Landscapes of Affinity

Movement, memory and practices of the imagination amongst resettled Karen refugees in Melbourne, Australia.

By Zoë Robertson

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Swinburne Institute for Social Research, Faculty of Life and Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology, 2014.
Abstract

This thesis examines how recently resettled Karen refugees in Melbourne seek to generate affinities to the world around them. The Karen have complex histories of being spatially restricted inside refugee camps for long periods of time and having their movements constrained inside Burma. This has resulted in the Karen community in Melbourne having tensioned perceptions of their movement in the world. In this ethnographic thesis, I examine Karen recollections of traversing the politically unstable landscape in Burma, their experiences of negotiating the shifting and precarious ground of the refugee camp, and their practices for successfully navigating resettlement in Australia.

This thesis draws on two years of fieldwork with Karen in Melbourne who have been resettled from refugee camps on the Thailand Burma border since 2006. The thesis has three main parts. In the first, I describe how the resettled Karen community has symbolically reconstituted the refugee camp of their pasts in the suburbs of Melbourne. This familiar layout of social relations, and nexuses of influence and ideology, has assisted the Karen in navigating through the unfamiliar settlement landscape. In the second part, I examine how Karen extend their movements through the unfamiliar landscape of Melbourne in search of analogous sensations and textures that will tether them to their memory, their sensorium and to experiences of familiar ecologies.

In the third part of the thesis, I explore a practice whereby Karen youth situate their bodies in time and place through the generation of image-worlds. These image-worlds are generated through gathering, curating and digitally assembling visual images into bricolaged collections. I argue that this visual practice produces inhabitable fields that are intimately experienced by Karen youth. Existing inside these re-posed visual images are new social and material landscapes which Karen youth create in order to rehearse for potential scenarios and to conjure the presence of people and places that are now absent. The visual images are also made and valued by Karen youth for their
generative power. Karen youth hope that the imagined futures presented inside the image will take on the flesh of real life.

This thesis demonstrates how Karen refugees recently resettled in Melbourne aspire to recover movement and create affinity to a new and unfamiliar urban landscape. I show how through a range of visual and embodied practices they are successfully and skillfully negotiating their movements in Australia’s social and material landscapes as well as uniquely curating their futures.
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to all who contributed to this research. First and foremost, I would like to thank the Karen community in Melbourne and acknowledge how kind, warm and welcoming they have been over the past four years. I am indebted to so many for their generosity, honesty and sincerity. In particular, I would like to thank all the families who welcomed me into their homes and their lives. I have really enjoyed all the time spent together.

I am especially grateful to my supervisors, Sandy Gifford and Raelene Wilding, who have guided me from the beginning. Throughout my candidature you have both been incredibly supportive and encouraging, and I thank you for that. I would also like to thank Klaus Neumann for his generous supervision and astute reading. Having the three of you as a supervisory team has greatly enhanced this dissertation and, I sincerely appreciate all that you have helped me with. I am also grateful for the financial support which was provided by an Australian Research Council scholarship as part of the Home Lands linkage grant.

I have been very fortunate to be a part of a wonderful cohort of scholars at the Swinburne Institute for Social Research and previously at the La Trobe Refugee Research Centre. In particular, I would like to extend my appreciation to my friends and colleagues in the ISR writing group and methods seminar. I have greatly enjoyed being a part of the team and would like to thank everyone for their constructive feedback and friendship. I am also especially thankful for the constant support of Sinead Blessing, Davey Wallace and the careful reading and feedback from Carolyn Pearce.

My partner, Vessal Safeai, has lived with this dissertation, and I am especially appreciative for your forbearance, generosity, unconditional support and for always making everything so fun. And, finally, I want to acknowledge and wholeheartedly thank my parents, Tom and Julie Robertson, for their unwavering enthusiasm and constant encouragement.
Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award to the candidate of any other degree or diploma, except where due reference is made in the text.

To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Where work is based on joint research or publications, this thesis discloses the relative contributions of the respective workers or authors.

Zoe Robertson

22nd of November 2013
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract iv
Acknowledgements vi
Declaration vii
Figures xi

1. Introduction ................................................................. 1
   1.1. Watching the city 3
   1.2. Background to the research 11
   1.3. Outline of the thesis 14

2. Research Methodology ..................................................... 17
   2.1. Framework 20
   2.2. Being in the field: methods, analysis and ethnography 23
   2.3. Analogy: seeking correspondences and attachments 31
   2.4. Nested envelopes 35

3. The Karen ................................................................. 39
   3.1. Pathos-laden signs 39
   3.2. The creation of a people: missionaries and the interpretation of history 42
   3.3. Constructing a nation: Christianity, leadership and autonomy 45
   3.4. Kawthoolei: the imagined homeland 48
   3.5. Refugee Camps: rice and rhetoric 52
   3.6. Point-fields of power 59
   3.7. Resettlement: the Australian suburbs 64
   3.8. A camp in the suburbs 67
4. Moving in Landscapes and Memory………………………………………..71

4.1. Movement: imprints of departures and arrivals 71
4.2. The landscape of valleys and hills: topographies of fear and persecution 77
4.3. Auditory landscapes: the noise of fear and safety 83
4.4. BMS, Nu Po and Mae La Camp Zone 1.A 91
4.5. The suburbs: moving to and through urban landscapes 103
4.6. The weight of memory: photographs of absence 108
4.7. The absent refugee 112
4.8. Arriving at nostalgia: landscapes of return 120

5. Living in Images……………………………………………………………127

5.1. A photograph 128
5.2. Holding on to vulnerable histories 130
5.3. Maintaining diasporic intimacy: memorialising presences 134
5.4. Image-worlds: tethering and stabilising shifting ground 141
5.5. Instant histories: how to begin, again 149
5.6. Experience captured: an album of presences and imagined landscapes 155
5.7. Behind the image 169
5.8. Visual strategies: movement in social imaginaries 174
5.9. Thinking inside the image: nostalgia and the future 183
5.10. Recasting the world: movements with bodies and images 195

6. Conclusion…………………………………………………………………200

6.1. The city outside, the city inside 200
6.2. Precipitating encounters 206

Bibliography 210

Appendix 236
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sky High, Mount Dandenong.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The city of Melbourne; and detail of suburban field sites locations.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Burmese border displaced persons and refugee camp locations, June 2012.</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Performance in Mae La.</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The landscape centerpiece in Mu Lay’s image-world.</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>At the bamboo fence line.</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mar Ner with a blue penguin in Europe.</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Portraits placed in the windows and bedhead of a designer suite.</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mar Ner in an auditorium.</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Nay Moo multiples on the edge of a pier.</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>“My life in 2011 is so stupid!!!! No1 know that.”</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>At two coastlines.</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Nay Moo and his daughter in the gilded frame.</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mu Lay in the perfume signs.</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>With trophies and a parrot.</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>“2gerther 4ever friends!”</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Sitting inside the screen prints.</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>A bricolage of friends.</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>In the city information sign.</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Two people in the billboards.</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>“2gether 4ever.”</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>“Friends forever.”</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>“Friends 4ever.”</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>“4ever love.”</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Nay Moo and his mother.</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>“Me and my lovely aunty” urbanscape.</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>The face of the bride has been re-posed.</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Nay Moo’s family.</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>“Back to 2009 &amp; 2010,” Mar Ner.</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>The jungle, the city.</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Karen in Australia.</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The thickness of my body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means

I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.

1. INTRODUCTION

The four of us are standing at the top of Mount Dandenong, leaning against the metal railing and watching the large ships slowly making their way in to port. Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner have brought me up here “to watch the city.” “This is what Karen like to do,” they tell me. Here, at the lookout at the top of Mt Dandenong, many recently resettled Karen families come to see the urban expanse of Melbourne. This afternoon, a haze hangs in the sky and the city stretching out in front of us looks like dense, opaque circuitry.

Watching the boats cross Port Phillip Bay, Sar Loe says, “I wonder where they come from?” Ti Na Aung, not breaking her observation of the ship tankers down in the bay replies, matter-of-factly, “Asia. Everything comes from Asia.” Sar Loe turns to Ti Na Aung; with a large smile she taps on her arm and quickly banteres, “Even you! You are coming from Asia too!” Ti Na Aung groans as she smiles, and it makes all of us laugh.

This afternoon is twenty-two months after I first met Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner, and just under four years since they and their families were resettled as part of Australia’s humanitarian program. Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner are ethnic Karen: one of the main groups persecuted by the Burmese military and continuing to fight in one of the world’s longest running civil wars. Twelve months ago, the Burmese government and individual ethnic armed groups in Burma, such as the Karen National Union (KNU), signed a series of cease-fire agreements but today the fighting persists.
Currently, there are over 400,000 internally displaced persons in Southeast Burma, and there are approximately 130,000 Karens currently living inside the ten long-term refugee camp settlements along the Thailand Burma border (TBC 2012: x). Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner all separately arrived in Melbourne with their families from refugee camps located in the Dawna Range, the seam of mountains separating Thailand and Burma.

Sar Loe and Mar Ner were born inside Mae La refugee camp, the largest of the ten long term camps guarded by Thai authorities on the border; Mae La has a population of approximately 50,000. The first time they left the boundaries of Mae La refugee camp was the day that they departed for Australia. Ti Na Aung arrived in Melbourne from Nu Po refugee camp, located to the south of Mae La. She walked to Nu Po camp when she was 15, after having lived most of her life moving in order to avoid the armed conflict and ethnic persecution inside Burma. When Ti Na Aung arrived at Nu Po refugee camp from Rangoon, she was reunited with her parents and two brothers, from whom she had been separated since she was 3 years old.

In this ethnographic thesis, I focus upon the lives of Sar Loe, Mar Ner, Ti Na Aung, their peers and their families who are a part of the growing community of resettled Karen refugees in Melbourne, Australia. The thesis draws upon two years of fieldwork and is an in-depth description and analysis of the experiences of resettled Melbourne Karen refugees departing, moving and resettling. I discuss the experiences of Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung, Mar Ner, their families and their peers, during pivotal periods of time and occurrences. The first is their experiences of leaving their home villages and traversing the politically tensioned terrain in Burma to arrive at refugee camps dotted along the border with Thailand. Secondly, I focus upon the years in which they lived inside the refugee camps along the Thailand Burma border, and how they learnt to skillfully negotiate the shifting and precarious ground of the restricted and guarded camp zones. Thirdly, I describe and discuss their experiences of resettling in Australia, and how Karen refugees in Melbourne engage in techniques to mediate settlement.
1.1. Watching the city

Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner explain that, for many Karen settled in the east of Melbourne, their movements begin at Sky High, the name of the viewing outlook at the top of Mount Dandenong. Sky High is a favourite place for many Karen resettled in the outer eastern suburbs. When families arrive in Melbourne from Thailand, families who have already settled bring newly arrived Karen to see Sky High. Sar Loe explains that people love to come to the top of Mount Dandenong “to see the city. To look at where things are. Where we live, like, in this spot here,” and she points down to the area where her house is located. She adds, “And see where everyone [else] lives. The other people [of Melbourne].”

As we sit on the edge of the platform waiting for the sun to go down, we run into many Karen from the resettled community in Melbourne. One family on the level below us sits on the roadside railing. They, too, are all lined up, and a young child is patiently trying to make people sit closer together so he can take a photo (see Figure 1). Sar Loe looks at the family and says, “There are lots of Karen here now.”

Behind us, another Karen family is slowly walking past. The family stops intermittently to look out across the city as they share a bag of prawn crackers in silence. The mother of the family says a passing greeting to us as we sit on the edge of the railing. I ask the girls if they know the woman and her family. They tell me that she recently arrived in Melbourne, and that they haven’t seen her yet at any Karen community events. They say that they recognise her from when they lived inside Mae La refugee camp and that she came from the same zone as they lived in, Zone 1A. Sar Loe says, “We usually know all Karen here. We were all really neighbours in the camp.” She shrugs her shoulders, turning back to look out towards Port Philip Bay. She falls silent for a moment, and then she says softly as she continues to look out across the city, “It’s just how it is.”
Figure 1. Sky High, Mount Dandenong.
Since 2005, over 80,000 Karen have resettled in third countries (TBC 2012: 12). The United States of America has resettled 78% of this figure; however the American government announced in January 2013 that the country will commence a programme of final deadlines for group resettlement from the camps (TBC 2012: 12). Departures for resettlement from the refugee camps along the Thailand Burma border have decreased incrementally since 2008. This is mainly because only persons registered prior to 2005 are eligible to apply for humanitarian resettlement. For those who have arrived at the refugee camps after 2005, there has not been any processing through the status determination procedure. Since 2006, however, Australia has begun to increasingly resettle Karen as part of the country’s humanitarian program; Australia now has the second largest country intake of refugees from the Thailand Burma border.

The first wave of migrants to Australia arrived following Burma’s independence in 1948, and continued steadily until 1959 (DIAC 2012a). The military takeover of Burma’s government in 1962 caused another wave of migration from Burma to Australia, predominantly by Anglo-Burmese and British nationals. In the last seven years, from 2006 until 2013, approximately 7000 Karen have arrived via Australia’s humanitarian migration stream (DIBP 2013). The Australian Government’s Department of Immigration and Citizenship records that 42% of Karen humanitarian migrants have resettled in the state of Victoria (DIAC 2012). The Karens who make up this figure of 42% have settled in both regional Victoria and in the city of Melbourne.

In the city of Melbourne, Karens have predominantly settled in two outer metropolitan suburbs: Werribee and Ringwood (see Figure 2). Werribee is an outer metropolitan suburb located 32 kilometres to the west of the central business district. The suburb of Ringwood is located 23 kilometres east of the city centre. The geographical direction of these suburbs is important particularly for resettled Karen youth who not only identify themselves as “Karen” and “Karen Australians,” but also as

---

1 In September 2013, the Department for Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) changed its name to the Department for Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP). References cited in this dissertation that are dated prior to September 2013 will continue to use the original name DIAC.

2 In 1989, the Military Government officially changed the country’s name to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar; however, numerous opposition groups retain the use of “Burma”. This includes the National League for Democracy (NLD), many ethnic nationalist organisations, and the British and United States of America governments. All participants in this research spoke of “Burma”, and “Rangoon” instead of the official names Myanmar and Yangon. I have followed their articulations of place names.

3 There is also a growing Buddhist Karen community in a rural Victorian township.
“eastern Karen” or “western Karen”, depending upon in which of these two outer suburbs they have settled.

Figure 2. The city of Melbourne; and detail of suburban field sites locations: Sky High (A), Ringwood (B) and Werribee (C).
The most recent government census, conducted in 2011, records approximately 40,000 residents in Werribee, and approximately 16,000 residents living in Ringwood (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011, 2011a). Both Werribee and Ringwood are outer metropolitan suburbs that have been enveloped into Melbourne’s conurbation. Werribee and Ringwood are notable for their multicultural populations and offer considerably more affordable housing options than inner city suburbs. In both Werribee and Ringwood, the weekly median income is just over $1100 and rental weekly medians are $241 and $281 respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011, 2011a).

Sitting at the edge of the Sky High lookout with Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner, they estimate, that in the resettled Karen community of which they and their families are a part in Ringwood (the eastern side of the city) there are approximately 300-400 people. This number, they believe, is continuing to grow as Karen families have continued to arrive steadily over the past few years. But when Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner separately arrived in Melbourne, between 2006 and 2008, they remember there being no Karens in the outer eastern suburbs.

This evening there are many Karen families next to us on the platform at the top of Mount Dandenong, looking out at the city. We are all waiting to witness the moment when the city’s lights begin to turn on. Mar Ner, Ti Na Aung and Sar Loe have brought me here specifically so I can see how the city and the suburban landscape will turn from light to dark. Ti Na Aung explains, “The ships will put on their lights,” and we will be able to see them continuing to slowly enter through the heads and steadily cross the bay.

We wait, watching the sinking sun quietly with many other Karens who have joined our position on the viewing platform. Mar Ner is trying to take photos of all of us, set in the foreground of the expansive orange evening sky. Each photo is flared and overexposed; frustrated, she stares at the menu list on the digital camera’s screen. She sits down looking at the screen, irritated, as the first of the city’s lights begin to turn on.

As the sky darkens and more lights turn on, people start to stand up and pay attention to the view. The lights start to spread out, small dots centrifugally fanning out
from the city center and merging with the large floodlights of the factories in the outer west of the city. Ti Na Aung directs us to look at Port Phillip Bay, and traces with her finger its jagged shoreline. She says, “It’s dark huh?” The bay is a spill of black set in a sea of electric lights. The young women believe that the city is calmer at night. Sar Loe says, “People are calmer, slower. In the day, everything is too busy. It’s hard to keep up.”

As is so often the case for people who have been forced to move, seek refuge and resettle, ‘landscapes are never taken-for-granted and are often a source of pain’ (Bender and Winer 2001: v). At the time when I first met Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung, Mar Ner, their families and their peers, and became a regular presence at Karen events in Melbourne, people had been settled for two to four years. For many resettled Karens like Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner, the city of Melbourne at this early stage in their resettlement posed a landscape that they had to learn how to negotiate. The busyness of the day time that Sar Loe describes as being hard to keep pace with, imbued her perception of the city as a landscape that was hectic, burdened and precarious.

On the surface, amongst the tree lined streets, Karen families—aided initially by governmental services—started to make their suburban rental houses into familiar, intimate dwelling spaces. Families would travel to a particular street in a suburb on the city’s edge, to buy a whole house’s surface area in woven mats. Back inside their newly acquired rental houses, the mats were unrolled as was their hope for a sensately familiar surface: an intimately familiar surface that could directly cover the foreignness of aged carpet that firmly occupied their new living areas. Soon after, these families began to experience that underneath the surface of the city, the façade of life going on as usual, was a daunting and unfamiliar social terrain. Their social interactions in these first two years were jarring. Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung, Mar Ner and their peers describe it as a period of having “No voice.” They recollect their social interactions during this period of “No voice” as awkward and embarrassing. They were, as they explain, “always making mistakes,” “not understanding” just “so confused” by it all. These interactions are remembered as among the first unsettling parts of settling in a new place. For Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner, these interactions as well as the fast pace of the city are described as being the first challenges of alterity. The foreignness they felt moving
through the city with no familiar smells or sensations to which to tether themselves evoked a raw sense of estrangement in Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner.

As we return to the car and make the quick descent from Mount Dandenong, the young women describe this estrangement to me as they look through the car windows. As we cut across the suburbs on the highway, they point to places they recognise: a park, a shop, perhaps a familiar traffic intersection. Movement with these young women continually involves placing the familiar and the unfamiliar, the absent and the present. Yet, driving down the highway in the darkness and looking through the car window across at the paddocks morphing into segmented vacant urban blocks, then into large commercial warehouses, Sar Loe, who is seated next to me says, “We can never be like you.” What does she mean, I ask her. She says, looking at me: “Like you belong, like you know what to do, where to go.” She turns to look back out of the window at the passing city streets and says, “We can’t be like that.” Mar Ner and Ti Na Aung agree, and then fall silent in the backseat.

Sar Loe’s statement, the sentiment of never being able to be *in place* in Australia’s social and material landscapes, is poignant and multifaceted. She presents Melbourne as a city that is *ready-made*: a social and material landscape where things were already *in place*, and where she and Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner are *out of place*. In this thesis, I examine the manifold layered details that contextualise this sentiment. This thesis first establishes why young Karen like Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner have come to this view and then, secondly, focuses upon the practices by which resettled Karens have since mediated this sentiment. In this thesis, I take resettled Karens’ experience of moving through the world and connect it to broader issues of place, belonging and resettlement.

For Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner, their movements in Melbourne at this time, four years after their resettlement, remained sharpened by the city’s contrast to the refugee camps along the Thailand Burma border in which they lived and moved. Spatially restricted inside the refugee camp, with all movements corralled and constrained by political and ethnic persecution inside Burma, Sar Loe, Ti Na Aung and Mar Ner harboured aspirations for a freedom of movement and for unrestricted travel. However, now, recently resettled in Melbourne, they felt equally spatially and socially
restricted. As emphasised by Sar Loe’s statement in the car, they believed that now, as well as in the future, they will not be able to look like they belong in Melbourne: they would remain outsiders, not knowing what to do or where to go.

In this thesis, I look at the aspirations of resettled Karens in Melbourne to recover movement, to create familiarity and curate their futures. It is an ethnography of Karen experiences of resettlement in Melbourne, but the research extends temporally to examine their experiences of leaving home villages in the northern hills of Burma as children or young teens, and their navigation through the valleys and the hills of Burma to arrive at one of ten refugee camps along the Thailand border. The thesis then looks into Karens’ experiences of resettling in Australia, their attempts to make Melbourne homely, and their discontent with the city landscape. Following this, I discuss the practices through which they seek to generate future possibilities. This temporally expanded focus is intended to convey that Karen experiences of resettlement are strongly mediated by their histories, as well as by their foreseeable futures.

In this dissertation, I am focusing upon the first five years of the Karens’ settlement in Australia and I actively seek to situate the reader in the details of people’s lives. The intention is to reveal the intricacies of resettlement—not from the top down nor through policy implications—but rather through the lived-in experience of people’s daily lives. This thesis takes into account the mundane, the normalcy of these settings, and illustrates how such places can become disquieting or can be actively navigated. It shows how movement in real and imagined landscapes and people’s being in and of the world, are ‘always historically and spatially contingent’, as well as ‘always in process, potentially conflicted, untidy and uneasy’ (Bender 2001: 3).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, commenting on the nature of a photograph, writes: ‘the photograph keeps open the instants which the onrush of time closes up forthwith. It destroys the overtaking, the overlapping’ (1964: 186). In a certain manner, this ethnography arrests a moment of time and experience, much like the nature of a photograph as described by Merleau-Ponty. This ethnography, with its focus upon the first five years of settlement, captures the passing moment; yet I also seek to convey the inherent continuity. I connect what came before, the Karens’ lives inside Burma and inside the refugee camps, with what is now present, their settlement in Australia. These
parts are then put into connection with people’s aspirations for the future: in particular, the future-driven strategies by which they seek to turn their imagined future trajectories into lived realities.

The thesis illustrates and examines the techniques of settlement practiced by Karen. I will demonstrate how they have overwritten their initial perception that the city was ready-made and how they have, through movement, come to see themselves as in place in the folds of the city’s suburbs and tree-lined streets.

1.2. Background to the research

I came to meet Sar Loc, Mar Ner, Ti Na Aung and their peers through my involvement in an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded digital media project, Home Lands. Home Lands was a joint local government, community service providers’ and academic project that explored the possible role of internet communication technologies (ICTs) in connecting young people of refugee background in Melbourne to their diaspora communities or home countries. The project explored the proposition that, ‘if resettled young people with refugee backgrounds are able to maintain their connections to home—to family and friends in their countries of origin or refugee camps—then this might enhance their sense of being at home in Melbourne’ (Gifford

For Home Lands research project related articles, see Gifford and Wilding (2013) and Wilding (2012, 2009).

The Home Lands research project was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant (LP0989149) in partnership with industry partners the City of Melbourne and the Cultural Development Network, and in association with the Centre for Multicultural Youth and APC.au.
and Wilding 2013: 5. My role in the Home Lands project was that of researcher and PhD candidate, funded through the ARC Linkage Grant.

The project commenced in January 2010, when 34 Karen youth were recruited by a peer facilitator in Melbourne to learn multimedia skills, and to collaborate with a group of young Karens residing in refugee camps along the Thailand Burma border in the production of short films, to be exchanged over the internet. The Melbourne based participants of the Home Lands project were involved in a series of digital storytelling workshops, in which they also learnt multimedia skills from media specialists and community cultural workers. My role, as part of the research team, was to conduct participant observation of project meetings and activities, to document with detailed field notes, to conduct interviews and to contribute to ongoing analysis.

Through my involvement in the Home Lands project, I was introduced to young Karens and had the opportunity to extend my participation in the broader resettled Karen community in Melbourne. As part of the research project, we visited many locations in Melbourne and attended Karen community events. These included, for example, events at the offices of community organisations involved in the project, community centers across the city, public spaces, such as libraries, private homes, and numerous Christian churches located in the outer suburbs, which are focal for resettled Karen in Melbourne.

The Home Lands research project grew in part from a larger academic programme of research into settlement and wellbeing among recently resettled refugee youth in Melbourne. In this way, the project sought to address the emerging issues of alienation and marginalisation associated with young refugees resettling in Melbourne (La Trobe Refugee Research Center 2010). One of the many aims of the Home Lands project was to enable and encourage young people of refugee backgrounds to access the city of Melbourne. The local government of Melbourne, one of the project partners, was mindful that young people of refugee backgrounds settled in the city’s outer suburbs were infrequent visitors to the city center. It was hoped that, through the Karen youth’s participation in Home Lands, their movement across the greater city of Melbourne and travel into the city center would be facilitated. However, the Karen youth participating in Home Lands resisted this aspect of the research project design and, during feedback
to researchers, said that they wanted the workshops to be held closer to the two outer suburbs in which Karen had predominantly settled: Ringwood and Werribee. One half of the Karen youth participating in the Home Lands project resided in Werribee, a suburb located on the western side of the city; and the other half of participants resided in the Ringwood area located in the eastern outer suburbs of Melbourne (see Figure 2). As a result, the programme of the project changed in response to the locational preferences of the Karen participants, as well as to their shifting interests in, and capabilities with, technical production (see Gifford and Wilding 2013: 5). At the time, the community cultural workers and media specialists facilitating the training workshops believed that Karen youth resisted going to unfamiliar parts of the city because travel was inconvenient and time consuming, considering that all participants had to travel from the outer suburbs of Melbourne. The approximate time taken by participants to attend workshops was between 1 to 1.5 hours, one-way, via public transport.

During this time, I noticed that many Karen participating in Home Lands felt a strong sense of unease about moving through parts of Melbourne which were unfamiliar to them, as well as apprehension about using public transport to navigate their way to the various locations involved in the project. This was a peripheral aspect to Home Lands but it reflected the central issue of being “at home” in a settlement context, to which the project aimed to contribute understanding. Following the completion of the Home Lands project, which involved Karen participation in April 2011, I maintained my links with this group of resettled Karen youth in Melbourne; furthermore, as I discuss in Chapter Two, I continued to conduct fieldwork. It is this ethnographic fieldwork and my involvement in the Home Lands project that inform my PhD research.
1.3. Outline of the thesis

Following this Introduction, the thesis begins with a chapter outlining the research methodology. I situate the context of this qualitative research, describe my ethnographic approach and discuss the organisation of this dissertation. I suggest in this chapter that a heuristic research methodology is most apposite for an enquiry that focuses upon resettled Karens in Melbourne, and for presenting this account based on a fieldwork period of over two years.

The dissertation thereafter is designed as three separate yet thoroughly interrelated chapters that are then brought together in a concluding chapter. First, Chapter Three consists of a discussion of Karen history and an examination of the current political and social context. The chapter illustrates how resettled Karen in Melbourne remain intimately intertwined with their ethno-political history, and how this is expressed through distinct practices in which the social group recollects and appropriates grand political and religious narratives that are prefabricated with specific ideologies. The chapter outlines the making of a Karen national identity, the Karens’ subsequent fight for political autonomy and the ensuing context of internal displacement, long-term settlement in refugee camps and the consequential need for humanitarian resettlement in third countries. This overview provides the context to my examination of point-fields of power, nexuses centralised around charismatic individuals that radiate power and influence out into the Karen social body, and the premise that a symbolic refugee camp structure has been recreated and manifested inside the suburbs of Melbourne where Karens have settled.

Second, Chapter Four of this dissertation addresses the primary question of how people on the move engage with landscapes and memory. I examine the narratives of Karen people who recollect their movements from home villages in the northern hills of Burma to the refugee camps running along the territorial border seam with Thailand,
and then onwards to Australia by way of humanitarian resettlement. The premise of this chapter is that no matter how out of place people may seem to be, they remain nonetheless in place and embroidered into the warp and weft of material landscapes. I examine how people situate themselves through a bodily awareness tied to the sensorium and, furthermore, how people are equally tethered to memory as they are to the physical environment. I reveal how people’s recollections of movement portray landscapes that are symptomatic. The jungle landscape in Burma, I assert, is perceived as threatening, a harbourer of military troupes and surprise attacks, and that such presences are seen as embossed in the undulating valleys of Burma. The refugee camp is viewed as a landscape of stasis in which habituated movements cause people’s understandings of the progression of time and opportunity to stagnate, and the landscape of resettlement in Melbourne is an unfamiliar terrain that needs to be actively negotiated and reconciled. I examine how these landscapes, the first (the jungle of Burma) marked by sharp movement, the second (the refugee camp) by a slow lethargy, and the third (the landscape of resettlement) by disquieting unfamiliarity, are experienced, mediated and navigated.

The final discussion section of this dissertation, in Chapter Five, examines the practices that resettled Karen youth use to navigate and mediate the urban landscape of Melbourne, and their techniques to generate future possibilities. I analyse visual materials produced by Karen youth and discuss how they employ visually creative image practices to construct new social and material landscapes in which to move. These movements, I argue, take place inside visual images and are fields of action whereby they actively mediate and rehearse potential scenarios, or enact aspirations for the future. I explain how their recent resettlement in Melbourne has entailed movement in unfamiliar landscapes and how, in direct response, they construct image-worlds by gathering, curating and assembling images in archives and collectivities that are inhabitable. I argue that these are not idealised images but, rather, inhabited surfaces that are intimately experienced, thought in, mediated and learnt from. These visual images, I further suggest, function as mini-narratives that, once threaded together, constitute an ever-evolving weave capturing how resettled young Karen experience, negotiate, sensorially and emotionally engage in the settlement landscape.
In concluding this dissertation, I reflect on the fact that some of the practices focal to the discussion in this research have since ceased. I reflect on the reasons and the implications of why Karens resettled in Melbourne have finished producing the reposed visual images, and what this entails with regard to how they perceive their movement in and through the world. Furthermore, I reflect on how the Karen contributors to this research now see their position in the social and material landscapes of Melbourne. I also explore the question of whether the generative and curative practices in which Karen youth engaged, in order to create an affinity with the landscape of their settlement, have taken on the flesh of real life, as they first desired.
We all begin, as Clifford Geertz famously writes, ‘with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having lived only one’ (1973: 45). As an undergraduate, I wanted to ask Clifford Geertz: how is it that this one life comes to be? What are the manifold captivating forces compelling our movements on certain trajectories? Professor Geertz would assumedly, at this time, have given an answer about the importance of culture. Yet this only goes part way to explaining the intricacies of lives that are inherently ‘lived in correspondence’ with each other and with the world surrounding our bodies (Ingold 2012: 14, 2010a: 243-244). Later on in his career, Clifford Geertz presented another pertinent statement in his essay, “The World in Pieces” (2000), on the research subjects in anthropology's future. In this essay, Geertz reflects upon emerging pluralist politics and the rise of borderless capitalism, spurred by technological advances and increased human mobility. Geertz describes a world that is marked by a ‘pervasive raggedness’, and a world where there is the ‘shattering of larger coherences […] into smaller ones’. It is these glacial undercurrents changing the world order, Geertz contends, that are disentangling ‘ideological rigidities and forced choices…. In a splintered world [anthropology must now] address the splinters’ (Geertz 2000: 221).

Geertz is encouraging anthropologists to attend to connections. He argues that the world, which he presents as fractured and fissured, remains nonetheless inherently tethered through the connections between people, people and larger social processes, and people and things. Therefore, it is important for anthropology to attend to forming understandings of the nature and character of these connections. Yet despite this inherent connectivity our age is characterised, as Edward Said writes, by the production

The images evoked by the words associated with “migration” are the antithesis to connectivity. Instead, migrating bodies evoke connotations of dislocation, rupture, uprooting and disconnection from homelands. Analyses of migrant populations in the social sciences ‘have tended to view the migrant’s home and host societies, and the local patterns of social relations and systems of meaning of each place, as discrete, homogenous entities, each with its own separate economy, culture and historical trajectory’ (Baldassar 2001: 7; see also Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992). In response, anthropology shifted its focus to include spatial global movements and placed emphasis upon routes. This shift was strongly influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1981) reaction against rooted and fixed histories (see, for example, Malkki 1992; Vigh 2006b). Deleuze and Guattari state: ‘We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots and radicles. They made us suffer too much’ (1981: 15). Instead, Deleuze and Guattari provide a metaphor of rhizomes and a notion of nomadology, which acknowledges the phenomenon of people being increasingly on the move. However, this shift in academic focus towards a more mobile and transnational populace has continued to fuel a misconception about movement as well as flattening vital differences in the human experience (Ang 1994; Bender 2001; Cresswell 1997). The assumption is that, with movement, a schism is created between people and the material world that surrounds their bodies. The “migrant” is now characterised not only as weighted under ‘a profound sense of loss of territorial roots’, as Baldassar (2001: 7) has written, but is further suffering from being disconnected from the ground beneath their feet.

‘Postcolonial narratives of the diaspora and exile’, as Pnina Werbner writes, ‘situate the stranger as the archetypal figure of a globalizing modernity’ (2002: 6). In this narrative the “stranger” is epitomised by the “migrant”, and it is his body that is ‘matter out of place’ (Werbner 2002: 6; Bauman 1993: 148; Douglas 1966). Referring to Alfred Schutz (1944), Zygmunt Bauman writes,

I may know the stranger so little that I cannot even be sure that she ‘fits’ any of the types I am familiar with. There is always the danger of the
stranger “sitting across the barricade”, blurring the boundaries which ought to be kept watertight, and thus sapping the securely “typified” world. The stranger carries the threat of wrong classification, but — more horrifyingly yet — she is a threat to classification as such, to the order of the universe, to the orientation value of social space — to my life-world as such (1993: 150).

In this extract, Bauman (1993) captures the ambivalent position of the “stranger” to a nation state. The stranger is a body subject which is out of material place as well as social space, and the stranger’s movement across the surfaces of place correspondingly evokes a disquieting sentiment in the thoughts of others. A body such as this does not fit into neat, orderly taxa (Harraway 1991). Yet, considering this positioning of the “stranger” as matter out of place, how does a migrant body subject re-orientate and become emplaced? What techniques are employed to resituate the migrant body subject, and how does one learn to move, not with the gait of a “stranger”, but with the fluidity of a body subject that belongs?

Recent theorising treats movement as the dominant trait of modern social life (Bauman 2000, Castells 1996, Robertson et al 1994, Urry 2000). Inside this discourse is the suggestion that mobility and the processes of migration destabilise identities and communities, primarily because people are increasingly detached from places (Ahmed et al 2003). However, as Trinh Minh-ha states, ‘every movement between here and there bears with it a movement within here and within there’ (1994: 15). For the resettled Karen contributing to this research, the experience of the migration process entails their arrival in a new and foreign settlement landscape of Melbourne. Their experiences of forced displacement and humanitarian resettlement have brought on the need for reorientations and a re-inhabiting of their body in order to negotiate movement in the settlement space of Melbourne (Ahmed 2000, 2004; Probyn 1996). In this thesis, I investigate the techniques that resettled Karen refugees in Melbourne employ to reorientate and to familiarise themselves as they encounter new social and material landscapes resulting from their resettlement in Australia.
2.1. Framework

The overall theoretical framework of this thesis is primarily within the discipline of anthropology, specifically in the fields of material culture and visual anthropology, but I also draw upon refugee and migration studies. As an ethnography, this research aims to recover dimensions of resettled Karen lives that are often left out of broader analyses on humanitarian resettlement and migration. In the broad and interdisciplinary field of refugee studies, investigations have been dominated by an understanding built upon push and pull triggers as well as upon an ‘implicit functionalist model of society’ (Malkki 1995: 508). Case studies of particular refugee situations have multiplied since the interdisciplinary field of “refugee studies” burgeoned in the 1970 and 1980s, and there has been a strong tendency to track these studies against the timeline of “the refugee experience” (Stein 1981). In this generalised phenomenon of “the refugee experience”, Barry Stein proposes that there are discrete “stages”. These are:

- perception of a threat; decision to flee; the period of extreme danger and flight; reaching safety; camp behaviour; repatriation, settlement, or resettlement; the early and late stages of resettlement; adjustment and acculturation; and, finally, residual states and changes in behaviour caused by the experience (Stein 1981: 321).

Stein’s carving up of “stages” in “the refugee experience” depicts a somewhat functionalist view, in which forced displacement is an anomaly in an otherwise stable and univocal life trajectory. It is a view that has been critiqued and there have been calls for a revision of the way societies are perceived as territorially based in the field of refugee studies (see Malkki 1995: 508, Marx 1990: 189). Liisa Malkki believes that Stein’s essentialisation of the experiences of being a refugee ‘reflects a wider tendency, in many disciplines, to seize upon political or historical processes and then to inscribe aspects of those processes in the bodies and psyches of the people who are undergoing
them’ (1995: 511). In this way, as Malkki continues, ‘very mobile, unstable social phenomena may be imagined as essential “traits” and “characteristics” attached to, or emanating from, individual persons’ (1995: 511). There is thus the tendency to view all refugee body-subjects as sharing in a common condition, and symptoms combine to result in the embodiment of exile.

In many works that focus upon the processes of migration, particularly in the field of refugee studies, there is the inherent suggestion that, in becoming displaced, uprooted and severed from their homes, territory and culture, refugees will suffer the loss of all that they know. Perhaps worse is the assumption that every experience thereafter will be weighted by this loss; and “torn loose” from place, the refugee body will be forever out of place. With settlement to a new country, the refugee body will suffer, as Daniel and Knudsen suggest, ‘a crisis in culture wherein past and present remain as rigid as they are disparate, connected only by a chasm of despair’ (1995: 24).

Against this reading, I suggest in this thesis that processes of displacement and emplacement, and movement across material landscapes, do not tear people away from all that is familiar. Rather, I investigate how resettled Karen refugees in Melbourne seek out familiarity with their past experiences in the places which they now live. I suggest, following Sara Ahmed et al, that ‘being grounded is not necessarily about being fixed; being mobile is not necessarily about being detached’ (Ahmed et al. 2003: 1, original italics). Furthermore, I examine how resettled Karen people in Melbourne remain tethered to the material landscapes and social relations of their past, and the ways in which these connections remain vitalised in the present.

The lives of resettled Karen people in Melbourne have been marked by the fissures resulting from living in a landscape of political instability and from the effects of forced migration. Their experiences, which are narrated in detail in this dissertation, are deeply inflected by the violence, dislocation and separation that are a result of the Karen and Burmese civil conflict. In this dissertation, however, I do not dwell on these separations or focus on fractured lives brought about as a natural corollary of forced migration. Rather, I seek to understand how past experiences affect people’s current movements in the city of Melbourne as well as their overall experience of humanitarian resettlement in Australia.
Early on in my research, a group of young resettled Karen who became central to this research described the characteristics of the resettled Karen community in Melbourne, reflecting upon what the Karen ethnic group is like in general. Their approach was to instruct me to envision and understand that, in their words, the “Karen community is like a circle.” This analogy of the circle is highly pertinent. The circle analogy accentuates the reciprocity that is central to Karen sociality and alludes to the moral obligation of individuals to the whole Karen community. In the circle’s structure, there is an assumed idea of bounded completeness; yet a circle is also about the looping of beginnings into endings and back into the beginning, again and again. These young Karen were alluding not simply to the bounded nature of a circle, but also to its processual nature. The circle analogy in this instance was used to metaphorically suggest renewal and, with the circle’s rotation, there is the idea that there are no finite beginnings and endings but rather that things continually come into being.

Furthermore, within this circle, a body subject is inherently in communication with the experiences of others and with the world around them. To think of things as continually being at a point of beginning was a way for these young resettled Karens to think about how to regain momentum now that they had arrived in Melbourne. This understanding, maintained by these young Karen, goes against the tendency in work coming from the intersection of anthropology and refugee studies to see settlement as the end of the migration process. Rather, settlement in Melbourne for this group of young resettled Karen was simply another point of beginning, hung in an ongoing process of movement through the world. For them, resettlement brought on a period of re-orientation and re-familiarising: this dissertation attempts to capture these experiences, and to offer an understanding that connects their present practices to their histories and to their aspirations for the future.
2.2. Being in the field: methods, analysis and ethnography

This dissertation is a mosaic of ethnographic description and analysis. In many ways, I have employed the same style as many urban ethnographers who use ‘social analysis to flesh out the stories’ that they have gathered from their interlocutors (Stoller 2002: ix). I have completed over two years of qualitative fieldwork for which I adopted an unassuming research strategy.

As I discussed in Section 1.2, I first met the Karen young people who contribute to this research in January 2010 when I was a research in the Home Lands project. During the Home Lands project, I met and gained rapport with a group of 6 young Karen men and women. Following the completion of Home Lands, I maintained my links and rapport with this small group and, following their networks, I met their families and peers.6

I spent the majority of my time conducting fieldwork with resettled Karens in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne, but I also regularly visited Karen families living in the western area of the city (see Figure 2). As I mentioned in the Introduction, the geographical direction of these suburbs is important for many younger Karen, who not only identify themselves as Karen Australians, but also as “eastern” Karen or “western” Karen depending upon which of the two suburbs they have resettled in. Going to visit the other suburb, from where they live, is also a marked event for many resettled Karen youth. Typically, families have kin living in the other suburb from where they are located, while there are also community events, celebrations, sporting events and singing competitions, which add to the division and competition between the young people residing in either of the two suburbs. I spent time predominantly in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne because more contributors to this research were residing in the

6 To conduct this research, I applied for ethics approval: Ethic Approval UHEC 10-049, La Trobe University. See Appendix for a copy of the letter of approval.
eastern area of the city; however, there were also people living in the western suburb who greatly influenced this research.

