Seeding Sovereignty: Sensory Politics and Biodiversity in the Karen Diaspora

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Abstract

This dissertation traces the sensory and political dimensions of Karen refugees’ co-movements with their seeds, plants, and agricultural practices in exile. It also tentatively explores understandings of sovereignty beyond the frame of the Westphalian nation-state through engagements with seed and food sovereignty in three locations that complicate understandings of territorial sovereignty. In this dissertation I explore what I call “agricultural forgetting” and how it occurs for Karen refugees in the context of the camp. Agricultural forgetting, I suggest, is the process by which linkages between people and plants are broken generationally. Such forgetting occurs in especially sudden and forceful ways in the refugee camp. This is in part because the camp, as a space of exception, ushers in new more-than-human social arrangements. Agricultural forgetting is deeply connected with Indigenous sovereignty, which is rooted in food and seed sovereignty as well as relational ontologies. Considering relationships between people and plants in the context of forced migration and exile provides a unique vantage from which to understand Indigenous sovereignty across borders. It also contributes to provincializing and ultimately moving beyond the concept of Westphalian, or territorial, sovereignty that has historically helped to produce and sustain understandings of humanity as overdetermined by (European middleclass) “Man” (Wynter 2003). This overdetermination, as manifested in the nation-state, has resulted in the exclusion of vast swaths of people from humanity.
SEEDING SOVEREIGNTY: SENSORY POLITICS AND BIODIVERSITY IN THE KAREN DIASPORA

by

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Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

Syracuse University
July 2021
To Moo Paw, San Nie and Htee Lah—for feeding me, and teaching me about plants, and so much more. Thank you.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation is the product of a large circle of care and support. It could never have been written if not for the numerous people who generously mentored me, provided me with hospitality, encouraged me, and shared their lives with me. First and foremost I want to thank all my friends and interlocutors, whose experiences and stories inform this study. In addition to the contents of this dissertation, you have taught me so much about what it means to live a good life in relationship with others.

Next innumerable thanks are due to my friends and comrades in Syracuse. My PhD cohort members: Ajaya, Matt, Ipshita, Tony and LuAnn: I can’t imagine a better group of people to learn and grow in company with. Thank you for making this journey a pleasure. Thank you to Ipshita, Sara, and Shaundel, my friends and PhD sisters. I cannot express how much your deep thinking and perceptiveness about important issues, along with your great senses of humor have enriched my life. Very special thanks to Kip and Terri, my dear friends and adoptive family in Syracuse. Your hospitality, care, and encouragement has been a mainstay of support. The rich conversations we have had, and the beautiful examples you set, continually inspires me. Knowing all of you has been one of the best parts of coming to Syracuse to complete my PhD.

I am so grateful to members of the Karen community in Syracuse, and friends, for welcoming me into your spaces, shaping my understanding, and for memorable times spent together. Special thanks to Pastor Gail, Poe, and Blessed Joe and family. To those at Syracuse University who have helped me tremendously throughout my graduate studies, thank you. In particular, thank you to JoAnn and Jackie in the anthropology department and to Dan, Shawn, Glen and Peg at the Graduate school.
I am extremely grateful to my network of research mentors and colleagues around the world who have taught me so much, helped to facilitate my research, and provided great company, conversation and encouragement along the way. Thank you to my teachers and friends made at SEASSI language program in Madison, Wisconsin. Abundant thanks to the faculty members, staff, and PhD students in Peace Building program at Payap University, especially Aj. Tony for first encouraging me to come to Chiang Mai and being a constant source of support and lively conversation. Tremendous thanks also to all those at Chiang Mai University’s RCSD program who provided me with a dynamic research community during my fieldwork and made me feel at home. Special thanks to Aj. Shirley for extremely generous hospitality and mentorship, and to Aj. Chayan and Aj. Lee for excellent research guidance and interest in my work. Many thanks to Ms. Chanida and all the administrative staff at RCSD for making my research possible through your tremendous support with visa and research paperwork. Thank you to Len Htet for your excellent work back-translating interview, for Karen lessons, and for thought-provoking conversations.

Special thanks to my family in Chiang Mai: Sarah and Michael. Getting to intersect and share our time together in Thailand was one of the highlights of my fieldwork.

I am deeply grateful to the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN). It has been an honor to get to collaborate and to learn from the immensely important work that everyone at KESAN does. Thank you to my researcher friends who kept me sane and supported throughout the challenges of fieldwork. To Shona Loong, Mollie Pepper, Kimberly Roberts, Charlie Hill, Hilary Faxon, Thomas Cole, Andrew Paul, Jared Naimark, Hayso Thako, William, and Alwyn, thank you! I am tremendously grateful and indebted to KKBBSC school and all the teachers and students there for welcoming me and for deeply shaping my research and my life.
Thank you especially to Wado, Alwyn (again), Nina, Mahle, and Winsome. My deepest gratitude to Htee Lah, for the enormous role you played in helping me carry out this research, in shaping my understanding of life on the border, and most of all for your friendship and shared love of plants and gardens.

Thank you to all those who provided feedback on my research at conferences and workshops including the participants of the SOAS-Oxford New Directions in Myanmar Research Graduate Workshop, the Cornell Southeast Asian Studies Graduate Conference, the EUROSEAS, and panel participants and attendees at AAA meetings 2017 and 2019, among other meetings.

To my advisor, committee members and mentors: thank you beyond measure for helping me learn and grow professionally and personally. Thank you to Virginia Nazarea for nurturing and shaping my curiosity about gardens from early on. Thank you to my amazing committee members, Ann Gold, Shannon Novak, Christina Fink, and Mona Bhan for being there for me every step of the way: for believing in me and pushing me to do my best. It is with great fondness that I remember John Burdick and celebrate all the ways he encouraged me as a young scholar. We are all so grateful for the influence you had on our lives, John, and for your kindness. Immense thanks to Azra Hromadzic, for being the most wonderful advisor anyone could ask for. You embody so much of what I aspire to be as a scholar and a person.

Finally, infinite love and gratitude to my family and loved ones who make my life full and who made this work possible. You have been an integral part of this journey. Thank you Mom, Dad and John for inspiring this work in countless ways, for helping me think through ideas, for reading drafts—and for supporting me and encouraging me through the hardest parts.
am grateful every day to have you as my family. Thank you to Taro, for grounding me, putting up with me throughout dissertation writing, and for bringing so much joy to my life.
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Vascular Roots

What is it to cultivate
A heart of humanity
Compassion baked from clay
And salt tears?

I want to water
The seedlings of ordinary
Sorrow and make them
Burst

Into snapdragons
Of irreverent hues
I want to let sink
Further and further

Into the soil
This bent and weathered
Body whose limbs
Are sometimes too tired
To carry even my own
Weight, and others
So light they are in danger
Of floating away

I want to expunge
The toxic fragments of
Fear inscribed in the muscles
That hug my spine

I wish that by simply
Having my feet planted
Firmly on the earth
I could know
My strength-through-connection
And in that space, rest
Beh Chi Daw

Across continents

I find you, friend

Growing small

In a garden you led me to
Prelude

“What is it to inhabit a world? How does one make the world one’s own? How does one account for the appearance of the subject? What is it to lose one’s world? What is the relation between possibility and actuality or between actuality and eventuality, as one tries to find a medium to portray the relation between the critical events that shaped large historical questions and everyday life?” - Veena Das

When I first encountered and became involved in the gardens of Karen refugees in my home state of Georgia (U.S.) and later in New York, I sensed that they were a world-making space. I sensed their world-making nature firsthand, as I felt and understood how these seemingly unassuming gardens reconnected Karen gardeners with the landscape of their homeland of Kawthoolie (bordered by Thailand and Myanmar), which my Karen friends were forced to flee because of war. These gardens facilitated affective connections (Gagnon 2021) with the homeland left behind through the materiality of biodiversity and the embodied motions and social relationships the diverse plant species enliven. These gardens were powerful, if unassuming, spaces for my Karen friends—namely Moo Paw, San Nie and their families—as well as for me and others who came into contact with them. This power stemmed in part from the garden’s capacity to reopen spaces of connection with the lives of plants even within asphalt-covered “blasted landscapes” (Tsing 2014) of late capitalism. These gardens allowed us to take an active role in the food system, counteracting, in small but important ways, the alienation from our food caused by plantation ecologies (Davis et. al 2019; Haraway and Tsing 2019). This alienation affected Moo Paw and San Nie’s lives in very different ways than it did my own life. Nonetheless, our senses of alienation were connected in part. Similarly, our efforts towards repairing our relationships with plants and with the world around us (Kimmerer 2013) were, and still are, interwoven.
In addition to creating cohesion in the lives of Karen refugees, these diasporic gardens present creative and forward-looking possibilities for ecology and Indigenous sovereignty in an ecologically harmed word. I consider Karen diasporic gardens to be “forward-looking” because they point to material and imaginative forms of sovereignty already being grown beyond the narrow and often failing frame of the Westphalian nation-state. The source of such possibility lies in the capacity of gardens as a form of trans-situ conservation (Nazarea 2005; Nazare et al. 2013) to create interconnected pockets of food sovereignty and biocultural repair for members of the Karen diaspora. In this vein, I suggest that Karen diasporic gardens are cross-species collaborations for repair that refuse, overflow, circumvent or defy the state and sovereignty in its traditional sense. Additionally, in this dissertation I illustrate how the politics of refusal (Simpson 2014) can works towards repair. Inspired by the world-making acts (see Loong 2020) of my Karen friends and interlocutors, in this dissertation I take up Lisa Stevenson’s call to explore, “un-stately, unseemly, un-fixative” (2020, 7) ways of looking.

At the same time, such acts of gardening and foraging, practiced within post-industrial landscapes, for example, call into question the broken understanding of ecological conservation in the U.S. and other nations of third-country resettlement. Many Karen refugees resettled in countries across the world make creative use of backyards, abandoned lots, high-rise balconies, highway shoulders, urban canals, forests, and lakes as sources of food. These are tenacious and inventive means of accessing food and creating moments of joy by cultivating, foraging, hunting, and fishing wherever possible and with whatever is available. Such quotidian forms of building relationships with other species—which could also be called agroecology—stand out against hegemonic conservation narratives in the U.S. that are dogmatic about “invasive” species in ways that sometimes mirrors xenophobic rhetoric. A conservation approach to ecology is also
harmful because it seeks to preserve nature, distinct from humans, as a pristine wilderness “out there” (Cronon 1996). It disconnects the concept of “nature” from human needs and economies (Roelvink, St. Martin and Gibson-Graham 2015), and thus obscures the place of humans within multi-species ecologies and diverse ontologies. Such a view of conservation renders places of human habitation ecologically expendable. In the face of this pervasive necropolitical paradigm, Karen Indigenous diasporic gardens—grown in the cracked-up pavement of parking lots in post-industrial urban U.S. cities, as well as in the backyards and fields of impoverished and depopulated small towns—offered a healing vision of one possible path forward in a damaged world made of many worlds (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018).

Yet, when these vibrant gardens eventually led me to the Thai-Myanmar border, to gardens inside Mae La refugee camp, what I found there baffled me. During my dissertation fieldwork and, subsequently, while untangling my experiences there through the process of writing this dissertation, I doggedly searched for the missing physical seeds that I had been told by the narratives of NGOs and those who had worked in the camp many years ago would be there. According to these narratives, Karen refugees in Mae La were continuing their gardening and farming practices from Kawthoolei to the extent possible and were saving Indigenous seeds from home. This was, as the NGOs framed it, part of “livelihoods” training programs aimed at preparing refugees for their impending return to Karen State, in Myanmar government-controlled areas. Yet, despite my best efforts, I kept coming up short in my search for these seeds that were purportedly being saved in the camp. In addition, among the lucky few who had a space to garden in the camp, many told me the agriculture they practiced did not closely resemble that of their home villages.
Moreover, in all my interviews and informal conversations with friends and interlocutors in the camp, I heard very little willingness or feasible reality of people permanently returning to the Karen State soon, as the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were pushing for. Further compounding this situation, during my fieldwork the peace process unfolding from the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement stalled. The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was a multilateral ceasefire agreement signed in 2015 by several ethnic armed organizations including the KNU, along with the Tatmadaw and President Thein Sein. However, due to the Tatmadaw’s recurrent violations on the NCA, the shaky peace had grown increasingly strained. In the fall of 2018 the peace process between the KNLA and Tatmadaw stalled. This occurred as fighting increased in Karen-controlled Mutraw (Hpapun) District over the Tatmadaw’s construction of a road large enough to allow heavy artillery to reach the Mutraw District Seat.

In this context, repatriation to Myanmar as a durable solution to the over 35-year-long protracted refugee situation on the Thai-Myanmar border seemed unlikely in the near future. As my friend, Mimi, a leader in the camp, told me one day in her soft-spoken but definitive way, “actually, if it was safe to go back, they would already be there,” referring to those who remained in the camp. However, as time wore on and funding to the camp was further cut to the point of being unlivable¹, what seemed more likely to me than repatriation was that many of the camp residents would flow out of the camp and become undocumented migrant laborers within the Mae Sot special economic zone in Thailand, or on the surrounding monocrop plantations located

¹ This is in the absence of a path for permanent legal settlement in Thailand, or third country resettlement, for those who remain in the camp.
not far down the highway, past where the camp’s razor wire fencing ended. Indeed, this was something many were already doing.²

As the reality of this dire situation sank in for me, with it came the realization that what I was searching for in the camp gardens was not so much the physical seeds of plants, although those matter. Rather, I was searching for the seeds of the political: for seeds and gardens that had the potential to make other worlds possible (Roelvink, St. Martin and Gibson-Graham 2015) by facilitating food sovereignty and enacting Karen relational ontologies even in exile. Karen relational ontologies understand humans and non-human species as kin and their fates as intertwined (KESAN 2020; Paul et al 2021). In the camp I was seeking to uncover gardens that created pockets of possibility. However, I had not fully contended with the power of the state of exception in the camp (Agamben 1998). I was looking for, and in part expecting to find, such gardens because I had encountered them even amidst the dire landscapes of capitalist ruins in places of refugee resettlement. Later, I also found them within a conflict-affected area in the Salween Peace Park. However, what I found in the camp was different.

What I found there was a space in which the incredible biocultural diversity and complexity of Karen mixed agricultural, agroforestry and foraging, fishing, and hunting practices were being whittled down to the radical simplification of agriculture as defined by capitalist logics. This was despite efforts by Karen refugees and NGOs to preserve connections to a rich pantheon of diverse species and complex mixed agricultural practices in the camp. Yet, in the absence of citizenship and rights, without freedom of movement and lacking sufficient land on

² A great many of those who remain in Mae La camp after the majority of third country resettlement programs have ended are stateless (lacking Myanmar citizenship) and many of them do not even have official UNHCR refugee status, due to Thailand putting an end to the registration process in 2005. This makes them especially vulnerable to labor and human rights abuses when they go out to labor as undocumented workers in the Mae Sot SEZ in Thailand.
which to grow food or forage (and as aid was steadily cut), camp residents had few options but to prepare themselves to flow out of the camp and become undocumented laborers on the industrial monocrop plantations surrounding Mae La. In the broadest sense, what I saw playing out in the camp, beneath a verdant exterior of garden plots, was an astonishing transition from the complexity and biodiversity of Karen mixed agroforestry and foraging traditions to the necropolitics of plantation ecologies.

This largescale picture of what is happening to seedsaving practices and agricultural memory in the camp is deeply disheartening. Still, when I focus on the intimate interactions I had with people in the camp, many of whom I became close to as a friend or teacher, the view shifts. Sociologist of Black freedom farms, Monica White notes that in the context of ecological harm and dispossession “when we look at the forest we see loss. But when we look at the leaves we see resistance. And we are really rooting for the leaves” (White 2020). This resonates deeply with what I found in my research in the camp and beyond. Despite the largescale picture of alienation and disconnection from Karen homelands, in the personal narratives of Karen young people especially, I found a strong desire to reconnect with landscapes of home and agroecological traditions. Moving beyond abstract desire, these young people also elaborated to me in detail their plans to make these reconnections a reality.

I also came to understand my students’ savvy intuition as national and ontological “border crossers” that defied any attempt at simply classifying their lives as either being “hopeful” or “hopeless.” These young people were oriented towards a future populated by highly creative means of constituting Karen sovereignty. This desire for self-determination, or “the freedom to decide our own life,” as many of my interlocutors put it, characterizes the pockets of possibility within Karen transnational networks. The narrated visions of the future that my young
friends shared with me point to other worlds that are possible. However, rather than representing prefigurative politics in the way that Karen diasporic gardens do, these other worlds, for the time being, live largely in the stories and memories of home that students recounted to me and each other (see Scott 1985). They also reside in the memory-laden tastes and sharing of cherished foods sent to the students by their families back in their villages, and in students’ narrated visions of their futures. These imagined futures diverge sharply from the one in which precarity and exploitative regimes of plantation ecologies and neoliberal economies prevail. However, the fight for these futures otherwise conceived will be bitter. The outcome of these students’ visioning, and the struggle it may conjure, is far from certain.

Furthermore, during my time doing research and teaching within the territory of the Salween Peace Park in the Karen homeland of Kawthoolei, I found tense and tenuous attempts at resettling a former war zone with the goal of realizing a vision for environmental protection and self-determination. Like my experience within Karen diasporic gardens, I understand the Salween Peace Park as a transnationally constructed, fraught “pocket of possibility.” This fertile pocket of possibility—which I define as a “refugium” (Chapter 6)—is situated within a conflict-affected landscape and complexly connected to Karen diasporic communities and gardens globally. This space of biocultural refuge and its interconnection with Karen exilic gardens, I believe, points to the possibility of a Karen diasporic sovereignty. By this I mean that, at this very moment Karen people across the world are re-growing their home landscapes and connections to biocultural memory in exile. In these memory landscapes, seeds and plants serve as portable alters of home. Through diasporic gardening practices facilitated by transnational networks that span places of resettlement, the camp, and Kawthoolei, Karen communities are continuing traditional agricultural practices, including saving seeds from home. This becomes
one means of reconstituting “in between” forms of sovereignty (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019) in exile. All the while, these actions are continually oriented towards and connected to physical landscapes of home.

Ultimately, I found that seed saving and gardening are compelling means of worldmaking and sovereign imagining in the absence of an internationally recognized national homeland. Such affective engagements with the lives of plants-tied-to-home have the capacity to weave Indigenous sovereignty within the global Karen diaspora, as well as in Karen homelands encompassed by the visionary project of the Salween Peace Park. The potentiality of gardening and seed saving comes from their combined power to reconstitute food sovereignty and to continue Karen relational ontologies that enfold humans and more-than-humans in the wake of war and the social and ecological harms caused by late capitalism. However, as my time in the camp showed me, gardens can only hold the seed of world-making power when they are allowed to be more than a means of basic survival. To achieve this more-ness, the people who grow these gardens must be recognized as full members of humanity, with all the rights that follow. Within the camp, where the space of exception becomes perpetual, gardens become a verdant guise. Gardens in the camp naturalize peoples’ exclusion from humanity.

In this dissertation I write against this kind of obfuscation. Rather than focusing on “hopeful” gardens that keep refugee bodies and spirits just alive, I argue that gardens can only really matter when they are allowed to be what Karen gardeners seek for them to be: a means of crafting a dignified life in relationship with more-than-human beings. Inspired by my Karen interlocutors, I define and understand sovereignty as a means of forging a life with dignity, a life that Karen people themselves can “decide.” Within the in-betweenness and for-nowness of sovereignty, Kawthoolei, the imagined free Karen homeland, exists in the day-to-day lives of
many Karen refugees primarily as a rich and interconnected network enfolding people and plants as more-than-human traveling companions. Yet, this diasporic sovereignty is always oriented toward a political imagination that is the antithesis of the ceding of sovereignty. Instead, the daunting reality of the territorial struggle for a free Karen homeland has, out of necessity, given birth to immensely creative means of enacting forms of sovereignty in the present.

This creativity is witnessed especially in two imperfect contexts: in the visionary project of the Salween Peace Park and in the intricate transnational networks of gardening and seed saving in the Karen diaspora. These spaces of biocultural persistence and thriving draw on a politics of refusal (Simpson 2014, 2017) as well as the perennial power of sensory politics to facilitate the rhizomatic, always grounded, seeding of Karen sovereignty globally. Far from negating the desire for territorial sovereignty in the Karen homeland of Kawthoolei, these projects are fundamentally oriented towards, and conceived in connection to, the tangible landscapes of home. In the end, I came to realize that the “missing seeds” I was looking for in the camp gardens were not primarily the physical seeds themselves. Rather, they were the seeds of political: the world-making seeds.
Introduction

Charged Materiality and The Open Wound of Dispossession

- “All our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming and severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources...these are all different facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle.” -Sylvia Wynter

- “You can’t say you are sovereign if you can’t feed yourself.” -Winona LaDuke

- “Radical hope...means thinking and hoping beyond the irredeemable state.” -Kim TallBear

Introduction: Agricultural Forgetting

In this dissertation I explore what I call “agricultural forgetting” and how it occurs for Karen refugees in the context of the camp. Agricultural forgetting, I suggest, is the process by which linkages between people and plants are broken generationally. Such forgetting occurs in especially sudden and forceful ways in the refugee camp. This is in part because the camp, as a space of exception, ushers in new more-than-human social arrangements. Agricultural forgetting is deeply connected with Indigenous sovereignty, which is rooted in food and seed sovereignty as well as relational ontologies. Considering relationships between people and plants in the context of forced migration and exile provides a unique vantage from which to understand Indigenous sovereignty across borders. It also contributes to provincializing (Bonilla 2017) and ultimately moving beyond the concept of Westphalian, or territorial, sovereignty that has historically helped to produce and sustain understandings of humanity as overdetermined by (European middleclass) “Man” (Wynter 2003). This overdetermination, as manifested in the nation-state, has resulted in the exclusion of vast swaths of people from the category of the human.
In contrast to agricultural forgetting, human relationships with plants can constitute important sites of intergenerational memory and the passing-on of biocultural traditions (Barthel et al. 2013; Nazarea, Rhodes and Swann 2013). Such passing on can occur by transmitting skills and knowledges, taste, nostalgia, myth, and symbolism along with the genetic diversity encapsulated in seeds. However, I do not view plants and seeds simply as static repositories of biological and collective memory. Instead, in this dissertation, I investigate the power of plant-human relationships—including engagements with the vibrant materiality (Bennett 2010) of plants and their sensory dimensions (Sutton 2010). In doing so, I articulate what sovereignty feels like through processes and practices that enfold humans and non-humans. Alongside unprecedented human forced migration in the world today, global climate change and large-scale habitat destruction, driven by the same forces of late capitalism and colonialism (Wynter 2003), are disrupting ecosystems and causing non-human species to move around (Stoetzer 2018) at rates not seen since the dawn of the Holocene (Tsing et al. 2017; Hartigan 2021).

I believe that this research is especially salient in a world where forces of late capitalism (Moore 2017; Tsing et al. 2017) are rapidly destroying habitats and displacing people form their lands, livelihoods, and relationships to place and other species (see Nazarea and Gagnon 2021). As of mid-2020, the UNHCR estimates that the number of people forcibly displaced globally has surpassed 80 million. Of those 80 million, 26.3 million are refugees. Half of those refugees are children under the age of 18 (UNHCR 2020). In this global context, where people are increasingly on the move due to displacement caused by armed conflict, climate change, and extreme economic inequality, vast swaths of people, especially those who have been displaced and who lack citizenship and thus “the right to have rights” (Arendt 1951) are in danger of slipping out of the category of the human all together.
This has been described variously as the emergence of the “global precariat” (Standing 2011), “expulsions” (Sassen 2014), “militarized global apartheid” (Besteman 2020), and more sweeping and foundationally—naming the forces of coloniality and exclusion that led to this present moment—as “the overrepresentation of Man” (Wynter 2003). Such large-scale dispossession, and exclusions of entire groups of people from the realm of humanity often takes the form of “the camp” (Agamben 1998)—represented in its various forms including prisons, refugee camps, and special economic zones. Two foundational critical theorists of state sovereignty and modern refugeehood are Hannah Arendt and Georgia Agamben. Arendt in the early 1950s began theorizing the relationship between the modern nation-state, totalitarianism, and the state of exception: in which individuals and groups are excluded from the right to life in the political community. Expanding upon Arendt’s famous statement that “citizenship is the right to have rights” (Arendt 1973, 297), Agamben shows how modern nation-states render certain individuals killable by collapsing the previously distinct realm of *zoe* (bare life) with *bios* (political life). According to Agamben, when citizenship, the right to political life, is retracted, so too is the right to basic human existence (Agamben 1998).

I do not agree with Agamben’s theory of the camp exactly, in that he sees the camp as totalizing. In contrast, as I document in this dissertation, I have seen firsthand that people’s agency is still at play even within such extreme circumstances. Nonetheless, I find Agamben’s theorization useful to the extent that it allows us to consider the camp as “the space that is opened when the state of exception becomes the rule” (Agamben 1998, Section 7). As such, the camp can be understood as the recurrent space of sovereign exception, foundational to the present world order (Besteman 2016, 29), the existence of which allows the perception of the sovereign nation-state to persist.
At the same time, non-human species are also increasingly under threat and lacking stable homes. Climate change and habitat destruction is forcing species to move around at never-before-seen rates, and to disappear altogether. Meanwhile, the ascendency of industrial agriculture and hybrid seeds is rapidly causing heirloom and traditional varieties, and whole species, to disappear from farmers’ fields. Widespread deforestation for development worldwide means less forests in which to forage, carry out agroforestry, hunt, fish, trap, and otherwise engage with diverse wild species. The world’s biodiversity—the other species on which human life depends and is enmeshed with—has already been greatly reduced. Many species are further in danger of disappearing.

This includes agrobiodiversity that comprises the world’s food system (Baird 2021; Figueroa-Helland et al 2018; Nazarea, Rhodes and Swann 2013; Veteto and Skarbo 2009). “In the twentieth century the proliferation of industrial monocultures resulted in the loss of 75 percent of world food crop biodiversity; currently just twelve crops supply 80 percent of global plant-based dietary energy…This is alarming because high (agro)biodiversity strengthens agricultural and ecological resilience to pests, climate change, and protects farmers from food market fluctuations” (Figueroa-Helland et al. 2018, 177). In addition, industrial agriculture accounts for between one fifth and possibly as high as half of all greenhouse gas emissions globally. As such, industrial, monocrop agriculture is a major driver of climate change as well as a source of dispossession and loss of sustainable livelihoods. Meanwhile, the rise of hybrid, patented seed represents the enclosure of the commons of life itself. This is because plant biodiversity, the very basis of our food system, has increasingly become the intellectual property of corporations, and sold as a commodity (see Kloppenburg 2010, 2014)
Ian Baird states that “while conservation biologists have given wild animals and plants considerable attention, there is growing recognition that the diversity of domesticated plants and animals is also critically important for biodiversity conservation, food security, climate change adaptation, and food sovereignty” (Baird 2021, 1). He further notes:

Agrobiodiversity has already suffered considerable losses around the world for various reasons, especially as a result of the proliferation of large-scale commercialized and commodified agriculture, and the expansion of the use of small numbers of genetically modified… and commercially produced seed varieties… We are still losing agrobiodiversity, even though it provides more genetic possibilities for adapting to change, and more opportunities for farmers to shift their practices to adapt to changing circumstances. Despite the above concerns, only limited research has been done specifically regarding the links between agrobiodiversity loss and violent armed conflict… Even less has been conducted that links armed conflict, migration, citizenship, and agrobiodiversity loss (Baird 2021, 1).

Baird notes the dimensions of citizenship and migration here. His research on biodiversity loss among Lao refugees in Thailand demonstrates that lack of citizenship results in lack of land and space for planting and limited freedom of movement as these refugees and stateless persons live constrained lives below the radar of state security. These factors all contributed, as Baird found, to the loss of agricultural species belonging to this community. In the process of carrying out my research in a proximate geographic and political context I ran up against power and politics as embodied in different forms of sovereignty and exception.

Specifically, Karen communities in the Salween Peace Park claim to have food sovereignty, seed sovereignty (KESAN 2020) and even political sovereignty. However, within this conflict-affected, autonomous area, they do not possess sovereignty in the Westphalian sense. In other words, they do not possess an internationally recognized nation-state. Meanwhile, a large percentage of Karen refugees in Thailand are stateless persons and thus do not possess rights. Living within securitized refugee camps, they lack freedom of movement, the right to
own property, and the right to work legally and with dignity. Those who manage to sneak out of
the camp and join other populations of Burmese migrant works in the Mae Sot Special Economic
Zone (SEZ) also live in a state of exception. This is because the SEZ is a space where the usual
laws of Thailand do not apply. In carrying out my research I realized that I needed to understand
sovereignty to comprehend what was happening with the human-plant relationships I was
following across these complex geographies. As such, alternative conceptualization of
sovereignty gradually became central to my research.

In a similar light, Figueroa-Helland, Thomas, and Aguilera, writing holistically on the
decolonization of food systems, observe that:

the food crisis is part of a global convergence of crisis, examined increasingly as a world-
system, planetary, and/or Anthropocene “crisis of civilization” …These crises include
global food, water, environment/climate, economic inequality/financial instability,
energy/mineral/resource depletion, livelihood/health, displaced
populations/migrant/refugee and (in)security crises (Figueroa-Helland, Thomas and
Aguilera 2018, 174).

In the face of these intersecting crisis, the authors argue that Indigenous revitalization and
counter-hegemonic food movements and organizations advance alternatives “to make other
futures possible” (174). Therefore, the making of other worlds and other futures, beyond the
destructive forces of late capitalism and colonialism, is intimately connected with the
(re)creation of alternative food systems. Answering the above calls to investigate these
interwoven global crises in relation to one another, this dissertation is an examination of
sovereignty uniquely explored through the lens of micro-level relationships between people and
plants in the context of armed conflict, forced migration and exile.

I came to the approach of examining sovereignty through the lens of human-plant
relationship by way of an unexpected research journey. Initially, I set out to understand what was
happening with Karen human-plant relationships and agricultural memory in the context of
armed conflict, forced migration and exile. In the process of carrying out this research across three complex geographies—each showing the limitations of territorial sovereignty in a unique way—I had to grapple with the gaps and exceptions within the framework of the nation-state. I discovered that relationships between people and plants on-the-move provides a unique vantage for investigating sovereignty grounded in embodied experiences of the everyday.

These themes intersect closely with existing conversations about seed sovereignty and food sovereignty. However, I felt that the political ramifications of peoples’ relationships with plants and seeds on-the-move, tied to food, sustainable livelihoods, biodiversity conservation, home, and Indigenous relational ontologies, exceeded the scope of most academic conversations about food and seed sovereignty. Important exceptions include the visions put forth by La Via Campesina (the international peasants’ rights movement) and the scholars and activists engaged in revitalizing Indigenous seed and food sovereignty (see Mihesuah and Hoover 2019; White 2018). The transformational visions of these two movements have greatly influenced my thinking. I seek to contribute to these projects by exploring what Indigenous seed, food, and political sovereignty might look like and feel like in the context of armed conflict, forced migration, and exile. In addition, I would like to recognize and honor the important work of the Indigenous activist organization Seeding Sovereignty, with which this dissertation shares a name. I am continually inspired by their transformative vision of Indigenous sovereignty and understand this dissertation as indebted to, and existing in dialogue with, that vision.

The rest of my Introduction is organized as follows: first I explore four main bodies of literature that my work builds on. The four bodies of literature are: 1) critical refugee studies, 2) plants, food, and sensory politics 3) multi-species ethnography and Indigenous relational ontologies and 4) expanded conceptualizations of sovereignty and Indigenous sovereignty. Then
I discuss my approach to the creative media employed in this dissertation and how they are connected to my theoretic and political orientations as a scholar. Finally, I provide a brief outline of the chapters in this dissertation.

