
Taking Flight in Condemned Grounds: Forcibly Displaced Karens and the Thai-Burmese In-Between Spaces

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Based on fieldwork in non-ceasefire war zones within and between Thailand and Burma, this article explores the nexus between written language, intelligibility, and qualified voice in order to examine the Karen people as unqualified political subjects in a quotidian theater of the displaced. **KEYWORDS:** borders; state terror; displacement; intelligibility; sovereign power

Experiences “inside” Burma/Myanmar¹ have been harrowing. Like many lives in many agony-ridden spaces, the torments inflicted on people under the Burmese dictatorship have by and large been imperceptible, out of the view of the world. Although the pattern dates back to 1962, when General Newin took the helm and the country became a hermit state, it has been most acute since the massacres in the country’s urban areas on August 8, 1988 (the cursed 8/8/88). Conservative figures show that as of December 2004 between five hundred and fifty thousand and eight hundred thousand people have been forcibly displaced “inside” the country.²

Although these people are living in danger zones, the territorial sovereignty of the despotic state renders them imperceptible to the “outside” world. Their sufferings have rarely been accounted for by the international community. Most of their stories have never been disclosed, and even when they have, they have often been ignored. No matter how loud they have screamed, a large number of forcibly displaced peoples “inside” the Burmese nation-state have been tortured and killed without being heard as they dissolve back to the soil they hoped would be their homelands.

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Consequently, many of these indigenous peoples or ethnic nationalities³ have taken flight through openings along the so-called Thai-Burmese state boundary, searching for sunlight, only to end up living in darkness on the Thai side.⁴ Once they cross the “state boundary” into Thailand, they are often regarded by the Thai society as the aberrant—those whose lives do not generally qualify to be accounted for, no matter whether they are living “legally” in what the Thai state terms “temporary shelter areas”⁵ or “illegally” outside those shelters. Among them are the Karen indigenous peoples, who already, long before the demarcation of the Thai-Burmese boundary, were located in the border zones. Whether in Thailand or in Burma, the forcibly displaced Karens, their voices and struggles, are usually ignored.⁶

This article calls attention to the necessity and urgency of conducting academic field research in the dangerous areas in the Thai-Burmese border zones, in “the condemned grounds.” As part of a research project studying political entanglements that have led to the invisibility of the suffering endured by displaced Karens, the article aims to highlight an intricate nexus between voice and territoriality. It especially seeks to delineate a geography of the sacred: a map of exceptional spaces, in the sense explored by Giorgio Agamben, whereby the displaced have been dispersed through complex forms of human disposal so as to become *homo sacer*.⁷ The article thus advances a new line of political inquiry, both by questioning the closure of the political through processes of exclusionary counting, in ways suggested by Jacques Rancière,⁸ and by showing how this closure is ultimately dependent on state terror and its capacity to enforce a distinction between the *logos* of the speech of those counted and the *phone* (noise) of those who have no-part.

To this end, the article takes three steps. First it argues that the forcibly displaced Karens are political subjects, not simple facts of life. Second it proposes a methodology for studying forcibly displaced peoples in the border zones by weaving three topics of anthropology together with the notion of “in-between spaces”—doing so in order to capture the kaleidoscopic realities of the border zones. The three are (1) an anthropology of borders and philosophico-cultural in-between spaces; (2) an anthropology of state terror and political in-between spaces; and (3) an anthropology of displacement and refugees together with in-between spaces of terror. Third the article develops a narrative of the effects on the forcibly displaced Karens’ lives caused by atrocities and territorial displacement.

Use of the term *Karens* is not meant to suggest that the Karens are a frozen, or fixed, people. 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 keeping with Gayatri Spivak's view that identities are strategically essentialized in encounters or political struggles.⁹ Following Rancière,¹⁰ I treat a strategic essentialization of the Karens as an enactment of subjectification, as the enunciative and performative acts through which Karens attempt to make themselves perceptible and intelligible and thus make themselves recognizable as qualified political subjects. Accordingly, in order to understand the sufferings and struggles of the forcibly displaced Karens in the Burmese war zones or inside and outside "temporary shelter areas" on the Thai side, it is imperative to understand how essential it is for the Karens to reenact themselves as Karens. For many illiterate, forcibly displaced Karens, a Karen dialect is their only language, their only enunciative vehicle. After days, months, or years of running for their lives, it is critical for these civilians who have taken flight to be able to trust that they belong to a "community" somewhere, a community that they believe can help them. For members of the Karen National Union (KNU—the governing body of most Karens) after more than half a century of fighting in the name of Karen nationhood, it is crucial to be able to trust that the "community" is not nameless.

An Almost Inaudible Voice, an Ungrammatical Writing

To offer a glimpse into the plight of the forcibly displaced Karens in the Thai-Burmese border zones I invoke here a story written by a twenty-one-year-old girl. She was one of my students in an "Introduction to Politics" class I taught while conducting fieldwork in a "temporary shelter area" on the Thai side. Except for excluding some place-names, following ethnographic etiquette, for reasons that will become clear I retain the original "ungrammatical" text.

"The Hardest Time in My Life"

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 situation was getting worse until we had to go to sleep between the mountains. One of my younger sisters was weak and she was very tired of climbing the mountain every evening. We studied in the daytime 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 or 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 our poor lives and myself. I couldn't do anything except crying.