Initially, I was introduced by people to their extended networks as “someone interested in Karen culture”. During the course of my fieldwork, a period of more than 24 months, I spent so much time in these areas that eventually I simply became a familiar presence. I attended all community events during this time, and spent time with Karen youth and their parents. Through this immersion, I was able to establish a strong rapport with these young people.

In the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, the resettled Karen community is very close-knit and regularly comes together as a whole every weekend. This is also true of Karens resettled in the west. I spent much of my time just being there with people, being at every community event and regularly attending the Sunday Karen church service. Following these church services, I would often be invited to go to people's houses, or else a group of us would take long drives together to visit parts of the city. These outings to explore the city became pivotal moments during this research and, in writing up this dissertation, I have attempted to bring these moments back to life: for example, in the opening passages of the introduction. These long drives exploring the city were enjoyable and became a beneficial offshoot for many Karen contributing to my research. Melbourne’s size and quick pace were perceived as a daunting landscape by resettled Karen. These outings enabled people to visit parts of Melbourne they had not yet seen and, over time, they became familiar with the layout of the city and where sites of interest were, for example parks and gardens.

The period of my fieldwork was marked by many events. There were numerous birthday celebrations, many weddings, high school graduations and citizenship celebrations. There was also the welcoming of three babies by people who feature strongly in this dissertation. After the completion of two years of fieldwork, during the

---

7 A recent research project by O’Neill and Hubbard (2010) is relevant here for its similarity. They undertook participatory action research with a group of asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants in the English East Midlands. The project involved walking through the East Midlands as a means for participants to reflect on being-in-place and making spaces of belonging. See also Fortier (1999), Ingold and Vergunst (2008), and Lee and Ingold (2006).
writing up of this dissertation, I continued to attend community events and various celebrations.

I achieved such a strong rapport with people because of the time I spent with them but, secondly, I believe because of my adoption of unassuming research strategies. Although it was well known that I was conducting PhD research about how resettled Karen experience their settlement in Melbourne, people greatly preferred that the research methodology be relaxed. Many resettled Karens in Melbourne struggled with speaking English and any use of audio recording devices was viewed as accentuating this difficulty. There was also a sense of trepidation involved in people having their voices recorded. Considering their histories of living in politically unstable areas and in long-term refugee camps which are heavily policed and where intimidation is a regular form of abuse, it was understandable that audio recording devices were viewed with more than a degree of uncertainty. There were a few occasions when I arranged to discuss certain topics with a group of young women; during these focus group interviews, I would use a tape recorder. At this stage, the people sincerely wanted to help me by contributing to my research project. They viewed my research much in the same way as their high school or Technical and Further Education (TAFE) assignments, with which I have continued to help them. In hindsight, I believe that this modest reciprocation in helping each other in our separate educations was also perhaps why I achieved such strong rapport and trust. Often, however, it was after the tape recorder had been turned off and put away that people started to talk animatedly about the issues. It was not that people did not want to discuss things openly and honestly, or that the audio recording device would remain as proof of what they said. Rather, I suspect that the inherent potential for endless playbacks made people feel uneasy about their language skills, and uncomfortable as they felt they were not able to adequately articulate what they wanted to say. They remarked that they were shy about being re-heard, even though they knew I would be the only listener and it would be in order for me to write detailed field notes. The time I spent conducting fieldwork, therefore, could be summarised as just my being there, hanging out, being a participant observer, listening and talking to people, and generally being a part of things. When appropriate, I would find a place to write down quick notes on these conversations; often, people would prompt me to take notes, suggesting that they were telling me about important historical events or pertinent
experiences and that I should “write about that”. I was transparent about conducting research and I was often asked about my progress. Contributors to this research expected that I would uphold core Karen values of privacy and decorum: adopting an unassuming research strategy was vital to what I interpreted many Karen to consider good manners.

My notes of these fieldwork conversations lacked the precision that is assured by using audio recording devices; however, it also opened up people’s willingness to engage me in conversation. At the end of each day, I would write up these notes in extended form, adding descriptive layers of the setting, the body language of people as they spoke, their mannerisms and the tonal inflections with which things were said. These details became vitally important when writing up this dissertation. They enabled me to describe the scene as it was happening so that a reader could be situated in amongst the details.

Many anthropologists, for example those working with homeless populations, have noted the advantages of adopting an unassuming research strategy and simply participating in people’s daily lives. As Robert Desjarlais states, using this research strategy, ‘one can develop lasting, informal ties with people, [that] often outweigh the benefits of information obtained through surveys and more intrusive methods’ (Desjarlais 1997: 40-41). Paul Stoller also agrees on the benefits of unassuming research strategies. His work with West African migrant traders is a case study example about which he notes that any other form of methodology ‘might have made them uneasy’ (Stoller 2002: x).

In this light, my research can be seen as directed to be in keeping with the research practices and descriptive analysis of some pivotal ethnographies in urban anthropology. Urban ethnographies, such as those of Bourgois (1995, 2009), Desjarlais (1997), Duneier (1999), and Stoller (2002), are methodologically thorough as well as highly theoretically invested. They form a canon of ethnographic writing that has informed my own methodological practices as well as the writing up of my research. Philippe Bourgois’ (1995, 2009) two main ethnographic studies focus upon the social lives of drug users in East Harlem and San Francisco. He engaged in long-term fieldwork, periods of five and twelve years, and employed the use of pseudonyms to
protect the identities of those he interviewed. Unlike my own research strategy of avoiding overt recording of people's voices, Bourgois used an audio recorder extensively: as such, the conversation details he describes is incredibly rich. Duneier's (1999) account of booksellers on the sidewalks of Greenwich Village also used a tape recorder: Duneier discussed the use of a tape recorder with the booksellers and it was kept visible from its placement underneath his seat as he spent his days at the book stalls. Duneier reveals the identities of his informants, arguing that this form of transparency increases his accountability to the study's description and interpretation. He argues that ethnographers should be highly accountable to their interlocutors and, as such, methodological openness and visibility is a prime way of assuring the inherent responsibility in scholarship that involves people's lives. In an interview published after his book *Sidewalk*, Duneier states: 'I think that there is a tendency in all methodological writing about ethnography to rationalize the way that one has done one's work' (Duneier and Back 2006: 547). Duneier states that ‘Goffman said that many of the methodological statements that we read are rationalizations for what the writer has done and what has happened in a particular research relationship' (Duneier and Back 2006: 547). Duneier does not specify in this interview which work of Erving Goffman's he is referring to. I think in this instance, however, Duneier may be referring to a statement in Goffman's lecture *On Fieldwork* (1989 [1974]), which was posthumously published. In it, Goffman states: ‘I am only going to report on what I conclude from studies of this kind that I've done. And I can only begin by repeating… that what you get in all of this [attempt to articulate techniques] is rationalizations, and we're in the precarious position of providing them' (1989 [1974]: 123). In this interview, Duneier reasons that ethnographers must conduct themselves in a manner that they believe to be best practice.

Paul Stoller's ethnography, *Money Has No Smell* (2002), is a case for diminishing the visibility of interlocutors. Stoller writes that among the West Africans with whom he conducted research, ‘privacy is a major issue, using real names would be unethical’ (Stoller 2002: 184). Therefore, Stoller states, ‘As is often the case in social science, an ecumenical approach to field methodology is usually the best path to follow’ (Stoller 2002: 184). In this research, I have chosen to change the names of those involved in this research. I have done this because the more time I have spent understanding the
nuances of Karen social practice, the more I have come to realise the vital importance of privacy and modesty. Decency, not talking ill of people, nor discussing the lives of others, are prominent characteristics of the resettled Karen community in Melbourne and, for that reason alone, I have changed people’s names. As I have re-described experiences with the same intimate emotive qualities as they were originally told, I have chosen to be overly cautious in respecting many people’s inherently private manner. The resettled Karen community is relatively small in Melbourne and, due to my presence at community events for such an extended period of time, it would be possible for some people to work out who is featured in this thesis. In most fieldwork settings this would also be an unavoidable possibility. My use of pseudonyms is, however, more out of respect, rather than necessity due to sensitive content.

This perhaps reflects on one of the main challenges to ethnography in general. This is the decision to be descriptive in details so as to present a sincere account of the lives of others; however, in doing so, the encompassment of all these elements can potentially be too revealing. As Duneier states:

I think that it’s interesting how the ways in which so much that goes on in ethnography is actually no different from everyday life. And I think that it requires a kind of the rethinking of the idea of a distinctive ethnographic encounter, an encounter that is different from the other things that we do, so that these are possibilities in life more generally. And I think that ethnography is one of the sub-set of cases where those kind of transcendent connections and recognitions of humanity of others are possible, where it is possible to gain access to the humanity of ‘others’ despite the normal barriers that are there (Duneier and Back 2006: 548-549).

Duneier’s research into race and social class is forward in recognising that the ethnographer, in this instance Duneier, and the subjects of research inquiry, the resource-poor African American booksellers, need to be honest regarding their positions of power and privilege. To this extent, Duneier argues for the redistribution of ethnographic authority. Conducting research in social settings of displacement and resettlement does invite the questioning of ethnographic authority. Furthermore, my participant observation was inherently limited because I do not share the traumas and
hardships of civil war, forced displacement, long-term residence in refugee camps and humanitarian resettlement. As others working with refugees and migrants have noted, as a researcher from a non-refugee background, I can never share in many aspects of their lives (see McMichael 2002).

During this research, I have actively engaged resettled Karen contributors to this dissertation to be forthcoming about the issues which they considered important for this research to address. A common response was: “We want people to know more about Karen … our experiences, our history … What it is like to be Karen.” These types of statements articulate that it is important to describe the finer details, the difficulties of moving to another country and the difficulties of leaving things behind. Resettled Karens contributing to this research viewed its collection and its subsequent writing as a means of disseminating knowledge about the Karen ethnic group in general—their political struggle, their refugee status—as well as of documenting their individual experiences to be read and learnt from by an Australian audience. The Karen contributors often said that they wanted their voices to be heard and they wanted the political plight of the Karen to be brought to more public attention. Many resettled Karen felt silenced by the process of humanitarian resettlement; and this research therefore became a positive outlet for people to reflect upon their settlement and their life trajectories.

As an ethnography, this dissertation seeks to add to an emerging field of anthropological research in the context of forced migration and Karen resettlement in Australia. Two recently completed theses by Worland (2010) and Moran (2012) are examples of this initial field. Worland’s (2010) dissertation is on Christian Karen identity: she conducted interviews with Karen people living inside Mae La refugee camp and Karen community leaders resettled in Sydney. Moran (2012) produced a comparative case study on belonging and multiculturalism amongst Karen and Sudanese people living in Brisbane. In both of these recently completed dissertations, the authors also noted that their research participants wanted Karen social-political experiences to be heard by a larger audience. I have drawn upon these dissertations, as well as a broad

---

8 See also for other examples Allender (2008), Bird (2013), Collopy and Crouch (2011), Schweitzer, Brough, Vromans and Asic-Kobe (2011); and for examples of Karens resettling in third countries, such as the United States of America, see Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny (2011); and in Japan, see Banki (2006).
base of other secondary sources, to enrich my own research, especially in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

In the broader field of discourse that focuses upon Karen, there are fine historical studies that are detailed with early missionary accounts from the 1800s and early 1900s. In Chapter Three of this dissertation, I have used these archival sources to establish the political background and societal forces that have propelled the Karen to their present situation. I have also looked at analogous ethnographic research that focuses on other ethnic groups who, like the Karen, are suffering from political displacement and living in long-term refugee camps on the Thailand Burma border. For example, Dudley’s (2007, 2010, 2010a) research on the Karenni, who live inside the same refugee camps as the Karen. Adding to these secondary sources, I draw from my fieldwork research throughout the entire thesis, but particularly in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. In this way, I have followed Chris Tilley’s notion of three phase research, whereby ‘The first phase of research informs an initial understanding; the fieldwork phase leads to an experiential revaluation and new understandings. The third and final phase recontextualises the first two to produce something that is different again’ (Tilley 2004: 224). Tilley (2004) suggests that our understandings gathered from being in the field are changing all the time (2004: 224). These changes are precipitated by all of the successive encounters we have in a particular field and, as we build up our knowledge of people and place, our understandings necessarily transform over time. Thus, as Tilley states, to greater or lesser extents, our ‘accounts thus produced are entirely provisional. Where they end is intended to facilitate another beginning’ (Tilley 2004: 224).
2.3. Analogy: seeking correspondences and attachments

There are twenty unique voices recorded in this dissertation, including my own. Although the research was conducted over two years and many resettled Karens in Melbourne contributed to it, the narratives of these 19 individuals were striking in their analogous nature and their reflection of more general experiences and themes that were revealed during the course of my fieldwork. I have chosen to focus upon these 19 lives as a means of enabling the reader to gain a picture of the lives of Karen people who are resettled in Melbourne. In this manner, I have followed Duneier and his response, given in an interview with Les Back, to the claim ‘that contemporary ethnography has gotten away from a couple of things with regards to units of analysis’ (Duneier and Back 2006: 554). Duneier states:

If you are going to get at the humanity of people, you can’t just have a bunch of disembodied thoughts that come out of subjects’ mouths in interviews without ever developing characters and trying to show people as full human beings. In order to do that it is useful to have a character that lives in a text from chapter to chapter and is recognisable (Duneier and Back 2006: 554).

Duneier’s ethnographic work follows in the tradition of Liebow (1967) and Stack (1974), whereby strong characters feature in their ethnographies depicting urban lives in America. The qualitative research I have conducted is representative of over two years of fieldwork in the two suburbs where Karens have predominantly settled in the city of Melbourne. In trying to illuminate the broader picture of settlement as experienced by resettled Karens in Melbourne, I believe that founding description and analysis on the narratives of 19 people provides a more thorough account. These individuals are unique, but their experiences are more often than not shared across the broader resettled Karen community in Melbourne. These include, for example, displacement from home villages, long walks through the jungle, navigation around, and
avoidance of, roaming Tatmadaw troops who attempt to control swathes of land through continuously patrolling areas, as well as long term encampment and the difficulties of establishing lives post-resettlement in Melbourne. With these accounts presented in this ethnographic dissertation, I have sought to enable the reader to see, through the focus on reoccurring identities, an intricate and often intimate expression of lives affected by forced migration. I believe that the descent into an understanding the lives of people, their perceptions of movement and placement in the world, needs to be centered upon longer trajectories of people’s lives.

The analysis of this research did not start at the end of my fieldwork but was, rather, a continual practice. Analysis and bridging connections between moments and details were ongoing; however, following the end of fieldwork, I spent a significant period of time condensing this ongoing systematic analysis and thematically coding the data I had gathered. This process is thus consistent with qualitative analysis and grounded theory (Glasner and Strauss 1968; O'Reilly 2009; LeCompte and Schensul 1999a, 1999b). The data were in the form of detailed fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews and a collection of over 2,500 images and photographs. I thematically coded the data in numerous channels, not all of which are featured in this dissertation. For example, I generated units of data that focused upon kinship, housing, material culture, love, education and learning, language, refugee camps, travel, the sensorium, ect. Inside these themes, I generated further sub-units to extrapolate further details. For example, the data related to Travel, were further segmented into sections that dealt with aeroplanes, vehicles, accidents, motion sickness, walking and navigation. In writing this dissertation, I approached each chapter and each subtitled section by continually re-interacting with the data on the relevant key themes. I colour coded, physically cut up sections of fieldnotes and collated canons of images, all with the intention of looking for connections. When viewing the collated data, the narratives and details I had collected revealed people’s lives, much like threads that ran through the various thematic units. Choosing which lives and narratives to use in writing this dissertation then became a

---

9 In regards to my approach for thematic analysis and coding, I have followed the suggestions presented in works focusing on methodology. For example, Bernard 2006, 2012; Bernard and Ryan 2010; DeWalt and DeWalt 2002; Given 2008; Madden 2010; Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte 1999.
process of picking up these recursive threads running through the mounds of fieldnotes and images.

In this manner, my methodology touches upon a statement by Whyte, who says, ‘I am convinced that the actual evolution of research ideas does not take place in accord with the formal statements we read on research methods. The ideas grow up in part out of our immersion in the data and out of the whole process of living’ (Whyte 2012 [1943]: 280). Whyte goes on to reason that it is inherently difficult to explain the processes of analysis because, as he says, so much of this ‘proceeds on an unconscious level’ (2012 [1943]: 280). All researchers can do, Whyte suggests, is describe how the patterns emerged.

It is the illumination of connections and analogous themes through experiences, moments witnessed and common sentiments, that I have sought to bring into constellation in this dissertation. ‘The objective of ethnography,’ as Tim Ingold writes, ‘is to describe the lives of people other than ourselves, with an accuracy and sensitivity honed by detailed observation and prolonged first-hand experience’ (Ingold 2011: 229). During the research, I have followed these objectives, placed theoretically informed ideas into the realities of everyday life and sought to witness them in the viscerally lived experiences of people. I have sought to open up analytic fields rather than be rigid in methodological or theoretical approaches. In this way, I have been guided by a statement of C. Wright Mills, as quoted in the PhD thesis of Alfred Gell, ‘who says, somewhere, that social scientists ought not to neglect the “interesting” in seeking only the “verifiable”’ (Gell 1973: 611).

Over a decade ago, Barbara Stafford wrote a book called *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting* (1999). In it, she notes that it is ‘time to develop a sophisticated theory and practice of resemblance rather than continuing endlessly to subdivide distinctions’ (Stafford 1999: xv). This appeal, although entirely separate from Geertz’s call for anthropologists to attend to connections, is strikingly similar in its overarching theme and remains highly pertinent. Stafford seeks to find the inherent connections and to witness, as she says, the ‘sameness-in-difference’ (Stafford 1999: xvi).
In keeping with Geertz’s (2000) perception of a ragged and fissured world order, Stafford comments on the modern day lack of discussion on resemblance. Instead, she believes that we are focused upon ‘an exaggerated awareness of difference’ (Stafford 1999: 10). The world in which we live ‘is staggering under an explosion of discontinuous happenings exhibited as if they had no historical precedents’, Stafford writes (1999: 2). She continues with the suggestion that ‘We are overloaded with personal statements, irreducibly distinctive subjects, and contradictory opinions’ (Stafford 1999: 10). Stafford contends that it is this ‘age of oneness, of assertive identities, of the “diversification of diversity”’ that has come to characterise our world since the late eighteenth century’s rise of romanticism and individualism (1999: 10).

The central idea that Stafford presents, that of the desire to seek correlation and connection between disparate things, is a tenet of approach that I am wanting to draw upon in understanding Karen sociality, and their perceptions of their trajectories and placement in the world. In this way, I am seeking to present an ethnography that is not so resolutely localising (see also Appadurai 1996: 55). The narratives detailed in this dissertation, of people’s experiences traversing multiple landscapes, places, countries and time frames, inherently curtail any attempts at resolute localising. Instead, these narratives describing people’s experiences extend across space and time. These narratives, portioned by way of subject and context, can be viewed as ‘fragments that’, as Stafford writes, ‘engage in a suggestive dialogue across the vast surfaces’ (1999: 148). Narratives and descriptions of experiences become catalysts in mobilising further analogous recollections or descriptive expression. They bring forth associational experiences and recollections which can come to regenerate bonds between people and place.

10 There is an interesting correlation in these objectives to ideas presented in an article by Wilding (2007) on the use of ethnography in transnational research fields: in particular, Wilding’s idea that in the discipline of anthropology, ethnographic practice has focused upon the migration of the anthropologist to the research field over the ‘movement of the mind or imagination’ (2007: 332). Wilding’s article is a critical examination into how much ‘the researcher’s focus on transnational processes and practices reflects the concerns and emphases of the participants in the research, as opposed to reproducing the particular conditions under which the ethnographer lives and conducts his or her research’ (2007: 332-333).
2.4. Nested envelopes

During this research, people did not lay out their life story or give a chronological account of their histories and their movements. Rather, people came to recollect, describe and narrate portions and moments of their lives as these were triggered by external stimuli. This is particularly why an unassuming research strategy was most appropriate. For example, during our visits to parks and gardens located around the city, people would recognise familiar shades of green or familiar textures in the foliage. These familiar hues and tactile sensations were catalysts for many Karen people to recollect memories or to express sentiments which correlated to broader perceptions of their being in the world and to their placements in it. On occasion, looking at ducks and birds in the municipal council’s manicured English styled gardens, the Karen young people often remarked with awe just how much life was contained in these spaces. The sight of ducks meandering freely in their man-made ponds would prompt many Karen to comment on the ecological disparity between these spaces, pocketed in the urban landscape of Melbourne, and the dry, denuded spaces they described in the refugee camp. Watching the ducks moving freely, they would remark that there are no ducks and birds inside the refugee camp. The ducks and the birds had been eaten, or frightened away by the excess of human habitation. Piecing together various contexts, it becomes inherently understandable why a duck meandering in a Melbourne park, freely moving and unintimidated by the presence of people, should manifest so much meaning for these young Karen men and women.

It is these analogous insights that build the focus of this research. Seemingly mundane observations are in fact highly pertinent, intricate and potently evocative, especially for people experiencing their settlement in a new city. To this end, I have sought to open up and unravel the argument that Stafford (1999) presents in her work on analogy, which is ‘the need to revisualise how we create attachments’ (1999: 4). This
notion of connection and attachment was further emphasised by a common transnational communication practice of resettled Karens.

In describing how Karen resettled in Melbourne post photos and letters back to family and friends remaining inside the refugee camp, people commented how “getting things back is very difficult.” To negotiate this difficulty they described an intricate and subversive process that negotiated multiple places and bureaucratic structures. Inside the refugee camps from which the Karen involved in this research have arrived, people are relegated to live in zones of the camp. Many people in the resettled Karen community in Melbourne have come from Mae La refugee camp, the largest of all of the long term settlement camps running along the border between Thailand and Burma. In particular, they have come from Zone 1.A. In order to send packages to kin residing in Zone 1.A, in which people have no addresses, Karen living in Melbourne apply the details of multiple destinations as a means of relaying their packages through their transnational networks. This is achieved by nesting envelopes within envelopes. At each point of destination along a long networked pathway, an envelope is shed from the package, which it will then continue to its next predetermined destination.

All of the points along this transnational network are designed to enable the package’s continual movement. For example, a trajectory could be networked through churches and their congregations. Each church receives an addressed envelope that is opened to reveal the next destination which, for example, could be a relay through congregational affiliations or prayer and singing groups. In this practice of relaying items—photographs, letters, t-shirts—each point of destination reveals a further pathway to accessing the person waiting at the other end. In this way, the surface of the envelope, the details marked on its side, become gateways that reveal movements in mediated and planned trajectories. From this practice of transnational correspondence, I suggest that the nesting of envelopes within envelopes becomes a revelatory act. Each detail of a person’s name along the pathway that relays a material item of sentiment reveals a further layer of social connection. In writing this dissertation, I have designed and structured the layering of ethnographic detail to mimic this revelatory nature of envelopes within envelopes. This method of ethnographic writing is, I believe, apposite and representative of the broader research experience. During fieldwork and during
analysis, more and more layers of details and connections were revealed. This thesis is structured in a manner that is akin to the whole fieldwork experience whereby with time, rapport and trust, you are increasingly let into the lives of others.

This movement of nested envelopes across territorial borders, institutional artifices like refugee camps and their precarious internal landscapes, also reflects—in a broader reading—that movement in and through the world is a continually mediated practice for resettled Karens in Melbourne. This dissertation explains how spaces, landscapes and places are moved in. There are spaces of safety opening up and spaces closing down. In this dissertation, I will illustrate how these shifting conditions are negotiated by Karen people, much like a receding tide. In each space, social and material landscapes must be negotiated to enable continual movement, sustain momentum and for bodies to be situated ‘in correspondence’ with the ongoing movements of the world (Ingold 2012: 14, 2010a: 243-244). On a further analogous level, the narratives that detail these movements, of people and of things, were also unveiled by Karen during this research, much like envelopes that nest one inside the other.

Each narrative offers potential for reflecting on another narrative, description or sensate recollection. Once illuminated, these moments of description and expression, tied to ecologies, anchored to landscapes, woven into the tempo of people’s momentum and gait, can be seen to seek union with other experiences, sensations, presences and knowledges. Even stark differences between differing narratives and descriptions, like the bird-less ecology of the refugee camp opposing the parks in the city of Melbourne that are teeming with life, can be relational and offer a progression into each other. In this way, this thesis is written to illustrate how narratives, once expressed, can be seen as seeking out the warmth of other narratives. The narratives of the contributors to this research ‘are not only connected forward and backward over time and space but are constantly being packaged and repackaged under the pressure of different contexts’ (Stafford 1999: 171).

The nesting of envelopes and the shedding of layers as a means of enabling analysis is a process of revealing, of understanding the complicated histories and increasingly contested futures of the Karen who are the subjects binding this research.
The circle they denote as representing themselves and their community, I suggest, is not ready-made, nor contained. Just as life is not ready-made, the circle also reaches out, extends temporally, encompassing different possibilities, trajectories and opportunities.

In the following chapter, I examine the historical trajectory of the Karen ethnic group and the current political and social context. I discuss how resettled Karen in Melbourne remain entangled with their ethno-political history. I examine the making of a Karen national identity, the subsequent fight for political autonomy and the ensuing context of internal displacement, long-term settlement in refugee camps and the consequential need for humanitarian resettlement in third countries. I then discuss how a symbolic refugee camp structure centralised around charismatic individuals has been recreated in the suburbs of Melbourne where Karen have predominantly settled.
3. THE KAREN

3.1. Pathos-laden signs

A Karen pastor is standing on the carpeted pulpit in front of the resettled Karen Baptist congregation in an outer suburb of eastern Melbourne. Today is a Karen community celebration called, *New Year, New Generation, New Start in a New Community*, and there are a few non-Karens who are also involved with this Baptist church attending the event. Pastor Wah Doh is recounting events that took place when he was a missionary at Ler Per Her Internally Displaced Persons Camp, on the Thai Burma border. Pastor Wah Doh tells us, the congregational audience, that the jungle is thick around Ler Per Her IDP Camp, but inside amongst the bamboo huts, the Karen inhabitants have built an open-air chapel. In this space, Pastor Wah Doh conducted his sermons and ran bible studies, until one evening when they heard muffled gunshots ringing through the dense jungle surrounding the camp. Pastor Wah Doh recalls how Burmese Tatmadaw soldiers started to burst through the barrier of trees and charged into the camp. The soldiers set “fire to the bamboo huts,” “hitting people” as they went. Pastor Wah Doh pushed people out of the chapel and they all ran, fanning out, towards the safety of the jungle as “the Burmese bullets” flew. For four days, Pastor Wah Doh led the small congregation through the valleys of the jungle as Tatmadaw soldiers tailed...
them, and fired their weapons into the sky. In the late afternoon of the fourth day, the congregation arrived at the base of a mountain just as the monsoonal rains began.

Pastor Wah Doh tells the Karen and non-Karen audience listening to his sermon how he led the congregation up the steep side of the mountain. Placed up high, they looked down to see the Tatmadaw soldiers on the crest of the valley wall stranded by the rising floodwaters. High on the mountain stood a Buddhist monastery, and Pastor Wah Doh negotiated secure refuge for his congregation. The congregation stayed inside the monastery for two months as the rains continued, and the floodwaters rose around the base of the mountain. Pastor Wah Doh testifies to the kindness of the Buddhist monks who “allowed us to run classes on scripture.” “They were good to us,” he says.

Behind the pulpit where Pastor Wah Doh stands, there is a projection onto the broad white altar wall. Images set to slideshow display the chapel, the bamboo settlements, the green jungle, Tatmadaw soldiers in their army fatigues, Karen victims contorted and bleeding, and then an image of the cleansing floodwaters carving through the landscape. As these photographs automatically scroll along, they form a collection. Such a collection is grouped by the horrifying details in the images and we, in the congregation, witness the content as small, unique yet re-occurring devastations.

The affecting nature of the images that pass behind Pastor Wah Doh is heightened because they are coupled with his narrative on his experience fleeing from Ler Per Her IDP Camp. To go a step further, however, is to consider such images, and their collective grouping that has been curated to decorate Pastor Wah Doh’s narrative, as pathos-laden signs. Pathos-laden signs are usually associated with art and literature in the early nineteenth century (Stafford 2007). William Blake’s images of twisted ecologies and the biblical tragedies painted by William Turner are pre-eminent examples of images that are seeped with catastrophism, anxiety and turbulence. This period was dominated by images of catastrophism that were later transformed by the Romantic movement into generalised and representative sentiments of the time, a collection of pathos-laden signs that tuned the social climate (Stafford 2007: 30-31). Pastor Wah Doh’s employment of his own images of catastrophism—soldiers standing in their jungle army fatigues, bloodied bodies of civilians, the torrent of water rushing
around the turns in the valleys—adds weight to his recollection of fleeing the camp and leading his congregation to safety.

The viewing of these images, alongside Pastor Wah Doh’s narrative with an awareness of its striking resemblance to biblical accounts of flood and deluge myths, suggests a particular mimesis. There is the sense of a deliberate formulation of a presentation that withdraws from emotive capital accrued by a system of religious signs and symbols. For example, Pastor Wah Doh’s narrated journey of the enemy and the rising floodwaters impelling him to find safety up the mountain for his congregation, strongly resembles the biblical and Quranic account of Exodus. There is also a strong resemblance to the account of Noah’s Ark, in which the waters are cleansing and there is the preparation for a future humanity by rebirth. As the floodwaters rose, Noah’s Ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat where it stayed for one month. The water, in both accounts, purifies horrifying details. There is also the sense at the completion of Pastor Wah Doh’s narrative, visually presented by the accompanying collection of images that, like the account of Noah’s Ark, the details are transformed and experience is de-fleshed from the individual and turned into a particular class of pathos-laden signs. What is broken, bloody and fearful in Pastor Wah Doh’s narrative is with time, patience and attentiveness to community and faith, reconstructed and creating resilience.

Social anthropologist, Alexander Horstmann (2011, 2011a), writes of witnessing similar presentations. In November 2010, he attended a workshop held at a Bible School in Chiang Mai alongside Karen pastors, Karen Baptist intellectuals from Thailand and Karen refugee leaders, which was an opportunity to read the bible ‘through Karen eyes’ (2011: 85). Horstmann recounts, that ‘Over two days, this illustrious circle would read from the bible to make sense of their “fate”, to find a reason for the suffering of the Karen population and to find biblical analogies to it’ (2011: 85). Horstmann discusses how these respected leaders from the Karen community found biblical accounts in which to interpret their own predicament and how the Karen leaders fashioned a manner through which to re-construct understandings of their social and political situation. This form of manipulating narratives is to deliberately ‘confer retrospective meaning’ on past events (Werbner 2002: 83). It shows, as Werbner states,
[That] ‘memories of the past mythologized in the present are reflexive: they commemorate past experiences through a heightened consciousness of the present. A corollary of this is that interpretations of the past depend on the narrators’ present positioning. Different narrators create generically different tales of past experiences, glossing those experiences as ideal or threatening, an exercise in nostalgia or a project for the future (2002: 83).

In the case of the Karen, Horstmann (2011a: 7-10), as well as other scholars (Rajah 2002: 526-533, South 2007: 70), all agree that religion and the national Karen identity and narrative are inseparable, and that this is particularly pronounced in the context of Burma’s ongoing civil war.

3.2. The creation of a people: missionaries and the interpretation of history

The Karen are the third largest ethnic group in Burma and form approximately 7% of the country’s current population. Martin Smith notes that, until the British Empire’s annexation of Burma in the nineteenth century, ‘the Karens were largely a hill or forest-dwelling people without a written literature… [and] as a result, the Karens appear as an ethnic group very much on the fringes of recorded history’ (2003: 11). Recorded historical accounts have been predominantly conducted at the behest of religious institutions and their missionary endeavors. When the first missionaries discovered the Karen in 1827, they were pleasantly ‘surprised’, as Marshall writes in 1922, ‘to find that these people professed having received from their forefathers
monotheistic traditions, in which the story of creation was almost parallel to the Mosaic account in Genesis’ (Marshall 1922: 11).

Two myths greatly impressed the American Baptist missionaries who began work among the Karen in the early part of the nineteenth century. The first story parallels the biblical account of the Garden of Eden, in which there is the creation of the first ancestral couple by a cosmogonic progenitor, Y’wa. The story begins when the couple is forbidden to eat a certain fruit but a female serpent, Mu ka li, persuades them to do so thus precipitating the couple’s physical decay. Some missionaries saw a strong resemblance in the Karen word for God, Y’wa, to the Hebrew equivalent, Yahweh. Keyes (1977: 52), however, remarks upon the selective interpretation of creation stories by missionaries. Keyes states that ‘contrary to such interpretations, Y’wa cannot in fact be seen (at least prior to Christian missionisation) as a high god that approximates the biblical conception of God’ (1977: 52). For the Karen, Keyes continues, ‘Y’wa represents a natural state, including the distinctions between men, some of whom are literate and other of whom, like the Karens, are not’ (1977: 52).

The second story begins with three brothers who ‘receive the original creation’ as a gift from their Father (Babson 2006: 406). As Babson, a theological historian writes, ‘The oldest, who had the darkest skin, received the earth; the middle son, whose skin was lighter, the skies and the waters. The youngest, who had the lightest skin, received only the ancestral story of his people in the form of a book’ (Babson 2006: 406). The people were then left to await the brother’s return. Babson’s explanation is that when the first ‘fair-skinned Christian missionary arrived in the land of origin, bringing the book he called the Bible, the [Karen] embraced him as their lost kin and adopted his book as their own new-found story’ (Babson 2006: 406). Keyes (2003: 212) makes the case that it was Protestant missionaries who presented themselves as the carriers of the book of creation, which they presented as the Bible.

A later story provided by Reverend David Gilmore (1911) recounts the travels of an ancestral progenitor who kills a wild boar. He uses one of the boar’s tusks to make a comb and, as he begins to comb his hair, he instantly becomes young again. His family members also comb their hair and they, too, become young. His children have many offspring who, in turn, continue to have many children whilst they continue to use the
boar tusk comb and circumvent aging and death. The land eventually becomes overpopulated and the ancestral progenitor decides he must search for new lands for his family to settle. He travels a vast distance and, along the journey, he loses his descendants after he crosses a river of sand. The account finishes with the declaration that when his descendants are freed from sin, the ancestral progenitor will return and lead his children across the river to the new lands he has found (Rajah 1990: 112-113).

Upon hearing Karen creation stories referring to a river of sand, some of the earliest missionaries, for example the American Baptist Francis Mason, were convinced that the Karen were the lost tribe of Israel (Mason 1846, 1866, 1866b; Rajah 2002). Dr. Francis Mason believed that this river of sand was an allusion to the Gobi Desert, yet some missionaries, for example Reverend Gilmore, were skeptical of this interpretation. Nevertheless, versions of these creation stories have woven their way firmly into the political ideology of the Karen. In fact, the influence of missionaries, in their interpretation of Karen oral accounts, fostering of theological education and the subsequent spreading of Christianity, has played a foundational role in the construction of a Karen national imagination (Horstmann 2011, 2011a; Keyes 1979, 1977).

The written accounts and interpretations of missionaries were considered by those who were also a part of religious institutions, such as Reverend Marshall, to be ‘but another by-product of the great missionary enterprise, which [sought] to lift the less fortunate peoples of the world to a higher plane of life and enjoyments, and to bring them the best of our Christian civilisation’ (Marshall 1922: 2). Their ‘missionary enterprise’ was successful and certainly bolstered by the practical work of missionaries in translating the bible into several languages for which there was no prior orthography (Keyes 2003: 212; Marshall 1922: 2). In the nineteenth century, huge numbers of Karennic-speaking people converted to Christianity. This had a profound impact on a very diverse society that included twelve mutually unintelligible, but related dialects, as well as five sub-groups.

In *The Loyal Karens of Burma* (1887), Smeaton publishes the letters of J.B. Vinton, whom he believes to be ‘one of the foremost missionary leaders’ (1887: 4). J.B Vinton witnessed anti-British rebellions in Burma in 1886 and, in one telling letter
from Rangoon dated the 28th of February 1886, he writes of the Karen hardiness and Christian aims amongst all the political upheaval:

So far from being daunted, I never saw the Karen so anxious for a fight. This is just welding the Karens into a nation, not an aggregate of clans. The heathen Karens to a man are brigading themselves under the Christians. The whole thing is good for the Karen. This will put virility into our Christianity... From a loose aggregation of clans we shall weld them into a nation yet (Smeaton 1887: 4, 7).

3.3. Constructing a nation: Christianity, leadership and autonomy

In *A History of Modern Burma* (1958), the historian John Cady was the first to argue that missionary schooling and religious institutional networks were pivotal in constructing a pan-Karen national identity from very disparate communities. Agreeing with this, Keyes states: ‘These schools were the crucible for an emergent sense of Karen-ness that transcended local communities’ (2003: 212). Cady (1958) also acknowledged the impact of literacy brought by Baptist missions, and points to the education provided in the 1800s as the origins of a distinct Karen nationalism. 11

A printing press was set up in 1837 and, by 1853, the Bible was published in S’gaw Karen; and in 1878, an entire Pwo Karen bible was completed (Hovemyr 1989: 98). Together with theological literature, missionaries established a network of schools for Karen people, which brought them literacy and a shared sense of identity. Through

11 Catholic missionaries were also involved with Karennic-speaking people inside Burma in the nineteenth century; however, Protestant missionisation, as Keyes writes, was ‘the primary catalyst for the emergence of Karen nationalism’ (2003: 217).
the churches and their schools, a supra-local network of connections and organisations was generated (Keyes 1977: 56). This missionary-led educational network directly related to ‘many literate Karen, particularly those who held supra-village roles in church organisations, education and publication, [beginning] to identify as “Karen” rather than as people of local communities’ (Keyes 2003: 212). Rajah (2002: 527) views these developments as a catalyst for a transformation in ‘modes of consciousness’: the Karen who were educated through the missionary-led educational network were able to envision their common ancestry irrespective of the diversity of spoken dialects. Furthermore, there was an encouragement of ethnic unity despite their inherent diversity which, in turn, strengthened the model of trans-local organisation. As Rajah states: ‘the Church-based supra-local organisations were a model for the constitution of social groups and new forms of consociation’ (2002: 527).

Christianity and the missionary enterprise can be seen as constructing Karen identity in Burma (Keyes 2003: 211). In 1881, following the successful education of many Karen, a National Association was established to promote ‘pan-Karen aspirations’ (Hovemyr 1989). The Karen National Association appealed to the people with its premise of uniting and promoting Karen identity, leadership, education and its encouragement of social and economic advancement for all Karen peoples: this was the first public assertion of ethno-nationalism (see also Renard 1980: 41-2, Smith 1991: 45, Smeaton 1887: 201). It also presents as a direct response to the perception of the time that ‘the very category “Karen” was a derogatory term and an invention of the Burmese that was only given respectability by Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century’ (Lieberman 1978: 469).

In 1928, Dr San C. Po, who is thought of as the figurehead for the Karen nation, issued the first decree for an independent Karen State (Smith 1991: 44-51). It proved a pivotal moment through the tying of territory to Karen sovereignty (Rajah 2002). To support this movement, the first and only Karen history was published in

---

12 S’gaw is the most commonly spoken dialect amongst the majority of Karen people.
14 Smith (1991) provides a very good overview of Karen nationalism which, alongside Burman nationalism, is protracted and complex. Ashley South (2011) provides a comprehensive analysis of the present situation of the Karen. Also see, Dudley 2003, Keyes 1979, and Rajah 1990.
1931. *Kanyau ata Si Tai Si (History of the Karen)* was written by Saw Aung La, a journalist who was literate in English. Ronald Renard states that Saw Aung La was anxious to describe ‘a glorious Karen past that, perhaps without intending to be misleading, he wrote an enhanced history of the Karens with little proof to support his claims’ (1980: 41-42). After the publication of Saw Aung La's history, there was also the deliberate creation of national symbols such as a coat-of-arms, Karen dress, a national flag, a national anthem and liberation day celebrations. These material culture items were symbols befitting a nation which, coupled with strategic hierarchies of power and authority based on church and village networks, added further weight to Karen elites promoting their ethnic and social differentiation from Burmans.

Officially commencing in January 1949, the Karen have been engaged in a lengthy and violent civil war against the military-run Burmese Government, following failure to achieve the autonomy that had been promised by the British Empire. The Karen have their own political administration: the Karen National Union (KNU) and its military arm, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The KNU grew from the Karen National Association founded in 1881, which was constructed upon the strong network and links between churches and their associates. Rajah writes that the KNA ‘was the first manifestation of a pan-Karennic-speaking nation of intent, one that transcended dialectal, religious and local-specific differences with entirely modern, secular, civic aims. The KNA, in short, represented the institutionalisation of Karen ethno-nationalism’ (Rajah 2002: 527, original emphasis). Whilst the Karen National Association aimed to solidify a homogenous pan-Karen identity, the KNU is now explicitly political; it succeeds the KNA in aspiration and intent as it now assumes to represent the political interest of all Karen. It is important to note, however, that the senior leadership in the KNU and KNLA are primarily Christian S’gaw Karen, whilst the rank-and-file serving underneath is predominantly made up of Buddhist and animist Karens. This religious division within Karen organisations is significant for acknowledging that recurrent political tensions are harbored inside, as well as outside, Karen political structures.