Theoretical Inspirations

*Critical Refugee Studies*

- “Refugees appear to have become a permanent part of the contemporary global landscape, the state of exception has become normal...They are at the heart of the definition of the world order and the debates it raises.” -Catherine Besteman

- “To challenge this “good refugee” narrative, we need to imbue the term “refugee” with social and political critiques—this is, to conceptualize “the refugee” not as an object of investigation, but rather as a paradigm “whose function [is] to establish a make intelligible a wider set of problems.”” -Yen Le Espiritu

The critical refugee studies literature “makes the familiar strange”, as the axiom goes. It does so by questioning accepted and naturalized categories, including the very term “refugee”, the way the figure of the resettled refugees is deployed in nationalistic discourse, and the existence of refugee camps as the supposed solution to forced migration across international borders. I had previously accepted the existence of the refugee camp as a foregone conclusion. However, my six months spent living in Mae La refugee camp, in combination with what I learned from the work of Critical Refugee Studies Collective scholars, and other scholars interrogating refugeehood and encampment through a critical lens, lead me to see the institution of the camp as strange and unsettling. These scholars theorize refugeehood and encampment as fundamentally interlinked with war and other forms of global capitalist and imperialist violence (Besteman 2016, 2020; Dunn 2017; Espiritu 2006). Yen Le Espiritu, the founder of Critical Refugee Studies, sums up a powerful contribution of this literature when she states:
Another way to deploy “refugee” to “make intelligible a wider set of problems” is to consider how the refugee, who inhabits a condition of statelessness, “radically calls into question the established principles of the nation-state. As Giorgio Agamben explains, refugees disturb the organization of the modern nation-state because their condition of statelessness is fundamentally opposed to the notion of rooted citizens, thus calling into question the “original fiction of modern sovereignty (Espiritu 2006, 422).

Indeed, Giorgio Agamben, and Hannah Arendt before him, both point out the inherent contradiction in contemporary human rights discourse: that recognition of fundamental rights based on the principle of a universal humanity are contingent on being recognized as a member of a political community. Lissa Malkki writes of Arendt, “she insisted on the necessity of examining displacement through the prism of often xenophobic national states, and she explicitly traced the political and symbolic logics that had the effect of pathologizing and even criminalizing refugees” (Malkki 1995b). This is related to Agamben’s “state of exception”, including the most extreme cases, when whole groups of people are forcibly stripped of their rights (Agamben 1998). Refugees are often considered to be a category of people that most strikingly exemplifies the state of exception. In their very existence as stateless persons, they make visible the inherent contradictions of the nation-state and the shortcomings of the lofty principles proclaimed by universal human rights discourse (Agamben 1998; Arendt 1973; Malkki 1995a).

Recent decades have witnessed an efflorescence of scholarship on humanitarianism and the international concept of human rights, building upon the works of Arendt and Agamben. Liisa Malkki and James Ferguson are two anthropologist who have paved the way in this regard. Though not specifically addressing human rights, Ferguson (1994) illustrates the ways in which humanitarian structures more generally, interlinked with international NGOs, straddle the humanitarian/development line by enacting what he calls the “development discourse fantasy”. His argument, drawing on Foucault, is that the net effect of development discourse and action is
to de-politicize questions of resource allocation and to strengthen bureaucratic power, thus extending the hand of the state or transnational forces of governmentality where it was not before.

In the context of his fieldsite Lesotho, Ferguson illustrates how development discourse severs the object of development from its historical and geographic context. This erasure of history, politics and complexity leads to universalizing narratives of humanitarianism and development operations that belie the vast differences in how these practices unfold and take on meaning in different places (see also Bornstein 2011; Debraix 1998; Malkki 2015; Redfield and Bornstein 2011). This is similar to the tendency, which scholars have critiqued, to speak of the refugee experience as if it were unitary, despite the myriad conditions of forced displacement and life in refugee camps in different parts of the world (Malkki 1995b). What is more, there is a visible tendency—especially on the part of international humanitarian bodies and sponsoring nation-states—to paint the refugee as a stand-in for all humanity (Malkki 1995a). As Malkki has pointed out, female refugees with young children are often depicted in portraits for promotional materials as the Madonna and Christ child. Through such representations, real, complex individuals with faults, allegiances, and desires like any of us are transformed into exemplars of vulnerable and apolitical “bare” humanity (Malkki 1995b; Ticktin 2011).

More recently Ticktin has written on the history and ethics of international humanitarianism and the politics of refugee resettlement (Ticktin 2011). She explores how migration is actually limited and mediated through highly selective acceptance of small numbers of refugees, where emphasis is placed on extreme conditions of helplessness, vulnerability and especially physical and psychological frailness, and thus exceptionalism. This practice frames the granting of entrance to the country as largess: a heaping of generosity upon recipients. In this
same vein Parek writes, in 2013, that while “there are 72 million people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes and have no effective citizenship...most states do not acknowledge an obligation to admit people who have nowhere else to live; and when they do accept refugees, it is considered an ex gratia policy, arising out of generosity, rather than the fulfillment of a moral or legal norm” (Parek 2013, 646). The flip side of this dramatic performance of selective generosity on the part of states is the way this discourse and practice serves to construct tropes of otherness and feelings of xenophobia by stringently blocking the vast amount of people seeking asylum (Appadurai 2006; Feldmant and Ticktin 2010; Ticktin 2011). Meanwhile the “privileges” granted to those select few who are admitted—heavily marked by their otherness through this process—may come to be seen as grounds for their resentment and even intense hatred by members of the national majority who feel they have somehow been left behind or that their majority status is being threatened (Appadurai 2006; Ignatieff 2017; Ticktin 2011). These approaches to studying humanitarianism and dispossession in anthropology have been strongly influenced by the watershed critiques put forward by postcolonial studies, feminism, and Indigenous studies. These disciplines have made visible the intertwined roles of colonialism and capitalism in enacting dispossession, subjugation, and suffering on a global scale. These projects have been achieved largely through the mechanisms of racism, sexism, and xenophobia.

In the wake of my time in Mae La refugee camp, I wondered: how was it that it had become so widely accepted that a “solution” to displacement caused by armed conflict and dispossession was the warehousing of people in open-air prisons, often without freedom of movement or rights, across decades and generations? The critical refugee studies literature was essential to my coming to understand the refugee camp and experiences of refugeehood as fundamentally linked to war, colonialism, and other forms of structural violence and
dispossession. As such, the work of these scholars has deeply shaped the arguments I make in this dissertation. I contribute to this literature by bringing plant-human relationships into this conversation and by extension, agriculture, and environment as they emerge within a framework that critically interrogates the securitization and dehumanization of people who have been forced to flee from their homes. Furthermore, I am interested in how the institution of the camp contributes to the permanent dispossession of forcibly displaced persons. What I saw playing out in Mae La camp over the course of my research was a context in which, despite the well-intoned efforts of NGOs, in the confined and tightly regulated space of the camp it became all but impossible for camp residents to carry on the subsistence livelihood practices of their homes. As such, they were unable to practice and pass on the skills and knowledges that has allowed Indigenous Karen communities to maintain self-sufficiency and Indigenous sovereignty in their rural homelands.

In this dissertation I argue that warehousing people in camps for decades and generations where they are unable to engage in subsistence livelihoods or nurture plant biodiversity, produces what I call “agricultural forgetting” that severs sovereign agency. I understand agricultural forgetting as the breaking of relationships between people and plants that unfolds across generations. In addition, I suggest that the camp shifts refugees to hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and individualized forms of laboring and consumption. These factors, I argue, generate intense and rapid social change away from subsistence-based and sustainable livelihoods. These changes, in turn, facilitate the dispossession of refugees from their lands because they may no longer be able to return home and resume subsistence livelihoods which have historically facilitated Karen Indigenous sovereignty, rooted in seed and food sovereignty (KESAN 2020).
Instead, forcibly displaced people often become incorporated into the global precariat class (Standing 2011). This often benefits the economies of nations hosting refugee camps, as they have a large labor force of flexible and precarious workers. These refugee workers, as informal migrants and often stateless persons, are not afforded the same minimum wage and labor protections as citizens and formal migrants (see Campbell 2018). Following calls by other scholars (see Dunn 2017), I argue that the camp is not a solution for refugees. Rather it is a solution for wealthy nations that seek to keep these populations out, or to benefit from exploiting their precarious and flexible labor. The camp, therefore, as the space of sovereign exception, is not an adequate response to forced migration. Instead, other frameworks for protecting and welcoming refugees must be imagined. The most basic start would be affording forcibly displaced persons the right to work and move freely in their host countries: recognizing that this is not without complications in some places.

**Food, Plants, and Sensory Memory**

In this dissertation, I connect the existing literature on food, plants, and sensory politics with the insights I have gained from my time spent with Karen friends and interlocutors across multiple geographies. I have paid careful attention to the importance of food, plants, memory, and the senses for Karen refugees attempting to re-emplace in the context of displacement and exile. Gaston Gordillo, in his book *Landscapes of Devils*, describes how after conquest by the Argentinian army, large numbers of Western Toba people, an Indigenous group of the Gran Chaco region, went to work as seasonal laborers in the distant sugar plantations (Gordillo 2004). For the Western Toba, serving as migrant labors between two worlds of the bush and the plantation (the former a space of rurality and freedom, and hardship; and the later a place of
wage labor and industrial landscape), wild food from the bush provided a source of strength. Hayden Kantor also writes about this in the context of male migrant workers from Rajasthan, India (Kantor 2021), and David Sutton in the context of migrant works from Kalymnos, in austerity-stricken Greece (Sutton 2021). In each of these contexts certain types of food, especially wild foods, offered not only physical strength and sustenance, but became a means of connecting to home and loved ones while living and working in exile. This is very similar to the ways in which Karen peoples I worked with in Mae La camp and in resettlement locations in the U.S. connected with family and place via food, seeds, and plants from home (Gagnon 2013; Gagnon 2021).

In the U.S., many Karen people, such as those working industrial jobs in Syracuse, New York, will go to great lengths and expense to get Karen “jungle food”, as they describe it, such as herbs, thorn, special types of pickles and even monkey meat. One of the owners of a Karen grocery store in Syracuse where I have been doing fieldwork, has impressed upon me on numerous occasions just how expensive (such as 25 dollars a pound for fresh thorn), and how hard to come by, these things are. Yet, she relayed with a sense of amazement how consistently and ardently ordinary Karen people will make the sacrifices necessary to procure these items, and perhaps use them to produce medicines of home.

Moreover, there is a significant international traffic of seeds that goes on with Karen people in refugee camps in Thailand. Karen people living in the U.S. will often send requests for seeds to family members living in the camps. Individuals living in the U.S. and traveling back will similarly carry with them requests and make it a point to bring back sought-after seeds. This raises the question of whether tasting, smelling and consuming the foods of home serve as similar sources of strength for Karen people, as eating bush food served for the Toba, or eating
food from the village does for Kalymnian and Rajasthani migrant workers in the cities (Gordillo 2004; Kantor 2021; Sutton 2021). What imaginings of ontological “returns” (Nazarea 2021) might be bound up in these sensory engagements?

Jennifer Jordan in her book *Edible Memory*, points out that food memory and taste can be important catalysts in shaping interwoven physical and social milieus. These often brushed-aside factors, she argues, are in fact largely responsible for bringing into being the rooftop gardens that buzz with people and pollinators, and old-time apple orchards that host seed-saver picnics (Jordan 2015). Thus, from Jordan’s perspective, economy and affect are co-constitutive. Indeed, the production and acquisition of food are some of the primary means through which human imagination and desire comes to shape landscapes. Simultaneously, food and landscape come to shape human bodies and cultural imagination through the entanglements of both work and consumption.

As exemplary evidence of the extent to which sensory politics emanates from food itself—extending to the places, practices and even objects associated with such items—Elizabeth Dunn writes of displaced peoples suffering from being given the wrong food. She tells of Georgian refugees refusing to eat the unfamiliar macaroni served at the refugee camp because, “in the context of Georgian cuisine, which is highly elaborate and full of spices, walnuts, pomegranates, fresh vegetables, and meats, macaroni is hardly food at all.” These displaced people “elaborated palpable memories of their orchards and gardens that were often recounted in this desolate refugee camp, along with a deep sense of loss not only of the food but also of the act of making food, even the jars used for canning the bounty of gardens and orchards” ([Dunn 2015] cited in Jordan 2015, 36). These mourned parts of their quotidian world could only be revisited through stories and vivid recollections, and through the taste of honey from ones’ own
bees, and homemade, jam and vodka—rescued from the rubble of siege—for as long as these lasted.

Thus, the materiality of food and plants (variety, style of preparation, etc.), the objects and actions involved in its cultivation, storage, preparation and consumption, and the landscape at large, together form a mimetic assemblage (DeLanda 2016; Novak 2014). Likewise, material presences have the power to ignite or rekindle imagination. As Shannon Novak states, “material objects can indeed act as subjects, influencing others in their presence, while still being materials upon which memories and meanings are inscribed. Understanding such dynamics requires attending to the political and historical contexts within which subjects and objects become assembled or ‘bundled’ (Novak 2014, 478). Similarly, Guntra Aistara writes about tomato seed politics and soviet memory. She illustrates how the materiality of tomato seeds and plants themselves, linked to childhood memories under Communism, revive imaginaries of different social and moral ways of being in present-day Latvia (Aistara 2014).

On the other hand, Jordan, along with Nazarea, Rhoades and Swann, places greater emphasis on the power of taste and remembrance to drive anachronistic acts of holding on and digging in, in support of the preservation of biodiversity as cherished foods. Nazarea and Rhoades describe the seed savers—counter-hegemonic figures—who they have come to known, saying, “even under the serious threat of diminishment… they continue to cultivate a wide array of plants, sustained by recollections regarding the plants’ aesthetic, culinary, and healing qualities, as well as their ritual significance and connection to the past” (Nazarea, Rhodes and Swann 2013). Here we see that it is the numerous favorable attributes of remembered plants that cause a particular varietal to be sought out, cultivated, and shared. Such culturally associated
qualities include the ability to hold up through the winter, being good for grafting, hardy in local soil, good as preserve, of religious symbolism, or having ameliorative properties.

One particularly powerful attribute of food is its ability to form pockets of possibility for the enactment of an alternative reality, not in some far-off utopic future but within the imperfect terrain of the present. As Sutton and colleagues relate in their discussion of food in contemporary protest movements, one of the most interesting features of these movements is that they have not solely been “directed toward a future overthrow of a political/economic order,” but instead, “devoted considerable efforts toward creating alterative spaces and alternative forms of practice in the here and now” (Sutton et al. 2013, 347). The authors, for example, describe acts that range from wearing helmets made of baguettes during protests, to cooperative forms of food sharing. It is significant that creative uses of food as both metaphor and social practice have in large part made it possible for these alternative practices to manifest in the present.

This can be related to the ways migrants create what Nazarea refers to as “out-of-place-senses-of-place” (Nazarea 2005, 109) through gardening and food practices. These grounded practices are not limited to cooking food that takes one back via enveloping flavors and aromas, although this is highly important. Rather, the creation of a miniature “wish landscape” (Nazarea 2005, 42) of home extends to the cultivation of familiar plants, the raising of animals, and practices of foraging within geographies of exile. Like the heirloom seedssavers and gardeners described by Jordan, Nazarea and Rhoades, who wish to manifest landscapes from seemingly bygone times and socialites in the present, refugees and migrants often use food and gardening practices as means of linking yearned-for landscapes of home with their immediate physical surroundings (Jordan 2015; Nazarea, Rhoades and Swann 2013). The phenomenon of immigrants and refugees creating spaces of refuge through food and gardens is often driven by
the necessity and practicalities of getting by. However, it is also motivated by the hunger for familiar forms of esthetic and emotional nourishment. The lengths and expenses to which Karen refugees will go to obtain foods of home corroborate this. In this dissertation, I take the discussion of “wish-landscapes” a step further by suggesting that the (re)creation of home landscapes in exile and the (re)establishment of seed and food sovereignty through complex diasporic networks offers a creative vision of what Indigenous diasporic sovereignty might look like.

From Multi-Species Ethnography to Indigenous Relational Ontologies

“In some Native languages the term for plants translates to “those who take care of us.””
-Robbin Wall Kimmerer

Since the beginning of this dissertation project, I have engaged with what can broadly be called “multispecies ethnography.” This loose title encompasses a diversity of perspectives. What brings these pieces of scholarship together is their concern with ethnographic subjects beyond exclusively human beings (see Haraway 2016; Kirksey 2014; Tsing 2015; Tsing et al. 2017).

Importantly, multispecies ethnography seeks to re-situate human social organization, including the institutions and technologies humans have created, within the web of other organisms and beings in which we are enmeshed. What sets this strand of scholarship apart from previous ethnographies is a focus on more-than-human ethnographic subjects not primarily as containers of human symbolism, but as beings that are part of a polyphonic material world. This more-than-human world must be grappled with beyond its symbolic, epistemological value.

This approach, taken up in various ways by most scholars engaging in multispecies ethnography, is part of the broader intellectual turn known as “new materialism.” Part of the
reason new materialism and multispecies scholarship have become so popular in the past decade is the deepening of intersecting climate and biodiversity crises. These crises have forced an awareness among ethnographers that humans are part of a planet that is comprised of a plurality of lifeforms and phenomena. These other inhabitants and co-creators of our world are, like humans, complex and finite (see Tsing 2015; Tsing et al. 2017). They are entangled with, but not reducible to, human systems of meaning-making. Currently, the institutions of late capitalism and the fantasy of perpetual economic growth, which originated with a particular group of humans in Western Europe, is endangering the continued existence of myriad forms of life on Earth, including humans themselves (Moore 2017; Wynter 2003).

I appreciate much of what the multispecies literature has to offer, and what it has pushed me to do in my own research. This includes attempting to expand the frame of my ethnographic analysis to include plants as well as humans as subjects. However, in addition to the fundamental difficulty of carrying out a multispecies ethnography, I have come to see much of the multispecies literature as limited in three important ways. First, as Zoe Todd (2016) argues, this literature often does not adequately acknowledge the contribution of Indigenous ways of knowing and the work of Indigenous scholars and activists who have long argued for many of the perspectives that the multispecies literature advances. Indigenous peoples have historically been marginalized, partially based on such relational ways of seeing the world, which has been disparagingly characterized as primitive or animistic. It was seen as something to evolve out of (e.g., Tylor 1871). However, when white scholars advance related ideas, and are praised and materially rewarded for our “innovative thinking,” this often occurs without acknowledging the influence of Indigenous ways of knowing.
As a white scholar and as a settler of Turtle Island (otherwise known as North America), I am in danger of falling into these harmful practices. It is for this reason, alongside a deep appreciation for the perspectives shared by Indigenous scholars, that I center the work of Indigenous feminist scholars in this dissertation. The work of these scholars, including Robbin Wall Kimmerer, Audra Simpson, Kim TallBear, and Zoe Todd has profoundly shaped my thinking about relational ontologies and Indigenous sovereignty. This is alongside the insights shared with me by Karen interlocutors, many of whom hold similar relational understandings of the world and approaches to Karen Indigenous sovereignty. I seek to highlight my intellectual indebtedness to these Indigenous scholars and my Karen research collaborators at every turn.

A second major limitation I found with the multispecies literature was in grappling with issues of the state. It is no revelation that nation-states and their laws play a tremendous role in regulating and blocking the flow of humans along with that of their companion species. Yet, much of the multispecies literature glides easily across geographies and presents images of “emerging worlds” without examining what experiences of mobility and immobility feel like from the perspectives of people who do not hold powerful passports or who inhabit socio-economic positions that do not allow them to experience such transnational movements so easily, or even at all. Lack of engagement with the state and sovereignty is an area that I find the multispecies literature lacking, although there are some exceptions (see Hartigan 2017). It is also an area where I see my research helping to expand the conversation.

I have come the find the writings of Indigenous scholars the most useful in understanding more-than-human relationships because these works often delve into the concept of what Arturo Escobar calls the “pluriverse” (2018): that is, a vision of the world as made of many ontological words (see also De La Cadena and Blaser 2018). I believe that scholarship highlighting relational
ontologies and more-than-human caretaking offer some of the most powerful critiques and vibrant alternatives to the destructive forces of capitalism and colonialism. These frameworks allow for multiple ways of being and knowing. This contrasts with much of the multispecies literature, which tends to (re)center western, scientific knowledge even while critiquing or departing from such hegemonic modes of knowledge production. Far from saying that there is no place for western scientific approaches in multispecies ethnographies, I greatly appreciate works such as Kimmerer’s, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) that bridges Indigenous relational ontologies and scientific ways of knowing. In so doing, through beautiful personal narratives, Kimmerer illustrates that we can cohesively inhabit a world made of many worlds. Such a framework also helps scholarship move beyond a singular Enlightenment conceptualization of the world to comprehend plural forms of sovereignty blossoming from diverse traditions.

*Expanded Conceptualizations of Sovereignty and Indigenous Sovereignty*

- “what has it meant to be a human capable of acting politically in and on the world? And how do we bear witness to these enactments? If we agree that sovereignty is best understood as dynamic practice, and that therefore there is no static constellation to which “it” refers, then we must think of it as performed and thus embodied...as constituted both from “below,” as it were, and from “above.”” -Deborah Thomas

- “Their actions, when contextualized, force us to ask how one is to define a citizenship for one’s own people, according to one’s political traditions while operating in the teeth of Empire, in the face of State Aggression,” -Audra Simpson

- “Making Kin is making people into familiars in order to relate. This feels like a creative alternative to nationalist assertions of inherent sovereignty” -Kim TallBear

Sovereignty as a concept has traditionally been limited to territorial understandings of the nation-state. Even when considered more broadly, it has conventionally been approached form a top-down perspective with a focus on politics narrowly defined. Furthermore, even though there is a
critique of the nation-state as universal and omnipresent, there is still near continuous normalization of its form and expectation. However, recent scholarship on Indigenous sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Simpson 2014; Tallbear 2019; Todd 2017) and alternative anthropological understandings of sovereignty (Bonilla 2017; Bryant 2021; Bryant and Hatay 2020; Folch 2016; Kuanui 2017; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Pugliese 2020; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019; Thomas 2019) problematize such top-down perspectives. Scholarship seeking to “unsettle sovereignty” (Bonilla 2017) has seen an efflorescent in recent years. My research builds upon this literature.

Conceptualizations of sovereignty that go beyond the nation-state are especially necessary within the context of ongoing global Indigenous struggles for land, and self-determination. This is particularly the case given the critical nexus of climate/sustainability/environment, armed conflict and forced migration worldwide. In this vein Yarimar Bonilla observes that:

Contemporary writings on sovereignty are steeped in postcolonial, postsocialist, and post-civil rights disillusion, a sharp awareness of the enduring legacies of settler colonialism, a deep distrust of the post-9/11 surveillance state, and a sober engagement with the pressing realities of climate change. As a result, the sovereign turn is marked by a skeptical and disenchanted view of state power and supreme domination—both human and environmental… Indeed, some contend that the contemporary challenges we face, most notably climate change and global pandemics, require a global community of coordinated action rather than a world system of competing sovereigns (Chakrabarty 2009). At the same time, others insist that we must reevaluate our understandings of not just the global system but also of the chain of existence itself, suggesting that the idea of human beings as self-contained, sovereign, and supreme within the natural order must be upended” (Bennett 2010; Agamben 2003; Haraway 2007; Grusin 2015)” (Bonilla 2017).

Due to its multi-species and multi-sited approach, I believe this study offers a perspective that is timely and useful in building upon prior works that “provincialize” (Bonilla 2017) and ultimately move beyond territorial understandings of sovereignty. Bonilla points out that “Anthropologists
have cast an important critical eye on the forms of violence and inequity enacted by modern states in the name of sovereignty. Yet insufficient attention has been given to the sign of sovereignty itself as a category of Western political thought” (2017). I contribute to addressing this deficit by illustrating forms of sovereignty beyond the historically specific, Enlightenment concept of territorial/national sovereignty. I do so by exploring the movement of Indigenous Karen refugees with their seeds, plants, and agricultural practices as they move across landscapes of conflict, displacement, and exile. I conceptualize Karen diasporic gardens as a form of sovereignty, that is nonetheless deeply connected to the physical, material landscapes of Kawthoolie and desires for Karen self-determination.

I ground this theorization of Karen diasporic gardens as a form of sovereignty in sensory, embodied experiences that, as my Karen interlocutors have told me, constitute a good life, or a life worth living. These sensory experiences enfold humans and other species in reciprocal relationships of practice in the everyday. This connects with Deborah Thomas’s assertion that:

Exploring the constitution of the political subject not primarily through nationalism or through state- (and extra-state-) driven processes of subjectification, but through the cultivation of embodied affects that are shaped by the particular temporal conjunctures in which they emerge, enables us to interrogate the ways political affects can transcend the context of their emergence, allowing them to appear and resurface unpredictably. It can thus unbind sovereignty not only from territory, and therefore from the political centrality of independent nation-state, but also from the teleologies of linear, progressive time… Here, sovereignty feels like a kind of self-naming, a responsibility for others to whom we are attached, an embodied practice that counters a history of dispossession, culminating in forms of transcendence—personally, spiritually, and communally…In this affective state, body becomes spirit becomes something more than the sum of its parts, resonating far beyond the domain of arts practice” (Thomas 2019, 5 and 208)

By this definition, I believe that gardens, much like the diasporic dance that Thomas describes, can enact sovereignty through communal, embodied experiences that are deeply tied to, but ultimately transcend, temporality and territorial boundaries. As such, the sensory, embodied
experiences of tending gardens tied to home can “counter a history of dispossession” and culminate in transcendence. However, as I discuss throughout this dissertation, when and how this transcendence can be enacted is still very much related to territorial forms of sovereignty and sovereign exception. This connects with Audra Simpson’s discussion of the relationship and tension between territorial and travelling forms of Indigenous sovereignty. Of her Mohawk interlocutors she says, “their own object was and is territory in a material sense. This encompasses their ‘land’, but also a territory of ideas, of the past, present and future and most vigorously, their membership within the polity itself…All of this effort is made as they travel across various borders and boundaries upon their territories” (Simpson 2017, 20). In addition to attending to sensory and embodied forms of sovereignty that cross or run up against borders and boundaries, here I explore more-than-human relationships as manifestations of sovereignty.

Following Indigenous scholars (TallBear 2019, Todd 2017), I propose understandings of sovereignty that are rooted in more-than-human caretaking relationships, which cross, exceed, and otherwise defy the borders of states. In contrast to the theoretical existence of Westphalian sovereignty, which scholars have noted is more performative than actual, given its punctuation by countless omissions, gaps, and exceptions (see Bonilla 2017; Bryant 2021; Bryant and Hatay 2020; Navaro-Yashin 2012), I employ an understanding of Indigenous sovereignty, grounded in the everyday. Importantly, these everyday forms of sovereignty involve embodied experience and the senses. Thomas (2019) asks us to consider: what does what sovereignty feel like? Following Thomas, I suggest that such everyday and embodied forms of sovereignty are embedded in human and more-than-human relationships.

The three geographies that my research spans (a Karen Indigenous autonomous territory; a refugee camp; and a post-industrial resettlement city) and which I discuss in detail in the
following chapter, are all spaces that acutely highlight the limits and exceptions of territorial sovereignty. As I learned through my fieldwork, territorial sovereignty and the nation-state are so central to conceptions of modern life that when they are absent a chasm of meaning opens. It is difficult to even speak about such spaces because an adequate grammar for political formations beyond the nation-state does not yet exist. The context of my research is different from that of North America in that Bamar communities, unlike white settlers, can also be considered native to the territory that is now Myanmar, along with Karen peoples. Nonetheless, I found that it was often the work of Indigenous scholars writing about struggles for Indigenous sovereignty in the face of ongoing settlement by colonial states of the U.S. and Canada that has productively helped me think through efforts for Karen Indigenous sovereignty in the Salween Peace Park and in the global Karen diaspora. For example, Audra Simpson’s discussion of the politics of refusal in the context of Mohawk assertions of sovereignty resonate strongly with my Karen interlocutors refuse the Myanmar state and enact repair even while moving across borders. Simpson reflects:

“I am interested in the ways in which alternative Indigenous citizenships may move politics away from this panic, from these seductive inducements to perform for the state, and the way they do a different kind of work through a narrative and memory-based process of constructing and affording rights to each other…Membership is a social, historical, and in the case of this study, narrated process that references personal and collective pasts while making itself over parameters and boundaries and all, in a lived present” (Simpson 2014, 159 and 171)

Engaging with the work of Kim TallBear, Zoe Todd, and Audra Simpson in particular, I take up their calls to think with more-than-human caretaking relationships (TallBear 2019) to imagine what Indigenous sovereignty looks like in the 21st Century, and how the politics of refusal (Simpson 2014) is critical to its enactment. I believe this study contributes to the Indigenous sovereignty literature by providing a more global frame of reference. Such a
perspective explores what Indigenous sovereignty or sovereignty-beyond-the-state might look and feel like in the context of global diaspora. I suggest that global Indigenous sovereignty is rooted in relationships to place and more-than-human relationships, even as these relationships travel across, and thus (sometimes) defy the territorial boundaries of nation-states. Like for Thomas, these relationships are anchored in affective, embodied experiences that constitute a sense of liberation. In this vein Simpson puts forth a definition of “Feeling citizenship” which is a “desire is made from the intimacy, the knowledge, and the messiness of everyday life, from the bonds of affection and disaffection that tie people into communities and communities into nations even if they are unrecognizable or unrecognized” (Simpson 2014, 177). I see this and related visions of Indigenous sovereignty and sovereignty-beyond-the-state as vibrant alternatives to present hegemonic understandings of territorial sovereignty and the primacy of the nation-state.

Integrating insights from these diverse bodies of literature with my research findings, I suggest that sensory and embodied experiences, embedded in more-than-human caretaking relationships (TallBear 2019) represent a powerful means of articulating what sovereignty feels like (Thomas 2019). Deborah Thomas states that:

while many anthropologists have offered brilliant and trenchant critiques of the diverse vectors of nationalist governance and subject formation, I have also felt we have sometimes stopped just short of the more sensory dimensions of sovereignty, leaving us largely unable to answer other, also pertinent questions (Thomas 2019, 2).

In this dissertation I build upon Thomas’s powerful theorization of sensory and embodied sovereignty that transcends, even if partially and incompletely, territorial states. Thomas argues for an understanding of diasporic dance as sovereignty. This is because of dance’s capacity to actually enact communal forms of liberation, rooted in the body, which transcend temporality and borders. For these same reasons, I suggest that diasporic gardens are a form of sovereignty.
In addition, following scholars such as Robin Wall Kimmerer, Lisa Stevenson, Kim TallBear, and Zoe Todd, I argue for an understanding of sovereignty as embodied in more-than-human relationships. These relationships serve to articulate what a dignified life smells, tastes, sounds, and feels like. Such articulations present an important counter-vision to the violent exclusions from humanity of the territorial nation-state.

**Ethnographic Poetry, Refusal, and Situated Knowledges**

"Science describes accurately from outside; poetry describes accurately from inside. Science explicates; poetry implicates. Both celebrate what they describe. We need the languages of both science and poetry to save us from merely stockpiling endless “information” that fails to inform our ignorance or our irresponsibility" - Ursula K. Le Guin

I made the decision to incorporate creative forms of expression in this dissertation, including ethnographic poetry, with intention. This choice is informed by the work of other anthropologists writing poetry, whose creative approach to ethnography has spurred my own. I have been reading and writing poetry since I was a young child. Poetry has been a continuous part of my life and a preferred mode of recording and making sense of the world around me and my responses to it. As such, I was thrilled when, as an undergraduate student of anthropology, I had the good fortune of meeting “literary anthropologists.” These scholars not only wrote poetry as part of their ethnographic practice, but also held meetings and workshops and published their poems in anthropology journals and even as ethnographic books of poems (see Rosaldo 2013; Stone 2019). These poet-anthropologists who inspired me early on, and who continue to do so, include Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor, Renato Rosaldo, Nomi Stone, and Ather Zia, among others. Reading the evocative, ethnographically rich poems by these scholars gave me a sense of permission to treat my poetry as a valid form of ethnographic expression alongside more
traditional social science prose. In addition to these contemporary poet-anthropologists, my use of creative forms follows a long tradition of literary-minded anthropologists. Although often overlooked by the discipline of anthropology, perhaps the earlier and certainly the most influential of these literary anthropologists is Zora Neal Hurston.