It is the hardest time for me in my life. It happened on Feb. 1997.¹¹

Recalling Aristotle's contentious distinction that signifies the sign of the political nature of humans in book 1 of the *Politics*,¹² one wonders whether the international community has disqualified these forcibly displaced peoples as political subjects by dismissing their voices as mere noises (*phone*)—that is, as a sheer fact of being—rather than as intelligible speech (*logos*), demonstrating recognition as political subjects. The relevance of this notion becomes clearer if we follow Agamben's reading of Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*:¹³ "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."¹⁴ Because many of these suffering voices—living in rural, jungle, or mountainous areas—are illiterate, their voices are not considered to be part of the *logos*. The illiterate Karens are thus not political beings but beings 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 only a small reading public, many of whose members are themselves living in danger zones and have little access to other forcibly displaced Karens' stories. Moreover, when those few who can write in languages that have a larger audience, such as English, they easily become unintelligible because the writers do not have adequate proficiency in English, like my student's story, and hence can be easily dismissed.

The fact that her English proficiency was the best among 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 condemned border zones. 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 Thai soil.¹⁵ Hence, we have disregarded an inexhaustible number of stories because the writings are seemingly unintelligible. Unintelligibility notwithstanding, writing, as Jacques Rancière argues, is "a modality of the rapport between *logos* and *aisthesis* [recognizing], which, since Plato and Aristotle, has served to conceptualise the political animal."¹⁶ We therefore have here one of the people's attempts to enunciate and construct themselves as qualified political subjects no matter how "distorted" such an enactment may be from the perspective of a nation-state's practices and its strategies of containment.

It is precisely because of this nexus between written language, intelligibility, and qualified voice that conducting fieldwork in the Thai-Burmese danger zones—that is, in non-ceasefire war zones—is both crucial and urgent for academic research. As the research that is institutionally approved of by the academic system, employing varieties of research methodology accepted by such a system, academic research is especially crucial in understanding basic human conditions and their interlocking relations with sovereign powers, especially that of the nation-state, in the danger zones. Anthropological fieldwork, with its ethnographic practice, then becomes imperative in attempting to gain basic understandings that illuminate the complexly harrowing experiences of human quotidian life.¹⁷

The conducting of fieldwork in the Thai-Burmese non-ceasefire war zones has become urgent and crucial also because, although there have been extensive reports of atrocities committed by the Burmese junta,¹⁸ no basic academic research has been conducted *within* such zones. Focusing on the Mons' "refugees" in

Thailand, Hazel Lang's important study *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand*¹⁹ is the first academic work specifically in the genre of refugee studies that pays attention to Thailand's western front. However, it does not include ethnographic details from the Thai-Burmese danger zones. Ashley South's essential study, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake*,²⁰ sheds more light on the situations in the danger zones from six and one-half years' experience in the border zones as an English teacher and relief worker, but its focus is not on the basic human conditions of the forcibly displaced: It deals with political actors like the resistance groups and relief organizations. Apart from those two crucial works, one must not forget some exemplary journalistic research and historical accounts from the war zones, especially Martin Smith's benchmark *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, largely covering the period from 1982 to 1990.²¹

My own fieldwork in the Thai-Burmese non-ceasefire war zones focuses on the daily lives of forcibly displaced Karens. Such fieldwork now offers perhaps the only remaining alternative that might give an account of the transversal subjectivities of forcibly displaced peoples like the Karens. Such fieldwork involves the need to expose the geography of the sacred along the Thai-Burmese border zones, where the two nation states' sovereign powers (though of the Burmese more than the Thai) have been transformed into spaces of exception.

Thailand's and Burma's separate productions of spaces and lives have produced similar effects: spaces filled with unrecognized memories as well as the tormented bodies of people who can be expelled or killed because of their lack of adequate juridical protection. All these effects have, in a way, resulted from a geographical imaginary and from the political "lawfulness" that the two nation-states have attempted to produce within their territories, without recognizing the cultural geographies, the nonstate maps resulting from the practices of spaces and identities, of indigenous/ethnic/forcibly displaced others in the "in-between spaces." It is these to which I now turn.

The Thai-Burmese In-Between Spaces and Three Topics of Anthropology

My account of in-between spaces is meant to capture the unique characteristics of the Thai-Burmese border zones. I deploy this idea in order to disrupt the conceptual frameworks of statecentric analysis, to problematize the Thai-Burmese state-boundary, and to open up spaces for nonstatist agents. The conventional statist

cartography depicts a Thai-Burmese border zone stretching 2,401 kilometers (about 1,500 miles).

I want to emphasize four dimensions to an alternative cartography of the in-between-spaces: philosophical, cultural, political, and violent. To conduct my fieldwork in the border zones I constructed a method that interweaves three key topics of anthropology: The anthropology of borders, ethnographic research on displacement and refugees, and the anthropology of state terror.²²

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.”²³ Like other forcibly displaced peoples situated along the Thai-Burmese border zones, the Karens’ transversality is thus a threat to the territorial integrity of both Thailand and Burma,²⁴ as well as to their respective national narratives: to their “imagined communities.”²⁵ 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 in the border zones, as unqualified forms of life.²⁶ Through this inclusive exclusion, these peoples have been abandoned by the two sovereignties. Being lives without, for the most part, any protection, they are deprived of any possibility of appeal.

As unqualified political subjects, the Karens have been excluded from statist forms of politics. Their histories and memories have been discounted, and their voices, bodies, and actions have been made imperceptible. Moreover, their enunciations and demonstrations are not intelligible because they do not comply with the juridical grammar of the nation-state. In other words, the forcibly displaced Karens’ loci of enunciation are ungrammatical. 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.²⁷

With the discourse of state-boundary problematized and blurred, the in-between spaces signify not only the zones beside the boundary but also other zones deeper inside, including war zones in the Burmese nation-state. It is in this light that the philosophical dimension of the notion of “in-between spaces” enables us to fathom a variety of 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 quotidian lives along the borders.²⁸ 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 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.²⁹ All these features, therefore, highlight cultural aspects of the Thai-Burmese "in-between spaces."

