situations to the livelihood of both Thai citizens and the forcibly displaced peoples along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces (e.g. Ball & Lang, 2001; Lang, 2002).

In other words, protecting the threshold of its sovereignty, the country has been resisting international hegemony as well as the influx of the forcibly displaced peoples. Hence, the kingdom does not want the "refugee" issue to be internationalized, to receive much attention and thereby undermine its control over decisions within its territory.

43 Department of International Organization, 2000: 2.

The handout outlines eight issues that could obstruct Thailand's accession to the Convention. The following are some examples (Ibid.):

First, the definition of refugees (Art. 1), especially the ambiguous and narrow conditions designating refugee status.

Second, the ambiguous legislative reciprocity (Art. 7), especially concerning economic, property, and education rights.

Third, the issue of gainful employment (Art. 17-19, 15), regarding right to engage in wage-earning employment, right to join and set up labor union, and refugees' right to campaign and demand for wage-raise.

Fourth, the non-refoulement issue (Art. 32-3), which is in conflict with the kingdom's Immigration Law ("the country, however, does not expel or return the displaced," (Ibid.) which is not true as will be discussed in following sections);

Fifth, the issue of naturalization (Art. 34), due to the complexity of Thai laws on this issue;

Sixth, the issue of compliance to the International Court of Justice's power in determining disputes on interpretation of the Convention without declaring any reservations (Art. 38, 42), which is in conflict to Thai government's policy. On this last count, Thailand had an humiliating memory with the Court's
There has always been a humanitarian tendency in Thai policy, since Thailand is a supposedly strong Buddhist country, to alleviate the displaced peoples' sufferings, much less so for the reason of human rights in the western sense. Some observers have described the country as having a remarkable history of hosting displaced persons (cf., e.g., Lang, 2002: 81).

**Thailand, the UNHCR, and Donor Countries: International Solidarity and Burden-Sharing?**

Along the western border of Thailand, the presence of a large number of displaced persons has created adverse consequences for local population, in terms of environmental degradation, deforestation, pollution, the spread of contagious diseases, the psychological impact on local Thai villagers as well as our security problems.

Kachadpai Burusapatana, Thailand’s Secretary-General of the National Security Council, "Statement at the 50th Session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of UNHCR."Acceptance is on a group basis and it seems that sounds of battle need to be heard before persons are accepted into camps.

An international relief worker.

There has been a general fear that most displaced peoples from Burma are economic immigrants and some are agents for drug producers. Therefore, most "illegal immigrants" are regarded as causes of major Thai social problems. Most Thai politicians

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44 The Thai’s national security policy toward Burma was made clear officially that the kingdom does not support “ethnic minorities” or Burmese-national political asylum seekers. The guidelines for treating these peoples are based on: Thai-Burmese relations, humanitarian principles, and national security (e.g., NSC, 1989: 1).


During the interview I had with Mr. Kachadpai Burusapatana on April 23, 27, 2001, he not only reiterated the humanitarian track records of Thailand in dealing with the displaced peoples from Indochina.
and government officials usually cite the increased criminal activities associated with "illegal immigrants," the increased occurrence of contagious diseases, and the increased deforestation. "Illegal immigrants" have become a topic of many political debates between rival political parties due to the increased negative portrayal of the immigrants in the media. No administration wants to appear 'soft' or to look like it is appeasing or complying with any foreign powers. This non-appeasement policy is also channeled towards any international organizations backed by foreign powers, like the UNHCR. Hence, relations with the UNHCR have been mostly cordial, but at times reserved and cautious. Although the role of the UNHCR has been somewhat marginalized regarding the crisis of the forcibly displaced peoples along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces, it still wields some influences within the Thai policy-making arena. This influence may also be accomplished through foreign embassies meeting with the Thai government, especially those meeting with the United States, or special relations with certain influential Thai policy-makers. Whatever methods used by the UNHCR, it is undeniable that the admissions boards, according to the Working Agreements, was formed as a result of the pressure from the UNHCR and foreign embassies, including the "brainstorming sessions" in 1998.46

According to the Working Arrangements between the Royal Thai Government and the UNHCR, the two entities agreed to closer cooperation between the two entities in the past, but also emphasized the extent of burden the country had shouldered both on the eastern and western fronts.

46 The information for this paragraph is heavily influenced by an interview with an international relief worker, who wished to remain anonymous, in May 2001. This relief worker commented that, from the Thai government's perspective, the creation of the admissions boards also illustrated to the public that some sound solution is in sight and that the
on displaced persons from Burma.\textsuperscript{47} The agreements signify intended cooperative relations between two sovereign powers – one national, the other international – to act upon forcibly displaced peoples from Burma. As an initial step, it was also intended that the agreements would contribute towards the resolution of the issue of the displaced peoples. The two entities agreed to coordinate on the following issues: admission to asylum, registration, the UNHCR access, repatriation, relocation of temporary shelter areas, the UNHCR assistance parameters, and long-term strategies.

In the Agambenian sense, the first issue, admission to asylum, is a strategy of inscribing lives from “outside” in the sphere of agreements, hence animating the agreements, by the two sovereign powers – how would the displaced persons be perceived, how should they be recognized? The inscriptive strategy would name the displaced in two categories. The Thai government wants to grant temporary shelter to only peoples fleeing fighting whereas the UNHCR have been trying to push the criteria to include also peoples fleeing effects of civil war.\textsuperscript{48} For those who would be granted temporary shelter, they would be, in a Kafkaesque sense, given “stools” to sit down at the side of Thailand’s “door.”\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} The agreement titled, “Second RTG-UNHCR Brainstorming Session,” was endorsed by the both the Thai government and UNHCR on May 15, 1988 in Bangkok; see Department of International Organizations, 1998.

\textsuperscript{48} However, a copy of the Working Agreements, that I received from Thailand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, states on the left column, which is “Steps to be taken by UNHCR”: “UNHCR as observer to Thailand’s assessment of the situation whether to grant temporary shelter on the ground of fighting and effects of civil war” (Department of International Organization, 1998: 1). See Appendix I.

\textsuperscript{49} However, as the working agreements also state on the right column, which is “Steps to be taken by RTG”: “Thai authority have the right to grant or deny temporary shelter to arrivals. Those with valid claims must either enter designated temporary shelter areas, or otherwise decline the temporary shelter in Thailand and return to Myanmar” (Department of International Organization, 1998: 1).
Locating the agreements in the horrendous effects of the Tatmadaw’s Four Cut strategy upon ethnic nationalities (which does not always mean direct fighting), however, one cognizes that the Thai government’s criterion to grant temporary shelter, to only peoples fleeing fighting, is alarmingly narrow. The forcibly displaced resulting from the Four-Cut strategy have become imperceptible. These peoples would be rejected at “the gate” and left outside the threshold of the sovereignty of the agreements, quintessentially situated “outside,” without existing in a corresponding “inside.” They would either have to attempt to traverse through other parts of Thailand’s “doorways” or wander and hide in the war zones – imperceptible naked-lives abound.

The following is an instance of such abandonment by Thailand. In November of 2001, Thai authorities forcibly repatriated 63 forcibly displaced Karen arriving at the Thai-Burmese state-boundary, which was done against the advice of the UNHCR’s officials observing an admission board, according to the Thailand-UNHCR “Working Agreements,” mentioned above. Aid workers along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces told a reporter that the 63 Karens “are now in hiding across the...[state-boundary]...in Burma,” along with other 600 Karen villagers who had earlier been rejected by the Thai authorities and are in “fear for their lives.” The United Kingdom, along with the rest of the European Union, the United States and Canada, had officially protested twice to the Thai government over the forced repatriation, urging the latter to allow the villagers to cross the state-boundary and stay at an ad hoc temporary reception center while waiting for their status, whether they were fleeing fighting or not, to be determined.

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The Thai government had continually rejected these western countries’ concerns and insisted that the repatriated forcibly-displaced Karens had not been in danger. Aid workers who had worked in the so-called “temporary shelter areas” said that this particular group of the Karens had until then been living in an area where there had been intermittent fierce fighting for more than two months, largely between two breakaway Mon armed resistant groups. The government was backing the assessment of the local military commanders and refusing to reconsider the case. The army insisted the area where the repatriated Karens were hiding was safe. “They’re in the safest possible area,” said Kachadpai Burusapatana, Secretary-General of the National Security Council.51

According to the news report, at least one European ambassador believed the European Union (EU) had to continue to vigorously press the Thai government on this case. There were even talks of the European Council adopting a motion criticizing Thailand’s policy. “The Thai government must realise that the EU is not criticising Thailand's humanitarian record,” said one diplomat. “They have been very generous with refugees – from Cambodia and Laos, as well as Burma. But they must ensure that international standards of treatment are maintained in every case” (Ibid.). The European diplomat continued that the issue which preoccupies everyone is how to speed up the dialogue process of talks between the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese generals and to support the work of the UN envoy in particular. Rangoon is desperate to get more aid – and the opposition leader has agreed in principle to the resumption of “limited humanitarian aid.” However, the EU believes this should only be

51 Ibid. According to the news, the Thai Prime Minister had also reiterated the government’s stand on the forcibly displaced peoples when he was briefing heads of diplomatic missions recently before the news report.
forthcoming once there is significant political progress in Rangoon. The fear is that some countries – specifically Japan and Thailand – have been too eager with their offers of financial support.\(^{52}\)

According to another news article published on December 21, 2001, on the same incidence, the Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman told reporters that Thailand stood firm on the issue of the repatriated Karens and would reconsider the decision only if violence against the group worsened. He maintained that Thailand has assisted displaced villagers escaping clashes between Burma's ruling junta and ethnic militias along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces for years, leaving some 108,000 people currently seeking asylum in Thailand. He averred, moreover, that “the EU should instead grant asylum to the Karen villagers whose cause they have taken up. The EU should grant them asylum if they are concerned about these people,” he said. “In the past, only 10 percent of Myanmar student dissidents have been granted asylum in EU countries.”\(^{53}\)

From the Thai nation-state’s perspective, this confrontation evinces how Thailand had been disappointed by the rich countries’ indifference toward the burdens she has shouldered on the western front officially since 1984, without adequate sharing of responsibility by resettlement. It is the same kind of disappointment that had led its Secretary-General to comment at the 49th Session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the UNHCR in 1998:

\(^{52}\) A UK government official said that the UK will be trying to impress on the Thai foreign minister that the international community must keep in step on Burma, "What must be avoided at all costs is a situation where Rangoon is given a chance to play one country off against another" (Ibid.).

It has been widely accepted that resettlement represents an effective method of protection as well as a solution to refugee problem. Resettlement represents an international responsibility sharing and safeguards the institution of asylum. 

Unfortunately, the principle of asylum is now under increasing threat. Presently, the 1951 Convention being re-interpreted in a restrictive and selective manner by some traditional resettlement countries, which have erected variety of physical, legal, and administrative barriers to obstruct or deter arrival of asylum seekers. Without adequate resettlement intakes, countries of first asylum will be left with indefinite burden of residual caseloads. Piece meal approach to take a few caseloads off the hands of countries here and there may ease one’s conscience but would have the undesired effect as a “pull factor.” Besides countries of first asylum may feel they are being reduced to a mere “immigration post,” while durable solution is not forthcoming (Boonsak, 1998: nos. 14-5).

The Secretary-General, therefore, requested that the structure of burden-sharing be carefully considered by taking into account “both visible and invisible impacts on first asylum countries and their citizens.” “In fact,” he continued “the luxury of distance of many actors involved should be balanced with the burden of proximity of the country of first asylum” (Ibid.: no. 25).

Moreover, when the Asia economic crisis hit the kingdom, Thailand’s cry for financial help and burden mitigation from the donor countries was louder than ever. Hence, the theme of the burden Thailand had carried was reiterated every year before the crisis became even more pronounced in 1998:

With such burden, financial support from the donor community plays a crucial role in sharing global responsibility to assist and encourage low-income or developing countries to cope with this humanitarian problem. Funding must be sustained and increased in order to enable UNHCR and related organizations to cope more effectively and sufficiently. It is also imperative that public awareness be promoted in the donor countries so that their public realize, understand and appreciate the extent of the sacrifices.

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54 Although the Asian economic crisis triggered in Thailand in July 1997, the 1997’s speech delivered in October of the same year does not mention the crisis, but the 1998’s speech does:

The recent financial crisis in Asia further added complications and limitations to Thailand in shouldering the burden of providing temporary shelter to thousands of displaced persons from Cambodia, Myanmar, and others. Although we would have wished to do more in terms of support to these hapless peoples, we are very much handicapped by the lack of resources. At the same time, cares and support have to be provided adequately to those sectors of the Thai community affected by influxes of these displaced persons and refugees (Boonsak, 1998: no. 10).
and burdens carried today by the worlds' foremost donors to the causes of refugees – the developing countries of first asylum (Boonsak, 1998: no. 11).