The ethnonym “Karen” is now synonymous with tense politics of ethnicity in Burma. This dates, as Keyes states, to the ‘Christian-led Karen ethnonationalist
movements that have been in rebellion against the Burmese nation state since its founding in 1948’ (Keyes 2003: 213). The Karen resolutely refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the current government and, alongside many other nation states and non-government organisations, they retain the use of the colonial-era name of Burma. The aspirations of the Karen political and military organisations ‘exemplify that curious bivalent orientation common to all forms of ethno-nationalism – atavistically looking backward to the past and forward to the future where the nation seemingly is never quite in the present’ (Rajah 2002: 528, original emphasis). The Karen are a social group trapped inside the processes of becoming a nation. Such processes of becoming are ongoing particularly in the modern day, yet Karen nevertheless continue their fight for an independent Karen state: Kawthoolei.

3.4. Kawthoolei: the imagined homeland

At a community event in 2010, held in western Melbourne and celebrating the Karen New Year, I was handed a photocopied letter that was being distributed to all in attendance. It was from the Karen National Union’s president, Saw Tamlabaw. On the letterhead, the headquarters of KNU are declared as located in Kawthoolei.

The political aspirations and the communal social dream of the Karen are embodied by the term “Kawthoolei”. As the name of their independent nation state that they have been fighting to establish for over 60 years, Kawthoolei does not exist in territory but rather remains a symbolic place (Gravers 2007: 245-247). Kawthoolei has
multiple translations into English, for example: the flower land, the land of no evil, the bare and black land. It is thought of as being located in the Kayin State in Burma.

For the current year of 2750 Karen Era, President Saw, on behalf of the “Office of the Supreme Headquarters of the Karen National Union, Kawthoolei” writes:

To all Karen Nationals,

The Karen people are one of the major ethnic nationalities in the country, but as they do not have freedom and rights befitting a nationality, many have gone to different parts of the world, and those remaining in the country, far from having guarantee to the security of life and property, have to live constantly in fear and anxiety.

We the Karen people, since the days of our forefathers, have been deprived of the right to our native regions and lands, by force. Though the KNU has struggled for liberation of the Karen people from persecution and for existence as a free people, it is still in the mode of liberation struggle.

In liberation movement in the past, due to weakness in unity and cooperation, victory had been beyond our reach and so we have to struggle on. In this New Year, it is necessary for every Karen to be involved in building unity and cooperation, at every level of our national liberation movement. Unity of the Karen people is a vital element in national liberation movement. Every Karen has the responsibility for liberation of the Karen people from persecution and for their development, and cooperation of the entire Karen people is especially necessary. I would like to remind all of you to work with discretion so as not to let our unity and our beliefs to become divided among ourselves, as a result [of] the enemy’s machination.

…It is necessary for every Karen, living in different parts of the world, to uphold the Karen people’s cultural heritage and language, and hand them down to posterity so that the Karen people may not become extinct.
The concept of extinction by Saw Tamlabaw (2010) is sensationally pertinent. For a short time, the independent state of Kawthoolei was fleetingly actualised in physical space, although not in the political structures based in Rangoon. Yet this locale in the jungle was devastated by such violent military action that it did, in fact, disappear within a day.

The village was called Manerplaw and it is a place of great significance to many Karen. But, in particular, it is of huge significance to some contributors in this research who were living at Manerplaw at the time of the siege. As the KNU and KNLA were successfully merging to create a united front of opposition against the military-led Burmese government, the government implemented the 4 Cuts strategy, Pya Ley Pya. Ruthless and effective, Pya Ley Pya translates as ‘denying water to the fish’, and it is a strategy targeted at cutting off the four essentials necessary for warfare: food, funds, intelligence and recruits (Lang 2002: 37-42).

In 1994, Manerplaw, the village headquarters for the KNU and KNLA and the fleeting territorial actualisation of Kawthoolei, was suffering as a result of the 4 Cuts strategy. The next move proved fatal for the territorial site: a group of Buddhist soldiers fighting in the KNLA became opposed to the Christian leadership of the KNU and broke away, establishing the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). Ball and Lang (2001) discuss how the KNU and KNLA senior leadership is Christian dominated, whilst the rank and file are primarily Buddhist. They state that ‘this political-religious difference has been aptly exploited by Burma’s government, which has used the pro-government Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA, a breakaway faction of the KNU, which mutinied in late 1994, with the support of the Tatmadaw) as proxy for its own ends’ (Banki and Lang 2008: 62).

When the Buddhist soldiers switched alliances, they revealed the location and logistics of the Manerplaw base to the Burmese military generals directing the Tatmadaw. The village of Manerplaw was well camouflaged in a valley, with only one pathway leading in and out through the overgrown jungle. It is said that only people with insider knowledge knew how to access the village. The Tatmadaw, having been informed by the defectors, planted land mines along the path, thus enclosing the people into the valley before commencing a violent assault. The fall of the headquarters in
Manerplaw and the counter-insurgency operations through the 4 Cuts by the Tatmadaw had multiple ramifications. First and foremost, was the extinction of the village site.

The KNLA military command structure was also toppled and decentralised. Many of the leaders high in command for the KNLA were either killed or, alongside all Karens, fled through the jungle to the border with Thailand to seek refuge. This event significantly raised the internally displaced population, and 26 refugee camps had to be constructed along the Thai-Burma border. The leaders of the KNU who, in Manerplaw had fleetingly realised the dream of their independent state, Kawthoolei, and had effectively administered their own albeit small government, were also dispersed across multiple refugee camps. Dislocated from one another and from the KNU organisation, they had to use their experience in civil administration and turn their attention to dealing with Thai authorities.

Prior to its fall, local autonomy had been almost tangible in Manerplaw, and it had been administered as the quasi-nation state of Kawthoolei. The ethno-nationalist movement that had been gathering momentum and encouraged by missionaries was severely disabled and, as Rajah states, ‘these developments have had profound consequences for the reproduction of Karen narrations of nation and, thus, Karen ethno-nationalism and nationalism’ (2002: 532). The dissemination and reinterpretations of these narratives are strongly coloured by the conditions in which they are produced and consumed. Currently, they are tempered by the conditions of life inside refugee camps and humanitarian resettlement to third countries.
3.5. Refugee Camps: rice and rhetoric

For more than 29 years, refugees of numerous ethnic nationalities affected by civil warfare inside Burma have continually fled over the land border and into Thailand. In 1984, large numbers of Karen crossed into Thailand and, unlike those who had arrived in other years, they remained permanently (Banki and Lang 2008: 62). Periodic rebellions and the forceful and systematic relocation of villages in the former ethnic territories since 1996 continue to cause fluctuation in the refugee populace. The Border Consortium (TBC), a syndicate of 10 international NGOs providing aid, estimates a current 2012 population of over 137,000 in refugee camps alone, and the figure for internally displaced peoples to be over 500,000.15

Ten separate refugee camps remain established along the Thai Burma border to manage the ongoing crisis (see Figure 3). The continuing military engagements necessitate that the enclosed refugee camp outposts remain as long-term settlements, reliant on aid from secular humanitarian institutions as well as from faith-based Christian organisations. Since the 1990s, there has been vast documentation of human rights violations, which has led to the rise of an aid industry along the Thailand and Burma border (Horstmann 2011: 87, 2011a: 7). The increased international awareness coincides with elevating aid budgets for refugees, which South (2008: 98) presents the figure of US $60 million, being funneled annually through humanitarian organisations that support displaced people inside, and originating from, Burma.

Such an aid industry and people's reliance on aid and assistance require independent organisations to work together and, in unison, to provide sustained benefit to the camp communities. This particular ethos of working together for a common goal is epitomised by the TBBC: the largest umbrella organisation overseeing the refugee camp's infrastructure. It is an organisation formed by 12 international non-government

15 See www.tbbc.org for up to date annual population lists.
Figure 3. Burmese border displaced persons and refugee camp locations, June 2012 (TBBC 2012: viii).
organisations, predominantly Christian-based, and together they distribute food aid and shelter, implement educational projects and conduct research and documentation on internal displacement in Burma.16

Humanitarian organisations located in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai freely provide aid and assistance to a large number of displaced peoples who remain invisible and undocumented in the towns, remote mountain villages and inside the camp perimeters. However, in the prime conflict zone of the Kayin State in eastern Burma, it is close to impossible to provide assistance to those in need; and carrying aid such as food, emergency medical kits, and educational books into the area is the work of volunteers in “backpack” relief teams. This urgent need to provide assistance to persons inside the borders of Burma has resulted in a sophisticated ethno-national Karen humanitarian relief network (Horstmann 2011a; South 2007). Karen organisations that operate in the borderland between Thailand and Burma are part of the Karen National Union (KNU) and thus support the resistance and insurgency against the Burmese military. Whilst many humanitarian organisations do not proselytise, some groups such as the well-known Free Burma Rangers do combine humanitarian and spiritual matters. In these movements across the border, action and physical risk can be seen under the guise of religious commitment. It is certainly the case that, where humanitarian organisations cannot go into the conflict zone in eastern Burma, the religious institutional networks, in particular Baptist networks, are skilled in filling the aid gap (Horstmann 2011).

Karen ethno-nationalism and the fight for political autonomy have to a large extent been legitimised by outside forces, including missionaries, aid organisations, and human rights activist groups. Inside the refugee camps, secular and faith-based organisations providing humanitarian aid ‘consciously or unconsciously thus support and keep alive a political and military project and help to legitimise and justify the evangelical imagination of a Karen homeland’ (Horstmann 2011a: 514). Horstmann (2011, 2011a) argues that the secular humanitarian and faith-based organisations have been drawn into the nationalist project of the Christian Baptist Karen and have, as a

16 The 12 members are: TBC; act for peace – NCCA, Australia; Caritas, Switzerland; Christian Aid, UK and Ireland; Church World Service, USA; DanChurchAid, Denmark; Diakonia, Sweden; ICCO, Netherlands; International Rescue Committee, USA; Norwegian Church Aid, Norway; Trocaire, Ireland; and, ZOA Refugee Care Netherlands. For a detailed history see www.tbbc.org/aboutus/aboutus.htm.
result, tended to give preference and privilege to Christian Baptist Karens over other ethnic groups, even including Buddhist Karens. Horstmann's interest is to examine the role of Baptist networks in reconstructing a contested borderland region, within the context of forced migration. His other primary interest is in how displaced Karen depend upon, and are in turn politically mobilised by, religious networks as refugees. This has been done by taking examples of military insurgencies and also the narratives of people's experiences and turning them into pathos evoking events. The Karen and the Christian partner organisations who support them have used images of atrocities committed by the Burmese Tatmadaw army and transformed them into ‘a powerful narrative about social suffering and Christian liberation’ (Horstmann 2011a: 3).

Propaganda materials in the form of video, still-images and articles display the plight and suffering of the Karen at the hands of the Burmese military. These pathos-laden materials also provide an apt platform from which to acknowledge the aid efforts especially of Christian Karen relief teams, hiking into the jungle to help those desperately in need. These materials are disseminated through the use of computer mediated communication technologies, which publicise and spread the plight of the Karen and the noble work of Christian-based organisations. Such forms of communication remain highly significant in connecting disparate individuals located transnationally, and groups originating from, and concerned with, issues in Burma. The internet has become a database for information on Burma and the ethnic conflicts inside the country. It is also a medium that enables considerable power in publishing targeted information and correspondingly in organising support. Inside Burma, however, the ownership of a modem to access the internet requires a special license for use and few are granted (Dudley 2003, Fink 1997, 2001). As Dudley states, ‘such restrictions are but one aspect of wider government control of communications’ (2003: 17). 17

Information does seep out through ICTs from remote areas and even inside the strongly monitored refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. This information ranges from the ethnic struggles of the Karen to their persecution at the hands of the Tatmadaw. This type of content can potentially promote a strain of militant pan-Karen identity in the ever-growing diaspora. As South (2007: 4) suggests with regards to the

---

17 See also Brooten (2011) for recent information of Burma’s internet and broader mediascape.
Karen, ‘the experience of exile seems to reinforce the most “hard-line” elements of socio-political identity. Driven by the imperatives of protecting a sense of self and community in a distant land, exile communities are often the source of strident uncompromising rhetoric’. The use of communication technologies means that individual and group struggles are no longer constrained within the geographical borders of Burma or the border region of Thailand. Instead, people residing in the Karen diaspora can remain plugged in to their homeland (see Dudley 2003).

By tapping into these communication networks, resettled Karens in Melbourne, as well as diasporic communities located in other countries in Europe and North America, remain linked into, and tied to, the ideology of Karen organisations: in particular the Karen National Union. Notions of strength and unity are pivotal to internal social group rhetoric as well as to their promotion to the public outside of the group. President Saw Tamlabaw’s address from the KNU in Kawthoolei for Karen New Year’s Day celebrations is a pertinent example.

Faith leaders and their congregations inside the refugee camps heavily promote the evangelical imagining of the Karen homeland, Kawthoolei. Inside the refugee camps the influence of the church is all encompassing. Horstmann (2011a: 12) describes the Church’s pivotal role:

The Church provides spiritual guidance in everyday life, education and the national “struggle” of the Karen. Karen pastors and evangelists thus play a key role in the Christianisation of the Thai borderland. Many Karen refugees who visit Christian kindergartens and schools want to become Christian due to their exposure to Christian discourse, prayer, singing and mission. Conversion to Christianity can provide relief from and a constructive interpretation of painful memories, in addition to ensuring memberships of a lively community, access to social security and diverse connections to the modern world.

The church is thus a gateway for Karen refugees to gain access to resources that are valuable and sought after for their practical as well as emotional and spiritual qualities. Horstmann (2011: 93–94) states:

Family members in different spaces form a densely-knit network of utopian Christian communities in intensive communication with each
other. Solidarity is extended to every single community in the most remote corners as well as to new arrivals to the camps and many illegal settlements across the border. Christian missionary networks take care of the refugee camps, for which they provide a huge spiritual umbrella, and connect the Karen refugees to the networks of the Karen churches in Thailand as well as to the transnational Christian organisations that provide humanitarian aid and that keep the Christian Karen’s project of reconstruction alive.

The most pertinent example emphasising the gravitational pull of the church inside the camp is the active conversion of those of Buddhist faith to Christianity. One family with whom I spoke stated that when they arrived in the refugee camp they found it difficult to manage on the limited food rations. When they learned that the Anglican Church was providing extra vegetables to those in their congregation, the whole family publicly converted. The mother secretly still identifies as Buddhist but she, along with all her children, now publicly present themselves as Anglican. South (2007: 61) writes that an investigation into Karen refugee communities conducted over a decade ago indicated ‘that access to services and other opportunities is much easier for Christians and KNU families than for Buddhists or Muslims (that is, among the refugees, religion is a more important factor in structuring inequality than is gender).’ In Australia, Karen people of Buddhist faith also come under pressure to convert. As Ashin Moonieinda, a Karen Buddhist who has resettled in a rural town in Victoria, states: ‘Karen Buddhists in Australia often find themselves under pressure from Karen Christians to convert to Christianity. Where Karen Buddhists are accommodated with Karen Christians or their settlement workers are Karen Christians, this pressure can be very strong’ (Moonieinda 2010: 43).

The pressure to convert is part of a larger pull in Karen communities to promote unity and strength, especially in opposition to the Burmese military. The churches, as focal points of activity inside the camps, provide the space and the structure to foster solidarity as well as providing emotional support. Horstmann (2011, 2011a) writes of scenarios inside the camps whereby the Karen frequently use the Bible and sermons given in church to interpret and mediate their past experiences. I have also witnessed numerous forms of these presentations during my own attendance at services in Melbourne, with members of congregations conducting presentations that incorporate a
historical overview of the Karen situation alongside teachings from the Bible. The pastors and congregation deduce explanations for their socio-political situations, and appropriate the Christian doctrine to provide a path by which to mediate painful experiences of persecution and dislocation from territory and kin. These presentations provide particular motivation in mobilising the younger generations located in the diaspora and the refugee camps to join the Karen armed forces by revitalising their relationship to an imagined homeland (Werbner 2002: 83). Because of this activism, the Burmese military considers the refugee camps as possible recruitment sites for the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), and they have, on various occasions, stormed and shelled the area looking for enemy soldiers. However, Rajah states that ‘the KNU and KNLA as a matter of policy do not actively seek support nor do they recruit conscripts from Karen in Thailand and it is a policy that clearly has to do with accommodations with Thailand’ (Rajah 1990: 117). In my own discussions with young Karens, I have been told of many male relatives who have followed their uncles and father into the KNLA rank and file. In the resettled Karen community in Melbourne, the idea of going back to help in the fight for autonomy is commonly shared and highly regarded.

Thawnghmung (2011: xv) writes about her own experience growing up in Insein, a suburb north of Rangoon:

…from a very young age I was exposed to countless stories of brave Karen soldiers in southeast Burma who had sacrificed their lives to liberate us from the Burmese military regime. I witnessed a continuous flow of Karens who travelled back and forth between Rangoon and the Karen-populated area in eastern Burma – a distance of only 150-200 miles – bringing with them stories of atrocities, repression, and mistreatment of the Karen people by Burma’s national army. There were also stories of incredible bravery and divine intervention—such as Karen insurgents repelling thousands of soldiers from the national army, or angels watching over the Karen fighters — which occupied our dinner conversation. Like many of my relatives, I silently prayed for the victory of the Karen fighters. Child as I was, I saw jungle fighting as “cool”, and hoped that someday I would join my counterparts in the “black” areas.
People contributing to this research share Thawnghmung’s childhood idea of fighting as “cool”, as well as the urge to join the armed movement. At a community liberation day celebration in an outer western suburb of Melbourne in 2010, I was standing in the grounds of a public school watching a dancing performance by young Karen men and women. On the stage, these performers wore distinctive Karen dress and performed a traditional Karen dance. A contributor to this research, Htoo Wah, a 30 year old Karen father of two who had resettled two years previously, leaned towards me and whispered that one young man on stage was known to be a “good hard fighter” and that, because of this, “everyone looks up to him... and asks him for advice.” Htoo Wah told me to look at the way his body moved through the dance and that it would show the embodiment of his military ability. I asked how old the man was and Htoo Wah told me he was 19, but he had followed his uncles into the KNLA at a young age and had been fighting in the resistance movement in the borderlands inside Burma. Htoo Wah said this young man had to resettle in Australia when he and his male relatives became targeted for their military involvement and the refugee camp was no longer a safe space for them. The resettled Karen community in Melbourne viewed this young man as embodying the fight for autonomy: and he was revered and often approached to answer how other young men located in Australia’s diaspora could join the resistance.

3.6. Point-fields of power

In Thawnghmung’s book, *The “Other” Karen of Burma* (2011), she writes as an insider growing up in Burma. She states that she is one of the “other” Karens, a section
of the Karen population who grew up living quietly and apolitically inside Burma. She writes that ‘some of these Karen display strong concern for the Karen people and take every opportunity to preserve and promote their culture and identity, yet at the same time they appear to have very little contact with the “freedom-fighting” Karens’ (2011: xvii). Her book focuses upon these ‘quiet Karen’ whom she states have been largely ignored by research studies, which have instead focused upon the ‘Karen “insurgency” and “rebellion”’ (Thawnghmung 2011: xvii). However, in reading her book, the impression is that although these “quiet Karen” remain uninvolved in the military movements of the Karen ethno-nationalist agenda, they are not apathetic to its cause nor very quiet. They are, as suggested periodically by Thawnghmung, a vital part of the complex whole making up Burma’s socio-political landscape (2011: 127-128, 153-155).

Prior to missionisation, the Karen were primarily Buddhist and animist, and Thawnghmung writes that there are collective memories in the Karen populace of oppression suffered under the rule of Burmese kings. She writes that there are ‘memories handed down from generation to generation within individual households and through documentation made by both the Karen elite and foreign missionaries’ (Thawnghmung 2011: 21). Thawnghmung states that, despite the character of the relationship between Karens and the Burman population varying throughout history, currently ‘many Karen communities harbour grim memories of intercommunal tension, often associated with brutality committed by individual Burman kings who set out to subjugate or enslave hill tribes (Marshall 1922: 22)’ (2011: 21). In looking into the long-held mindsets of ill feeling, distrust, and divergence that even Thawnghmung’s “quiet” Karens harbor, the collective memories of Karen oppression under Burman kings in the pre-colonial past is significant, as it becomes the first reference for hostile memories that are recalled and employed by the Karen elite and foreign missionaries to work like pathogens, inciting social and political divergence. In this instance, there are leading figures, for example Dr. San C Po, and organisations such as the KNU, who act as central points, or hubs, for the dissemination of ideology and power.

In his discussion on political units and sub units in Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia, Lehman (1981), utilises linguistics to discuss the structure of power that radiates outwards from a central point-field. These point-fields are centralised nodes of
power and influence which are hierarchically ranked, organised and linked across space (c.f. Werbner 1996: 311). Through exploring the semantics of political territory and the respective terminology for township centers of power in various Southeast Asian languages, Lehman’s (1981) shows the vital link between power and space in Burma. He writes:

…round the centre of power of each kingdom were provinces, themselves, as it were, point-fields, bounding the centre. It is known that this pattern was deliberately arranged and that it was considered more or less essential to the effective working of the power of the kingdom; moreover it was understood as essential in a ritual sense. It is naturally characteristic of what I have been calling point-fields that boundaries are established for them solely by the adjacency of neighboring points. Therefore, it is, I assert, understandable why Southeast Asian Buddhist kings felt obliged to set up their domains in this way, as a means of containing the power of their centrepoints, which, as one might well say, would otherwise “leak away” (1981: 105).

Lehman’s premise is that a Buddhist understanding of a field of power is as an unbounded radiation from a central hub, or nucleus. To extend this idea, I’d like to suggest that there is a resemblance in the way that political and social power continues to disseminate in the current context of Karen internal displacement, and humanitarian resettlement. Specifically, this can be seen in areas I consider to be four distinct, but interrelated, point-fields: Karen political organisations (KNU, KNLA), refugee camps, the diaspora, and the church including its numerous congregations. It is not only the effects of that power which is significant but also the spatial reproduction of these point-fields (for example Baptist and Anglican church congregations), and their conjoining across transnational territorial borders due to the long running civil war in Burma.

Lehman does not detail the populations situated in, and adjacent to, his pre-colonial “point-fields”, but it would be remiss to assume homogeneity in that instance. However, as the political and social situation of Karen persecution and displacement evolves and more people are growing up inside the confines of refugee camps dotted along the Thai Burma border, as well as resettling to third countries like Australia,
where they in turn build up communities and a strong and highly organised diaspora, there is a developing uniformity of ideology and aspirations. Thawnghmung (2011: 82) discusses a ‘common sense of dispossession’ as well as the common experiences of suffering being shared, which contribute to the fostering of solidarity between strangers, and hence a swelling of nationalist sentiment within the refugee camps (Rajah 2002: 532-533).

Ananda Rajah likens Lehman’s notion of a point-field to a Venn diagram, ‘with flexible, elastic circumferences pressing on each other, as it were, superimposed on real ground’ (Rajah 1990: 127). Karen political organisations such as the KNU effectively run as a central hub that disseminates ideology and power outwards. In the instance of the KNU, the point-field radiates outwards from the symbolic locale of Kawthoolei. Using Lehman’s original formulation, the ‘power, in the conceptions governing these politics, is defined as radiating outwards, indefinitely from the centre and that the territory defined by such a conception of power is, in the first place at least, an unbounded “point-field” (in approximately the sense of the physicist) rather than an axiomatically bounded neighbourhood’ (Lehman 1981: 103). The circumference of the KNU’s point-field, to draw on Rajah’s (1990) depiction of an elastic and malleable barrier, has historically fluctuated and is still necessarily tied to military battlefronts. As these battlefronts have encroached upon the population, more people seek the refuge of the camps strung along the border. Inside the camps, where rice and rhetoric dominate, such a domain becomes, as Lehman writes, ‘analogue of the universe as a whole’ (1981: 103). This is even the case for those Karen who are born inside the refugee camps and have lived without experiencing internal displacement or armed conflict inside Burma. Instead, these Karen know the fear and instability that they garner from the narratives and experiences of others, all of which necessarily construct their worldview.

The power structures, ideological beliefs, and collective memories of oppression all become standard luggage as people relocate, and join the large Karen diaspora, which has been expanding since the 1980s. Understanding the camps as sites of transmission for ideology and social practice, can provide a context for Thawnghmung’s statement that the camps ‘serve as stepping stones for many ambitious Karens who long for a
better life or who want to continue the Karen revolution from the relative safety of another country’ (2011: 81).

Ferguson (1981: xi) suggests that Lehman’s model is useful ‘in comprehending the way secular and religious power seems to expand and wane always from inside to outside, so often centering around charismatic individuals’. His noting of charismatic individuals is certainly pertinent both in the context of revered members of the Karen community, as well as for Church nominated individuals, such as Pastor Wah Doh, who unite congregations of people and remain connected to the transnational diasporic matrix. Charisma and the ability to convince people to listen are especially powerful, and these individuals become, in themselves, point-fields. The Karen diaspora, Karen political organisations (KNU, KNLA), church congregations, and the life inside refugee camps, rotate around such charismatic individuals. Monique Skidmores’s book, Karaoke Fascism, also notes communities rising up around charismatic individuals in Burma, in particular monks (2004: 17), such as Thamanya Sayadaw. Skidmore writes that ‘people lived under a kind of benevolent dictatorship of the ruling sayadaw’, and that his ‘moral authority’ extended for a three-mile radius from Thamanya Hill (2004: 17).

The idea of a three-mile radius extending out across space, from a point-field, is analogically relevant to the fields of power and influence I consider to be present inside the Karen body politic. However, it is not just about power reaching outwards, but it is also about bringing people inwards, into the field of power, and therefore uniting disparate individuals and their experiences in one commonly shared narrative. A form of this collective narrative is characterised by Pastor Wah Doh’s recounting of fleeing with his congregation during the monsoon and his utilisation of pathos-laden signs. These various narratives seek to conceal internal differences and construct an overarching evangelical purpose that drives ethnonationalist agendas and the pursuit for political autonomy. Yet, even for those Karen who reside on the periphery of the ethnonationalist agenda, like the Karens about whom Thawnghmung writes, still inherently remain inside these point-fields of power and, in such domains, there remains the distinct and unrelenting social pressure to remain Karen (Keyes 1979: 19).
3.7. Resettlement: the Australian suburbs

The Karen who have resettled in third countries, including Australia, as well as those still residing in the refugee camps, have in effect become Kawthoolei In Exile. Between 2005 and 2012, over 80,000 refugees from the camps along the Thai Burma border have been resettled in third countries (TBC 2012: 12). Of that number, Australia has taken approximately 7000 Karens as part of the government’s humanitarian resettlement program between 2006 and 2013 (DIBP 2013). The KNU still provides the political leadership uniting these disparate localities in the Karen diaspora, and the organisation has taken up the use of communication technologies to expand the radius of its point-field. A pertinent example is the dissemination of President Saw’s Karen New Year address over the internet. Most Karen organisations and many Karen individuals have taken up the prodigious use of new media technologies, which means that people can remain linked through expressions of their shared experiences, despite geographical separation.

Through the production and consumption of content on the internet, individual experiences for many Karen are now being understood in relation to the whole political rhetoric. Therefore, even those Karen who have resettled in third countries remain plugged into the current context of the border camps and the civil war inside Burma. These shifts in the nature of social connection and public dialogue have recently become increasingly noticeable in the camps. Even the TBBC\textsuperscript{18} notes in their annual 2012 report the increasing impact of resettlement of Karens to third countries. The report states:

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18} The Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) has, in November 2012, changed its name to The Border Consortium (TBC). They state that this is to reflect the changing political environment and sensitivities in Burma. They believe that the new name of TBC positions the organisation on both sides of the border, Thailand and Burma, and promotes hope for the return and reintegration of refugees (TBC 2013).}
As resettled refugees gradually establish themselves in third countries though, the benefits are also becoming apparent. Although there is no record of remittances received in the camps the impact is now becoming noticeable and diaspora communities are becoming more vocal in their support for change in Burma/Myanmar. Many resettled refugees maintain close links with camps and as they achieve travel status are able to return for visits. As they acquire education and new skills in their new countries it is likely that many of them will return in the future to help rebuild their communities in Burma/Myanmar (TBBC 2012: 11).

Once people have gained Australian citizenship and an Australian passport, they all speak of when they will return to the refugee camps. Some Karen speak of just regularly visiting if they can afford to, whereas other more politically motivated individuals imagine the near future when they can return permanently, with the safety of an Australian passport, and take back their newly acquired skills. Many organisations, such as the TBC, see hopeful signs of refugee reintegration into Burma; however, ‘in practice, it is unlikely that the Burmese regime will want to take back refugees until it has secured ceasefire surrenders (on its own terms) and/or complete control over the minority military forces and their border territories’ (Banki and Lang 2008: 70). Banki and Lang (2008) state that the aim of the military-led Burmese government’s counter insurgency strategy is to destabilise and eradicate the civilian support base of insurgents such as the KNLA and, therefore, it is highly unlikely that it will accept back people of whom it remains suspicious. Even the recent political maneuvers, such as the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners in Burma, do not significantly suggest a seismic shift in political relations between the Burmese government and the KNU, or the near future closure of the long-term refugee border camps. As Banki and Lang bluntly state: ‘The Burmese government (SPDC) has perpetrated five decades of violence as a means to solve Burma’s internal crisis, generating extensive militarisation and displacement. In human security terms, in Burma the state is more a security threat than a security guardian’ (Banki and Lang 2008: 70).

Karen families resettled in Melbourne speak of their past as a hostile environment, tempered by bouts of harassment by the state and the Tatmadaw: “It was horror”; “There is no safety”; “They will find you.” Amongst such bleakness, the Church
provides a buoyant domain where resources are mobilised for attaining a better spiritual and quotidian life. Within the congregations, there is solidarity with other refugee families and a vision. Furthermore, as Horstmann states, ‘far from being passive recipients of humanitarian aid, refugees make careers in the church and emphasise their aspirations by actively participating in evangelical efforts’ (Horstmann 2011: 101).

For the Karen, Christian networks are central to social security and mobility both inside the camps and also to people’s resettlement in Australia. The Church and the religious networks between different congregations spanning transnational borders, have the spiritual and material resources to provide an improved environment, especially in comparison to the hostility marking their past. Horstmann (2011: 101) believes that ‘the Christian landscape of the Thai-Burma border uses education as a crucial resource to socialise Karen refugees in a predominantly Buddhist environment’. As the KNLA fights a losing battle against the Tatmadaw, and there is the slow silent realisation that the Karen state of Kawthoolei is increasingly unobtainable, the Karen educated into missionary career paths now focus their attention to spreading the gospel in Thailand, Burma, resettlement countries and across the world.

Recent studies of Karen in Australia by Worland and Darlington (2010) and Brough et al (2012) both point to the central presence of the Baptist and Anglican churches for recently resettled families. Worland and Darlington state:

The Church was central to their life here in Australia. Karen-based churches were formed mostly by the second wave of Karen migrants, thus newly arriving Karen are able to worship in their own language and tradition. For Christian Karen in Australia, the Church is more than a place to hold Sunday services in a language understandable to all. It is a place where information is shared, where needs are identified and support given, where specialist ministries for youth, women, men, and music are centered, where cultural programs are delivered, and where remittances are channeled via their tithes back to missions and churches in Burma, and on the border. In essence, the church is the hub of the community (2010: 23).

In Worland and Darlington’s (2010) research they found that participants in their focus groups all unequivocally identified their faith as helping them manage the
many challenges they faced with humanitarian resettlement. An interesting finding from their Karen focus group investigations is that the participants 'likened Centerlink to God’s provision, enabling them to not only meet their own needs but also to send remittances back to family and churches in the camps' (Worland and Darlington 2010: 24). The Church, however, provides more than faith. For many recently arrived Karen in Melbourne, there is significant remuneration for working as part of the Church’s social outreach or for being involved with religious education and Karen language classes for children. This is further exemplified by larger scale transactions whereby diasporic tithes are injected into the KNU, the KNLA and into the refugee camps on the Thailand Burma border. In the context of a Karen family resettling on a humanitarian basis in Melbourne, the foremost questions are, firstly, what are the effects of the Church and Karen congregations on resettlement and social practices? And, secondly, what are the effects when fields of power, *point-fields*, are spatially reproduced and superimposed onto new geographies in suburban Melbourne?

3.8. A camp in the suburbs

Many older Karen who have resettled in Australia were a part of the KNU and KNLA leadership who fled, carrying their young children, to refugee camps after the fall of Manerplaw. Inside the camps, they automatically assumed leadership roles and became the voice representing the refugee population in the management of the camps to NGOs and government organisations. Rajah (2002: 532) states that 'because of their education, administrative experience and ability to deal with Thai officials and NGOs,

---

19 Centerlink is name of the Australian government’s welfare and social security.
KNU leaders who previously held positions in the civil administration of the KNU government now play key roles in the refugee social organisation known as the Karen Refugee Committee. Some of these individuals who assumed leadership roles were the first wave of Karen refugees to resettle in outer suburban Melbourne with their families, and they are well known as leaders in the Melbourne Karen community's resettlement and establishment.

As educated Christian Karens involved in the administrative caretaking of Kawthoolei located at Manerplaw, either in the KNU or the KNLA, they are adept at management. In Melbourne, they continue to actively monitor and mediate the Karen community's atmosphere. At Karen church services and community events, it is common practice for these elders to sit together and to also use the occasion as a meeting to hold discussions on the community and transmit news from the diaspora and from inside the refugee camps. It is from these charismatic and powerful individuals and their families that the point-fields radiate out, constructing, mediating and affecting the Karen body politic in Melbourne (c.f. Werbner 1996).

In effect, these individual centered point-fields have migrated from the refugee camps to the resettlement context of the Karen community in Melbourne, and for many young Karen, their perception of the social world in which they move and interact is strikingly similar to that in which they grew up in the camp. When articulating the differences between their current situation, as opposed to living inside the refugee camp, many youth focused upon material differences and the sensorium. When I asked what are the differences between living in Melbourne and the refugee camps from which they had come, Ti Na Aung struggled to think instantly of differences. “Um,” she said and fell silent; then she continued to say, “I’m just trying to think of something.” Next to us, Lily Htoo said quickly, “Fear.” Sar Loe quickly followed suggesting, “Different future. Options, opportunities.” Then, Ti Na Aung who had been quietly thinking, suddenly said, “Oh! The landscape.”

The young women’s responses, especially Ti Na Aung’s instant and honest response of trying to think of something different, provide insight into their perceptions of the world. In many ways, the ideology and expectations circulating in the Karen community on the border and in the camps remain a fundamental base, even after
people’s resettlement in Australia. This is a common feature of many migrant groups who retain their own distinct culturally salient features even many years after settling and raising a family in a new country (Werbner 2005). For example, Anastasia Panagakos writes that ‘when Greeks began immigrating en masse to Canada in the early-to-mid-twentieth century, they formed communities by reproducing familiar institutions from the homeland in order to preserve their traditions and Greek culture’ (2003: 202). Just like the Greek communities Panagakos researches, the Karen ethnic identity is also ‘grounded in the various organisations and activities of the ethnic community providing outlets for religious, social, cultural, and political expression’ (2003: 202).

For the Karen, however, the length of time spent inside refugee camps is disruptive to a comforting illusion of temporary transmigratory experiences (Brough et al 2012: 11). Furthermore, the pathway to resettlement for the Karen is largely opaque. As Brough et al (2012: 11) found in their research on Karen who had resettled in southeast Queensland, people would be waiting inside the refugee camps for many years before a humanitarian offer was ‘abruptly made with little preparation for the resettlement’.

Except for one contributor to this research, all with whom I spoke had spent over 10 years inside one of the refugee camps. Inside, they had shared the common experience of suffering and dispossession at the hands of ‘a generalised Burman Other’ (Rajah 2002: 533). The camps had, for these Karen, become ‘frozen and fixed at sites of implantation’ (Agier 2008: 48-49). Inside the camps, applying for resettlement was a lengthy bureaucratic process, but the result was that many families who resided in the same zoning inside the camp were resettled as a group in their chosen resettlement countries. Thus, in the suburbs of Melbourne, many families live in approximately the same radius as they did inside the refugee camp zone. For many families, their daily life revolves around socialising with the same families in the outer suburbs of Melbourne as they socialised with inside the refugee camps. They attend church services with the same people, making up the congregation as they did when inside Mae La camp, for example. Many young people also continue to maintain the same romantic interests now as they did when they were much younger and living inside Mae La camp,
irrespective of their various resettlement pathways. In some ways, the resettlement in Melbourne has brought many Karen families full circle and as a result, the young Karen people involved in this research perceive the structures making up their socio-cultural world in Melbourne as analogous to those of their time inside the refugee camp. Expectations, cultural decorum, language, faith and cuisine are all facets of daily life that have remained constant from their pre-resettlement lives to their current contexts. In effect, the refugee camp as experienced by many resettled Karen youth has been superimposed and transplanted into their perceptions of the urban suburb.

Through their experiences, understandings and perception of their social worlds, the Karen engage with the materiality of the Melbourne suburb in which they have recently resettled. These encounters and movements ‘are subjective, predicated on our being in and learning how to go on in the world’ and it is a continual process of navigation and re-orientation (Bender 2001: 4).

Movement for the Karen, and other ethnic nationalities in Burma, is acutely sensed. As Skidmore writes, ‘It is movement that is frightening in Burma. Staying in one place, staying out of the cities—these are strategies of safety, but it is an illusionary safety, continually torn down or made flimsy’ (2004: 14). Here we see the Burmese landscape as a “tensioned” surface: ‘always in movement, always in the making’ and strained by the pressure of current ethno-political relations (Bender 2001: 3). This setting lends itself to understanding how the ethnic history of the Karen, and the choices organisations and individuals make in recounting that historical narrative, are considered and deliberate. There is the sense of active positioning in which movement is responsive and reactive, and there is measured pacing through complex histories as well as landscapes. The resettled community, their rotation around point-fields of power that is centered on charismatic and powerful individuals, and the circulation of pathos-laden signs, temporally extend Kawthoolei and their perception of their social environment, yet also constrain people to a particular worldview.
4. MOVING IN LANDSCAPES AND MEMORY

4.1. Movement: imprints of departures and arrivals

One morning at dawn in 1990, Ler Wah Aung was seven years old. He says that on this morning he woke to see his parents hurrying around their bamboo hut, located in a small village nestled by the hills of northern Burma. Ler Wah's father is a doctor and he remembers watching quietly from his sleeping mat as his mother “tears pieces of cloth into small squares” and hands them to his father. His father, Ler Wah recalls, is “bending over” and “very carefully wraps his [medical] equipment.” “He puts them in a line on the ground—one, by one, by one,” and then places the small bundles “gently in a bag.” Ler Wah recollects how he got up from his sleeping mat and walked over to his parents. He asked them, “Why are you doing this?” His father, Ler Wah says, looked at him sternly and replied, “You don’t need to know about these things.”

Ler Wah retains an impression in his memory of this morning: the tense manner of his parents, and how “they were both very serious, very strict this morning.” His younger brother and sister woke up shortly afterwards and their parents directed them outside of the hut. Ler Wah recalls the feeling in his palm as his father “pulled [him] outside by [his] hand. It was tight; almost pain[ful].”
The village “was empty” and Ler Wah says he “didn’t know what [was] happening.” He recalls becoming confused so he asks his parents, “What are we doing?” His mother replied, “We have to leave.” With that, Ler Wah says, “we walked together out of the village and into the jungle.”

Ler Wah remembers how it felt moving through the jungle, and how his family “walked in a line.” He recalls the order: “My father, my mother, me, my brother.” He also remembers the silence: “there was no noise, we were quiet.” Ler Wah recalls:

We were all alone in the jungle and it was hard to walk through the trees. We were always covered by the jungle, and then, we came to the top of a hill that went around in a circle and down, like a washing basin. Suddenly, I saw some people through the trees. Then, behind them there were more and more people, all in the jungle. They looked like us. Mothers and fathers, grandparents, and children; all carrying some bags.

We fell into a large group, walking in between all these people. We walked and walked, and jungle was hot, humid. We walked until we reached the border. There were hundreds of us and we stood in front of the Thais [police] but they wouldn’t let us through. They yelled at us. They said that we had to go to another place, [and] that we have to walk on the Burma side.

We all had to start the walking again. I could hear the guns behind us. The noises [became] closer and closer as we walked along the border. I was so tired, and we had to walk, and walk, until finally, I don’t know when, but we reached the camp so full of people. They let us in, and there were so many people that you don’t know where to go.

My parents found us somewhere to lie down. It was nighttime and it was all quiet in the big camp. Everyone had stopped talking, and we lay down close next to each other, even next to people I didn’t know. And we were all looking up into the sky.

We could see flashes of light, and hear the gun[shots] as the army was fighting. All the small lights looked pretty in the black sky.

Ler Wah was watching the sky from Nu Po refugee camp: the place where he, his brother and his parents would stay for the following ten years. Ler Wah’s description of the night sky, foregrounded with the flashes of light from the fighters’
ammunition, suggests a vista that is symptomatic. The lights are signs of a threatening environment, but now that it is witnessed from the confines of the camp, a sanctuary space, Ler Wah’s remark on the prettiness of the small lights brings attention to a moment of change in the way in which he views the social, political and material landscape. He alludes to a sense of distancing, whereby watching the ammunition flares marks a retracting from his former position of being in a landscape-in-crisis to now being a witness of that vista.

Ler Wah is vividly descriptive in narrating his journey from his home village to the refugee camp on the Thai Burma border. The landscape he walks over is fraught with fear and apprehension, and his sensorial recollections of being held by his father’s hand, the density of the jungle foliage, its humidity, and the undulating surface of the valleys as they merged into the wave of people moving over the land, coalesce for Ler Wah into a moment of genuine significance that he remembers with striking clarity. His memories of this moment in his past are embodied and anchored to the materiality of landscape, in his recollection of walking over the undulating valleys and through thick jungle; it is also tethered to the corporeality of his body in the visceral recollecting of the sensation of heat and humidity trapped under the jungle canopy.