The ethnographic research methods favored in anthropology allow us to pay attention to the becomingness of displaced peoples. I employ this methodology to discern both the torment and cultural transformation amid danger of the forcibly displaced Karens by following 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 a "positive, productive status and . . . a profoundly meaningful historical identity."³⁰ Likewise, in my study of the displaced Karens I ask whether 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."³¹ Such is a view generally held by the international community and particularly 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. Worse than that, many forcibly displaced peoples have not even been recognized as political subjects. With this latter 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," many having 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 semirule of the British in the nineteenth century³²—many of today's displaced Karens have been struggling relentlessly to survive and to be seen again as a nation. 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, my study is inspired by the Rancière's conception of the political.³³ The in-between spaces are spaces of a meeting among the heterogeneous. Expressed theoretically, the heterogeneous meet in the places and with the words that are common to both a statist logic and a nonstatist logic, "even if it means reshaping those places and changing the status of those words."³⁴ Hence, after reconfiguring the in-between spaces by conceptually neutralizing them from a statist logic, and after deviating from the following common terms that are antipolitical yet reflect the statist logic—terms such as *stateless peoples*, *internally displaced persons (IDPs)*, and *refugees*—my study uses the term *forcibly displaced peoples* as a way to deviate and distance itself from the univocity of statist discourses.³⁵ Moreover, discerning attempts by the forcibly displaced Karens to name themselves, to participate on the stage of the common world, I want to highlight the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces as spaces of political subjectification that produce a heterogeneity that was not recognized in the statist constitution of the community. It is the heterogeneity that poses itself as contradictory in terms of the statist logic.³⁶

Nonetheless, sovereign power over various subjectivities in its territory often results in the state committing terror upon peoples. The anthropological study of state terror then becomes imperative for my study so as to understand the situatedness of the forcibly displaced Karens who have taken flight in the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces.

The final anthropological approach that my study employs investigates the extent and characteristics of state violence—the operating procedures for suppressing or eradicating dissenting voices or nations. As a result of these processes of control, cultures of terror emerge and flourish.³⁷ 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 of those who oppose the political status quo.³⁸ My study examines 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 Thai and especially Burmese state functionaries have committed atrocities upon the Karens and other forcibly displaced peoples. Although multifaceted state terror is a state construction, its effects upon the

life-worlds of a variety of peoples in the in-between zones have reached far beyond the territories of these two countries. The wounds and memories that the forcibly displaced unwillingly carry with them while traversing the “Thai-Burmese state-boundary” transcend Thailand’s and Burma’s territorial sovereignties and their containment strategies. That is, such memories and wounds reflect the universality of human sufferings of those who have had to endure atrocities, let alone the sense of pride as humans that has been lost along the way.

Regretfully, there is inadequate knowledge of these peoples’ sufferings. 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 “others”—the aberrant; unqualified political subjects. Nonetheless, when these voices have been listened to, many survivors have become speechless.³⁹ By connecting the anthropological studies of atrocities and their effects on the displaced Karens’ collective selfhood in the border zones, the resulting methodological approach helps me to reconfigure the relationships between space, identity/temporality, and culture amid state terror. By combining philosophy, political theory, and critical comparative politics with in-depth ethnographic research, I hope to add new dimensions to these three anthropological approaches.⁴⁰

Controlled Spaces, Contested Spaces

A space is never neutral. It is always a part of contestations over control. A political space is always produced and controlled by sovereign power(s), no matter how contested such control might be. Likewise, in the Burmese war zones one at first glance finds oneself walking in a junta-produced area or an ethnic armed organization’s area. Specifically, in the junta-designated Karen State, either the Tatmadaw (Burmese army) or its allies (e.g., the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army—DKBA) control the space. If not, one finds oneself in a KNU-controlled area. Hence, it would seem that the forcibly displaced peoples are under the “protection” of the KNU or the Burmese state; however, the two controlled-areas have always been contentious.

From the Burmese state’s practice of space, these contested areas are designated in different colors according to the intensity of fighting with the ethnic nationalities’ troops, from black to brown

to white, with the aim of finally whitening all the areas. As Martin Smith wrote:

The map of Burma was divided into a vast chessboard under the *Tatmadaw's* six (later nine) regional military commands and shaded in three colors: black for entirely insurgent-controlled areas; brown for areas both sides still disputed; and white was “free”. The idea was that each insurgent-colored 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.⁴¹

The junta also calls the “black” areas the “free-fire” zones, where troops can shoot anyone on sight without the need to determine identity. This was one of the causes of the death of the relatives of a “refugee” interviewed by the Amnesty International.⁴² This whole zonal categorization, however, is misleading because atrocities have been committed by the junta’s functionaries in every kind of zone, including so-called white areas, although that state’s practice of space is intended to win the hearts and minds of the local peoples. The zonal categorization, together with Four Cuts operations,⁴³ are military strategies that have resulted in indigenous peoples—whether rural or hill peoples, villagers or peasants—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.⁴⁴

In the Karen-Burmese war zones I visited, KNU has lost most of its areas of control and its communication routes in the jungle. The junta’s Four Cuts strategy had been atrociously effective.⁴⁵ While it was always the case that, during the dry season (roughly between mid-November and early May), the junta’s troops attacked areas controlled by fighters from ethnic nationalities, civilians had borne the brunt of the attacks, even during the rainy season, when they hid in the jungles with little or no food. Arbitrary and severe atrocities had claimed many, many lives. Families and communities had scattered throughout the jungles.

The attacks of 1994–1995 and 1997 had inflicted the most serious damage and casualties on the Karens’ side since their retreat to the Karen State in 1974.⁴⁶ On January 27, 1995, KNU lost Manerplaw, its headquarters adjacent to the “Thai-Burmese state-boundary.” They lost this HQ after many of the fighters they had considered to be

their “brothers”—men in what they called the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army—turned to side with the junta, helping the latter to attack Manerplaw.⁴⁷ Such loss of the controlled-areas and communication routes has resulted in many Karen villagers leaving their lands. Some have been able to escape from the SPDC-controlled areas, but others have not.