In addition to my predilection for poetry and my desire to follow the course set by other literary anthropologists, I have turned to ethnographic poetry and narrative forms in this dissertation for other practical reasons. These reasons have to do in part with what Audra Simpson terms “ethnographic refusal”. As such, they exist in dialogue with the theoretical framework I employ in this dissertation, building on Simpson’s interwoven concept of the “politics of refusal.” Through the politics of refusal, Mohawk, Karen, and other Indigenous peoples refuse their erasure and the settlement of their lands by colonizing states. Simpson, in her book, describes the ways in which her interlocutors refuse the settler colonial states of the U.S. and Canada through their words and actions, such as traveling to an international lacrosse tournament using tribal passports and refusing to claim citizenship of settler states at international border crossings.

Similarly, Simpson’s concept of ethnographic refusal has to do with her decision-making process about whose baggage to publicly unpack, or not, and to what ends. She writes powerfully about the historic violences that “tell-all” anthropology has enacted against marginalized and Indigenous communities. These communities have too often been subject to both trivializing fixations on “cultural” details and the indiscretions of thick description that lay everything bare for the historically white reader in a way that manifests a grave power imbalance. It is with this history in mind that she ethnographically “refuses” to share all the details about the internal politics and conflict facing the Mohawk community with which she works and is personally
connected. Rather, she situates her prose so that it looks outward onto the actions of the settler states of the U.S. and Canada that are squeezing Mohawk communities and exerting pressure surrounding issues of membership the community faces.

While I have not undertaken a project of ethnographic refusal to the extent that Simpson does, I have used ethnographic poetry and narrative descriptions intentionally at certain points to elide over-scrutinizing the marginalized communities with which I work. Following scholars writing in the context of armed conflict and social unrest, where certain details are not able to be ethically shared (Nordstrom 2004), in this dissertation I periodically use ethnographic poetry and narrative description as a means of helping the reader experience a place and a set of circumstances without laying out everything in exacting detail as social science prose often demands. In particular, details of security, movement and its constraints, bordering, and border crossing, are ethically sensitive. Sharing these details in ethnographic prose could make life harder for or endanger my interlocutors. As such, I include these aspects of my research as poetry. I consider this a form of creative ethnographic refusal. In this sense, I am also following the example of Kathleen Stewart who, in her book of poems, *Ordinary Affects* (2007), brilliantly uses ethnographic poetry to let her reader *feel* what neoliberalism is rather than attempting to explicate it. Like Stewart, I seek to give my reader a sense of what the camp feels like, and what the Karen autonomous territory of the Salween Peace Park feels like. Necessarily, such senses of place are from my own embodied and subjective experience. My friends and contacts may, of course, feel differently.

Yet another reason for my incorporation of ethnographic poetry in this dissertation is out of a sense of organic affinity between myself and my Karen interlocutors. There is a strong Karen oral poetry tradition known as Hta, which persists in its importance to this day. Violet
Cho, a Karen anthropologist, has done important work translating and writing about Karen diaspora Hta. She also writes Hta, including her Hta titled “The Academic Life of Savages”, some stanzas of which are included below. These diasporic poems powerfully express experiences of dispossession and life in exile, along with pointed critiques of those who facilitated this dispossession and loss of cultural heritage, including missionaries and anthropologists. At the same time, these poems illustrate ways in which Karen Indigenous life and culture continues tenaciously in diaspora (Cho 2014; Tee Noe and Violet Cho 2014). I believe that, along with seeds and gardens, diaspora Hta is an important means of constituting Karen sovereignty in diaspora.

Excerpts from “The Academic Life of Savages” by Violet Cho

In the past, mother gave us hta
we knew how to speak
Father’s hta voice
sang the night and day

Our grandmother in the past kept hta
Our grandfather in the past held hta
She whispered hta to her children
He sang hta to his children

When Kawlah came to visit
waving texts to read and write
in that short appearance
he brought us words to write
he came with many heads
like Kali: missionary
scientist, anthropologist
bureaucrat

Karen life and knowledge
recorded by Kawlahwah with rulers,
they measured us
and we became vicious

Since then,
the spoken hta vanished
kept safe in the liver
With death it decomposes

Mother gave birth to me in the ’80s
I became “Karen”
Without a hta voice
schooled to read and write

Mother, for literacy
displaced hta
I learn for father
at the Kawlah academy

I wish I could be wild
and speak through hta — an imagined past
I wish I could be a savage
Will it ever be?
I can’t speak *hta* with my mouth
so I write on this white sheet
I can’t sing *hta*, with my voice
I’ve written *hta* as I’ve learnt it

If I can verbalise *hta*
I’ll sing away the texts
If I know the *hta* of speaking
I’ll escape from writing passed

In the academy of savages
we search for that which can’t be read
In the academy of spirits
we produce what can’t be written

Reflecting on this *Hta*, Violet Cho writes:

I am ambivalent about writing when I consider the oral culture in my background
which has been lost to me through colonization and through my own desire to gain a
“Western” education that moves me further from a “Karen” past. Writing involves the
grieving of an oral culture that I’m displaced from. As a “Karen” subject, the effect of
colonization is so deep that writing is part of thinking and I cannot (re)construct oral
forms of culture without text (Cho 2014).

*Hta* was often a topic of conversation “in the field.” Such conversations provided openings for
me to better understand the ways in which my college students in the camp and Karen high
school student in the U.S. attempt to hold onto a sense of home and Indigenous Karen identity
even while living in exile. More closely related to my research focus, there is also an important
genre of *Hta* known as “environmental *Hta*”, which imparts lessons about proper relationships
between humans and other species. For example, this *Hta* related to food sovereign and
biodiversity conservation reminds the reader the importance of “saving” diverse domesticated species (KESAN 2020):

Mother told us to save yam species
Father told us to save taro species
When we preserve up to thirty kinds
When famine comes we will not die

The poems included in this dissertation were drafted in the field. I wrote poetry as a means of recording my emotional responses in order to subjectify my research: to make it relational and situated. This was a personal but also a political choice, as the epigraph by Ursula K. Le Guin indicates. Donna Haraway famously writes of science’s god’s-eye view from nowhere, that “like the god trick, this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters” (1988, 581). It is out of my enduring respect for “Situated Knowledges” and the work of feminist, queer, third-world, and decolonial scholars who have exhorted us to produce knowledge that is framed as a “view from a point” that I write myself into this ethnography through poems. At times “navel gazey”, and my craft not as sharp as I would like, these poems are a humble(ing) attempt at situating myself within the text. As Ather Zia states “translating the field is a dual labor—providing witness as a professional and as a dreamer. Not that poetry is dreaming, but there is an ethical responsibility that descends through the device of language for what remains beyond translation in the shorthand of the represented world” (2019, 25). Indeed, I feel that the labor of ethnography involved in this study demands multiple modes of witnessing and bearing testimony, some of which changed me in the process. Thus, in what follows, I ask the reader to
be open, affected, and troubled by what they read. I also ask them to experience joy and hope in small acts and recollections that things might be different.

**Dissertation Outline**

This dissertation is divided into two sections of unequal weight. Part I “Severing Sovereignty” constitutes the main argument of the dissertation and, as such, is more developed. Part II, “Seeding Sovereignty” provides a counterpoint to discussions of loss and agricultural forgetting. In Chapter One I situate my research within the context of my two main fieldsites of Mae La camp and The Salween Peace Park, as well as my peripheral fieldsite of Syracuse, NY. Throughout the dissertation, interwoven glimpses of Karen refugees’ lives in Syracuse, NY and Athens, GA provide context for the diasporic connections that I refer to when discussing my main fieldsites of the camp and the Peace Park.

In Chapter One I also discuss my multi-sited research methods. In the narrative interlude to Part I of the dissertation I introduce Mae La refugee camp, setting the scene for the chapters to come and highlighting the ways in which it is as a liminal and exceptional space. In Chapter Two I lay out my core concept of agricultural forgetting as it occurs for Karen refugees living in Mae La camp. I follow this in Chapter Three, with a detailed discussion of the ways in which seed sovereignty comes to be “severed” in the camp. In Chapter Four I show the connection between the camp as a space of exception and the wider social and economic context, suggesting that the camp produces biocultural simplification inked to precarity. I follow this in Chapter Five with a counter discussion of how college students in the camp refuse this simplification and precarity through connections with food and stories across borders. This conversation continues in Chapter Six in the context of the Salween Peace Park, where students, Karen leaders, Internally
Displaced Persons, and others actively refuse the Myanmar state to create a space of biocultural refugium and tenuous returns. Finally, in Chapter Seven, the conclusion, I draw together my findings, illustrating the worldmaking power of gardens, while underscoring the ongoing violence of sovereign exception.
Chapter One
Sensing Sovereignty Across Intertwined Geographies

Introduction

This dissertation traces the sensory and political dimensions of Karen refugees’ co-movements with their seeds, plants, and agricultural practices in exile. It also tentatively explores understandings of sovereignty beyond the frame of the Westphalian nation-state through engagements with seed and food sovereignty in three locations that complicate understandings of territorial sovereignty. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part explores the main context and unique yet interconnected geohistories in and across which this research unfolds. The second half of the chapter describes the main methods used in this work. The two primary geographies this research engages with are 1) Mae La Refugee Camp in Thailand and 2) The Salween Peace Park in the unrecognized Karen state of Kawthoolei (bordered by Thailand and Myanmar). Yet, these places cannot be fully understood without considering their connection with diasporic Karen communities. As such, a third geography which serves as a backdrop and point of reference for this research is the resettlement city of Syracuse, New York. This research is also informed by prior research and ongoing relationships with Karen communities in the state of Georgia. In fact, my friends in Georgia and Syracuse checked on me via messenger and video chat, kept track of me, asked how I was adjusting to the food, and sent friends and relatives to meet me during my fieldwork in Mae La and in the Peace Park. This added to the sense, from a first-person perspective, that these geographies are not only connected but are constantly co-creating one another.

With the goal of facilitating grounded connections and comparisons to other geographies, three primary spaces I explore are loosely conceived as 1) a space of sovereign exception 2) an unrecognized state/ Indigenous sovereign territory and 3) a post-industrial city in a hyper-
capitalist country. A tentative hypothesis that I put forward when beginning this research was that pockets of autonomy might emerge to greater or lesser degree within and across these different spaces. The structural components of these three fieldsites represent a striking continuum of control verses freedom: from an Indigenous sovereign territory within a conflict-zone, The Salween Peace Park, to perhaps one of the most governed types of places imaginable, a securitized refugee camp.

Based on preliminary research, I expected that I might find pockets of partial autonomy emerging not only within, but across, these spaces. I considered that with the movement of people, skills, knowledges, ideologies, and seeds and plants between these spaces, tentative pockets of possibility might emerge that could potentially challenge the constraints these spaces placed on the ability of Karen people to “decide their own lives.” As will be discussed further in this dissertation, the saying “being able to decide our own lives” was a salient key phrase that arose from my preliminary research. Its importance was born out more fully during the course of my full fieldwork. In this chapter I provide context for each of these locations. I discuss the methods I employed in undertaking this challenging multi-sited, and to an extent multi-species, research and how these methods are connected to my theoretical framework and approach to this research.

I begin with a discussion of the history of state formation and ethnic conflict in Southeast Asia broadly, and in the context of the Karen Revolution specifically. Then provide history and context for the existence of Mae La camp within the landscape of humanitarian aid and conflict on the Thailand-Myanmar border. I situate Syracuse, New York within my research as a post-industrial city that has become a significant location of U.S. refugee resettlement. Finally, I discuss my research methods.
Kawthoolei: The State and Its Shatter-Zones

The State and Ethnic Conflict in Southeast Asia - Regional Context

During the initial Colonial period in Southeast Asia (1511-1950s), the colonial powers of Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands and the United States drew the boundaries of their territories arbitrarily from a demographic perspective. This period was also strongly marked by the importation of western ways of conceptualizing race and the counting of populations that colonial officials brought with them (Loh 2017; MacKerras 1995). Important factors in this were the employment of scientific racism and use of the census. Both mechanisms contributed to the diffusion of majority/minority thinking (Appadurai 2006; Loh 2017). Perhaps most fundamental to the legacy of the Colonial era in Southeast Asia was the mistreatment of Southeast Asian populations (MacKerras 1995). This mistreatment held in it the seeds of nationalism that would be a reaction to the paternalism and oppression enacted by the colonizers. This seed, germinated during the colonial occupation, began to grow during WWII when Japan took control of much of Southeast Asia. For, while nationalist factions had existed throughout much of the region during the first Western colonial period, their aims remained largely unattainable until after the close of World War II, with the cultural and political changes brought about (Brown 1997; Ganguly and Macduff 2003; MacKerras 1995; Reid 2010; Tarling 2001).

After World War II, Western colonial powers tried to regain control of their former territories but this was largely unsuccessful. Nationalism had gained ground and either through negotiation or violence most Southeast Asian territories were able to throw off their overlords (Brown 1997; MacKerras 1995). This led to the rapid creation of many new, modern nation-states. Yet, significant vestiges of colonial rule remained, such as Western European notions of
racial hierarchies. These came to be potent, often combustible, factors in the successes and failures of nation-building, especially regarding majority/minority politics (Appadurai 2006; Landry 2002; Loh 2017; Scott 1998; Snitwongse and Thompson 2007). Notions of racial inferiority were now used by dominant groups in these newly formed states as justification for repressive treatment of subordinate ethnic and religious groups, just as colonial officials had used this same logic (Loh 2017). Additionally, the high expectations for nation-building, that it would lead to prosperity and social transformation, left many with feelings of disillusionment and states frequently found it useful to have a highly visible group to scapegoat. Finally, some have argued that the modern nation-state is an inherently Western creation (Anderson 1983), and that its philosophical underpinnings—especially the mandate for a constitutional democracy—were ill fitting to the context of Southeast Asia (Snitwongse and Thompson 2007).

While nationalism has been largely successful in the region in the sense that the newly created states have by and large remained intact, ethnic and religious conflicts and ensuing authoritarian repression have been common themes. Southeast Asian states have employed different strategies for the control and/or accommodation of the groups that have challenged national authority. These tactics of pacification range from more negotiation-based, as in the cases of Malaysia and Thailand (though Thailand was never directly colonized, it was still influenced by colonial thinking and pressures), to more repressive, as exhibited by Indonesia and Myanmar (Ahmad and Yusof 2010; Ganguly and Maeduff 2003; Landre 1999; Snitwhongse and Thompson 2007). Furthermore, scholars suggest that to understand conditions of ethnic conflict in the region it is necessary to address both the material/structural and cultural dimensions of marginalization (Harish 2006; Kingsbury 2011). Ethnic dissent, rebellion and secession have largely been based on both of these factors. These dissenting minorities have often sought
federalism or outright autonomy with full separation from the nation-state, as is the case with
Karen armed groups in Myanmar. Interestingly, the ability of Southeast Asian states to quash
these uprisings was facilitated by the scare of communism during the Cold War that led the U.S.
government to provide large amounts of funding for “security”. This resulted in the ascendency
of military power generally in the region (Acharya 2014; Brown 1997; Barnett 1995; Kingsbury
2011; Tarling 2001).

In brief, ongoing ethnic and religious tensions and conflicts across Southeast Asia can be
read, in part, as an outgrowth of colonial legacies, including the measurement of populations and
differential treatment of groups based on supposedly inherent qualities (Appadurai 2006; Harish
2006; Kingsbury 2011; Loh 2017). They may also be interpreted as reflections of the basic
nature of the modern nation-state—liberal or illiberal—based as it is on the myth of a unified and
singular people (Agamben 1998; Appadurai 2006; Arendt 1973) These dynamic have been
further modified by emerging effects of increased economic growth in Southeast Asia, and the
increased presence of transnational corporations. Some have argued, in the case of Myanmar,
that economic instability and dispossession brought on by extractive development projects and
land-grabbing may be violently fueling preexisting ethnic tensions to the point of genocide
(Prasse-Freeman 2017).

*State-Making and Ethnic Conflict in Burma/Myanmar*

Capitalism and the expansion of the cash economy over the subsistence economy, and individual
ownership of land over communal tenure started under the State Law and Order Restoration
Council (SLORC) in 1989. However, due to the extreme closure of Burma/Myanmar for over a
half-century (beginning with the 1962 coup d’état that began authoritarian rule in the country),
the cash economy has not fully developed in all regions of the country. It seemed that this situation might change rapidly in 2012, about a year into the first hybrid military-civilian government under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). However, investment trailed off just before the 2015 election, with worries that the NLD government might be less open to large-scale economic development projects, as Aung San Suu Kyi was calling for “responsible” investment. With these opening and democratizing trends (the later in reality proving to be slow and highly tentative), there was a great deal of initial interest that made it seem as if a tidal wave of international investment and plans for large-scale industrial and economic development might be poised to hit the country (Jones 2014; Prasse-Freeman 2017; Seekins 2015; Woods 2011). However, as it has played out until the present there has been some actual investment, which is now continuing at a much slower pace than expected.

The outcome of this, in combination with the backsliding of hope for human rights and free speech in the country—evidenced especially in the military’s ethnic cleansing of Rohingya communities in Rakhine State (International Crisis Group 7 December 2017) and the jailing of journalist under the Section 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Law (Human Rights Watch June 29, 2017; Frontier Myanmar September 15, 2017)—has been the development of overlapping conditions of neoliberalism and authoritarianism. This new order in many ways combines the worst aspects of each system in a terrifying bricolage. A thin veneer of democracy has lifted many sanctions previously imposed by foreign governments and has allowed for free and massive investment by transnational corporations in hydroelectric projects, mining enterprises, the development of cement and coal factories, and the throwing-up of shopping malls, to name only a few of the projects. This is all while basic human rights and workers’
rights are yet to be secured and while peace between the national military and ethnic armed organizations has yet to be achieved (Kipgen 2015; South and Lall 2016).

In Myanmar the threat of the authoritarian state to kill remains strongly foregrounded. By virtually all accounts, the military maintained effective control of the country even during the NLD period. The structure of the government in the 2010s was one of hybrid civilian-military rule based on the military-written 2008 constitution. This was the case from 2011 to February 2020, the period during which I conducted my research. Thus, while international bodies, transnational corporations and NGOs newly take root in the county it seems that both the Weberian notion of state rule through the monopolization of legitimate violence and the Foucaldian notion of biopower are simultaneously applicable (Foucault 1984; Weber 2015). Here Jasbir K. Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* provides a powerful example of an ethnography that holds in co-presence biopolitics and necropolitics (Mbembe 2001; Puar 2007). Like Taussig’s *Magic of the State*, if less fictive, Puar provides a “hauntology” of the nation-state’s diffuse regimes of folding-into-life and death (Puar 2007). However, the unique conditions emerging at the intersection of authoritarianism and neoliberalism in Myanmar remain to be fully explored. Some hints are offered in Nick Cheesman’s discussion of the lip service given to the concept of “rule of law” by leader Aung San Suu Kyi during an international tour, even while rule of law is powerfully opposed and negated in Myanmar courts (Cheesman 2015). The function of the state in Myanmar is further complicated by the long and complex history of ethnic conflict in the country that continues forcefully in the present (Fink 2009; South 2008)

The power maintained by numerous ethnic political and armed groups in the country, who in some cases fulfill the role of the state in their territories (South 2015), contest the nation-state’s rule both by disrupting its monopoly on the right to kill and its control of biopower, such
as through domains of health and education. Ethnic armed organizations also kill and terrorize people, including those they believe are military informers or people of other ethnicities. In the shatter-zones (Scott 2009) of rural areas of much of Myanmar, national infrastructure and services have only scarcely or never existed (South 2015). In many areas where residents speak distinct languages from the national language, Burmese, and have their own histories and cultures, residents widely believe in the sovereignty of their respective ethnic territories (South and Lall 2010). In most cases these communities have only ever experienced the Myanmar government through military violence and conscription, understood as attacks by a foreign regime. This has been true for the majority of Karen residing in rural parts of Kawthoolei (KWO 2010). This leads me to a discussion of the history and current context of civil war and ethnic tensions between Karen groups and the Myanmar state.

The Karen Context

The Karen peoples of Myanmar are a highly diverse ethnic minority group, whose members have historically resided in greatest numbers in the Delta, in lower Myanmar, and in the southeast region of the country in the area recognized by the Myanmar government as “Karen State.” However, many Karen people, especially those from the mountainous southeastern borderlands, speak of their homelands as Kawthoolei: a sovereign state separate from Myanmar, whose territory is similar to but does not directly correspond with the national government’s boundaries of Karen State. Karen language includes under its banner multiple dialects that are often not mutually intelligible, with the most significant distinctions being between S’gaw and Po Karen dialects. These linguistic categories are often associated with cultural differences, including both distinctions between S’gaw and Po Karen internally, and between Karens and Burmans more
broadly. While many, though not all, Karen people speak and understand the national language, Burmese (Myanmar), some refuse to speak it out of protest of the Myanmar government (Cho and Noe 2014; Po 2001 [1928]).

Karen peoples in rural areas—and sometimes including those living in urban areas, though less frequently so—often demarcate themselves by dressing in traditional Karen woven clothing (Ananda 2002). This style of dress is distinct from the favored sartorial styles of the Bamar majority. Furthermore, Karen identity, for many though not all individuals, is articulated in part through rurality and identification with an agrarian lifestyle. (An exception is, for example, Karen in Yangon.) Additionally, “Karenness” is often linked with certain plants and foods that are considered to be particularly “wild” or “jungle” foods, such as dogfruit and curries made from the pumpkin leaves, although members of other ethnic groups in Myanmar also eat these foods. Karen identity is also strongly articulated through emblematic Karen dishes such as the ubiquitous favorite rice (preferably grown by hand) served with fish paste and spicy chilies (Gagnon 2013; South Interview 2016; Burma Environmental Working Group).

In mountainous areas of Karen State, the majority of residents derive a living from subsistence agriculture: practicing swidden cultivation of rice in the hills (and where it is flat they have paddy cultivation) in combination with the gardening of a great array of other plant species and sophisticated practices of agroforestry, hunting, and fishing (KESAN 2017). It is important to emphasize that Karen people live in many different regions of the county, both rural and urban. This is not to mention the significant populations of Thai Karen who, unlike Karen refugees to Thailand from Myanmar, have lived for many generations in Western Thailand.

In Burma there are tens of thousands of Karen who live in cities such as Yangon, the principal city and former capital. As such, it should go without saying that not all Karen are
agriculturalists. Nevertheless, identification with a rural lifestyle and the ability to grow plants, build traps, read the forest, and make a living from jungle resources have remained strong elements of Karen identity for Karen peoples living in the mountainous parts of Karen State and Tenasserim Division, and those exiled from these regions. This is especially true when members of these groups are emphasizing their difference from the Bamar majority (South Interview 2016). This intentional construction and even reification of Karen identity in association with plants, the jungle, and wild things is especially important in the context of the longstanding armed conflict between Karen people and the Burmese military, or Tatmadaw, and their active, often violent, propagation of Burmese cultural hegemony. Tropes of rurality and nostalgia for rural places and customs also play a significant role in the construction of Karen identities in exile around the world (Cho 2013; Gravers 2015; Po 2008; Samson 1990; South 2008; 2011).

As stated previously, for the past nearly 70 years the Karen have been engaged in a civil war with the Burmese military. This conflict is the longest ongoing civil war in the world at present. The history of tensions between the Burmese state and Karen people is long and complex. The original outbreak of war between the Karen and the Burmese army began on January 31, 1949 when the Karen Revolution was declared following Burma’s independence from the British colonial regime. This connects with the wider history of post-colonialism, the formation of modern nation states, and patterns of ethnic conflict and state authoritarianism throughout Southeast Asia (Bertrand 2009; Falise 2010; Po 2008; South 2011).

From the Karen perspective, cultural difference from the Bamar majority is articulated along the lines of language, dress, rural lifestyle, but also along the lines of religion. Twenty percent of Karens are Christians with the remaining eighty percent practicing either animism or Buddhism that is usually intertwined to some degree with animism (Hayami 2011). In contrast,
nearly all members of Bamar majority are Theravada Buddhists at least culturally. While most Karen communities were at one point animist, this began to change with Christian missionizing that started circa 1820. The first missionaries to come were the Baptists from the United States, led by Adoniram and Ann Judson (Warborton 1937). Soon after Catholic missionaries from the U.S. and Europe arrived. Around the same time there was a significant diffusion of Buddhism from neighboring non-Karen communities. While most Karen Buddhists retain elements of animism in their practice and beliefs, there is still a significant percentage of the population that remains principally animist (Gravers 2013; Kawanami 2009; Schober 2011). However, these numbers have declined sharply in recent years due to the displacement caused by civil war, as people who become separated from the land and graves of their ancestors are unable to continue their ritual practices. This is combined with the incentives to convert to Christianity wrapped up in some programs of aid to internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees (KESAN 2011; Sampson 1990).

As I have mentioned, for some Karen, especially those living in highland parts of the southeastern borderlands, ethnic identity is tied in part to possessing the skills and desire to live largely outside the purview of the Burmese state (KESAN 2017; Scott 2009). However, the Karen National Union (KNU), the dominant Karen political organization, performs state-like functions of providing schools, medical care, and governance in many of the areas where they maintain control (South 2015). Indeed, a significant percentage of Karen living in Kawthoolei (predominantly Karen-controlled areas) see the KNU as their state government and the Myanmar military as an invading army. Like in other ethnic minority states of Myanmar, people in rural areas of Karen State have received very little support or infrastructure from the Myanmar state in the past decades (Davis et al. 2015; Gravers 2015; South and Lall 2016). On top of this, they
have been taxed and used as forced, unpaid laborers by regiments of the Myanmar Military
whose soldiers are often not provided food rations when in conflict areas and must obtain their
food by extorting local communities that are already stretched thin (KWO 2010). While the
Tatmadaw is the main perpetrator of such actions, KNLA forces also carry out taxation and
conscription. In some cases, communities already living on the edge become doubly taxed (Fink
2009; KWO 2010)

For some, though not all Karen living in peripheral parts of Kawthoolei, their only
interaction with emissaries of the Myanmar state has been the Tatmadaw soldiers who have
burned their villages, killed, and raped villagers, and subjected civilians to grueling forced labor,
referred to as being a “porter” for the Myanmar military (KWO 2010). These soldiers speak a
different language than them and are perceived as culturally and sometimes religiously distinct.
So, in many ways one can understand the perception, which has existed among Karen
communities since at least 1949, that Kawthoolei is a homeland under attack that must be
defended from the foreign invades—the Tatmadaw—who seek to appropriate their lands and
either destroy or assimilate them culturally.

The narrative of the Myanmar-Karen conflict is not as simple as one of a repressed
minority people being brutally dominated by the national military. This is true also for most
areas of the country where there is ethnic conflict. Rather, there are numerous actors who must
be considered and many layers of nuance, intention and power that must be addressed to gain
critical understanding of this protracted civil war (Fink 2009; KWO 2010; South 2007, 2015).
Two Karen militarized groups, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and Democratic
Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), represent the Karen armed resistance forces. Additionally,
scholars have noted the important role that external support, from neighboring and foreign states
as well as from refugees making up the Karen diaspora, has played in supporting the KNU and KNLA (Brower and van Wijk 2013). Brower and van Wijk state that, “support from neighboring states and refugees has for years kept the Karen rebellion alive.” Additionally, they assert that there has been, mostly informal, support for Karen resistance from the United States and some European countries and, more formally, from their citizens. This is because “western countries perceived forms of resistance to the illegitimate Burmese regime as just and have therefore played a crucial role in the continuation of conflict in Karen State” (Brower and van Wijk 2013).

As has been the case in many rural-based ethnic/political insurgencies throughout history in various parts of the world, it is often hard to clearly distinguish between Karen militants and civilians. First, the Myanmar military sees all civilians in conflict areas as the enemy. They assume they are supporting Karen armed groups in one way or another. In addition, many village men have been given basic military and information gathering training. They are part of the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO), which is directly linked to the Karen National Liberation Army. As such, categories of civilian and soldier are often somewhat slippery, shifting and contextual, as villagers need to appease the contradictory and often simultaneous demands of the two Karen armies and the Myanmar army to survive (Kalyvas 2003; KWO 2010). This ambiguity has led to the widespread burning of Karen villages, destruction of crops and fields, and thousands of cases of rape, torture, murder and forced labor of Karen villagers on the part of the Myanmar military. These practices have targeted the young, the elderly, women, men and the disabled alike, with little to no effort to discern one’s actual involvement with armed groups (Fink 2009; KWO 2010).

Such extreme violence has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Karen people from their homes. Fleeing attacks on their villages, many end up traveling through and
hiding in the jungle for months, sometimes years on end. It is a testament to Karen people’s environmental literacy that so many can survive, even if barely, in such conditions. Ironically, for those who have remained in Karen state—either in their home areas or as Internally Displaced People (IDPs), who frequently must move from one place to another, this difficult situation has been further complicated by the signing of bilateral ceasefire agreements in 2012 and multilateral ceasefire agreements in 2015 under the NCA. While many are very grateful for an end to active fighting, there are now additional state security forces to contend with such as the Border Guard Force (BGF), comprised of breakaway factions from the DKBA and notorious for their extortion of residents. Additionally, there are now government officials, representatives of transnational corporations, and KNLA leaders working together to secure land for gem mining and other extractive industries, coal and cement factories and plans for the construction of hydroelectric dams. Here consent is often achieved in dubious ways, such as with the approval (i.e., paying off) of the village headman, but with no knowledge of the deal or consent from the village residents (Human Rights Watch 2016; Woods 2011, 2018)

Sometimes even such a thin guise of legitimacy is absent, and lands are simply appropriated with almost no attempt at justification or remuneration. Many Karen people are deeply concerned about new developments since the signing of ceasefire agreements. Karen farmers do not wish to lose their lands, which some have managed to maintain despite decades of civil war. Such Karen villages are highly self-sufficient: they depend on traditional systems of communal governance and land management, and violence and displacement did not totally preclude their function (KESAN 2017). With the rapid incursion of military owned and foreign companies into Karen territories, which escalated during the 2010s, rampant land grabbing, and contamination of water and soil, as well as clearing of forested areas, many villagers have
already lost their ability to make a living through farming. As such there is intense concern over the future of livelihoods in Karen state, but also concern for the lands, waters, plants, and animals of the region which—notwithstanding widespread religious adherence to Christianity and Buddhism—are often closely tied to beliefs about spiritual, moral and communal well-being (Human Rights Watch 2016; KESAN 2017; Paul 2018; Paul et. al 2021)

With a strong aversion to renewed fighting, and the KNLA and DKBA generals often setting their own agendas that increasingly includes collaborating with the Myanmar military where it can benefit them, Karen communities have few legal avenues for claiming rights to land and livelihoods, requiring them to find creative means for asserting an alternative vision of a peaceful, modern, and free Kawthoolei. One innovative and emblematic project in this regard is the Salween Peace Park. Located in one of the last fully KNU controlled areas in Mudraw District (as not all regions have come under the control of the Tatmadaw), the Peace Park is conceived as an extensive “region dedicated to socio-ecological conservation of the Salween River Basin, and an important ecological corridor between Burma and Thailand” (KESAN 2017, 1). What is more, it represents an aspirational Indigenous sovereign territory where a grassroots vision of peace and alternative development can be realized (KESAN 2017; 2019a). I now turn to the material and imaginative complexities of this project.