Ler Wah’s narration of how he moved across the landscape provides a powerful entry point to understanding how he relates to, engages with, and inhabits his material world. W.G. Hoskins’ utilises the idea of a palimpsest in his *Making of the English Landscape* (1985 [1955]) to illustrate how a landscape is imprinted with the traces of people’s activities. ‘This is a very seductive way of visualising the land’, Bender writes, as it encourages an ‘intimate sense of a sedimented past’ (2001: 6). The physical marks and impressions on the landscape rest as factual evidence of people’s inhabitation and movement, and like a palimpsest—a scroll with the material affordance to be scraped, washed clean and used again—people continue to rework the landscape, imprinting over the footsteps of others. In reflecting upon the migration of Karen refugees from their home villages and across the hills of Burma to refugee camps on the Thailand border, visualising the landscape as an embossed medium, a palimpsest covered in footsteps, paints an arresting image.
Hoskins (1985 [1955]) writes about how the English countryside is continually reworked and, through his descriptions of changing landscapes, he encourages an unbridled nostalgia for times past. This robust nostalgia appears as a byproduct of Hoskins’ horror in response to witnessing signs of dislocation and change (Bender 2006 [1998]: 28-31). There is the distinct focus in Hoskins' writing upon a person being rooted in-place and, with such anchoring, there is of course the coinciding assumption of stasis. But landscapes and the material world are not passive and as such stasis, even in Hoskins’ portrayal of the English countryside, is illusory.

Recent phenomenological based accounts present a focus on a *being in the world* attachment to place and the material world (Bender 2001; Feld and Basso 1996; Ingold 1993; Tilley 1994).

Bender states that ‘by moving along familiar paths, winding memories and stories around places, people create a sense of self and belonging. Sight, sound, smell and touch are all involved, mind and body inseparable’ (2001: 5). This notion of mindfully being in the world assumes that, as people move across various landscapes, there is an eye to ‘stock-taking’ at various markers along the way (Bender 2001: 5). Memory in this sense is directly tied to places, or sites of significance (Connerton 2009: 7-39). As Connerton states, memory ‘depends essentially upon a stable system of places’. In Ler Wah’s narrative there are places where he has recorded an impression, much like a mnemonic photograph of, for example, his village and their bamboo hut, which will then reside in his memory bank. There is also, however, the strong and vivid recall of bodily movement and sensation as he walked with his family across the landscape.

In Ler Wah’s narrative, there is equal attention to the memory of places as there is a memory of movement. Migration, as Ahmed has written, ‘could be described as a process of disorientation and reorientation: as bodies “move away” as well as “arrive”, as they reinhabit spaces’ (Ahmed 2006: 9: c.f. Ahmed 2000; Ahmed et al. 2003; Brun 2001; Werbner 2012). For Ler Wah, his habitation of spaces is tethered to material memory and, in this sense, Connerton’s notion of remembering as relating ‘implicitly to

---

*For further phenomenological anthropology studies that are concerned with embodied constructions and experiences of “being in the world” see Feld (1990), Csordas (1994), Jackson (1996), and Ingold (2011).*

74
the human body’, and ‘acts of memory…[being]… envisaged as taking place on a human scale’ is particularly apposite (2009: 5).

Part of remembering, for Ler Wah, was to recall the sensation of his body lying down, amongst a crowd of strangers, watching the lights from fired weapons in the night sky. Movement across the landscape was also ingrained in his recollection, as exemplified in the memory of the ordered line the family members took to weave through the jungle and the sensation of suddenly seeing, hearing and falling into a flow of people who were also fleeing to find the refugee camps along the Thailand border. In this context, it is more appropriate to think in terms of what Ingold (2000: 226), following Gibson (1979), calls ‘ambulatory vision’.

In accordance with his ecological approach to visual perception, Gibson (1979) presents the notion that we perceive the world when we are in movement. It is a ‘path of observation’, as Gibson states (1979: 197). Along this path, things fall in and out of our sight, new vistas open up and others fade. ‘Thus’, Ingold states, ‘the knowledge we have of our surroundings is forged in the very course of our moving through them, in the passage from place to place and the changing of horizons along the way’ (2006: 49). It is the ‘ambulatory encounters’ we experience through our movement in the world that forms our knowledge of the world which is then sedimented in memory and thus able to be continually accessed and worked with (Bender 2001a: 83). This understanding leads to the acknowledgment that people inhabit, as opposed to simply occupy the environments in which they dwell (Ingold 2006a).

Ingold (2011: 12) has recently turned away from the concept of “dwelling” that was emphasised in his book, The Perception of the Environment: Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill (2000). He states: ‘the concept carries an aura of snug, well-wrapped localism that seems out of tune with an emphasis on the primacy of movement’ (2011: 12). Ingold now prefers the concept of habitation and, through his wayfaring perspective, he envisages that through movement people trace paths and thus bring their perception of the world into being (Ingold 2011: 12). In light of this, Ingold writes: ‘Bathed in light, submerged in sound and rapt in feeling, the sentient body, at once both perceiver and producer, traces the paths of the world’s becoming in the very course of contributing to its ongoing renewal’ (Ingold 2011: 12). It is a two-fold
process: like the metaphor of the landscape as a palimpsest, the world is at once made as well as being continually superimposed and renewed by our movement through it.

Dwelling, in the instance of Ler Wah and other families who were forced to undertake similar movements, is a concept that still has pertinence despite Ingold’s (2011) later arguments against it. Ler Wah describes his childhood prior to leaving the village with warm reflection. He recalls the sound of the bamboo when it was collected for building materials and held in one’s arms: “it [clacks] like a little echo, a fast echo,” he says. And Ler Wah describes how the noise, when the bamboo was stepped on, unsettled the chickens underneath their huts: “They run around crazy as you step on [the bamboo].” Inherent in these descriptions is the essence of what it means to dwell. There is the warmth of homely recollections and the embodied sensation of familiarity. Ingold’s original conception was that dwelling is a ‘perspective that treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence’ (2010: 153). Ingold continues: ‘from this perspective, the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life and activity’ (2010: 153). Dwelling as a term denoting living and lingering in a place with “a regular pattern”—a form of a home making—is, however, not available to everyone all the time. In this instance of the ongoing civil war inside Burma which, at the time when contributors to this research were living there, was at its violent apex, the warmth of dwelling and the everyday practices of home-making were tempered by the rising fear of persecution at the hands of the Burmese Tatmadaw military. All contributors to this research recounted daily incursions by the Tatmadaw as being commonplace occurrences.

On the morning that Ler Wah left with his brother and parents, his younger sister Ti Na Aung, was left behind in the village with her elderly maternal grandfather. She was 3 years old. Ti Na Aung says that she “was young to remember” the day that her family left their village. She remained in the village for three more years until one day, when she was six years old, she travelled with her grandfather to Rangoon. Ti Na Aung remembers riding in “the back of a truck” along “the bumpy road,” and arriving at “the city [that] was so noisy.” Her grandfather took her to a large unfamiliar brick
building. She says, “We stand out the front [of the building]; the streets were so noisy, so busy. My grandfather said to me, wait here until my mother comes to pick me up.” She pauses for a moment and then says, “I didn’t know it was an orphanage.”

Her grandfather was forced to move to a different remote village due to increased Tatmadaw incursions. Ti Na Aung remained in the orphanage until she was fifteen when, one unexpected day, her mother did arrive.

4.2. The landscape of valleys and hills: topographies of fear and persecution

Persecution, or the fear of persecution, was such a chronic feature of people’s lives inside Burma that even once settled inside the refugee camps and also after resettlement in Australia, it is a feeling that people cannot shed. Most people to whom I spoke in the Karen community in Melbourne had relatives who had experienced forced labour: the Tatmadaw soldiers would take them from their home villages and force them to carry ammunition and food supplies.21 Brough et al’s (2012) research into refugees from Burma who have recently resettled in Queensland recorded the same experiences by their participants, also noting that those forced to be carriers for the Burmese military suffered from regular beatings and malnutrition. Another common experience across our participant groups was permanent food insecurity as Burmese soldiers regularly raided communities and cleared village supplies. The village was also expected to support the passing Karen resistance fighters and provide them with food

21 For further narratives on forced displacement in Burma see Dudley (2010: 67-90) and Delang (2001, 2003).
resources. Brough at al (2012: 9) state that ‘these sorts of loss of freedom and chronic fear led a number of participants to characterize their life in Burma in terms of “not really existing”’. One of Brough et al’s (2012: 9) research participants stated that, ‘You don’t have your own right to live or to exist because the dictator will dictate you and you belong to them, so really don’t have a choice of your life or anything’ (2012: 9). For their research participants, as for people contributing to this research, chronic fear permeated everyday life and the ubiquitous presence of roaming Tatmadaw soldier units meant that the landscape in which people were situated was viewed with trepidation and apprehension.

One late summer afternoon in 2011, I was visiting four young women in western Melbourne: Lily Htoo, Mar Ner, Sar Loe and Ti Na Aung. It was a lovely day, but we were bunkered down in a darkened living room to eat fruit and watch DVDs of Thai pop concerts. At this time, two years after resettling in Melbourne, these young women chose to stay at home rather than spend time outside in areas of the city. The young women were tentative about moving about in the suburbs where they all lived, so we would regularly congregate at someone’s house to watch DVDs. There is an elaborate black market accessible for people living inside the refugee camps that stock a lot of illegal and subversive music and film productions. These productions make their way to Karens resettled in Melbourne and are often passed around in the community by young people. I was told that if people residing in the refugee camps are caught distributing, producing or consuming these materials, they risk physical abuse and imprisonment.

During this afternoon spent with Lily Htoo, Mar Ner, Sar Loe and Ti Na Aung, a homemade music video started to play. The young women told me that the video had been produced by three young male Karen anarcho-punks living in Mae La refugee camp. These young men had left the camp and walked into the surrounding jungle to film parts of the subversive clip. The lyrics are saturated with political and social discontent, using rough language to describe death, fear and fighting, and calling

---

on the Burmese General and ex-Chairman Than Shwe to “fuck off” and to “fucking die” as well as referring to them as “the fucking monkey”.

The music video is produced as a slide show that flashes through images of identifiable landmarks in the Burma and Thai border region, and superimposed on top of some of the photograph slides is footage of the lead singer thrashing through the musical performance. The background images race past and show the delicate pagodas nested on Mount Popa and the power of the Irrawaddy River moving through bamboo-dense forests. Then the slides shift to content of terror, destruction and devastation, with images of burnt out villages, and lifeless Karen bodies bloodied and contorted in the eroded gullies lining the sides of walking tracks. After these images of Karen suffering, the video manipulates official photographs of Than Shwe from news agency footage. His face is contorted and then we witness his beheading, which is digitally replaced by the face of a monkey.

The music video is confronting. A landscape, which in the beginning seems idyllic with golden pagodas and beautiful vistas, is presented as cruel and the terrain of sorrow and suffering. It is an ‘interior landscape’, a metaphor Fassin and Rechtman (2009) employ to portray an area profiled by trauma, which they say is crossed by ‘neither martyr nor combatant, nor even ordinary people’; but instead, all we see that is left, is ‘the intimate suffering of victims’ (2009: 198).

The young women’s experiences of persecution and the fear of violence and oppression are described as being expected as soon as you walk across the landscape of Burma. Lily Htoo says:

Whatever the Burmese army like to do they can do [to Karen people] because they [the Karen] are not eligible. You know in Burma you either have the card - you know the card? It says - I am Burmese – but when they do something wrong to you, they don’t care. They don’t care that you have the passport. Even if you have something to prove that you are the Burmese [person] but when something happen to you, they don’t care because they know you are Karen, so.

They know you are Karen—the way you speak, the way you dress and even you know when you get into border area—because most [people] are Karen there. They know, okay this area is going to be all Karen, all the
Karen people are going to live [there]. And this area is Chin, Chin going to live [here]. They all live mostly in communities. [The Burmese] know which area is Karen, which area is Muslim…. They know very well!

Lily Htoo points to the sinister nature of warfare and victimisation. She explains that the reason why the Karen are victimised is because the “Burmese and the Karen leader don’t want to understand each other, and also the Karen leader had divided a lot of the group in [Burma], so [there is] not much understanding each other.” Lily Htoo shakes her head and laments, “[It’s] very difficult.” She pauses, and then gets angry and says:

You know what, they are annoying! Because [large] numbers of Karen people they live in the borders, like the borders near Thailand, [and] that’s where the Burmese armies come. And when they travel a lot, they are [going] to see lots of villages or people, [and] they’re going to try and take everything. And they’re going to burn everything!

Lily Htoo depicts an environment of fear, callous indifference and calculation as well as a landscape with a distinct lack of safety. This fear even extends to Karen resistance fighters who, she explains, also bring insecurity to the areas where they live. She starts to say, “We have some Karen army to protect someone, so they’re not,” but then she pauses, readjusts her thoughts and continues to say, “They’re like enemy too.” Lily Htoo explains:

So when you see the Karen village, you know they [the villagers] have to support both the Karen army and Burmese armies. But sometimes once the Burmese come —and they’re stronger than the Karens—they defeat them and they take everything! They burn the house! They [are] very violent, take whatever they want.

Sometimes they take the man, to carry stuff with them because living in borders they travel a long way, and they get tired and [so] they take them. Because when they have Karen in their army, our Karen armies mostly don’t like to fight them because they are Karen. They know there are Karen villagers in that army. So [that is why] they [the Tatmadaw] usually take some Karen villagers.
An environment contoured by a distinct lack of safety is firmly etched by Lily Htoo's descriptions. She conveys fear, intimidation and an atmosphere of distrust and deception. She describes the subversive acts whereby Burmese soldiers learn Karen language in order to disguise themselves. She says, “They can tell, [the] Burmese army, they can speak Karen, they have to learn [it] and then use [against] us.” Ti Na Aung and Lily Htoo have grown so distrusting of their social and material environments that even their Karen language is instilled with fear and caution. In the end, their portrayal of life inside Burma gives the stark impression that you cannot hide. It is not only the young women as ethnic Karens who are targeted, but also other ethnic minorities such as Chin or Mon peoples who cannot blend in to the material or social landscape to find some reprieve.

Skidmore writes that, inside Burma, the ‘Generals are not content to control only the flow of information in the public domain; they seek also to dominate, reconstruct, and regulate urban space in a ceaseless breaking down of barriers that previously signalled sanctuary’ (2004: 14). In the case of Burma, fear is spread by the State like a virus, a toxicity in the landscape, which as Skidmore notes, manipulates the body politic and forces bodies to move between various sanctuary spaces, such as monasteries and pagodas. Skidmore states that ‘the experience of fear occurs in these “open” and regulated spaces as people necessarily shuffle from one sanctuary space to another. The primary mechanism for controlling space in Burma is to order the appearance, or placement, of Burmese bodies in public spaces’ (Skidmore 2004: 14). Skidmore’s ethnography describes the lives of people living in Rangoon, a militarised city, which during her research was littered with police checkpoints. Any movement through the urbanscape, she explains, was impeded and halted by the overbearing presence of the military-led government. The material landscape, in this case, was not a passive template to violence and persecution, but something that cunningly enforced fear of the state.

Allen Feldman (1991: 28) also writes about terrains of terror in Northern Ireland whereby space becomes both ‘a power and an animated entity’. He asserts that ‘to simply study power at the “center”, that is, from the perspective of formal rationalities, is to collaborate in the essential myth of formal rationalization: that power
distributes itself from some place external to its effects, external to its violence, which is reduced to a transparent instrument’ (1991: 2-3). It is a fallacy, in other words, to think that power only exists in the center point of its administering, as in the example of Burma and Northern Ireland; the exertion of power is embodied in all types of violent acts be they subtle or overt. Feldman (1991) describes his ethnography as being about surfaces: the sites and stages, such as an interrogation center, which simulate the state violences and simultaneously sanitise and deny such acts of terror whilst signifying its very inescapability. The materiality of places and artifacts are not only the ground on which violence takes place but are also representative of violence itself—thus his view that where power takes place is ‘a zone of particularity’ (Feldman 1991: 3). From this point, Feldman argues, ‘all generalities and universal claims of domination flow’ (Feldman 1991: 3).

In the context of Burma, Skidmore suggests that the same apparatus that simultaneously simulates violence and manipulatively denies such acts, is installed and operated by the military regime. This occurs to such an extent that Skidmore maintains that some of these spaces have been totally appropriated by the military. For example, she writes of pagodas being turned from spaces of sanctuary into spaces housing violence. She writes:

The pagoda is a sanctuary space usually surrounded by a lush garden setting where families picnic on weekends. Lovers are sanctioned (and chaperoned) by their elders to meet in the pagoda grounds, and a wide variety of healers offer their services, including astrologers and hermit monks. Since the British invasion of Burma, however […] the pagoda has taken on additional symbolic meaning as a political site whose sanctuary has been repeatedly violated (2004: 15).

It is now widely known throughout Burma, Skidmore notes, that the monastery and the pagoda are no longer enduring sanctuary spaces nor ‘safe havens for those who wish to escape the politicisation of Burmese life’ (2004: 16). The loss of these universally recognised sanctuary spaces, as spiritual sites of exclusion from violence in a totalitarian landscape, proffers the lament that nowhere is truly safe.
In 1990, the year Ler Wah was forced to leave his village and the year when the resignation of General Ne Win did not create momentum for democracy, both the urbanscape of Rangoon and the landscapes of jungle valleys and pagoda-dotted hills in Burma’s countryside formed the enduring topographical representation of fear and persecution. This topography of fear and persecution for Ler Wah and his peers is inlaid into the palimpsest landscape, and also remains in their memories as symptomatic of the terror expected, and experienced, in their pasts.

4.3. Auditory landscapes: the noise of fear and safety

In the remote areas of northern Burma, Karen families like Ler Wah’s and Ti Na Aung’s lived alert, in a state of emergency. The terrain of the hill region means that, for people living in remote villages, their vision is strongly mediated, and often impeded, by the surrounding thick vegetation. As a result, acoustic information becomes significant, and Ler Wah and Ti Na Aung both recount stories they have been told, whereby they learnt that they could hear incoming Tatmadaw soldiers before being able to see them. Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah describe how you can hear Tatmadaw soldiers chatting, and the sounds of their footsteps as they wind their way through the dense understory. Ler Wah says he also often heard gunshots in the distance but, in the end, as he says, “You get used to guns.”

Karen villages, like Ler Wah and Ti Na Aung’s home village, existed with the everyday threat of Tatmadaw incursion and violence. Ler Wah describes an environment where Tatmadaw soldiers would come into a village and everything would
be razed, as bamboo huts would be set alight. He recalls the muted tapping of tins that were filled with water and strung up along the rooflines of the bamboo huts, as a thin protection from the potential flames. They explain that some noises, like the water tins, “are nice”; some, like gunshot echoes, are “dangerous”. The auditory in this instance becomes distinctly classified into a catalogue of safety, or a catalogue of fear and threat. It forms a soundscape in which noise and its many connotations reverberate meaning across the social body as well as across the environment. This knowledge of signs of danger lurking inside landscapes and auditory connotations, are contained in the stories passed between villages and down generations, just as the memories of distinct noises and corresponding acts of violence are contained and carried within the sinews of people’s bodies.

Ler Wah remembers hearing the noise of soldiers entering their village. Ti Na Aung remembers the same moment. She says, “One afternoon, when I was younger, Burmese soldiers came into my village. They were yelling at us. Yelling a man’s name [out], that lived in the village. Everyone was scared.” Ti Na Aung describes the soldiers pacing through the village, and then says:

“the soldiers grabbed the man and dragged him in front of everyone. They said, ‘You gave them [the Karen army] rice! We know you did! Say you did it!’ But the man didn’t say anything. The army men then started searching the village.”

As Ti Na Aung speaks she unfolds her arms and starts to pretend that she is wildly throwing things over. She says, “They wrecked everything. Turn it [all] over, spill out the food.” She stops moving, and says:

“A soldier found a box for a dvd player. It was all still wrapped up inside, like new. But they took it all out the box, and they [brought] the plastic wrapping [over] to the man, and they [stripped] him. They said, ‘You have to tell us that you gave them rice!’ But the man said nothing.”

Ti Na Aung pulls up her sleeves revealing her bare arms, and says, “A soldier had a small lighter. They put the plastic in the air, on top of the man. They turned on the lighter and the plastic drip, dripped all over him.” Ti Na Aung points with her index
finger up her arms, and pulls on the neckline of her jumper, exposing her neck. She says, “It went everywhere! The man yelled!” She then recalls an image: “I remember that all over his body he had big, painful blisters. All red. Like blood.”

Listening to Ti Na Aung, watching her bare her arms and contort her shoulders, and seeing her face wince as she described the yelling, is to see that for Ti Na Aung fear is partnered with noise. For Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah, noises brought forth fear (gunshots, screams) as much as they evoked fond memories of a past life lived (the echo of tapping bamboo).

Ti Na Aung was never again as animated in the subsequent time we spent together as she was during this description of witnessing the raid and the torture of the man. In a way, everyone to whom I spoke during the course of this research was distinctively reserved. Their communal manner, I found, was very akin to Skidmore’s notion (2004: 35), following Leehey (2000), of Burmese ‘wooden faces’. Skidmore (2004: 41) writes:

Burmese people consider expressing emotion, especially by allowing emotions to play across the face, distasteful. Expressed anger, in particular, is considered a likely sign of madness. It is crucial for their survival that Burmese show only “appropriate” emotions when in public. Because they find feigning enthusiasm for the junta exceedingly difficult, the vast majority of Burmese I have met survive by adopting a blank exterior persona: listless eyes in wooden bodies.

Ti Na Aung’s remembering the sequence of events—the soldiers entering, pacing through the village, demanding the man be turned over to them, forcing him into a confession, the dripping plastic, the final scream of the man and the image of his bloody blisters—exemplifies the sad truism that moments of fear and trauma once experienced, can remain as visceral in memory as they were when first experienced. Ti Na Aung’s recall of that afternoon also suggests that fear, carried in a scream or in pain-filled yelling, expresses its content extremely vividly. With acts of violence that cause someone to yell out in pain, as the man did, the audible experience for those who are witnesses can be felt as a reverberation, an echo, which does not make us think of violence but is in effect violence in itself. This idea is much like Merleau-Ponty’s notion
of yelling out in anger, where he says that a yell as a ‘gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself’ (1962: 184).

There were many recollections by young people that involve yelling, screaming, and gunshots. Saw Nay, a young man, used to climb across the bamboo boundary of Mae La camp to walk small distances in the surrounding jungle. He and his companions often went to cut down bamboo and return to the camps with heavy loads to use as building materials. One day they were caught by Thai guards as they walked along a path towards a nearby village. Saw Nay says, “The soldiers pull us by our arms, and yelled at us to give our [identification]. But we don’t have it. They say to us that if we give them money we can go. But we hid our money. They yelled to make us give them our money.” Saw Nay describes how they were pushed onto the back of a truck and frisked. Their money was discovered and everything taken. The tray of the truck was full of people who had been picked up and Saw Nay and his uncle were pushed in amongst the bodies. The truck started to travel further into the jungle. “The truck,” Saw Nay says, “bounced” and the “old engine was noisy.” They travelled back over the border and into Burma. He says the truck “pushed” through the foliage and into the jungle. Saw Nay explains that everyone on the back of the truck became disorientated. The soldiers then suddenly stopped the truck, pushed all the people off the tray and drove away. This was the first time Saw Nay had been in Burma. He and his two sisters and two brothers were born inside Mae La refugee camp. The group of approximately 10-12 Karen who had been on the back of the truck, he explains, were all forced to be lost in the landscape. Saw Nay recalls walking “all quiet” through the jungle: “We listened” he says, “to find if there were other people there” or “to hear a village.”

In this situation, Saw Nay’s disorientation and attempts at re-orientation are heavily marked by the surrounding soundscape. Navigation through a jungle landscape and along unfamiliar paths is recalled by Saw Nay as an auditory experience as well as a visual experience of the environment. The auditory field provides clues about how to mediate potential dangers, as foregrounded in Ler Wah’s narrative: in Saw Nay’s situation, as much as sounds provide markers indicating shelter and help. In these examples, the auditory has significant utility.
Another young man I met at a community dance event told me that in the jungle, you must walk “like you’re invisible.” He motioned, on the spot, the need for a person to take light steps that are at once noiseless and traceless, and said there must be “No fires” at night time. This was described like a game and at intervals he laughed about the context of avoiding and outwitting the Tatmadaw. His abilities in avoiding the army were presented as a piece of evidence, a succinct expression proving his facing of fear or, perhaps, his dispossession of it.

It is on such paths and movements through landscapes that, as Ingold writes, ‘lives are lived, skills developed, observations made and understandings grown’ (Ingold 2011: 12). The landscapes as experienced in these narratives—walked over, listened to, actively navigated—establish how these young men move in correspondence with material ecologies. Landscapes, and how they are perceived by people who move on their surface, are no longer ‘to be separated from human experience or seen as purely visual’ (Bender 2001a: 76). Instead, as Bender states, ‘they are part of a world of movement, relationships, memories and histories’ (2001a: 76; see also Feld and Basso 1996, Stoller 1989).

There is a common critique that enquiries into sensorial experiences of being in the world are dominated by visualism. This is an attribute that is often considered as part of the residue of European romanticism for the landscape. This critique is often made by academics in their reasoning for investigation into other sensory modalities, for example, audition or olfaction (Cosgrove 1984; Feld 2005; Howes 1991, 2003, 2005, 2005a, 2011). David Howes, a founder of the field of anthropology of the senses, and Tim Ingold recently had a written exchange in the debate section of Social Anthropology (2011) over just this issue. One of the principle claims in the anthropology of the senses, as Ingold writes, ‘is to have dethroned vision from the sovereign position it allegedly held in the intellectual pantheon of the western world, and to highlight the contributions of other, non-visual sensory modalities, above all to the sensory formation of non-western peoples’ (2011a: 316). The anthropology of the senses has been critiqued specifically because the different modalities of sense have been relegated as cultural products. This conceptualisation, however, seems to be a universalising project that flattens differences between individuals and social groups.
Different faculties of the sensorium (for example, the seeing and hearing that are foregrounded in Ler Wah and Saw Nay’s recollection of moving across the landscape of Burma) are nevertheless equal in the experience of movement through the material world. The different faculties in the sensorium are in interplay, and it a combination of this ‘medley of the senses’ that enables and facilitates Ler Wah and Saw Nay’s skill in navigating danger and fear (Taussig 1993: 57).

The material environment through which Ler Wah, Ti Na Aung and Saw Nay have moved is not carved along sensory pathways and neatly segmented into discrete units for perceiving. Their narratives of various experiences are, rather, all of the same world (Ingold 2011a). Their narratives point to the practicalities of sensing and navigating their way through material and social landscapes. Their senses are in tune with their inhabited environments, and they are also in a feedback relationship to the world in which they move. There is a cultural construction of fear in their material environment, however viscerally sensing that fear through sight, sound, smell and touch, and having to respond to it, is an individual pursuit.

Henri Bergson writes in *Matter and Memory* (2010 [1908]: 17) that ‘there is no perception which is not full of memories’. He continues:

With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as ‘signs’ that recall to us former images. The convenience and rapidity of perception are brought at this price; but hence also springs every kind of illusion (Bergson 2010 [1908]: 17).

Here Bergson’s suggestion is that our experiences of the world are impregnated with the past and, in looking to the future, the gait with which we will traverse experiencing the world is set by the memories of former activities. Bergson argues that our perception is inherently selective, in that we are continually in a process of editing from the streams of data we pick up from our movements.

Through narrating their experiences, Ler Wah, Ti Na Aung and Saw Nay weave together ‘strands of experience’, and the resultant fabric that emerges unites disparate
events (Ingold 2011a: 326, 2000: 286). Hence, as Bergson asserts, ‘what you have to explain… is not how perception arises, but how it is limited, since it should be the image of the whole, and is in fact reduced to the image of that which interests you’ (2010 [1908]: 35). Bergson suggests that memory can be, in a way, remodeled, recast and repackaged. Memories and recollections give perception its essentially subjective character.

Layering experience and knowledge, Ler Wah, Ti Na Aung and Saw Nay create a type of bank that can be withdrawn from. Edward Casey explains this well:

Moving in or through a given place, the body imports its own emplaced past into its present experience: its local history is literally a history of locales. This very importation of past places occurs simultaneously with the body’s ongoing establishment of directionality, level and distance, and indeed influences these latter in a myriad of ways. Orientation in place (which is what is established by these three factors) cannot be continually effected de novo but arises within the ever-lengthening shadow of our bodily past (1987: 194).

With their movement across the landscapes of Burma, Ler Wah, Ti Na Aung and Saw Nay have drawn upon the ‘kinesthetic interplay of tactile, sonic, and visual senses’ (Feld 2005: 181).23 Being in-place, emplaced within a landscape, their narrative shows their attentiveness to having a sensorial presence (Feld 2005: 181). Thus, movement across landscapes, the sensorium, perception and memory are interlinked and mutually engaged in their movements. As Bergson wrote at the turn of the century, ‘There is no perception which is not prolonged into movement. Ribot [1889] and Maudsley [1876] long since drew attention to this point. The training of the sense consists in just the sum of the connections established between the sensory impression and the movement which makes use of it’ (2010 [1908]: 50).

When he began to reflect on his experiences living inside Mae La refugee camp, Saw Nay recalls the reverberating sounds of helicopter rotor blades and aeroplane engines that crossed overhead. He remembers the rising volume of the noise of the engines as they came closer. He recalls how often he heard them and that he would look

---

23 See also Classen (1993, 2005), Feld (1990), Stoller (1997), and Howes (2003).
up to find them in the sky. There is a common everyday quality to this recollection and the auditory memory of this flight activity has left a lingering impression. To view perception, as Howes and Pink (2010: 355) do, as a cultural construct is to disavow in many ways the primacy of Saw Nay’s experience. As Ingold argues, ‘people do not “make sense” of things by superimposing ready-made sensory meanings “on top” of lived experience, so as to give symbolic shape to the otherwise formless material of raw sensation’ (2011: 326). Rather, this ‘fragmentary sonic remembrance’ alludes to Saw Nay perceiving and sensing his body amongst the scale of the landscape and the surety of his placement whilst listening to a fading sound, projecting outwards and vanishing over the jungle and hills (Feld 2005: 186). For Ler Wah, it is a memory of a ‘moment hung within a long coercive past’ (Bender 2001: 7).

Ler Wah’s sensorially laden memories of arriving at Mae La refugee camp—“everyone being hot,” that there were “people everywhere,” and that the ground was “dry dust”—illustrates the potent shaping forces occurring in the landscape as well as in his memory. Ler Wah’s arrival at Mae La is firmly etched by memories of a crowd, and the rush of bodies as he and his family searched for a spot to lie down. These descriptions and narratives are anchors, forming his understanding of being and moving in the world. In turn, these anchors form markers in his memory and, much like palimpsest landscape, there is a deposit of skill and experience that can be drawn upon to negotiate the present. The body thus becomes, as Bergson suggested, ‘an ever advancing boundary between the future and the past, as a pointed end, which our past is continually driving forwards in our future’ (Bergson 2010 [1908]: 40).
“Everything good is green.

Other things is just brown; dirt and dust.

Too many people make the green [turn to] brown.”

Lillian Wah

Many contributors in this research came to recollect life inside their respective refugee camps by way of departures—specifically, dates that everyone remembered without fail:


“The day I left,” Htoo Wah says, “my friends gave me a party. We played guitar, we ate food.” Next, Htoo Wah says with disdain, “The camp is just like a human zoo”: he describes foreigners who come to the edges of the refugee camp and take photos, often handing money to people inside the camp. “The other camp always got the money for taking the photos,” he says. He seems equally affronted firstly that the foreigners are taking photos and, secondly, that those photos (and the money) were not of (and for) him.

Michel Agier writes: ‘to speak of time spent in the camps is a disturbing subject: durable life is not supposed to exist in a space outside of place, a moment outside time, an identity without community’ (2008: 49). Htoo Wah would agree to some extent with
Agier’s discussion on the artifice of a refugee camp. Htoo Wah’s analogy of a “human zoo” does make the construct of the refugee camp disturbing in the way that Agier (2008) in a more general discussion intends. Nonetheless, Htoo Wah and the other contributors to this research speak fondly of the community inside the camps, the sense of solidarity that is fostered and the feeling of being home.

Lillian Wah left BMS camp on the 21st April 2009. She matter-of-factly states that in the refugee camp there were 800 homes, 100 offices, and 4000 people. Having dealt with the descriptive formalities of BMS refugee camp, Lillian Wah reflects upon the nature of the camp grounds: for her the ecology of the grounds is symptomatic, and suffering under the weight of intensive use. Much like Ler Wah’s description of the jungle landscape etched with uncertainty and fear, the landscape of the refugee camp is buckling and changing as a result of social processes. Lillian Wah says “Everything good is green. The other things is just brown; dirt and dust … Too many people” she says “makes the green brown.” Lillian Wah portrays a decaying colour of green, set in a landscape with decaying ground, however this imagery is contrasted by her nostalgia for the smells and the sounds. She says, “I miss the camp fires, the smoke smell,” and how “every day, water was put on the soccer ground to stop the dust.” The decay is not necessarily a sign here of devastated and wilted ecologies. Lillian Wah’s discoloured landscape and Htoo Wah’s analogy of a “human zoo” reflect the duality between what is being done to them and what is being done to the landscape. Lillian Wah and Htoo Wah are simultaneously victims in a faded landscape as well as being complicit to its decay.

Ti Na Aung says that inside the refugee camps, “Every day is just the same as [all] the other days.” Here the monotony is devastating. Ti Na Aung continues: “In camp you feel like you have more time. But there is nothing to do after, you know, every morning you are just going to school. But for what? You just come back, and there is nothing else.”

Ti Na Aung’s statement implies that there is a distinct debasement of life and people’s options that stems from the artifice of the refugee camp. Time is plentiful but it is not able to be used to form a future. Time is, in many ways, felt as stagnant. In his discussion of refugee camps, Agier (2002) contends that due to its very nature, a refugee
camp is a satellite resting outside the ordinary social world. He states more generally about all refugee camps:

The camps are […] the emblem of the social condition created by the coupling of war with humanitarian action, the site where it is constructed in the most elaborate manner, as life kept at a distance from the ordinary social and political world, and the experimentation of the large-scale segregations that are being established on a planetary scale (Agier 2002: 320).

Agier’s impression is that, in general, refugee camps are maintaining the material conditions symbolising the repression and violent warfare that caused their establishment (see also Hidalgo 2012: 197). He portrays camps as frozen sites of ‘lasting and separate non-development’ (Agier 2002: 59). For Agier, the focus is upon the artifice of the refugee camp, a living entity that is amputated from broader social and political processes. Looking inside the refugee camp entity, however, is also to see that for those inside, as the Karen contributing to this research have been, there is an enduring social world.

Camps such as those along the Thai Burma border are so long-term that they have turned into established settings and, as such, they are described with affection and fondness by the Karen, much like that given to a central protagonist in their lives. When Sar Loe reminisces about Mae La refugee camp she says, “I miss the land. It is beautiful. There are hills and the jungle, the smells and the food. Fruit tastes better there you know. Bamboo shoots are better there. The sunsets are better there.”

Tempering this nostalgic attraction, Ti Na Aung describes the monotony of the built environment: “In the camp [Mae La Zone 1.A] it’s all the same, the houses are all the same, everything is going to be the same… It is all just one by one by one.” She illustrates a scenery of ubiquitous constructions, a built environment fabricated for utility only. But she says, “And, then in you walk between [the houses].” Here, in the alleyways between the bamboo houses, people meet. Ti Na Aung says, “You talk to everyone. You know everyone. You can never feel alone.” It is in this detail of social interaction that the scenery built for utility gains the element of community.
Ti Na Aung and Sar Loe did not see the camp as just a political space, separated from the processes of the larger social and political world occurring in Burma and Thailand. Instead, they view the refugee camp as space that is enlivened by the density of people and their needs and, much like a living organism, it needs to be tended to and nurtured. Many Karen youth said they would, or at least wanted to, return to the camps to take skills and resources back to the camps. Whenever this was discussed, they would denote the whole camp, as opposed to only their next of kin and close friends who remain living in the camp. Moe Wah, a young Karen man, says that, “I know that I belong here [in Australia but] I don’t feel like, I want to live here forever. I want to go back to my refugee camp to be a teacher, or something like that.” The obligation is to take care of the camps in their entirety.

Tha Soe epitomises this obligation. He is 30 and recently left Mae La, having chosen to be resettled in Australia with wife Lwe Moo. He says, “We have to take care of the camps.” He continues to say: “They [Karen resettled here in Australia] should remember their brothers and sisters left behind there, and in such a way that after they know this skill they can share it [as well as using] it for personal benefit.” Like Ti Na Aung and Sar Loe, Tha Soe explains how the landscape of the camp and the close living conditions builds a strong community. He explains:

Community [is] not only house or food, but it’s the community. It’s very different from the culture here [in Australia]. For us, we have neighbours. We talk to our neighbours. You know we cook something nice, and we go to our neighbours and say, ‘Oh try this.’ And you go, ‘Oh your Chilli sauce is really good, I’m going to take some home!’ And then we share, with the ladies, with the old people. The communication is very close. [In the camp] it’s like 50,000 people but you might know 20,000 of them, whereas in Australia, one thing that has really shocked me is that no one talks. I have never seen neighbours talking! Everyone is in their own home watching their TV, or doing something, and I just say, ‘When are you people going to come out!’

Tha Soe arrived at Mae La refugee camp in 2004 and quickly became a very active member of the community. He works for the Management Training College that was established in 2006. Tha Soe confidently outlines the organisation’s mission
statement: the “Vision is to collaborate in the community development and corporate effort, and cultivate partnerships, [which] would be politically and religiously neutral, and accepting of all ethnic from Burma, [in] providing professional education through academic streams.” He says, “I was told that as soon as you reach there [Australia], you have to organise fund raising and we have to buy some things like microscopes [for the school]. The basic things we take for granted here [in Australia].” Tha Soe continues:

For us [at Leadership and Management Training College], we want to ensure that these young people sharpen their knowledge through appropriate technology, teach them about the environment. Provide them [with] questioning tools to be potential leaders, to make good decisions for their people. But we don’t force them to work back for the community if they graduate, like an intern or something, but if they work back for us this is a bonus. As long as we change their life, and form their lives, and make them a better person to understand the world that we’re living in. This, to us, is all success.

We train our students to be democratic young leaders. To make them better parents, better citizens of the world and transform their lives through this academic education. Better parents because our community is still very, very remote. Left behind in some respects and [for] many young people primary school is the highest level of education in the camps and on the border. So, normally after a year or two, they get married. We want parents who are able to teach their children the homework.

Enabling this education is a difficult task inside Mae La camp. As Tha Soe says, “You can imagine: we have 50,000 people in this camp, and another camp has about 30,000, another 20,000, and every year our annual intake is only 60.” Tha Soe was in charge of facilitating movement for the 60 students chosen to attend the school. He explains that he is adept at moving across the refugee camp landscape, both inside and outside the boundary fence, as well as at negotiating the social and political landscape contoured by inconsistent silent rules metered out by the Thai soldiers guarding the area. He explains: “You cannot [fully] predict it, you can roughly predict it by making friends with them.” He details a covert barter system: “Like before money was invented, like give and take, and favour for favour. We work out a system with them.” Tha Soe continues, “I’m not saying that that’s their weak point, but that’s the pity they take on
us.” The pity of Thai soldiers, however, he describes as being unreliable and erratic. Tha Soe explains that to move the students from their camp zone to the school entails working closely with local authorities yet also, as he says, it entails working “in the shadows.” He is clear, however, that you cannot draw the attention of Bangkok authorities. He continues:

To me it seems that Thailand is not a very free country. It’s almost like [a] dictatorship because the King still has got all the power. I’m not saying the King is ruling it, but some policies they just don’t want. They cut it from the bud before it becomes a big plant, so that [is the] type of system, and they have their own internal problems already apart from that. They don’t want refugee problems to overlap them like [they do] here, [where] you have on TV the boat people.

It becomes like a circus at the end! Some people try to help. A lot of journalists have come over there, and the ways they try to help is to send out the message, [and] of course [it is] in the wrong form [because] the government controls the press. It is being dictated what they should write, and then it comes the other way around where the opportunities, the small, small opportunities of the refugees have been exploited, it’s been blocked!

Tha Soe depicts a social and political landscape that is risky and hazardous:

Anything can be taken away from your house. You have a nice watch, or a nice bling, they take it away. You cannot have anything there, and many people, like Westerners, try to come there and they say, ‘I want to come there and take photographs, I have visa’, and they [the authorities] say ‘No! We don’t care about your visa, this is a special zone!’ It’s just shut down.

Tha Soe describes the refugee camp zones and the Thailand territory outside those boundaries across which he travelled to transport students as a social environment marked by precariousness and instability. The social terrain shifts unpredictably, meaning that most movement has to be undertaken, as he says, in the safety of “shadows”. Tha Soe explains:
Every week or every month it’s a new environment, a new day …. It’s so thrilling there because one week they [the authorities] will say, ‘Okay white people can go in,’ and the next day they say, ‘No get out!’ and they just spit on your face. You know, [every] several days [is] a new beginning, [it’s] unexpected.