It is contended here that the success of Thailand’s and the UNHCR’s Working Agreements in May of 1998, which enhanced the role of the UNHCR, resulted from Thailand’s intention to alleviate its burden after the economic crisis as much as, if not more than, from the pressure from western embassies and the UNHCR in Bangkok. The involuntary repatriation of the forcibly displaced Karens committed by the Thai functionaries mentioned above demonstrates that the kingdom could be forthright and indifferent to the international protection regime when it deemed is necessary. Hence, at the moment when its financial instability immensely outweighed its border security, the kingdom decided to trade off its intention to de-internationalize the issue of protecting forcibly displaced peoples for its financial stability (cf. Lang, 2002).

In reality, such involuntary repatriation has intermittently occurred; it was not the first and last time. National sovereign power and the kingdom’s security is the most critical. Between the lives of the un-accounted for from a despotic country and the stability of its body politics, the Thai government has demonstrated time and again what its priority is.

At the end of the day, it was the forcibly displaced peoples who have had to bear the horrible brunt of not only the confrontations between national sovereign power and international sovereign power, but also the national security of a nation-state. This chapter has evinced how the forcibly displaced peoples from Burma coming to Thailand have become abandoned lives through statist practices and discourses both at the national and international level, although these discourses and practices have rendered the forcibly displaced Karens perceptible. These peoples have been abandoned at Thailand’s “gates”
from months to years. Before we know it, it will have been twenty years since the first official “temporary shelter area” was allowed by the Thai government in 1984. In the next chapter, we will explore the lives of the forcibly displaced Karens in a “temporary shelter area,” together with the lifeworlds of the forcibly displaced peoples in the borderlands outside the string of “temporary shelter areas” along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces.
Before the Law – Threshold

...before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a teenage girl from Burma, who prays for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance at the moment. The girl thinks it over and then asks if she will be allowed in later. "It is possible," says the doorkeeper, "but not at the moment." Since the door leading into the Law stands open, as usual, and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the girl stoops to peer through the door. Observing that, the doorkeeper laughs and says: "If you are so drawn to it, just try to go through it despite my veto. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the least of the doorkeepers. From door to door, there is one doorkeeper after another, each more powerful than the last. The third doorkeeper is already so terrible that even I cannot bear to look at him."

These are difficulties the girl from Burma has not expected; the Law, she thinks, should surely be accessible at all times and to everyone, but as she now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper in his trench coat, with his big sharp nose, and hugely vicious eyes, she decides that it is better to wait until she gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper allows the girl to build a shed to stay by the door. There she lives for days and years. With her perseverance, she makes countless attempts to be admitted. The doorkeeper frequently has little interviews with her, asking her questions about her home and other matters, but the questions are put indifferently, as bureaucrats put them, and always finish with the statement that she cannot be let over yet.

The woman, who has furnished herself with things for her journey, sacrifices all she has, however valuable, in the hope of bribing the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts everything, but always with the remark: "I am only taking it to keep you from thinking you have done nothing." During these long years the woman fixes her attention constantly on the doorkeeper. She forgets the other doorkeepers, and this first one seems to her the sole obstacle between herself and the Law. She curses her bad luck, and since in her attentive observation of the doorkeeper she has come to know even the ants on his trench coat's, she begs the ants as well to help her and to change the doorkeeper's mind. Later, as she gets very weak and very ill, she only grumbles to herself and to her tiny daughter.

Soon her health deteriorates and her eyesight begins to fail, and she does not know whether the world is really darker or whether her eyes are only deceiving her. Yet in her darkness she is now aware of a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the door of the Law. She does not have very long to live and her tiny daughter is very sick, too. Before she dies, all her experiences in these long years gather themselves in her head to one point, a question she has not yet asked the doorkeeper. She waves him nearer, since she can no longer raise her ailing and stiffening body, hugging her sick, tiny daughter. The doorkeeper has to bend low toward them, for the difference in height between them has altered much to the woman's disadvantage. "What do you want to know now?" asks the doorkeeper; "you are insatiable." "Everyone strives to reach the Law," says the woman, "so how does it happen that for all these years no one but myself and my daughter have ever begged to enter the door?" The doorkeeper recognizes that the woman has reached her end, and, to let his failing senses catch the words, roars in her ears: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this door was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."
Chapter 7 – Imperceptible Naked-Karens’ Temporalities and Struggles
Contained in Security Spaces, Destabilizing Statist Univocity?

1. The Discourse of “Temporary Shelter Areas”

I wish to underscore that shelter and protection given to refugees/displaced persons in Thailand on humanitarian ground is “temporary.” Although resettlement, local integration and repatriation are traditional durable solutions, Thailand has no policy of local settlement or local integration, whereas resettlement could be a double-edged sword, stimulating greater outflow rather than halting it. We thus are convinced that the most viable durable solution for refugees/displaced persons is for them to return to their motherland and to serve their countries as productive and responsible members of their societies. Against this backdrop Thailand advocates the concept of “safe return” when the situation in the countries of origin permits. This is in line with emerging notion of “temporary protection” in case of mass influx, which should be repatriation-oriented.

Krit Garnjana-Goonchorn, “Statement at the 48th Session of the Executive Committee of the Programme of the UNHCR.”

Sovereign Power’s Inscription of Lives & Knowledge Production

As of December 2000, there were ten registered temporary shelter areas or “camps” along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces under the jurisdiction of Thailand’s Ministry of Interior, with relief support from a network of international relief agencies called the Burmese Border Consortium Relief Programme (BBC). There were three shelter areas where the Karennis (red Karens) were the majority, nine for the Karens (three of which were not registered), and one for the Burmese students, which was later closed down in 2002. Moreover, there was one site for the Karens and there were three resettlement sites for the Mons, all of which were located on the Burmese side and not registered. Altogether, there were 127,914 people (up by 5,137 from the figure of June 2000, just six months earlier) and 943 Burmese students (down by 824 from the figure of

June 2000 - most of these people had been resettled in third countries). Of all these peoples, 98,421 or about seventy per cent were Karens (up by 4,484 from the figure of June 2000) (BBC, 2000: 3).

Before I attempted to enter one of the “temporary shelter areas,” I had not had a clear understanding that unauthorized people are officially not allowed in those security spaces, let alone an academic who wished to conduct research therein. In other words, those security spaces have been off-limit areas for unauthorized activities, including the production of knowledge. During my visits to the Operations Center for Displaced Persons in Bangkok, where I interviewed the director and later picked up the letter translated and shown below, I was told by an official that without a letter from the Office of the National Security Council, it would take at least one month to process a letter asking for permission. And not everyone who asked for permission in the past had been approved; even a member of the Thai army working on a Master’s thesis was rejected an entry. Luckily her questionnaires were distributed and collected by shelter’s officers instead. Moreover, at least one foreign professor’s request to enter a shelter was rejected; the professor had been teaching in a US-branch private university in Thailand. A person asking for permission would typically have to prepare a package summarizing their research purposes, rationalizing the necessity to be in the intended shelter, together with references from their education institutes and sample questionnaires, if they are parts of the research. I was informed by the official, furthermore, that mine would be the first doctoral dissertation research to be allowed to occur in shelter areas after they became

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2 These four “camps” are the manifestations of humanitarian assistance conducted by international relief agencies, but they could not be considered as preventive protection because of the lack of security for these “camps.”
closed areas. The whole procedure therefore reinforced a statist partition of the sensible, with its specific general laws: how the temporary shelter areas are usually not the place to look into; and how only certain appropriate subjects are qualified to look, to judge, and to decide about them. Even so, the police logic which governed the perceptibility of the temporary shelter areas, and whatever was inside in this case also ordered an approved researcher’s body – defining the allocation of his ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying. For instance, the official in Bangkok told me that I would not be allowed to stay overnight in the temporary shelter areas during my research, which meant that I would have to commute back and forth from a town with a hotel, which was about 35 miles each way, unless I could find a place to stay with a local near the temporary shelter area. I, too, was supposed to be there temporarily.

It is the figure of sovereign power who makes the decision whether to learn to know about the forcibly displaced peoples from Burma or not, which entails its control of the production of knowledge about these peoples. From the Thai nation-state’s perspective, there is nothing else to know about these peoples’ pasts. One could imagine the Thai figure of sovereign power says: “We have already and adequately known them and we are not interested to know more.” And this is understandable. For the production of knowledge about the histories of the forcibly displaced peoples and ways of locating themselves in time will not only rip off the controlling cage constructed by the Thai sovereign power and hence destabilize its sovereignty, but, in the process, also empower the forcibly displaced. Nonetheless, I contend that these peoples’ situatedness and their pasts must be known not only for “their” sake, but also for “our” sake, because tragedies
are occurring and, at times, exploding, as in the Ratchaburi hospital siege – which will be discussed below. We must, therefore, be vigilant, or, better yet, we must wake up.³

As a statist discourse, the languages and practices surrounding “temporary shelter areas” has inflicted security forces on any kind of subjectivities that come to be involved with it, whether politically qualified or not. Below is a literal translation of the letter that opened a “door” for me to enter a temporary shelter area to conduct my field research.⁴ I was another form-of-life that was inscribed and managed by the sovereign power, as part of the discourse of the temporary shelter areas. Though revealing myself to the sovereign power as a researcher, as someone who conducted research on this very sensitive issue, was my choice, my being inscribed was by no means an option. It will be possible, therefore, for the sovereign power – if it deems necessary – to abandon me, ripping off my form-of-life and exposing my nakedness.

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³ I am alluding to Benjamin’s sentence: “There is a not-yet conscious knowledge of what has been: its advancement has the structure of awakening” (1999a: 389[K1.2]).

⁴ Again, for the reason of anthropological etiquette, I omit some information in the letter.
MOST URGENT

At MOI xxxxxx

To the Strategy Institute, Office of the National Security Council

According to a letter stamped “Very Urgent” from the Office of the National Security Council at NR xxxxxxxxx dated D/M/2001 asking for permission for Mr. Decha Tangseefa, a research affiliate with the Peace Information Center, Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, who is working on a doctoral dissertation at the University of Hawai'i in the United States, to enter the temporary shelter area for peoples fleeing fighting from Burma at..., ..., district, ..., province, during D-D/M/2001, to conduct research on problems regarding peoples fleeing fighting from Burma, from anthropological perspectives, as was described in detailed,

The Ministry of Interior has approved such person to enter the area, and informed the...province to coordinate with concerned agencies in the area, in order to facilitate the trip so as to fulfill the intended purpose, without causing security problems and disrupting international relations. In this regard, may the Office of the National Security Council please inform Mr. Decha to also submit the research result to the Ministry of Interior.

Hereby informing.

Office of the Permanent Secretary
Ministry of Interior
D/M/2001

Operations Center for Displaced Persons,
Ministry of Interior
Tel. 2430595
Fax. 2430592
xxx/xxxxxxx

After picking up this letter, I started to ask myself: Is there a link between a nation-state’s security, the security of the forcibly displaced peoples, and the production of knowledge? Can’t sovereign power and knowledge conjoin for the betterment of the
forcibly displaced? It became obvious to me later on that they can. As a result, I intend to evince in this chapter that, as far as the forcibly displaced peoples are concerned, the sovereign power that has attempted to silence their plight is ironically the pathway for these peoples' perceptibility and recognition. In other words, the forcibly displaced peoples' sufferings and struggles - their histories and temporalities - cannot be perceived without sovereign power. What, then, are the characteristics of the entanglements embedded in perceiving their plight and paths? More specifically, what are the conditions for the apparatus of recognition for the forcibly displaced Karens living in these shelters? In response to these questions, the rest of this section will explore the forcibly displaced Karens' situatedness in a temporary shelter area by focusing on three themes: being non-human “aberrants” to the host country, educating the young, and being afraid in sanctuary. When interwoven, these issues signify the perceptibility of the Karens as a nation in the security spaces of another nation-state, far away from their “homeland.”

In a “Temporary Shelter Area”: Forms-of-life or Sheer Fact of Living?

These camps are not remote. Simply fly to Thailand, as many tourists do, and then instead of heading south for the islands travel west and north to the border. There you will find a string of camps, one after another, for hundreds of kilometers, with a total inmate population now approaching 150,000. These camps should be completely open, so the entire world can see the suffering they contain, and so any providers of assistance, including tourists, may help. They should not be guarded by soldiers and hidden from sight, so the world is ignorant of the refugees’ plight, so business between Bangkok and Rangoon may proceed without distraction.