The Salween Peace Park

The leading proponent of the Peace Park is the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) in partnership with local Karen residents, and a wide range of stakeholders that include international donors and KNU officials. In line with this unique form of collaboration for the governance of space and conservation of biocultural heritage, KESAN states that: “alongside
promoting a biocultural approach to socio-ecological conservation and seeking a bottom-up path to peace, the SPP initiative also aims to expand the conversation around governance in Burma beyond mere management of resources: assessing the impacts of militarization, conflict, displacement, resource capture and destructive development”. Additionally, “It further aims to expand the concept of ‘Water Governance’ beyond just water in the river itself, to include the land, forest, biodiversity, upland shifting cultivation, customary land systems, and cultural and sacred sites along the Salween River Basin” (KESAN 2017a, 2).

Ultimately, “KESAN’s and its partners’ long-term vision for the Salween Peace Park is to demonstrate what truly good governance could be for the Salween River Basin and provide a people-centered alternative to top-down, militarized development” (KESAN 2017a, 2). In approaching my research within the Park, I was interested in the ways that those involved in creating this space highlight and creatively respond to accelerating issues of top-down control, dispossession and destruction of land, water and biodiversity that is considered sacred and central to villagers’ ways of life in the territory.

At the time of planning and carrying out my research, I was especially interested in the Peace Park in relation to the prospect of possible return for forcibly displaced people. This along with almost every other aspect of politics and daily life in Myanmar/Burma has changed drastically in the wake of the February 1, 2021 coup attempt. The Peace Park, long in the making, was formally launched roughly six months before I began my fieldwork. Its creation was especially pertinent and timely as many of the hundreds of thousands of people displaced from Kawthoolei were thought to possibly soon be returning “home” (Malkki 1995b) either by choice or by force. At that time, ceasefire agreements had been in place for multiple years (myanmarpeacemonitor.org). This meant a decrease in the worst active fighting in the region
(while fighting between ethnic armed groups and the State escalates in other parts of the country). However, skirmishes still occurred regularly between the Tatmadaw and KNLA forces, especially in Mutraw near the site of a contested road that the Tatmadaw was attempting to build across KNU territory in violation of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).

Despite this decrease in active fighting, during my preliminary research in the summer of 2017, I learned that many Karen in the southeast thought of the ceasefire period as a “cold war”. In this “cold war” the number of Myanmar military bases had grown significantly, land grabbing was rampant, and landmines were still a major issue for farmers and rural civilians. Furthermore, there was great concern over plans to dam the Salween River in multiple places to use for hydroelectric power to be sold to China and Thailand. The Salween is an essential component of the watershed in Karen homelands, a source of subsistence and a significant presence in spiritual and daily life.

At the time when it was thought that refugees might be returning to the Peace Park territory and other parts of Karen State, a major question was whether home would be there when they returned, or what “home” might mean in a newly configured context. There were considerable concerns over how families would make a living as their lands had often been sold to companies or given to Bamar migrants after they were forcibly displaced. In this context, the creation of the Salween Peace Park had potentially powerful implications. Its vision is connected to larger regional and global trends of Indigenous and peasant communities reclaiming lands and enacting relation ontologies (Escobar 2009).

Mae La Refugee Camp, Northern Thailand

_History and Context of Refugee Camps along the Burma/Thai Border_
Since the 1980s refugee camps have existed in western Thailand, just across the border from Karen State (Smith 2016) as a refuge for the tens of thousands of individuals expelled from their homes and fleeing political violence in southeast Burma. Escalating with the ruthless “four-cuts” policy beginning circa the 1950s that included killing, burning of villages, and forced labor, the Burmese Army has long sought to culturally assimilate, drive out, or violently exterminate Karen communities, as well as other ethnic minority groups in the region including Karenni, Mon, and other peoples (Falise 2009; Milbrandt 2011). In recent decades an estimated 1.7 million people from southeastern Myanmar have come to be internally displaced. At the time of conducting my fieldwork research roughly 100,000 refugees remained living in the nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Previously there were more camps, but they have been consolidated. Of those who made it to the camps in Thailand as refugees, many have remained there for upwards of twenty-five years, unable to move on and unable to return home. Small numbers of people have returned to Myanmar and still others (roughly 100,000) have been resettled through third country resettlement programs. The nine camps are administrated by an organization called The Border Consortium (TBC) that works in partnership with both the UNHCR and the Thai government. Though the TBC receives donations from foreign governments and other donors it operates as a single organization.
Map: Location of Refugee Camps in Thailand, just across the border with Myanmar (theelders.org)

Despite the highly marginal circumstances of their displacement, Karen people commonly maintain engagements with plants of home as a means of physical, and perhaps emotional, survival all along their journey of escape: from fleeing through the jungle to life in refugee camps, and even to places of resettlement. While traveling through the jungle, in addition to using skills to hunt and forage, Karen people often grow things in the tenuous, flexible style sometimes referred to as “escape agriculture” (Scott 2009). Groups of Karen people fleeing through the jungle will even plant fruit trees for those who will come behind them, or to return to later (Gagnon 2013). In planning my research in Mae La, I was interested in the ways that camp residents gardened within the confines of the camp and what significance these gardens might hold for them.
Context at the Time of My Research: Threat of Forced Repatriation

Mae La camp, during the time that I was there, had roughly 35,000 residents receiving rations and more living there informally. The living quarters were cramped, although the camp population had declined somewhat over the years due to the resettlement program. Living conditions in the camp were quite rough as the infrastructure was often in disrepair, there was insufficient garbage collection and lack of clean water for drinking and bathing. Furthermore, severe flooding was causing serious problems for camp residents. Many adults in the camp had lived there for 30 years or more, and a great number of camp residents had primarily grown up in the camp. Due to the perceived democratizing of Myanmar in the years leading up to my fieldwork research (2012-2016) and the signing of ceasefire agreements between the Tatmadaw and Karen Armed groups beginning, there was a perception that conflict in Karen State is cooling off. As such, there was a push from Thailand and the UNHCR for refugees to return to Myanmar. The Thai government was eager for the camps to be closed after hosting refugees for over thirty years (Asia News Monitor May 30, 2012). Additionally, funding for humanitarian aid from international donors was drying up as NGOs redirect their funds away from the border to and towards projects inside Myanmar, especially to cities such as Yangon and Hpa-an (the capital of Karen State.)

This led to threats of impending closure of the camps and the forcible repatriation of residents. However, due to the increase in Myanmar army bases in Karen state (Human Rights Watch 2016; Karen News May 1, 2017), and in light of flare-ups in fighting that had been occurring in other regions of the country such as northern Shan and Kachin States (Amnesty International June 14, 2017), many Karen refugees living in the camps did not trust that the peace will hold, especially with their longstanding oppressors closer than ever to their villages.
As such, many refugees rejected the prospect of repatriation. The anxiety provoked for refugees around the prospect of mandatory repatriation was underscored by the fact that, “Many Karen refugees know that Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and is therefore not bound by the Convention’s well-founded fear of persecution definition of a refugee” (Fuertes 2010). In addition, at the time of my research, food rations and other forms of aid to camp residents had been cut steadily. In Ei Tu Hta IDP camp rations had recently been stopped completely. This created a situation where refugees living in the camps felt squeezed by a lack of options: they could not safely return “home” and they could not easily stay where they were as conditions of life in the camp were increasingly and intentionally made more difficult.

These were the harsh context in which I lived full-time for six months, taught and conducted research in Mae La camp. Meanwhile, while residents of Karen State and those living in camps along the border face tentative futures for their livelihoods, lands/homes, and the continuation of Karen language, governance practices, and other cultural traditions, many tens of thousands of Karen people face similar challenges in a different milieu: as refuges resettled in other parts of the world, including in the United States.

**Syracuse, New York**

*Geographies of Refugee Resettlement in the U.S.*

Those former residents of camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, such as Mae La camp, who have made their way to the United States as part of one the largest UNHCR resettlement initiatives to date, lasting from 2005-2015, (UNHCR January 29, 2014), have ended up in an array of cities scattered across the continental U.S. These cities include for example: Des Moines, Iowa; Kansas City, Kansas; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Clarkston, Georgia; Lewiston,
Maine; and Buffalo, Syracuse, and Utica, New York. While such resettlement cities may be geographically dispersed and culturally distinct, there are certain commonalities many of them share. Namely they have the common fate of being post-industrial cities that in recent decades have experienced the moving-out of industry, significant economic shrinking, and population decline.

An excess of available property, need for low wage, “un-skilled” labor (Holmes 2013), and relatively low costs of living have made them supposedly ideal places for refugee resettlement, according to the U.S. federal government and the national offices of resettlement organizations whose task it is to allocate newly arrived refugees to cities (Besteman 2017; Syracuse.com May 14, 2016). This is despite the paradox that peoples from countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa—many of whom come from rural/agrarian backgrounds—will be living in a rough, post-industrial city with limited transportation options and that are often among the coldest and snowiest cities in the country (Besteman 2017; New York Times August 10, 2014). Syracuse, New York, in many ways exemplifies the trends in this correlated process of urban decay and refugee resettlement in the United States.

Rust-Belt Context

Syracuse, New York, is included in what is often referred to as the “Rust Belt” of the U.S. This term denotes a particular swath of postindustrial cities, mostly located in the Midwest and Great Lakes regions, and gained popularity in the 1980s with the onset of rapid economic decline in these areas. Here “rust” refers to the deindustrialization and attendant negative socioeconomic effects of the shrinking of the formerly mighty industrial heartland of America (Kapp et al. 2015; Syracuse.com October 24, 2017). According to Eide, a researcher of Rust Belt economies, “The
long decline of manufacturing has left Rust Belt cities with many of the same challenges...high debt, shrinking populations and growing poverty” (Syracuse.com October 24, 2017).

Factors leading to this moving-out of industry have included the shift of manufacturing operations further west, increased automation in factories, and a general decline in U.S. steel and coal sectors, as well as dynamics of globalization and the offshoring of production (Kapp et al. 2015). As Knauss notes, “While some cities and towns have managed to adapt by shifting focus towards services and high-tech industries, others have not fared as well, witnessing rising poverty and declining populations” (Syracuse.com October 24, 2017). In Syracuse, the most notable indicator of Rust Belt identity is the alarming poverty rate that has continued to increase in recent years. Here, extreme poverty is heavily concentrated in the Near South and Near West Side neighborhoods, where Black and Latino residents predominantly live, and in the North Side neighborhood where almost all new refugees are resettled (Van Deusen 2002).
Table 1. Top 20 older industrial cities in population loss and their 2000 residential vacancy characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Population decline 1960–2000 (%)</th>
<th>Vacant units (% of total units)</th>
<th>Other vacant (% of vacant units)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis, MO</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>37.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youngstown, OH</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland, OH</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo, NY</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh, PA</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit, MI</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utica, NY</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrisburg, PA</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntington, WV</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>34.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binghamton, NY</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saginaw, MI</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dayton, OH</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint, MI</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati, OH</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newark, NJ</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>26.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Syracuse, NY</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scranton, PA</td>
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<td>11.4</td>
<td>29.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rochester, NY</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>24.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baltimore, MD</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton, OH</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2017, Syracuse’s poverty rate ranked 9th worst in the U.S. As of 2019, incremental improvement and being outpaced by other rust belt cities such as Buffalo placed Syracuse 18th on the poverty list (Syracuse.com). Important to note is the dynamic between poverty in the city of Syracuse and increasing prosperity on its outskirts and in the country generally. Census records show that between 2015 and 2016, even while poverty rates improved in most of the country, Syracuse’s already desperate poverty rate increased further (Syracuse.com September 14, 2017). Although the national poverty rate decreased to 12.7 percent in 2016, data shows that the poorest people in Syracuse and other Upstate New York cities were only further left behind while other portions of the population experienced economic recovery.

Poverty has stood out as a red flag issue in Syracuse, especially since 2015 when a study by a Rutgers University professor revealed the alarming fact that Syracuse has the single highest rate of extreme poverty concentrated among blacks and Latinos of any city in the country. Over time, poverty has, “spread out from the city’s core to the Near South, Near Southwest and North Side” (Syracuse.com September 14, 2017). Syracuse’s North Side, formerly populated and given its distinctive character by Italian, Polish and other European immigrants, now represents a refugee ghetto of sorts. Virtually all refugees newly resettled in Onondaga County are placed in Syracuse’s North Side neighborhood. One reason for this is so that they can be within walking distance to the offices of the two refugee resettlement agencies operating in Syracuse: Catholic Charities and Interfaith Works. The North Side, “has seen an unparalleled increase in the concentration of extreme poverty since 2000”. Extreme poverty means that at least 40 percent of people residing in an area live in poverty (Syracuse.com September 14, 2017).
Indeed, the correlation between crippling poverty on the North Side and the extremely high concentration of refugees placed there does not seem arbitrary. As Gilhooly and Lee note, “Since the mid 1970s, the majority of refugees in the U.S. have been resettled in urban areas (Marks 2014; Singer and Wilson 2007). Over the decades, this policy has resulted in resettlement in some of the most deprived urban neighborhoods (Zhou and Bankston 1994; Singer & Wilson 2007; Laugar 2010)” [ quoted in Gilhooly and Lee 2017, 38]. Thus, the nationwide pattern of resettling refugees in economically struggling and underserved urban neighborhoods is not haphazard. Nor, according to the small number of studies that have been done, does it seem that this poverty is primarily an effect of refugees living there (Syracuse.com March 14, 2016).

Rather, many city officials, including Syracuse former mayor Stephanie Miner, see welcoming refugees as a “long-term investment” in the future of the city (Syracuse.com March 14, 2016). Minor, who was active in promoting Syracuse as a refugee resettlement destination, stated publicly on several occasions that she believes refugees are an “economic engine” for the community despite the initial payout that their establishment in the community requires (Syracuse.com March 14, 2016). Refugees are supported by social services paid for by federal funds for their first eight months. Then, if they are still on assistance, that money “comes from the same pot as any local person”, according to Helen Malina, directory of Interfaith Works CNY. Yet, data shows that refugees tend to utilize public assistance for a relatively short period in comparison with U.S.-born individuals (Syracuse.com March 14, 2016).
From 2007 to 2017, the average annual number of new refugees coming to Onondaga County, where Syracuse is located, was around 900. The largest number was in 2016 when 1,466 new refugees arrived. However, this number took a nosedive after President Trump’s inauguration in January 2017, with his temporary suspension of new refugees. This was followed by his putting in place multiple iterations of what has come to be known as “the travel ban” and decision to decrease the total number of refugees allowed into the country by half. In practice, far less than the 45,000 quota actually arrived and during the Trump years refugee and as a result programs for resettlement in the U.S. virtually came to a halt. Resettlement organizations closed across the country with no federal funding and no new refugees to resettle. In Syracuse, Catholic Charities and Interfaith Work cut their employees’ pay, held fundraisers, and sought emergency donations from the public to avoid closing completely. Meanwhile, the demographics, economy, and local geography of Syracuse has already been significantly transformed by the arrival of thousands of refugees from various world regions since 2000, just as the city was shaped by the arrival of German, Greek, Irish, Italian, Polish and other European immigrants in the 1800 and early 1900s.
Where Onondaga County’s refugees came from, 2007 to 2016

Onondaga County received 9,538 refugees since 2007. The most came from Burma, a country in southeast Asia.

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN FOR ONONDAGA COUNTY REFUGEES

(Countries with 10 or more refugees are labeled)

Countries of origin and number of refugees, 2007 to 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burma, 2,409</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan, 2,075</td>
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<td>Somalia, 1,681</td>
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<td>Iraq, 829</td>
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<td>Dem. Rep. of the Congo, 816</td>
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Graphic from:

Syracuse’s Onondaga County welcomes refugees at the highest per-capita rate in the state of New York and at the third highest rate in the nation (Syracuse.com November 21, 2017). Specifically, of the more than 70,000 Myanmar refugees who have been resettled from camps in Thailand to the U.S. (UNHCR January 29, 2014), 2,409 have been resettled in Onondaga County, whose major metropolitan area is Syracuse, (Syracuse.com). According to news source Syracuse.com, “Onondaga County [has] received 9,538 refugees since 2007. The most came from Burma...” (Syracuse.com February 9, 2017). The other nine of the top ten countries that refugees in Onondaga County came from include Cuba, Syria, Sudan, Eritrea, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Somalia, Burundi and Bhutan. Anthropologist Retika Desai (2018; 2021) writes about the lives of Bhutanese refugees resettled in Syracuse. Her work highlights the degree to which wage-labor and capitalist structures of time characterize experiences of resettlement for refugees in Syracuse. She shows how even in the refugee camp, before resettlement, Bhutanese refugees spend months “resting” in preparation of the “night and day” labor they know they will have to perform when they reach the U.S. (Desai 2021). Desia powerfully illustrates how knowledge about life in resettlement circulates through refugees’ transnational networks. I found this to be true in my research also.
Karen friends and interlocutors in Georgia have close ties with Karen family members and friends in Syracuse and Buffalo and thus were the ones telling me about the area when I was preparing to move there for graduate school. Similarly, when I was in Mae La refugee camp, friends there informed me that the next “Global Karen” (a diasporic Christian leadership group) meeting was set to occur in Syracuse. Karen friends in Syracuse told me that Mae La had flooded terribly when I was en route there for my research. Similarly, friends I met in Thailand have put me in touch with Karen folks in Syracuse and alerted me of events happening locally. Given this degree of connection, it is usurping that in recent years Karen refugees initially resettled in other parts of the U.S. have moved to CNY cities like Syracuse, Buffalo and Utica, drawn by connections with family and friends and the opportunity to be part of larger, more established communities of Karen people and to garden together (New York Times August 10, 2014).
Karen Communities in Syracuse

While it is difficult to obtain an exact count, reports have estimated Syracuse’s current Karen population at 2,500 (Cornell Southeast Asia Program: Burma/Karen Project). The appeal of joining already established Karen communities, is not only the opportunity to be around people who speak one’s language—though that is significant—but also to be included in networks of reciprocity, to find jobs through friends and acquaintances, to be able to access foods and plants from home, and to partake in religious and cultural events and holidays. Perhaps most notable
among these events and holidays are the elaborate festivities (including dancing and theatre performances) that are part of Karen New Year celebration taking place either in December or January, as based on a lunar calendar (New York Times August 10, 2014). In Syracuse the benefits of such “establishment”, include several Karen Christian churches and a Karen Buddhist temple. Additionally, Syracuse boast Karen restaurants and grocery stores as well as establishments run by members of other ethnic groups from Burma that furnish many of the vegetables, spices, meats, herbs, teas, and cosmetic products (such as the famous Thanaka made from ground tree bark and worn mostly by women and children across Burma) from home, that would otherwise be very difficult to come by in the United States.

Engagement with Food, Plants and Sensory Memory

In addition to accessing foods and plants through the more formalized channels of Karen markets/grocery stores, people often trade and share seeds and other coveted but hard to find items from home. Here the continuation of biocultural traditions extends from the materials of foods and plants themselves to communities of practice (utilizing Karen cooking and gardening techniques) and even to the subtle but significant transformation and creative use of new landscapes and public spaces. Many Karen living in Central New York as well as those in other parts of the country (See FRANK 2015; Gilhooly and Lee 2017; transplantingtraditions.com) defy local expectations of land use, and perhaps local regulations as well, by locating places to forage, hunt, fish and cultivate small farms or gardens. In Syracuse, these practices often take place within urban and peri-urban settings as this is where refugees are primarily resettled.

Many Karen people in the U.S., such as those working industrial jobs in Syracuse, will go to great lengths and expense to get Karen “jungle food”, as some describe it, such as herbs,
thorn, special types of pickles and even monkey meat. One of the owners of a Karen grocery store in Syracuse where I have conducted preliminary fieldwork, has impressed upon me just how expensive (such as 25 dollars/lb. for fresh thorn) and how hard to come by these things are. Yet, she relays with her own sense of amazement how consistently and ardently hard-working, ordinary Karen people will make the sacrifices necessary to procure these tastes and perhaps medicines of home.

Furthermore, there is a significant traffic of seeds that goes on between Karen communities in the U.S. and contacts in refugee camps in Thailand. Karen individuals living in the U.S. will often send requests for seeds to family members in the camps, and individuals living in the U.S. and traveling back will similarly carry with them requests, and make it a point to bring back sought-after seeds upon their return (Gagnon 2013). Through my conversations and time spent cooking, gardening and eating with Karen individuals in Syracuse and Georgia, I believe there is good evidence that foods and plants of home help Karen refugees get through long days at factory jobs and connect to memories of home, including the people, places and spheres of meaning and experience they have left behind (see Gordillo 2004).

**Methods: Doing Multi-sited Ethnography of People and Plants in the Context of Armed Conflict and Forced Migration**

-“One of the challenges of research with refugees (or any population in precarious conditions) is how to provide an account of people’s lives and struggles without either painting a picture of utter abjection or describing a scene of unending resistance.” -Elizabeth DeLuca

To answer my research questions, I needed to collect detailed evidence about Karen research participants’ engagements with plants in each of my fieldsites in connection with their discourses, stories and conditions of daily life. To gain this information, I engaged in sustained
participant observation and apprentice with consultants in cultivation, foraging, processing of plants, shopping and cooking in each of my three fieldsites. I conducted fourteen months of fulltime ethnographic dissertation research across three fieldsites. In each location, research included in-depth, semi-structured interviews focusing on plants, food and gardening as well as the broader conditions of life in the different places research participants had lived, and discussions about their aspirations for the future.

I conduct a total of 64 formal interviews with different people, of which all but three were recorded (according to the preference of some people to not be recorded). In addition, I had over 200 informal conversations related to my research with people in these different locations. I had 3-5 key research participants in each fieldsite. Interviews were conducted in English and S’gaw Karen depending on the research participants’ languages abilities and preference. For those conducted in Karen I had assistance from an interpreter. I recorded these interviews and had them back-translated by a different person in order to cross reference with the translation I was given by my interpreter. I paid all interpreters and translators at or above the rate that the UNHCR pays its interprets in the camps.

In particular, the person who I refer to as Paw Lay Lay in this dissertation and elsewhere who was my interpreter and research assistant in Mae La camp was vital to my research not only in that location but elsewhere and in my understanding of the context of my various fieldsites and Karen experiences generally. Sadly, due to security reasons I cannot name her here. However, I consider this project in many ways a collaboration with her and wish that I could recognize her contribution in a more meaningful way. Perhaps at another place and time.

In June 2018, I begin six months of fieldwork living fulltime and serving as a volunteer college teacher in Mae La Camp, near Mae Sot, Thailand. Upon the completion of that part of
my participant observation research, in January 2019 I began two months of fulltime research and volunteer teaching at a college in the Salween Peace Park. I then spent two months conducting research in Chiang Mai Thailand with Karen NGOs, Karen leaders and academics, and I presented my research findings to interested groups. From May to August 2019, I conducted research with Karen communities in Syracuse, New York. In September 2019, I initiated data analysis and dissertation write-up.

Unlike prior investigations that have focused on Karen communities either within Myanmar, in camps in Thailand, or in third country resettlement locations, my research traced Karen itineraries of home, flight and exile. By investigating networks of plants, seeds, and people across geographies, I have sought to contribute to a more holistic understanding of Karen experiences of armed conflict and forced migration. It is my hope that my research findings will provide critical insights into the socio-political and environmental realities in and across these places. Moreover, through this dissertation I hope to advance theory and ethnographic methods relating to the globally critical nexus of climate and sustainability, armed conflict, and forced migration. In this vein, I discuss my methodological consideration and some of the approaches I utilized given this project’s unique challenges and complexities.

*Multi-sited Ethnography*

The first consideration I faced in my research was that of using multi-sited methods (Marcus 1995). A suite of questions has been raised about multi-sited methods, including how will depth or “thick description” (Geertz 1973) be obtained? How will ethnographers manage to have the resources and language abilities needed? And can substantive relationships be formed with consultants? (Falzon 2009; Grandia 2015; Sorge and Padwe 2015). In response, scholars have
proposed strategies for improving multi-sited methods while also reconsidering apparent
disadvantages to view them in a positive light (Coleman and Von Hellermann 2011; Dalsgaard
2013; Falzon 2009). For example, Falzon suggests that the “shallowness” of relationships and
local knowledge produced may offer valuable insight into how mobile consultants experience
their cultural worlds (Falzon 2009). Additionally, having knowledge of distant places and people
meaningful to consultants may grease the wheels of research by building rapport or facilitating
access (Fitzgerald 2006, 5). These all proved to be true in the course of my research, especially
as networks of personal connections in one location facilitated and deepened connections with
people in other locations.

In this project I have tracked a heterogeneous group of people in relationship to their
diverse array of plants. In this sense I suggest that my dissertation is a multi-species, multi-sited
ethnography that follows relationships between people and plants across spaces of armed conflict
and forced migration. I believe my approach can also be described as a multi-sited tracing of
“memory-scapes” (Basu 2013, 115). When approaching research with people who have
experienced war and displacement, and seeking to understand their memories, there are ethical
issues that need to be considered beyond the usual debates of multi-sited methods.

Ethnography of the Warzone, Displacement and Resettlement

A persistent challenge for anthropology is to reshape methods to enable a sophisticated analysis
of warzones (Nordstrom 1997). For, classic participant observation cannot be used for the
inspection of chaotic and rapid social changes, such as refugee flow. There is a need for a new
ethnography: the ethnography of unstable places (Greenhouse et al. 2002) that problematizes the
position of an observer and participant and forces anthropologists to study "a process (political
violence and creative resistance) rather than a circumscribed locale” (Nordstrom 1997:10). Yet, numerous questions remain: During periods of mass violence “what is an appropriate distance taken from our subjects? What kinds of participant-observation, what sort of witnessing are adequate for the scenes of genocide and its aftermath?” (Schep...Hughes 2002:374) How do we interpret the recollections people provide, when it is the unspoken that often says the most? (Manz 2004:299) “How do we write effectively against terror?” (Taussig 1984:1) and what can we ethically disclose? (Warren 1993:386). Schep...Hughes reminds us that anthropologists have an obligation to document what people narrate as their own histories. Thus, writing becomes a “site of resistance”, so that anthropology becomes an agent of social change (Schep...Hughes 1992:28; Tambiah 1996:140). Such dynamics of social change are especially near to the surface in the liminal and contested spaces that are conflict-affected areas, refugee camps and places of resettlement. While the fieldsites I worked in were not places where mass violence was presently occurring, one (the Salween Peace Park) was a militarized and conflict-affected area. That area has now, as of March 2021, become a war zone. My friends, including my fellow teachers at the college, my students, relatives of my friends and acquaintances that I made during my research are now fleeing, hiding and struggling for their lives. In addition to engagements in response to these recent developments, my research examines the long-term impacts of mass violence on peoples’ lives and ongoing conditions of uncertainty.
An interview in the garden, Mae La camp. Photo by Naw Thi Klo Poe.
Part I. Severing Sovereignty
Poems

Welcome

To a place that straddles a line
A mountain ridge and a river both

A place of overwhelming green
And abundant mud when the rains come

A place where the currency belongs to one nation
And the time to another

A place where languages overlap
Like the leaves of the rooves

Welcome to a temporary place that has seen built schools,
churches, pagodas, mosques and recording studios

And when one school burned completely,
Rebuilt with miraculous speed

A place with cemeteries on hilltops, a cathedral of tress
Where the young and the old are buried alike
A place where the water is sometimes muddy
And where nine Kg. of rice doesn’t stretch the month

Welcome to a place that everyone is hoping to leave
But to which some, in far off lands, wish to return

*Heh Kay, Heh Kay*

“Come back home, come back home”
Are the words on everyone’s lips, in everyone’s ears

But we do not yet know
Exactly, where that may be.
The week after the flashbacks returned,

Memory seeping and soaking

Into everything

That angelic baby—

So close to being a human

Departed from us

Eyes closed and lips pink.

He was buried in the high cemetery

Populated by trees

Seemingly already halfway between heaven

And this muddy green world of those who

Remain despite

Because our throats were too dry

The plumbing did it for us.

The blue plastic water pipe burst
In lieu of our hearts
And filled the apartment with
An urgent torrent of water.
We had to find the main valve
And shut it for a while
Least we drown.

That morning, after the funeral
The fever returned
I went to my bed
And danced with shadows
In and out of sleep for two days
Until it broke
And I returned to life
The air smelled fresh.
I chose to eat

During that same week
The clothes were all dirty
Because the water ran brown.
The rain did not cease
For days and nights and days.
The remaining friends
Like the remaining clean shirts
Became more precious
As each one departed
Things grew quieter
In that time and the drains
Of all the sinks clogged
The water backed up
And had to be scooped out
With a pink plastic bucket by hand
In other states and countries
The floodwaters rose
And took life
The price of a bag of rice swelled
To four times its usual size, they said
And months of planting was drowned
Yet,

As I lay in my bed

Under the purple mosquito net

Still, I heard the students singing

Their voices soaring and falling

In harmony below me

Behind my headboard

Though I could not see it

I knew, the mountain was still as ever
In the Christian cemetery at dusk on the day the dead are remembered. Photo by the author.
Dear Self

Can you please write something that is not about the sounds of the rain?

Or the magical bird calls of geckos on your ceiling

And frogs and insects in the tropical forest night

Just behind the headboard of your bed?

Can you not write about the sounds of students’ voices

Rising and falling in rounds of harmony below where you lie

Or the lonely, warm lights of houses perched on the edge

Of the mountain across the way?

Can you please write something didactic: biting and useful

Instead of wondering on and on

At the muddy wet beauty-mixed-with-sorrow of it all?
Opo squash leaves growing on a handmade trellis, after a rain. Photo by the author.
Narrative Interlude: Getting Oriented in a Liminal Space

It is July 2018, rainy season in Mae La refugee camp—technically a “temporary shelter” since Thailand is not a signatory to the UN 1951 Refugee Convention. I am newly arrived to the camp, as an anthropology student who came to do her dissertation research and as the new volunteer teacher at one of the colleges in the camp, where I am living. The rains have slackened enough (a rare event) for me to get out of my upstairs dormitory, and away from the college compound and to trek up the muddy track that leads through the rest of the single zone of the camp that I am allowed to be in…and up the mountain. This walk is to become a regular practice for me during the six months that I will live in the refugee camp. It will be an anchoring activity that helps me process everything I am learning through interviews and conversations, and through what I am seeing, and to work through all my various emotions—that will range from sadness, frustration, despair, joy, loneliness, and ambivalence—while moving my legs and getting fresh air: one of the best means of clearing one’s head.

I hike up the narrow path, past bamboo houses on stilts with hand-woven leaf rooves, the only kind of structures allowed in this supposedly temporary shelter, which has now existed for thirty-four years. My sandals are sliding in the mud underneath me, which makes me think about the Burmese language saying, used by rural people, “phanet si”, ဖိနပ်စီး ("phanet" being a sandal and “si” meaning to ride) or to ride one’s sandals, since, according to by Burmese language teacher, to rural people, sandals are considered a technology. I remember my Burmese teacher in Madison, Wisconsin, himself from a rural part of Myanmar telling me this and laughing deeply, in the endearing and distinctive way he does, pocking fun at his own humble origins. I pass chickens and ducks pecking around the foot of houses, large black pigs, who will make fatty pork one day, lounging in their tiny, rooved pens and looking quite bored.
I walk past yards adorned with ornamental plants including roses creeping over fences, past trellises draping bitter melons off them, and one particularly notable large leafy plant, which looks like a Taro plant that has been carefully draped with a green mesh fabric around its base. This is most likely to protect it from pecking chickens, or the energetic children who like to hang out around that spot, chasing each other and playing games, including the hand-clap games that I will later teach them, and which they will then want to play with me every time I pass that way on my walk. I don’t know yet of our soon-to-be routine: them chasing me up the hill at a short distance, giggling and holding out their hands in anticipation. As for now, I go up and up, past the sound of a learner’s violin music coming creakily from the entry level of one house. I go past the little storefront installed at the threshold of someone’s home with colorful fake flower garlands draped on display and items on offer ranging from tomatoes and cucumbers, to bottled drinks, chips, and small green plastic tubs of thanaka a traditional Burmese beauty product and sunscreen made from ground tree bark.