Tha Soe’s description shows that it is not just people who are on the move, but social and material landscapes are also moving, continually being subtly remade and reconstructed. Tha Soe’s description of the refugee camp points to Bender’s notion that ‘the experiences of place and landscape for those on the move work at many different levels, they shift with the particularities of time and place, and alter shape in accordance with individual biography’ (2001a: 79). Landscapes like the landscape internalised by way of the camp boundaries are ‘polysemic, contextual, processual and biographical’ (Bender 2001a: 79). Tha Soe alludes to these qualities of the material world:

Sometimes [it’s hard] depending on the camp situation, [and] the place [camp zone] where people stay. Sometimes the camps have been shut down, the transportation has been shut down because of the border situation. Like in June we had a very, very bad situation where just three days or four days before my students should arrive the fight broke out.

Tha Soe had to pick up 34 students from that section of the camps in the time of fighting between the Karen Liberation Army and the Tatmadaw Burmese military. He indicates the ongoing strategic planning and improvisatory nature in undertaking movements saying, “First we use special cars, and then we think, ‘Okay, this time to go!’ But, it’s impossible. We take half way cars, half way boat and then, car again.” Tha Soe acknowledges the risks involved in unauthorised movement between designated camp areas, and in trying to move the young Karen students from their zones to the school. But, as he says, “To us, at that moment, it’s most important that we make it happen. Then later on, the Thais who don’t agree with us say, ‘Yeah, you did this! That is why we close it down’. But, sometimes you know, we have to take those chances.” Tha Soe explains that “Everything is illegal there. You cannot have a phone, they can arrest your phone and you cannot have bikes, you cannot have anything there, you cannot own a TV, nothing.” Restriction on travel, he points out is severe, with regularly spaced armed
checkpoints. He says, “Unlike here [in Australia], after every fifteen minutes [that] you go on the highway you have a checkpoint with gun point. They ask for your documents, and if you’re illegal they arrest you, they seize the car, they do anything to you. So, I have to organise special cars to get these students.” He ends with the statement that one just has to “make things happen.”

Tha Soe illustrates that the armature of these spaces is insecure, disorderly and prone to change. To work and move in amongst this patrolled but inherently chaotic environment means that people stageise and move amongst the shadows that transiently move across the camp landscape. Tha Soe’s narrative describing everyday life in Mae La camp captures the reactive movements and pacing that is necessary to navigate through a socially volatile landscape. Thus the familiar topography of a refugee camp as a controlled area, albeit divorced from global processes, gives way to an often unspoken portrayal: one whereby movement and action is possible if performed in “the shadows” and new paths can be traversed through regulated zones. There is thus the idea of multiple landscapes nesting informally within one another. For those living inside the refugee camp boundaries like Tha Soe, movement is always part-familiar and part-unknown. Walking along pathways, as Bender (2001: 6) states, ‘a person part-knows the way, part-knows that each time of return there will be change and unfamiliarity; part-fears, part-revels in the chance encounter, the possible adventure’.

In *A Seventh Man* (1975), John Berger and Jean Mohr present an impassioned portrait of migrant life. Their account now shows its age with outdated figures and statistics, as well as the changes following the collapse of the Soviet Union; however, it combines, in rare measure, empathy and insightful analysis that has continuing relevance. It is a book that shows individual and group experiences of landscapes, which is then placed within the broader scheme of social, political and economic relationships. Berger and Mohr write:

To see the experience of another, one must do more than dismantle and reassemble the world with him at its centre. One must interrogate his situation to learn about that part of his experience which derives from the historical moment. What is being done to him, even won his complicity, under the cover of normalcy? (1975: 104).
The men in Berger and Mohr’s book have made precarious journeys to hostile countries and they experience the alienation of an unfamiliar land.

One of the walls of the corner where his bed is, leads to a door, the door opens onto a passage, at the end of the passage are the taps to wash under the place he can shit in, the wet floor of this place leads to the way out, down the stairs into the street, along the walls of the buildings on one side and the wall of the traffic on the other, past the railing, under the glass and the artificial light to the work he does … (Berger and Mohr 1975: 87).

Berger and Mohr suggest the creation of lives from nothing, except that which is carried in sinews of the body, like habits and narratives. Tha Soe explains similar constructions: “It is quite challenging to work in this type of environment, with people being very traumatised, and with lots of difficulties and having been through that. And then to educate them again, and to put them into, make them sit in a classroom where they have to focus. Just to try motivate them again you know.” Tha Soe provides the analogy of a student’s mind being akin to a clay pot in that it is moulded and given its shape back again. However, with so many people being witnesses or victims of violence and trauma, Tha Soe says bluntly that “First you have to break them down.” He continues to say that it is “Because they already have come through this difficulty, and this nightmare I can call it, and it [the knowledge] doesn’t go into them very easily when you just put them in a class. You have to spend time with them, and break them down. It’s like making a clay pot, you start from scratch.”

The notion of breaking people down, dismantling them of their traumatic experiences and sponging them anew in preparation for their academic education, is acutely poignant. The refugee camp is, as Tha Soe says, “a special zone.” But is it possible to really be formed anew? How can a person be eased into new environments after living a distinctly hostile past? Berger and Mohr (1975: 179) saw their male migrants creating something out of nothing:

By turning in circles the displaced preserve their identity and improve a shelter. Built of what? Of habits… the raw material of repetition turned into shelter… words, jokes, opinions, objects and places… photos,
trophies, souvenirs… The roof and four walls… are invisible, intangible, and biographical.

Ti Na Aung describes that the only thing in the camp that is plentiful is time. She portrays an environment saturated in time, with every day being a rerun of the day before. She says, “You don’t have to think about it, you just [are]. Like when you wake up you’re not straight away [thinking], ‘What its going to be like in the camp?’ [She pauses]. It just is.” For Ti Na Aung, Nu Po refugee camp was a place where time spreads out as an expanse to be endured. Htoo Wah mirrors Ti Na Aung’s sentiments, saying, “I was born in that camp, I'm going to die in that refugee camp.”

Unlike Tha Soe, who reveled in movement across unstable terrain and mediating the shadows, Ti Na Aung and Htoo Wah present as being saturated and weighted down by time and the monotony of day to day life. For Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah, the habits that Berger and Mohr (1975) see as repairing life worlds are, instead, recurrent reminders of limited options. There is the distinct acknowledgement of the inability to progress forward with any momentum. They are just existing in the landscape that is deeply coloured in the gloomy tonality of Agier’s notion of ‘durable life’ that is not meant to ‘exist in a space outside of place’ (2008: 49). In sensing their lack of movement and social mobility, they reach Hage’s (2009) state of ‘stuckedness’; a situation where one ‘suffers from both the absence of choices or alternatives to the situation they are in and an inability to grab such alternatives even if they present themselves’ (Hage 2009: 100). Hage notes that ‘viable life’ comes with the presupposition of imagined mobility, ‘a sense that one is “going somewhere”—an existential mobility (2009: 97). It is basic human nature to seek existential mobility and, therefore, we all aim to avoid the opposite, which is ‘a sense of existential immobility’: Hage's stuckedness. But for Ti Na Aung and Htoo Wah, immobility and stuckedness are simply a part of the vicissitudes of ethnic persecution. Their momentum in catching opportunities and pursuing the future with vigour is stalled or crudely limited, as if marooned on an island of ‘frozen transience’, as Bauman writes, in ‘an on-going, lasting state of temporariness, a duration patched together of moments none of which is lived through as an element of, and contribution to, perpetuity’ (2002: 114).
The differences between Tha Soe, Ti Na Aung and Htoo Wah in their perceptions of the refugee camp landscape show how experiences shift with the contextualisation of individual biographies. For some inhabitants of the refugee camp, time just resonated in the background and needed to be endured or waited out like a ‘passive activity’, but for others time was an expanse to be conquered (Crapanzano 1985). Recent political developments in Burma’s government, marked by the release of Aung San Suu Kyi from house detention, point to the possibility of resolution and the reintegration of internally displaced peoples to Burma. Even the TBBC (2012) reports in its most recent executive summary that:

This report is one of hope and change. For almost 28 years the message was that there was no immediate prospect of an end to conflict in Burma/Myanmar, the situation in the South East continued to deteriorate… In an incredibly short amount of time reconciliation looks possible, refugee>IDP return seems feasible in the foreseeable future (TBBC 2012: 2).

It is unclear just how these political shifts will affect lives inside the refugee camps, as the majority of people under 20 years of age have not lived outside its boundaries. The potential for reintegration is also seen as a disquieting possibility, much like resettlement in third countries. Tha Soe is circumspect about the ending of political unrest and ethnic conflict. He says:

The July campaign was so bad on people because there was a lot of rape, a lot of third world techniques for warfare was still applied. Lots of land mine victims, a lot of rape, torture. Horror, which you don’t see in other places mostly now, but the attention of the world isn’t going there to look because it’s the wrong place of the world, at the wrong time. The revolution has taken place 60 years ago now. There’s a different story to look at now.

The refugee camps along the Thai Burma border have been in some form of operation since 1984, proving the adage that refugee camps are established in response to an emergency, yet the duration of that emergency is rarely fleeting (Agier 2008: 48). In their ongoing habitation, refugee camps such as Mae La are experienced as having a
life force of their own. The landscape is simultaneously decaying and vitalised, a constant renewal and coming into being. The social landscape is disorderly but, with skills in moving through the camouflage of “the shadows,” amongst the fissures and fractures in surveillance, the refugee camp landscapes become especially enlivened. There is a constant negotiation between dislocation and relocation in these movements, but people nevertheless remain in firm relationship with the landscape within which they move.

Saw Nay remembers the day he departed from the camp. He drew a picture of it: a portrait of his full body, leaning over and being steadied against the body of his dog that pivots on its hind legs, leaning back against Saw Nay's body. This is the moment, he says, of “saying goodbye.” The landscape illustrated in the drawing background shows the football pitch and rolling hills. This drawing is the memory of saying goodbye to a place, a landscape enlivened by activity and interactions; furthermore, it is a ‘spot of time’ that is ‘pitched against all other meaningful places’ in Saw Nay's biography (Wordsworth 1850; Bender 2001: 78).

Refugee camps like Mae La, BMC and Nu Po, from which these narratives originate, are expected to be places that endure by those who leave having chosen resettlement in third countries. Certainly places, landscapes and people do endure, but it is never in the way expected. Change is as ever an unrelenting force. Ti Na Aung tells me: “In the next two years in my camp, they are going to send people back to Burma. The camp is going to stop and not going to be there anymore.” For Ti Na Aung, this is the amputation. It is the same amputation that Agier (2008) uses to assemble his image of the refugee camp as a spatial site dismembered from the broader social, political and economic processes of the world. But for Ti Na Aung, it is now she herself who is cut off from the camp.
4.5. The suburbs: moving to and through urban landscapes

Tha Soe has just been released from hospital. He arrived in Australia three weeks ago with his wife Lwe Moo, via the UNHCR humanitarian resettlement program. On his second night in Melbourne, he was taken to the emergency department suffering from a recurrent bout of malaria. Smiling, Tha Soe recounts: “I arrived, and then I got malaria – again! And here, the people just begin to panic because I have malaria!” He shrugs his shoulders, bemused, and continues, “I can understand it though, because here [in Australia] you have the terms like ‘infectious disease’ and ‘chronic infection.’ It is those terms that scared me!”

When Karen families and individuals arrive in Melbourne, they are allocated a case worker from the Migrant Information Center (MIC) who helps with finding housing, employment and schooling. Often Karens would tell me that the case workers were very helpful in their first few months, but many then reported that they had only met with their case worker once, when they were first taken to temporary housing.

Tha Soe and Lwe Moo were placed by their caseworker in 14 John Street, a run down weatherboard house in an outer eastern suburb of Melbourne. As a designated temporary residence for new Karen arrivals, this house has seen many families and individuals between its walls. It is in poor condition and slowly dismantling itself along the sides as the foundations weakly holding the house upright appear to have taken on the pressures felt by the transient residents. The house seems to be slowly folding itself into the yard.

Tha Soe leads a tour around the house and says that there are currently “seven families living in the house, or eight. It’s hard to tell sometimes.” In the house there are four bedrooms, two living rooms, two bathrooms, and a kitchen that has been haphazardly modified to cater for more residents. Tha Soe explains that the “house is
very big and many people stay here, and you can have the smell.” He pauses the tour, turning to face me, and asks, “Do you smell it? The house?”

It is a strong odour. A smell of ageing materials, blended in with rising damp and body odour. Tha Soe is offended by this odour. It is unfamiliar, redolent with foreignness, and he lays the blame on the materials of which the house is built: “It is in this!” he says, pointing to the walls. He believes the house “has been too busy!” The impression is that Tha Soe expected more of the house and more of resettlement.

Tha Soe describes the layout of the house, with its specified and fractured spaces, as alienating. “Everyone is separated,” he says. The scenery he is used to, he says, is “like in Vietnam war movies [where] all over the hills, small, small hilltops, you have lots of huts with thatched leaves, and bamboo awnings.” He is referring to Mae La refugee camp, which has a population of just under 50,000 people who live communally and with little privacy. Tha Soe raises his hands in disbelief, and communicates that he is speechless at the differences in living conditions between Melbourne and Mae La refugee camp.

Tha Soe recalls moments over the previous 3 years when his former students would contact him from the towns and cities in Australia and the USA, where they had resettled with their families. He mimics the students phone calls: “Oh! It’s so difficult sometimes. And, the system here is very different!” He admits that he chastised them, saying, “You guys are not trying enough!” However, he then concedes that he was too tough on these students and did not understand the difficulties of relocating to another country. He says, “When I arrive here, I too almost broke down.” Sitting down on an old couch Tha Soe says, “Of course you have to leave your loved ones behind, and your friends you know, your church community behind.” He pauses, shifting in the seat, and lowers his face as he continues: “Of course this will take time. But you must gradually get over that.”

Tha Soe is 30 and had not travelled outside the border region between Thailand and Burma. He explains he is having difficulty acclimatising to his new surroundings so he spends time trying to find similarities in the suburban landscape of Melbourne with
what he is used to. He notes a familiar shade of green amongst the trees, convincing himself that “It's nearly the same.” Tha Soe says:

   The place where we [are] staying is quite green, so it's okay. I like Australia. It’s beautiful, each house. Especially in Ringwood, out there looking at the houses all have their own small land, lots of flower trees and lemon tree, and something so green when you get up and look. And I’ve not been wearing my glasses until now, because you just get up and you see all these green things. [It's] so good. The only thing is the coldness. But they said this is Spring! It is fantastic you know.

   Tha Soe pauses, looking out the window, and then continues: “I'm just beginning to wonder what does fantastic really mean...[pause]...because everything is fantastic, its Fan-Tas-Tic.” As he says this, Tha Soe strips all meaning from the word.

   Tha Soe admits to losing his composure at times. His wife is seven months pregnant with their first child and they need to find new housing before she delivers the baby. He explains:

   Because this is just a temporary house so we cannot stay here. We are going through the internet, to find some houses, then I’ll go for inspection. And so one day I go for five house inspections, and then apply for maybe two, and the next week we get phone calls ‘Oh it was unsuccessful, your application’. I said ‘Don't call me, you spoil my day!’ Early morning at 9, I didn't get a house! ‘Thank you so much for everything’!

   Tha Soe notes the urgent need to settle quickly into another house. He says:

   My wife is getting, going to get the kid soon, so we want to prepare the house for the kid, and know [find out] where the public transportation [is]. Like at least for a year I won’t be able to buy a car of course, so realistically, I'm just thinking how I can settle into the new environment quickly.

   Tha Soe says he has been walking across the suburbs. He describes being disorientated and unfamiliar with the suburbs “busy roads” and “empty streets”. For Tha
Soe, this new landscape lacks social interaction and personalised experiences. On some walks, he has come across other Karen families, which quells the feeling of loneliness and longing for familiarity. He describes this feeling as “the longingness to be with the people you share your culture with, [because] it brings you together. It brings a bond together more closely.” Tha Soe says, “Meeting other Karens, from other camps, we get along very well because you know, just being a Karen, you feel them like they are your brothers and sisters in a new land.”

During his walks across the suburban landscape, Tha Soe notices that the young Karen children he meets have taken upon an Australian quality, as if the environment has seeped into them. He says, “Here, [I have met] just five families and the kids are still very young. When they arrived here the kids were very young, so they've become more Australian. I can see it in them.” Tha Soe witnessing young Karen children taking on an Australian tinge shows the influence of social and material landscapes. He remarks on the importance of being reconnected with one's personal history and says,

It would be good for these young people who were born in the camps, to see that they were born in this place. And, you know they have become Australian but to look back into their history, their youth, their younger age, and continue to see the situation of the camps it would be interesting for them.

The idea of an awareness of being born in a refugee camp as being interesting for the children seems to be underwritten by the moral obligation to take care of and nurture the refugee camps and its inhabitants. The crux is not to forget where you have come from. As Tha Soe says: “This is one thing I would like, because keeping alive the memories of what we have been through—documenting—is very important. Because you can say it and next year you have [an] event and you say it again, but it is just a forgotten memory.”

Tha Soe's aspiration to preserve memory stems from his own awareness that his recollections are disintegrating. He reveals: “I have very less memories actually. Because you know after this nightmare you try to have these good thoughts of it, and then it just goes away, it doesn't stick with you, childhood or anything.” When Tha Soe reflects on
memory, he points to the importance of an ongoing active dialogue between people. In this way, memories are made available, rejuvenated and re-circulated in the community. As Raphael Samuel (1994: 10) notes, memory is conditioned, ‘changing colour and shape according to the emergencies of the moment’. Samuel continues:

that so far from being handed down in the timeless form of ‘tradition’ it is progressively altered from generation to generation. It bears the impress of experience, in however a mediated way. It is stamped with the ruling passions of its time. Like history, memory is inherently revisionist and never more chameleon than when it appears to stay the same (1994: 10).

The collective memory of the resettled Karen community is contested, and forms another landscape to be negotiated. It is a memoryscape that nests within the resettlement landscape and vitalises the community. There is also the expectation that the landscapes of return, in Tha Soe’s understanding, will present things being in place, frozen at the moment when people left. But this is an impossibility, as ‘no-one returns to the same place twice. Time moves on, the person and the landscape have changed’ (Bender 2001a: 81).

Lily Htoo returned to Mae La refugee camp 3 years after resettling in Melbourne. She was horrified at the change. “My house in the camp,” she says, “now it’s [where] the pigs live!” Another young man, Nay Moo, returned at around the same time to visit his elderly mother. In the two years since he had left Mae La, he said he returned to find much change. He describes seeing his mother and says, “I saw her, and I stand [in front] of her. She is [all] bones, and she looks so old. Her skin is all…” He cannot think of the word, so he pulls on his skin all over his body. I suggest, “Loose?” He says, “Yes, her skin was very loose.” He then holds out his arms, says he hugged her, and that she felt so different, like bones gathered together in wafer-thin skin.

Both Lily Htoo and Nay Moo returned with great expectation and were both, in separate ways, confronted by what they returned to. The social life inside Mae La camp, which once offered an example of relative permanence to them, is now instead the guarantor of impermanence. There are terrors in exile, but they came to realise the terrors in returning (Orford and Becker 2001). It is as Eva Hoffman (1989: 132) writes
on her return to a Polish landscape: ‘I have been dislocated from my own centre of the world, and that world has been shifted away from my centre. There is no longer a straight axis anchoring my imagination; it begins to oscillate, and I rotate around it unsteadily’.

The hopes for returning to landscapes once inhabited are predicated upon earlier perceptions of time spent in place, situated and anchored in a sensorial correspondence with the environment. There is the thus the absence brought on by exile, but there are also the absences only recognisable through return.

4.6. The weight of memory: photographs of absence

“My memory is full and heavy.”

Sar Loe

Sar Loe and her mother have recently returned from a trip revisiting Mae La refugee camp, which they left four and a half years ago. In their home in Ringwood, we sit together looking through her photographs. Sar Loe says, “Just here [she points]. My memories are here, like [they are] sitting down next to me,” and she points to a spot in the photograph. The photograph records the unmarked plot where her maternal grandmother is buried. In the center of the photograph is the small mound that looks anonymous in the landscape. It rests on the crest of the hill and the background of the
photograph records a vista that seems to fall out from behind the grave to show the surrounding jungle-covered valleys and hills.

Sar Loe is pointing to a small, flat patch covered in grasses next to the grave. She describes how she took many photos of the site from all different angles, as she wanted to record all the different perspectives. After she had taken all the photographs, she says that she sat down on the earth next to the mound, and watched as her mother neatened the grave. Her mother, she says, “pull[ed] out plants from on top of my grandmother.”

Sar Loe has recorded a whole series of images that focus solely upon the grave of her grandmother. The photographs scan the various perspectives from which one can look at the small grave when standing beside or below the plot; if the photographs were placed side by side, they would offer the full breadth of the horizon. Sar Loe describes her grandmothers’ qualities while looking at the photographs, and she likens these to qualities present in the landscape where her grave is placed. The setting sun and the rolling mountain range in which the plot sits “give good ground,” as Sar Loe explains, to be laid to rest.

Sar Loe speaks of the very literal weight of her memories and being able to sense their material essence. She describes her memory as being “full and heavy”: a suggestion of the burden on her body as it stands pinned under a heavy load. Her memories also have a quality suggestive of personhood as they, the memories, place themselves “just here” next to her buried grandmother as well as “sitting down next to” Sar Loe. Sar Loe’s memory is at once internal and external to her body and mind. An impression of the scene is that, once tending to the plot of her grandmother is finished, Sar Loe will pick up her memory, put it over her shoulder and walk back down the hill carrying it.

In Sar Loe’s grandmother’s grave plot, as in the photo of the grave, the absence of her relative is made present as if it were, in effect, a presence. This reaffirms the axiom that ‘People die, but this does not mean they disappear’ (Callon and Law 2004: 5). Absence becomes something that can be engaged with and something that can cause effects. For Sar Loe, her grandmother is physically absent, but she nonetheless remains present as a weighted memory and as a spot in the landscape. Acknowledging her
grandmother’s absence promotes neither a ‘hypochondria of the heart’ nor blasé acceptance, but rather reveals her as ongoing presence in their lives (Boym 2001: 7).

This revelation through acknowledging absences is a feature of Sar Loe’s return visit with her mother to Mae La refugee camp. Sar Loe and her two brothers were born inside the refugee camp and, for them, it is the place of their childhood as well as a home, residing in their memory. Returning to the camp after over four years of living abroad entailed acknowledging that the absences hurt Sar Loe and her mother. They were faced with the reality that this is not the place that rests in their memory but, instead, it is a place of ongoing change, ongoing difference and numerous absences. Such a sting of acknowledgment came when seeing her grandfather again. In the photograph Sar Loe shows me, her mother kneels beside her elderly father who is crumpled in a hammock. Sar Loe points to his face and briefly across his resting body and says, “He is the reason we go back.” She insinuates that soon he will become absent.

Even with his approaching absence from Sar Loe’s life, her grandfather will, as Hetherington (2004: 159) writes, ‘have just as much of an effect upon relations as recognizable forms of presence can have’. When Sar Loe’s grandfather is placed next to his wife on the hill, the ‘social relations [will be] performed not only around what is there but sometimes also around the presence of what is not’ (Hetherington 2004: 159, emphasis in original). Like Sar Loe’s grandmother who rests in the landscape, he will continue to be part of the material world (Fowles 2010). People inevitably become absent, but Sar Loe and her family will continue their engagement with kin and friends who become marked by absence, and the deceased will still have a ‘significant presence’ in their social relations as well as in the perceptions of the material world around them (Hetherington 2004: 159).

In all the photos that Sar Loe guides me through, there is the recognition of absence, and it takes multiple forms. Such absences are a feature of everyday life (Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen 2010). Sar Loe and her mother, Lah May, lament the distance between them and their friends who remain inside Mae La. In a series of photos, we see multiple shots of a large group, huddled and posing together for the photographer in a sunken alleyway railed by bamboo stilts on either side. Sar Loe explains that they are “all Htoos”—their shared family name—and she points to each person and relates their
kinship. They are cousins, aunties, uncles as well as old school friends. Sar Loe also describes everyone's traits: “they are funny … they sing well,” and how “nice” they are.

In another photo, Lah May, Sar Loe's mother, is reconnecting with friends, and we see images of them walking together through Zone 1.A. Sar Loe says her mother “loves those types of clothing—loose and baggy! They are good for the humidity.” She moves on to remark on how much her mother misses her friends and that that “She is lonely here” in Ringwood. Sar Loe tries to explain her mother's feelings of being in Melbourne and she describes it as “empty”: as if “nothing and no one [is] there.” For Lah May, it is an acute feeling of the absence of her family and friends affecting her in Melbourne, but she says it is necessary to “be like this.” She means it was necessary to have left the refugee camp and resettle in Australia.

As Sar Loe goes through photos of her childhood friends living in Mae La, she remarks on one significant difference between them now. She says, “They already have so many kids.” Her mother, Lah May, laments: “They are too young and [they] don’t know how to build a family.” Sar Loe puts it down to there being little to do in the camps and says, “They're just bored.” But Lah May, who was a nurse inside Mae La camp, suggests that the practice of youth having children is a reflection of the lack of resources and education in the camp. She believes that the absence of contraceptives, sexual health education and family planning is negatively affecting people’s lives. Here, the notion of absence takes its most material form.

For Sar Loe, it is her sensorium which predominantly registers the absence of familiar landscapes. Sar Loe says: “I miss the sticky heat, and the cold mornings and nights… I also miss the mist” that comes to sit in the basin of the valleys surrounding Mae La refugee camp. These laments read like grieving, and she continues to note that she misses the sensation of walking through the camp and the smell of bamboo, rain and dirt. “I come back to Ringwood,” she says, “and nothing is the same.” The visual and the olfactory registering of being sensorially engaged in the resettlement landscape lacks the same primacy or, perhaps, it lacks the potency of familiarity and refractions of nostalgia. In either case, for Sar Loe it doesn’t smell like belonging in landscape.
Sar Loe, nevertheless, acknowledges that she feels that she no longer belongs in Mae La Camp. “I’m so different now,” she says. “My life is so different,” she continues, to what it is for her peers remaining in Mae La. She scours through the photographs, and finds images of herself sitting with her old school friends. “Look at them,” she says, “They look like refugees.” She points to her own body in the photograph and remarks, “I start to look like a refugee again.” But then she looks up and shyly laughs, adding the correction: “Oh [pauses]… I mean, I am already a refugee.”

4.7. The absent refugee

When do you stop being a refugee? This is a question that has long engaged scholars as well as people of refugee background. In the statements above, Sar Loe seems to suggest there is a threshold. Her language reveals that she has crossed over a threshold of difference which now demarcates her from her old school friends. This progression from the essentialist category of refugee to a position where the term is believed to no longer apply, is not unique. Kumsa’s (2006) research into young Oromos living in Canada investigates this same transition. Her research participants recognised, and were sensitive to, the negatively inflected history which overlays the category of “the refugee” (Kumsa 2006: 240). This same understanding and sensitivity underpin Sar Loe’s comment.

Public political dialogue and the resulting media coverage in Australia are currently absorbed by a omnipresent anti “boat people” narrative. In this narrative, the

24 It is a question famously exemplified by Hannah Arendt’s essay, “We refugees” (1943). In this essay, Arendt gives a personal account of fleeing the Third Reich along with other German Jews.
nation is presented a reluctant host to desperate asylum seekers. This particular public narrative does not necessarily encompass refugees who arrive via the Australian government’s humanitarian entrance program but, nevertheless, Sar Loe and her peers are alert to this highly politicised atmosphere. Refugees in all countries, as Bauman (2001) suggests, are viewed with more than a degree of uncertainty and cast as threatening agents. Kumsa (2006: 240) states that refugees ‘embody the violence that created them. They are feared and Othered as though they were that violence itself’. In Australia, it is not only violence that refugees and asylum seekers embody as in Kumsa’s argument: the images published in the media portray the arrival of bodies manifesting desperation, poverty and grief at picturesque Australian shorelines. Sar Loe and her peers are aware of, and sensitive to, this negative sociopolitical atmosphere. Perhaps this is why Sar Loe says she has become different, and that both her life and the way that she looks are fundamentally different from those of her peers who remain inside the refugee camps. It is a difference that Sar Loe can see and pinpoint and, as such, it is this difference she sees as making her an absentee from that world. There is the sense that Sar Loe understands herself to be just a visitor to Mae La refugee camp, to her past life, and to all the refugee-ness that it represents.

Sar Loe believes that the quality that makes someone a refugee is, for her, in some way absent. She alludes to markers that make her seem different: the clothes, the location, not having children in her teens. But there is also something more innately sensed: a feeling out of place that is socially, corporeally and sensorially registered.

For Sar Loe, being a refugee also means feeling in tune with the landscape of Mae La refugee camp. Now that she returns as a visitor, a non-refugee entering the heartland of Karen refugees, the refugee camp loses its aura of restriction and fear; instead it becomes a home that is sentimental, beautiful. The refugee camp as an artifice that is steeped in unsettling connotations is also a place to be missed.

It was not just Sar Loe who believed she was no longer a refugee. On a different day, when I was visiting Ti Na Aung, she explained that “Some people, they are really refugees. They don’t have a house. They really have nothing.” Ti Na Aung explains:

When I was in the camp, the people who came to the camp did have a house but they just can’t live in it. They have to sell their house and sell
everything. Some people, they can’t really live in a place anymore. They want to move to another country.

Some people, they come [to a third country] because they want to have a better life. You know, some people just don’t have any way to have a better life. It is scary.

For Ti Na Aung and Sar Loe, being a refugee is both a concept and a context. It entails someone having nothing, having to flee, and being utterly desperate. A refugee has no other options and, essentially, as Ti Na Aung asserts, they are people who want freedom from persecution and fear. Ti Na Aung’s statement reveals a position from which she watches refugees coming into the camp: those are the people who have left everything and now have nothing.

Ti Na Aung arrived at the refugee camp when she was 15. When her mother arrived at the orphanage in Rangoon to pick her up all those years later, she asked Ti Na Aung to return with her. Ti Na Aung says, “She asked me to come back to Thailand, to apply for resettlement.” Two weeks before her mother arrived in Rangoon, Ti Na Aung’s parents had been filling out the required forms to apply for their family’s resettlement and they were told that their daughter had to be inside the refugee camp with them to submit their application. Ti Na Aung says, “They needed a photo.” She returned with her mother, and the family underwent the required medical examinations together. Ti Na Aung explains:

When I come [to the refugee camp], I’m just there for one week and we have the interview and take the photo. After that, my dad applied. They [the authorities] asked, ‘So what country do you want to go? America or Australia?’ That’s what it was like when I arrived.

Three months later, they were told their application to resettle in Australia had been processed and they would be departing. The context of Ti Na Aung’s own arrival underscores the way in which she watched the other refugees arrive in the camp. It is plausible to infer that, at that time, Ti Na Aung didn’t really see herself as a refugee in the same category as those people she saw entering the refugee camp. Rather, she saw herself as an individual once orphaned who had just arrived at the same place. Ti Na
Aung is not a refugee in the sense in which she understands the word, but she is a victim of the overall context of civil war in Burma.

For Sar Loe, being a refugee is a life experience, and it entails learning how to be resilient. She states, “I am stronger” for growing up in a refugee camp. She also believes she is “a better person” because of it. This suggests that there is virtue to be gained from the vicissitudes of ethnic persecution and being confined to living inside a refugee camp: a particular moral quality for which, through enduring a situation, you can be rewarded. Sar Loe continues to say: “It’s like I can do anything now. It has given me strength.” She says: “My family and I always say we feel like we have been blessed in our lives. We don’t say lucky because we are Christian, so we have actually been blessed to have good luck.” I ask Sar Loe, “Do you really think you were blessed having to grow up in a refugee camp, because it seems more like bad luck?” She resolutely replies, “But I guess we are lucky to have had that experience, and it has made us stronger.”

After the initial shock that resettlement brought, Sar Loe adapted well to life in Melbourne. She learnt English quickly and was able to finish secondary school with only slight delay. She has recently finished her training to be a dental nurse and has been offered a job in a local dental clinic.

Later on this same day, we drove to see a painting Sar Loe submitted at an exhibition curated by the Migrant Information Center for National Refugee Day. It was held in a run down gymnasium far out in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The attendees were predominantly of refugee backgrounds, as well as people who are involved in human services for migrant populations in eastern Melbourne. Entering the gymnasium, Sar Loe points out families who represent different ethnic groups originating from Burma. She says, “Everyone here is all refugees to Australia,” and that “Everyone has been [affected].” She continues to say that “these days are good for the young kids so they remember the language [and] the dances.” However, she then says: “No one accepts,” and turns to face a group of Australian-born women working behind the canteen bench. She says, “We can never really have your lifestyle. We just don’t share the same lifestyle. We can’t be that comfortable—Like them.” She motions towards the women.
Sar Loe explains that being comfortable in a social and material landscape is about moving freely and looking as if you belong. If this naturalised movement is achieved, you can blend in to the Australian landscape and not inhabit solely the landscape of resettlement. Looking at me she says, “You know, you can go anywhere. You know where to go.” She suggests that there is not one landscape, but many landscapes and they are distinct. There is the landscape traversed by people born in Australia, who move with ease and embody dispositions of a particular habitus (Bourdieu 1977). Then there is the landscape of resettlement, occupied by people of refugee background, like Sar Loe. The two landscapes do not overlap for Sar Loe.

Sar Loe’s words speak to the condition of migrancy, displacement and emplacement, belonging and non-belonging. Tha Soe also acknowledged the need for movement within two landscapes and two separate communities. He describes it as a standoff:

I feel if I’m going to settle here, it’s better to not be very close inside the community, because that way, you know, it’s like, I feel it will be a set back for our kid. He’s born here [in Australia, and] I feel that he’ll have the privilege, the kid should have the privilege to be like any other kid [in Australia]. Maybe, okay every Sunday or Saturday we’ll go to church [Karen congregation services], we will go and meet our community members, okay. That way I want to introduce the kid to a community that is not like, you are from here, you should be here.

This idea that because you are from “here”, therefore you should be “here” is affecting. Tha Soe rails against such constraint and containment saying, “I feel that our child should have, every person should have, the opportunity to choose anything. Where they want to go, what they want to do. I never had that option. I feel our child should at least have that option.” There is the suggestion in Tha Soe’s comments that his child would be held back if he or she is only familiar to move within the resettled Karen refugee community. Now that his child has “the privilege” to be born in Australia, he or she should have “the privilege” to be able to have the same freedom of movement as other Australian children.
Tha Soe feels tethered to Mae La refugee camp due to his work and his moral obligation to help, but he is clear that he wants his child to have freedom to choose bound to social and material landscapes as well as to people. It is noticeable that Tha Soe is actively seeking to provide his child with an environment in which he does not experience the same implicit cultural obligations. The crucial point is that, just because his child is descended from “here”—a place of refugeeeness—this does not mean that he should have to occupy that place, a withering location of “here”.

This consideration to his child comes across as a sacrifice, but it is one that will enable his fluent movement in Australia’s social landscape. Tha Soe infers that for his child to succeed, to feel that he belongs and to have opportunity, he should not feel weighted down or tied solely to the Karen community but should be able to move through many different social, cultural and political landscapes. This fluency of movement across different landscapes is necessary because, as Tha Soe says, “People migrating just is.” It is a fact of living in countries that are surrounded by neighbouring states. Tha Soe continues: “The migrating will never end and the cultures will keep, just keep exchanging [with] other cultures and [having] mixed marriages and it’s better to educate people so they can live in harmony on the borders.” From Sar Loe and Tha Soe’s accounts, movement through various landscapes is not separated from experiences, but is vital to it.

Sar Loe and Tha Soe’s accounts also alert us to a particular polarity. Sar Loe didn’t see herself as a refugee when she revisited Mae La camp as she had now traversed beyond its boundaries, off its particular landscape; and at her return, the topography had become unfamiliar. In Melbourne, she feels tethered to the resettlement landscape, a plane necessarily traversed by people of refugee backgrounds. It suggests the idea that you are only a refugee in certain places thus whittling the notion of refugee to a sociopolitical construction: an identifier. Sar Loe is an absentee to the world of Mae La refugee camp and the microcosm of refugees she sees as contained there, and she also desires for her own refugeeeness to be an absent quality when she traverses the urban landscape of Melbourne. Sar Loe, however, remains doubtful that the second desire will ever be possible to achieve.
A recent anthology of Burmese poetry, called Bones Will Crow (2012), contains a poem by the famous writer Zeyar Lynn, titled Sling Bag. The poem hauntingly presents the suggestion that you can never be absent from your past and the conditioning you receive as a result of your experiences. Zeyar Lynn (2012: 159-161) writes,

Wherever he goes, in his sling bag
He carries his severed leg. If he has to shake hands,
He takes his severed leg out from the bag,
And touches it on the other person’s hand
As he says ‘Nice to meet you’
He must have gone through a lot of suffering
With that severed leg in his bag,
Though he still has his two legs intact.
When he needs reassurance, he’ll insert his right hand,
Like a dead hand, into the bag slung on his right shoulder,
To feel the sinews and greasy slime of the severed leg...

The severed leg is his life, his past, his present and
His future, he says. 'It's truth', he says.
'It's honesty', he says.
'It's just him', (says someone else).
Someone who claims to be a childhood friend.
He too always carries a sling bag.

Lynn’s protagonist is dismembered and bereaved. The protagonist’s childhood friend shares the same fate, and we are brought to acknowledge that everyone has their own sling bag. Lynn’s severed leg is silent brutality, as well as a strategy for dissociation. The protagonist has been ‘transformed into a cipher’ and the severed leg is a detached portion of his political agency, whereby there can be ‘multiple and antagonistic counter discourses and acts [that] can be attached to the same performance, thereby transforming its semantic efficiency’ (Feldman 1991: 138, 15).

Disassociation involves attention being withdrawn and refocused on a safer place in ‘one’s imaginings, an alternative self, or [via] concentration on a highly focused part of the social field. Perception, imagination, and memory are absorbed into that particular focus’ (Kleinman and Kleinman 1994: 717). Skidmore (2004: 193-203) writes on the culturally embedded strategies for disassociation in Burma. She notes how
‘Burmese become voyeurs, viewing their actions of their bodies from a safe and distant realm. This method of detachment from the body is taught as basic to the meditation process in Burmese Buddhism’ (2004: 197). Lynn’s poem is written in this context. There is containment and mediation. The severed leg contains the protagonist’s past and directs his future. In moments of uncertainty, he can reach into the sling bag to feel the leg’s presence: the leg coats him in its viscous film of security and surety. The protagonist of Lynn’s poem illustrates Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman’s (1994) point that ‘bodies transformed by political processes not only represent those processes, they experience them as the lived memory of transformed worlds’ (1994: 716-717, original italics). Kleinman and Kleinman continue:

The experience is of memory processes sedimented in gait, posture, movement, and all the other cultural corporeal components which together realize cultural code and social dynamics in everyday practices. The memorialized experience merges subjectivity and social world (1994: 717).

The severed leg is the weighted anchor from which Tha Soe wants to free his child. However, for others like Sar Loe, the limb is carried with her as the material debris of a past life lived and is retained as evidence of moral fortitude, endurance, and origins.

People attempt to try to recreate their refugee experience of time living in camps such as Mae La through ubiquitous and simple domestic habits. Sar Loe shows us a snapshot of domesticity: “We always ate fruit in the camp. More than vegetables. That’s why you get fruit every time you walk into a house now [in Melbourne] and at every ceremony.” Her friend Mu Lay alludes to a similar condition: “These bamboo shoots, they’re my favourite. You have them here [in Melbourne], but they are better in the camp. They are much better in Thailand. I still eat them here [in Melbourne], reminds me of the bamboo shoots in Thailand.”

Sar Loe and Mu Lay try to mimic their pasts, the domesticity of their former homes inside Mae La refugee camp. In moments when the façade cracks and mimicry is but a thin veil, they focus instead upon improvising on the exilic theme. Much like
Zeyar Lynn does in his poem *Sling bag*, Sar Loe and Mu Lay engage in acts of intimation that speak to ‘personal and intimate pain and pleasure through a “cryptic disguise”’ (Boym 2001: 252). It is as Boym writes, that ‘playing the game of hide and seek with memories and hopes, just as one did with friends in one's distant and half-forgotten childhood, seems to be the only way to reflect the past without becoming a pillar of salt’ (2001: 252).

This characteristic is visible in Sar Loe’s landscape painting that she exhibited on National Refugee Day, where the pictorial focus is on a scene in Mae La camp. A young woman walks out from between the bamboo stilts and down a dirt path towards us, the viewers. On her head, she holds a basket and behind her are the rolling hills and undulating valleys glowing with the passing colours of vibrant sunset. There is a bamboo fence framing the scene, which leaves no illusion that despite the beauty this is Mae La refugee camp. It is a romantic landscape and the woman is alone in a silent and shifting light. The scene is designed by Sar Loe to capture a sense of ‘diasporic intimacy’ (Boym 2001). It is a diasporic intimacy that ‘is haunted by the images of home and homeland, yet it also discloses some of the furtive pleasures of exile’ (Boym 2001: 253).

4.8. Arriving at nostalgia: landscapes of return

Nay Moo had been in Melbourne two years before he travelled back to Thailand to visit his family in Mae La refugee camp. Lifting his arms, Nay Moo describes the heat that hit him when the sliding doors opened at Bangkok’s international airport.
“The heat went BOOM!” he says as he hits his chest with his open palms. “I hadn’t felt it [in a] long time,” he continues. “It was good [to feel].”