Roland Watson, “A Thai Christmas Present: NGO Harassment and Intimidation.”

In this remark, Ronald Watson, an activist with “Dictator Watch,” does not acknowledge the fact that “temporary shelter areas” exemplify the statist security
discourses. The shelters are security spaces that must be kept out of sight, and as little noise from inside as possible should be heard – the littler, the merrier. These are spaces of exception, spaces of pollution (Malkki, 1995) – heterotopias (Foucault, 1986) to the attempting utopia of the Thai nation-state. These spaces contain elements of chaos from another failed utopia, Burma. When these suffering elements arrived at “the door” of the neighboring countries, they, therefore, had to be contained, disciplined, and ordered.

Since Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the discourse of humanitarianism has been the sole impetus that has obligated the kingdom to receive the forcibly displaced peoples from Burma. The kingdom has invariably hoped that they could exert as little effort as possible. Hence, for Thailand to let the temporary shelter areas open to the “outside world” would be to sow the seeds of unruly and, hence, from the kingdom’s perspective, to instigate chaotic elements embedded within these suffering bodies.

Everyone with whom I talked and who was not a Thai official uttered the term “camp” for the official term “temporary shelter areas” (Phunthi phakphing chuakhao). I hence was “corrected” and reminded during an interview with a Thai official supervising the temporary shelter area, where I conducted my fieldwork and teaching, that it was a “temporary shelter area,” never a “camp.” He wanted to make certain that I saw where I was, where he had been working, and where the forcibly displaced peoples had been inhabiting as “temporary shelter areas.” In so doing, he re-entrenched the statist discourse of “temporary shelter areas.” It was, therefore, supposed be clear to me that

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6 Even the programme report of the Burmese Border Consortium Relief Programme (BBC) Refugee Relief Programme uses the term “camp” throughout (2000).
only such statement and such kind of place, and not the “camp,” were capable of being thought.

Having visited that “temporary shelter areas” in all of Thailand’s three seasons (winter, summer, and rainy), I asked myself whether this place could be called a god-forsaken space: extremely hot, very cold, a lot of rain and incredibly muddy. The shelter was very crowded. As of May 2000, when the biggest town nearby had the population density of one person per 4 acres, this shelter’s density was 81.5 persons per acre.

At first glance, an outsider could get the impression that the shelter members, most of whom were the Karens, were docile bodies living in bamboo houses. Initially, it seemed to me that many people in the shelter had little senses of self-reliance, future, and certainty – compared to those of other humans who are not forcibly displaced. The shelter members did not know the duration of their stay – when they would be repatriated by the Thai government – an issue I was occasionally queried by those who were still concerned about their futures or straightforward in their inquiry. Many youngsters got married not long after graduating from high schools, and some even before then – there was not much to do in the shelter. There was a saying among the shelter members that many just “eat sleep, eat sleep” (au mee, au mee). Or, some shelter members told me that some Thai villagers living nearby shelters always scolded their dogs that often slept: “Don’t be lazy like the Karens in the camps. They only sleep and eat.” Coming from the Thais, the statement not only reinforced the perceptions about life in the shelters, but equally importantly, it also degraded the Karens to animals because, unlike in many western “cultures,” the mainstream and highly-hierarchical Thai “culture” generally does
not regard dogs as human companions, but merely as guards or servants. Such a statement pushes the shelter members back to the sheer fact of being (zoe).

Being physically confined, provided monthly food rations, and nutrition-intake surveilled, the shelter members are disciplined by the containment strategy of the statist discourses and practices. In other words, as temporary shelter areas are located within the Thai state’s jurisdiction, and as lives within are supported by international protection regime, biopolitical bodies have been produced out of these forcibly displaced peoples from Burma. Nonetheless, unlike the biopolitical status of citizens in general, the shelter members have been perceived by the Thai nation-state as politically unqualifed beings, and thus they have no juridical protection from the state. As a result, their voices by and large express merely their state of being and their speeches do not demonstrate recognition as fellow members of the human community.

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- **Rice** 35.2 lbs./adult; 17.6 lbs./child < 5 years
- **Fish Paste** 2.2 lbs./person
- **Salt** 2.2 lbs./3 persons
- **Yellow Beans** 2.2 lbs./adult; 1.65 lbs./child < 5 years
- **Cooking Oil** 1 ltr./adult; 500 ml./child < 5 years
- **Dry Chili** 0.55 ltr./person
- **Cooking Fuel** 22 lbs./person for 2-person family;
  15.4 ltr./person for 5-person family
- **Blanket** 1/2 persons/year* (* = or new persons, if necessary)
- **Mosquito Net** 1/3 persons/year*
- **Sleeping Mat** 1/5 persons/year*
- **Cooking Utensils** 1 /family; 1 larger p. /family > 5 persons
  (The first time was early in 2001)
- **Building Materials** For annual housing repair: Bamboo and Eucalyptus poles (to most camps), thatch or roofing leaves (to some camps) (starting early 2000)
- **Clothing** Warm clothing (starting for the cold season of 2000)
Most shelter members had no income and land to farm, and they, therefore, had become more aid-dependent. It was a state of dependency that became even more drastic when one considers, firstly, the rate of new lives coming out to see the world every month, and, secondly, the amount of food that could be produced without income and land. There were about one hundred new-born babies monthly, i.e., about 3.18% annually (Ministry of Interior, 2001: 7); and except for some small plots for gardening, and only for earlier shelter members, the Thai government did not allow the members to cultivate any crops. In other words, from the Thai state’s perspective, allowing cultivation could engender the sense of permanency, both for the shelter members and the international community. The shelter members must not be allowed such a perception. Time and again, the Thai government officials reiterate the temporary nature of hosting the forcibly displaced peoples. Hence, the sense of dependency in the shelter reinforces the statist discourse of temporariness. As aberrants to the Thai nation-state – epidemically, socially, culturally, juridically, politically, and environmentally – they have therefore been abandoned and left “outside” Thai society as imperceptible naked-.

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8 According to a report on the Burmese Border Consortium Relief Programme (BBC) Refugee Relief Programme, by the mid-1990’s, it had become necessary for the programme to supply one hundred per cent of basic food needs (BBC, 2000: 39).

9 From the dominant perspectives of many Thais, the forcibly displaced peoples as aberrants have not only inhabited the spaces of pollution, they have also been sources of pollution in many senses of the term. Below are two examples of environmental pollution.

In an interview I had with a village-headman in a village adjacent to a temporary shelter area, he pointed to the stream that ran from the hill in the area, passing through the shelter and flowed down to his village. In 1999, Thai villagers got sick and some of them died. They believed that the death resulted from the sanitation problems in the shelter. The interview was conducted in May 2001.

In a copy of a letter from another village leaders to a district chief in Kanchanaburi, another province that also has a temporary shelter areas, the leaders also complained about the shelter at Ban Ton Yang located above the stream which ran down to the Thai villagers’ reservoir a source for the latter’s livelihood. The Thai villagers began to have rashes and felt itchy. According to the letter, all these “may
lives before the law. One wonders, however, to what extent has the kingdom succeeded in its attempt to maintain them as sheer facts of being? One effective way to respond to this question is to explore the education being provided to the young in the temporary shelter areas, for it is through education that the Karen nationhood has been reenacted and their forms-of-life reinvented.

According to a report by ZOA Refugee Care, a Dutch non-governmental organization focusing on education, between March and July 2000 in the seven registered temporary shelter areas where the Karens were the majority, the Karen peoples made up roughly more than eighty per cent of the registered shelter members in Thailand (Maat & Taloung, 2000: 1). For the 2000-2001 academic year, there were fifty-five primary schools (Kindergarten [2 years] - 4th standard), eighteen middle schools (5th - 7th standard), and thirteen high schools (8th - 10th standard) in the seven registered temporary shelter areas, teaching 27,475 students with 917 teachers (Ibid.: 12). Primary school curriculum includes Karen language (especially Sgaw Karen, whereas the Eastern Pwo Karen dialect was taught during the summer season), Burmese, English, Mathematics, Geography, Science, and History. In 1997, the Karen Education Project introduced five more courses, in the field of music, sewing/knitting, drawing, carpentry and first aid into the high schools (Ibid.: 25-6). The Head of the Karen Education Dept. pointed out that education provided in temporary shelter areas is of a higher quality than that provided in

result from the water turning dirty due to the shelter members pollutes the upstream; now Thai villagers no longer use the water in the reservoir for either drinking or cleaning” (Villagers of Para in ok, 2001).

There were quite a few Burmese-speaking Muslims in these temporary shelter areas; and their children had to learn 3 to 5 languages from kindergarten. Besides Burmese, Karen, and English languages, they had to learn also Arabic and Urdu on a daily basis in the evening (Maat & Taloung, 2000: 25).
schools in the Karen State.\textsuperscript{11} Since the late 1980s, ethnic nationalities’ languages have rarely been taught beyond the fourth grade in Burma.\textsuperscript{12} In these security spaces, therefore, nationhood has been reenacted, forms-of-life have been reconstructed, and naked lives have been qualified. Nonetheless, as beings abandoned by sovereign power through the “inclusive exclusion,” the Karens’ nakedness is at times harrowingly revealed.

During my fieldwork in a temporary shelter area, a Karen shelter member told me of his belief that there was an insidious collaboration between the Thai armed forces and the Burmese junta, together with its ally, the DKBA. Such collaboration had resulted in an attack on his shelter area in early 1997, which would not have been possible without permission from the Thai army, due to the fact that the shelter area is located about 7

\textsuperscript{11} Maat \& Taloung, 2000: 13.

\textit{One day while I was talking with the family of the principal of the best high school in a temporary shelter area, a family of Thai villagers outside the shelter area came to meet the principal to ask for permission to send their teenage girl to study in the school. The parents of the girl told me, after being asked for their reasons of doing so, that English teaching inside the camp was much better than that taught by the Thai local public high school in their locality. Since the family is also a Thai Karen, the girl could also learn Karen language if she would be accepted. I was told by the principal that there had been quite a few cases like this girl in the school.}

\textsuperscript{12} Smith, 1995: 230.

My Karen friends from Rangoon (Yangon) mentioned to me, after learning about Karen language of various dialects being taught in the temporary shelter areas that his children had not been able to learn Karen language because of the military junta prohibitive policy.

Alan Saw U, a Karen leader in Burma, writes a brief history of such policy:

\begin{quote}
In the year 1922, during the British occupation of Myanmar, the Karen leaders worked hard for the Karen people to have access to information in their own language, the right to use their language in governmental educational institutions; and the right to have adequate provision created for the use of the Karen language where needed.

Consequently, a bill was declared for the Sgaw Karen dialect to be used in the High School up to 10\textsuperscript{th} Grade; and the Delta Pwo [i.e. Western Pwo] dialect to be used up to the 7\textsuperscript{th} Grade. Primers and textbooks were published and the Karen people were able to fully enjoy the right to their own language for quite a number of years.

Unfortunately that right to language was short lived. The Myanmar Government started the process of \textit{ethnic linguicide} soon after it gained independence from the British in the year 1948.
\end{quote}
kilometers from the Thai-Burmese state-boundary. When I interviewed a Thai government official taking care of the shelter, I inquired about any possibility of the shelter being raided by either the Tatmadaw or the DKBA troops from the other side of the river. I was confirmed that with such a distance, there was no way that those troops would be able to attack the shelter without any knowledge of the Thai armed forces that patrol the Thai-Burmese state-boundary. But the following short essay of my student in the shelter provides a glimpse of a shelter raid that occurred on January 29, 1997. Again, I copy it here verbatim but omit some information for the safety of the student.

From 1995 we always heard the news that DKBA has threatened to attack us all the time. I couldn’t bear with this news because it’s a bad news and made me tired. From then, we hardly had good opportunity to celebrate Christmas, Karen New Year and New Year.

On 28th January 1997 night we slept peacefully. That night was a quiet night and I slept very well. In the morning at 6:00, the shooting started like a raining which made all of us got shock and get up to see what was happening. Mortars shelling came from every direction and I pray while my heart is shattering with fears. I tried to find a refuge but no way and everyone seems to find his or her own refuge as well. Within few minutes a man came to our house and said, “seventeen houses are burnt down by the DKBA.” It makes me more hopeless and fearful. From then we move to the other side of the camp. When I came close to my friend’s house, she looked at me and sadly said, “my grandma was hid by a mortar shell that fall near my house and died.” I was shocked and I couldn’t imaging myself being in that kind of situation. After hearing the news, “why?” came to my mind while moving my foot step to the other side of the camp.