My legs carry me up and onwards as I struggle to comprehend this place that will be my home for these next many months. I have been preparing myself for this experience, in different ways, for over seven years now, ever since I first met and became close friends with two Karen families resettled in my home state of Georgia, U.S.A. Both families had come from Mae La camp. As I get higher up the mountain, the houses grow fewer and the terrain rockier. I realize that I am no longer in the village area, but rather am in a high agricultural field at the far edge of the camp, the direction, by road, leading away from the Thai town of Mae Sot and towards the “back way” into rural parts of Myanmar’s mixed control Karen State. I find myself as high as I can safely reach with my flimsy sandals that will slide under me at any moment
without notice. I am surrounded by tall corn stalks with only one small farmers’ shelter in sight, and, I realize, a striking view before me.

I turn and look out over the camp. What greets my eye is a vista with mountains on either side and, in the middle, a valley that stretches as far as the eye can see, cut down the middle by a serpentine stream along the banks of which strips of land for planning proliferate. There are bamboo houses from this mountain slope on which I stand, all the way to where my line of sight ends in yet more hills covered with cramped bamboo houses. I know there are many more beyond that. There are roughly 36,000 people still living in this camp that is really a small city, as many people who live here, and many who have left and been resettled, such as my Karen friends in New York and Georgia often told me.

As I look out over this expanse of land and think of the lives contained therein, I strikes me forcefully: the fact that so many people have been born and lived their whole lives here, and that many have died here. I think about how for so many residents of the camp, this spit of green nestled between mountains contains nearly all their day-to-day experiences, as well as the milestones of their lives. It is a space which they can rarely, if ever leave, due to the strictly closed and militarized nature of the camp: something that is uncommon among refugee camps worldwide. It is in fact, quite a lucky thing that I have the opportunity to stay here, as it has always been difficult for foreigners to visit, and especially to stay, and has grown increasingly so in the last one to two years. Thailand was pushing very hard for the closure of the camp in 2016, the culmination of years of warning that this would happen, beginning around 2014 when Burma appeared to be democratizing.

However, the horrific reality of Rohingya genocide in Myanmar in the summer of 2017 has slowed the process of forced repatriation as donors recognize that it is not yet safe to send
people back in mass, and especially when they are resistant to going. In the fall of 2018, the suspension of talks led to the stalling and then official breakdown of the ceasefire agreement between Karen and Burmese forces will further contribute to this. Now things hang in an uneasy limbo, with conditions inadequate for life in the camp. Refugees have barely enough food and materials for repairing their houses, which by the rules of the camp must be built of temporary natural materials that require routine replacement. The camp infrastructure is in disrepair and there are increased restrictions on flow of people and information in and out of the camp. Nonetheless, this is not bad enough yet to force people back to the potentially deadly landscape of their home villages on the Myanmar/Karen side of the border. Many of the places camp residents come from remain conflict-affected, with active fighting still ongoing in some areas and with oppression by the Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw, and ethnic/racial discrimination, landmines, and poverty present in virtually all areas for Karen and other ethnic minority peoples.

The world beyond the barbed wire enclosure and military checkpoints of the camp is something camp residents are at once deeply connected to, and not. As I will come to learn in my six months living here, and from return trips: this camp that straddles a creek, this liminal space that straddles two worlds— those of the forests and agricultural fields of Kawthoolei and the Special Economic Zone and border city of Mae Sot, Thailand located an hour away by car— represents a space where the future is actively contested. This is a space that begs the question: what constitutes a life worth living?
View of Mae La camp from the mountain at the back of zone C. Photo by the author.
Chapter Two

Torn from the Roots: Agricultural Forgetting in Mae La Camp

Introduction: Becoming Refugees

- “We had to flee our village [because of the fighting] and go into the forest, and then we learned that we had to go to the border. Some people told us, “So now you will become refugees.” But we didn’t even know what that was.” - Interview with elder gardener

- “While we have been living in refugee camps, we have slowly been losing our heritage, our wisdom and our ways. For our children, rice comes from a warehouse, not grown by our own hands.” - David Saw Wah, The CAN Handbook

Shock and Agricultural Forgetting

In this chapter I illustrate the various ways that the process of “becoming refugees” (Besteman 2016) in Mae La camp severs individuals from their homes in Southeastern Myanmar or Kawthoolie and the practices that have enabled them to survive as small-scale farmers there. This severing is facilitated in the camp in large part through a phenomenon I call “agricultural forgetting.” This is the process by which linkages between people and plants are broken generationally. Agricultural forgetting, I suggest, is a human forgetting of knowledge about plant biodiversity and agricultural practices as well as an affective estrangement from plant lives. Along with dispossession and exile, this forgetting is facilitated by social and economic factors including privatization—or the enclosure of the commons—biopolitical regimes, and
commercialization\(^3\) (see Nazarea 2005; Seremetakis 1994; Kloppenburg 2010). These are articulated in especially sudden and forceful ways in the camp, where the “shock” of displacement seems to clear the slate for new more-than-human social arrangements.

This is in line with Naomi Klein’s theory of “the shock doctrine”, which posits that it is in the aftermath of natural disasters and war that corporations and their affiliated national governments capitalize on opportunities to forcibly privatize what were previously public sectors or communally held resources (Klein 2007)\(^4\). I do not see agricultural forgetting in the camp as a teleological process—and especially do not believe that it is directly traceable to intertwined corporate interest and the actions of the United States government as Klein suggests of the examples in her book. The shock and forgetting happening in the refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border is more nuanced than this. It involves multiple actors with distinct motivations, shaping already complex conditions of life on this human and resource frontier (Taylor 2016). However, I believe Klein’s fundamental concept of the “double shock” is particularly illuminating in this context. Such a double shock is characterized by the shock of natural disaster or war followed by a human-created economic shock. These dual shocks together produce a space of social rupture in which sweeping privatizations are made possible that would otherwise be strongly opposed. In making this argument I build on the substantial literature about refugee camps as spaces of transformation underwritten by shifting humanitarian ideologies of global care, security and governance (Ilcan and Rygiel 2015; Malkki 1992; Tazzioli 2019). I explore questions about the humanitarian governance of refugees these scholars have raised in regard to

\(^3\) These processes have been occurring in many parts of the world, becoming heightened in the 19th and 20th centuries and continuing until present.

\(^4\) Out of respect for survivors of torture, I strongly disagree with and wish to distance myself from Klein’s use of physical torture as a metaphor for economic and social suffering. I here wish to preserve a strong distinction between the two.
technology, data use, and identity by applying them to the lesser-understood domain of agrarian transformations taking place in refugee camps.

Agricultural forgetting in the camp is bound up with the shifting valorization of different types of expertise: privileging modern agricultural science rooted in Enlightenment thinking over traditional and Indigenous way of knowing (see Kimmerer 2013; Todd 2017). Such an emptying and refilling of expertise becomes especially possible in the context of the camp where power differentials between refugees, NGO workers, and aid practitioners are stark. These power imbalances create a hierarchy of legitimate knowledge, even while these discourses are actively contested and internally complex. In Mae La camp specifically—located in Tak province on the Thailand side of the Thai-Myanmar border—the process of enforced forgetting about plant lives and the rupturing of peoples’ sensory and embodied connections with plants is also brought about by the particularities of life under securitized and highly restrictive encampment. In Mae La there is no freedom of movement for residents, and access to land is highly limited. In such a restrictive and “securitized” context, as Bjørn Møller suggests, although their identities are very different—the lives of refugees share much in common with those of fellow encamped peoples such as prisoners and captives (Møller 2015).

Throughout this chapter I make reference to “the camp” with the intended double-meaning of both Mae La camp specifically and “the camp” in the Agambenian sense (1998) where rights and political life (bios) is denied and where, in a state of bare life (zoe) one’s humanity is destabilized along with one’s agency and fundamental choice of life or death. Agamben writes, “The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (Agamben 1998, 7.2). By drawing on Agamben’s theoretical mobilization of

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5 Modern organic agriculture—especially on a large commercial scale—is not necessarily free from this thinking.
the camp I do not wish to diminish the tremendous complexity and heterogeneity that exists among very real forms of encampment worldwide. Nonetheless, I hope this unpacking of the experiences of Karen refugees in Mae La camp may prove illuminating for understanding the role of refugee and IDP camps as spaces of social and economic transformation more broadly.

Agricultural forgetting, as it occurs in the camp, is fundamentally a process of alienation. Through it, people are disconnected from intimate relationships with living plant species and from the non-commodified, miraculous, (re)production of plant life: the very basis of our own human life. A central feature of this forgetting is the rupture of the knowledge, ability and right to freely and openly save and share open-pollinated seed, which constitutes the basis of food sovereignty. Here, as I came to find, Southeast Asian regional transitions of depeasantization and urbanization are woven into the very interstices of peoples’ relationships with plants. In this chapter I illustrate how the shock of enforced agricultural forgetting takes place and also how it is contested through “nostalgia work and the commons” and “privatization without land or rights”.

Nostalgia Work and the Commons

Expectations vs. Reality in “the Field”

The narratives of NGO garden initiatives in the camp are beautiful and hopeful. As it happened, their inspiring agricultural handbook for refugees, The CAN Handbook, written by Karen refugee and former engineer David Saw Wa, in collaboration with The Border Consortium (TBC)\(^6\), reached me from across continents. As an undergraduate student of anthropology in Georgia, I had been “adopted” by and become school tutor and cooking/gardening apprentice to

\(^6\) TBC is the umbrella group of humanitarian organizations and NGOs that, in partnership with UNHCR and the Thai government, oversees the management of the camp.
two amazing Karen families. Reading the CAN Handbook prompted me, with the help of friends, to write a grant to begin a market garden in collaboration these two Karen families—growing traditional Karen vegetables for their home use and also for sale to local people (including the owner of the local Thai restaurant who religiously came to buy us out of long beans). Even this early on in my journey with Karen gardeners and gardens, this “make do” agricultural handbook filled me with wonder. It infused my thoughts with visions of a green resurgence from the exilic margins—be it the marginal fingernail of the Thai-Burma border or the peri-urban margins of Athens, Georgia.

This hope in grass-roots resistance and resilience had taken root in my heart, leading me to volunteer for a year on peasant farms in Europe, and later leading me to grad school, and eventually to the camp itself. This was met with the hard-to-stomach realization that these powerfully hopeful narratives belie expansive conditions of exclusion. This exclusion is so all-encompassing that, despite peoples’ inspiring perseverance and quiet forms of resistance, for most camp residents it precludes the realization of such a beautiful vision of a “green” resurgence from the margins. In the absence of widespread agricultural remembering, gardeners in the camp were learning and being taught new ways to struggle towards survival. The commons, as it were, was learning to become the plantation.

In addition to attending to pockets of sanctuary and possibility where they exist, I suggest it is equally important to observe larger-scale shifts taking place within the camp. A central shift, as I came to understand it, is the widespread agricultural forgetting leading to depeasantization and the severing of Karen sovereignty. Such an account of agriculture in the camp is necessary because more prevalent narratives of healing gardens and the upbeat discourses of livelihoods programs gloss the ruptures and present absences of human-plant relationships in this liminal
space. By doing so, these narratives obscure the enforced epistemological and bodily forgetting taking place across generations and between species.

As most Karen refugees have had to flee their villages or “run out”7 multiple times, leaving behind their physical homes and belongings and the farms and forest surrounding them (see Palmberger 2016, 236), such geographic dislocation and social rupture, coupled with the “blank slate” of the restrictive camp, has created gaps and silences in the transmission of memories generationally (Palmberger 2016; Mannheim [1928] 1952; Novak 2017) In some instances this rupture represents an unbridgeable chasm of understanding—what Azra Hromadžić refers to as a failure of “intergenerational grammar” (Hromadžić 2019). As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013) points out, inter-generational remembering as well as forgetting about homelands becomes uniquely configured both despite and because of physical distance and the multi-faceted movements of refugees, especially refugee youth, living in and beyond camps. While I did not come to the camp primarily looking for ruptures and absences, it was the narratives of friends and consultants that first alerted me to their importance. Often these narratives contrasted life in the camp now with how it had been in the past. In parable-like form the stories people told me critiqued the shift in values they saw taking place around them and, as many acknowledged, which they were deeply implicated in.

Critiquing the Present, Longing for a Convivial Past

Soon after my arrival to Mae La I started to notice the reoccurrence of people telling stories recalling a more cooperative and convivial past in the camp. In these stories, sharing homegrown food was a central feature of life. Paw Lay Lay, my close friend, consultant, and indispensable

7 This is the term many people I spoke with, especially young people, used to describe times when they had to flee their villages on foot because the Burmese army was attacking.
research assistant in the camp spoke frequently and at length about how things were different when she was a college student in the camp roughly ten years prior. One especially memorable recounting was while we were driving from the camp to the nearby border town of Mae Sot on a monthly grocery run for the school dormitory to one of the big-box bulk grocery stores there. Paw Lay Lay and I were squeezed in the bed of a full pickup truck as she recounted to me how during her time as a college student in the camp she and the other students had all worked in the garden and shared the produce together. Because of this they had plenty of fresh things to eat. “But now”, she said, the wind whipping our hair violently into our faces as we had to yell over the sound of the truck’s engine to be heard, “the students don’t get many green things.” She continued, “Now they mostly just have rice and chili and almost no vegetables. Back then when we had Thakapaw it was full of vegetables, but now they have just a few specks of green for looks.” Often, I joined the students in their open-air kitchen shed, with its impressively large firepits and long wooden tables, when they prepared and ate their twice-daily meal. This meal consisted of only a bowl of white rice with spicy chili powder (a Karen essential) mixed in with the hands, and a few slices of cucumber on the side. The school still had a garden plot cared for by the students, located just behind the dormitory where I stayed. However, an increasingly long rainy season with more flooding was making it difficult to utilize that low-lying land. Additionally, when I asked students about gardening they told me that some took part but many were not interested or didn’t know how to garden, especially those who had grown up in the camp.

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8 Such travel into Mae Sot was only possible due to special permissions given to school leaders. This is not possible for normal individuals in the camp, and even the school leaders make such trips with trepidation and obstacles.
9 Thakapaw is a traditional Karen rice porridge boiled with wild herbs and vegetables and sometimes with chicken, that is often referred to as the national dish. Despite its ubiquity there is extreme variety. Most people seem to agree that no two bowls of Thakapaw are alike.
On another occasion, when walking through the twisting back pathways of Zone C of the camp on the way to do an interview, Paw Lay Lay told me about the generosity of neighbors she experienced as a student. As we walked, I took in the onslaught of sights and sounds—from twisting vines and a narrow gurgling creek and bamboo huts perched on steep hillsides, to noisy ducks and ducklings bobbing along the path next to us. Fat black pigs with pink bellies pulled on their short rope leads. Paw Lay Lay lifted a purple and white polka dot umbrella above our heads to block the sun while expertly holding on to her htamein\textsuperscript{10} to keep it out of the mud. As we made our way, she pointed out to me one of the female students’ dormitories—a long bamboo hut on stilts. This prompted her to tell me about how when she was a student staying in the dormitory, there was an older neighbor woman who “adopted her”. This woman would check on her, give her fresh vegetables from her garden, and let her stay at her house for periods of time. This relationship of fictive kinship endured for years as Paw Lay Lay stayed in touch with the woman even after she went to the Philippines to earn her master’s in theology.

As we continued to ascend the steep, muddy path on our way to the interview she told me that these kinds of things don’t happen in the camp nearly as much as they used to. She lamented the fact that students are mostly concerned with their cell phones and not about building relationships with members of their community. She expressed that generally as things have gotten economically harder in the camp people are less willing to look out for one another in the way this kind woman had looked out for her when she was a young student, away from her family in a different camp. Social solidarity in the camp took on a golden aura in Paw Lay Lay’s stories about the past. People were cash poor then, and there was much less digital technology in

\textsuperscript{10} A htamein is a long straight traditional skirt, made from a brightly-colored and usually intricate piece of woven fabric wrapped around the body and secured at the waist.
the camp. Yet, in her telling of it, these were simpler times and people were happier. There was even a certain kind of abundance: that of fresh food and warm conviviality between neighbors.

Similarly, two adult male cousins, Saw Poe Wa and Saw La Ka Paw, who I met early on during my time in the camp described how it was the generosity of other people that had allowed them to move from living under a tree to living in a regular bamboo hut. One afternoon, sitting on a straw mat on the floor of the small home their families shared, the two cousins, Paw Lay Lay, and I talked for almost two hours with Paw Lay Lay translating. Steam rose from a pot boiling a few feet away as chicks peeped and scurried around the dirt floor pecking at rice grains. The eldest daughter of one of the men—tall, elegant and a first-year student of mine at the college—sat on the ladder to the loft chatting over messenger on her smartphone and half listening as we talked. Our conversation ranged from unbearably raw and depressing to hopeful and humorous, with these emotions often falling side by side. One of the cousins remarked on my persistent notetaking during the interview, following a particularly painful part of the conversation in which they described the terror they lived through during the Burmese army’s occupation of their village. He said, “if you want to write down everything [we have experienced] you will need many notebooks.”

The two cousins recounted to me their childhood growing up in a rural village in Karen state and helping their parents on their farms, as well as the Burmese military’s brutal occupation of their village in Brigade Three of Karen State. Because of the details they shared about this they asked me not to use their real names for fear that they or their families could still face retaliation. They described in detail how when they could finally no longer endure the terror and violence of the Burmese army’s occupation they decided to flee through the jungle, arriving to Mae La camp in 2008. They told me about the ensuing struggles and successes they found there.
Among their hopes for their children’s futures, they underscored their desire to transmit to them an understanding of and appreciation for the lives of plants and animals they themselves had gained growing up as subsistence farmers in their village. As one of the cousins recounted humorously and poignantly, “my children don’t even know how rice is grown. One day on the farming [TV] channel they were showing paddy being grown and I yelled to my children… ‘come quick, come quick, look—this is how you grow rice!’” Although both families were doing reasonably well now financially, having secured land for gardening and being able to send their children to school with the small profit made from selling their vegetables in the market, this had not always been the case. By their own admission, they were among “the lucky ones” in the camp as such humble upward mobility was far from accessible to all.

They struggled immensely when they first arrived in the camp. Because there were not enough houses and rations for everyone, they had slept outside with only a tarp to cover them. “We were six people sharing one pillow!” one of the cousins recounted, giving me a chance to laugh in the midst of a story that was so weighed with sadness my body feel as if it was made of lead. They told me how it was the kindness of others that allowed them to recover from the initial shock of displacement and to begin to “stand on their own two feet”—a phrase I heard again and again during my research. The students from the school where I stayed had generously brought food to them. Eventually, the principal of the school secured a house that he gifted to them, where they have now lived for ten years. The generosity of neighbors, combined with the cousins’ skills in farming (one cousin had even attended a prestigious agricultural university in central Myanmar, a rare opportunity for a rural Karen farmer), had allowed them to make a

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11 It is essential to note the role of shared ethnicity and race here—as darker skinned Rohingya Muslim residents of Mae La camp, and even Karen Muslims (whose authentic Karen identity some Karen Christians refute) have consistently faced discrimination and exclusion from such essential networks of reciprocity, to the extent that some have been forced to leave the camp and become undocumented works in Mae Sot (Human Rights Watch 2012, 74).
stable home for themselves. But they expressed their concern for the uncertainty of the future and their children’s’ lives as resources in the camp grew scarcer and the threat of forced repatriation loomed.

Several other people I spoke with similarly recounted to me how someone had given them a house after they arrived in the camp, having fled through the jungle while evading the Burmese military. This stands in contrast to the oftentimes prohibitive cost of buying a house in the camp with the average selling price in 2018 at around 30,000 Thai Bhat, approximately 1,000 USD. Taken together, I understand these stories to be illustrative of a perceived shift in values over time in the camp. More importantly, I see them as a means of critiquing the present social order and insisting that alternatives are not only possible, but in fact have already existed.

Even those who lamented these lost times of greater communal spirit admitted, with a sigh, that things simply work differently now. By doing so the tellers of these stories exemplified Svetlana Boym’s concept of “reflective nostalgia.” In contrast to restorative nostalgia, which Boym’s defines as stressing “nóstos (home) and attempts at transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home, reflective nostalgia thrives in álgos, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately” (Boym 2001) (see Anastario 2019, Chapter 312). It was through these frequently surfacing stories that I came to understand that in the eyes of many of my interlocutors and friends, social relationships in the camp have become less convivial over time as the general commercialization of life has increased (see Sutton 2001; 2013; 2021).

Indeed, records kept by The Border Consortium (TBC)13 indicate that around 2010, facing large incoming groups of newly displaced refugees and cuts in funding, TBC, in line with

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12 Thank you to Mike Anastario for introducing me to Boym’s scholarship, first in his talk at the Symposium of Australian Gastronomy and later in his book.
13 Formerly Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC).
global aid trends (Omata 2017) began promoting policies of “self-reliance” and targeting food provision to the most vulnerable people rather than everyone (TBC 2010). A central feature of this plan was encouraging refugees with access to land (about 25%) to not only consume their vegetables and distribute them to friends and neighbors, as was common, but to make a business by selling them (TBC 2010).

This new turn towards requiring refugees to meet the shortfall in provision for their basic needs with their own ingenuity and entrepreneurship while simultaneously lacking citizenship and rights (Arendt 1951)\(^{14}\), access to land, and freedom of movement resulted in vegetables being less commonly seen as items to share and more as commodities. As gardening became a means of earning much needed cash, what limited agricultural land there was in the camp became increasingly valuable and hard to access. These trends and the sense of social distance they carry with them have provoked reflective nostalgia for the sociality of times past— times that perhaps never existed just as such (Palmberger 2016). Boym says of nostalgia, “while futuristic utopias might be out of fashion, nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes it is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways. The nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space” (Boym 2001,152). The pervasive surfacing of such nostalgic accounts shows that even while people largely feel unable or unwilling to combat such changes in the here and now, the economic shock from repeated cuts in rations and the ways it has frayed their social fabric is very much registered. Through stories, the experience of this shock is given form and substance, articulated via the grammar of bland food and lost conviviality (Gold 2009; Sutton 2001). This opened my

\(^{14}\) As stateless refugees without citizenship and in many cases without even UNHCR documentation, the majority of residents of Mae La camp live out daily the paradox in Hannah Arendt’s famous statement that “citizenship is the right to have rights” (Arendt, 1951).
eyes to looking at gardens not only as small spaces of resistance and resilience but also as a fraught terrain of enforced forgetting. I came to see gardens in the refugee camp as micro-political interstices in which broad regional transitions are unfolding.
Privatization Without Land or Rights

- “*I have had to run so many times. And now, even this is not a permanent place.*”
  —Interview with a gardener

In this section I describe the ways in which the accelerated shift from the commons to commercialization has been taking place in the camp. I illustrate how agricultural forgetting is not only a symptom of this process but rather is integral to it. As I began looking more into why sharing and conviviality were perceived to be decreasing in the camp, I came to see that the articulation of the camp economy, rooted as it is in neoliberal ideals of “self-reliance” (Omata 2017), promotes individualism and entrepreneurial spirit as core values. That is, in the words of
Ilcan and Rygiel (2015), it “responsibilizes refugees.” The values that the camp economy mobilizes stand in contrast to the important role of communal ethos intrinsic to commoning practices “back home” in Karen villages in Myanmar and Kawkhoolie. Granted, these communal values manifest in different ways and to different extents in varying contexts.

Private property certainly exists in Karen or ethnically “mixed” villages “back home.” However, it is usually not state-recognized and is embedded within wider contexts of mutuality. Common practices of sharing labor, for example Ku farming\(^\text{15}\), and community forest management—which deliberately maintains some areas for communal use while reserving others, such as protected forests and riverbanks, for sacred purposes (Paul 2019, 4)\(^\text{16}\)—have together made group decisions about work and land management necessary. In such contexts cooperation and sharing, as opposed to self-reliance, are upheld as central values.\(^\text{17}\) At numerous points, spanning from growth and care to imbibement, plants and the foods they provide are understood not only as a central medium for enacting sharing but also as living beings who are partners in reciprocal relationships, and even as kin (for similar examples see Berrigan 2014; Hallam and Ingold 2014; Kimmerer 2013; Miller 2019; Todd 2017). Sharing and agricultural remembering are strongly linked and transmitted inter-generationally, as several ethnographers have illustrated (Aistara 2021; Gold 1998; Gordillo 2004; Sutton 2001). For Karen villagers

\(^{15}\) Ku, is the S’gaw Karen term that refers to rotational upland farming. The lands used for this are communally managed for most Karen villages (or Kaw) (Paul, 2019, 3); KESAN’s Climate Change video states, “Maw Lay Kho villagers have practiced Ku rotational farming since their ancestors time in order to produce food. This is done using collective labor. We don’t hire laborers” (KESAN 2018)

\(^{16}\) It has been well documented in the environmental anthropology and religion and ecology literature that areas reserved for sacred use often have important benefits for environment and conservation (see Bagwat et al 2005; Gadgil 2018 Scientific American; Kent, Eliza, 2013; Notermans et al. 2016; Sheridan and Nyamweru 2008; Singh, G. 2016; Susham et al. 2017). Additionally, the KESAN briefer on Kaw community land management states that, “All Karen Kaw (villages) include forest areas which must never be cleared. Taboos protect many of these forests, which are respected as the habitation of the spirits” (Paul 2019, 4).

\(^{17}\) This is true even if it the realization of these values is, necessarily, always only partial.
living in the rural highlands sharing and its attendant rituals—from the communal labor of rice planting to ritualized cooking of a specific dish for one’s mother-in-law-to-be—are also a means of collectively knowing and remembering plant lives.

Figures 2a and 2b: Images illustrating the central role of collective labor and sharing of food in a Karen village, as described. Photo Credit: Climate Change Film, KESAN 2018
The self-professed importance of sharing and mutual aid for members of rural Karen communities, and extending out to the global Karen community, was something I heard about repeatedly in informal conversations and interviews. Such discourse is also notably present in the narratives of Karen NGOs and CBOs (see KESAN 2018). Given this, it is hard to imagine that displaced people would be easily convinced to adopt the individualistic values of self-reliance promoted by humanitarian organizations and development NGOs in the camp. However, such changes are indeed taking place along the border—if unevenly and with pushback. As Philip Taylor writes of “frontier commoditization” in Southeast Asia:

The moral resources of post-socialist frontiers...are in a state of flux. Moral economies characterized by mutuality flourish alongside instrumental relations shorn of sentiment and trust...However, people’s capacity to mobilize social connections to secure their wellbeing is limited by the sheer volatility of frontier society (Taylor 2016, 151).

This moral “flux” can be seen in action through humanitarian discourses in the camp that promote earning a profit in order to be industrious and self-sufficient over building generalized reciprocity and the social safety net provided by having “good relationships”19. Importantly for humanitarian governance, a shift to refugee self-sufficiency would justify aid organizations scaling back their assistance (Omata 2017), which is often seen as inevitable as funds dry up due to donor fatigue, funding moving “inside” Myanmar, as well as more recent humanitarian crisis elsewhere that demand international support—including the genocide and mass displacement of Rohingya Muslims from Rakhine State in Myanmar.

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18 CBO stands for “community-based organization” and is often used to differentiate a grass-roots, Karen-run organization from an outside (Thai or International led) “NGO”.

19 This was a term that consultants brought up, voluntarily, again and again in interviews. It was clear that the work of “building good relationships” was something that was often on peoples’ minds and that they worked at. I was told numerous times by students working in dormitory gardens that such work was beneficial not only for the produce they got, but also for the benefit of “building good relationships.” As one young woman put it, with a smile, “we work together and laugh together, so we know our relationships will be good.”
Through interviews and participant observation I came to see the camp as a space where generalized shifts in core values—away from communal spirit and sharing, and toward individualism and self-reliance—is accelerated. Refugees are required to turn themselves into entrepreneurs, but there is just one caveat: they don’t possess land or rights (Omata 2017, 4). Residents of Mae La camp lack the right to own property and are not allowed to leave the camp. Neither do they have the right to work legally in Thailand. When it comes to establishing a business, even in the camp, the vast majority of people lack the basic resources required. Those who do manage to start a business, such as running a small shop out of their home or growing and selling vegetables, can only sell to other refugees whose main source of cash is remittances from relatives resettled in third countries. Because space is highly limited in the camp this creates a situation where inequality becomes heightened as refugees compete with one other by the standards of capitalism while living out the state of exception (Agamben 1998).

Although potentially seen as inevitable I suggest that these shifts in values and practices, *away from commoning and towards commercialized competition*, are significant. This is because of the role these shifts in values play in facilitating a broader regional transition from small-holding farms and the relative autonomy of rural communities to precarious migrant labor and de-peasantization (which I will discuss further in the next chapter.) Agricultural forgetting and the rupturing of Indigenous seed and political sovereignty are attendant to this transition. In short, it is not only a shift in livelihoods that is taking place but rather an ontological change. The realization of this change would help the Myanmar government and transnational capital capture

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20 This includes having control over the means of production and non-alienated labor for small-scale farmers, even if there is already significant seasonal or long-term out migration for the purpose of waged migrant labor, especially among younger generations in these communities (Cole lecture, November 2019). As I will discuss later in this dissertation, this autonomy from the Myanmar state is far from hyper-local. It is deeply embedded in and made possible by complex transnational relationships and global flows and connections.
lands and resources in the highlands of southeast Myanmar that have been stubbornly difficult for them to access until now. This is because, along with the mountainous terrain, famously sturdy practices of commoning and relational understandings of more-than-human socialities have been instrumental in fostering impressive levels of autonomy in rural Karen areas of Southeastern Myanmar/ Kawthoolei.

The Enforced Performance of Temporariness

One factor in particular that contributes to agricultural forgetting is the enforced performance of temporariness in the camp. Given the fact that Mae La camp has been in existence for over thirty years and that for many it is the only home they have ever known, it is an absurd situation that camp residents are required by Thai authorities to enact their temporary status on a daily basis. Ways in which performed temporariness is demanded of residents include a ban on permanent structures (officially only bamboo huts with leaf roofs are allowed), a prohibition against refugees using forest resources and, in the past, a rule that forbade the planting of gardens, since they would quite literally show refugees to be putting down roots in Thailand. The restriction on gardens was lifted in 2004 to dramatic results. As a friend and researcher mentor, Dr. Worland, who was volunteering in the camp at the time recounted to me dramatically over the phone one day, “after they lifted the ban gardens sprang up along the creek virtually overnight. It was incredible!” (personal communication). Even though camp residents are now able to grow gardens from season to season, the fact that they could lose their access to this land at any time is constantly at the front of peoples’ minds.

21 The same is true of other ethnic minority groups living in rural/peripheral parts of Myanmar, or what they also claim to be independent States with self-determination (Hong 2017).

22 Phone conversation between the author and Shirley Worland, September 2018, Mae La and Chiang Mai, Thailand.
Because people understand their places in the camp to be tenuous, as has been reiterated to them again and again and because they are trying to turn a profit, it is often seen as no longer worth people’s time, effort and limited space to save seed. Instead, gardeners have become habituated to receiving seeds each planting season from Service with Love, the agricultural NGO operating in the camp. In turn, when seeds are in short supply or when peoples’ first and second plantings have been washed away by floodwaters—as was a pervasive problem during my time in the camp—increasingly gardeners rely on purchasing hybrid seed from the market to meet the shortfall. These hybrid seed packets, produced by major agribusiness corporations, do not include Karen heirloom and traditional varieties. Due to this, Indigenous plant varieties and perhaps whole plant species, as sensory artifacts of memory (Seremetakis 1994), fall out of use among camp residents. Over time the collective memory of such local plant varieties, including how to cultivate them, their taste, distinctive hues, and the socialities they helped to constitute (Aistara 2013), will likely fade to the point of being hard to recall (Seremetakis 1994). This, in fact, is enforced agricultural forgetting.