Nay Moo was very excited leading up to the trip, and anxious to see his mother and sisters. He tentatively admits that arriving at Mae La and seeing his mother, sisters and extended family was underwhelming: “It was ok, [pause]… my mother is old now. My best friend is gone. He went to America [pause]… My aunt went to America.”

A period of two years has brought significant change to Mae La refugee camp, and Nay Moo had also experienced changes of his own. In that time, he had moved to Melbourne and married his girlfriend who had relocated with her family two years before Nay Moo, and they had recently had their first child. However, the only changes Nay Moo acknowledged when we spoke, were the differences he encountered in Mae La refugee camp. This had made him unhappy. It was not how he remembered or how he expected it to be.

This is the ‘danger of nostalgia’ as Boym (2001: xvi) writes, as ‘it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one’. Nostalgia, as Boym writes, ‘is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy’ (2001: xiii).

Nay Moo describes how, on the first day of his arrival, he went to the makeshift stalls along the road and bought vegetables and fruit from young children. He was anxious to be involved in the social landscape again and enmeshed in the material world of Mae La refugee camp: to achieve the state and the feeling, as he says, “to be home.” Here, the vegetables and fruit are an attempt to repair his longing that has been welling up during his first two years away from home. But Nay Moo only sees a façade of familiarity. The street sellers and the landscape of Mae La refugee camp with its functional bamboo housing are certainly similar to, but can never be the same as, it was before he left. For Nay Moo, this was his first experience of not being able to return to his pre-resettlement past.

The impossibility of a homecoming is the quintessence of the exile experience. Habib’s (1996: 96) personal portrayal of returning to her homeland of Lebanon laments that ‘the end of the war allowed a physical return, but home was not to be found and the
past was not to be recreated’. The sad truth for Habib (1996), as well as for Nay Moo, is that there can be no true homecoming. Landscapes, relationships, memories and places of biographical importance inevitably shift and alter with time. Perhaps this is why John Berger (2005 [1984]) was impelled to see home as represented:

\[
\text{not by a house, but by a practice or a set of practices. Everyone has his or her own. These practices, chosen and not imposed, offer in their repetition, transient as they may be in themselves, more permanence, more shelter than any lodging. Home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived (Berger 2005 [1984]: 64).}
\]

There is a comfort accessible in Berger’s notion of home that liberates people from the structures of a physical home as it instead places the feeling of home as being attained through habits and everyday practices. However, this could also be a ‘strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming’, as Boym writes (2001: xvii).

Ler Wah always implicitly knew that he would not be returning home. As he walked out of his home village with his family, he felt the weight of his father’s hand pulling him into the safety of the surrounding jungle to start their journey to the refugee camps along the border. His narrative suggests that this sensation was a ‘spot of time’, a discrete resonating moment by which he began to chart his movement and experience in the world. Wordsworth coined the phrase ‘spots of time’ in his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude* (1850), which was posthumously published by his wife. Wordsworth writes:

\[
\text{There are in our existence spots of time,}
\text{That with distinct pre-eminence retain}
\text{A renovating virtue, whence … our minds}
\text{Are nourished and invisibly repaired.}
\]

Wordsworth began this autobiographical poem in 1798, and he continued suturing epigraphs on to it throughout his life, allowing the piece to extend. It is, in effect, his memory laid bare. What is acutely poignant to Wordsworth’s lines in *The Prelude* is that each turn of phrase is anchored to moments of activity, or to a change in tempo and a quickening of events. These spots are moorings to which he ties his
responses to discrete incidents: for example, guilt, or periods of emotional intensity like learning about the death of his father at the age of 13. Such binding is strikingly similar to the narratives of movement from home villages to the refugee camps resting on the territorial seam between Thailand and Burma. For instance, Wordsworth describes waiting for the horse carriage in the Lake District of northeast England to travel back to his family home where, later, he would find out his father had passed away. Poignant in these lines is the power of evocation with which Wordsworth attributed to the sights and sounds of his wait, all of those years ago, which were then bound to his memory of the death of his father. He writes (1850: Book XI, 258-278):

And afterwards, the wind and sleety rain,
And all the business of the elements,
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
And the bleak music of that old stone wall
All these were spectacles and sounds to which
I often would repair and thence would drink.

The narrations of people's migration contained in these pages are constructed in the same way. Recollections are sequenced by events, anchored to movements through sensorially registered environments, as well as to people's ambulatory encounters. The spots, as sediment of experiences, intertwine people, place and movement. They are the centre of experience and, as points of evocation, the spots of time do not just reside in the past, but continue to mark the present.

In this chapter, I have shown how people on the move engage with their social and material environment. I have also shown that landscapes cannot be taken for granted in people's experiences of dislocation and relocation, and that people's experiences of the world are necessarily interwoven with their movement. Landscapes are often a source of pain because of exile or warfare, yet they are also a source of vitality and renewal (Bender 2001, 2001a; Bender and Winer 2001; Schama 1995). For Ler Wah, Ti Na Aung, Lillian Wah and Lily Htoo, landscapes become symptomatic of personal experiences and histories, and are contoured by fear, violence and distrust. There are environments, such as inside Burma, in which there can be no reprieve from fear and terror. This reveals that material landscapes are not passive templates or mere
canvases to people's lives. Landscapes can also be manipulated into cunning enforcers to larger political and nation state constructions of violence and militarisation.

When Ti Na Aung was put on the back of a truck and taken to Rangoon by her grandfather, her brother Ler Wah had already travelled through the jungle to the refugee camps along the territorial border with Thailand. Separated across space, the siblings had analogically replicative experiences of movement across Burma's landscape. Their social movement under politically repressive machinery and their physical movement, anchored by the sensorially based memories, also track those of their peers. All had their individual journeys, but their experiences correlate to form a similar pattern of being in the world: a manner that is sensorially acute, perceived through their movement across social and material landscapes, and layered by experience and memory.

A poem called *Over the Mountain Ranges* written by a prominent Burmese writer and translated by anthropologist Jennifer Leehey (1995; cited in Skidmore 2004: 187) depicts movement and meandering in politically and socially tensioned environments in Burma, which can potentially lead to spaces of openings and possibilities:

- in the eyes there is a well
- in the mouth there is a desert
- in the ears a mad man with a broken leg is doing a jumping dance
- in the stomach a complete poem
- in the heart children are playing hide and seek
- in the brain two rivals in love are fighting with swords
- in the hand a flower which hasn’t been presented
- is starting to wither

I—
Sleepwalking over mountain ranges
Pressing and sharpening myself.

The poem draws a body, with isolated organs housing disconnected events, whilst the ego—alert and armoured—sleepwalks a pathway across the mountainous landscape. The flower withers in the hand like a lost opportunity, yet contained in the

---

25 See Leehey (2005) for research on the relationship between Burmese fiction writers and poets and the censorship board in Burma. Leehey (2005) suggests that Burmese writers have taken to writing in 'a crazy way', thus directly avoiding political content and enabling them to negotiate the strict censorship in Burma.
organs are scenarios that represent a hint of possibility. There is the underlying suggestion of possibility that, through traversing pathways with a gait honed and sharpened to the social landscape, certain spaces may become available to create opportunities and potential. Tha Soe’s narrative draws upon this ability to find openings: by utilising the shadows that are cast across social fields, there is the potential for movement. This shows how ‘people do not just occupy but inhabit the environments in which they dwell’ (Ingold 2006a: 22). People are always in-place, through their engagement with the materiality of the world.

With their resettlement in Australia, many Karen have suffered from dislocation, which is primarily experienced through the sensorium. For the people who narrated their movements in this chapter, relocation to Melbourne brought on an evaporation of the familiar sensations that had embedded them in their material world. To counter this erasure of familiarity, individuals and the collective resettled Karen community seek to recreate the domesticity of their past lives in their new resettled locales. Yet resettlement in new environments necessarily involves learning to move and interact in these new fields, an acquiring of a habitus (Bourdieu 1977). These newly learnt social and physical postures can also cause people to feel displaced from their pasts, and can contribute to their not being able to feel an intimacy with their former homeland when they do undertake return trips. Returning home can work against people’s idea of intimacy with a place and with a past. Instead, realising that there can be no return enforces the difficulty of resettlement, and brings the first pangs of nostalgia and longing for a past time, past landscapes and places.

This realisation, I contend, causes people to meditate upon future-driven strategies and upon diasporic intimacy, which are composed by the various articulations of experiencing displacement (c.f. Meskell 2010: 212). Diasporic intimacy, as Boym writes,

- can be approached only through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets…. Diasporic intimacy does not promise an unmediated emotional fusion, but only a precarious affection—no less deep, yet aware of its transience… diasporic intimacy is dystopic by definition; it is rooted in the suspicion of a single home, in shared
longing without belonging. It thrives on the hope of the possibilities… (2001: 252).

After their resettlement in Melbourne, the people who narrated their journeys across the landscapes of Burma, inside and through the refugee camps and now across the resettlement environment of suburban Melbourne, are commencing new and innovative forms of movement. These movements are unique, singular and undertaken across imagined landscapes and surfaces.
5. LIVING IN IMAGES

Figure 4. Performance in Mae La
5.1. A photograph

One day, near the beginning of my fieldwork, I happened on a photograph that contains irrepressible happiness (Figure 4). The face that draws my attention is that of the young boy on the right hand side of the photograph: behind the girl in blue clasping her hands, he is the one wearing a white t-shirt. Only half of his face is visible, but it is caught in such a moment of intense laughter that it is arresting. The effect of the young boy’s face as I first witness the photograph is what Roland Barthes’ refers to as the punctum: an ‘element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me’ (Barthes 2000 [1981]: 26). I do not know, or even know of, the boy and that is why punctum is pertinent: it can be random, but acutely affecting.

I know only two people in this photograph: they are sitting in the foreground. They, like everyone in the photograph, are wearing their best clothes because it is a celebration to mark the end of their first year at school, and they are attending a farewell party. Amongst the laughing bodies, there is a small view of the dirt floor and four thick, structural wooden pillars, textures and materials that characterise buildings in Mae La refugee camp. These presences—the laughter of young Karen and the marked, whittled wooden beams framing their gathering—fill the photograph and give it meaning. With bodies congregated tightly, this photograph records a moment in a performance which is inferred by all the faces attentively looking in a shared direction out of the frame. The photograph is also a performance (Edwards 2001, 2009). An image of prescience, it records the gathering’s equal involvement in making and sharing histories, before they inevitably separate and move along their individual pathways.
Chapter 4 of this dissertation described these movements and pathways. It described people’s experiences moving from home villages in the northern hills of Burma, to refugee camps running along the territorial border seam between Thailand and Burma, and then onwards to Australia by way of humanitarian resettlement. This chapter now focuses upon the landscape of resettlement. For the Karen community, their recent resettlement to Melbourne has entailed movement in unfamiliar landscapes, recorded in a vast collection of images that are circulated in the community. Photographs resting in albums carried with families on their journeys, or images uploaded onto social media such as Facebook, archive people’s experiences. There is another form of image, however, that is unique in illustrating the Karen experience of settlement: it is created by individuals through repurposing imagery and producing images anew. These are images in which the *punctum* is purposeful, and in which layers of meanings can reveal intimate and intricate understandings and experiences of being in the world.

In this chapter, I discuss how the Karen youth who are a part of this research use visual creative practices to construct new social and material landscapes in which to move. As in the previous chapter, the emphasis remains on movement and shifting landscapes. This analytical and metaphorical focus presents a world that is in motion, an environment with abundant change, which is at the heart of how young Karen men and women perceive their world. In the previous section, I analysed physical movement across insecure sociopolitical landscapes; this chapter now shifts focus to movements in imagined landscapes, vistas and scenes, which are creatively articulated in images created by the same research contributors, using techniques of bricolage. These images, I suggest, function as mini-narratives which, once threaded together, constitute an ever-evolving weaving capturing the ways in which young resettled Karen experience, negotiate and sensorially and emotionally engage in the settlement landscape.
5.2. Holding on to vulnerable histories

*Home is where one starts from. As we grow older*

*The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated*

*Of dead and living.*

_T.S. Eliot (1943)_

How do you begin again? How to be happy and content, to reinvent the self, and cast off from complicated histories? These are the foremost questions I carried into the houses of recently resettled Karen families. I visited many houses in the suburbs of outer Melbourne. Often I would drive for hours with the young women through the suburban landscape and, passing through empty streets, they would casually say “Karen live there” and “here Karen are”. Sometimes they clarified by saying, “I know them” or “I just know they are Karen, from Mae La”. There was one house at which we would often gather. It was Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah’s family residence. The house has been built on a slanting block, and its height off the ground aggravates a deteriorating floor, causing sagging pockets to form that are thinly covered by stretched, calloused laminate. In the kitchen area, where we would often eat, the cupboards are stripped back to the original carcass, leaving the tins and condiments naked. In one empty corner, there is a portable gas stovetop on which Ti Na Aung would reheat her family’s weekly-prepared meal for everyone to share. In the winter, I would huddle with her and her friends around the same stove to get warm and they would banter, laughing at my poor attempts at learning to speak Karen. There we were, laughing in a dilapidated kitchen: an undisguisedly decayed timber and laminex skeleton working against any impression
of homely domesticity. By the time summer came, I had spent many afternoons there with Ti Na Aung, Ler Wah and their friends.

One particularly hot afternoon, we were all sitting on bare, aged mattresses buttressed up to three of the living room walls, with curtains drawn to prevent the heat from charging in, looking through photo albums that their mother had brought with her. Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah’s mother had created extensive photo albums, which she treasured; consequently they were objects revered by her children. The albums are worn and, as Ti Na Aung comes to open the oldest album, we all shift to kneel, encircling the photographic archive, leaning in to see the photos. Plastic covers snap under her sweaty fingers as they are turned, and blank faces stare back. Very few images are of people smiling. Instead, they look serious, respectfully reluctant participants to the photographic moment. Ti Na Aung says suddenly, “They are all important to my parents,” and then falls silent again. A few more pages pass when she adds, “My mother, she looks at them, all the time looks.”

Ti Na Aung describes a ritual of how her mother silently comes in to the living room and, ignoring the family as they watch the television, she kneels down in front of the bottom drawer of the TV unit. Her mother tucks her feet under her torso and opens the drawer where she takes out an album. Ti Na Aung mimics her mother’s movements. Opening an album, she bends over in silence and looks as if she is about to fall into its hard plastic coated sheets. Ti Na Aung says, “She just does this. All the time looking, looking. But I guess she is sad. She misses people, [but] she doesn’t say anything.”

Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah’s mother laments a loss, but Ti Na Aung does not connect with it. Her relationship with her mother is dutifully respectful, but not close. Ti Na Aung’s relationship with her past is characterised by the same manner. Pushing away the photo album she says, “That’s the Past. I don’t want to think about it. What does it do?”

She says this, but Ti Na Aung was actually often nostalgic for her past: her first memories of her home village, the smell of ripe fruit and makeshift food stalls. She could recall pathways that she had walked, how dense the bamboo was, and the humid heat trapped in the valleys. The impression is that it is the past contained in her
mother’s photo album that she does not want to think about. It is the past held in the bodies respectfully posing in the photographs, who unrelentingly look back at whoever is viewing them, that makes her rhetorically ask “What does it do?”

Ti Na Aung wants to be free from the trammels of Past and its firm look represented in the faces of the photographic subjects. However, the weight of all these personal histories collected, allocated and contained in the photo album, seeps out and stifles her. These archives, coupled with her mother’s ritual of tending to her albums and quelling her longing, have taken on the qualities of a memorial: a shrine which, in all of the portraits of families, couples and individuals, solemnly standing there, trapped in the plastic coated sheets of the album, returning the viewer’s gaze, palpably contains everything that will never be again. For Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah’s mother, it strikingly represents the very bitterness of ‘the irreversibility of time and the unrepeatability of experience’ (Boym 2001: 25).

This irreversibility and unrepeatability, however, is what we hope photographs can work against. Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah’s mother’s ritual of walking to her albums, submerging herself in their content, is premised on her belief in the certainty of her images and their alluring yet beguiling quality of engulfing her within past relationships and experiences, as she rests knelt over in the present. With her “looking, all the time looking” as Ti Na Aung describes it, she elevates her photographs to a level on par with her memory in their ability to flood her mind, effortlessly taking her to another time, and another place. Yet unlike her memory, which is prone to fading or embellishment, photographs are evidential, irrefutable proof.

is fundamentally different to the work of memory, which is continuous and layered like a geological stratum. A photograph isolates.

Understanding a photograph’s characteristic of isolating and disconnecting presences can bring understanding as to why Ti Na Aung subtly recoils from her mother’s albums. The photo albums and the portraits inside represent their mother’s current despair. Ler Wah stays silent as Ti Na Aung quickly says, “I can’t, I don’t. [pauses] My family says this is our past, but I don’t know everyone in here,” as she points to the stack of photo albums. These photograph albums retain the absent for their mother, yet for Ti Na Aung the same collection of images hold the non-existent: people who she feels should mean something to her but in truth are simply strangers. These same photograph albums also confirm Ti Na Aung’s discontinuity from her family and from a full life lived in a refugee camp like that of her peers, resulting from her having been left at an orphanage in Rangoon. Berger writes: ‘Between the moment recorded and the present moment of looking at the photograph, there is an abyss’ (1995 [1982]: 87). Within the sorrowing context, this abyss for Ti Na Aung is literal, and it is made even more empty through her own looking at, and resultant disconnection from, the photographs in her mother’s albums. In this sense, the silence that reverberates from the isolated material photographs—visual image captures of bodies lending themselves to the photographer and standing to attention with little softness in her mother’s albums of memorial—can be piercing (c.f. Barthes 2000 [1981]). Here, Barthes’ punctum escapes from the photos that are confined in their plastic covers; for Ti Na Aung, Ler Wah and their mother, there is a genuine and tangible effect on the social reality in their house. The gestures between parents and children that consolidate warm domesticity present themselves as tensioned, and are inevitably strained by their separate yet essentially knotted biographies.
5.3. Maintaining diasporic intimacy: memorialising presences

In a house four streets away from Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah’s house, another family is also colliding with the awareness of the vulnerability of their histories. Sisters Mu Lay and Su Eh are teaching me how to recognise a Karen family’s house. “Do you know how you can tell it’s a Karen house?” Mu Lay asks, laughing. “It is only full with couches and seats. [laughter] Always big families need lots of seats!” They laugh again. They are laughing in irony as they have been describing how difficult it is for recently arrived Karen families to furnish their rental houses. Mu Lay and Su Eh’s family have lived in the same house since they arrived in Melbourne. “We have always lived in this house,” Su Eh says. “It’s seen everything. [pause] So much family, so much friends.” She looks around the room and then says sadly, “But we have to leave. [pause] The real estate rang us, said they want to sell the house so we have to find a new one.” Mu Lay and Su Eh are both upset. Mu Lay gets up to walk away but turning back she says, “We have got all these memories here, and we can’t take the memories with us.” Upset, she walks away to the kitchen.

For Mu Lay and Su Eh, *keeping* their place and their *sense* of place is intricately intertwined (Gelder and Jacobs 1996: 119-120). Now, with the phone call from the real estate agent asking the family to vacate the premises, the ground has slipped (Gelder and Jacobs 1995, 1998; Vidler 1994: 117-146). Their residence and their idea of the memories made and contained within the house have become, in a moment, distanced.

Later on in the evening, Su Eh says, “It’s so sad, that we have to leave is very sad.” She and her sister describe the memories that, with their family and their friends, they have created in this house: the memories of family history, localised inside the intimate shelter of the house, and experienced amongst the furnishings. Mu Lay and Su Eh point to a recent portrait of the family. Everyone is seated or standing in amongst the living room couches, with the bouquet of plastic fluorescent flowers arranged on the mantelpiece in the background, next to framed photographs of deceased grandparents.
This portrait is referred to as evidence—“Look. Everyone’s here, a big family,” Mu Lay says—instantly transforming its subject matter from bodies captured in private comfort into a scene of domesticated nostalgia.

The awareness that they must soon vacate the house has led the sisters to question the accuracy of their memories and their future ability to recall family history. As Mu Lay said, she believes they cannot “take the memories” with them. It is as if she envisages those memories to be material traces that cannot be taken with them. The material debris of memory will be lost in the relocation, or simply left behind as if lodged in the mortar of the interior brick walls. Hence, it is fortunate that they have the family portrait, proof of their history inside this Australian home. The house has also shifted to become an object of memory, an instrument of nostalgia, transposing its former consubstantiation of the warmly inhabited space for dwelling (Vidler 1994). It is a change that Su Eh describes sorrowfully, “It was our home, but it is not really our home anymore.” The effect of one phone call has dislodged them from their sense of place well before the family is to relocate from the house.26 It has also dislodged their perception that shared histories can be made, together, in the future.

Bachelard, writing on the house in his *Poetics of Space* (1958), suggests that ‘A house consists of a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability’ (1994 [1958]: 17). Bachelard’s images are not visual images, but rather the moment of imagining being in the house and moving past its walls, through and into its rooms. In Bachelard’s phenomenology, the house is interwoven with the biographies of its inhabitants. Lang (1985) interestingly discusses how the materiality of the house wraps around its inhabitants like a skin, extending the physicality of their bodies, whilst also reassuring people of their social identity. For Mu Lay and Su Eh, this stability, the sensation being wrapped, and the forthcoming biography that could be woven from residing in the house, have been unsettled. Now, Mu Lay and Su Eh walk through the house as in place yet, at the same time, they are viscerally and markedly out of place. The

---

26 Residential renting in Australia is an area of known difficulty for refugees and asylum seekers. In capital cities like Melbourne, it is difficult to attain long-term rentals and to continue living in a rental house with the frequent rises in rates. For further studies see Dwyer and Brown (2005); Liddy, Sanders and Coleman (2010); McNevin (2010); National Shelter (2011); Spinney and Nethery (2013).
sisters are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar with their home of the past 4 years, and the resultant estrangement is particular.

This particular sensation of estrangement was theoretically termed by Sigmund Freud as “uncanny” (*unheimlich*). Freud’s essay, first published in 1919, primarily addresses the psyche but it also refers to how one conceives of one’s place in the world. Freud draws from two dictionaries to theoretically articulate the term *unheimlich*, the “uncanny” (*Freud 1985 [1919]: 341-347). The uncanny, Freud writes, ‘is that class of the terrifying which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’ (*1985 [1919]: 340*). Freud’s essay demonstrates cases in which the sensation of uncanny arises: a direct result of a ‘transformation of something that once seemed homely into something decidedly not so, from the *heimlich*, that is, into the *unheimlich*’ (*Vidler 1994: 6*). This transformation, experienced when one’s home, a place of intimacy, metamorphoses into a place that is distinctly unfamiliar, has the effect of causing someone to feel simultaneously *in place* and *out of place* (*Gelder and Jacobs 1996*). This awareness of viscerally experiencing a state in which senses of familiarity and unfamiliarity begin to coexist, being *in place* and simultaneously *out of place*, is essentially what Mu Lay and Su Eh are undergoing as they restlessly move from the living room to the kitchen, and back again.

The uncanny, as articulated by Freud (*1985 [1919]*) and substantiated by his etymological derivation, is posited in domesticated environments. In this way, as Vidler writes, the notion of uncanny opens ‘up problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence’ (*1994: x*). This focus recognises, as Vidler continues, ‘its force in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis’ (*1994: x*). Many have drawn upon Freud’s notion of the Uncanny. In literature, the uncanny is often conflated to be an illness dispersing through a metropolis: the symptoms are: ‘spatial fear, leading to paralysis of movement, and temporal fear, leading to historical amnesia’ (*Vidler 1994: 6*). There is also the tenet of biological uncanniness through, for example, Donna Haraway’s (*1991*) work on cybernetic culture, whereby the cyborg is a being that can never nostalgically relate to its birth but nevertheless is presented as a human double. The “uncanny” has also been drawn upon in architectural discourse (*Vidler 1994, 2002*), as well as in
postcolonial relations and Indigenous Australian land claims (Gelder and Jacobs 1995, 1996, 1998). Homi Bhabha has appropriated the uncanny in his writing on migrants, minorities and diasporic communities that return to the city, ‘the space in which emergent identification and new social movements of the people are played out’ (Bhabha 1994: 170). These broader conceptualisations of Freud’s analysis of the sensation of the “uncanny” and the emic context of Mu Lay and Su Eh becoming increasingly restless in their house, illustrate that these particular fears, brought on by disruptive events and the awareness of one’s state of being at once in place and out of place, can be both exteriorly and interiorly pervasive. Mu Lay and Su Eh’s disquiet about the potential loss of their memories stems from their awareness of suddenly being in place yet concurrently out of place. The sisters’ experience and their intensifying sadness is the narrow sharpness to a common anxiety of wide perspective.

Included in Freud’s (1985 [1919]) notion of the “uncanny” is the idea that anxieties stemming from sensations of dislocation could be mitigated through repetitious action. This behaviour, however, is interlaced with stark and salient moments in which the repetitious action is suddenly broken. For example, Freud describes his act of repetitiously walking through a provincial town. He writes:

I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without inquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another detour at the same place yet a third time. Now however a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny (1985 [1919]: 359).

As Mu Lay and Su Eh repetitiously moved through the house—from the kitchen to the living room and returning, again and again—it suggests the occurrence of a moment that is strikingly similar to Freud’s making his way around the streets of the provincial town. It is as if the feeling of the “uncanny” has suddenly affected Mu Lay and Su Eh somewhere between the kitchen and the living room.

Mu Lay and Su Eh’s concern about losing their memories to the materiality of the house—“we can’t take the memories with us”—reflects a larger ongoing anxiety referring to dispossession, unsettlement and insecurity resulting from their complicated
histories. Mu Lay explains, “In the camp, you can’t own anything, that’s how it is.” The social landscape and the material world are underwritten by a pervasive precariousness. Strongly prevalent in their histories from living inside the refugee camp is the experience of being denied, as well as the enforced absence of the acquisition and owning of material things. Such is the sociopolitical nature of the refugee camp where they lived for over 18 years, that Mu Lay and Su Eh have come to embody the awareness that the ground can slip at any moment and in any space. There is a distinct understanding and an embodiment of not having control. Here, the residues of past experiences, sedimented in memory as well as in the sinews of the body, can return as an elemental force to the present moment and to Mu Lay and Su Eh, who now move through the house as if abruptly reunited with that embodied awareness of precarious and shifting ground. ‘The familiar’, as Freud states, has ‘become uncanny’ (1985 [1919]: 340).

In the kitchen, Mu Lay, Su Eh and their cousin begin to prepare dinner. Tonight, Su Eh is taking charge of cooking “Aussie food,” which she has learnt from tending to elderly patients through her work as a carer in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. “Tonight,” Su Eh says, “I am cooking food that I cook for my Italian patient. She taught me how to cook it and she loves pasta. All the time always [eats] pasta! You know I pick her up, so little, she is so umm… no weight. Old, but still talks a lot!” Su Eh trails off, laughing. Mu Lay follows quickly to say (to the dismay of their brothers), “We can’t just eat Karen food all the time!” Sitting across from their mother, I am directed to see the collection of framed photographs clustered together on the tiers of a shelving unit that overlooks the kitchen table. It is the family’s own iconostasis. “It is our family,” she says. “All the important people, all important time.” The photographs show her children when they were young, playing by a stream, singing in church and graduating from school classes. Other frames show grandparents and other deceased kin in solemn yet hesitant poses, fleetingly captured before they look away.
from the camera and at the photographer. Mu Lay and Su Eh’s mother’s introduction of the frames containing the portraits of “important people” and “important time” imbues the collection of presences, an iconostasis of heritage and family, with an empowering and sustaining quality. This quality alludes to the idea that photographs, and the subjects captured in the image’s chromatics, demand a particular and respectful treatment. Drazin and Frohlich (2007: 51), who investigate the role of family photograph in British homes, make the similar argument that photographs ‘demand of us that they be treated right’. Drazin and Frohlich (2007) further suggest that there are ‘morally correct’ material practices enacted when amongst photographs (2007: 54). This means that there are also potential consequences as a result of mistreating photographs (c.f. see Behrend 2003a).

Sitting around the table, the family laughs at the pasta dish Su Eh has cooked. It has a distinct Karen flavor of chilli, fish paste and citrus, causing the family to tease her about her idea of “Aussie food.” “It’s not [even] Italian!” her brother teases before he checks, “It’s not, is it?” “Ah!” Su Eh retorts. “You have no idea too!” The siblings’ discussion about different cuisines presents a warm domesticity which, coupled with the shelving unit full of framed portraits and scenes overlooking the kitchen table, is a snapshot of how routines and seemingly mundane acts sculpt upbringings and histories. After the dinner, Mu Lay predicts these gatherings will end when they leave the house and says sadly, “We can’t do that anymore.” For Mu Lay and Su Eh, it is these interactions and banter that establish the foundation upon which their concept of home is built. “In the camp,” Mu Lay explains, “every year we make the house. The bamboo doesn’t go on, so every year the house begins again.” She goes on to describe the changing landscape of Zone 1A where they lived. “All the houses always changing, changing the [bamboo], changing people.” Mu Lay and Su Eh, and their family and peers, are not accustomed to material permanence. The continual replacement of bamboo structures and precarious ownership of consumer goods contribute to their

---

27 For further studies, see also Empson (2011), Marcoux (2001), Rose (2010).
belief that home must reside in the clustering of bodies. It is, as Mu Lay says: “Home is in the family, in the people.”

In these examples—memories unable to be withdrawn from the house in the Melbourne suburbs, and the continual material renewal of their childhood bamboo huts inside the refugee camp—the underlying tenet is that there is a constant struggle for a form of domestic security. After receiving their notice to vacate the residence, Mu Lay and Su Eh’s family struggled to find housing that would allow their large extended family to all live together. It was the dismantling of kin living together which made the ground slip, which made the sensation of the “uncanny”, of estrangement from familiar and intimate spaces; it is this that unsettled them in their movements inside the house this night (c.f. Gelder and Jacobs 1995). When this response is understood within the context of their perceptions on changing materialities, domestic structures and the shifting ground that underpin Mu Lay and Su Eh’s histories, it is simple to see why the sisters have instead sharpened their focus upon the practices and relations inside the domestic space (c.f. Douglas 1991). Here, the idea of home can be based on more stable foundations that are, in a way, impervious to unsettlement.

It was decided that Mu Lay and Su Eh would rent a separate house with their cousin, and that their brothers and parents would live together. The whole family was upset with the arrangement, and Mu Lay lamented, “Nothing stay the same. The life, the future, never stay still.”

Here, Mu Lay’s words reveal that it is not the materiality of the home that manifests uncertainty. It is, rather, time that is unsettling. Unable to ‘imagine possible futures’, based on kin clustered together inside the space of a dwelling, Mu Lay and Su Eh are now also unable to ‘return to equally impossible pasts’ (Vidler 1994: 5). The disquiet is exacerbated because of the absolute normality (Vidler 1994: 18). The house, which is four streets away from Ti Na Aung and Ler Wah, is now a deracinated home.
Mu Lay and Su Eh’s new house is one of two residences on a plot of land edged against a main road. As on walks in, the house looks bright and made to be distinctively Karen, with colourfully patterned woven mat flooring covering the living areas. The faux lace curtains are all drawn, prompting Mu Lay to say this is “because they watch us all the time.” Pulling back one half of the curtain, she points to the close-by second residence which, she explains, is occupied by the owners. “I don’t know if we will stay here,” she says, leading the way to the living room. Mu Lay says, “It’s hard, a little bit lonely,” to be separated from the rest of their family. Mu Lay reveals her discomfort in occupying this new residence, the separation from her extended family and the feeling of being scrutinised by her landlord. Entering the living room she says, “We put up photos, we put up paintings.” These are definitive actions to make the house homely. In the living room, a cheap multi-coloured bag is noticeable in the corner. “This,” she says pointing to the bag, “is what they give us, it is what we come with.”

This particular type of bag, given to departing refugees by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), is a prominent feature in many of the Karen homes I have visited as part of this research. In the houses, the bags are on display, in bedrooms, in hallways and in living rooms. They are still marked with identification numbers and people’s original lengthy surnames that have been superseded by shortened variations that are commonly imposed on many Karen during the administrative processes of immigration. These bags, as material objects posed and on display, poignantly illustrate how objects take on heightened significance (c.f. Dudley 2010, 2010a; Marcoux 2001; Parkin 1999). These bags also saliently represent identities of the past, fixed in the ink of permanent marker publicising their true names across the bag’s plastic weave. As Mu Lay says, “Just one bag. We didn’t have much things.” What she did bring with her from Mae La refugee camp, however, remains on display. A few photos are stuck to the wall above and an old dress is draped beside the bag which is
now bulging with items acquired since her resettlement. It is these items that form a base from which to begin again. It is a pertinent image showing that any beginnings are not without a material analogue.  

Mu Lay leads the way out of the living room, and indicates a bedroom: “This is my bedroom, only me sleep[ing] in here.” As we walk through the doorway, the room presents itself as split into two halves. One half is modestly furnished with a neat bed and short stacks of folded clothes. The other half is elaborately furnished by images: paintings, photographs and drawings clustered together, originating in one corner and fanning outwards as if ‘an image-world is replacing the real one’ (Sontag 2008 [1977]: 154). Mu Lay is happy to show the pictures. The photos, she says, are “of my past” and paintings that “show what it is like,” but that is all the detail she goes into. Stopping short of describing images, she just points to their subject matter, as if to allow the images to speak for themselves.

One painting stands out. Larger in scale than the other images, it was created by her friend. This painting sets the scene by establishing a context for the collection of images (Fig. 5). Against the backdrop of a cold intimacy that resonates from the pairing of emerald green and indigo acrylic paint, a man and a pregnant woman are walking in the foreground, as if to exit the border of the painting. In the background, bamboo huts are alight and expelling blackened smoke that is rising almost to the same level as the picturesque hills and lightened blue sky above. Leaving the presence of disaster, the couple are walking away, carrying their possessions and their unborn child towards the absence of certainty.

---

28 Anthropologists have long argued that the material world, ‘the exterior environment that habituates and prompts us’, cannot be divorced from sociality (Miller 2005: 5). As Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley write, ‘an adequate understanding of any social actions and relations… demands an understanding of material culture, and vice versa’ (Miller and Tilley 1996: 6). For leading texts see the Journal of Material Culture and Tilley, Keane, Küchler, Rowlands and Spyer (eds.) Handbook of Material Culture (2005).
In the setting of Mu Lay’s bedroom, amid the mundaneness of bedding and clothing, the painting presents itself as surreal. Transporting us back to the time of crisis, the painting establishes the view for the other images in her collection. Looking at the painting, Mu Lay says, “It’s scary. My friend is a good painter, that’s what it is like.” Mu Lay, however, was born inside Mae La refugee camp; having spent the majority of her time inside the confines of the camp, she has not been to Burma, nor has she experienced first-hand the scenario presented in the painting. When Mu Lay says, “that’s what it is like” about a picture resting in a collection that “is of my past,” this is an allusion to a contagious element in people’s histories. Pasts are equally malleable through their recollection as in their making.

Through its production, the painting has given its creator and, by extension, Mu Lay the imaginary possession of a past marked by traumatic scenes and territorial
dislocation, which now, from the vantage point of standing in her bedroom, seems distant and remote. The painting works on a further auxiliary level: it assists Mu Lay to take possession of a space—her bedroom and the house—in which she feels insecure. No longer viewed in isolation, the images, paintings and photographs united in the corner of Mu Lay’s bedroom form a collection that visualise absence and presence, departure and arrival. Stepping back and viewing the collection from a broader perspective, there is a noticeable pattern of subjective posing. There are familiar body poses in images of the past, and then re-creative actions of posing to familiarise in images of the present. The corner of her bedroom is an image-world, a constructed visual landscape, that Mu Lay has created in which to reminisce, reflect and to move. At the same time, beyond her bedroom’s suburban window, Australian society—which Mu Lay describes as “hard,” “difficult,” and “just so fast”—is also on the move.

The image-world created by Mu Lay in her bedroom functions as an island, a domain cauterised off from spaces and landscapes in which she feels insecure. As Sontag writes: ‘in the real world, something is happening and no one knows what is going to happen. In the image-world, it has happened and it will forever happen in that way’ (2008 [1977]: 168, original italics). Mu Lay tries to describe resettlement, saying, “It’s hard to move country you know, everything so different. Speaking different, eating different, driving, working, study at Tafe. Everything so different that it is really hard.” She then goes on to state how the Church and its congregation provide continuity and security, as it is in these domains that she continues the practices that remain familiar from her pre-resettlement life. In this sense, the Church and its congregation provide another island where Mu Lay feels in-place and familiar: the practices they undertake during a Karen service, prayer and singing, provide an imaginary thread, tethering her body in the present to her past and to the sensation of familiarity. 29 This tethering to familiarity is also achieved through the images that she has put up in the corner of her bedroom.

All of these images enable Mu Lay to cope with the discomfort of feeling simultaneously in place and out of place, and to resist the sense of the “uncanny”, as

---

29 See Rangkla (2013) and McMichael (2002) for discussions on how religious practices contribute to place-making and belonging in the contexts of the Mae-Sot borderlands in Thailand, and in Melbourne, Australia.
described by Freud (1985 [1919]). The photographs portray scenes from Thailand and Australia, and the paintings and drawings present scenes from Burma; however, in all of the images, there is relevant likeness in unlike landscapes and social settings. Posed with friends and posed against the backdrop of landmarks, the photographs provide snapshots of insights into Mu Lay’s experiences. One section of images coalesces around photographs of her deceased brother. Mu Lay says, “That’s my youngest brother, Rado, he is dead.” She continues:

We were all in the car [near Mae Sot], my parents and my brothers and sister, and other family. My father was driving and suddenly the tyre exploded making the car roll over so many times. We were all hurt. My mother fly out the car and into a [ditch] with all the plants with thorns. They were all over her body, the thorns, and she broke her arms. My father had his heel cut through, and I cut open my head and my teeth went into my lips. I had 20 stitches. Seiko cut his head open, and he had 30 stitches. Saw Nay cut his head open too. Su Eh had all the skin torn off her hand.

Mu Lay looks up and asks, “Have you seen her scar? She is very shy about it.” Then she describes how “They cut skin off her leg and put it on her hand but now she can’t bend her fingers.” Mu Lay then says:

When her boyfriend saw it, I mean her husband, it was long time ago now, it made him scared and it upset Su Eh. She thought he wouldn’t like it, but he accepts it now. My brother Rado was thrown out of the car and his head was hit. He died. We all went to hospital, but we can’t remember getting there. It was a very bad accident. Two people died that day.

In the photographs of her brother, he is young, small, unsmiling, standing close to his siblings on a sepia coloured dirt alleyway in Mae La refugee camp. “We used to run with the chickens,” Mu Lay says laughing. Flapping her arms wildly, she demonstrates the chase and says that it “make them [chickens] go, ‘Squaor! Squaor! Squaor!’” She laughs at the recollection. The photographs of her brother, the painting of Burma’s landscape on fire and people on the move, and more recent images of Mu Lay standing with arms wide open, smiling in front of the Sydney Opera House, interrupt as
well as establish daily life. What could be interpreted as past-as-a-wreckage, from viewing the fire and blackened smoke in the painting and knowing that the young boy in the photographs playing with his siblings has died, has been repurposed and repossessed by Mu Lay to instead cater for past-as-attachment. Here, the photo of her brother comes to stand in for him, and to stand in for her relationship to him. The object of the photograph and the person to have become mutually constituted (c.f. Parkin 1999). Creating the image-world in the corner of her bedroom, tethering herself to images of the past in order to situate the self and her relationships in the present, Mu Lay manages the visceral sensation of estrangement, of the “uncanny”, familiarity and unfamiliarity, dislocation, separation and adaptation.

The images also arrest the flow of time in Mu Lay’s biography, acting as a tourniquet to the condition she describes as “Nothing stay the same.” Berger (1995 [1982]: 86) writes that ‘All photographs are of the past, yet in them an instant of the past is arrested so that, unlike a lived past, it can never lead to the present’. Thus, Berger continues, ‘Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity’ (Berger 1995 [1982]: 86). The image-world that Mu Lay has created in her bedroom pushes back against this ‘shock’; it is as if, by witnessing the images every day, Mu Lay is putting pressure on the laceration of discontinuity, and lessening the secondary conditions of feeling separated and dislocated from any sensation of familiarity.

The image-world in Mu Lay’s bedroom corner is common also to the living areas of other young Karen men and women that I have visited during the course of this research. It is also common to their parents: Mu Lay’s mother’s frames shelved to form an iconostasis, and Ti Na Aung’s mother’s photograph albums stored in the cabinet’s bottom drawer. These differing forms of memorialising presences all sustain a place of familiarity, a domain of concentration and reflection, and an emplacement in the landscape of resettlement in Australia that is perceived as being contoured by degrees of uncertainty. Mu Lay has memorialised objects such as her bag and her old dress so that they become poignant shrines of remembrance. The images in her bedroom, furthermore, situate her in an unfamiliar house, which is set on an unfamiliar residential block, and act as visual anchors to situate the self in her wider landscape. The image-
worlds constructed through people’s visual collections provide security as opposed to uncertainty, and permanence in a world tinted with unpredictability.