*Taking Flight to the “Thai-Burmese State Boundary”:
A One-way Trip?*

Nowadays, many forcibly displaced Karens still drift around in the jungles and mountains, traversing one frontline after another to avoid Tatmadaw troops or their allies, carrying whatever they can of their limited belongings. When the rice that they have with them runs out they survive on animals, edible plant roots, and other vegetation. These are the sources of their food and medicine, though not everyone has knowledge of herbal medicine. During my time traveling with the relief team I often witnessed displaced Karens, themselves very sick, taking elders and small babies with them as they fled. Is it possible that, as Marianne Forro states, “to some people the very ‘state of movement’ is being ‘at home.’”⁴⁸ I doubt that it is the case here.

In one village we passed through there was a school with almost a hundred students and eight teachers. One of the teachers, asked why they did not flee to “temporary shelter areas” on the Thai side, said: “We intend to stay free amid dangers rather than live a secure life without freedom.” But displaced Karens have reasons other than that of wanting freedom for not fleeing to the Thai side. First, many Karen villagers are Animists: Their sense of rootedness to the land and the spirits of the land tie them to their native soil.⁴⁹ Second, being mountain farmers or deep-jungle farmers, without education or points of reference to life outside the forests, many villagers find it hard to imagine what their lives might be in “camps” in another country. Third, some of these villagers have heard from others who have returned from Thailand because they could no longer bear life without farming: because the Thai government had not allowed them to farm, they had had no income, and some of them had not received good treatment in the “camp” in which they had stayed. Hearing this, villagers still might, if the situation in their ancestral areas became too grave, take flight to the Thai side, but for many this option was a last resort.⁵⁰

The paths of the forcibly displaced Karens—attempting to traverse the so-called Thai-Burmese boundary, finally arriving at a “camp” and hence ending the tormenting journey—are not always

linear. Two examples can illustrate this point. The first story is that of a woman I met at a KNU temporary district headquarters—a story of loss and odyssey.⁵¹ The second is that of a family whom I met as they were heading back to their village, ready to confront any worse situations.

A Mourning Lady, a Lady “on the Move”

She was a thirty-two-year-old woman whose husband had been killed by a landmine planted near her village by a Tatmadaw soldier after the troops had stormed in and found no one. After hiding in an adjacent jungle her husband had gone back home to replenish food supplies, and while he was gone she heard a mine explode. When her husband did not return she began to worry that he might have gotten killed. At that moment, she told me, she became terribly worried about the future for herself and her small children.

The next morning villagers found her husband’s body. “I felt heartbroken and cried badly when seeing his body,” she said. “My husband’s eyes did not close, one of the legs was torn apart from the body, and his hands held something like dirt.” Tears welled up in her sad eyes. “I asked myself what I would do with my future, now that I had lived away from my relatives.⁵² I did not know how to take care of myself.”

If, she was asked, a Burmese soldier without a gun was sitting with us and she had a gun, would she have shot him? “Yes!” she said. “Because he is an enemy. Although he’s not the one who killed my husband, they are in the same army.” After almost nine years of marriage she was left her with a two-month-old girl and a five-year-old boy. The boy had had chronic diarrhea and a lot of “worm in the stomach.” Before arriving at the KNU temporary district HQ two months earlier she had been weak and at times exhausted. Now she felt strong, and her boy had started to feel better because there were a couple of medics there, and food—as she put it, “rice, salt, monosodium glutamate, and once in a while some pork or chicken.” Her boy had started to go to school, and she would like to attend medic training so that she could take care of her children. “But,” she said, “I have no education.”

Her life exemplifies that of many in the land called Burma. The Karens’ struggles officially started twenty years before she was born (KNU declared what they call their revolution against the Burmese government in 1949). When we met at the temporary district headquarters, her odyssey had already taken her to more than ten locations, starting when she was very young. Loss and separation had always been her companions.⁵³ In most of the places she stayed, it

was concern about food, sickness, or security that kept the family moving.

One location was a “refugee camp” called Pa Leh, on the Thai side. There, one of her sisters died through diarrhea. Her family had arrived at the camp not long after it was set up in 1976.⁵⁴ There were a few thousand people in the camp. Conditions were horrendous. She remembered hundreds of people becoming sick with diarrhea. “I heard of a couple of persons’ deaths or witnessed either Christian or Buddhist funerals every day,” she said. Everyone in her family was often ill and her family finally left the “camp” and embarked on the long journey back to Burma territory. Most of their material possessions (a ring, old coins) had gone, used to buy food. They had no means to earn income. She recalled being about eleven years of age at the next location, and they stayed there for about six years without being attacked by the Tatmadaw troops. “Until one day, *they* came and my family had to flee again,” she said.

Some idea of her odyssey since she was born can be seen in the following partial list of place-names and distances, given here to show the rough amount of time it takes, at local walking speeds, to travel between villages. With the exception of Pa Leh, the names have been changed: 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 Tha > 2.5-hour walk > Po Ho Der > 1-day walk > Ta Keh Pu > 4-hour walk > Koh Khee

It was hard for this woman to remember exactly how long she had stayed at each location. I double-checked her path of flight, and the two accounts were not the same. After an interview of about three hours, I stopped lest she become upset or annoyed.

*Ready to Die, but Not in a Camp*⁵⁵

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. Suddenly we saw a small boy cautiously walking on the bridge. A girl, a little older, followed him, and on her back she carried another, very young sibling. The girl’s hand was guided from behind by her father, who to help the girl across the bridge had had to put down his wife, who had been traveling on his back.