Fighting for Space, Struggling to Survive

Along with living in the distinct temporality of perpetual temporariness, another aspect of life in the camp contributing to agricultural forgetting is lack of space. In Mae La, refugees have highly limited access to land and no freedom of movement outside the camp. In this “exceptional” (Agamben 1998) context, something that came as a surprise to me was the existence of land as private property and its centrality to the camp economy. Shortly after arriving, I learned that the

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23 This argument has most prominently been made by anthropologist C. Nadia Seremetakis, who illustrates such enforced sensory forgetting through the evocative example of the disappearing Rodathkhino peach in the context of Greece being disciplined into the biopolitical regime of the EU seed Common Catalogue.
seemingly uniform humanitarian space was something mapped onto the place only by relatively uninformed outsiders such as myself. This is similar to how the purportedly apolitical operations of the humanitarian regime is strategically used to mask the always existent politics of displacement and exile (Dunn 2017; Espiritu 2006; Waters and LeBlanc 2005). In reality, the camp during my time there was a complex and dynamic space where individuals understood themselves to be property-owners and renters. Private property included homes and residential plots as well as highly coveted and costly agricultural fields. The extensive, and apparently ad-hoc, informal sector around selling and renting land was initially shocking to me. Yet, I gradually came to see it as in-part an outgrowth of humanitarian and NGO initiatives that push refugees to become self-reliant entrepreneurs since continued aid funding is not guaranteed.

Private property ownership not only reflected existing inequality in the camp but was actively increasing stratification. It was also pressuring gardeners to adopt the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in order to achieve bigger, more plentiful, and more “beautiful” vegetables, herbs and flowers that would sell better at the camp market. This was essential for covering the cost of renting the land—and hopefully also making a profit. This is even while many gardens discussed with me their distaste for using chemical inputs and their fear that the chemicals were harmful, and while the official position of the agricultural NGOs operating in the camp was to promote organic gardening. All in all, it appeared that a multi-pronged shift was occurring in the camp by which gardeners were moving from the expected social protocol of sharing produce to selling it, and from traditional agricultural practices (in all their variety) to the rapid adoption of “conventional” (chemical) agriculture. In the process, an inter-generational forgetting of traditional knowledge about agriculture, seed-saving and biodiversity was
occurring. Gardeners were increasingly relying on purchased, hybrid seed instead of open-pollenated Indigenous seed saved from year to year.

Figure 3: Paw Laway Lu in her garden, tying bundles of sour leaf for sale while we talk. Photo by author.

In highlighting this shift, I adamantly do not wish to suggest that Karen people should somehow be constrained to an idealized box of behaviors or remain fixed in time and place. Rather, I seek to provide space for the voices of my consultants, many of whom voiced strong feelings about the change of peoples’ values over time, and who delivered powerful, grounded critiques of the unhealthy (in their view) chemically grown vegetables in the camp that drained their energy and caused their skin to break out, as multiple college students described to me in detail. While I seek to avoid the crude characterizations of a so-called “romanticized” view of

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24 These complaints, they noted, they had not suffered back home in Kawthoolei where the vegetables and “leaves” they ate were fresh and organically grown or wild.
Karen identity, I also want to pause to reflect on the way this word is often deployed. On one hand there is a very real the danger of portraying reified images of an entire group and thus helping to confine Indigenous peoples to “eco-prisons” (Cole lecture 2019). Such discourses implicitly suggest that it is the inherent obligation of Indigenous persons to bear the burden of reconciling humanity’s relationship with the natural world at the expense of their freedom and self-determination. Nonetheless, there is also violence done when scholars are too quick to invoke “romanticization” as inherently negative: the slightest whiff of which will automatically discredit any argument on the grounds of being sentimental, naïve, or dangerously nationalistic.

As anthropologist Bhrigupati Singh has discussed (lecture 2016) the damning label of romanization can, with one fell swoop, be used to discredit and thus silence the primary language with which people talk about the things that are meaningful to them. These are the more intangible parts of existence which “make life worth living” as opposed to the sterilized biopower of being “made to live” (Foucault 1976)—something humanitarian regimes have often been accused of doing (Dunn 2017; Stevenson 2014). Arguments both for the vital necessity of the way of life being foreclosed, and the argument against the tastelessness of regimes of “bare life” that force one to live, are often articulated through the language of the sensory and the embodied—of which food and taste are primary domains (see Dunn 2017; Gold 2009; Holtzman 2009; Trapp 2016).

Different forms of agricultural practices and the social relationships they engender between plants (and animals, and microbes) and people, and between people and people create

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25 These arguments often include claims to contested territory but potentially even more importantly, claims to modes of being including how time is experienced (Stevenson 2014), a sense of autonomy and certain forms of pleasure (Dunn 2017).
distinct “structures of feeling”, to borrow the words of Raymond Williams (1977). That is, they shape emotions and experiences that are not only internal to individuals, but rather which exist between sensing, feeling bodies in a historically specific context. As Tsing notes, carrying this idea across species boundaries:

Plantation crops have lives different from those of their free-living siblings; carthorses and hunter steeds share species but not lifeways. Assemblages cannot hide from capitalism and the state; they are sites for watching how political economy works. If capitalism has no teleology, we need to see what comes together—not just by prefabrication but also by juxtaposition (Tsing 2015, 23).

Following Tsing’s mandate to use juxtaposition as a tool, I consider the striking differences between agricultural practices in Karen villages “back home”, imbued as they are with spiritual and communal dimensions, and this camp agriculture based in necessity (Trapp 2016) and rational use value. As cultivating becomes a means of sorting winners from losers (Sassen 2010) as opposed to a more holistic and relational worldview, in the process much is forgotten. Domains of forgetting range from principles of “right being” that help to maintain good relationships between neighbors, and between humans and non-humans (including the gods), to more technical but also critical domains of knowledge such as how to save seed, make natural soil inputs, and traditional Karen systems for pest management (personal communication with Saw Ne Kaw). These forms of expertise, skill, and embodied knowledge passed down from generation to generation are being forgotten as ritualized sharing, traditional agricultural techniques, and seed-saving are being left by the wayside. This is in part due to the raw edge and

26 Raymond William’s concept of structures of feeling was important precursor to the explosion of interest in affect theory in recent decades.
27 Examples include which parts of the forest not to cut or disturb, which animals not to hunt, and the parts of the watershed that should be specially protected due to the presence of animist gods of “owners of the earth” (Cole lecture 2018; KESAN 2018; Paul 2019).
28 In-person interview between the author and Saw Ne Kaw, January 2019, Chiang Mai, Thailand
rupture cause by displacement itself. Yet, I argue it is being hardened by the “solutions” injected into this context that responsabilize refugees (Ilcan and Rygiel 2015), coupled with the economic fallout as aid is withdrawn while rights guaranteeing peoples’ humanity remain absent.

This sprawling forgetting has been unfolding throughout the world for decades due to the growth of industrial agriculture—with the increased geographic distance and alienation it engenders in food systems—as well as the rampant privatization of plant genetic resources (Kloppenburg 2010; Trauger 2014). However, in the camp this process is occurring at an intensified and accelerated rate. This is facilitated by a leveraging of the double shock (Klein 2007) experienced by Karen refugees. The initial shock is that of war and displacement, followed by economic and social shock as the aid that refugees are dependent on is withdrawn. Into this disarray are inserted the “ideas that are lying around” (Milton Freidman quoted in Klein 2007). These “convenient” wisdoms serve to transition Karen peasant farmers, as well as the plants they work and live with, from co-enacting a biodiverse commons to being denizens of the now ubiquitous—but always historically specific—plantation (Davis et al. 2019; Haraway 2015; Haraway et al. 2015; Tsing 2015).

Indeed, shocking/shock are accurate descriptors for the situation in the camp as I came to know it as well as the reverberating waves of emotion I experienced following my time there. The crumbling camp infrastructure (see fig. 4), severe flooding, frequent power outages, and stress around insufficient food rations all contributed to this protracted disquiet. Highlighting that this was not only something I experienced as a newcomer, was the fact that a burning topics of conversation during my time in the camp was the increased criminality there, especially reports of violent theft often tied to drug use.
This social unraveling was attributed by many to the same cause as the epidemic of suicides witnessed in the camp: desperation and loss of hope. As a flurry of international news reports detailed in 2017, in the two years preceding my arrival (2016 and 2017) 28 residents of Mae La camp took their own life and 66 attempted suicide (Asia News June 22, 2017). This is out of a population of roughly 38,000 people, giving the camp a suicide rate three times the world average. Many of those in Mae La who took their life during this time did so by intentionally ingesting weed killer, such as in the case of a young expectant couple’s double suicide detailed in a medical journal article (Fellmeth et al. 2016). As reported by Reuters, “Nearly four in ten deaths were from drinking weed-killer which is widely available in the camps where residents grow food” (June 19, 2017). Several times, people I spoke with made reference to others obtaining herbicides in unmarked containers from Thai farmers outside the camp and drinking them to end their life. This sense of desperation to the point of suicide touched especially close to home when a student in the dormitory I lived in attempted to take her own life by hanging herself with the mosquito net that hung above her bed. In such a context, for those still committed to life with dignity, keeping hope was tantamount to survival.

**Marginal Land, Vanishing Hectares**

In addition to the forced performance of temporariness and the struggle for space and survival, a further factor contributing to agricultural forgetting was the marginal nature of the land itself. Lack of space and poor conditions for farming made it difficult for residents to continue sophisticated agricultural practices from home. This is being increased by the rapid onslaught of climate change and related disturbances such as floods that are actively disappearing what little fertile land is available; droughts are also common, making the seasons increasingly
unpredictable. Mae La, like many refugee camps worldwide, is situated on marginal land, “on land nobody wanted” (Dunn 2017, 18). It is land poorly suited for agriculture. The particular land on which Mae La camp is located had previously been a natural reserve overseen by the Thai government. As the director of the main agricultural NGO operating in the camp, Service with Love, observed when I met with him, “our camps do not have high quality soil...but then again, just looking at history and tradition, if this was good farmlands—these places have been occupied for thousands of years—they wouldn’t be jungle, they would be farmland.”

Adding to these significant challenges is the fact that many of the farmers coming from mountainous areas of Kawthoolei and Karen State are accustomed to practicing a mixed system of cultivation that combines swidden (upland) rice farming with the agroforestry cultivation of a diverse array of crops. In contrast, the mostly low-lying topography of the camp represents a substantially different terrain from that which farmers previously cultivated. When I asked middle-aged gardeners who came from highland areas how similar cultivating in the camp was to farming in their home village, many told me “it is totally different.” This had to do with the fact

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30 Much has been written about the Thai government’s policy since circa the 1960s of turning forestland into natural parks. Most of this was land previously communally held or informally owned by ethnic minority peoples of Thailand. (Laungaramsri 2000; Peluso and Vandergeest 1995; Peluso and Watts 2001; Roth 2004).

31 Along the same lines, Dunn describes the marginal land on which the Georgian refugee camp sits and where she did her research, saying: “[the IDP camp] they were sent to was on land nobody wanted. It was a low-lying, often muddy and occasionally swampy place...When I asked Temo who had owned the land before the war, he scoffed and said, “Owned it? The frogs owned it! If it had been good land, somebody would have already stolen it” (Dunn 2017, 18).

32 TBC data about camp residents’ places of origin by percentage.

33 Many of the camp residents had previously used shifting cultivation (or swidden farming) to cultivate upland rice as their main crop along with planting vegetable gardens in the margins of their rice fields and kitchen gardens close to their home. Those who owned or had access to land often also did agroforestry by propagating fruit trees (such as durian and banana trees) and other crops in the forest along with foraging for wild-growing plants such as bamboo shoots, wild fruits, and different types of ferns and other leafy greens. Some people also grew a second crop, such as beans, in their rice field after the rice harvest was finished. This is primarily subsistence farming, but in some cases also the growing of certain cash crops Some examples of cash crops grown grow by camp residents in their home villages include mat bean, soybean, and cardamom (Data from Interviews).
that farming in highland areas usually involves swidden farming of rice rotated with another crop like beans, and agroforestry, where fruit trees and other crops are grown in the forest and where lots of wild foods are also gathered for consumption. Obviously, with space being highly limited in the camp there is not enough land for Mae La’s roughly 40,000 residents to practice swidden farming or agroforestry—although some do still find careful ways to forage under the radar in the forests on the edges of the camp (as I will discuss in the following chapter).

For virtually all gardeners, as well as the great many people who wished to garden but did not have access to land, the extreme lack of space and access to water made the camp a place where the ability to cultivate was highly constrained. A silent, vibrant, testament to the overwhelming, unfulfilled wish for land for planting were the small trees, rose bushes, herbs and vegetables planted in any available container (such as rusted biscuit tins), and crammed into the small spaces around almost every bamboo hut—situated, as they are, only a few feet apart from one another. On my daily walk up the hillside, everywhere my eyes fell they met bitter melon, passion fruit, and pumpkin vines draped over bamboo trellises or trained to climb fences. With a smile, I noticed taro and sweet potato plants covered in nets to protect them from children and chickens, as people made the very most of what little space was available.

Yet another major issue affecting peoples’ ability to farm in the camp was the torrential rains of the rainy season that turned into unprecedented flash floods the year I was there. These floods came multiple times over the course of a single planting season, washing away entire fields already full of seedlings. The flooding overwhelmed the lives of camp residents by flooding houses up to their roofs and inundating churches and community buildings. The flood waters took with them peoples’ few material possessions including clothing, pots and pans, bowls and utensils, and family photographs and legal documents. The torrents also carried off
pigs and chickens. The flood waters endangered the elderly and the handicapped who were immobile or homebound and spread diseases, as the waters carried open sewage.

Reflecting on the floods, one gardener I spoke with who was especially impoverished, Naw May, described how they had added to her persistent struggles of trying to provide for her family. Naw May was a lovely woman whose simple lean-to style house was located on a marginal piece of boggy land off to the side of the narrow path between where I stayed and the fields by the creek. She told me, “there are more problems this year because of the flood.” The problems she would go on to highlight were many: “We cannot breed the pigs because of it. Two fetuses died in the mother’s stomach. Our house is also deteriorating. [The water], it covered my house. We had to go find our plates and utensils after the flood. I may have picked up the wrong ones because the pot and its cover doesn’t match anymore.” I had arrived in the camp eager to speak with gardeners at a bleakly ironic time: when everyone’s newly planted gardens had been washed away multiple times by the torrential rains and floods.

One evening, months after my arrival in the camp, when presumably the worst of the rains had passed, I returned to the camp from a visa run in Chiang Mai34 to find the electricity off and water supply contaminated with mud due to heavy rain. That night the bridge connecting our zone of the camp to the next—the sole means of access between the two zones—collapsed (fig. 4) and the nearby church and houses in low-lying areas again flooded. The whiplash I felt from moving so quickly between the luxurious five-story malls and over-the-top consumerism of Chiang Mai to this dire reality in the camp was so profound that I entered a period of despondency. For several day, the weight of incommensurable inequality and something that felt like hopelessness sat so heavy on my chest that I was hardly able to get out of bed. Meanwhile,

34 Chiang Mai is the most significant city in the Northeast of Thailand, and an extremely popular tourist and expat destination.
camp residents rose early and began the work of fashioning a makeshift bridge out of a simple plank of wood, carrying water, and trying to put right what the storm had upset. 

As I came to increasingly understand, one reason agricultural forgetting seems so prevalent in the camp, as indexed by my conversations with adult gardeners and college students alike, is that remembering is inseparable from access to land. The people who I came to know and love during my time in Mae La live in the swing of precarity. They are denied the right to own property and even an adequate space to live, along with the vaster absences of citizenship, rights, and freedom of movement. In this context of confinement, recreating the vibrant lieux de mémoire (Nora 1989) that nurtures biological and cultural diversity (Nazare 2013) becomes all but impossible. What is left is the scrappy tenacity with which people create imperfect spaces of sanctuary: pockets of remembering that endure amidst powerful forces of privatization and exclusion.

Figure 4: After the bridge collapse. Photo by the author.
Chapter Three

“There are No Seeds Here”: Severing Seed and Sovereignty in Mae La Camp

- “All reification is forgetting” - Theodor Adorno

- “But [biodiversity] is fostered as well in small, reverberating acts of human defiance to the homogenizing forces that erode identify, agency and diversity.” - Virginia Nazarea

Introduction: Promoting Self-Reliance, Killing Seed Sovereignty

When it comes to agricultural remembering and forgetting in the camp, paradoxes abound. Residents are exhorted by NGOs to share the produce of their gardens. Meanwhile, selling vegetables and entrepreneurship generally, become an increasingly necessary means of survival as aid to the camp is cut. NGO gardening initiatives encourage refugees to hold on to Karen “traditional agricultural practices” and “indigenous seed” (TBBC 2010, 26). Their stated missions include promoting organic gardening and the use and saving of open-pollinated seeds. At the same time, land is exceedingly difficult and costly to access and water for irrigation is scarce. This leads to highly unequal opportunities for refugees to take part in such programs.

At the CAN annual agricultural workshop for refugees held in 2010 with the stated objective of “developing an understanding of increasing self-reliance through gardening activities,” it was remarked that “a seed was sprouting” one that was “shifting the responsibilities/ownership to the insiders (camp residents) to pursue opportunities in partnership with outsiders (NGOs and Thai villagers)” (TBBC 2010, 24). The problem with this shifting of responsibility onto the refugees themselves—What Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) refer to as the “responsibilizing of refugees”—is that the necessary conditions for enacting this beautiful visions of gardening and the saving of Indigenous seeds are absent for the vast majority of refugees in Mae La camp. As I came to see, the most fundamental requirements of access to
adequate land, water, and the assurance that those resources—and indeed people themselves—would be there the following year simply did not align for most camp residents.

TBC records show that in 2010 there was an emphasis on encouraging refugees to secure land outside the camp for gardening. By 2018, however, during my stay in the Mae La, conditions had changed considerably and refugees had less latitude to visit garden plots outside the camp. There were harsher restrictions on the movement of refugees outside the razor wire fence, and strictly patrolled gates of the camp and NGOs that had once supported gardening initiatives were moving their funding inside Myanmar. Even longstanding garden plots that had been secured with the help of NGOs, such as the verdant “handicap farm”, were in danger of being taken away. In 2010, TBC reported that on average twenty five percent of all households in six of the nine camp along the border were “receiving seeds and cultivating gardens inside and outside the camp” (TBBC 2010, 22). Due to the factors mentioned, this percentage is likely lower now. This relatively small group of fortunate camp residents who do have access to agricultural plots are beset by the disappearance of their land due to flooding caused by climate change.
Moreover, many of the gardeners I spoke with felt pressured to grow hybrid seeds with the aid of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to help their produce compete in size and “beauty” at the camp market. Some residents must leave Mae La camp altogether—sneaking out to find informal work as migrant laborers in Thailand, including on monocrop plantations located between the camp and Mae Sot (the closest town) as a means of survival and supporting their families. Thus, the discrepancy between the official discourse of aid organizations and NGOs and the reality faced by refugees living in the camp is significant. Here, self-sufficiency and self-reliance (Shiva 2000, 14) are pitted against each other. This is to the detriment of the former as refugee farmers rapidly lose the embodied knowledge that would allow them to control their own means of production: seeds and the ability to freely and openly save them.

This transition from seed saving and subsistence agriculture—rooted in social relationships of reciprocity—to market gardening and reliance on hybrid seeds dictated by “the temporality of consumption” (Connerton 2009, 53), can be understood as an example of Paul Connerton’s (2009) argument that systematic forgetting is induced by the political-economic structure of modern life, i.e. capitalism. Yet, even in this generalized context of pervasive exclusion and forgetting, it was in perhaps the most unexpected place—in the garden of an impoverished and socially marginalized woman—that I found traces of sanctuary. Her counter narrative about NGO seeds and her out-of-the-way practices of resistance and recuperation pointed to the existence of a wider peripheral network of seed saving and agriculture memory persisting within the camp.

35 Shiva defines “self-sufficiency” as “food grown locally for local consumption” and “self-reliance” as “buying your food from international markets” (Shiva 2000, 14). In using the terms here, I draw on Shiva’s meaning as well as Omata’s (2017) critique of self-reliance discourse in the context of refugee camps, where it is used by international humanitarian organizations as an excuse for the withdrawal of aid.
Service with Love and Seed Saving as Present Absence

One organization in particular came up constantly in my conversations with gardeners.36 This was the Thai Christian NGO “Service with Love”, dedicated to providing humanitarian assistance in the form of disaster relief and aid to refugees in Thailand. It was one of the first NGOs present at the Thai-Burma border when the crisis of forced migration began more than thirty years ago. Over the years, Service with Love has become increasingly focused on providing agricultural training and extension to residents of the nine camps.37 However, as I came to see, the program is having unintended negative effects on a larger scale. This is even while attempting to and actually doing much good in the immediate present—and being lauded by almost all the gardeners I spoke with.

Most notably, Service with Love’s practice of providing free seed to gardeners every planting season has resulted in the fact that the majority of gardeners have stopped saving seeds either in part or in whole. This is because if seeds are being provided it is no longer worth peoples’ time, effort, and the use of highly limited space to save their own seed. As one woman I interviewed, Naw Lu, spelled out for me as we chatted, seated in her garden plot on a glorious clear November day while she weighed and bundled morning glory leaf for sale at the market:

“We get [our seeds] from Service with Love. But if we don’t get enough seeds from Service with Love then we have to buy on our own…we buy them from the shop [in the camp market].”

36 This includes in conversations with the Karen environmental NGO “Kaw La” (“Green Land” in Karen) with which I worked closely.
37 This is alongside other livelihoods trainings programs, such as candle-making and weaving, aimed at providing residents with skills that could help them earn a living if and when they are forced to return to Myanmar.
When I continued my line of questioning, incredulously asking, “don’t you keep your seeds?” she replied, “No. there are no seeds here. Actually, we keep gourd seeds and pumpkin seeds but we can’t keep the seeds of most of them.” This it took to mean that certain seeds were considered too labor intensive to keep or that there was not adequate space or materials to keep them due to the various drying process required for the seeds of different plants. Besides, they were available anyway from Service with Love or in the market.

Determined to get to the bottom of this, I asked, “is it because it is hard to keep the seeds?”

“Not really”, she said, “but we sell them before the seeds can be kept… We just grow them and sell them before [the vegetables] can grow seeds.” This partial persistence of seed saving is a hopeful indication that agricultural forgetting about seed saving is not beyond recovery. Naw Lu’s words confirmed my suspicion that their value at the market was playing a role here: it seemed they were too valuable as produce, and the seeds were easy enough to acquire, to bother any more with saving the seeds of certain plants. This partial persistence of seed saving is a hopeful indication that agricultural forgetting about seed saving is not beyond recovery. The clear message I received from Naw Lu, like others, about her vegetables’ value as commodities out-weighing the importance of seed-saving for seed-saving-sake did not bode well for even the large gourd and pumpkin seeds that were presumably the easiest to save. It seemed plausible that, continuing along the same course, soon they might also cease to be considered worth the space and effort required to save them.

I asked her whether people saved seeds in her home village.
“Yes”, she answered, “There is more space there. We plant the seeds everywhere so we can’t eat or sell them all. Here there isn’t enough space, so we sell them all. No time to keep the seeds.”

Then, knowing I was testing the limits of her patience with my questions, I asked, “wouldn’t it be better to keep the seeds?”

Her reply underscored what she had already told me multiple times—"If we keep the seeds, we cannot grow anything in its place. There is no space.”

Later, at the end of our interview, as I did for all interviews I asked, “do you have any other experiences or anything else you would like to share?”

Her tired reply was simply, “I’ve experienced too much. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

One of the things that was most striking to me about this conversation with Naw Lu was how completely she had appeared to internalize NGO mandates that refugee gardeners embrace market farming, rather than subsistence farming and the reciprocal sharing of produce that had been widely practiced, and even ethically prescribed, in the camp even a few decades prior. This was underscored by her continual motion as we talked: eyes focused on her work and only occasionally raising to meet mine as she busily weighed the morning glory leaf from her garden on a portable metal scale and tied it with thin yarn into neat 10-baht bundles for sale in the market.

The “handicap farm”—referencing the former name of an NGO operating in the camp—was an impressive, large plot located across the highway from the camp. It had been secured especially for the use of handicaped individuals, most of whom had been severely injured by landmine blasts. One brilliantly sunny Saturday in the cool season, Paw Lay Lay and I snuck
across the road to visit the farmers there. They proudly gave us a tour of their farm; it was by far the most impressive I had seen in Mae La (figure 5b). It boasted long rows of morning glory leaf and other popular green vegetables, banana trees, vibrantly colored zinnia flowers, and even a fishpond that facilitated a closed-loop agricultural system by providing a source of fertilizer for the plants.

After the tour, four of the handicapped farmers, Paw Lay Lay and I sat in the farm lean-to of an older couple and chatted about their farm and their concerns for the future, namely the rumor that the land and support for their farm was going to be taken away. They told me they were afraid that they would stop receiving seed and asked if I could help them with this. When I enquired about whether they saved their own seed, the farmers explained to me that they did save the seeds of some plants. However, others they were not able to save themselves and so these they bought as seed packets. They told me buying seed packets from the camp market was their contingency plan if Service with Love stopped providing them.

As the tough and innately cool silvery-haired woman, Naw Thay La, whose lean-to we were sitting under explained to me between drags off her leaf cigarette, “the only thing we can do then is to struggle to buy [the seeds] ourselves if Service with Love stops supporting us.”

She told me about the numerous trials she and her family have faced: she and her husband are both handicaped, as both were blinded and he lost one of his arms in separate landmine explosions that happened in the same year near their home village. She also explained to me that she supports her grandchildren in the camp after her son died and the children’s mother “went off with other people.” Explaining why they must continue to sell their produce no matter what, she told me, “We have to make a living only like this. We have young children and grandchildren. We survive like this day by day.”
One elder woman gardener I spoke with, Pi Ka Paw, was a certified garden trainer through Service with Love’s “trainer of trainers” (ToT) program. When she came to meet us for an interview at Paw Lay Lay’s home, she proudly brought along her cloth-bound diploma that certified her as a trainer. When she squinted to read the words on the certificate but could not make them out, Paw Lay Lay asked her, “why don’t you get glasses?” Pi Ka Paw endearingly replied that she can’t because, “If I get glasses people will think I follow fashion!”

Her sweet demeaner and slight build did not evidence the numerous tragedies she had survived—including the deaths of all six of her children. Sitting with her and listening to these hard details of her life it became especially clear what an important role gardening played in her day to day routine, and probably in holding onto sanity and a sense of meaning within the confines of the camp.

Our conversation gradually steered back into less emotionally turbulent waters as we discussed the details of her garden. In response to my questions about what she chooses to plant in her garden, she told me baldly—as though it should have been obvious—that like all other gardeners, “we plant whatever Service with Love gives us.”\(^\text{38}\) This response, which I heard again and again from gardeners when asking about their planting decisions, explains the high level of uniformity in crops among the gardens I visited and gardeners I interviewed. Morning glory leaf, mustard greens, long bean, bitter melon, opo squash, coriander leaf, and chilies were ubiquitous staples. When I probed for information about lesser-known species they might be growing, or things they might have brought from home, people tended to shrug and inform me, like Pi Ka Paw, that they simply planted what they received.

\(^{38}\) The Service with Love director emphasized that the organization is “proud to work with an agricultural consultant…who chooses crops that are very culturally relevant” for refugees in the camps.
The director of Service with Love explained to me when I met with him at the organization’s headquarters in Bangkok a few months after my visit with the farmers of the handicap farm, that they are aware people are saving seed less because of the distribution program but they are dismayed by this. After all, it is an aim of the organization to promote seed saving. However they feel there is little they can do since it would seemingly be unfair to deny seed to some people while giving it to others. Service with Love’s organic agricultural program has many wonderful effects on the day to day lives of camp residents including beautifying the space, supporting food security, and helping people find joy through gardening. Yet it appears that this practice of distributing seed is resulting in widespread agricultural forgetting around seed-saving and may also be contributing to a decline in biodiversity in peoples’ gardens.

As gardeners grew habituated to receiving seed, buying it from the market became a logical next step. Quite unintentionally, the agricultural program has served to alienate camp residents from the “vibrant materiality” (Bennett 2010) of seeds and the re-generation of plant lives. The gradual collective forgetting around seed saving I was witnessing in the camp might be understood in light of Connerton’s assertion that, “culturally induced forgetting is reinforced by the temporality of consumption. To buy objects for consumption is to participate in commodity exchange rather than in gift exchange” (Connerton 2009, 53). This is especially pointed for members of younger generations, having grown up in the camp many never learned to save seed. As Ben, an Australian man working at a Karen Environmental Organization, Kaw La, once memorably teased his Karen colleague, Naw Thay Pa Hi, who grew up in the camp, “Those of you who grew up in the camp will be in trouble if you go back to Kawthoolei…you

39 There have even been initiatives in the camp to promote and facilitate the use of Indigenous Karen seed among gardeners by coordinate with Karen agricultural groups inside Myanmar to attain such seed for refugee gardeners.
won’t know how to grow food!” To this she responded, covering her face and laughing into her palms, “It’s true. Those who stayed [in Kawthoolei] call us “no eat refugees!”

As has been widely documented, the loss of seed sovereignty is a significant step in the loss of food sovereignty. This, by extension, can result in a loss of political sovereignty, or, as Indigenous environmental activist Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe) puts it, quoting Sugar Bear Smith of Oneida, “you cannot say you are sovereign if you cannot feed yourself” (LaDuke 2019, 2). This is especially the case for rural Karen villages located in contested territory where practices of seed saving and the inter-generational passing down of agricultural skills and knowledge about diverse plant species have, in some cases, enabled small-scale farmers to survive amidst the incredible challenges posed by the world’s longest civil war. Seed sovereignty is a heritage that, once lost, is very difficult—though not impossible—to reclaim.
Figures 5a: An older male gardener stands in his garden plot by the creek that runs through the center of the camp; 5b: Farmers of the “Handicap Farm”, including Naw Thay La (right) and her husband (center) standing in their field. Photos by author.

**Enclosure of the Seed Commons as Accumulation by Dispossession**

The privatization of plant genetic resources—or enclosure of the seed commons—currently playing out in Mae La camp as in many other parts of the world, represents a loss of seed sovereignty that has serious implications for the realization of Karen Indigenous sovereignty. As Jack Kloppenburg points out, the commodification of seed in the 20th and 21st centuries represents an ironically classic case of Marx’s (1977, 873) theory of primitive accumulation. This is ironic because Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation or “PA”, now widely applied to privatization in all realms, was first elaborated in relation to land and agricultural production.
Diverse contemporary manifestations of PA within neoliberal modernity have been further theorized by Marxist geographer David Harvey, under the often-cited banner of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003, 144).

The theory of accumulation by dispossession is highly applicable to the Karen context, in which both the Myanmar government and multinational corporations—and sometimes Karen ethnic armed organizations (EAOs)—have long been encroaching upon and usurping land and resources from ordinary people in majority Karen areas. Often discussed by Karen activists and human rights organizations in terms of “land grabbing”, these groups have systematically turned what in many cases have been communally held or un-ownable entities into private property (Human Rights Watch 2016, 2019; KHRG 2019). With land, water, and resources such as teak wood and minerals being rapidly appropriated, the commercialization and control of farmers’ seeds represent a subsequent frontier of enclosure in Myanmar and its ethnic borderlands.