Mu Lay and her sister Su Eh are very alert to the myriad connections between different people and different places. For Mu Lay and Su Eh, who both work in Aged Care, the elderly patients to whom they provide at-home care come in to their lives and quickly go out of them again when Mu Lay and Su Eh leave the patients’ homes. Through this work, the sisters witness many people’s lives in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. In their kitchens, Mu Lay and Su Eh prepare meals; in their bedrooms, they tend to the bedding; in their bathrooms, they wash their bodies. These intimate routines add pertinence and imagery to Gelder and Jacobs’ premise that, essentially, ‘We inhabit the same place, yet we seem to inhabit places which are not the same’ (1995: 178). It also shows how these connections between people and places multiply, and gives insight into the nature of those connections. Mu Lay and Su Eh make these connections in the suburbs where they work and live; yet they see themselves as out-of-place in that same landscape. In this sense, there is dual terrain: they traverse one landscape and other Australians, like their elderly patients, traverse another. The sensation of moving through and residing in the suburbs is acutely felt with a vastly different embodiment for young resettled Karen like Mu Lay and Su Eh. The employment of image-worlds acts as a resistance to their perception of a pervasive and spreading unfamiliarity contouring Melbourne’s urban landscape.

This duality of landscapes is also embodied by older members of the Karen community. One cold winter’s evening, I was walking past a bus stop outside an rundown shopping mall, and encountered a young Karen man and his grandmother whom I had met one year previously. He had resettled in Australia alone. His parents are deceased and his only sister, having not received refugee status, works illegally in a factory in Thailand. He now lives with an elderly ethnic-Karenni woman to whom he is not related, but to whom he refers as his grandmother. She had resettled in Melbourne from a refugee camp on the Thailand Burma border with her biological son three years before. The young man and the old woman share a small bedroom in a house to the west of Melbourne. His “grandmother” sleeps on a small bed, her pillow edged up to dictionaries and English textbooks, and he sleeps below on the floor next to their woven
plastic IOM immigration bags. His grandmother is strict and always concerned for his safety. “The world is a scary place,” his grandmother says to me as buses pull in to the stop. “Just look at the camp we were all in,” she continues. “The camps were awful! No food at all! [This is] how we are treated.” She looks around at the emptying street and laments: “No where in the world is safe. Here, is not safe,” she says. She says that for people who do not know “what to do, how to behave,” like her and her adopted grandson, the streets appear to be dangerous. It is a disarmingly simple statement that indicates how those who have been displaced continue to fear further unsettlement for years after resettlement. Getting anxious to leave as evening is falling, she motions to her grandson and says, “We shouldn’t stand here.” She glances at the scene around us. She starts to slowly walk off, propping herself up by her walking stick. Then she half turns back at me to say, “Not even you, [pause] maybe, not safe here.” She continues walking slowly away, leaving behind the weight of her prophecy in the bus stop where I stand. It is a salient example of the contagious diffusion of trepidation and apprehension across precarious and shifting suburban landscapes.

In a landscape deemed precarious, unpredictable and even dangerous, the image-worlds created in people’s home become important sites of significance. As the outside world becomes increasingly littered with experiences of discomfort and unfamiliarity, these images, photographs, albums, and landscape paintings can be sustaining. Being displaced, by definition, alters one’s relationships to the material world: its landscapes, its things, and the other people who share it, are all inherently estranged (Dudley 2010: 1, 2010a). As mementoes of sentiment and biography, as well as being the bases for rebuilding a material life post-resettlement, these objects are vitally important. The nature of Mu Lay’s relationships to images, as well as that of her peers like Ti Na Aung and others across the extended Karen community, fulfill the inherent purpose of image archives: to retain and memorialise presences of what has passed and will never be again.

As if to obstruct the inevitability of change directly, Mu Lay and Ti Na Aung have started to curate their own archives of experience and presences that are important to them. Ti Na Aung has recently started to create her own photo albums, following, yet clearly diverging from, the tenet of her mother’s photographic archives in content and form. Her photo album is digitised, uploaded to her Facebook profile. Instead of
the subdued faded tones of her mother’s aged photographs, Ti Na Aung’s photos are saturated with colour and resistant to age. She has a boyfriend now, a young Karen man who lives in Sydney. In her photos, they sit close, laughing, or leap on each other’s backs at the beach. She looks happy, and these images come together to provide an instant history (Sontag 2008 [1977]: 75). These photos are in sharp contrast to her mother’s; yet they aim to achieve the same end, which is to protect vulnerable histories and gather together memorials of presences.

5.5. Instant histories: how to begin, again

Sar Loe, Mar Ner and Ti Na Aung are waiting for me outside the library. I can see them through the building’s sliding doors, standing there, grouped together on dirty pavers in the outdoor shopping plaza which is filled with vacant shops. Three skinny teenage boys wearing tight singlets saunter up to them. Eyeing the girls, they walk past, only to quickly circle back and yell at them: “You don’t belong here!” Their voices echo through the plaza. One boy, his arm freshly tattooed, spotted with blood and wrapped up in glad wrap, raises a pale fist and he shakes it repeatedly, pointing his forefinger menacingly towards the girls. “Hey! You don’t fucking belong here! You know that!” When I get there the three boys have taken off—running, swearing and kicking the public bins as they go along the walkway, out of the plaza and to the main road. I must look offended because Sar Loe moves to stand closer to me and, with a soft, knowing smile, she says: “I just pretend I can’t speak English. I don’t hear them.”
As we stand in the dirty vacant plaza, the area suddenly seems as offensive as the three young men’s comments. It also seems lonely: a response that typifies how locales can be tainted by experiences. Later on in the evening, we park outside a fast food outlet. Returning to the car, the four of us witness a minor car accident. The two vehicles involved in the accident pull into the dark car park. An Indian couple slowly gets out of their car, whilst a middle aged white male aggressively storms up to them, getting in their faces and hurling racial abuse. The unfolding scene happens quickly and it gives everyone a shock. Mar Ner, Ti Na Aung and Sar Loe want to avoid any confrontation and they quickly go to the car. Later on, as we drive to their houses, Ti Na Aung says of the middle-aged aggressor: “They think refugees and other people like that [non-Australian born] don’t know anything. They think they are stupid!” Sar Loe adds, “It happens to people we know too, Karen people. People get so angry, they say it’s all our fault.”

These experiences and sentiments were common in the Karen community in both the eastern and western suburbs of Melbourne. For the young women, it caused their movements in the suburbs where they live and work to be very tentative. Not wanting to stand out and risk drawing unwanted attention, people usually preferred to stay at home. Ti Na Aung and Sar Loe’s statements present a hazardous picture for people of refugee backgrounds, as well as for “other people” who have immigrated to Australia.

Ti Na Aung and Sar Loe, as well as their peers and their parents, continually comment on how grateful they are to have been allowed to settle in Australia. Repeatedly commenting on the benefits of Australia’s democracy, educational system, and the freedom that citizens have, are views that reinforce Sandra Gifford’s (2012: 7) notion that settlement is the ‘gift that can never be repaid’. Australia’s humanitarian settlement regime, Gifford contends, is propped upon and functions to propagate an inherent obligation: ‘contingent on deserving refugees’, it is a regime that shapes people to be ‘forever grateful for what they have been given’, the invaluable gift of settlement (Gifford 2012: 7). Exacerbating this condition, is the fact that in the suburban streets and in vacant shopping plazas, the young women as well as young Karen men are continually reminded that they “do not belong here,” that they are always outsiders, and
that they should be grateful just for their position on the caustic periphery of Australian society. Forever marked as outsiders, they are also doomed through resettlement to embody this corrosive perception.

For Mu Lay, Ti Na Aung, Sar Loe, Mar Ner and their peers, their inherent understanding that there is a forceful undercurrent in Australian society, a rhetoric spun around outsiders that “do not belong”, causes them to retreat. Not only do these young women need to begin their lives again in a resettlement landscape, they also need to conduct their new lives in a manner that publicises their gratefulness through a successful settlement. They must, to use their words, “not speak with accent … work hard … be [a] good Christian” and “not look like a refugee”. As they feel unresourced and unskilled to tackle these obligations, they view the landscape of settlement in Australia as a place that is opaque, complex and, at times, insurmountable. As a strategy, these young women and their peers therefore retreat into image-worlds. Such spaces are abstract, yet are their own and obligation-free.

There is also another form of imagery that is particular to these young resettled Karen and that is part of their attempts to negotiate their place in the world. Through creative visual practices that most frequently begin with photography, the young men and women construct images that present scenes and scenarios anew. The images are made up by layering familiar elements and, when bricolaged together, the visual elements form a new scene. The re-posed image comes to present a new object of evidence that an experience has been captured, or it can also be a reworking of their biographical past.
Figure 6 is indicative of this type of image. Mar Ner sits just outside the fence line and bamboo lattice gateway sectioning off an inviting environment. She leans against the bamboo lattice, wearing a leather jacket and sunglasses that she recently purchased in a Melbourne shopping centre. The image gives the illusion of a photograph but it is a composite. It is an image and a scenario that Mar Ner has created as she sits in her bedroom, working on her laptop.

On multiple levels, this image is striking. Mar Ner places herself on the surface of the image and her body floats a plane above the landscape, thinly edged by opaque pixels to blend herself in to the background. The location Mar Ner has forged in the background is reminiscent of the boundaries of the refugee camp: she said that the camp “has bamboo all around it,” and there are “policemen” monitoring the entry
points. Yet, the landscape employed in the image is distinctively Australian and can be seen as such, despite being sectioned off by the equally distinctive un-Australian feature of a bamboo fenceline. Furthermore, Mar Ner’s clothes are indicative of Melbourne’s climate, not the humidity of Mae La refugee camp that is located in the Dawna Range. Nevertheless, the image reconstructs a scene that she only describes with the words: “It's my past.”

Through the ‘substance of the image’, Mar Ner has creatively deformed her position in the world (Oguibe 1996). Writing on postcolonial photographic traditions, Christopher Pinney (2003b: 202-220) discusses images that also ‘deform’ people’s position and place in the world. In his description of photographic practices that actively resist the archetype of a colonial image, which automatically positions people to either the role of the coloniser or the colonised, Pinney puts forward the importance of the utilisation of the surface of images to deconstruct these categorisations. For example, in the popular Indian post-colonial photographic practices discussed by Pinney, there is a prodigious use of backdrops and props in front of and with which people pose: hence, the concern is for the ‘surface’ substance of images and not their ‘narrativized indexical depths’ (Pinney 2003b: 204). This surfacing, as Pinney contends, becomes a space for exploration as well as a space for refusing dominant ideologies. Pinney states:

In these practices the surface becomes a site of the refusal of the depth that characterised colonial representational regimes. “Surface” and “depth” refer here not simply to sedimentary layers, but rather to more profound positionalities that fuse the ethical/political with the chronotopic (2003b: 202-203).

The placement of people on the mobile location of the surface of image, at the front of imagined backdrops and props, enables people to explore worlds not necessarily available to them. It is a practice that seeks ‘to get hold’ of objects and imaginaries (Benjamin 1968: 217; Pinney 2003b: 203).

Mar Ner’s re-posed image, in which she places herself in the mobile location of the surface, gets hold of her aspirations to be confidently in-place in the landscapes of the
refugee camp and Australia. The image also reworks her experiences to present a more perfected front. The image is an astute meditation on her position in the world. Furthermore, it is designed to present successful movements. For example, her clothing is completely unlike anything she wore or owned prior to resettlement. Such clothing, for Mar Ner, represents greater independence, wealth and autonomy in comparison to the clothing she wore prior to resettlement. The background she constructs in the image is simultaneously representational of Australia as well as of the boundary of a refugee camp. Considering these binaries, the image is produced and employed to creatively deform the artifice of the refugee camp and rework her recollections of it, as well as to interrogate her placement in an Australian landscape. In both narrative structures—at the boundary of the refugee camp’s bamboo fence line, or her body placed outside the border that opens up to a distinctive Australian landscape—she is astutely interrogating her own position in the world. Using the surface of the image, she is placing her body on the outer of both scenes.

At the time when Mar Ner uploaded this image to her Facebook profile without the accompaniment of a caption, she had been resettled in Australia for two years. She was attending secondary school and, three years older than her classmates, she struggled with learning English. She didn’t like to talk about these daily struggles, the difficulties she had at school with learning the curriculum or with the other students who, she says, were “not nice” to her. Instead of focusing on the present and the difficulties that she felt were overwhelming, she would sit in her family home and look at pictures.

When I visited, Mar Ner would flick through photographs in her family’s photo albums, searching them for visions she would photograph with her mobile phone. The images became photographs of photographs, in an instant divorcing the content from the material constraints of a photograph. She would also scour the internet and Facebook for images, and capture stills from popular Thai movies and music videos. The amount and content of these image pickings were vast.

The images became, in their various forms, points of departure for recollection or hopeful forecasting. Spending time together as a group in their houses and watching

---

30 Mar Ner’s practices of self-fashioning various identities is akin to broader ideas on clothing that have been raised by Küchler and Miller (2005), Tranberg Hansen (2000, 2004) and Norris (2005).
Mar Ner sit with her laptop working to remake images, Sar Loe quietly explains that “She is just go[ing] back.” Then she clarifies that the destination Mar Ner is going back to is “in her imagination.”

Mar Ner was not the only one who engaged in these imagery practices. Many other Karen did. From the beginning of my fieldwork in the Karen community in 2010, which coincided approximately with people involved in this research having been resettled in Melbourne for between 2-4 years, I noticed the rapid production of these reconstructed, re-posed images. For the following two years, these constructed images would appear on the Facebook profiles of young resettled Karens in Melbourne, and would also appear stuck to their bedroom walls as a growing part of their image-worlds. This practice of image creation amongst Karen youth, beginning with photography and then progressing to new forms of image construction through bricolage techniques of appropriating pictorial elements and manipulating their arrangement to create brand new scenes, constructed a new, innovative landscape. People like Mar Ner, stuck in the vicissitudes of difficult adjustments through their resettlement to Australia, instead focused their movements in imaginary landscapes, projected vistas and imagined scenarios.

5.6. Experience captured: an album of presences and imagined landscapes

The following is a selection of images that have been created by the Karen youth involved in this research between late 2010 and the end of 2012. During this research, I have taken, collected or been given just over 2,500 images. These include photographs,
drawings, paintings and bricolaged images. From this collection, I have selected the following 22 images as representative of the types of re-posed imagery that is being produced. At the beginning of 2013, this form of re-posed, bricolaged imagery stopped. Currently, there are very few of these re-posed images being created in the resettled Karen community network in which I have been involved since the beginning of fieldwork in 2010.

I aim to present these images in the form of an album, uninterrupted by text. This is to simulate as much as is possible within the material constraints of this dissertation, the way in which they are displayed by the Karen young people themselves: collected, assembled, clustered together into running narratives and contained in people's image-worlds in their bedrooms and living rooms, as well as collated in people's Facebook profile albums. This album of captured experiences, illustrates the diversity of imagined landscapes and scenarios that are being created, mediated and lived through. By placing the images sequentially, I aim to replicate how people are creating albums of presences, memorialising instant histories from scattered sources and mediating future-driven strategies of how to act and be in the world. This album ‘does not reproduce the visible but makes visible’ the ways in which Karen youth are approaching settlement in Australia (Klee 1961: 76).
Figure 7. Mar Ner with a blue penguin in Europe.

Figure 8. Portraits placed in the windows and bedhead of a designer suite.
Figure 9. Mar Ner in an auditorium.

Figure 10. Nay Moo multiples on the edge of a pier.
Figure 11. “My life in 2011 is so stupid!!!! No1 know that.”

Figure 12. At two coastlines.
Figure 13. Nay Moo and his daughter in the gilded frame.

Figure 14. Mu Lay in the perfume signs.
Figure 15. With trophies and a parrot.

Figure 16. “2gerther 4ever friends!”
Figure 17. Sitting inside the screen prints.

Figure 18. A bricolage of friends.
Figure 19. In the city information sign.

Figure 20. Two people in the billboards.
Figure 21. “2gether 4ever.”

Figure 22. “Friends forever.”
Figure 23. “Friends 4ever.”

Figure 24. “4ever love.” Mar Ner’s body is re-posed to stand in the picnic site.
Figure 25. Nay Moo and his mother.

Figure 26. “Me and my lovely aunty” urbanscape.
Figure 27. The face of the bride has been re-posed.
Figure 28. Nay Moo’s family.
5.7. Behind the image

In the opening pages of Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* (2008 [1977]: 3-11), she writes that photographs are experiences, captured. The material and semiotic qualities of photographs offer proof for an experience, a material testimony to living through, as opposed to beside, a moment. With this substrate, Sontag leads to the suggestion that ‘people robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers, at home and abroad’ (2008 [1977]: 10). Journeying through the world, taking pictures, collecting captured moments of experience assists people “robbed” of their past to instead ‘collect the world’ (Sontag 2008 [1977]: 3).

The Karen youth with whom I spent time with in Melbourne habitually moved through areas as if led by their cameras or mobile phones. The Karen youth contributing to this research came to own mobile phones or digital cameras following their resettlement in Melbourne. Unlike many young people today, they have not grown up with these types of technology but started using them in their late teens and early twenties; they have now been firmly adopted in their everyday life. Stopping to capture the experiences of *being somewhere*, or simply photographing their movements through the urban landscape of Melbourne, the young men and women were never without a device that took images.

Often we would go on small road trips to visit places that they had heard of from other Karen families in the community. One Friday, during their school holidays, we went for a picnic in the Yarra Ranges. There were two full carloads of young women, happy to be leaving the city’s outskirts behind and recording the passing landscape from the car windows on their mobile phones.

---

31 This is, of course, a feature of youth culture more generally. The affordability and proliferation of mobile phones and smart phones which have picture and recording capabilities means that currently most people, the young especially, are tethered to their mobile devices. For further comprehensive studies see Buckingham (2011, 2008), Ito (2005), Ito and Okabe (2005), Ling and Donner (2009), Ling (2004) and Turkle (2011).
It is a hot summer day and we slowly walk off into the park’s network of pathways and English-styled gardens that lead up to the edge of Maroondah dam. Every few steps, and at every change along the pathways, we must stop—pose—take photos with every camera and mobile phone. Camera-wielding, they walk with small steps along a long winding path, passing gardens full of azaleas and rhododendrons. The movement of the group is focused, with each step leading towards taking the next photo. The young women view the landscape, the bush and the structured English gardens, through the lenses of their cameras or on the screens of their mobile phones. Their eyes are alert to capturing an image of the next movement along the pathway, and to finding the next position in which to pose in front of something of interest.

Reaching the top of the dam’s spillway wall, the young women walk along the concrete barrier, regularly stopping for photographs. After the photo is taken, they continue walking with their focus on the screens of their mobile phones and cameras while, behind them, are the large dam and the blackened trunks of trees still slowly recovering from bush fires. Reaching the end of the concrete spillway, we sit down and everyone looks through their images, flicking across their screens until a particularly good image arrives that makes someone turn around and tell the group. Deciding that their photographs have turned out well and that the trip has been captured, we all get up to return slowly, recording image-by-image our movements on our way back to the car park. This particular practice of photographing movements through the various landscapes of Melbourne and capturing the experience of being somewhere—anywhere—was common to all of our time spent together. It was vitally important to the young Karen to record the moment, and to capture the experience of time spent together.

In the previous section’s sequence of images (Figures 7-28), the moment is captured but the experience is not. Unlike the movement of the group in the Yarra ranges, in which people moved, clustered and posed together, these images are of individualised, subjective movements, and are particular in presenting the individual view of the image’s creator. Some of the re-posed images are realistic (Figures 9, 11, 24, perhaps 27); others are subtle in the way in which bodies have been inlaid into landscapes and scenes (Figures 5, 9, 13, 14, 17, 19, 20, 24); and the rest forge
completely new scenes and scenarios in order to regain lost friendships, revive deceased
k, and approach their hope for future autonomy, or love and marriage (Figures 7, 8, 9,
10, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28). These constructed images
function as mini narratives which, once threaded together and understood as a
collection and not as a singular practice, present an intimate and intricate picture of how
young Karen negotiate their settlement in Australia.

The poignancy of these re-posed images, however, rests upon recognising the
scene that exists behind images. In the re-posed images, the space in which people place
their bodies is idealised, dust-free and temperate. The poses are also self-assured and
composed. These underlying positive characteristics are common, even when the re-
posed image mimics the materiality of the refugee camp, as in Figure 6. Whereas the
reality of refugee camp is, as Mar Ner describes, full of “dirt … dust” and “heat”, the re-
posed image presents itself as mild, green and neat. These discrepancies, between the
truth behind the image and the truth that the image presents, illustrate the innovative
reworking of people’s experiences and presentations of the self (Goffman 1959). It is in
the details existing between ‘the alleged colors and visibles’, as Merleau-Ponty writes,
that we ‘find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which
for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a flesh of things’ (Merleau-

Merleau-Ponty’s flesh is the fine intertwining of the visible and the invisible, the
sensate and the sensible (Flynn 2011). The flesh is not matter; rather:

It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible
upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body
sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things, such that,
simultaneously, as tangible as it descends among them, as touching it
dominates them all and draws this relationship and even this double
relationship from itself, by dehiscence or fission of its own mass
(Merleau-Ponty 1968: 146).

Seeing the re-posed images as Merleau-Ponty’s flesh, an intertwining of a visible
presentation reworked with invisible motivations, the young men and women lend their
bodies to the image in order for them to be inscribed, and given a resemblance of the
confident, self-assured subjective self that is contained and looking back at them in the re-posed images.

Shortly before the time when Mar Ner created the re-posed images in Figures 7, 9 and 27, the Karen New Year celebrations were held in the outer western suburbs of Melbourne. To celebrate the incoming year there are speeches, performances, soccer and volleyball competitions: these are festivities aimed at bringing together the whole Karen community that have resettled in Victoria. After the main formalities, and to close the celebration, there is an extended concert in which young Karen bands and church singing groups perform.

I sit with Mar Ner, Ti Na Aung, Sar Loe, Lily Htoo, Mu Lay and their friends, and we watch people setting up the amplifiers and lights. Outside the hall, in the corridor, a trestle table is set up to sell items. Upon the table, a large selection of individual plastic flowers are displayed for sale. Thick plastic stems prop up fluorescent petals: some dripping with glue to mimic raindrops, others dusted with glitter so that they will shimmer under the stage lights. As one part of the concert occurs on the stage, with the routines of young men and women in their rock bands, another part of the performance occurs in the audience sitting in front of the stage. As the lights go on and the band hits their first chorus, confident men and women begin to approach the stage, weaving their way around the mass of tables and chairs; they arrive at the bottom of the stage and each of them holds up a fluorescent flower to a chosen musician. A surprised, grateful lead singer or guitarist reaches down to collect the flower and everyone in the audience claps and laughs. The young women I am with encourage Mar Ner to go up. She thinks about it, shifts in her seat getting ready to get up but then, suddenly, thinks twice and quickly pushes into the back of her chair again. As the concert ends, the musicians carrying their flowers and the audience begin to file out of the auditorium, whilst Mar Ner silently goes around to the empty tables and collects the individual plastic flowers left behind. As she goes to each table, she neatly places the flower into her growing bouquet. As we get into the car to drive home, Mar Ner evidently values the plastic bouquet as if it were presented to her in front of the large audience. She holds it in her lap and jokes, “See! Everyone loves me!” And then she laughs.

32 The staging of concerts and the prodigious use of amplifiers is an important characteristic of Burmese modern music. See Ferguson (2013: 228-229).

172
Mar Ner and her peers say that, in daily life, they experience things from afar. The re-posed images work against this perception and, in the bricolage and layering of visual elements the young men and women can create any scene they can imagine. In *The Intertwining—The Chiasm*, part of Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished manuscript, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), he discusses the interweaving of our subjective experience and our objective existences:

> The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 130-131).

In her re-posed images (Figures 7, 9, 27), Mar Ner has captured the vision that Merleau-Ponty suggests will vanish at the moment of its formation. In Mar Ner’s re-posed images, as in the images produced by her peers, the young people are able to reformulate a scenario into how they would like it to be. For example, in Figures 25 and 28, Nay Moo has re-posed his family into the images. In Figure 25, he stands with his mother in a location-less white scenery. In Figure 28, he places the images of his living relatives into an anonymous blue scene, where they are reunited with the image of his deceased father. In the re-posed images, Nay Moo’s family, separated over three countries, the dead and living, are brought back together again. The scenarios ‘to which [they] could not be closer than by palpating it with [their] look’ are reinvigorated and lived in as part of their individual image-worlds’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 131).

The experiences of the people in this research—Mar Ner silently gathering the discarded plastic flowers and creating her own bouquet; Mu Lay feeling watched and scrutinised by the neighbours in a new unfamiliar house; Nay Moo’s separation from his family; the three young women being racially abused and told that they “do not belong” in Australia—enables these re-posed images to be understood as complementary visions of those experiences. Mar Ner, being too shy and unsure to present her own flowers to the band members, instead collects discarded flowers; yet, in her re-posed images (Figures 7, 9, 27) she presents herself as confident and self-assured in unfamiliar
environments. Mu Lay, who feels ill at ease and scrutinised by her landlords, instead presents herself as comfortable with being viewed (Figures 14 and 17). Nay Moo reunites the dead and the living (Figures 25 and 28). And the young women who experienced being told they “do not belong” in a place, instead forge new scenery in which to belong (Figures 18, 20 and 23). These re-posed images do not only allow a reimagining of people’s experiences and the perception of where they are situated in the social world: the images also provide a space in which to dwell. These spaces are abstract but approachable, as well as improved and idealised. Mar Ner, Mu Lay, Nay Moo and their peers are able to create complementary visions, or another vision of themselves as seen from the outside, as another would see them, ‘installed in the midst of the visible, occupied in considering it from a certain spot’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 134). By dwelling in the space of these re-posed images, pinned up on bedroom walls or collated in albums to make image-worlds, people can descend into the heart of the image, feeling as close as is possible, ‘palpating it with [their] look’, despite essentially remaining far from it (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 131).

5.8. Visual strategies: movement in social imaginaries

Standing next to a distinctly European canal with darkened waters and granite arches, Mar Ner gently holds a stuffed fluorescent blue penguin (Figure 7). Posing on the surface of the image, Mar Ner’s body is fastened to the European background by means of three centered light flashes, propped upon the grey arches, and anchored under a glaring sun overhead. Standing on a walkway in a foreign landscape, solarised and empty of people, Mar Ner poses comfortably, the epitome of the competent
traveller. Here, Sontag’s suggestion that ‘the very activity of picture taking is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel’ could be reworked (2008 [1977]: 9-10). Images like Figure 7 show that exacerbated feelings of disorientation and disjuncture at home can be mitigated through image-making practices of travel abroad.

Many of the young Karen involved in this research dreamed of travelling. “In the future,” Sar Loe says, “I want to travel everywhere.” Travelling represents true freedom and autonomy for these young people. Ti Na Aung says: “You know, when I got my passport, I feel safe. I can travel anywhere.” Up to now, the only trips that have been taken are to revisit family and friends who remain in Mae La refugee camp; however, these aspirations for future travel reinforce Arjun Appadurai’s premise that ‘there is a peculiar new force to the imagination in social life today. More persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before’ (Appadurai 1996: 53).

Arjun Appadurai (1996) argues that, until the recent saturation of digital media, social life could be considered as largely inertial, as the traditions particular to geographical regions and its inhabitants dictated a relatively finite set of possible lives available. Having grown up in refugee camps along the Thai Burma border, the Karen youth were sensitive to this “inertia” happening to them. All the young Karens to whom I spoke believed that not gaining resettlement to third countries meant they would have a more-or-less predetermined life trajectory. The young women commonly remarked on how their childhood friends, who remain living inside Mae La camp now have families of their own. Sar Loe explains: “People are bored, there is nothing to do in the camps. Everyone has babies when they are young. That could be me.” Another young Karen man, Eh Doh, described life in the refugee camp: “Every day we used to go to school, go to Church. Everyday is the same.” Eh Doh believed his life trajectory to be set, saying, “Born in that refugee camp and I will die in that refugee camp.” He said that he often thought, “I want to get away from that refugee camp, enjoy something else …. I didn’t like where we were.” But seeing other places on the TV or print media was daunting. Eh Doh says that when he saw the vision of other towns and countries, he believed that the world “seems too big for me.”
Many young people said that they imagined what life was like for people living outside the refugee camps. Sar Loe says: “In the camps there are big [display] boards about each country. There are letters and photos from the people who move there, like to USA or Australia. The family writes, says how they are to their family [remaining in the camp], and says what it is like.” She remembers going to see the boards and looking at the photos of the different places where Karen families had resettled, before she herself resettled in Australia. Sar Loe says, “I saw a photo of [Sydney] Opera House.” She then goes on to say, “I have actually been there now. It’s kinda amazing.” These experiences point to the beginning of imaginings of lives lived outside of the refugee camp. Returning to Appadurai’s (1996) point about a general shift in people imagining a multiplicity of possible lives, his suggestion remains pertinent to this ethnographic context. He writes:

One important source of this change is the mass media, which present a rich, ever-changing store of possible lives, some of which enter the lived imaginations of ordinary people more successfully than others. Important also are contacts with, news of, and rumors about others in one’s social neighborhood who have become inhabitants of these faraway worlds. The importance of media is not so much as direct sources of new images and scenarios for life possibilities but as semiotic diacritics of great power, which inflect social contact with the metropolitan world facilitated by other channels (1996: 53).

The display board erected in the refugee camp, portraying lives lived by Karen in their new resettlement countries, and the vision of other locales seen through TV or DVDs, buoyed the Karen young people’s imaginings of other possible life trajectories when they were living inside the refugee camp. Following on from Appadurai’s (1996: 53) original suggestion, when they were residing inside the refugee camp the imagination was an antidote ‘to the finitude of social experience’. Now resettled in Australia, Karen youth engage the imaginative faculty to envision their lives through the various prisms cut-copied from mass media. These prisms are in turn embellished and individualised by them through image-construction, as evidenced in Figures 6-29.

Fantasy and imagining are now a recurrent social practice in which Karen youth engage in order to negotiate and mediate their daily lives. Following Appadurai, ‘I
should be quick to note that this is not a cheerful observation, intended to imply that
the world is now a happier place with more choices (in the utilitarian sense) for more
people, and with more mobility and more happy endings’ (1996: 54). Karen youth do
not simply engage the imagination to divorce themselves from the difficulties they face
in day-to-day life; rather, the imagination and fantasy are engaged through
photographic and image-construction practices to pre-empt, mediate and rehearse for
potential scenarios. A recent special issue in the *Journal of Material Culture*, called
“Imaging Digital Lives” and edited by Graeme Were (2013), has an interesting focus in
relation to this point. Were’s (2013) motivation for this special issue was to see ‘the
ways peoples marginalized from mainstream society were crafting digital images for the
purposes of individual and community affirmation’ (2013: 213). This diverges from my
premise that these particular digital images are used as inhabitable social fields. Instead,
the focus is more upon how new imaging technologies have more generally brought
about a change in the conditions of production, circulation and accessibility (Were
2013: 220). These Karen specific image practices enable resettled youth to learn, test
and work through various situations. Testing boundaries, practising movements across
differing social and material landscapes, and practising successful settlement, are all
achieved through imagining and making images, which can then be applied to scenarios
that they encounter in their daily lives in Melbourne.

Imagining settlement and successful movement through social and material
landscapes enables a form of knowledge acquisition and builds the confidence of Karen
youth, which can be drawn upon in their daily interactions. Early understandings of the
imagination in the field of human sciences, in particular psychology, were based on
ideas of fantasy and pretend-play. Jean Piaget (1962) put forward the understanding
that the imagination is expressed through social practices of make-believe, and he then
linked these cognitive processes to more mature modes of apprehension, such as the
development of logical thought processes. Recent work in developmental psychology
has furthered these understandings: imaginative play is now seen as vital for child
development (Harris 2000; Taylor 1999). The imagination, defined as the cognitive
faculty or action in forming new ideas, images and concepts that are not present to the
senses, is—for Immanuel Kant—‘a blind but indispensible function of the soul, without
which we should have no knowledge whatsoever’ (1978: 112). In *Critique of Pure Reason*
(1978), Kant presents knowledge acquisition as resulting from the subtle processes engaged by the imaginative cognitive faculty; accordingly, Kant presents the imagination as the preeminent practice for human apprehension. Thus, just as we construct and acquire meanings from a diversity of referents and stimuli in the social and material world, as cognitive beings we can also imagine potential realities. And it is through these *processes of imagining* that we gain the ability and the skills to actually perceive them (Turner 1996). However, imagining is not purely a cognitive activity divorced from people’s sensate movements through the world around them (Vergunst 2012: 19-21). Phenomenological focused anthropologists such as Ingold (2000) contend that human cognition ensues from our engagement with and in the world, and that the imagination is thus ‘not the work of mind alone but of one’s entire being’ (Ingold 2012: 7). Starobinski, a literary critic, explains this well, drawing attention to the manner in which the imagination constitutes our realities as we move through the world:

> Insinuated into perception itself, mixed with the operation of memory, opening up around us a horizon of the possible, escorting the project, the hope, the fear, speculations – the imagination is much more than a faculty for evoking images which double the world of our direct perceptions... the imagination, because it anticipates and pre-views, serves action, draws before us the configuration of the realisable before it can be realised (Starobinski, 1970: 173-174, cited in Crapanzano 2004: 19).

With this recognition of the importance of the role of the imagination in daily life, it is fitting that references to the *imagination* and *social imaginaries* in anthropological discourse are becoming increasingly frequent. Charles Taylor, a political philosopher, employs the term ‘social imaginary’ to encapsulate the way in which people imagine their surrounding social environment: the ‘ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’ (Taylor 2002: 106).

---

Taylor wants to engage with, ‘the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings’, which are ‘carried in images, stories, and legends’ (Taylor 2002: 106). Contributing alongside Taylor, Dilip Goankar explains that:

We lean on nature but we are steered by the social imaginary. [...] Within the folds of a social imaginary, we see ourselves as agents who traverse a social space and inhabit a temporal horizon, entertain certain beliefs and norms, engage in and make sense of our practices in terms of purpose, timing, and appropriateness, and exist among other agents. The social imaginary is something more than an immediate practical understanding of how to do particular things [...] It involves a form of understanding that has a wider grasp of our history and social existence (2002: 7; 10).

The social imaginary, then, is a way in which we envisage our position and future possibilities within the social terrain. Anthropologists have equally adopted and critiqued this approach. As Sneath et al state, ‘The social imaginary is presented as a continually changing and implicit template through which individual agents make sense of their world, which, the underlying assumption seems to be, is both epistemologically and ethically superior to the elitist foreground of explicit rules and propositions, which was once known as culture’ (2009: 8). Claudia Strauss, a cognitive anthropologist, states: ‘it is not a coincidence that talk of imaginaries became common just as culture was falling out of favour: to a certain extent the imaginary is just culture or cultural knowledge in new clothes’ (2006: 322). The semantic obscuring of social imaginaries, like culture, replaces the ‘fixed totality of explicit meanings’ with a ‘fluid totality of implicit ones’ (Sneath et al. 2009: 8). Yet Henrik Vigh, an anthropologist researching ‘would-be migrants’ in Guinea Bissau in ethnographically rich detail, employs the social imaginary to detail how, in a landscape marked by deterioration and impoverishment, young Guinea Bissauians strategise to navigate their way through the country’s conflict and poverty (2009: 92). For Vigh:

The social imaginary is the key faculty through which we anticipate the unfolding of the social environments our lives are set in – evolving positively or negatively from the potentialities of its current states (cf. Agamben 1999). The concept brings us close to Bourdieu’s notion of illusio as ‘a feel for the game [...] a future in the making’ by which ‘one
positions oneself not where the ball is but where it will be’ (ibid [Bourdieu 1998]: 76). It is the imagined unfolding of social life which orients our movement and positions in the present. In other words, moving away from the game metaphor it is, I hold, the social imaginary that allows us to anticipate, position and act in relation to a world that is constantly approaching and engaging us rather than merely being subject to our command or a solidified surface of enactment (Vigh 2009: 100).

Focusing on the sometimes desperate attempts by young men to leave Guinea-Bissau, Vigh shows that the social imaginary, ‘as an analytical optic’, enables insight into the multiplicity of reasons leading up to acts of violence, or attempts at migration which often involve perilous journeys, through illuminating ‘the sphere of our existence which we have not yet experienced but which we nonetheless act towards in anticipation’ (Vigh 2006a: 24). Vigh’s ethnographic research shows that there is insight to be gained from articulating movements through the social imaginary. It moves understanding of migration beyond classic push-pull theories (Lee 1968 [1966]) and sole focus on economic rationales (c.f. Hollifield 2004; Portes and Borocz 1989; Yea 2005). Instead, the praxis of migration is seen within a broader context of societal pressure and communal imaginaries, which reveals and thickens understandings of individual motivations and people’s consequent trajectories.

In comparison to Vigh’s (2009, 2009b, 2006a, 2006b) usage of social imaginaries to illuminate the reasons behind, and possible trajectories of, ‘would-be migrants’ in Guinea-Bissau, the re-posed images created by Karen youth can be seen as utilitarian: as tools that assist in the navigation of the social imaginary (Vigh 2009: 92). Vigh’s interlocutors are aware that they are navigating through a social imaginary articulated by economic decline and material dilapidation, a landscape which they see as offering a relatively finite set of possible lives. Although his interlocutors have hope for the future and for improving their situations, their imaginaries are constrained to the social and material conditions that they see as available to them as Guinea-Bissauians. Vigh states:

The young men I speak to in Bissau perceive themselves, as Bissauian, to be the least capable of all social categories when it comes to creating ordered states and functional societies. In other words, rather than seeing themselves as inhabiting a history of exploitation and degradation my
informants describe themselves as the producers and bearers of a history of decline and destruction (Vigh 2009: 101).

The Karen youth who engage in these visual image practices are not only navigating through their own social imaginary, attending to the family and community obligations that bind them, but are also poaching social imaginaries—to which, they perceive, they do not belong. Unlike Vigh’s interlocutors, contained in their own socio-cultural social imaginary as Guinea-Bissauians, the Karen youth seek out other social imaginaries which they witness through mass media and which belong to non-Karen peoples; acknowledging that they are different, they take advantage of adopting these other imaginaries to bolster their own. Thus, the social imaginary that Vigh presents as ephemeral, existing out-there, in and of the world, is viewed instead by the Karen as another landscape to traverse. The social imaginary is examined by Karen youth through its portrayal; the intentional layering of visuals cut-copied from a diversity of referents which, in a way, maps out the terrain of their social imaginaries, enabling them to pre-empt, cater for, and mediate future scenarios.

In the discourse that adopts the social imaginary as a framework by which to examine the context of people’s lives, very little heed is paid to material conditions and environments. Vigh (2006a, 2006b, 2009) notes the material dilapidation of Guinea-Bissau, the instances of poverty in the run-down buildings and streets affected by civil war; however, this is presented as a backdrop, a texture that adds nuance to his depiction of the social abjection of many Guinea-Bissauians of whom he writes. In a special issue of Ethnos, Sneath, Holbraad and Pedersen (2009), critically reflect on previous theorising about the imagination and imaginaries, and offer a reconceptualisation in order to pursue the possibility of empirical investigation. Sneath, Holbraad and Pederson (2009) are defiant in pushing aside key assumptions, such as the automatic relegation of the imagination to the passive role of providing a holistic backdrop. Instead, they seek to ‘focus on the concrete processes by which imaginative effects are engendered’, which they term technologies of the imagination (2009: 11). Yet for Vigh (2006a, 2006b, 2009), the usage of social imaginaries provides insight into the incorporeal social-based movements, networking and trajectories.
In the ethnographic context of resettled Karen in Melbourne, the material environment holds just as much pertinence for their perceptions of being in the world. For resettled Karen youth, their social movements in Australian society, successfully settling into new lives, and their sensate movements traversing through textured landscapes, function concomitantly, and are of equal importance in their perception of being in the world. For many resettled Karen, their recent arrival and their feeling socially and linguistically unskilled caused many to stay at home with their extended families, only going out to do weekly food shopping or attend church services and occasional Karen community events. Many young people also contained their movement within the suburbs where they lived, except for occasionally going to visit family living on the other side of the city. Feeling socially immobile in navigating Australian society for the first few years following their resettlement, the Karen youth were also, in a way, physically immobilised. In not wanting to draw attention to lacking in confidence and being unsure of how to act in a foreign landscape, they instead stayed within the security of their houses, with their family and friends.

Considering this limitation to social and physical movement experienced by the Karen, their practices of image creation and the gesturing and inscriptions contained in the pictures enable them to generate a world into being (c.f. Ingold 2012: 7, Janowski and Ingold 2012). Their movements in the terrain created by the layering of visuals in re-posed images, mimicking landscapes where they place their bodies next to geographical features or create themselves as the feature, re-enact an engagement with the environment. It is through the unfurling of pathways in these visually constructed landscapes that Karen youth can practice social engagement, and rehearse movement and the building of intimacy with the material and social environments of their resettlement.
5.9. Thinking inside the image: nostalgia and the future

“At start, I don’t want [to use] internet. I want privacy,” Mu Lay says as we sit waiting at an Australia Day celebration near the Royal Botanic Garden. She and her friends are about to perform a traditional Karen dance in front of a small audience. Mu Lay says that it is “important to represent our community. To show people [in Australia] who Karen are.”

Mu Lay is comfortable in performing her dance with her friends publicly but she feels a strong unease in performing the self on the internet (c.f. Goffman 1959). She believed that having a presence on the internet made her, in some way, more vulnerable than she was when physically standing in front of an audience. Mu Lay started using the internet when she arrived in Melbourne and, two years later, the virtual domain still felt very unfamiliar. Standing there, huddled with friends and waiting for their turn to perform, the young women were resolute about presenting the community in a proud manner. They believed that, more than performing the dance as individuals, they were performing the community. As Nay Moo explained it, the Karen “community is like a circle,” meaning that not only are Karen morally obliged to help and assist other Karen, but they also as individuals represent the whole.