All of the children I met that afternoon looked extremely exhausted. I gave them mineral water, and with that their eyes freshened, even sparkled, and at that moment they looked like children of the Thai poor. But while Thai poor children have citizenship—supposedly adequate juridical protections—this family was from the war zone.

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

Asked by my Karen friend why they were returning, the husband replied that his wife had not been happy in the camp and did not want to stay there anymore. The family had felt confined; they loved to farm, but were not allowed to cultivate in or near the camp. They were returning to their home and paddy fields, which the Tatmadaw troops had looted and burned, and would hide in the jungle. Asked what they would do if the junta’s soldiers found them, one replied, “We will run away.” Pushed farther and asked what if they could not hide or run, the husband stated quietly but firmly, “We will fight till we die.”

The Exception, the General, and the Undeniable Sovereign Power

One evening near 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 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.

From my diary:

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-boundary. When we met, most of them were preparing their dinners. Having been traveling for more than 2 weeks in the war zones, I knew what they would eat because I had had [those] 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 rule, 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 (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.

My fieldwork in Thailand, Burma, and the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces lasted for eleven months, from July 2000 to June 2001.⁵⁶ Obviously, it was my choice to intertwine my life as a researcher with those of my “subjects” in such danger zones, and I thereby confirmed Arjun Appadurai’s distinction between “the voluntarily displaced anthropologist” and “the involuntarily localized ‘other.’”⁵⁷ But, voluntariness notwithstanding, within those spaces of exception, I, too, 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, journal entries like the one I just quoted. Then to think again, had I lived there much longer, perhaps no entry at all could have been written in my diary, because the time for keeping a diary could be considered too much of a luxury.

Research from the dangerous zones challenges readers to pay urgent attention to the Benjaminian sense of the *real* states of exception in the world. As Walter Benjamin writes: “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.”⁵⁸ 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*—that is, a landscape of varieties of subjectivities that signify a shifting world of people on the move, hence disrupting the nation-state’s territorial sovereignty—a question arises: Who are these people? And the answer: that they are people in general. To 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.”⁵⁹ 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.

One can, therefore, ask: Who can exploit technoscapes and mediascapes when they do not even have electricity, or financescapes when they do not have money, or ideoscapes when they do not even know how to read? There are, for instance, tremendous differences between those who are running for their lives in war zones and diasporic nationalists who send money from the United States 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,⁶⁰ his treatment of sovereignty has not paid much attention to *sovereign power*.⁶¹ 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 both the people of exception and people in general.

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. A figure of sovereign power not only controls, and potentially threatens, human lives but also embraces them, providing protection and services. In this light, for many of the forcibly displaced—crossing mountains with little to eat, devastated by sickness, a woman suckling a four-month-old baby with almost her last breath—flight to a safer area in a war zone means life or death. All of this happens, to quote Appadurai again, "in a world of people on the move." And so, in war zones, one would think, varieties of governmental services 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—"care for life" and the "threatening of life." Perceptibility presupposes and entails a certain kind of sovereign power: be it intelligible language (for example, the Aristotelian distinction between *logos* and *phone*), community, nation, state, and religion, among others. For perceptibility implies not only *what* is being perceived but also *by whom* it is perceived.

Being forcibly displaced peoples *on the move*, the Karens' strategies for survival and struggles are precarious and limited. Their transversal struggles are unlike those of peoples with citizenship. Their ability to exploit the translocalities⁶² along the borders of Thailand and Burma, for example, has become contingent, to say the best, and at times very precarious.⁶³ The fact that many struggles

cannot be mentioned here, lest my Karen informants be in even more danger, demonstrates both Thailand's and Burma's sovereign power to threaten their lives, and perhaps mine, too. Appadurai downplays the aspirations for territorial sovereignty of "most cases of counternationalism, secession, supranationalism, or ethnic revival on a large scale,"⁶⁴ but against this it can be said that the Karen peoples' aspiration is to return to a Karen land under the Federal Union of Burma. According to KNU,⁶⁵ the Karens want to return to or remain in the land they call Kawthoolei, which means "pleasant," "plentiful," "peaceful." The land of Kawthoolei is "a land free of all evils, famine, misery and strife."

Closing the Curtain?

Theater: a humanly animated site where living community and live performance are "mutually engendered and the lifeworld at large is writ small with human materiality."⁶⁶ And so it is in the condemned grounds, where the forcibly displaced and their communities "perform" and where their bodies and bodily movements speak—louder than their screams—to those who will listen. In attempting to reconfigure such imperceptible, unaccounted for theater, this article has deployed a critical discourse of displacement and a critique of the conventional constitution of the political to delineate a "geography of the sacred." For the critical discourse, the article reads terror by intertwining "cultural" geographies and "political" geographies, demonstrating how political spaces result from and depend upon "cultural" readings of identity and spatiality. For the critique, it demonstrates that there is an intelligible speech (*logos*) in the noise (*phone*) of the forcibly displaced, hence disallowing depoliticization of inquiry. In so doing, the article advances itself as a new mode of political inquiry operating in a different and real plane of geography: the quotidian theater of the displaced, where I once traveled through the curtain of the Thai-Burmese state boundary.

In May 2002, while writing my dissertation in Hawaii, I came across news from the *Bangkok Post* that villages in the Thai-Burmese border zones, "within" Burmese territory, had been burned down and people had had to flee their homes. I cross-checked with friends who still worked in the border zones and learned that some of the villages I had visited were among those burned down. Having been invited to present parts of my dissertation at various places—Yale, Cornell, the University of Minnesota, and in South Korea—I could not help but ask myself whether I was and had been capitalizing on the Karens' sufferings.

The news also reminded me of tragic scenes on television after September 11, 2001: people in New York City carrying pictures of their loved ones, searching for missing bodies, in hope and agony. How familiar the feelings were—those of the New Yorkers and those of my Karen informants; yet also, how dejectedly dissimilar! How come some lives are so precious, while others have an existence that, apparently, is utterly meaningless?