However, Kloppenburg crucially points out that agriculture, and seeds in particular, due to the notoriously hard-to-commodify aspects of their being, represent an especially fruitful space of possibility for re-possession of the commons (Kloppenburg 2010, 367.). This is because seed, as living biological material, is both the product and the means of production. As Kloppenburg states, “who controls the seed gains a substantial measure of control over the shape of the food system” (Kloppenburg 2010, 368.) This statement highlights linkages between the control of seeds, or seed sovereignty, and the widely discussed concept of food sovereignty, the

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40 One particularly damaging example of this is the Vacant, Fallow, Virgin (VLV) Land Law amended by the Myanmar government in September 2018 that effectively allows for the seizure of vast swaths of land that have for generations been communally held agriculture or agroforest land. A report by Human Rights watch states that the law, “creates incentives for authorities to take land from traditional communities that have for generations passed down land to their children by traditional or informal means. The law also opens the possibility that businesses and private companies can make claims to this land, adding to the potential for land conflicts” (Human Rights Watch 2019)
central mission of which is regaining control of the food system for the common benefit of the people.

**Indigenous Food and Seed Sovereignty**

First used by *La Via Campesina*, the international peasants’ movement in 1996, the term “food sovereignty” was further elaborated and “brought to the world stage” in 2007 at the Forum for Food Sovereignty in Sélingué, Mali (Mihesuah and Hoover 2019, 8). There 500 delegates from over 80 countries adopted The Declaration of Nyéléni which defines food sovereignty as, “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agricultural system” (Nyéléni 2007). Geographer Amy Trauger observes that, “food sovereignty narratives identify modern notions of property rights and global capitalist markets as the source of the problems in the food system and demand more rights for producers and consumers” (Trauger 2014, 1132). As anthropologist Elizabeth Hoover and historian Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw) point out, this stands in contrast to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) definition of “Food Security”, which in failing to address the source of food, “promotes the dumping of agricultural commodities at below-market prices and the use of genetically modified seeds and other expensive agricultural inputs” (Mihesuah and Hoover 2019, 8).

Further building upon food sovereignty’s inherent critique of (neo)colonialism enacted through the food system, Indigenous food sovereignty takes on its own particular meaning, embedded as it is in the complex terrain of nested tribal and nation-state sovereignties. Some including LaDuke have critiqued the use of term sovereignty because of its roots in western Europe, disconnected from the aims of Indigenous peoples. However, others within Indigenous
food movements have argued for its usefulness, since in the context of Indigenous Food Sovereignty both “food” and “sovereignty” are recast to be understood in terms of relationships. Miheusuah and Hoover write that definitions of Indigenous Food Sovereignty “are constructed within a framework that recognizes the social, cultural, and economic relationships that underline community food sharing and seek to stress the importance of communal culture, decolonization and self-determination, as well as the inclusion of fishing, hunting and gathering—not just agriculture—as key elements of a food sovereign approach” (Miheusuah and Hoover 2019, 11).

The concept of Indigenous food sovereignty is crucial for understanding how Karen peoples have survived and, in some areas, maintained autonomy in the context of 71 years of bitter civil war. If rural Karen communities in Southeast Myanmar and Kawthoolei were not as largely food sovereign as they are, it would have been impossible to sustain such a longstanding revolution. Without the relative autonomy of farmers and agroforests, the bid for Karen independence would have quickly crumbled following the Myanmar junta’s implementation of the brutal “Four Cuts” tactic—chocking off the flow of food, supplies, recruits and information to “rebel” controlled areas (Smith 1999, 259). Building upon the work of Karen leaders in agricultural revival such as David Saw Wa and the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), I suggest that it is important to explore how the skills, knowledges and practices that have sustained Karen food sovereignty are either persisting or being forgotten in the context of refugeehood. This is because Karen food sovereignty has been a cornerstone of Karen Indigenous political sovereignty.

As I was told by a prominent Karen leader in the camp, Saw Daniel: it is this very capacity for self-sufficiency in the context of mutualism that constitutes for him a dignified life or a life worth living. This stands in contrast to the values of individual “self-reliance” promoted
in the camp (see Omata 2017). For Saw Daniel—whose sentiment was echoed by numerous other people—this dream that Karen people, including refuges like him, will be able to “determine their own lives” is why he remains committed to achieving the vision of a free Karen homeland despite the myriad complexities and at times the seeming hopelessness of this. Saw Daniel’s vision for a free Karen homeland centered on making whole again his perhaps idealized memory of his childhood growing up in a rural Karen village. In his narrated re-membering of this longed-for place, villagers abided by principals of right being and in turn found fertile soil and fresh streams that made crops grow easily. They found in the forest a bounty of wild plants to harvest and animals to hunt, which they shared equitably with one another. For Saw Daniel the capacity for rural Karen self-determination was thus rooted in the inter-generational passing down of specific understandings of right behavior regarding food and intertwined human and non-human lives.

The persistence of these intergenerational linkages, or their rupture, will largely determine the conditions under which Karen homelands are eventually resettled. With the significance of Indigenous food sovereignty for self-determination in mind, I have attended to the details of life in the Mae La camp that are largely hindering the ability of displaced Karen people to maintain control over their food system. One of the most important details is the role of seeds and seed saving in the camp. Understanding the relationships between nested forms of sovereignty—seed, food and political—reveals the heavy implications of enclosure of the seed commons, by which farmers lose access to the means of agricultural (re)production through the privatization of plant genetic resources. Such an understanding also illuminates emergent possibilities for “stealing back” (Kloppenburg 2010, 368) the commons and reclaiming
agricultural and political autonomy. These possibilities allow for imagining a future in which Indigenous sovereignty might not be ceded but rather “seeded”\textsuperscript{41}.

Indigenous seed keeper, Rowan White (Mohawk), describes seeds as “life capsules of memory” (White 2019, 7). Through this framework we see that the thousands of seeds given by one open pollinated seed represent thousands of new opportunities for the creation of sovereignty. This is sovereignty that can be (re)constituted at the communal and also national levels by reclaiming the “vibrant matter“ (Bennett 2010) that allows people to “determine their own lives” (interview, Saw Daniel). In contrast, the loss of the knowledge, ability and right to save seed in a free and open manner results in dependency. This becomes starkly apparent from one generation to the next in Mae La camp.

Figure 6: A hybrid seed packets mark the ends of rows in one of the students’ dormitory gardens. Photo by author.

\textsuperscript{41} I use this metaphor acknowledging the Indigenous women-led land and justice organization, Seeding Sovereignty, whose work deeply inspires my own.
Pockets of Remembrance, Critique from the Margins

In contrast, agricultural remembering is the intergenerational, passing-down of knowledge about how to care for and live with plant lives. Such remembering persists in marginal but nonetheless important pockets in the camp. Rather than being limited strictly to the realm of empirical knowledge, this remembering is also sensory and embodied. It involves an affective connection with plant species (Archambault 2016; Kimmerer 2013; Kirksey 2014; Nazarea 2005; Nazarea et al. 2013). It is the processes by which plant lives are grown and reproduced “at home” and where the embodied knowledge of how to save seed and care for plants is passed from person to person.

Agricultural remembering represents the continuation of crucially intertwined human and plant lives (Hallam and Ingold 2014) across generations. Following Audra Simpson’s (2016) elaboration of the “politics of refusal”, agricultural remembering becomes an active choice and even a form of refusal amidst conditions of pervasive collective forgetting. This becomes an especially charged terrain in the camp, where the complexity and biodiversity characteristic of smallholder shifting agricultural traditions, based in an ethos of relationality, are pressured to give way to the hegemonic and extractive monoculture of the ubiquitous, but always historically specific, plantation (Davis et al. 2019; Dove 2011; Haraway et al. 2016; Tsing 2015). Some persistent “pockets of memory” (Nazarea 1998) that resist this cheapening and flattening of intertwined plant and human lives presented themselves to me in the camp.

One small but forceful pocket of agricultural remembering I encountered was the seed saving practices of Naw May, an especially impoverished woman who lived in the small hut directly behind where I stayed. Her simple lean-to house was quite literally situated in a marginal space—crowded onto a boggy piece of land off to the side of the path connecting the rear of school dormitory where I stayed with the coveted agricultural plots by the creek. This woman
had three young children and a verdant garden of trellised vegetables and looping vines, including one impressively enormous opo squash, propped up with supports and covered in mesh to protect it (Figure 6). She also raised pigs and chickens. I often passed her on the path and we exchanged smiles and greetings, *Oh Su Oh Klay Ah?* (how are you?), as she sat cooking, squatting over an open fire outside her house.

I finally sat down and spoke with Naw May at length one afternoon with help from my student and stand-in research assistant, the magnetic Naw Thi Klo Poe, as interpreter. Looking out on the beauty of her rain-drenched garden we chatted over the din of the driving downpour and the cries of the baby in her arms. I worried that the noise of the rain would cover up her voice on the recording and moved my outdated iPhone directly next to her. She described to me how she had moved from the previous place she lived in the camp to this spot she was borrowing from her aunt in order to have a garden and raise animals.

Naw May told me, “We are so poor. Sometimes we don’t even have one baht [$0.031USD]. We don’t have extra income. The income from raising chicken and pigs is for the children’s’ school fees. We make very little extra money from selling vegetables.”

In response to my question about how she felt about living here in the camp, she continued, “I like living here, but it is hard to go out and travel to make a living. I feel distressed sometimes when I don’t have money. My only source of income is from the animals and from selling my vegetables…and that is not much.”

When I asked her if the plants she grows in her garden here are similar to what she grew in her village in Kawthoolei she replied, “Not really. Some of the vegetables don’t grow very well here in the camp. The soil quality is different here. Here we have to work very hard to keep
the plants growing. In the village the plants would grow fine if we only water them. Nobody uses chemicals [fertilizers and pesticides] in the village, but everyone does here.”

I asked where she gets her chemical inputs or Ka Thi (a word borrowed from Burmese and translated literally in as “medicine”). “I don’t use them. That’s why my plants grow very poorly”, she told me, gesturing to her plants. Although, the general health of her garden and the massive opo squash in particular appeared to be some evidence to the contrary. “Other people use chemicals and their plants grow very well” she added.

Most significantly, my conversation with Naw May stood out from others because she was virtually the only person I spoke with who told me that she doesn’t get her seeds from Service with Love. But based on what she told me I surmise that there are others.

When I asked her where she gets her seeds, she told me, “I keep them on my own. I got them from other people the first time and keep them on my own after that. I can keep gourd and lettuce seed. You can’t save the seeds from Service with Love. Some elderly people [the grandpa and grandma] use natural seeds and I get my seeds from them.”

This perspective, while being uncommonly expressed, is important as it provides evidence of pockets of seed saving knowledge and seed sharing practices persisting in the camp. Despite everything, such practices are alive and being nurtured by marginal people—such as the elderly and Naw May—in “out of the way places” (Tsing 1994) in the camp.
Conclusion: Of Seeds and Shifting Ontologies

Drawing on ethnographic data from six months spent living full-time in Mae La camp in 2018 and a short return stay in 2019, along with the numerous conversations I had with gardeners there, I suggest that the camp itself plays an integral role in rupturing of linkages between Karen refugees and their homelands. These ruptures include the severing of seed-sovereignty and an inter-generational forgetting of agricultural skills and knowledges necessary for self-sufficiency in Southeastern Myanmar and Kawthoolie.

In addition to attending to pockets of sanctuary and possibility where they exist, I suggest it is equally important to observe larger-scale shifts taking place within the camp. A central shift, as I came to understand it, is the widespread agricultural forgetting leading to depeasantization.
and the severing of Karen seed and political sovereignty. This forgetting can be linked to the more generalized shift taking place in the camp by which humanitarian organizations along with NGOs who are facing serious funding shortfalls, encourage refugees to become “self-reliant” vegetable entrepreneurs. This ushers in a move from subsistence farming and a gift economy, based in relationships, to a life structured around the “the temporality of consumption”, which as Connerton (2009) argues, “makes us forget.” As Indigenous seed savers and activists Rowan White and Wynona LaDuke have emphasized, a resurgence of food and seed sovereignty is necessary in order to help us remember the social relationships embedded in the cultivation and consumption of food that its reification as commodities erases (LaDuke 2019; White 2019).

The agricultural forgetting playing out in the camp helps to facilitate Karen refugees’ transition between “there” and “here”: from Indigenous homelands to precarity on the border (Campbell 2019.). This transition does not only represent a shift in livelihoods and property relations. Rather, it is part of an ontological shift taking place in relationships between plants and humans, and between human and humans. Here relational understandings of plants and humans and the commons give way to conditions in which migrants themselves are in danger of slipping out of the category of personhood altogether.
Chapter Four

From Relational Ontologies to Plantation Ecologies:

How the Camp Produces Biocultural Simplification and Precarity

- “In order for any people or any nation to survive, land is necessary” - Fannie Lou Hammer
[quoted by Monica White, 2019]

- “The frontier is both a place and a time” – Phillip Hirsch (2008)

From Relational Ontologies to Sa(l)vage Accumulation and the Refugee Camp In-between

In the proceeding chapters I have shown some of the ways in which Mae La camp facilitates transitions that reshape relations among people and between humans and plants. Here I zoom out to show the broader significance of these changes in more-than-human relations by situating them within the regional context of depeasantization. Building upon the existing literature on precarious migrant labor in the Mae Sot Special Economic Zone, located roughly an hour by car by Mae La camp, I argue that the camp effectively helps transition Karen Indigenous subsistence farmers into members of the global precariat. Central to this transition is the camp’s role in transforming complex traditional agricultural practices and biodiverse ecologies—part of the larger whole of Indigenous Karen relational ontologies—into the deathly monoculture of the plantation. As such, I am interested in analyzing shifting ideas about “not work”, meaning labor that brings joy and connection and, “work”, labor that is alienating (Tsing 2015, 68, 78) as witnessed in micro-level engagements between people and plants in the camp. I consider how shifting ideas about labor and property are bound up with the simultaneous “salvage accumulation” (Tsing 2015) of capitalist value through Karen Indigenous knowledge and non-
human process within transnational networks, and the “savage sorting” (Sassen 2010) that renders many Karen refugee bodies temporarily usable and thus disposable.

While not black and white, in Karen villages, subsistence strategies that engage people with the material environment and other living beings cannot fully be accounted for solely in terms of “work.” Simply put, their meaning and totality, including the relationships they enact, is more than that. In many cases, Karen refugees from highland areas of southeastern Myanmar and Kawhoolie have come from villages with complex practices of mixed agriculture. Overlapping subsistence practices in these areas include growing upland rice using shifting cultivation; tending home gardens that host a diversity of species; growing fruit tree “orchards” in the forest (agroforestry); foraging for wild foods (including herbs, ferns and mushrooms, among other things); hunting and fishing in appointed areas; and in some cases cultivating cash crops on a small scale, including rubber and cardamom.

These complex livelihood practices engage with and, in large part, help to preserve the rich biodiversity that constitutes these extraordinary landscapes (KESAN 2020, FS during COVID 19; KESAN 2018 Climate Change Video). In striking contrast, the camp—by the very nature of its setup as a “closed,” securitized space (Møller 2015), or total institution—slots people into fixed and individuated garden plots. The ensuing simplification of previously complex mixed subsistence practices means that camp residents must use cultivation in very different ways than they did in their home villages. In the camp, highly limited and coveted garden plots become valuable real estate through a thriving informal property market. As such, garden plots are accessible only to those with social and economic capital (Bourdieu 1986 “The Forms of Capital”), often in the form of remittances sent from relatives resettled in third countries.
Further curtailing Karen refugees’ ability to continue their subsistence practices from home and the more-than-human relations they enfold, is the Thai government’s prohibition against refugees foraging in the forest surrounding the camp (Human Rights Watch 2012, 36-37). This prohibition greatly impedes the passing-on of intergenerational memory about diverse wild plant species and how to use them. Along with being an important source of food, wild plants have traditionally provided crucial medicine and building materials to Karen villagers. This was also the case for refugees in decades past. Now, however, due to the Thai government’s restrictions, refugees cannot forage, hunt or fish in the forests without risking severe retribution. While some still forage, it is at the risk of paying a terrible price. In some instances, refugees cutting bamboo in the forest have been shot on sight by Thai military police (Human Rights Watch 2012, 37-38).

Taken together, these significant limitations redefine Karen refugees’ approach to agriculture and engagement with plant species. In this chapter, I argue that the bio-cultural simplification playing out in the camp in part prepares refugees to become precarious laborers on industrial monocrop plantations, the pinnacle of the necropolitics of radical simplification (see Davis et al. 2019; Haraway 2015; Haraway et al 2015; Lennon 2020; Mitman 2019; Thomas 2019; Tsing 2012). I explore various dimensions of this process in the following sections: “Becoming Precarious,” “Abandonment,” “Vegetables Entrepreneurship’s Sa(l)vage Heart,” “Private Property and the Vanishing Hectare,” “Two Stories of Property and Precarity: Salvage

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42 Refugees are prohibited from for finding densely notorious wild foods in the forest, including wild herbs such as po shi daw and roots such as wild ginger. They are also banned from collecting bamboo which is needed for construction and repair of their huts and the leaves of teak trees that camp residents need to regularly rebuild the leaf rooves of their huts. These materials are necessary to refugees because, according to camp rules, huts can only be made of natural materials, so the structures will not be permanent. In the past, bamboo and teak leaves were distributed to refugees, but this has stopped with the cuts in rations. Yet, the prohibition on harvesting them from the forest remains.
Accumulation and Savage Sorting,” “Why the Camp Can’t be a Village,” and “From Biodiverse Commons to Plantation Ecologies.”

**Becoming Precarious**

A significant amount has been written about the Mae Sot-Myawaddy border (close to Mae La camp) and the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) there as a site of precarious labor and struggle (see Arnold 2012; 2016; Campbell 2019; Loong 2019; Pongsawat 2007). These critical works demonstrate how a combination of statelessness, armed conflict, racial/ethnic oppression, and poverty in Myanmar drive individuals across the border and into Thailand. Once there, undocumented and largely unprotected, they are subjected to numerous labor and human rights abuses. As people without a stable home to return to in many cases, these communities represent some of the most precarious members of the global precariat.⁴³

The precariat, what Guy Standing calls the world’s “new dangerous class” (2011, 1), is a heterogenous mass of people across the world, united by the profound uncertainty and coerced flexibility that increasingly characterizes their lives (if to highly unequal degrees.) According to Standing, the precariat is made up of workers whose conditions of laboring can no longer be adequately understood by the longstanding moniker of “the proletariat” because their socio-economic status is too unstable. Alienation, as well as anxiety, anomie, and anger, are defining features of the contemporary precariat experience (Standing 2011, 19). Indeed, the degree to which deeply unsetled people have become central to the functioning of contemporary global

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⁴³ Many migrants on the border are stateless people, including those who have had to flee conflict. Others are driven by extreme economic conditions.
political economy\(^{44}\) is far from a matter of chance. As such, spaces of exception (Minca 2016; Ong 2006) like the Mae Sot SEZ, and the people in precarious positions they lure (and sometimes trap), demand careful attention and analysis. Often these individuals inhabit the slippery space between categories of “migrant” and “refugee.” In the context of the Mae-Sot Myawaddy border, I suggest it is important to understand refugees and migrants as constituting a much more continuous population than has usually been imagined. This is because they are, in some cases, the same people.

There is a robust literature on the blurry distinction between refugees and migrants in the context of the European “migrant crisis” or “refugee crisis”\(^{45}\), and concerning migrants and asylees to the U.S. from Central America, among case studies from other world regions (see De Coninck 2020; Lee et al. 2018; Speed 2019; Ticktin 2002). In contrast, despite being geographically proximate, the Mae Sot SEZ and Mae La camp have largely been theorized separately, even when there is tacit acknowledgment of peoples’ movement between the two spaces (although, there are a few important exceptions, as I will later discuss). Studies of the border have predominantly examined refugee camps and SEZs in Thailand as alternative routes that migrants take in attempting to escape dire conditions in Myanmar. Both refugee camps and SEZs along the Thai-Myanmar border have been conceptualized as spaces that, in different ways, offer refuge or temporary opportunities to those fleeing conflict and/or economic hardship in Myanmar. They are also each discussed as quintessential examples of Agamben’s “state of

\(^{44}\) While this phenomenon is tied to the global economy, it is important to recognize that specific conditions in various places are very much dictated by the policies of nation-states and regional frameworks of governance (Arnold and Pickles 2011).

\(^{45}\) The deployment of the terms “migrant crisis” or “refugee crisis” has been widely critiqued for displacing blame from governments and humanitarian organizations, onto forcibly displaced people themselves (see Devereux 2017).
exception” (1998), because Thai policies restrict movement and undercut human rights in both spaces (Pongsawat 2007 131-132, 432).

Part of the reason these two spaces have remained mostly separate in scholarly and applied discussions is because the reality of the Mae Sot SEZ and life in the camps have changed over time but analytical frameworks have not always kept pace. What scholars wrote about life along the border ten to twenty years ago often does not adequately capture the current situation. In the past, the camps more clearly delineated where the “refugees” were (Dunn 2017, 122-125). This was before significant cuts in funding, and when there was greater freedom of movement, and thus less need for residents to sneak out of the camps to find work and to feed themselves and their families (Human Rights Watch 2012). An additional factor leading to the bifurcated study of Mae La camp and the Mae Sot SEZ is the widespread understanding that refugees and economic migrants along the Thai-Myanmar border represent different ethnic populations. Those considered refugees on the border are mostly Karen, Karenni, and some Rohingya. In contrast, economic migrants in Tak province are characterized as primarily members of Bamar ethnic majority group. This is partially related to the ethnic divides along the lines of employment sector, with the robust garment industry of the Mae Sot SEZ being comprised mostly of Bamar workers, while agricultural and domestic sectors are understood to employ more Karen people (Campbell 2019).

The separation between refugees and migrant laborers is unsettled in Pitch Pongsawat’s influential work on “Partial Border Citizenship” (2007). Pongsawat acknowledges overlap

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46 Although, camp residents did seek out day labor in areas surrounding the camp in earlier times (Pongsawat 2007 443-44).
47 Because they have often faced discrimination from other refugees in Mae La, including members of the Karen majority, many Rohingya refugees who come to Mae La camp do not stay but rather move out after a short time to live in the town of Mae Sot. Some Rohingya have reported they left they camp because they were not able to buy a house there due to prohibitive cost and discrimination against selling to them (Human Rights Watch 2012).
between the supposed groups, as well as the early influence of refugee populations on the Thai government’s pursuit of an SEZ in Mae Sot. Additional scholarship has explicitly called this binary into question (Human Rights Watch 2012; Pobsuk 2016; Rhoden 2017). For example, Rhoden’s quantitative study directly challenges the “refugee-migrant binary” (Rhoden 2017, 1), showing that the paths which lead people to become either “refugees” (in the camp) or “economic migrants” (in the SEZ) are highly dependent on what members of their network have done before them, among other pragmatic factors. Building upon this, I suggest that these categories should be understood not only as largely arbitrary, but that the populations themselves should be studied as complexly connected and often continuous.

I contribute to this discussion by analyzing the role that Mae La camp plays in effectively resocializing refugees (see Dunn 2017, Chapters 1 and 6) in preparation for becoming precarious laborers outside the camp. I do not believe that refugees’ changing habitus (Bourdieu 1977) in the camp is the result of a premeditated plan or a teleological process. Nonetheless, I find it useful to examine the camp as a liminal or transitional space (Hirsch 2008) within the regional context of sweeping rural dispossession, depeasantization, and urbanization (Taylor 2016). I argue that the biocultural simplification grided onto the camp—including the flattening of more-than-human caretaking relations into property relations (Tallbear 2019, 25)—helps facilitate the eventual movement of refugees out of the camp and into the precarious labor force (Dunn 2017, Chapter 5).

This is in part because the camp itself is a problem. As Elizabeth Dunn so precisely contends, drawing on Badiou’s (2006) concept of “the normal situation,” the space of the camp is fundamentally unsuited to social meaning making (Dunn 2017, 3). Taking as a starting point the fact that encampment itself is untenable as a “solution” to protracted displacement for
refugees, I add to Dunn’s argument by considering the broader effects (beyond the space and
time of the camp) that ripple out from the cycle of liberal aid-to-abandonment.48 I ask: what is
produced in the wake of the social “nothingness” and existential (eternal) displacement generated
by the camp and the humanitarian condition (Dunn 2017, 94-95)? More specifically, in what
ways might this nothingness experienced by displaced peoples and its far-reaching effects—what
we might refer to as a kind of “emptiness” (Dzenovska 2018, 2020; Hromadžić 2020a)—be
productive for states and transnational capital?

As a partial answer to these questions, I contend that, from the broadest view of my
fieldsite along the border, biodiverse commons can be seen to be “becoming” plantation
ecologies. Such more-than-human becomings (Biehl and Locke 2017; Kirksey 2014) occur as
Karen subsistence farmers transition to being undocumented laborers on the industrial monocrop
plantations of the Mae Ramat agricultural zone.49 These plantations are situated only a few miles
beyond where the tall razor wire fencing of the camp’s Zone A ends. This space is delineated by
three police check points with their orange cones and guard huts, where Thai military police
stand in starched uniforms and dark face masks, holding semi-automatic weapons and carefully
check every vehicle that goes by. The movement refugees out of the camp happens especially as
rations and other forms of aid are progressively cut, as has been the case in Mae La for over a
decade.

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48 Whether the camp/encampment is a “solution” to securitizing the boarders of wealthy nations is another matter (Dunn 2017, Chapter 8).
49 These monocrop plantations grow mainly corn and soybeans for export.
Abandonment

If, as I have acknowledged, the camp itself poses an existential problem, the present harsh conditions of survival as a racialized undocumented, stateless worker in Thailand may be yet more difficult and dangerous.\(^\text{50}\) As such, it is only under serious duress or “pressure” (Dunn 2017, 128-132), caused by the progressive withdrawal of aid, and the withering of life that occurs in its wake, that people leave the camp in search of work in Thailand. Since 2007 there have been steady reductions in aid, with dramatic cuts implemented between 2011 and 2012, following the signing of ceasefire agreements between the Myanmar Government and ethnic armed groups (Human Rights Watch 2012). Further cuts were made in 2015 and 2016 when food rations were reduced to a stark minimum (BNI 2015) and prioritizing those deemed by NGOs as “MVPs” or “Most Vulnerable People” including the handicapped, sick and elderly (see Ticktin 2011; Trapp 2018, 103; UNHC 2006, 23). This severe reduction in aid became a major theme in my research and significantly shaped the context of the camp as I encountered it. Indeed, I came to know the camp as it was in the throes of abandonment.

For example, my students spoke to me shyly (and only after they had known me for a few months) of eating only two meals a day except for on “special occasions,” as my student, Saw Taw Tho, put it. As I mention elsewhere, these meals were very simple: usually consisting of only white rice mixed with chili paste and a few slices of cucumber. The diffuse and all-pervading effects of humanitarian abandonment were at once everywhere felt in the camp and also never wholly visible. Abandonment circulated through tensions, such concern that dormitory pets had been or would be eaten by hungry camp residents. This included my friends, who were volunteer teachers at another college in the camp, telling me how their pet dog had

\(^{50}\) Although, the two experiences present such different kinds of challenges as to be hard to compare.
disappeared and they suspected someone killed it for food. Then there was an impassioned plea from Mimi over Facebook to the one who stabbed the cat belonging to the “orphan” dormitory, who pleaded for them to “please stop doing this to our friend!” Abandonment also traveled via stories of robberies: an old man shop keeper who was pushed down; a thief moving around in Paw Lay Lay’s hut at night while she was there alone with her young niece and nephews. It also surfaced in the chastising I received when I was encountered walking on the path after dusk: didn’t I know I could meet bad people on the path? Abandonment also surfaced in and between bodies, like in Paw Lay Lay’s anxious trips to the underfunded clinic (without a permanent doctor) with her nieces and nephews who were regularly sick and never totally well, and in the failure of the clinic to detect that something was wrong until the baby, only a few days from being born, stopped moving in Mimi’s belly. Meanwhile, as aid withdrew and let die, it found a moral justification for its abandonment in the liberal imperative for self-reliance (see also Dunn 2017, Chapter 7).

Humanitarian organizations operating in the camp that have had their funding cut have addressed shortfalls in rations and other essential aid by turning to the promotion of “livelihoods” projects (TBC 2010). These projects are aimed at transitioning refugees to being “self-reliant”, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Yet, as the authors of the Human Rights Watch report so aptly put it, while a shift from aid to livelihoods training “would make sense both to prepare refugees for eventual repatriation and reintegration in Burma and to promote their greater self-sufficiency in Thailand, conditions in Burma are clearly not yet ready for safe and dignified return and the Thai policy of closed encampment means that donors’ efforts to promote livelihoods are ineffective and do not benefit most refugees” (Human Rights Watch 2012, 2).
I would add that in addition to being ineffective, efforts to promote livelihoods within a closed and securitized camp are cruel. They are cruel because they displace the responsibility for keeping body and soul together onto refugees themselves. In the absence of land or rights, this presents refugees with a maddeningly impossible situation. Without wishing to pin the blame on any single NGO, each of which is trying to improve the lives of camp residents within a challenging political landscape, I insist that these approaches are cruel because they normalize and capitulate to the dehumanizing or, in the words of Thara Ta Tha Taw, “unhuman” conditions imposed upon refugees. Thara Ta Tha Taw, a friend and fellow teacher in the camp, on two
separate occasions said to me, “I don’t know how humanitarian organization can be so un-human.” Both times he stated this while describing to me what he understood to be NGO’s self-serving practices and the inferiority and even disdain with which they treated refugees.

Furthermore, the policy of promoting refugee “self-reliance” turns international discourse around refugeehood away from fighting for internationally displaced persons’ rights to a dignified life and an ability to imagine their future. Or, as my interlocutors often put it, what was so frustrating to them and what aid organization could never seem to grasp was that above all else they desired the ability to “decide their own life,” not only as individuals but as a nation. Instead, this neoliberal “fix” of refugee self-reliance always already concedes to reduce refugee life to mere survival. Such a life poses a serious existential challenge to refugees because of its fundamental erasure of place, meaning and time (Dunn 2017; see also Stevenson 2014).

Given this impossible context, I describe some of the ways refugees in the camp have adopted new practices of laboring and otherwise attempting to carve out a space of survival in the camp and beyond. Here I am partially inspired by Paul Willis’ classic work, Learning to Labour (1977), despite the vastly different contexts of his study with British working-class youth and residents of Mae La camp, including the young adults whose narratives I focus on in the next chapter. Drawing on the work of Kim Tallbear and Katherine Verdery, I illustrate how shifting forms of labor and value reconfigure more-than-human relations in ways that orients refugees towards futures as migrant laborers in the Mae Sot SEZ and beyond. This re-orientation contrasts sharply with claims by NGOs that livelihoods programs in the camp reinforce refugees’ linkages with Karen homelands and the practices that have historically enabled sovereignty.

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51 Examples he provided included aid organizations price gauging refugees on the cost of electricity and making refugee NGO employees do the majority of the work at organizations for only a small stipend, while Thai and international NGO employees received plush salaries and got to home to Mae Sot town at night.

52 This is certainly not to say that their becoming undocumented laborers is a foregone conclusion.
there, such as keeping Indigenous seed, traditional agricultural practices and mutual aid (see TBC 2010).

**Vegetables Entrepreneurship’s Sa(l)vage Heart**

Here I explore the role that a widespread transition from subsistence farming to gardening for the market plays in reshaping labor and more-than-human relationships (Tallbear 2019; Tsing 2015) in and beyond the camp. I do so by examining how refugees in the camp “learn to labour” (Willis 1977) in ways that may allow them to “swim the tide” of frontier commoditization (Taylor 2016, 152), characterized as it is by rapidly changing social and economic relationships, in a notorious Southeast Asian resource and human frontier.