When I sat in a quite place, certain questions came to my mind such as, “why my people kill my people?” and “Why life is very uncertain?” “The grandma whom I saw yesterday, watching T.V. together with me is now gone.” “Why it happened.”

People gave me food to eat and I said, “no.” Then, it was a time for me to study, cook, eat, go to church and pray,..., play and so on. But with this kind of situation, I couldn’t do what I wish to do.”

In the evening, we came back to our house and were not allowed to open the generator, and even a candle. In a very dark night, I thought, “What should I need to do for my people and the grandmother who died recently?” For sure, I can’t do big things,

During the session in the Parliament in 1958, the Bill for the right of the Karen people to their own language was rejected without mentioning any reason at all (Alan Saw U, 2000:1).

13 The interviewee even named Gen. Chavalit Yongchayiyut, the then Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, whose close relations with the ruling junta began in the 1980s.
but...one little task for me is to share to the people who do not know about this cruel event happening in...Refugee Camp on 29th January, 1997.

While I was conducting fieldwork in the temporary shelter area, there were other stories that I heard and other events that I witnessed that I cannot write down in this dissertation for the safety of those who were involved. Many of the memories and stories that would let “outsiders” recognized their plight and struggles, which they had experienced even while living within a supposedly protection area, will not be recorded and hence will die with them in the future, unless they have other means to let the world know.

What was terrifyingly interesting was that the atmosphere of fear that I personally encountered in Rangoon between August and September 2000 also occurred in the shelter area. One time, while I was having dinner and a very friendly conversation with a group of students, with whom I had taught and spent time throughout the day, a student talked in passing of violence committed upon shelter members by Thai authorities who were taking care of the shelter area. I asked that student to stop while I picked up a tape recorder, after which that student refused to say anything, no matter how much other students and I begged him to. He said he was afraid for his own safety.

After that incident and others that I had encountered, I also found out that before I began my research at the shelter area, such violent incidents within the temporary shelter areas had largely become things of the past. Some infamous incidents had forced the Thai government to remedy the situations, especially after the UNHCR was allowed to become involved since 1998. Nonetheless, many shelter members could not forget those violent events, especially those whom the atrocities were committed against – one of whom was a girl who had been raped by a Thai local politician after she had set her feet

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on Thai soil, but had decided first to traverse through a “doorway” and became an “illegal laborer” outside the shelter area. At one point of our interview, the girl asked, “what will come out of this interview?... In the past couple of years I has been interviewed a couple of times, both in Bangkok and in this province, both by the Thai authorities and foreigners. But nothing better has happened to me; and nothing worse has happened to that man.” This time, it was me who became speechless.\footnote{14}

These violent incidents raise questions about the politics of authority: of who speaks and who gets to listen to the memories of these “unqualified” voices abandoned “before the law” by the Thai sovereign power? Such politics of testimony implies hearing, which, as Ranajit Guha writes, “we know, ‘is constitutive for discourse.’” To listen is already to be open to and existentially disposed towards: one inclines a little on one side in order to listen.”\footnote{15} One can still asks how one can incline toward shelter members in restricted “temporary shelter areas,” even if one had already been aware that hearing constitutes a person becoming, by alluding to Martin Heidegger, being-open as being-with for Others. Moreover, when Heidegger avers that one hears because one understands, and that one has “understood” only if one had heard “aright” (1962: 206), one can also inquire how one can hear the shelter members aright. These questions exemplify the very imperceptibility attached to the status of shelter members.

Not only are lives in a “security space” not always secure, but the enunciation of their memories of violence are also usually not heard. This is because those who would listen to such memories are often those who would not be authorized to enter the shelter areas. It is true that there are quite a few international relief agencies authorized to work...
in the string of temporary shelter areas along the Thai-Burmese state-boundary. Yet, these agencies’ onus is not to listen to the forcibly displaced peoples’ memories of past sufferings but to remedy the present ones. Such acts of remedy are so immediate that discerning the political dimensions attached to their work or to the act of listening has often become luxurious. In this light, as a dissertation that is aimed to listen to the shelter members’ sufferings and their political ramifications, I needed an approval from the very sovereign power who has attempted all along to silent those voices – such is another moment of the paradox of perceptibility.

As a way of continuing our weaving of perceptibility of the forcibly displaced Karens, I would like to invoke again the stories of the “silent boy” (who refused to speak) and of the “raped girl” (who was not accounted-for) mentioned above. While the boy was inscribed by the statist discourse of “temporary shelter area,” the girl, and her mother, originally passed through Thailand’s “door.” While the boy was “before the law,” the girl was “beyond the law.” Such acts of passing and being beyond rendered her extremely vulnerable, becoming an imperceptible naked-life with tremendous possibilities of having violence committed against her because of her lack of protection – having no one to cry her agonies to. Yet, she and her mother were not alone in traversing through the “door” and living their lives at large as “illegal laborers.” Such living at large is in fact their way of struggling – earning some income instead of waiting for food rations in temporary shelter areas. Regardless of their past sufferings, they intended to start their lives anew by exploiting myriad of opportunities available in some translocalities of the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces. We now turn to a narrative that

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15 Guha, 1996: 9; the quotation is from Heidegger (1962: 206).
follows these imperceptible naked-lives’ paths in the border zones: how they have struggled by constructing their temporalities.

2. Karens’ Temporalities & Struggles along the Thai-Burmese In-between Spaces

Space, especially for those occupying it, tends to have an air of neutrality, to appear empty of normative imposition, as “the epitome of rational abstraction...because it has already been occupied and used, and has already been the focus of past processes whose traces are not always evident in the landscape” (Shapiro, 1997: 15-16: quotation from Lefebvre, 1976: 3.

Up to this point, this study has for the most part omitted one crucial aspect of many imperceptible naked-Karens’ lives: how they have grasped any available propitious opportunities to create their own spaces and times, hence transforming tragic senses of life into strategies for survival, shifting from poetics of grief to poetics of struggles. After all, for them to be situated along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces, where there are quite a few borderlands, is to be in a strategic position to maneuver those ample opportunities available. Borderlands are translocalities where a variety of localities merge, a variety of subjectivities mingle, both of which produce lifeworlds that may at first glance be spatially confined by the nation-state’s territory. In reality, however, such lifeworlds transcend and at times disrupt the nation-state’s jurisdiction (cf. Appadurai, 1996b: 42, 44). A genealogy and an ethnography of the translocalities in the Mae Sot contact zone located in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces will illustrate the possibilities for the Karens’ strategies and struggles for survival and the ways in which borderlands’ cultures enhance or hinder cultures of terror.
Mae Sot: A Borderland & Lives Along A “Borderline”

The work of producing localities, in the sense that localities are life-worlds constituted by relatively stable association, relatively known and shared histories, and collectively traversed and legible spaces and places, is often at odds with the projects of the nation-state. This is partly because the commitments and attachments that characterize local subjectivities...are more pressing and more continuous, and sometimes more distracting than the nation-state can afford. It is also because the memories and attachments that local subjects have to their neighborhoods and street names, to their favorite walkways and streetscapes, to their time and places for congregating and escaping are often at odds with the needs of the nation-state for regulated public life.

Arjun Appadurai, “Sovereignty without Territoriality.”

The biggest and busiest district on the western front of Thailand, Mae Sot is located in the Tak province across Myawadi, a Burma’s town on the other side of the Moei river, a boundary. Different ethnic groups have lived in this town for over one hundred years: first was the Karens, later on the Tais, the Chinese from Yunnan, the Burmans, the Muslims from Bangladesh and northern Thailand, and the Sikhs and the Hindus from India. Later on, many Tais, Chinese, and Burmans have also fled turbulence in Burma to live here; not to mention the migration of many Chinese from mainland China to Thailand, who came to Mae Sot through Bangkok. Northern Thai and Thai-Chinese merchants from southern Thailand also migrated here later (Anurak, 1998: 14-17). Before the construction of a highway from the city of Tak province to Mae Sot over mountainous terrains, it was far easier for Mae Sot’s residents to trade with people at the Moulmein province of Burma (later renamed as Mawlamyine by the junta), which is a seaport by the Andaman Sea of the Indian Ocean. Under the British rule especially, Moulmein was one of the most important seaports of British Burma (Ibid.: 14). In addition, many international non-governmental organizations from many parts of the globe have their local offices here because three of the ten registered “temporary shelter

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areas" in western Thailand are located in Tak province. After more than one hundred years, varieties of localities have been produced – translocalities have emerged in and surrounding Mae Sot.

Mae Sot has become and continues to be a manifestation of multi-faced localities (see also Jakkapan, 2000) where both official and black market economic transactions have alternately or simultaneously been thriving. Mae Sot as a border zone has been a site of conflicts and/or accommodation, on the one hand, and cultural translations and negotiations, on the other, for over a century. Some Chinese traders I talked with in Mae Sot recounted the time over two decades ago when they helped their counterparts from Burma who were forced to temporarily leave Mywaddi to the Thai side because of sporadic fighting between the Karen National Union and the Tatmadaw troops. Perhaps it was because of such "specific histories of cultural displacement" (Bhabha, 1994: 172) that have been parts of every town dweller’s genealogies and memories, especially the older generations’ memories, that, in turn, have rendered this town accommodating to "the others." The memories they refer back to and the discourses that account for those memories are rooted somewhere else. Such transnational dimension of the cultural transformation of these residents has complicated cultural signification – cultures are then always translational (Bhabha, Ibid.). And the Thai national culture has not been easily entrenched here: "The fiction of cultures as discrete, object like phenomena occupying discrete spaces becomes implausible for those who inhabit the borderlands," write Gupta & Ferguson (1997: 34). The transnational and the translational intertwine and closely akin – they form a hybrid location of cultural value. Cultures become strategies for survival (Bhabha, Ibid.) for every subjectivity in this contact zone.
Moreover, peoples’ spatial histories of displacement within and along the translocalities have more often than not been accompanied by “the territorial ambitions of ‘global’ media technologies” (Ibid.). Together with capital flows, the territorial ambition of “global” media has tenaciously deterriorialized nation-states’ boundaries. As a borderland, Mae Sot has, at least since the opening of the Thailand-Myanmar Friendship Bridge on August 15, 1997, been a zone where the electronic mediation thrives along with capital transactions, creating the capital-electronic circuits, which have in turn been exploited by a variety of subjectivities, including members of ethnic nationalities fighting against the Burmese junta. Specifically, there have been more computer-support and/or internet shops in Mae Sot to serve local peoples, international relief workers, and tourists. Ethnic nationalist organizations located not far from Mae Sot have also exploited cyberspace and technological supports from experts in the town by setting up their own

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17 The Thailand-Myanmar Friendship Bridge was first envisioned in 1986 as the connection point, filling the missing gap of the Asian Highway A1, between Myawadi town of Myanmar and Mae Sot. The Asia Highway A1 runs through Iran, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, altogether with the length of 7,615.6 miles. As Mae Sot was later envisaged as a strategic gateway of a land-bridge from Da Nang Port of Vietnam in the Pacific ocean to a few deep seaports of Burma in the Indian ocean, the Friendship bridge then became critical in fulfilling this aspiration. Such land-bridge which will be part of a new ocean and land shipping route will shorten even the shortest ocean route, for instance, between Japan and the Persian Ports through Malacca Strait (in between Malaysia and Indonesia) from 6,800 miles down to 5,500 miles (Directorate of Operation, Royal Thai Army, 1997; Udorn, 1997)

18 Since Thailand’s policy of “turning war zones into trade zones” in 1988, the Thai government began to link with its war-torn neighboring countries by focusing on economy. Along with the strategic envisioning of the Vietnam-Myanmar land-bridge is a series of multi-billion dollars developmental projects in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces ranging from logging, natural gas, dam projects, highway constructions, to deep seaports These economic prospects have been too tempting for some Thai armed-forces leaders, business people, and politicians to not pay attention (see a variety of views in e.g., Chae, 2000; ERI & SAIN, 1996; ICN, 1999; Mananya, 1996; Pa Pawklo, 2002; “Phama poet prathet tem roi,” Pichachakmatawan; Rachada, 2000a, 2000b; Radom, 1992; Surath, 2000; Thai Koei International Co., Ltd. et al, 1996).

More importantly, within statist discourses, economic collaborations between the two nation-states are more sustainable than Thailand’s maintaining policy of having some ethnic armed organizations as “buffer zones,” which had been practiced until officially, but doubtfully, dismissed by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2002 (cf. Tawee, 1996: 94). Under the present administration, the fate of the forcibly displaced peoples has been extremely grimmer than before.
websites to disseminate to the world the causes and the struggles of their peoples in the war zones.