The forcibly displaced left their homes because of the junta's atrocities. On their travels they have maintained their lives with little food, suffering unimaginable sickness. They keep moving, only to encounter even more hunger, sickness, and fear. On occasion, we would encounter groups of forcibly displaced peoples and the medic teams would start their treatments right there in the jungle. Then both the relief team and the relieved had to move on to avoid Tatmadaw patrols. We knew *our* future: We would return to Thai territory, passing through and leaving behind the theater's curtain. But we did not know *theirs*. At times, to think about it is too painful.

Notes

Parts of this article are taken from my "Looking through the Eyes of the Karen 'Others': Towards a Methodology for Studying Forcibly Displaced Peoples in the Thai-Burmese In-between Spaces," in *Varasan thai kadhi suksa* [Journal of Thai Studies] 1, no. 1 (October 2003–March 2004): 154–196, 308–315 (in Thai).

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1. In this article, I refer to Burma throughout except when intending to convey the present official recognition of the country as Myanmar. The change from Burma to Myanmar is not accepted by the opposition, and use of the latter term is politically charged. For discussion, see, for example, Robert H. Taylor, "Stagnation and Stalemate," introduction to Robert H. Taylor, ed., *Burma: Political Economy Under Military Rule* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 1 n. 1; David I. Steinberg, "The Burmese Conundrum: Approaching Reformation of the Political Economy," *ibid.*, p. 41 n. 1; Stefan Collignon, "Human Rights and the Economy in Burma," *ibid.*, p. 70 n. 1; and Josef Silverstein, "Burma and the World: A Decade of Foreign Policy Under the State Law and Order Restoration Council," *ibid.*, p. 119, n. 1.

Regarding the term Burma: Three related terms need clarification. First, *Burma* is a noun, referring to the country's name. *Burman*, an adjective, denotes an ethnic nationality living among varieties of other ethnic

nationalities. *Burmese*, another adjective, signifies the discourse of statehood of Burma; hence, Burmese peoples, for instance—peoples living within the territory of Burma.

2. See, e.g., U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), “Internally Displaced Persons (as of December 31, 2004),” *World Refugee Survey 2005*. (Washington, D.C.: Immigration and Refugee Services of America, 2005): www.refugees.org/uploadedFiles/Investigate/Publications_&_Archives/WRS_Archives/2005/internally_displaces_persons, accessed May 2006.

3. It must be noted that within the Burmese nation-state, the term *indigenous peoples* has to be separately deployed and cannot be used interchangeably with *ethnic nationalities* because not only just some indigenous peoples in this land have subjectified themselves as a nation but also it is the latter term, not the former, that has normally been used by the governing bodies of ethnic nationalities to refer to themselves. As Martin Smith states in a paper written between 1989 and 1990, “the literature produced by the Karens, the Karenis, 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*”; see Smith, “A State of Strife: The Indigenous Peoples of Burma,” in R. H. Barnes, Andrew Gray, and Benedict Kingsbury, eds., *Indigenous Peoples of Asia* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Association for Asian Studies, Monograph and Occasional Paper Series no. 48, 1995), p. 237. In an official booklet, for example, the government of Kawthoolei alleges that “throughout history the Burmese [*sic*] have been practicing annihilation, absorption, and assimilation . . . to the Karens. . . . The Karens are much more than a national minority. We are a nation”: *The Karens and Their Struggle for Independence* (N.p.: KNU Publishing, 1984), pp. 2–3, quoted in Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, 2d ed. (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 36; cf. Karen National Union (KNU). *The Karens and Their Struggle for Freedom* (KNU Publishing, 2000), pp. 4–5.

4. The phrase is from Pim Koetsawang, *In Search of Sunlight: Burmese Migrant Workers in Thailand* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2001).

5. For a critical narrative of the forcibly displaced lives in a “temporary shelter area,” see, e.g., Decha Tangseefa, “‘Temporary Shelter Areas’ and Paradox of Perceptibility: Imperceptible Naked–Karens in the Thai–Burmese Border Zones,” in Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, eds., *Borderscapes: Rethinking the Politics of Borders, Belonging, and Migration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).

6. Because the Karens in the Thai nation-state have not been brutally treated and forcibly displaced as their kin in the Burmese nation-state, a distinction must be made between the Karens from Burma and those from Thailand. The latter are not the focus of this article.

7. I am grateful to Nevzat Soguk for the expression “geography of the sacred.” As for *homo sacer*, in a nutshell it 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. In such relation, humans encounter their nakedness and extreme vulnerability: see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998); see also Decha Tangseefa, “Imperceptible Naked-lives and Atrocities: Forcibly Displaced Peoples and the Thai–Burmese In-between Spaces,” Ph.D. diss. (University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2003), pp. 23–34.

8. For Rancière, politics is viewed as contained in a specific mode of relation of “part-taking,” and political struggle is about a special kind of “counting.” For Rancière, there are two contrasting ways of counting. One he calls *police*, the other *politics*. The former counts only empirical parts, whereas the latter counts, “in addition,” a part of the no-part: see Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Theory and Events* 5, no. 3 (2001): p. 19; and Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); see also Decha Tangseefa, note 7, pp. 35–44.

9. See, e.g., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sarah Harasym, “Criticism, Feminism, and The Institution,” in Sarah Harasym, ed., *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.

10. See, e.g., Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” note 8; Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, note 8.

11. She told me later that her father died when she was seven years old.

12. Aristotle, “Politics,” trans. Benjamin Jowett, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle—The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 2, 1253a 9–17.