Today’s dance performance is to officially celebrate multiculturalism in Australia, a day dedicated to quickly displaying diversity in snapshot performances in the city. The Karen performance is bookended by the Indian community and the Cambodian community dance representatives. About twenty metres away from the

---

34 For research on the internet and social media that touches upon the sentiments that Mu Lay expresses, see Turkle (2011).
35 A recent PhD thesis by Laura Moran (2012) shows how young people from refugee backgrounds are experiencing conflicting expectations: the pressure to integrate into Australian society, whilst also being singled out, sometimes in overtly racialised displays of their ethnicity, in the various public celebrations of Australia’s multiculturalism. Moran’s (2012) ethnographic research focuses upon Sudanese and Karen young people, and investigates how they experience their identity in response to the strong social forces of national belonging and multiculturalism in Australia. See also Fozdar 2012; Fozdar and Hartley 2013; Fozdar, Wilding and Hawkins 2009; Moran 2012b; and, Werbner 1999.
imperfect circle surrounding the dance performers, there is a hot-rod cars display where over 100 cars are lined up, with a strong crowd weaving in between the gleaming vehicles. We had just come from looking at all the cars. The young women said that they had only seen such cars on the internet and in movies, and they were eager to take their photos next to the cars. As they lined up beside a car, they reached out to touch it. The angry owners aggressively shouted out from their camping chairs, “Don’t touch the car, mate!” The young women rushed away from taking the photos and sat back down in the small group of Karen who had either come to perform or to watch their performance.

At this time, the young women had been in Australia for less than three years. After the performance, we walked into the Botanic Gardens, and they were amazed. “It’s so clean, so much green,” Ti Na Aung said. Walking over the lawns, they remarked on how “soft” it was under their feet, saying that it felt “so full” of grass. One young woman joked that walking over the grass, feeling the cushioning underfoot, reminded her of the carpet flooring in her family’s house in the western suburbs of Melbourne. The young women say they are not used to the sensation of soft ground; instead, they say, their idea of the ground is “hard”—the “hard dirt” of the refugee camp and the bamboo and thatched mat flooring of their housing. The women walk off, deciding to find the bamboo garden so that they can take photos standing in between the thin bamboo trunks. Taking their photos next to the bamboo stems, they joke about how small the trunks are compared to the healthy bamboo that they built with, climbed on, and that surrounded them in the landscapes of Thailand and Burma. Always looking for sensate experiences to bring back snippets of familiarity in an Australian landscape, the young women lament that no sensation, be it touching the bamboo, or seeing familiar shades of green leaves in the Botanic Gardens, is truly replicable.

The young women’s searching for familiar colours and textures in the Australian landscape reveals their poignant attempts to feel their way back into the world, and to tether themselves to familiarity. Gaston Bachelard (1994 [1958]), writing on the familial home, a place of intense sentiment, alludes to this intimacy of the body returning and moving through a familiar space. He writes:
After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways, we would recapture the reflexes of the “first stairway”, we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house’s entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would feel our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 14-15).

Here, Bachelard (1994 [1958]) captures the intimacy of recollection and the rush of familiar sensations returning to the body, like the latch returning to fit its impression, which remains on the inside of the hand. In moving through the Botanic Gardens, and moving through the urban suburbs, the young women seek out affinities with their pasts. It is as if the bodies of these young women have many small threads tied to them, extending out like feelers and into the environment to find a speck of affinity in the landscape. Brushing past an imperfect bamboo stem, or a familiar shade of green, the thread can be gently reeled in, and, with it, the sensation of bodily awareness of being truly in place, embedded and intimately tied to the ecologies of the world surrounding them.

These sensations, for the young women, are few and far between. They are aware that most often there is an undertow of disappointment in their attempts to seek out affinities. The ground is too “soft,” the green is too “dark,” the bamboo is too “small”. The inability to ever truly replicate the bodily awareness and sensation which are attached to being in a place of intimate familiarity is, therefore, what the re-posed images seek to overturn. As Sar Loe says, “Because you know the picture that you take, like, it shows the emotion of how you’re feeling, you try to make it balance with the background more, like, a more suitable background.”

With this explanation, Sar Loe makes it clear that, for many Karen youth, there is a disconnection between how they feel and how they are placed in the environment. The creation of re-posed images deliberately recasts the landscape, the broader environment in which they are living, into a terrain, texture and light they find more suitable, favourable or desirable. It is scenery that is constructed to match people’s emotions, as Sar Loe explained. These manoeuvres to recreate the background in which
the body is placed, endow the images with complexity. The image is not a univocal, flat and rudimentary referent. Instead, with an understanding people's motivations, the image becomes, 'a complexly textured artifact', to use Pinney's description (2003a: 5).

The images created by Karen youth constitute an 'enchanted technology' of the kind that anthropologist Alfred Gell (1992) proposed. Gell proposes that art objects have power and significance because of how they are made. Through the processes of its production, art is an 'enchantment of technology'. Gell states that:

the power of art objects stems from the technical processes they objectively embody: the technology of enchantment is founded on the enchantment of technology. The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form (1992: 44, original italics).

My interest in Gell's (1992) thesis is the idea that an enchanted technology works by making things not simply a reflection of thought, but instead makes things—in this instance, images—vessels in which thought can dwell. The images become a 'place where thought can conduct itself freely, over and over again' (Küchler 2002: 149). Susanne Küchler, an anthropologist and a student of Alfred Gell’s, who has conducted research in Melanesia, discusses objects and their production, which constitutes an enchanted technology. In her study on the New Ireland funeral sculpture, malanggan, an artifact that is ubiquitous in nearly every ethnographic museum collection, Küchler writes that malanggan is 'made as “skin” and as a “likeness”, of life' (2002: 1). Her ethnographic study illustrates how art forms, in this case funerary effigies, ‘can be thought-like and, as a vehicle of thought, be the very stuff out of which life is wrought’ (2002: 1). Küchler writes:

by thinking in, through images of malanggan, a holographic worldview, in which every detail projects visions of further more encompassing details, brings to the fore the possibility of an alternative reality, one in which endings are turned into beginnings, distinctions into connections and presents into futures (2002:149).
Kuchler’s study of *malanggan* elucidates how objects like funerary sculptures or images can be, following Gell’s theory (1998), ‘cognitively sticky’ and an integral ‘part of the nexus of social relations’ (Kuchler 2002: 10). The images that Karen youth are producing are economical and efficient in transmitting their observations, perceptions and sensitivities. It would be hard to deny that these images, posted and stored in online social media archives, are not intended to present the self and to convey an identity that is more cosmopolitan, more self-assured and worldly. Yet it is important to note that there is little interaction resulting from these images when they are uploaded to social media; nor, when discussing the images, do young resettled Karen say that the images are posted in order to elicit a response. On the whole, people did not like to discuss, either the images they created, or those that were created by others.

This section began with the example of Mu Lay not wanting to interact on the internet. She did not want to interact on Facebook to an invisible audience either; however, in her desire to interact with her peers, she ultimately had to allow herself to be pulled into the ubiquitous vortex of social media. A little time after signing up to Facebook, Mu Lay began to appear in photos posted on the site, yet she didn’t want to necessarily interact on the site. She did not upload commentary or involve herself regularly in ongoing conversations; however, what she did come to do regularly was to post re-posed images and photographs of herself. Sometimes these images gathered responses from her friends back in Thailand. If the photos included some of the other young women here in Melbourne and they were alerted to the image through tagging, then they would occasionally post a comment to thank Mu Lay for including them in her profile. Despite Mu Lay’s trepidation, Facebook nevertheless became a site for playing out her own engagement with, and rumination on, her perception of moving through social and material landscapes in Melbourne. Yet the images were not envisaged as being important or interesting to others. The images were, as Mu Lay simply explained, “just for me.”
Certainly, because of the presentation of the images on social media, there is an audience whereby they could be seen as working towards fashioning the self exactly the way the presenter would like to be seen. Nevertheless, the primary reason these images seem to be created is much like Kuchler’s first premise of *malanggan* creation in New Ireland. The images create a place which can be thought in and through. Through the construction of imaginary scenery to accompany their bodies, the images created by young resettled Karen illustrate people’s other histories, alternate spaces in which biographies, presences and futures are enacted and drawn upon. ‘The thinking in, through and with images’ creates a world, a landscape to traverse, which is ‘not divisive, but paved in connections’ (Küchler 2002: 33). These re-posed images, living in image worlds on their bedroom walls or existing in their albums in virtual domains like Facebook, are punctuations that break up the ever-widening field of unfamiliarity the Karen face as a result of their resettlement in Melbourne. They are also images created by Karen youth to mediate their position, to negotiate possible future trajectories and to re-envision the world, as a way of rehearsing the means of achieving future-oriented goals.

The use of photography—and image-based practices more generally—to subvert, recast and re-envisionge people’s perceptions of placement in their social and material landscapes, is well founded. Arjun Appadurai (1997), writing on popular postcolonial photography, suggests that the use of backdrops and the employment of props to accompany people’s poses, a preeminent feature in portraiture practices across India and Africa, exemplify a resistance to photography’s documentary certainty and offer critiques on modernity. Appadurai states:

the backdrop resists, subverts or parodies the realist claims of photography in various ways… In these postcolonial settings, photographic backdrops become less the site for debates about colonial subjectivity and more the place for… ‘experiments with modernity’ That is, outside the taxonomising and coercive techniques of colonial observers and the colonial state, backdrops tend to become part of a more complicated dialogue between the posed photograph and the practices of everyday life (Appadurai 1997: 5).
Writing on photographic practices in India, Christopher Pinney suggests the use of backdrops and alternative stage settings is not only ‘a substitute in the absence of their referents, but [is used] as a space of exploration’ (Pinney 2003b: 213). These explorations can be geographically focused, with people posing in front of landscapes and monuments that they have not actually visited in India. These posed portraits, taken inside photographic studios, also ‘function as chambers of dreams where personal explorations of an infinite range of alteregos is possible’ (Pinney 2003b: 213). The task for the photographers, which Pinney discusses, is to ‘produce not an imprisoning trace of their sitters but to act as impressarios, bringing forth an ideal and aspirational vision of the bodies that sitters wish themselves to be’ (Pinney 2003b: 213-214).

Pinney’s investigation into photographic practices in Nagda, a town in central India, revealed that people were interested in the manipulation of photographic practices to enable them to ‘come out better than they really are’ (Pinney 2003b: 214). Only Nagda’s law enforcement agents were interested in photography’s primary quality to capture and record what Pinney refers to as ‘quotidian reality’. The residents of Nagda looked to photographic practices to lift them out of everyday realities and supplant them into more desired locales, presented in the studio’s decorated stage settings. The façade created to improve their reality and to present an enhanced version of themselves ‘is achieved through two routes: through the adoption of gestures and through the deployment of costume and props. Frequently the one implies the other’ (Pinney 2003b: 214).

Whilst Pinney’s investigation into Nagda studio photography presents subjects as being wilfully complicit in presenting themselves in a way that comes out better, Heike Behrend’s (2003) studies of the Likoni Ferry photographers situated in Mombasa, presents people taking on, and truly believing in, the façade of props and costumes. In the Likoni photography studios, people could walk in and have their portrait taken in front of stage settings. These stage settings presented a vast selection of desirable locales and, by sitting in front of a backdrop or in a staged scene, people were able to inhabit environments from which, in actuality, they were largely excluded. For example, Behrend writes,
Customers could transform themselves into airline passengers, part of the modern jet set, and thus connected to a wider global world […]. In the photos, the photographed persons are placed in an airport as a privileged place, a “non-site”, in the sense that it is a place of arriving and departing, a place of passage not of staying (Behrend 2003: 227).

Through these images people could participate in cosmopolitan lifestyles and transnational travel which, in reality, they would be unable to experience. Placing themselves in the photography studio’s decorated stages, people could holiday in exotic locales or be passengers aboard cruise liners. This meant, Behrend states, ‘the modern means of transport and exotic places were at their disposal, and the studios with their imaginative geographies became a surrogate for travel’ (Behrend 2003: 231). Behrend continues:

In their images, the Likoni photographers did not so much attempt to produce an outside “reality” but rather they used the décor of their studios to improve the world and to transform and upgrade their own position in it. For them, the painted backdrops were “real”; they were not part of attempts to deceive or lie (Behrend 2003: 237-238).

These practices show that the images taken in Likoni photographic studios in Mombasa and the images taken in Nagda have gained reality in and of themselves.36 Despite the images’ false veneers, with bodies placed in the posed stage settings giving the illusion of being elsewhere, they are nonetheless valued for their acuity. These photographs and re-posed images are not merely pictures, they are social objects which are entangled in a wider set of social relations (Edwards 1999, 2003, 2004; Edwards and Hart 2004; Hoskins 1998, 2005; Miller 1998; Pinney 2011, Wright 2004). The photographic image has materiality, opacity and tactility and, as such, these types of images ‘cannot be understood through visual content alone but through an embodied engagement with an affective object world, which is both constitutive of and constituted through social relations’ (Edwards 2012: 221). In this context, Alfred Gell’s (1998) premise about the social agency of objects and their ability to create cause and effect remains pertinent. Taking Gell’s premise on the agency of objects, and extending it to

36 See also Constable (2006) and Kendall (2006) for related practices.
include the context of the images created by Karen youth, it is possible to understand how these images, as materialised objects, are employed to work in the world, inasmuch as they are employed by the young people themselves, as spaces to occupy and rehearse for social situations. The example of the Nagda photographs shows people using images and deliberately creating images to project something better. The images are used as objects to represent a better scenario (Pinney 2003b). The Likoni photographs show a progression in people’s perceptions of the agency of images. These photographs illustrate how images can, in effect, be lived in; and the experience of taking the posed portraits is not so much a substitute for the real experience—for example, being on board a cruise liner or an aeroplane—but actually is the experience. The re-posed images created by Karen youth illustrate a further, yet analogous, progression of how images can be used to enable people to feel their way into the world. Karen youth create these images as visual fields that can be lived in, experienced and navigated through. These images are not simply replicative of experience, but exist as domains in which experience can be gained, skills acquired and knowledge attained.

The images, as domains to think in and through, as well as being sites for practising and rehearsing movements and interactions, work effectively. The image below (Figure 29) depicts Mar Ner recollecting fragments of her experiences since she resettled in Melbourne. With an eye to the changes in her appearance, dress and gesture in each individual frame, it is possible to see her perceptions of how she has progressed, how she has navigated her way through different experiences and acquired a ‘muscular consciousness’, to use Bachelard’s (1994 [1958]: 11) description.
Following the image by the singular frames and working in an anticlockwise direction, Mar Ner clocks her trajectory. This trajectory (from the first frame, taken shortly after her family arrived in their new house; to the second frame, where she tests out new, unfamiliar clothing; to the third frame, where she poses in and enjoys new settings; to the final frame, where she confidently poses with her can of coca cola in a public bus) illustrates not only her movements in different spaces, but also her rising confidence. Mar Ner’s ability and skills in traversing new landscapes are evident in the shifts in posing: from sitting inside on their couch, to visiting a tulip exhibition in outer Melbourne, to gesturing in non-Karen clothing and, finally, to her leaning against a seat whilst on board an empty public bus. Here, in Figure 29, the image is a record of ‘penetrating certainty’, to use Pinney’s (2008: S39) phrase, as well as also being a mirror that Mar Ner can hold up to herself: a testament to her own development in mastering
different situations (Pinney 2008: S39). Images such as this are carefully created “biographical objects” in which stories can be told, as well as contained (Hoskins 1998).

These biographical images, re-posed and layered with various narratives, draw upon the past as much as they mediate the present and look to the future. In Nay Moo’s re-posed images (Figures 25 and 28), the absence of his family and the loss of his father are not necessarily tied to bereavement; ‘rather, they can proffer a future-driven strategy to reimagine oneself, one’s community and its practices’ (Meskell 2010: 212). In anthropologist Fiona Parrott’s (2010) research, the displaying of photographs and objects which have images of deceased individuals imprinted on them have salient effective qualities. In her research on photographs in South London households, Parrott (2010) illustrates how images are saturated in practices of remembrance and how they come to effectively stand in for the deceased. It is these processes of embodying which, in turn, have significant effect on social relations performed inside the house. Parrott’s (2010) research also shows the strong durability of relationships between the living and the deceased: the here and the removed.

In Nay Moo’s images, he seeks to carry with him the intimate and protective qualities of the relationships with his parents and extended family: those who are deceased or absent in his life, as he has resettled in Australia without them. In Figure 13, we can see Nay Moo enacting these same nurturing intimacies with his newborn daughter. Lying side by side and segmented out of the plush interior scene, removed by virtue of their positioning inside the gilded frame, Nay Moo and his daughter are together, asleep and quiet, despite being watched and discussed by the two spectators. These images (Figures 13, 25, and 28) show ‘the way in which photographs are revalorized and reimagined, and new identities and sets of connection forged, through material practices that mobilize[s] content in different ways’ (Edwards 2012: 227, see also Naficy 1991: 289). Nay Moo, in making these re-posed images, does not intend to conjure up imaginings of other places and other times, true or false, virtual or actual; rather, he is participating in the practice, common to his resettled peers, of descending

---

37 Pinney (2008: S39) employs the term ‘penetrating certainty’ in his discussion of photography and its nexus to India’s ‘colonial habitus’ (Pinney 2008: S33). Pinney (2008) uses the term to articulate photography’s inherent truth making and evidentiary characteristic in his ethno-historical focus on Punjab during the years, 1919-1922.
into the heart of things. The creation of these re-posed images allows for an articulation of sentiments and the rumination upon experience, which contributes to the stemming of retrospective and prospective nostalgia.

Many of the Karen youth involved in this research are not only nostalgic about their pasts, but are also nostalgic for their future. Svetlana Boym (2001: xvi) writes about the prospect of nostalgia in her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*. Boym argues that the ‘fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on the realities of the future’ (Boym 2001: xvi). In ruminating upon the future, we are made aware of our nostalgic tendencies and, perhaps, the manner by which we maintain a false clarity of our pasts. Nostalgia, Boym writes, ‘tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence’ (2001: xvii). ‘It is about the repetition of the irrepeateable, materialization of the immaterial’ (Boym 2001: xvii). The re-posed images which we re-work their pasts (Figure 6), and the images which propose, preempt and work towards their desired futures (Figures 7, 24 and 27), are tantalizing for their producers. Furthermore, they are objects which will the seemingly unobtainable into being: a prime example of this is the perfect wedding day and model husband that are presented in Figure 27. The images are also biographical and built from an underlying nostalgic desire for calm: a more socially temperate time that is free from political violence and precarious landscapes. However, Susan Stewart warns us that sought-after nostalgic desires are inevitably experienced as lacking. She writes:

Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack (Stewart 1993: 23).

The images created by Karen youth resettled in Melbourne, and the treasured photographs carried with them, are objects to accompany sadness. To use Rudyard Kipling’s (1994 [1903]) famous line, the images ‘make your heart-strings crack’. Yet they are also material analogues to numerous other sentiments and, certainly, not all of
them are sorrowful. The nostalgic yearning of which Stewart writes, the attainable before and after but never the evasive middle of an experience, suggests that what is at play is the *presencing* of that which is absent. For many, the images are attempts at *getting hold of* things that are ‘held at the end of the gaze’ (Benjamin 1968, Merleau-Ponty 1968: 131).

5.10. Recasting the world: movements with bodies and images

The re-posed images made by young Karens who have resettled in Melbourne, and the image-worlds contained and cherished inside the new homes of families, turn the past into a private collection and the future into an acquirable acuity. This chapter has shown how the images, and the image-worlds created by gathering, curating and assembling images into archives and collectivities, are inhabitable. They are not idealised images; rather, they are inhabited surfaces that are intimately experienced, thought in, mediated and learnt from.

This chapter has shown that photographs are created, interacted with and displayed, as much to live in and through as they are employed to capture, freeze and record the moment, as Barthes (2000 [1981]) and Sontag (2008 [1977]) originally suggested. Some of the photographs and images are citational, and refer back to shared experiences and shared histories (Edwards 2001: 157). Figure 4 and the discussion on photographic archives—such as Ti Na Aung’s mother’s photograph albums, carefully placed and waiting for her in the bottom drawer and Mu Lay and Su Eh’s family’s framed and positioned photographs forming an iconostasis next to the kitchen table—
evocatively illustrate the maintenance of diasporic intimacy and acts of *presencing*. For Ti Na Aung’s mother, her photographs are implicated in her self-preservation, as every day she goes to kneel in front of the drawer, takes out an album and falls into its content, in the hope that she can melt through and into their surfaces.

Mu Lay’s image world reveals how people can live in images, and also how photographs can come to stand in for people. Fanning out from the central nexus of the landscape painting depicting burning homes blighting the picturesque valley, the image world that is in Mu Lay’s bedroom corner crawls out and over her walls; it is a field that she has created to move through and live in. In her image world, a world where things do not change and people cannot be hurt, she remains standing next to her deceased brother in the denuded dirt alleyway of Mae La refugee camp. Feeling the rush of Australian society moving outside her bedroom window, Mu Lay can situate herself in the images coalescing in her image world. This demonstrates that it is not only the semiotic and forensic qualities of photographs that are important; also vitally important is the way in which they are displayed and interacted with. The ‘photographs, those visual incisions through time and space, constitute such ‘little narratives’, yet at the same time are constituted by and are constitutive of the ‘grand’, or at least ‘larger’ narratives’ (Edwards 2001: 3). It is these narratives, contained or created through images, that the resettled Karen community are using to mediate their resettlement to Australia (c.f. Werbner and Fumanti: 2012: 23).

In the re-posed images, bricolaged and layered with details by the Karen youth, there is the space for alternative presences and histories. Through the composition of the images, the ‘very performative qualities of re-enactment [become] a site for multiple subjectivities’ (Edwards 2001: 158). In Figure 10, this is actually represented. Nay Moo poses in four bodies, clustered together on the edge of a pier. Behind his body multiples, the sea extends backwards to meet a clear blue sky. Yet the image is presented like the beginning: as his four separate bodies are looking forward, directly and out of the image at the observer, Nay Moo prepares for a place into which to step. In this re-posed image, Nay Moo’s bodies are not petrified like statues, nor is the image engaged with as a static object. Rather, this image, like the multiplicity of other re-posed images created by the Karen young people involved in this research, are made to be moved in, thought
with and learnt from. The images are created and employed to rehearse for, and enact, movement.

A recent book entitled *In Ramallah, Running* (2012), presents a series of vivid explorations in, over and around the hills of Ramallah, a city ten kilometres north of Jerusalem. The separately authored texts describe the undulating and incised landscapes of the Palestinian city and how they are intimately experienced, moved in and responded to. Guy Mannes-Abbott, a writer and critic, takes to running across the city, a method by which he hopes to feel his way into the environment. He writes:

*I am running* in Ramallah.

Running through, around and on Ramallah […] I’m making Ramallah homely by running here, leaving some of myself out there, drawing into myself whatever is here. Shortening and lengthening my time […] I’m running in Ramallah and it is painful’ (Mannes-Abbott 2012: 25-26, bold text in original).

Mannes-Abbott’s running, Nay Moo’s bodies re-posed onto the pier, Mar Ner localising herself in urban streets (Figures 19, 20): these are all examples of various movements. And like Mannes-Abbotts running to make Ramallah “homely”, leaving some of himself “out there”, the creators of the re-posed images seek to explore the visual image, as a space that can be experienced. The images are also created as fields that can be interacted with and thought in—enabling skills to be acquired and movement mastered. Through his running over Ramallah, Mannes-Abbott describes his movements as making the city “homely”; his explorations lead to feeling his way back into the city. This is akin to how Karen youth explore the social and material landscapes that are contained in the re-posed images. Imagining and enacting movement in the images, planting and relocating their bodies in various scenes, young resettled Karen feel their way back into the world. Often, like Mannes-Abbotts’ explorations, the explorations in photographs and images can be painful. Looking at them, ‘palpating’ them with our looks, creating new images from them, can be painful actions (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 133). As Edwards writes, ‘Photographs are painful, not only in their content matter sometimes […] but sometimes their truth-telling, their
performance of histories, their reality has a painfulness – rawness’ (Edwards 2001: 6).
Despite this, the act of moving, weaving their way through pixilated scenery like Mannes-Abbott’s runs across Ramallah, “drawing” themselves into an environment, can also be acutely freeing.

The reposing of images by resettled Karen youth reveals a particular innovativeness: a practice that is representative of original attempts to mediate their resettlement in Melbourne and to negotiate its social and material landscapes. The Karen youth involved in this research have, to use perceptual psychologist Rudolf Arnheim’s words, invented ‘a thoughtful medium in which the qualities of a particular situation can be represented’ (Arnheim 1991: 184, translated and cited in Stafford 2007: 1). Creating the backgrounds to suitably match how they are feeling, as Sar Loe explained, is also a way in which to ‘fiddle with the scale of the world’ and move towards the compelling unknown with a ‘muscular consciousness’ (Sontag 2008 [1977]: 4; Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 11).

One day, as I was sitting with Ti Na Aung, she explained the uncanny feeling of the past suddenly rushing up from behind: startled, you are suddenly alerted that it is still there (Freud 1985 [1919]). Ti Na Aung said: “Sometimes it’s so weird to think about being here [in Melbourne]. We talk about the past, but we are here, it makes being here kinda weird, you know?” This statement, a description of being simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, points to Ti Na Aung being aware that she is participating in the world from within. Through her movements, gathering a “muscular consciousness” through perception and action, she is inherently involved ‘in the very becoming of things’ (Ingold 2012: 3). Yet, for Ti Na Aung, realising in a moment that you are here, but you are also there, living in your past, living in images, is disconcerting. She says, “Our parents all make us remember. Remember who we are and where we come from.” She looks up, raises her hands, and asks: “What do we do?”, implying “What about the future?”

By creating and moving within image worlds, Ti Na Aung and her peers are constructing a ‘form of seeing which makes all subjects equivalent’ (Sontag 2008 [1977]:

---

38 This quotation is originally from Rudolf Arnheim’s (1991) “Ein Plaidoyer für Anschauliches Denken” in Neue Beiträge. Cologne, DuMont Verlag, page 184. I use Barbara Stafford’s own translation from the German original.
In managing the complexities involved in their resettlement in Australia, Karen youth are not only producing radically different accounts of eye witnessing in these images, but they are creating the possibility of alternate realities, with re-enactable pasts and malleable futures. Feeling constrained to lives lived in a landscape of resettlement in Australia, unskilled in negotiating precarious social environments and thus assuming they are sectioned off from desired futures, these Karen young people create ways to mediate this predicament. This is achieved through the performing of histories, the navigating of social imaginaries and the creating of an alternative present, in which a parallel social and material landscape are envisioned. It is in this parallel landscape that Karen youth actively work towards sculpting their futures.

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, he views objects not as simply symbolic vehicles but, rather, as extensions of the body. He states: ‘the things are the prolongation of my body and body is the prolongation of the world’ (1968: 255). The images created, collected and thought with by young resettled Karen are such things. They are not separated from daily experience, but formative of it. In this sense, the boundaries of their bodies ‘do not end at the skin’ but extend into images much as, through our sensorium, ‘the body extends into the world’ (Tilley 2004: 220). This idea of living in images, and of the boundaries of a body extending beyond the surface of the skin, reflects upon the early work of Gregory Bateson who, in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), insisted that ‘the mental world—the mind—the world of information processing—is not limited by the skin’ (1972: 460). Instead, the mind can breach our bodies, “leaking out” and extending out into the social and material world (Clark 1997: 53).

These image practices are the heuristic strategy related to Merleau-Ponty’s statement that begins this dissertation: ‘The thickness of my body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 135). To go “unto the heart of things” is to see the body as a thing: a thing that can move and create effect amongst a world full of things. By making their bodies things, extending into images as they extend into the world around them, young resettled Karen descend into the heart of their conditions and self-fashion the world around them.
6. CONCLUSION

Nothing endures but change.
Heraclitus
(In Laërtius [1925], Book IX, Section VI.)

6.1. The city outside, the city inside

As I write the conclusion of this dissertation, the practice of visual imagery reposing by resettled Karen youth has ceased. Their making of these visual images began as a means of producing an affinity with the world around them. The images were valued for their generative powers: the potential that the imagining taking place inside the image could take on the flesh of real life. At the beginning of 2013, however, five to seven years after their resettlement in Melbourne, Karen youth are no longer engaging in these same forms of visual bricolage practices.

When I first met the people involved in this research, they were experiencing a displacement of their bodies. Their resettlement in Melbourne from the refugee camps
along the Thailand Burma border had brought on the visceral sensation of feeling acutely *out of place*. In the Introduction of this dissertation, I described how when many Karen first arrive in Melbourne, members of the community take them to the top of Mount Dandenong. Here, people line up along the viewing platform of Sky High and they look out across the city landscape. Those who have been resettled in Melbourne for some time and have learnt the layout of the city, assist people who are visiting Sky High for the first time. They point to areas, seemingly opaque and barely distinguishable from their aerial position, and they describe what is there, how these spaces relate to them, and how they relate to the extended Karen community. Here, many recently arrived families see for the first time how the suburb in which they have been settled nests alongside other suburbs. They see the distance to the church where they will join the larger Karen community, and where the supermarket that will provide them with the most familiar food is located in relation to their house.

Looking out at the city from the aerial position of Mount Dandenong is a means of re-placing their bodies. It is a method to generate an understanding of where their bodies are in relation to the ongoing movements of the city. These were initial actions to make Melbourne, the city landscape of their futures, navigable. By seeing the city from up high, resettled Karen were enabled to understand and to imagine their placement in the landscape below. Being able to imagine their placement in the landscape of their settlement, people were then further enabled to mediate the perception of the city that was inside their minds (see Figure. 30).
Figure 30. The jungle, the city.
Initially, people had the perception that the landscape of Melbourne was ready-made. They believed that they would not be able to feel their way in to the folds of the city. They feared, at this time, that the continual sensation of unfamiliarity that conditioned their movements through the landscape and gave rise to such estrangement could be permanent. Sar Loe, Mar Ner and Ti Na Aung, the three young women with whom I began this dissertation, initially believed that they could never look as if they belonged inside the city of Melbourne. They believed that they would not be able to move with a ‘muscular consciousness’: an embodiment of knowing what to do, where to go and how to act on their way through the suburban landscape of tree lined streets, let alone through the busy centre of the city (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 11).

For recently resettled Karen, living inside the city landscape of Melbourne was a daunting prospect but was, nonetheless, sought after and believed necessary in order to have a “good life”. In the painting above (Figure 30), there are two distinct landscapes. The terrain of Burma, with Mount Popa distinctive yet darkened in the background, is threatening. The city resting inside the mind of the mother is a set of surfaces and objects of progress. Whereas the landscape of Burma in the painting is weighted with the momentum of nature, the city inside her mind is propelled by vehicles that move people. The darkened shipping tankers in the bay move to face the city, the aeroplane is ascending, and the coloured cars move away from the family who are in a line, centered, and looking directly at us. In both landscapes—the darkened valley in front of Mount Popa and the busy urban port—there is a depth of field, just as there is also depth of sentiment.

In this dissertation, I have examined the aspirations of the Karen community to create familiarity, recover movement and curate their futures in multiple landscapes. I have illustrated their practices of tethering and seeking attachments to the world around their bodies. The thesis shows, as Ingold suggested, that ‘proceeding along a path, every inhabitant lays a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other’ (Ingold 2011: 148).

In this ethnographic thesis, I have described these pathways and how, for Karen, lives are lived in correspondence with one another and the world around them. The research has been temporally extended to include their recollections of leaving home.
villages in the northern hills of Burma as children or young adolescents, and their navigation through the valleys and the hills of Burma to arrive at one of ten refugee camps along the Thailand border. The thesis also examined people's experiences of resettling in Melbourne, the practices in which they engage in order to make Melbourne homely, and their initial discontent with the city landscape that they innovatively began to overwrite.

Part of these actions intended to familiarise the urban landscape of Melbourne entailed the resettled Karen community re-establishing what they referred to as “a circle”. In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I examined how Karen resettled in Melbourne perceive the extended community. They described the community to be a circle, an analogy that represents the centrality of reciprocity and the moral obligations of its members, as well as the nature of connections between people, and between people and places. In Chapter Three, I examined how this circle, self-designated to represent the community, has been historically and politically formed. I then explored how the circle, as a bounded construct, has been established inside the suburbs where Karen have been settled in Melbourne.

The circle analogy, I have shown, vitalises the core understanding that one is inherently in communication and correspondence with the experience of others and with the world around one’s body. In Chapter Four, I examined how, just as a landscape unfurls in the fore as it is moved across, the circle and hence the resettled community also reaches out, temporally extending to encircle new possibilities. Karen people in refugee camps along the Thailand border and also resettled in the third country of Australia have sought to extend their movements across their social and material landscapes, encouraging a diffusion of the circle's edge. In Chapter Four, I further examined the ways in which people have learnt to navigate manifold tensioned landscapes and the importance of movement in those navigations. I have described the practices whereby people attempt to find analogous sensations and textures, which tether them to memory as well as to ecologies.

I have examined in Chapter Four and in Chapter Five, how Karen people—with their resettlement in Melbourne—have gradually extended the length of their movements across the city, and how they have enacted practices intended to evoke
particular correspondences between their bodies and the settlement landscape. These practices, I have shown, were not restricted to moving across physical landscapes but also included movements across imaginary fields. The movements which take place inside the visual images that I analysed in Chapter Five are a means of mediating, rehearsing for and acquiring knowledge that is to assist them in their settlement to Melbourne. The making of re-posed images is also a means of *presencing* what is absent, of articulating future aspirations and is a method by which to engage with the world around them. I have shown that extending into images, just like extending into the world around them, enables young people, particularly in the resettled Karen community, to *presence* a private locus in which to mediate and practise settlement. The re-posing of visual images and the curation of image-worlds are practices through which to gain a “muscular consciousness” in their movements across social and material landscapes (Bachelard 1994 [1958]).

Figure 31. Karen in Australia.
As a result of engaging in these various practices, the resettled Karen in Melbourne have familiarised themselves with the city and its processes, and established their place in it. Upon reflection, the people who have been a part of my research now say, “I know this area,” “I am comfortable here.” The city, which was initially viewed as freighted, complex and precarious, is now viewed as a landscape through which they can actively navigate and with which they can generate affinities. This change in the perception of their environment illustrates how places can breach our bodies. A place, which was viscerally experienced as unfamiliar, has been recast as people have skillfully generated a “muscular consciousness” with which to move through new landscapes.

A recently produced image being circulated in the community illustrates this. In Figure 31, the outlines of Burma and Australia have been welded together. In this image, territorial landscapes have been visually layered. Placing Burma inside Australia poignantly illustrates how the resettled Karen community has generated an affinity with the world around them and, further, suggests how, for people who have been on the move, the ground beneath their feet has never been taken for granted.

6.2. Precipitating encounters

With the account presented in this thesis, I hope to have in some way contributed to a new way of critically reflecting upon the more subtle processes that are involved for people experiencing humanitarian resettlement in third countries. For the Karen who have contributed to this research, the subtle, mostly unspoken, vicissitudes of daily life brought on by resettling to a new country were saliently affecting. Every
movement and every interaction during this period of familiarising themselves in the resettlement landscape of Melbourne were significant.

Sar Loe brought this to my attention late one summer afternoon. After a long day out, only she remains in the car with me and, as we begin to drive off in the direction of her home, she turns to me quietly. She fleetingy grasps my arm and suggests that we take a longer way back. “Let’s just look,” she says and she points outside the car windows. “At what?” I ask her. She replies, “Anything.” She pauses, and looks out of the passenger window. Then, with a wry smile, she shyly shrugs her shoulders and clarifies: “I mean everything.”

We drive across four suburbs in silence and then, as we pass a park, she suggests we stop and have a walk. “I think I have been here before,” she says. It is a very hot Sunday afternoon, and the park is full of families having picnics. The barbeques are crowded, and people stand at their brick counter tops drinking beer and laughing. As we walk along the winding paths and over the network of miniature bridges crossing the modest man-made ponds, children and dogs run around and parents call out after them. Sar Loe surveys the scene and says, “Look how happy people are.” Taking a few steps forward, she says, “People are lucky here, Australia is a good country.” She lifts out her arm to encompass the scene of the park. This scene of summer time family picnics, of children and dogs running in a manicured park in the outer suburbs, is evidence to her that Australia is a “good country”. Sar Loe then says, “I am happy here, too.”

As the evening comes, Sar Loe says she remembers passing an ice cream shop and we circle back through the streets to locate it. Winding through the suburbs, we eventually find the shop, on the corner of a large busy intersection. After parking the car, we walk inside the aged shop, place our orders and sit down. The orange light from the evening sun saturates us as we sit on the window bench, and then slowly it begins to sink down the wall in the background. There are no other customers, and the two young women running the shop are leaning on the back wall behind the counter, intermittently speaking as they languidly stare straight ahead. The four of us stare out the shop window in silence, straight into the light of the sinking summer sun, deceptively fattened by the haze of pollution, stagnant in the large intersection.
“It takes a lot of people,” Sar Loe suddenly says. “To do what?” I ask turning, to face her. She replies, looking straight ahead out the window: “To have a good life.” As we sit together on the bench by the window, watching a sprawling suburban landscape flooded by the falling sunlight, Sar Loe’s comment is poignant. It is a reminder that all of us are implicated, to greater or lesser degree, in humanitarian resettlement and in one another’s experiences of the precipitating encounters ensuing from our being in the world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bender, B. 2001a. 'Landscapes on-the-move'. *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 1(1), 75-89.


University of Pennsylvania Press.


Drazin, A. and D. Frohlich. 2007. 'Good intentions: remembering through framing photographs in English homes'. *Ethnos,* 72(1), 51-76.


Fortier, A. M. 1999. 'Re-Membering Places and the Performance of Belonging(s)'. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16(2), 41-64.


Fozdar, F. 2012. 'Beyond the rhetoric of inclusion: Our responsibility to refugees'. In Hayes, A. and R. Mason, (eds.). *Seeking Sanctuary: Cultures in Refuge in Modern Australia*. Farnham: Ashgate, 49-64.


Howes, D. and S. Pink. 2010. 'The future of sensory anthropology/the anthropology of
the senses'. *Social Anthropology*, 18(3), 331-40.


Mason, F. 1866. 'Physical character of the Karen'. *Journal of the Asiatic Society (Bengal), XXXV*(1), 1-31.


Schweitzer, R., M. Brough, L. Vromans and M. Asic-Kobe. 2011. 'Mental Health of Newly Arrived Burmese Refugees in Australia: Contributions of Pre-migration


APPENDIX

MEMORANDUM

To: Professor Sandy Gifford, La Trobe Refugee Research Centre, FH&SS
Ms Zoë Robertson, La Trobe Refugee Research Centre, FH&SS
From: Secretary, La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee
Subject: Review of Human Ethics Committee Application No. 10-049
Title: Negotiated Identities: the role of new media technologies in the formation of attachments and wellbeing
Date: 16 September 2010

Thank you for your recent correspondence in relation to the research project referred to above. The project has been assessed as complying with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. I am pleased to advise that your project has been granted ethics approval and you may commence the study.

The project has been approved from the date of this letter until 31 December 2012.

Please note that your application has been reviewed by a sub-committee of the University Human Ethics Committee (UHEC) to facilitate a decision about the study before the next Committee meeting. This decision will require ratification by the full UHEC at its next meeting and the UHEC reserves the right to alter conditions of approval or withdraw approval. You will be notified if the approval status of your project changes.

The following standard conditions apply to your project:

- **Limit of Approval.** Approval is limited strictly to the research proposal as submitted in your application while taking into account any additional conditions advised by the UHEC.

- **Variation to Project.** Any subsequent variations or modifications you wish to make to your project must be formally notified to the UHEC for approval in advance of these modifications being introduced into the project. This can be done using the appropriate form: Ethica - Application for Modification to Project which is available on the Research Services website at http://www.latrobe.edu.au/research-services/ethics/human.htm. If the UHEC considers that the proposed changes are significant, you may be required to submit a new application form for approval of the revised project.

- **Adverse Events.** If any unforeseen or adverse events occur, including adverse effects on participants, during the course of the project which may affect the ethical acceptability of the project, the Chief Investigator must immediately notify the UHEC Secretary on telephone (03) 9479 1443. Any complaints about the project received by the researchers must also be referred immediately to the UHEC Secretary.

- **Withdrawal of Project.** If you decide to discontinue your research before its planned
completion, you must advise the UHEC and clarify the circumstances.

- **Annual Progress Reports.** If your project continues for more than 12 months, you are required to submit an Ethics - Progress/Final Report Form annually, on or just prior to 12 February. The form is available on the Research Services website (see above address). Failure to submit a Progress Report will mean approval for this project will lapse. An audit may be conducted by the UHEC at any time.

- **Final Report.** A Final Report (see above address) is required within six months of the completion of the project or by **30 June 2013**.

If you have any queries on the information above or require further clarification please contact me through Research Services on telephone (03) 9479-1443, or e-mail at:

humanethics@latrobe.edu.au.

On behalf of the University Human Ethics Committee, best wishes with your research!

Ms Barbara Doherty
Administrative Officer (Research Ethics)
University Human Ethics Committee
Research Compliance Unit / Research Services
La Trobe University Bundoora, Victoria 3086
P: (03) 9479 – 1443 / F: (03) 9479 - 1464
http://www.latrobe.edu.au/research-services/ethics/