The gradual development and urbanization of the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces in the late 1990s have resulted from a spatial transformation: from contested spaces to Burmese-controlled spaces and from war zones to economic zones, as it were. Through a variety of foreign-invested developmental projects, global capital flows have enabled the Burmese nation-state to weaken and gradually wipe out resistant ethnic armies along the in-between spaces (e.g., ERI & SAIN, 1996). The spatial memories of ethnic nationalities in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces have gradually been erased, while the two nation-state’s memories have been re-entrenched. However, once the electronic mediation began to surge in Mae Sot in the late 1990s, in comparison to other border towns on the western front of Thailand, such capital-electronic forces have begun to deterritorialize both Thailand and Burma.

The proliferation of the capital-electronic circuits has, in some ways, pushed, and in others, opened, another space for members of ethnic nationalities (and their sympathizers) to also start fighting against the junta in cyberspace. Now, they can publicize their struggles and call for recognition as politically qualified subjects. Moreover, their fights with the junta have, willingly or not, been supported by the global force of the international protection regime through a variety of international relief agencies – especially those of the Karens, whose 120,000 plus people have been the majority of the forcibly displaced peoples in Thailand.¹⁹ If Christianity was the first

¹⁹ See figures of the forcibly displaced peoples supported by international relief organizations from, the time when the first official "temporary shelter area" was established in, 1984 until 2000 in the program report of the Burmese Border Consortium Relief Programme (2000: 49). For figures of the forcibly displaced Karens from 1984 to 1997, see BERG (1998: 75).
globalizing force that transformed the Karens, in the nineteenth-century, it is the
twentieth-century international protection regime that has maintained the Karens as a
people that once was constructed by the British Empire. The significant differences
between the two phrases lies, firstly, in the strength of the Burmans against whom the
Karens have been struggling, and, secondly, in the interest of the global sovereign
powers. The nineteenth-century Burman kingdom of Ava was waning and incapable of
withstanding the British global empire, which was also interested in civilized peoples.
The twentieth-century Burmese nation-state has become too strong for any ethnic
nationalities to fight against, while indigenous peoples and the ethnic nationalities have
been of little concern to the world big powers, who excuse themselves by appealing to
their inability to infringe upon the territorial sovereignty of the Burmese nation-state.

Economic opportunities resulting from the capital-electronic circuits, moreover,
have attracted a variety of subjectivities to “illegally” pass through Thailand’s “door,”
many of whom started working in various translocalities along the border zones and later
moved to other parts of the country. Such an influx, however, dated back to the arrival of
“illegal” migrants and laborers of whatever ethnicities since the massacre/uprising in
Burma in 1988. The advent of these peoples has disturbed some Thais and stirred up a
sense of animosity from the “host” towards “the others” in Mae Sot, especially in those
who do not rely on cheap labor. Mae Sot has since become a town where sweatshops
have been bustling (invested especially by either Taiwanese or Thai-Chinese business
people). The trafficking of women and the brothel business are particularly booming.
All of these emerge, especially, whenever Thai-Burmese relations are amicable and the
Burmese junta do not shut down the border checkpoint and discontinue official trade
activities through and from Myawadi.
Of the international boundary between India and Bangladesh, Sankaran Krishna states that “people on both sides were operating within a moral economy that had comfortably internalized the border into their everyday lives” (1996: 205). Such an image accords well with the Mae Sot borderland. Hence, sitting in a restaurant, being serviced at a gas station, shopping at local grocery stores in Mae Sot, a Thai citizen always encounters “the others,” most of whom are “illegal.” Thai visitors to this town, like myself, can keep speaking Thai; but if asking too many questions, he might be returned with just a smile. Coming with Karen friends, a Thai gets to communicate to waitresses/waiters easier. Chinese business owners have not only been able to speak Chinese, central Thai dialect, and northern Thai dialect, but they have also learnt to speak at least some Burmese. Everyone has strategized in order to survive or flourish here.

The notion of sweatshop could, from another perspective, be considered absurd. Factories owners get cheap labor and the “migrant” laborers earn the monthly income of a Rangoon (Yangon) physician in just a couple of days – according to a rate in September 2000, the salary was about 500 Bahts per month (about $11, black market rate). On the other hand, female migrants have to worry about being harassed or assaulted sexually by owners or managers of restaurants or factories, some of whom have turned their places into brothels (e.g., TACDB: 2002). AIDS is therefore epidemic.

Here in Mae Sot, instead of worrying about the possibility of being tortured by the junta’s functionaries if one is politically active and critical, one must be careful not to stroll on the streets between 6:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. lest one be rounded up and deported.

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20 I was informed by my Karen friend from Rangoon in February 2003 that, at that moment, $1 was about 1,200 kyats (Burmese currency) and a physician’ monthly salary in the city was about 6-7,000 kyats, which is about $5-6/month.
back to Burma.21 Even with deportation, however, it is easy to sneak back in — the river is narrow and shallow here for about seven months of the year. Policing authorities and immigration officers have not worked effectively, especially when local politicians and local business people have conspired, and when central power from Bangkok has not been adequately effective. Moreover, as a zone filled with unique cultural translations and negotiations along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces, Mae Sot can, in many ways and many levels, be called a Burmese town. It is a town where, to follow Edward Said, the “generalized condition of homelessness” (quoted in Gupta & Ferguson, 1997: 37) has become a major beat of life. Gupta and Ferguson write of other translocalities filled with many deterritorialized identities:

In a world of diaspora, transnational culture flows, and mass movements of populations, old-fashioned attempts to map the globe as a set of culture regions or homelands are bewildered by a dazzling array of postcolonial simulacra, doublings and redoublings, as India and Pakistan seem to reappear in postcolonial simulation in London, prerevolution Teheran rises from the ashes in Los Angeles, and a thousand similar cultural dramas are played out in urban and rural settings all across the globe (Ibid: 38).

Similarly, “Burma” has been recreated and cultural differences from the Burmese nation-state have been reenacted in Mae Sot. In this kind of locale, many imperceptible naked-Karens have been able to transform a poetics of grief to a poetics of struggle. From deep jungles and war zones, to camps for forcibly displaced peoples on Burma’s side, to the “temporary shelter areas” on the Thai side, to some of the translocalities along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces, many Karens have not been subdued by their memories of grief. How can one explain the large market in a shelter area where most shelter

21 One of my informants in Mae Sot sent an email to me on January 21, 2003 telling that there have recently been a lot of policemen in Mae Sot cracking down, especially, anti-Rangoon elements. Critics have charged that this security beef up along Thailand’s border zone resulted from the Thaksin administration’s appeasement to Burma, especially before his visit to the country during February 9-10, 2003.
members do not have income? What about the Karen medical teams and their supplies going through the Thai-Burmese state-boundary into the war zones in Burma’s side, in order to help the elderly, the sick, the young and those who chose to stay in the jungles? Moreover, as harsh and docile as life can be in “temporary shelter areas,” it is a space where certain potentialities of each subjectivity can be actualized, even more than for many Karens in Burma, especially regarding the study of their language – hence, the reenactment of their nationhood.

*Karens’ Cultural Maps, Capital Times, and Benjamin’s Now-Time*

I’m standing here.
Looking over the mountains and across the river,
I see sufferings and hope.
I see the people.
I see no borderline...
Friends Without Borders, Dairy 2000.42

The Karens’ cultural maps, resulting from their practices of space and identity, have been able to exploit the translocalities and utilize the flows of capital (along with other heterogeneities and fluxes that characterize such flows) in order to struggle for their survival. Such struggles are litigious experiences demonstrating/enunciating in order to supplement, if not disrupt, the statist mode of the partition of the sensible – the police – and thus enact “the political” from their loci of enunciation/demonstration. An idea like “illegality” becomes litigious; the notion itself results from the police’s logic. Hence, the Karen “illegal” bodies must not be visible outside the “temporary shelter areas,” for example, in the streets of Mae Sot or the social imaginary of those who belong on the Thai soil.
The imperceptible naked-Karens' exploitation of the translocalities and utilization of the capital-electronic circuits, therefore, have been significant tactics for them to survive amidst a variety of threatening situations; and by so doing they have been able to define their own temporalities – times of the “insurgents,” “refugees,” or “illegal migrants.” Since the creation of Thailand and Burma, the two nation-states have attempted to achieve the “amnesiac ‘suspension of historical time’”\(^{23}\) of others, without realizing that “there is always a trace of nonpresence in presence” and that the presence of the two nation-states’ times has “debts to other times.”\(^{24}\)

The Karens’ temporalities have participated with the temporalities produced by global economic forces of “capital times,” resulting in turn from the “sovereignty of money” (Alliez, 1996: 6) and the geography of capital (cf. Coleman, 2002). Such capital times produce different dramas of a variety of subjectivities (cf. Shapiro, 2001: 124-25). This is because “money turns value into a flow that tends to escape the juridical frame of political territoriality” (Alliez, Ibid.: 6), which, at times, disrupts nation-state’s territorial integrity. Moreover, capital times are disruptive of the nation-state’s ideational management of their pasts, presents, and futures (Shapiro, 2001: 124), producing a nationhood anxiety as an effect. Dictated by market mechanisms, capital temporalities often render problematic any attempt to unify memorial narratives, present self-understanding, and future anticipations of a nation-state. By participating with the capital temporalities, the Karens have been able to disrupt the two nation-states’ ideational

\(^{22}\) Friends Without Borders, 1999: 1.


\(^{24}\) Shapiro, 2001: 121. Shapiro here deploys a Derridian move of the dependence of the presence upon a nonpresence (Ibid.: 200, n18).
management of their pasts, presents, and futures. They have also competed with the two states’ production of space: resulting in a contrariety of cultural maps of the imperceptible naked-lives vis-à-vis juridical maps of nation-states.

Nevertheless, as imperceptible naked-lives living outside state-centric jurisdictions, the Karens’ cultural maps have often been forced to negotiate more extremely than the two nation-states’ juridical maps. Moreover, the translations of their “cultures” have been more ubiquitous than the “national cultures” of the two nation-states. These peoples have to re-enact their identities and attempt to survive – all of which are acts of “living on the borderlines” (Bhabha, 1994: 227). Hence, their identity as a nation has been more contested; and their cultures have become less tenable than the Burmese and Thai “national cultures.” Unlike the notion of national cultures, with their claims to “continuity of an authentic ‘past’ and a living ‘present,’” these peoples’ cultures depends more on strategies for survival (Ibid.: 172) than do Thailand’s and Burma’s “national cultures.”

Nonetheless, there have been times when the imperceptible naked-lives in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaced have been able to grasp the pasts and made the present of the two nation-states appears bizarre – creating the times of the now (Benjamin, 1968: 263). This is because history is “the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time - filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]” (Ibid.). From time to time, then, the imperceptible naked-lives, the Karens included, blasted out of the homogenous continuum of the national time(s) of either or both Thailand and Burma, and, in effect, created another time: a full-time of their own, enunciating their plight with a hope to demonstrate a shared recognition as qualified political subjects. Such full-time could be seen as a time of the “insurgents” or “rebels,”
etc. These peoples evoked the pasts that undermined the normalized present—exploding the latter's hegemonic histories and temporalities, an example of which we now turn.

**Ratchaburi Hospital Siege: "Making Corpses out of Them"**

A Karen boy was born in Burma.
Lived with his family just like you and me.
One day the troops came.
Burned his house.
Shot his father.
Raped his mother.
In front of his innocent eyes.

A Karen boy grew up with pain.
Shout? No one would hear.
Took up weapons to open the world's ears.
At the dawn of new century
The troops came again from the west.
From the east other troops started the shelling.
He was in the middle.

As a young man, he fought to protect his people.
Two hundred women and children died.
Many were injured.
No doctors. No medical care.
He and his friends decided to raid a hospital
Asking for shelters and doctors.
Hoping that his brothers and sisters would be saved
But violence was used.
All the raiders were killed.
Another flower's gone out of the field.

From an innocent boy, he died as a terrorist.
Violence only adds more to violence.

My little child, don't cry.
Your mother is here.
You father is near.
Close your eyes and rest in peace
For the first time in your entire life.
Muda, "A Karen Boy."

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25 I made a decision to include this section after coming back from the fieldwork. I am therefore aware that no matter how thorough I attempt to be, the information from news reports that I heavily rely upon can occasionally be inadequate.

They deserved it [the execution] because they brought much trauma and suffering to the Thai people, especially those in the hospital. I felt sorry for the people inside the hospital who might be shocked by the raid but the government had no alternative. This time they encroached on our national sovereignty so we had to be firm. Public outcry would be enormous and could even bring down the government if they were allowed to cross back into Burma.