13. Aristotle, “De Interpretatione,” trans. J. L. Ackrill, in Barnes, note 12, vol. 1, 16a 3–9.

14. Giorgio Agamben, preface to *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Ritz Heron (New York: Verso, 1993), p. 8.

15. In this light, in every three-to-four-hour class, twice a week, I spent about half of the class time teaching “English” (i.e., my nonnative English with a certain level of proficiency), while simultaneously teaching “Introduction to Politics.” This class was one of a very few opportunities for post-high school education in the temporary shelter areas. Most people there had no access to higher education.

16. Jacques Rancière, Solange Guenoun, and James H. Kavanagh, “Jacques Rancière: Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement,” Roxanne Lapidus, trans., *SubStance* 29, no. 2 (2000): 11.

17. The notion of quotidian life employed here is inspired by David Campbell’s treatment of “everyday life”: David Campbell, “Political Prosaics, Transversal Politics, and the Anarchical World,” in Michael J. Shapiro and Hayward R. Alker, eds., *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 7–23. Specifically, everyday life is a “transversal site of contestations” rather than “a fixed level of analysis”: *ibid.*, p. 23. Referring to Richard K. Ashley’s development of Michel Foucault’s notion of transversal struggles, 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”: *ibid.*, p. 23. See also Richard K. Ashley, “Living on Border Lines: Man, Poststructuralism, and War,” in James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro, eds., *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 270, 296–297; Michel Foucault, “Afterward: The Subject and Power,” in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2d ed., 1983), pp. 211–212.

18. There have been many publications and some websites.; see, for example, Free Burma Range: www.freeburmarangers.org/, by a group of missionary and medic teams going into war zones “inside” Burma; also report of the special rapporteur on the situation in Myanmar to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights: www.unhchr.ch/html/menu4/chrrep/6497; Open Society Institute; Karen Human Rights Group: www.khrg.org. In addition to annual reports by Amnesty International and the US State Department, see, for example, Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), *Relief Programme: January to June 2005* (Bangkok: Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2005); Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), *Karen IDPs Report: The Plight of Internally Displaced Karen People in Mu Traw District of Burma* (Chiangmai, Thailand: Nopburee Press, 2000); annual publications of the Human Rights Documentation Unit of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), e.g., *Human Rights Yearbook, 1999–2000* (Nonthaburi, Thailand: NCGUB, 2000); Burma Ethnic Research Group (BERG), *Forgotten Victims of A Hidden War: Internally Displaced Karen in Burma* Chiangmai (Thailand: Nopruree Press, 1998); Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), *Wholesale Destruction: The SLORC/SPDC Campaign to Obliterate All Hill Villages in Papun and Eastern Nyaunglebin Districts* (Chiangmai, Thailand: Nopburee Press, 1998); Images Asia and BurmaNet, *Nowhere To Go: A Report on the 1997 SLORC Offensive Against Duplaya District (KNU Sixth Bridge) Karen State Burma* (Chiangmai, Thailand: Images Asia, 1997); Moe K. Tun, *The 1997 Offensives: Suffering and Struggle for Identity and Justice of the Ethnic Karen in Burma* (Bangkok: Burma Issues, 1997).

19. Hazel J. Lang, *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2002). The reason for putting quotation marks around the word *refugee* will be obvious below.

20. Ashley South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma: The Golden Sheldrake* (London: Routledge/Curzon, 2002).

21. Smith, *Burma*, note 3. The other works are Jonathan Falla, *True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Bertil Lintner, *Land of Jade: A Journey Through Insurgent Burma* (Edinburgh: Kiscadale Publications, 1990). In the words of Martin Smith, written more than ten years ago, going into the “ethnic-minority regions”—which by and large are equivalent to the later Thai-Burmese non-ceasefire war zones—is also critical because “any journey into the ethnic-minority 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 population’s detriment, remain largely unrecorded.” Smith, “State of Strife,” note 3, p. 234.

22. For anthropology of borders, see, e.g., Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation, and State* (Oxford, Eng.: Berg, 1999); cf. Alexander Horstmann, “Incorporation and Resistance: Borderlands, Transnational Community and Social Change in Southeast Asia” (WPTC-02-04, 2002): www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working%20papers/WPTC-02-04%20Horstmann, accessed February 2002. For ethnographic research on displacement and refugees, see Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Finally, for anthropology of state terror, see Jeffrey A. Sluka, ed., *Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben, eds., *Fieldwork Under Fire*:

Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Michael Taussig, "Culture of Terror—Space of Death: Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture," in Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 241–279.

23. Jennifer Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 27.

24. See Rajah Ananda, "Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Nation-State: The Karen in Burma and Thailand," in Gehan Wijeyewardene, ed., *Ethnic Groups Across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), pp. 102–133; Carole Nagengast, "Violence, Terror, and the Crisis of the State," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994): 118.

25. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, rev. ed., 1991).

26. Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

27. Agamben, note 7, pp. 9, 27, *passim*; see also "The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin," in Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 161–162.

28. See Donnan and Wilson, note 22.

29. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 38; cf. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

30. See Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," in K. F. Olwig and K. Hastrup, eds., *Sitting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological Object* (London: Routledge 1997), p. 227; cf. A. S. Preis, "Seeking Place: Capsized Identities and Contracted Belonging Among Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees," in Olwig and Hastrup, *ibid.*; and Malkki, note 22.

31. See T. Allen and D. Turton, "In Search of Cool Ground," introduction to T. Allen, ed., *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight, and Homecoming in Northeast Africa* (London: James Currey, 1996), p. 9; Prem Kumar Rajaram, "Humanitarianism and Representations of the Refugee," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 3 (2002): 247–264.

32. See Decha Tangseefa, note 7, pp. 89–106.

33. See, e.g., Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," note 8; *idem*, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, note 8; Decha Tangseefa, note 7, pp. 35–44.

34. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, note 8, pp. 32, 33.

35. The notion of "univocity of statist discourses" belongs to Ranajit Guha, "The Small Voice of History," *Subaltern Studies* 9 (1996): 1–12. I adapt it for my study of atrocities upon the forcibly displaced peoples. Although the target of his critique of univocity and mine is the state, the peoples for whom Guha intended to create a theoretical space were those who had been struggling within the boundary of the nation-state, whereas I am concerned with transversal subjectivities.

36. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, note 8, p. 36.

37. Taussig, note 22, p. 242.

38. *Ibid.*; cf. Jeffrey A. Sluka, "Reflections on Managing Danger in Fieldwork: Dangerous Anthropology in Belfast," in Nordstrom and Robben, eds., note 22, pp. 276–294.

39. Compare E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), chap. 6, for the speechlessness of those who have survived traumatic experiences of violence.

40. No published study in either English or Thai combines these three anthropological approaches and focuses on atrocities committed against forcibly displaced peoples in the Thai-Burmese border zones. In Thai, there are only two books that study ethnic nationalities from Burma in these zones, and they employ different approaches: Pornpimon Trichot, *Chonklumnoi kap rattaban phama* [The Burmese government and the ethnic minority groups] (Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund, 1999); Somchoke Sawasdiruk, *Khwamsamphan rawang thai-phama-kariang* [Thai-Burmese-Karen Relations] (Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund, 1997).

41. Smith, *Burma*, note 3, p. 259.

42. Amnesty International, "Myanmar Ethnic Minorities: Targets of Repression" (Amnesty International—Report ASA 16/014/2001, June). www.amnestyusa.org/annualreport/, accessed November 2002, p. 13.

43. Known in Burmese as the *Pya Ley Pya*, the Four Cuts strategy was a so-called counterinsurgency program. It was designed by the Tatmadaw in the mid-1960s to cut the four main links—food, funds, intelligence, and recruits—between ethnic nationalities' soldiers and their families and local villagers. For more details see Decha, note 7, pp. 142–147; BERG, note 18, pp. 23ff.; Smith, *Burma*, note 3, pp. 263–267.

44. Smith, *Burma*, note 3, p. 259; BERG, note 18, p. 23. For more details of the procedure of these military strategies, see Smith, *ibid.*, pp. 258–262, *passim*.

45. See, e.g., Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP), "No Mercy, No Peace: Burma's Internally Displaced," *Internally Displaced People News* 1, no. 5 (2000): 2; BERG, note 18, p. 98 fig. 12.

46. See CIDKP information sheet, *Internally Displaced People News* 1, no. 2 (1999): 3; BERG, note 18, p. 23; Smith, *Burma*, note 3, pp. 258–267. According to David Eubank of Christians Concerned For Burma, an organization that has long been active in helping forcibly displaced peoples from Burma, 2002 saw the severest onslaught against ethnic nationalities because attacks continued throughout the wet season: Benedict Rogers, "Visit to the Thai-Burmese Border, 30th June–8th July 2002," a report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) (2002), p. 12. This electronic document can be solicited from Benedict Rogers through brogers50@hotmail.com; or visit www.csw.org.hk or www.csw.org.uk, accessed September 2002.

47. Because my study focuses more on Karens in general than on the leaders, the issue of the politics of disintegration within KNU is beyond the scope of this article.

48. Paul Tabori, *The Anatomy of Exile: A Semantic and Historical Study* (London: Harrap, 1972), p. 37.

49. This was also confirmed by a conversation with a KNU leader in December 2001. The word *Animist* is capitalized in order to problematize the very notion that Animism is not a religion in the conventional sense.

50. See, for example, an editorial of *Internally Displaced Peoples News*, a newsletter produced by a group of Karens on the Thai side: CIDKP, note 45, p. 3.

51. This story is from an interview conducted in January 2001.

52. For many displaced in the war zones, being away from relatives could mean being separated forever.

53. In *The Rice Fairy: Karen Stories from Southeast Asia* (Simplicity Press, 1987), a compilation of Karen folktales by the Rev. Edward N. Harris. The main characters of most of the tales are orphans.

54. A district KNU leader told me of this exact date. As well as working as a district head of KNU's Department of Information and Organization, he has kept records and written historical accounts about the Karens, in Karen language, for years.

55. The conversation took place in January 2001.

56. Since 2003 and completing my doctoral degree, I have renewed my fieldwork along the Thai-Burmese in-between spaces.

57. Arjun Appadurai, "Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory," *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. (1988):16–20.

58. Quoted in Agamben, "The Messiah and the Sovereign: The Problem of Law in Walter Benjamin," note 24, p. 160. See also Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed., Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 259.

59. The notion of being victimized here is different from that in the earlier section, where I problematize the general conception held by many international relief agencies about forcibly displaced peoples, that they are victims without agency. Among other things, even with agency, the forcibly displaced are not in a position to deal with the transnational public sphere because they have inadequate juridical protection. That public sphere is a stage of engagement predominantly for citizenry.

60. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Appadurai, "Sovereignty Without Territory: Notes for a Postnational Geography," in Patricia Yaeger, ed., *The Geography of Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 40–58.

61. See, for example, Agamben, note 8; and Decha Tangseefa, note 7, pp. 23–34.

62. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, note 60; and "Sovereignty Without Territory," note 60.

63. See, for example, Decha Tangseefa, note 7, pp. 208–248. For discussions in the same light, see Victor Roudometof, "Transnationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Glocalization," *Current Sociology* 53, no. 1 (2005): 113–135; Yan Haiping, "Other Transnationals: An Introductory Essay," *Modern Drama* 48, no. 2 (2005): 225–248.

64. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, note 60, p. 21.

65. KNU, "Karens and Their Struggle for Freedom," note 3, p. 5.

66. Yan, note 63, p. 226.

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