Interior Minister Sanan Kachornprasart

On October 2, 1999, the government let a group of Burmese students raiding the Burmese embassy in Bangkok get away by flying them on a helicopter to the Thai-Burmese state-boundary and having the Deputy Minister of the Foreign Affairs and another senior official as hostages in place of hundreds of embassy staff. After less than four months from the embassy siege incident, the government would not let that happen again. The Ratchaburi Hospital siege at the dawn of the “new millennium” exemplifies a group of forcibly displaced peoples’ construction of the Benjminian now-time against the empty time of a nation-state. It was a grasp of time, making themselves perceptible and transfiguring field of experience, but at great and horrifying costs.

On the killing day, a Thai government source told an English newspaper, the Bangkok Post, “Rangoon is most satisfied we could make corpses out of the Karen radicals. Their deaths will pre-empt any future sabotage plot,... Besides, it would have been a waste to keep them in our care.” Some peace activists in Thailand believed that all the negotiations taking place during the first thirteen hours on January 24, 2000, the first day of the siege, were just facades and ploys. Hours into the siege, the Thai

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On the same day, the Karen National Union (KNU) issued a formal statement denying any involvement in the Ratchaburi Hospital siege, stating that the God’s Army is an independent group and took no order from the KNU.
29 “Swift end to siege draws praise from military junta in Rangoon,” Bangkok Post.
government already developed a plan to execute the ten Karen and Burmese hostage-takers.

The hospital siege started at about 5:30 am on January 24, when a group that called themselves God’s Army hijacked a bus from a rugged and hilly area almost two

30 For instance, read Venerable Phra Phaisal Visalo’s view presented at a seminar titled “Is Thai Society becoming a Violent Society: Learning from the Ratchaburi Hospital Siege” at the Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, February 2, 2000, in Adison, 2000: 89-99.

31 Although the raid was conducted in the name of God’s Army, it has been asserted by some that the armed resistant-group calling themselves Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors (VBSW), who had seized the Burmese embassy in Bangkok on October 1-2, 1999, led the God’s Army into conducting this operation (e.g., Ball & Land, 2001: 7). Until the hospital siege, the God’s Army had given refuge to the VBSW (Wasana, 2000a; “Oct siege led to rebels’ doom,” The Nation). Although it is difficult to pin down exactly who led whom, the fact that this is one millenarian group in the history of the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces who have armed themselves to fight those who in turn had oppressed them enables us to discern that the group would not shy away from using violence. For instance, the group estimated that in May 1998 it had organized around 79 operations against the Tatmadaw in the previous year (Ball & Lang, Ibid.). The group became an independent armed-resistant group after it broke away from the Karen National Union on January 4, 1997. This group fit the characterization as a millenarian as Desmond Ball and Hazel Lang state that “oppression, ignorance and despair have favoured the development of millenarian sects, especially among the Karen, whose political, economic and religious persecution by the Burmans has included denial of education” (2001: 7; see also Smith, 1999: 454-56; Stern, 1968).

The anti-Rangoon God’s Army had been active in areas opposite Khao Krachom in Ratchaburi’s Suan Pueng district. As a group with high morale that had fought fiercely by its 500 soldiers as it claimed in 1998, the God’s Army emphasized strict moral behavior, forbidding lying, bad language and sexual misconduct (Ball & Lang, Ibid.). However, according to P’doh Ba Thin, the president of the KNU, the God’s Army’s force could range from 50-60 and sometimes 100-200 depending on situation. Ba Thin called them “pick soldiers” as they were picked up in villages to fight their enemy and resumed their lives as civilians afterwards (Bachoe, 2000).

The God’s Army was supposedly led by three teenagers aged about twelve years old, two of them are twins brothers; their names are, respectively, Johnny, Luther Htoo, and Jor Pa Supree. The last one has a black tongue, which, according to news sources, in the Mon and Karen traditions is taken to be a sign of divinity. Although not obvious what Supree’s rank was, the twins held the rank of colonel; and all of them were revered by their followers who believed the boys had divine protection (Wasana, 2000a).

For more information on the God’s Army and/or the VBSW, see e.g., “Luther-Chomni Hatu,” Matichon; “Thep lin dam - 2 phunam faset,” Matichonsutsabda; “Peot pum dek lin dam haeng thuakkhao tanaosri” Nationsutsabda; Pornpimol, 2000; Prasong & Surath, 2000; Ukrit, 2000. However, the information regarding the three “leaders” of the God’s Army was by and large shrouded by mystery, as Terry McCarthy wrote in Time: “For the past three years, stories, rumors and superstition have swirled around the Htoo twins as mysteriously as the early morning mists that swathe the mountain forests where they live” (2000: 60). In this light, the year after the hospital siege was like late morning when all the mists dissipated because the twins finally surrendered to the Thai government on January 16, 2001 after another small clash between members of the God’s Army and Thai locals, resulting in seven people dead, whereas the other “leader” had already left the group some time earlier. For the twin’s less mysterious stories, see 238
miles from the Thai-Burmese state-boundary and ordered the driver to drive them for about 44 miles to the downtown of Ratchaburi, a province located about 63 miles southwest of Bangkok. According to the Thai Interior Minister, although both the border patrol police and the army had checkpoints close to the state-boundary, survelliance may not have been thorough because the border zone is long. There was only one police checkpoint on that 44-mile road, he added, stretching from the state-boundary to Ratchaburi; and because the hijacked bus regularly ran on that route and there were some locals on it, it was not stopped by the police. However, according to the bus conductor, there were no police in that checkpoint. All of these realities exemplify the everyday life of the border zones when there is no crisis; and how possibly and smoothly peoples can cross the Thai-Burmese state-boundary. Once across, it would take just about three hours, without heavy traffic, for any "disquieting elements" to travel from the Thai-Burmese state-boundary to Bangkok the heart of the kingdom.

Upon arrival at about 7:00 a.m., the group raced into the 770-bed Ratchaburi Regional Hospital and took about two hundred staff and patients hostages at gunpoint, while there were other five to six hundreds of people in the compound. The hostage-
takers, with AK-47 and M-16 rifles, along with M-79 and M-80 grenade launchers and claymore mines, originally issued two demands at about 9:00 a.m. Then at about 1:00 p.m., they set forth another set of five demands: 1) an immediate halt to the shelling of forcibly displaced peoples’ areas populated mainly by women and children; 2) shelter for the displaced and hospital treatment for the wounded; 3) an end to Thai assistance to Burmese troops fighting the Karen armed resistance group and raping and killing Karen women; 4) pressuring Rangoon to stop attacking the forcibly displaced as well as requesting the Thai government to work to this end with the UNHCR; and 5) prosecuting the Thai personnel who ordered the shelling.

Surgical operations were carried out daily, depending on appointments and urgency (“Nearly 800 being held hostage,” Bangkok Post; “Khwampenma,” Matichon).

36 Newspaper in Thailand did not seem to pay adequate attention to the first set of the demands and those that reported about them each did so differently.

The Bangkok Post reported that the demands were: firstly, an immediate halt to the shelling into their areas, which they claimed, had killed or wounded 200-300 of their soldiers and civilians (but the army also claimed that they had fired blanks to deter intrusion, yet they agreed to silence the guns); secondly, medical treatment aid for the wounded survivors (Post reporters, 2000b).

The Thaipost stated that the two demands were: firstly, opening the state-boundary for the God’s Army’s attacked troops to flee to the Thai side; secondly, medical treatment aid for the wounded soldiers (“24 chuamong wikrit ‘Ratchaburi,’” Thaipost).

In the Matichon, however, there were two sets of demands before the final set of five demands. The first set was requested at 9:00 a.m. and they were, firstly, the Thai authorities had to back off from the hospital 300 meters, and, secondly, Thai soldiers had to halt their mortar shelling that had costed 200 lives of their children and women. Then at 11:00 a.m. the second set of demands comprised, firstly, 15 doctors and nurses sent to treat the wounded at the border zone, and secondly, opening the state-boundary for the Karens fleeing fighting into Thailand (“Nathii to nathii,” Matichon.).

37 Thailand’s secretary-general of the National Security Council conceded that the God’s Army might have taken the hospital because Thai troops had blocked their retreat from a Burmese offensive (Yuwadee et al., 2000).

38 Post Reporters, 2000a, 2000b; see also “Nathii to nathii,” Matichon. Again, no two newspaper reported the five-point demands exactly the same; Bangkok Post’s and Matichon’s reports were the closest to each other. See also The Nation’s “editorial” on January 25, 2000, which stated that one of the hostage-takers’ demands urged Thailand to pressure Burma for political reforms. The rest of the demands wanted the Thai government to: take care of wounded Karen refugees; open the border to allow fleeing refugees into Thailand; stop assisting the Burmese Army; reprimand the Thai commanders who ordered the artillery shelling of their camp (“Editorial: God’s Army hits at the Thai Army”).

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At about 5:55 p.m., the army commander-in-chief gave a press conference stating that the Thai government decided to comply to two of the hostage-takers' demands: first, sending a medical team to cure the wounded at the Thai-Burmese state-boundary, and, second, opening the boundary for unarmed forcibly displaced people. The Thai authorities also asked the hostage-takers to leave the hospital without harming anyone. Right after the press conference, there was another round of negotiation and the God’s Army asked for a helicopter to fly them along with one high-ranking Thai authority as a hostage to the Thai-Burmese state-boundary. It was not confirmed whether these requests would be granted or not. Then there was another round of negotiation and the hostage-takers demanded that they would not be tried for “illegally” entering the kingdom, for raiding the government’s building, for possessing military weapons, and for “terrorist act.” Moreover, they also requested that Thailand provided safe refuge for the forcibly displaced Karens from Burma. But the Thai authorities refused to grant all the demands; they, on the contrary, gave an ultimatum that the God’s Army turned themselves in immediately after they left the negotiation table.

Although during the first twelve hours of the siege, a few dozens of hostages were released unharmed, more than 150 were still being held at gunpoint. An estimated of 580 staffers and patients remained elsewhere in the compound, too afraid to move (Post Reporters, 2000b). After long hours of negotiations, the fates of the ten hostage-takers were sealed hours before the pre-dawn attack was launched. During the

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39 "Nathi to nathi," Matichon; see also Wassana, 2000b; "Mongkol revokes deal not to shell Karen," Bangkok Post.

40 "Nathi to nathi," Matichon; cf. "24 chuamong wikrit ‘Ratchaburi,’” Thaipost.
negotiations, troops disguised as medical staff entered into the compound building and
weapons were smuggled through the building's kitchen. The decision by the National
Security Council, endorsed by the prime minister to send the commandoes of about 200
to storm the hospital and to execute the hostage-takers was made after authorities turned
down the hostage-takers' demand for safe passage out of Thailand. Bursts of automatic
gunfire and thuds of grenade explosions were heard during the hour-long gun-battle,
which began at 5:35 a.m. of the second day.

Critics commented that with the siege beginning on the eve of the Armed Forces
Day, there was an extreme danger that the armed force of a nation-state could appeared
impotent if it did not take a swift action. For instance, the Bangkok Post's journalists
wrote:

National pride and military honour sealed the fate of the 10 God’s Army guerrillas, with
the prime minister making the final call as early as Monday evening [the first day of the
siege], when he met his security advisers, an intelligence official said yesterday.
The decision was unanimous — the terrorists of God’s Army would be removed
by force if they refused to surrender..., said the source who was present.

41 “Nathi rathuk,” Matichon; see also Post Reporters (2000b) which reports that the God’s Army
requested the Thai government to provided safe haven for up to 30,000 forcibly displaced people.

42 Not to mention other reasons why the swift execution had to be carried out by the Thai
government which critics already articulated in the various media: first, for its own survival in the year of a
few important elections, hence they had to appeared decisive; second, there would be the 10th United
Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Bangkok during February 12-19 and the
Board of Investment Fair 2000 in the same month (see e.g., Adisorn, 2000; Sermruk & Wassana, 2000;
Post Reporters, 2000b).

One day after the killing, the mood of the Thai society drastically shifted. Heartfelt praise for the
decisive execution and the effective rescue of hundreds of patients and hospital staff without none getting
hurt was initially the tone of the day. Then, the public was shocked, not to mention the shell-shocked
hostages experiencing the so-called Stockholm Syndrome of sympathizing with their captors (“Editorial:
Can We Live with Use of Excess Force?”; see also Thitinop, 2000) who had treated them well by their
captors (e.g., “Chali Sripen’ changphap chong chet,” Matichon; Wassayos, 2000).

Some hostages reported that the hostage-takers had been killed after surrendering. According to
the Bangkok Post, a witness said that the hostage-takers had been rounded up and told to strip; and they had
then been shot one by one. Moreover, Thai troops who stormed the building compound had been ordered
to shoot anyone armed. A special force officer who was part of the operation said, on condition of
From all the God’s Army actions and demands during the whole showdown, it was obvious that the ten hostage-takers were either too optimistic, if not naïve. P’doth Ba Thin, the KNU’s president, remarked that the God’s Army was not a political organization and had no understanding of the concept of sovereignty or the consequences of violations (Bachoe, 2000). Not only was there no group, either in war times or not, who would capture a hospital to voice its sufferings and struggles, but also the group’s demands evinced its inability to discern the insidiousness of the figure of sovereign power. In particular, the hostage-takers were non-state subjectivities, who were politically unqualified from the statist paradigm, which, in turn, rendered the possibilities for themselves to appeal to the Thai sovereignty down to zero. The hospital siege, therefore, lasted roughly 24 hours and ended with a lightning commando operation of the army’s special forces and elite police anti-terrorist units.

From the univocity of statist discourses and the ASEAN dominant policy of non-intervention, it did not matter how much harrowing the experiences of the imperceptible naked-lives were, under the dark shadow of military operations within the country next door.” The forcibly displaced peoples’ memories were not recognized by the Thai and

anonymity, that some of the hostage-takers had been shot dead after they had raised their hands in surrender. He himself had also shot a hostage-taker, who had raised his hands, dead because he had not been sure the person had meant to surrender: “We didn’t know whether there were any more guerrillas hiding somewhere who might shoot us.”... “Besides, it was a life for a life at the time. If we didn’t shoot them, they would shoot us” (“Some had their hands up,” Bangkok Post; see also, e.g., “Crisis ends in clinical strike,” Bangkok Post).

Hence, answering a reporter’s question whether there would be any change on the country’s foreign policies toward Burma a day after the execution of the hostage-takers, the Thai prime minister said:

What happened had nothing to do with foreign policies... Hence, [considering Thailand’s] good policy toward neighboring countries...[in relation to]...what just happened, [there will be] no change of the [foreign] policies. [What happened] was a problem of a group having conflicts with their government and fled war into [our country]. Our country had provided care, but when a group caused a problem, the government had to act according to the law. [The problem] had
Burmese nation-states’ homogenously continuous histories. The commander of Thailand’s 9th Infantry Division, for instance, whose jurisdiction covers the lower part of the kingdom’s western border zones stated on the day the siege took place that the God’s Army was destabilizing border peace (Wasana, 2000a). He added that Thai and Burmese border troops had “co-existed in harmony” before the God’s Army settled in the area.

Moreover, “[s]ince the dissidents involved in the embassy seizure fled to live under [the God’s Army’s] protection, a myriad of problems have occurred” (quoted in Ibid.). These statements result from discourses that reinforce only the state’s raison d’etre, on the expenses of the lives of political subjects of any kind. Such statements were enunciated without inquiring about the legitimacy of the figure of the sovereign that controls the Burmese nation-state. Hence, these statements did not recognize that the forcibly displaced Karens had lived peacefully in these areas before the junta’s army and its allies started oppressive military operations – let alone the fact that many Karen (and other) indigenous peoples have lived in these areas before the two nation-states were even created.

nothing to do with foreign policies whether or not they must be changed to this and that. It is not” (“Ratthaban kae khosongsai patibatkan ku wikrit Ratchaburi,” Thaipost; my emphasis).

This answer did not acknowledge that the Burmese government was not the legitimate government of both ethnic nationalities and Burmans, hence the government was not their government. Therefore, the hostage-takers like many anti-Rangoon elements did not consider the ruling junta as their figure of sovereign power that they would let themselves be inscribed into the Burmese nation-state’s sphere of law, these elements had thus been non-statist political subjects.

Consequently, the ASEAN’s non-intervention policy (not the failed policies of “constructive engagement” or “flexible engagement”) has therefore been detrimental to the grievances of the forcibly displaced peoples from Burma. In this light, Thailand’s reevaluation of policy towards Burma is an imperative, if it does not want to encounter similar problems (which it later did with the “prison escape” in November 2000), not to mention other problems like drug trafficking.
From the hostage-takers' memories, a politics of counter-memory was at work: we were told by one of the ten hostage-takers, during the incident, that the God's Army had been facing brutal suppression by the Tatmadaw troops. Rangoon wanted to punish the group for having provided safe haven to members of the Vigorous Burmese Students Worriers who had seized the Burmese embassy in Bangkok in October 1999. Rangoon had therefore beefed up its military operations over the group since early January 2000, forcing the God's Army and Karen civilians in their areas to flee across the Thai-Burmese state-boundary. However, all of them were immediately pushed back by the Thai armed forces, especially the Surasi Task Force, which also had fired warning mortar shots into the God's Army stronghold. The hostage-takers also accused the Thai Army of collaborating with the Burmese Army in shelling their Kamerplaw camp, which resulted in many casualties. The situation developed into a clash on January 13, after four Thai soldiers on patrol were killed by exploding booby traps planted by the God’s Army, who had informed the Thai soldiers and border patrol polices that the landmines were to trap the Tatmadaw. Within a week before the hospital siege, the Burmese troops had shelled Karen hideouts across Ratchaburi and were moving on to the God's Army camp at Kamerplaw. According to the Nationsutsapda, which quotes a Thai local source in the

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45 This long paragraph relies heavily on the following sources: “Chali Sripen,” Matichon; “Khrai pen phu chat chanuan,” Nationsutsapda; Post Reporters, 2000a, 2000b; “Ratthaban kae kho songsai patibatkan ku wikrit Ratchaburi,” Thaipost; Wasana, 2000a.

46 Since Thailand’s policy of “turning war zones into trade zones” in 1988, the issue of the Thai army’s collusion with Burma’s Tatmadaw on attacking the ethnic nationalities armed resistant groups and/or civilians, has from time to time been suspected - no matter under governments headed by civilians or by former armed-forces commanders.

47 According to the Post Reporters, the God's Army had decided to mine the track used by the Surasi Task Force's troops only after Thai forces let the Tatmadaw's soldiers use it to outflank them (Post Reporters, 2000a).
Phapok village Suan Pueng district – another non-state memory – after the death of the four Thai soldiers,

the Thai troops hence responded by setting up a K.120 gun and shelling in projectile trajectory during the two days from 19 to 20 January, shelling very heavily, even into the third day the shelling still continued. You, reporter, yourself came in and witnessed it, didn’t you. Coincidentally, the shells really fell down into the Kamaiplaw village in the Khao Krachom pass where the Karens inhabit. Many people died or were wounded. And the sound of shelling on the other [Burma’s] side was roaring all the time. Possibly, the Burmese troops were attacking them in the back. And our Thai [troops] crushed them heavily. There was no way out ("Khrai pen phu chut chanuan," Nationsutsapda).

However, at the press conference one day after the execution of the ten hostage-takers by the Thai government, the army chief stated that the God’s Army had occupied a hill where the Thai border patrol polices had set up a post; and the former had pushed the police, who were fewer in number, down from the hill. The first regional army’s troops then went to the hill telling the God’s Army that the area was in the Thai territory, hence they could not enter with arms. After the talk, the God’s Army did not move out of the Thai hill. “We therefore had to use force...deploying the projectile shelling...hence, it was possible that there were casualties because of the shelling.... And that was also what pressured [them] and [became] a reason that they later seized the hospital and demanded an end of shelling.” And that was why the Thai sovereign power later made “corpses out of them.”

Among the three modalities primary to both the symbolic and material conditions of the quotidian facts of everyday life in the border zones – cultural encounters, capital-electronic circuits, and the state’s territory (hence sovereign power) – the first two could

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48 “Ratthaban kao kho songsai patibatkan ku wikrit Ratchaburi,” Thaipost.

It must be noted that although the army chief stated in the press conference regarding the God’s Army’s occupation of the Thai hill – which was unequivocally the issue of territorial integrity that, in turn, clearly legitimized the Thai army’s shelling into that hill – I have not found any news reports yet that played up this critical issue. One wonders whether it was the issue of newspaper’s incompetence, hence paying no attention to the issue, or it was the issue of the truthfulness of the statement itself.
at times be seen as more prevalent than the last one. Yet, the state territory/sovereign power always re-entrenches itself, at times insidiously. Capital-electronic circuits and cultural encounters can attenuate the sovereign power, hence delimiting nation-states power along the border zones where the demarcation itself could otherwise symbolize the nation-state's power. Performing terror in the borderlands is therefore one of the nation-state’s acts to signify its jurisdiction. One must not forget, as William Connolly emphasizes, to “occupy territory...is both to receive sustenance and to exercise violence;” hence, there are strains of terror embedded in the logic of territorialization. When necessary, the figure of sovereign power performs terror in order to maintain the territorial integrity of the nation-state where it belongs. The execution of the God’s Army hostage-takers by the Thai commandoes on January 25, 2000 was a stark exemplification.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Connolly writes, *territory* derives from *terrere*, meaning to frighten, to terrorize, to exclude. And *territorium* is “a place from which people are warned” (1995: xxii). Not only were the God’s Army “the others” that must be warned on the Thai soil, but they were also *imperceptible naked-lives* and

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49 Connolly, 1995: xxii. Connolly states further that the word territory is presumed by most moderns to derive from *terra*. *Terra* means “land, earth, soil, nourishment, sustenance; it conveys the sense of sustaining medium that fades off into indefiniteness.” Peoples, he continues, “you might say, feel the claim the land they belong to makes upon them. This experience of belonging to a place, as long as it does not exclude other identifications, as long as it incorporates the disruptive experience of earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, and firestorms into the experience itself..., can play a positive role in the cultivation of care and critical responsiveness.” But the form of the word *territory*:

the *OED* says, suggests something different from the sustenance of *terra*. *Territorium* seems to repress the sustaining relation to land organized and bounded by technical, juridical, and military means. Perhaps the experience of land as sustenance is both presupposed and repressed by the modern organization of *territory*...

Territory is sustaining land occupied and bounded by violence. By extension, to territorialize anything is to establish exclusive boundaries around it by warning other people off.” (Ibid.).
they had no juridical protections. Although storming a hospital and taking hostages was unacceptable even during wartime, one must however be ready to discern that such act was meant to seek recognition for a claim based on an identity not currently recognized on geopolitical maps. As an attempt of political intervention, the hostage-takers set a political scene through a series of actions and a capacity for enunciation not previously authorized within the statist fields of experience, hoping to transfigure fields that had until then caused many casualties in the forcibly displaced peoples in the war zones, as they had claimed. They were attempting to re-qualify the spaces of their struggles to be seen as the spaces of community of humans, participating in a common-recognizing – getting themselves and the rest in the war zones to be seen and as politically qualified subjects. They wished that those running for their lives in the war zones – the people of no account – would be (ac)counted. All of these they did, but to no avail.

The Thai-Burmese in-between spaces are where we witness a real state of exception, especially for the forcibly displaced peoples, ready to be erupted every now and then. Moreover, they are not neutral spaces, but ones whereby nation-states have attempted to achieve, again, the “amnesiac suspension of historical time” of others. The imperceptible naked-lives’ histories and memories in the spaces are, therefore, forgotten, voices are not heard, practices of spaces and identity rendered juridically ungrammatical. The geographical imaginary therefore tends to neglect the contested history of space (Shapiro, 1994: 494). In this light, a part of then SLORC chairman, General Saw Maung’s speech on the Independence Day of Burma in January 1991, sounds absurd considering Burma’s histories:

*The people of all the national races, with a high sense of patriotism, fought with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on against the British imperialists’ enslavement of our nation. The patriots from among the various national races, the Kachins, the Kayahs, the Karens, the Burmans, the Mons, the Arakanese, and the Shans, who had taken part in the anti-imperialist and*
national liberation struggle, must go down in the annals of our history as patriotic heroes so that their memory will last for eternity.\(^\text{50}\)

In the history of the land known as the Burman kingdom of Ava, British Burma, and later the Burmese nation-state, many non-Burmans had been badly treated by many Burmans. Also, some ethnic nationalities, the Karens included, had been much better treated by the British imperialists. Hence, the memories of ethnic nationalities have not been part of the national memories reinvented by the General. In fact, many of their memories have been haunted by atrocities committed by the despotic rule of the General’s junta and its predecessors.

\(^{50}\) British Broadcasting Corporation, Jan. 7, 1991, quoted in Smith, 1995: 236 – my emphasis. Notice the singularity of the word “memory” being used in this speech.
Chapter 8 – Conclusion

To Write is to Take a Journey, To Write is to Protect

The other day when our medic team was staying in a village, I was talking to a couple of villagers in a bamboo house. While I was folding my sleeping bag, some of them touched it with great interest. I would have given it to them had it not been for the fact that my trip into the war zone just started. As night fell, it got colder and colder. The night seemed to pass by very slowly, and the sleeping bag was not enough to protect me from the cold, to prevent me from shivering. It was impossible for me to sleep no matter how much my body needed to, after hiking the highest mountain of the trip into the war zones.

I got up and walked to the kitchen. I found five people sleeping: two men and three boys squeezed next to each other by the fireplace, covered with two or three light and old blankets. I came back and tried to sleep in my sleeping bag. The cold was unbearable. After a while, I decided to walk back to the kitchen again, bringing along my sleeping bag. I tapped on one of them and made a sign asking to be allowed to squeeze by the fireplace. A couple of them woke up and enthusiastically moved aside and gave me one of the best spots by the fireplace.

With the kindness of the people who had almost nothing and lived under danger, I was able to sleep through that freezing night. As the trip unfolded, I developed an acute awareness of my own nakedness in such terrain. Like them, my journey situated me almost as a naked life with very sparse protection. I felt their nakedness and surely they felt mine. Yet, unlike mine, their inadequate protection was not temporary.

To write is to take a journey. And as far as the forcibly displaced Karens are concerned, to take a journey is to write with the hope of better protecting them. The journey I took during my fieldwork in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces was originally intended to discern the complexities of a variety of forces that had rendered naked the Karens’ “disquieting elements” against the two nation-states. During the journey, however, I came to learn that many of the disquieting elements had been quieted, most disruptive rudiments had been disrupted and crushed, and countless civilians had died down quietly. Most people who have taken flight for their lives have desperately sought protection – yet, in vain.

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With such exigencies, this study has attempted to weave threads and quilt patches of various narratives as well as those of some theoretico-philosophical discursive fields to form this discursive fabric. In the process, I have recourse to various traveling theories and philosophies as well as numerous sources of information including missionaries’ accounts, governmental documents, human rights agencies’ reports, international juridical fabrics, my field notes, and fleeting stories in newspaper. During the time of writing in a “paradise” such as Hawai‘i, however, some painful memories of my fieldwork have flashed up involuntarily, a few of which have horribly haunted me. Hence, every so often, I cannot help picturing myself taking the journey and imagining myself knitting a piece of cloth to cover the forcibly displaced Karens’ shivering bodies (although it was me who asked for protection from cold in the war zone). Thus, the actual discursive fabric of this study and the imaginary knitted fabric intertwine.

As a piece of knitted fabric, it is to be presented to the forcibly displaced Karens to express my gratitude for their kindness: protecting me from cold and preventing me from hunger, while they had so little. As a discursive fabric, this dissertation is also a writing to mourn for the countless who had died silently while becoming forcibly displaced peoples. This discursive fabric is a small way of telling a few forcibly displaced Karens who will have opportunities to read this dissertation that, as qualified political subjects, they are not alone—although it could be hard to convince them so. In a major way, however, this discursive blanket is meant to awake the nation-state of its own violence. Hence, weaving and quilting this study is just the beginning of what I will carry on: to make the tormenting experiences and their struggles perceptible.

Accordingly, not only does this study attempt to fathom the interconnections of violence,
perceptibility, and protection, but it also endeavor to create a discursive fabric to cover
the Karens’ fleeing, frightened, and finished bodies.

The Exception, Strategies for Survival, and Perceptibility

The exception explains the general and itself. And if one wants to study the
general..., one only needs to look around for a...legitimate exception. It
reveals everything more clearly than does the general. Endless talk about the
general becomes boring; there are exceptions.... [T]he general is not thought
about with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, on
the other hand, thinks the general with intense passion.
Soren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling: Repetition.

The flights and strategies of survival of the forcibly displaced Karens in the Thai-
Burmese in-between spaces have always been precarious. In the Burman-Karen war
zones, teams of Karen medics, teachers, and chruch workers have been exemplary.
These small groups of people have been resisting any attempts by the Burmese junta to
strip off the forms-of-life of their fellow Karens. Yet, as this study has evinced, the
plight of the forcibly displaced Karens, once they arrive at or pass through Thailand’s
“doorways,” has been more perceptible than when they were fleeing for safety inside
Burma. Because perceptibility implies particular modes of inscription of lives by certain
sovereign powers at their thresholds – be it intelligible language (e.g., Aristotelian
distinction of logos and phone), community, nation, state, empire, religion, among others
– a variety of political subjectivities have been inscribed by various statist discourses and
practices. Also, a researcher, like me, who attempts to make the forcibly displaced
Karens perceptible has to be inscribed by the Thai sovereign power.

Collectively, the Karen forms-of-life are perceived and flourish in the “temporary shelter areas,” although being inscribed means that they could be abandoned whenever the Thai sovereign power deems necessary. It is thus ironic that the very power that can strip them naked is the same power that enables them to strengthen their form-of-life as a Karen nation – hence, they have encountered the paradox of perceptibility. Individually, many “illegal” immigrants just ignore the “law” and go through the “door.” Millions of “illegal” laborers from Burma are in Thailand. They have been deterritorializing the Thai nation-state (which has not succeeded in regulating and controlling the flows of peoples, perhaps it never will) and roaming “illegally” outside the shelter areas. They, however, could not reveal their forms-of-life and be perceived as forcibly displaced Karens from Burma. Once they are perceived as “illegal” immigrants from Burma, they will be deported. Perceptible or not, a figure of sovereign power decides.

By formulating the idea of “imperceptible naked-lives” to discern and account for the forcibly displaced Karens, this study highlights the imperceptibility of their sufferings and struggles in order to make them perceptible. To explore the entanglements of discourses and practices that render their plight imperceptible as well as the implications of disregarding their voices, this study has, for the most part, deviated from and disrupted the police logic of the univocity of statist discourses. Yet, the forcibly displaced Karens themselves have resorted to the statist discourses and practices in attempting to render their plight perceptible, intelligible, and recognizable – employing statist maps, deploying the discourses of “internally displaced peoples” and “refugees,” among others. In effect, they have strengthened the very power of the state-centric paradigm.
What can they do? The forcibly displaced Karens’ quotidian lives have not confirmed the glories of the Appadurian ethnoscape – the global nomadism. They are not parts of “the general” of those subjectivities who can freely move in this world. On the contrary, they have often been recognized as the parts that have no parts in the human community. The forcibly displaced Karens are “the exception” in motion whose lives have been under fire, dreaming passionately of becoming parts of “the general.” The Karens have dreamt to live such lives for more than half a century, ever since they officially started their “revolution” in 1949. Similar to many other forcibly displaced peoples elsewhere, the displaced Karens’ lifeworlds epitomize the Benjaminian notion of the real state of exception. It is thus ironic that many of us have kept advocating an idea of non-territorial sovereignty while we have not been forcibly displaced, have been juridically protected as members of a territorial sovereignty, which at least most of us have never lived without it. But the forcibly displaced Karens, who have yearned to go back “home” and be part of a nation-state, have been living outside their “motherland” in the flight of fear that no one would envy, and few would notice.

“We are a family without a home”

Palantaung land or Kawthoolei\(^2\)
Well known by many, in the Golden hills
My land, my rivers, my region.
I remember, the Karen...
Since the old days
They’ve shed their blood, to rid the land of injustice
For the Motherland
And for peace, they swore.
Now the green hills have dried.
The brooks and streams stop flowing
And the skies become grey and smoky.

\(^2\) A Karen term referring to the land of their ancestors.
There is no more blue.
In the generation of the empty days
I live so bitterly, and I am bereft
Of all that I know...
My tears flow so easily now.
From the land I love, I’ve been away
Driven, as by the wind.
Its’ hard to live
In a land that’s foreign to me...
Feeling burn within
Endless memories, yearnings...
For the Karen land, I dream
Dreams of remembrance...yet still I’m away.
I prey...
For the final day of school
I study everyday
Facing my troublesome moments.
I seek education
To contribute, and not for me
But for the Karen.
May the sun rise, and its rays be bright
May there be peace
In the land of the Karen.
I still pray
Though I am away...
May Oo, “Longing to See the Motherland.”

One day in December of 2000, while sitting at a lunch table, P’doh Ba Thin Sein, the Karen National Union’s President, said at one point in our conversation: “We are a family without a home.” From the President down to the frontline soldiers whom I interviewed, the memories of their places in the Karen land, Kawthoolei, have always been vivid. Yet, all the Karens I met during my fieldwork have been away from their “home” for many years. As for the “home” of the future, they aspire for, to reiterate, a Karen State under the Federal Union of Burma – an aspiration that, until now, has been relentlessly resisted by successive Burmese juntas. Still, the Karens have persistently struggled to achieve that aim, against all odds. Many of their strategies for survival cannot be revealed in this study, just yet. The figures of sovereign power that project their dark shadow over the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces are too powerful; and there

3 Naw May Oo, 1999: 36-7.
are too many powers trying to rip off what little they have to cover their nakedness. The fragility of their lives continues, at least for another generation.
The Second RTG-UNHCR Brainstorming Session  
Bangkok, 15 May 1998

1. The Second RTG-UNHCR Brainstorming Session on Myanmar displaced persons in Thailand was held in Bangkok on 15 May 1998, as the continuation and in the spirit of the first Brainstorming Session in Chiang Mai during 19-21 February 1993, to formulate working arrangements for closer cooperation between the RTG and the UNHCR on Myanmar displaced persons in Thailand.

2. The meeting agreed on the following working arrangements:

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<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Steps to be taken by UNHCR</th>
<th>Steps to be taken by RTG</th>
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| 1. Admission to asylum | - UNHCR as observer to Thailand’s assessment of the situation whether to grant temporary shelter on the ground of fighting and effects of civil war.  
- No screening to determine refugee status of the arrivals. | - Thai authorities have the right to grant or deny temporary shelter to arrivals.  
- Those with valid claims must either enter designated temporary shelter areas, or otherwise decline the temporary shelter in Thailand and return to Myanmar. |
| 2. Registration | - UNHCR assisted registration in certain designated temporary shelter areas, to facilitate eventual repatriation. | - MOI will allow UNHCR to assist in registration.  
- During the registration process, UNHCR will be allowed temporarily to use facilities in the temporary shelter areas, which will not constitute UNHCR establishment of a permanent office in the temporary shelter areas. |
| 3. UNHCR access | - UNHCR will be granted free and early access.  
- UNHCR must keep central Thai authorities informed in advance of each access so as to ensure security of its field officers. | - MOI/Military authorities will be the competent agencies to grant permission. |
| 4. Repatriation | - RTG may invite UNHCR to witness spontaneous return and verify voluntariness in a manner so as not to disrupt the process, eg., through interviewing heads of families rather than individuals.  
- When conditions become conducive to repatriation with guarantees of safety and dignity for displaced persons, UNHCR will assist in organised voluntary repatriation and, with the permission of the Myanmar Government, monitor the safe return and facilitate the reintegration in Myanmar. | - Displaced persons would have free choice for spontaneous return.  
- MOI/Military authorities will coordinate the safe spontaneous return. |
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| 3. Relocation of temporary shelter areas | - UNHCR supports RTG's decision to relocate temporary shelter areas.  
- UNHCR will help provide transportation, shelter materials, drinking water, perimeter fencing & security infrastructure, and registration. | - MOI: Military authorities have the right to enforce the RTG's decision to relocate temporary shelter areas.  
- Displaced persons, in this regard, have 2 choices: be relocated or return to Myanmar. |
| 6. UNHCR assistance parameters | - In light of the existing assistance arrangement in temporary shelter areas, UNHCR may provide complementary assistance in these areas, through the RTG, on the basis of basic minimum needs in order to avoid magnet effect.  
- UNHCR will coordinate with the MOI in providing such assistance. | - Any assistance requires approval by the RTG.  
- The MOI is authorised to oversee the implementation of humanitarian assistance and to manage the temporary shelter areas. |
| 7. Long-term strategies | - UNHCR will continue its dialogue with Myanmar in order to ensure UNHCR's role in monitoring safe return and in providing reintegration assistance, as soon as possible.  
- In so doing, UNHCR will undertake necessary steps to ensure confidence and trust of Myanmar. | - Thai-Myanmar Sub-Committee on displaced persons and illegal workers will work out/discuss strategies and/or plan of action on the issues. |

3. The meeting agreed to ensure that the above working arrangements will be implemented expeditiously.

4. The meeting considered that the above working arrangements would contribute, as an initial step, towards the resolution of the issue of Myanmar displaced persons in Thailand.

5. The meeting also agreed that the consultation between the RTG and the UNHCR should be maintained, as necessary, to ensure coordination and effective implementation of the above working arrangements.

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15 May 1998  
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