This is not to suggest that my interlocutors in the camp were purely subsistence farmers in their home villages. Many of people I spoke with described to me how, in addition to growing food for their own consumption and sale on a local level, their families grew one or more cash crops such as cardamom, rubber, or cashews as a means of earning some cash to supplement their diet or meet household needs.53 Rather than setting up a binary between subsistence farming and agroforest in Karen villages, and growing for the market in the camp, I am interested in exploring the nuanced effects that the humanitarian ethos of self-reliance (Dunn 2017, Chapter 6; Omata 2017) has on more-than-human relations and intergenerational memory for camp residents. It is in this vein that I probe the shifting “atmospheric attunements” of everyday life in the camp: what Kathleen Stewart describes as “the enigmas and oblique events and background noises that might be barely sensed and yet are compelling” (Stewart 2010, 446).

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53 Young people in particular, many of whom had come to the camp relatively recently, explained this to me in detail, including relating to me the sad fact that those who grow cashews for the market can’t afford to eat the nuts themselves. Instead, they told me, they would eat the soft flesh that the nut grows from.
It is in these minute instances that we are able to gain a sense of regional trends of
depeasantization and alienation as they are experienced at the ground level of everyday
occurrence and embodied experience. The first such attunements I explore are those surrounding
the buying and selling of vegetables and the shifting of more-than-human relations to concepts of
property and value that they enfold.

Growing and selling vegetables has become a robust sphere of entrepreneurship in Mae La camp. One of the most frequent themes in my conversations with adult gardeners—along with descriptions of the suffering they faced during the war and while fleeing through the jungle—was discussion about the importance of selling their vegetables in order to get by in the camp. These narratives illustrate how selling vegetables has grown in importance as a crucial source of income over the years of the camp’s existence as aid has been gradually withdrawn. Gardening for the market stands alongside two other main economic lifelines in the camp: 1) remittances, sent back to those families lucky enough to have relatives resettled in third countries and 2) people, especially younger adults, sneaking out of the camp to find work under the radar in Thailand.54

This situation closely parallels both Micha Trapp (in Ghana) and Elisabeth Dunn’s (in Georgia) descriptions of refugee camp economies, including the limited possibilities for agriculture on small patches of land, and the necessary reliance on remittances (Trapp 2018) and work outside the camp (Dunn 2017) as deeply fraught survival strategies for refugees. Importantly, Trapp and Dunn both narrow in on the ways in which camp economies—coterminous with but not equivalent to the global capitalist economy—generate increased

54 Those who sneak out of the camp to work under the radar in Thailand for the most part find employment in the Mae Sot SEZ/ in the monocrop fields around Mae Sot (like those along the road between Mae La and Mae Sot or in households in Mae Sot town (see Campbell 2018).
inequality and social tension among refugees. Almost identical to what I found in Mae La camp, Trapp writes of her experience at the Buduburam Liberian camp in Ghana:

…rations were intended to compose a portion of the diet; refugees were expected to meet the bulk of their food need on their own. However, few refugees had access to land for food production; instead, two markets at the camp offered a variety of fresh vegetables, grains and proteins in varying degrees of quality. Generally food was available but many refugees faced uncertainties related to the resources to buy the food. By the time of my field research in 2008 and 2009, the distribution of humanitarian food aid had been significantly scaled back, and further reductions took place as I collected data. In the wake of reduced humanitarian aid, social relationships, “petty trade,” and transnational remittances constituted vital livelihoods strategies (Trapp 2018, 96).

Trapp goes on to describe how these livelihoods strategies, rather than being primarily “restorative” as they are often framed, “also generate conflict and inequality” among camp residents (2018, 97). It is in this vein that I consider the effects “self-reliance,” instilled by humanitarian organizations and crystalized in vegetable entrepreneurship, has on more-than-human social relations in Mae La camp. Trapp draws on J.K. Gibson Graham’s concept of post-capitalism to make a compelling argument for the diversity of refugee camp economies, presenting them as not neatly encompassed by either the global capitalist economy or the so-called “informal economy” (a gloss which she considers unhelpful.) However, I find Tsing’s more circumspect analytic of “salvage” accumulation to be most useful in making sense of the confounding reality that is the highly transnational camp economy and the social and economic relations and forms of value that ripple out from it.

In articulating her concept of salvage, Tsing engages with apparently diverse and culturally loaded economies in which “peri-capitalist” modes of production, such as Indigenous knowledge and non-human reproduction, are harnessed by global supply chains to generate capitalist accumulation (Tsing 2015, 64-66). As she succinctly defines it, “this is salvage accumulation: the creation of capitalist value from noncapitalist value regimes” (2015, 128). The
camp, as a space of exception, assumed by most outsiders to be a site of charity in the form of humanitarian aid, and host to people caught between Indigenous subsistence livelihoods and concentrated late capitalism, strikes me as a particularly fruitful space in which to use this salvage lens. Yet, the camp as a total institution adds an authoritarian layer that is not present in Tsing’s own globe-spanning ethnographic analysis of late capitalism as experienced through mushroom-human relationships. As such, I am most interested in asking of this hard-to-parse space of the camp, where Indigenous knowledges and non-human assemblages run up against raw neoliberalism and its shadow exclusions: what is the relationship between “savage” (sorting) and “salvage” (accumulation)?

While necessary for survival in this exceptional space, I suggest that vegetable entrepreneurship in the camp is implicated in what Saskia Sassen refers to as the “savage” work of “sorting winners from losers” (Sassen 2010). This is because it divides refugees based on those with social and economic capital and those without. On the one side are camp residents with ties to remitters (see Omata 2017, Trapp 2018) who are able to buy or rent the only suitable agricultural land, located along the banks of the creek that runs through the center of the camp. On the other are those who lack such connections, who are “expelled” from the space as Sassen (2014) describes. According to Sassen, such “expulsions” represent a rapidly increasing phenomenon observable across vast and divergent areas of contemporarily life and the biosphere. Indeed, refugees and the increasing encampment of millions of displaced people globally is an important example Sassen takes up in constructing her far-reaching argument (2014). In line with the premise of “expulsion”, those in Mae La without social connections find themselves in an increasingly dire position as rations are cut and practices of reciprocity and commoning

55 Additionally, some refugees are entirely supported by remittances while others combine support from abroad with the small stipend received from having one of a very limited number of positions working for an NGO in the camp.
increasingly transition to gardening for the market. More and more, these individuals are pressured to sneak out of the camp and find jobs as undocumented laborers in Thailand. This puts them at great risk of physical harm, jail or death, either from abysmal labor conditions on plantations or zealous military police and immigration control.

Yet even while the consequences fall unequally, both groups—those squeezing a living from their vegetable gardens, and those pressured to seek out precarious labor outside the camp alike—are pressured to adopt new ways of disciplining their bodies, time, and visions of the future. I suggest that the shift taking place in the camp is one that transitions some refugees from being participants in Indigenous relational ontologies to being precarious laborers on industrial monocrop plantation ecologies. These shifting modes of laboring are outcomes of the frontier dynamics (Taylor 2016) between conflict-torn Karen Indigenous homelands and the neoliberal space of the Mae Sot SEZ (Loong 2019; Pongsawat 2007)\(^\text{56}\). Wrapped up in this savage sorting of winners from losers is the role of private property in the camp, the very existence of which came as a surprise to me, as did the transnational networks involved in the buying, selling and renting of property in the camp. The existence of the property market in Mae La was first revealed to me in a conversation with a friend who had grown up in the camp and lived there on and off her entire life. When I met her, she had recently returned to Mae La after gaining citizenship in Australia.

\(^{56}\) Mae Sot and the SEZ there has long played a crucial role in Thailand’s strategy for economic development (Arnold and Pickles 2011; Pongsawat 2007). This and other SEZs also play a critical role in the global political economy at large (Tsing 2015) that increasingly demands nimbleness and flexibility of produces and thus creates such spaces of exception.
Private Property and the Vanishing Hectare

When I first learned about the scope of the property market in the camp, it was mid-afternoon and I was sitting at the kitchen table in the upstairs dormitory of the college where I was teaching; this space also became my home in the camp. Having already taught my sociology class for the day, I was perched in front of my laptop in one of the turquoise plastic chairs ubiquitous in the college, pouring over my fieldnotes with a cup of Royal Myanmar tea mix beside me. My laptop charger was tied with a piece of yellow plastic bag to the loose socket that constantly buzzed and sometimes shocked me: a technological innovation I inherited from my Sema, the volunteer teacher from Nagaland who was my predecessor and friend.

At that moment, one of the daughters of the late founder of the college, Naw Ta Thaw Ta They, entered the kitchen. Intensely quiet and with a perpetual lively sparkle in her eye, she appeared in her daily uniform of a t-shirt, leggings, and striped slide sandals, her long ponytail swinging behind her. Naw Ta Thaw Ta They has been living in Australia for several years as a resettled refugee until she could get her Australian citizenship, securing her freedom of movement. With the mandatory period that she had to remain in Australia having just ended, she had recently returned to the camp to help look after the dormitory students. Along with her older sister Mimi, she considered this her life calling—carrying on the mission of her mother and father by running the “orphan” dormitory in the camp. Normally shy, today she sat down at the kitchen table with me, covered in its torn floral plastic tablecloth, and we began to chat. Our talk quickly turned to the land that the camp is situated on and what will happen if the Thai government decides to close the camp. This was something weighing heavily on her mind.

57 Many of the students living in this dormitory or not technically orphans, but most do come from backgrounds especially marked by economic hardship and lack of support or family connections.
She told me that the school was an important institution for Karen people in Myanmar and Thailand as well as many now resettled in third countries (see Yeo, Gagnon and Thako 2020), adding that for her and her sisters, “this school, and the camp, is our only real home…it is like our hometown.” This is because, like many who are now adults, Paw and her sisters were born in the camp. It was literally the only home they had ever known and the hub of their community. For this reason she and Mimi had put a lot of effort into trying to determine how they might buy the land on which the college is located in order to preserve the school in the event that the camp is closed. Indeed, impending closure of the camp has been threatened multiple times and people feared it would become a reality in 2017. This was immediately prior to the Rohingya Genocide in Myanmar. After the genocide, humanitarian pressure for what many refugees in Mae La call their “forced” repatriation eased temporarily. Sema, who had been living in the camp at that time, recounted to me how the principal of the college had instructed students, “if they come to take you [for repatriation], whatever you do, don’t let them take you. Grab onto a piece of wood, or a tree or anything. Grip firmly. Don’t let go!” Sema told me this, pantomiming the principle’s example of how to grip, with tense curled fingers.

However, even with the temporary easing of efforts by humanitarian organization to repatriate reluctant or outright resistant camp residents in the wake of the atrocity of the Rohingya genocide, Naw Ta Thaw Ta They and Mimi were not resting comfortably. They knew the Thai government was long past ready to close the camps and that funds for aid to the camps on the border were continuing to dwindle. This was in part because of new, more urgent, humanitarian crisis elsewhere in the world (see Dunn 2017, 204-208), including the sprawling camps for displaced Rohingya people in Cox Bazar, Bangladesh that were desperately in need of funding for infrastructure, rations and social services. Despite the sisters repeated attempts to
gain clarity about how they might purchase the land the college is on, Naw Ta Thaw Ta They told me, “no one seems to know whose land this is.”

When she and Mimi began inquiring into the matter they heard contradictory claims. Some said it was government land, while others claimed it was private property. The sisters made a formal inquiry to the Camp Commander (the Thai official tasked with overseeing the camp) about acquiring rights to the land that the school is on. In keeping with the way things often operated in the camp, she told me with a heavy sigh, “there was no reply. We still don’t know anything to this day.” Naw Ta Thaw Ta They then began to share with me her reflections on the paradox of private property in the camp. The existence of private property in Mae La was hard for me to comprehend as the very notion of humanitarian space seemed to me to preclude the possibility of private ownership. As it turned out, I was wrong.

The property market in Mae La not only existed but was robust and thriving, even as land titles and other forms of documentation were lacking. Following Katherine Verdery (2003), I conceptualize the burgeoning property market in the camp as fundamentally a transformation of relationships, both human and more-than-human. As Verdery asserts, “property transformation is above all a story of relationships and interdependencies” (362). She also asks, as I ask of garden plots in the camp, “what kind of reality does property become?” (18). The answers that I found in my conversations with camp gardeners and in Naw Ta Thaw Ta They’s reflection, pointed to property becoming a reality of increased competition. This competition, in turn, enacted a flattening of complex caretaking relationships and interdependencies between people and more-than-human beings (Tallbear 2019).

Reiterating what Indigenous scholars and activist through the world have emphasized for centuries (Todd 2016), Verdery notes that “standard western property conceptions have long
presumed an object-relations view of the world” (pg). This is in contrast to the relational worldviews of Indigenous ontologies, such as those traditionally held among rural Karen communities in southeastern Myanmar and Kawthoolei. As Paul et. al state, “Like many Indigenous peoples, Karen villagers in the mountains of northern Kawthoolei inhabit an animate world alive with more-than-human social beings…In a Karen Kaw [Indigenous land governance system], land is not a material object of property relations but is rather a ‘field of relationships of things to each other’ (Coulthard 2014, 61)” (Paul et al. 2021, 6-7). However, as Paul et al. also observes, relationships between Karen villagers and the Htee K’Sah Kaw K’Sah, the spirits who are the “owners of the land, forest and water,” change significantly in the context of displacement when ritual obligations are ruptured. Such ruptures in the ritual obligations that underpin Karen Indigenous relational ontologies becomes even more marked in the context of protracted displacement in the camps. I argue that it is precisely in the camps that Karen Indigenous relational ontologies shift towards “western” property relations.

While it is true that no one is expressly forcing Karen refugees to adopt private property in Mae La, the socially constructed conditions of the camp work to articulate “western property conceptions,” as described by Verdery. Such conditions include the extreme lack of space and refugees’ restriction from using the plants and animals of the forest. Furthermore, these major limitations on subsistence livelihoods are coupled with the embedded (unquestioned) liberal ideology of humanitarian organizations, which imagines refugees as individual, entrepreneurial subjects rather than as members of a community (Dunn 2017, Chapter 6). With humanitarian funding schemes aimed at individuals and households, communal land governance and relational worldviews are actively diminished. The effect of this is that, as Tallbear asserts, “property literally undercuts Indigenous kinship and attempts to replace it” (Tallbear 2019, 32). Such a
replacement of kinship and what Tallbear calls “caretaking relations” with western, capitalist property relations, in turn shapes the social life and economy of the camp as a whole (Tallbear 2019). This is especially the case as more people continue to move into the camp while aid and resettlement are already closed to them, making the (exceptional) camp economy more competitive and dire.

Indeed, as Naw Ta Thaw Ta They explained to me in her gentle but pointed way, “actually, people are still coming into the camp to this day” (on this point, see also Human Rights Watch 2012). Naw Ta Thaw Ta They described how these newcomers are purchasing houses from those who have been resettled to third countries with the hope of taking over their rations and maybe even qualifying for resettlement themselves. “They don’t know”, she related soberly, “that the cutoff for resettlement was in 2005.” Thus, these newcomers purchasing homes in the camp are pinning their hopes and life savings on a prospect already foreclosed to them: the opportunity for repatriation and receiving rations. Meanwhile, houses in the camp do not go cheaply. According to Naw Ta Thaw Ta They, the average selling price for a bamboo hut in the camp is 30,000 Bhat, roughly $1,000 USD: more than the entire annual income for many families from Southeastern Myanmar/Kawthoolei.

She wondered aloud how it would be possible to get word to everyone who is still trying to come into the camp that the resettlement program has long been over. She told me that even though The Border Consortium (TBC), in partnership with UNHCR, has worked for years to dispel this myth, people continue arriving with the hope of finding stability and accessing resettlement. A few months after our conversations, her sister Mimi independently confirmed this situation while she and I were chatting in the open dining hall of the dormitory one afternoon. Responding with a slight smile to my continued astonishment at the prospect of the
property market in the camp, she added, “actually the economy in the camp is quite good. Once I spoke with a Canadian man who is an economist. When I told him the average wage for camp residents compared to the average cost of a house in the camp he told me that, based on those numbers, it seems the camp economy is equivalent to the economy of Canada!” The paradox is, however, that such a refugee economy is highly uneven. It depends heavily on the flow of remittances from third countries that reach some and not others (Omatta 2017; Trapp 2018) and thrives off the misplaced hopes of many who still think that by purchasing a house in the camp they may one day be reach resettlement. Meanwhile, as people struggle to survive in the camp they are compelled to adopt modes of laboring that prepare them to make the transition from being “refugees” in the camp, to being precarious “migrant laborers” in the Mae Sot SEZ and beyond. It is in the camp that they first become accustomed to toiling in Thai territory without citizenship, freedom of movement, or rights.

**Two Stories of Property and Precarity: Salvage Accumulation and Savage Sorting**

In all my conversation with adult gardeners, they told me about either having purchased or renting their plots of agricultural land on an annual basis, with the majority being renters. In the few cases that gardeners actually “owned” their land, this had been facilitated by family members resettled in third countries. This is even while the permanence of such supposed ownership is highly questionable, since any deeds are not legally binding or recognized by the Thai government. These resettled relatives, benefitting from a favorable exchange rate between Thailand and resettlement countries such as the U.S., Norway and Australia, worked hard and in many cases skimped on their own needs and wants in their new countries in order to send back remittances. These remittances in some cases enabled their relatives in the camp to purchase a
highly sought-after plot of agricultural land. This was the case for Naw Ta Kwa and her husband, Saw La Eh, the couple I spoke with on several occasions who tirelessly tended a relatively large plot of land close to the creek, directly behind the dormitory where I stayed. Their story played an important role in opening my eyes to the highly transnational nature of the camp economy and the degree to which some refugees are “included” in the work of salvage accumulation taking place in the camp (Trapp 2018; Tsing 2015). Meanwhile, others lacking social and economic capital are excluded and ultimately expelled from the space via the savage sorting of winners from losers (Sassen 2010) in this liminal, exceptional space.

**A Story of Salvage Accumulation**

One day I spoke with this couple, Paw Lay Lay serving as interpreter and cultural broker. The wife, Naw Ta Kwa, explained to me that her sister, resettled and living in New York, had bought their plot of land for them. Her sister had saved the money for the land from her wages as an agricultural worker on an apple orchard. With a sneaking suspicion, I asked where exactly her sister lived. Naw Ta Kwa said she didn’t remember, but that she had her sister’s address written down at home. She told me she would bring it with her the next time she came to her field.

When we met again, she had a tiny slip of notepaper with her sister’s address carefully penciled on in neat English letters. To my surprise and delight the address was on none other than Butternut Street, Syracuse, New York! Butternut Street, on Syracuse’s North Side, was a place already very familiar to me because it is where the largest concentration of Karen families in

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58 It is worth noting that the economic status and types of work done by resettled Karen refugees varies tremendously depending on their country of resettlement. At the two extremes: most Karen in Norway receive years of government sponsored job training and end up working white collar jobs that put them solidly in the middle class, while most Karen in the U.S. work minimum wage jobs, and often on the third shift, most commonly in poultry plants or as domestic workers or agricultural day laborers.
Syracuse lives. Within the span of a few blocks along Butternut and its side streets, numerous Karen families are clustered into dilapidated private apartments or public housing units.

Butternut Street is also where the Karen grocery store in Syracuse was located, where I had spent a winter of weekends doing ethnographic research among the shelves packed with food and other goods and speaking with the owner about his memories of Kawthoolei, the refugee camp, and his thoughts about life in the U.S. Many of our conversations had centered around food, agriculture and the hauntings and failures of intergeneration memory. This included the detailed descriptions he provided me of the “jungle” foods he carried in his shop, which Karen people in Syracuse were hungry for, and many of which he procured from Kawthoolei and Myanmar via Mae La camp.

As such, in this moment of seeing the Butternut Street address written on a slip of paper, standing in the middle of an agricultural field in Mae La camp at the peak of growing season, the circularity of my research sites was brought home to me in a potent way. The fact that this very field, what I had come across the world to study, had been purchased by a sister living in my home city and whom I could have met on any number of occasions, showed me the profound connectivity of these spaces. This chance discovery confirmed my sense that these places are not only linked by transnational networks but are, in fact, actively and dynamically shaping one another in complex ways. This co-shaping is happening on the scale of the personal as well as on the world-making scale. Furthermore, the distanced intimacy (Belford and Lahiri-Roy 2018) connecting the laboring by these sisters struck me as significant. Of these two sisters who had together been subsistence farmers and agroforesters in M’utraw Kawthoolei, one sister was now working as a minimum-wage agricultural laborer on an apple farm in New York state. Meanwhile, her sister in Mae La was using the remittances skimmed from her earnings to
produce neat rows of vegetables and flowers for sale in the camp market: the stalks of her brightly colored zinnia flowers grown straight by a bamboo box surrounding them.

During our conversation, Naw Ta Kwa described to me her almost relentlessly difficult life experiences: fleeing Burmese military attacks multiple times, escaping through the jungle and moving from place to place, and finally coming to settle in the camp with her family. However, even life in the seemingly safe haven of the camp was not so simple. After sharing her life history with me, Naw Ta Kwa let out a sigh from her thin body. Surveying the quarter acre field that she and her husband cultivated morning and evening with the help of their young children, she concluded, “even this place we know is not permanent.” Talking with Naw Ta Kwa showed me that even those people who have been relatively “successful” in the camp, facilitated in large part by strong connections to remitters, still struggle with the uncertainty of their day-to-day existence.

Like Dunn describes in her ethnography of life in a Georgian refugee camp, even the agricultural ventures started by entrepreneurial self-starters are highly precarious in the context of the camp. Similar to the residents of the Georgian camp who lost their fruit tree to a hailstorm, or the man whose piglets died when he was detained for taking a bribe (Dunn 2017, Chapter 6), for my interlocutors in the camp, even the lucky few who were able to obtain a plot by the creek lost their purchased seeds and weeks’ worth of labor when flood waters consumed their fields. At least three times flood waters took everything from gardeners like Naw Ta Kwa and Saw La Eh during the rainy season when I lived in the camp. Moreover, their existential questions of how to make meaning and where to call home remain fundamentally unanswered. Meanwhile, as the story of Naw Ta Kwa and her family illustrates, such “successful” refugees—the uneasy winners
in the process of savage sorting—are enlisted in the _salvage_ accumulation of value as they turn Indigenous agricultural knowledges and non-human processes into commodities for the market.
Resettled Karen refugees send remittances back to the camp that fund market gardens there. In return, longed-for food items from the market are regularly packaged up by those living in the camp and sent to resettled relatives and friends. These relatives and close friends living in exile hunger for the pungent flavors of home including *La Phet Tho* (pickled tea), *Nya U Ti* (fish paste), and *Ta Nay Tha* (dogfruit) along with numerous varieties of beloved herbs, “leaves” and types of thorn that grow wild in the forest of Kawthoolei. These traditional and wild foods lend strength and nourishment to hard-laboring Karen bodies far from the camp much in the way that “bush foods” of the Argentinian Chaco give nourishment to Indigenous Toba bodies toiling at
industrial mill sites as described by Gaston Gordillo in his book *Landscape of Devils* (2004)—a prime example of salvage.

Along with cherished foods from home, hand-loomed Karen traditional garments woven in the camp and in Kawthoolei are packaged for export with care and creative tactics. They are posted from the camp and eventually make their way to third countries including Australia, Canada, Norway, and the United States where there is a virtually inexhaustible and high-paying demand for them. Once there, individuals receive them and enjoy with delight. There too are the small Karen grocery stores that have sprung up like mushrooms after a rain in the various cities and towns where resettled Karen people have clustered, and whose shelves are stocked with the prized contents of transnational parcels (see Anastario 2019). These items sell out quickly to the members of the local Karen community who frequent their small time-space portals of shops.

In this sense, the camp is part of a highly globalized world. It is a threshold that facilitates salvage in the sense that it is wild foods from home that sustains the body and spirit of resettled Karen refugees working the never-ending third shift in the belly of capitalism (Desai 2018). Yet the extra value acquired from these transactions does not flow only one way. For it is the exceptional, liminal space of the camp that links the “illegal” nation of Kawthoolei59 with the diaspora that materially and affectively sustains the physical existence of this thumbnail of autonomous territory. At once a real and a “make believe” space (Navaro-Yashin 2012), this small but very much physically present territory has tremendous significance for millions of Karen people living in exile, still very much oriented towards home.

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59 Kawthoolei being an autonomous territory that claims to be a state but is not recognized by the UN or other national governments and which is not accessible by any traditional legal channels, including with a passport and visa.
A Story of Savage Sorting

Meanwhile, camp residents who are “expelled” (Sassen 2014) from the camp due to an inability to survive there, sneak out to find employment in the monocrop plantations surrounding the agricultural town of Mae Ramat. Backdropped by stunning purple mounts, emerald fields of corn and soybeans line both sides of Highway no. 105 almost the whole way between Mae La and Mae Sot (see Human Rights Watch 2012, 35-37; Pongsawat 2007, 434). As the Karen pastor of a church in Mae Sot who Ruth and I stayed with on multiple occasions told us once while passing these fields in his pickup on the way to church, “ten years ago this was all jungle.” Indeed, the plantation ecologies of this Southeast Asian frontier are still just unfolding.

Such plantations, and the role refugees from Mae La camp play in their functioning, first appeared on my radar before I ever went to the border to conduct my fieldwork. One day, while back in Georgia and visiting with San Nie, one of the two Karen gardeners and mothers who I had become especially close with during my undergraduate research, she told me how she was very worried about her young nephews back in Mae La. She told me that her brother’s family in the camp was very poor and they could not afford enough food and basic necessities for their family. Due to this, his young sons, still just children, had to sneak out of the camp to work as agricultural laborers on one of the plantations close to the camp. She told me how the younger of the two boys had become very sick from this work due to the hard nature of the labor on his still growing body, and due to getting “burned” by the harsh industrial chemical—herbicides and pesticides they were required to spray on the plants. I expressed my deep concern and dismay at hearing this. Indeed, I was shocked to know just how dire the conditions in the camp had become.
She went on to tell me that the boy was in the clinic in the camp but that she was worried about the level of the treatment he was receiving there, since they did not even have a full-time doctor there, and refugees were only able to receive a permission letter from the camp commander to travel to receive care at the clinic in Mae Sot in “emergency” situations. San Nie, working though this dilemma with me that was weighing heavily on her, told me that she was sending more money back to her brother to try to help their situation, no doubt hoping this would mean that her nephews no longer had to go out and work on the plantations. However, San Nie’s own family was far from well off. San Nie’s husband works over 60-hour a week on the line at the nearby “chicken plant” that employs the majority of Karen in Athens-Clarke County, Georgia. As an undergrad at UGA some friends and I started a Karen Market Garden project with Moo Paw, San Nie and a horticulture professor at UGA. However, as we soon realized, San Nie’s husband was the only one with a car and he worked overtime, even on weekends. My friends and I had only bikes for transportation. As such, we had no way to transport Moo Paw and San Nie to the garden which was located a few miles outside of town.

San Nie had six boys and the day I went to visit her she shared with me that she was expecting a girl. She and her husband were very excited to finally have a girl, but I also understood that she was concerned for how they would provide for an additional child. Over the course of the time that I knew her, she went from being a stay-at-home mother of this newly resettled family to also taking on several shifts a week at the chicken plant to cover the bills. While she was away, one of the older boys would watch the younger ones. The garden that the family kept at “neighbor’s field” in the intentional community in Comer, Georgia, along with San Nie’s backyard container garden, had initially helped to offset the cost of food for their family. But the more hours that San Nie and her husband took on at the chicken plant, the harder
it was for them to make the twenty-minute drive to the garden plot even one day a week. Thus, they started to eat simple food, much of it from cans, in their small bare apartment on the outskirts of Athens, trying to stretch their dollars as far as possible. In light of all this, I could appreciate what a sacrifice it was for San Nie to send money back to her brother in the camp, perhaps in addition to other relatives she was supporting there, and how hard it was emotionally for her not to be able to send more. This story that San Nie shared with me stuck with me and was brought home in a powerful way when I actually encountered the plantation fields during my fieldwork and heard the horror stories about the experiences of those who worked there from my fellow teachers at the school, themselves Karen refugees. Every time we made the drive from the camp to Mae Sot, either to buy food and supplies for the school (a special privilege only afforded to this one school by the camp commander, and then only tenuously), or when I had to return to Chiang Mai for a visa run or meeting with faculty advisors at Chiang Mai University, we passed the vast expanses of these plantations.

Thara Thara Ta Tha Taw, along with Paw Lay Lay was my cultural “interpreter” for many matters about camp and border life during my fieldwork. As a highly intellectual person with a master’s degree from a school in India who had lived in multiple areas of Myanmar, including major cities prior to coming to the camp, he was a clear-eyed and incisive critic of the oppressive conditions he and other refugees were subject to. As such, it was only natural that of his own accord he would offer details of the harsh and exploitative conditions of agricultural laborers on these monocrop plantations almost every time we made a trip into Mae Sot. He described to me how the Thai workers on the plantations make very low wages, below the national minimum wage, because this is a special economic area. Karen refugees working on the plantations, because they are stateless and undocumented workers (see Holmes 2013,) make only
a fraction of what the Thai laborers make, abysmal wages equivalent to only a few US dollars a week for long hours of physically grueling, dangerous work. Intersecting with what San Nie had told me about her nephew, he informed me that many workers on these plantations became very sick from the harsh chemicals that they were forced to use on the plants without proper protective gear.

Moreover, there were frequent immigration raids on the plantations. As a result, refugee laborers had to be ready to run and hide at any minute during their working day. This precarity made it even easier for the bosses and owners of the plantations to manipulate and exploit their labor, and to reject any demands for improved wages or working conditions, including basic health and safety measures. Unfortunately, due to the scope of my study, which was focused almost entirely inside the camp for the Thai-Myanmar border portion of my multi-sited fieldwork, and the difficulty of accessing these plantation and speaking with workers there, I was not able to investigate these claims and verify the conditions myself. However, while these are all antidotes that I heard second hand from San Ni and Thara Ta Tha Wa, as the accounts were consistent with others who I greatly trusted, such as Paw Lay Lay and Mimi. Additionally, these descriptions fit with the general conditions of precarious work on the border as detailed by Steven Campbell (2018) and others, as well as the ethnographic literature on the conditions of undocumented migrant agricultural laborers in other parts of the world, such as in the United States (Holmes 2013; Minkoff-Zern 2014).

In addition to working on such industrial plantations, according to Campbell (2018), Karen migrants are also commonly employed as domestic workers in Mae Sot households. Some former camp residents go as far as Bangkok to find work. In order to do so, in most cases they must rely on human smugglers to get past the numerous strict Thai military police immigration
checkpoints around the Mae Sot SEZ (Campbell 2018; Human Rights Watch 2012). These checkpoints are specifically designed to catch migrant workers attempting to leave Tak Provence for the interior of Thailand, where minimum wages are higher and there are more regulations enforced for the health and safety of workers (Arnolds and Pickles 2011).

As Mimi told me one day while we chatted in the dim corridor of the teachers’ dormitory, those who go to the interior of Thailand to find work come back to the camp for the census in the camp so they can still be counted as living there. After all, as she remarked, although the journey back to the camp is extremely risky they are willing to undertake it because the camp is the only stable home they have because it is where many of them were born. If they are caught, they could be fined, beaten and jailed or deported to Myanmar (Human Rights Watch 2012). Such risk-taking signals the importance of registering their rootedness in the camp even while living elsewhere, working to send money back to their family. After all, the camp, for all its problems, is their last main connection to their community, their identity and their homes in Kawthoolei or Karen State. As precarious non-citizens (Ramírez 2021), these refugees-turned-migrant laborers are strategically exploited by corporations and nation states. Indeed, state-level political decisions, including negotiations between Myanmar and Thailand, are made on the basis of ensuring that such precarious migrant populations continue to exist (Pongsawat 2007).

**Why the Camp Can’t Be a Village**

Many, including myself, have questioned why the camps cannot simply become Thai villages, their inhabitants recognized as permanent residents. In the past, when there was much greater freedom of movement in and out of the camps, refugees essentially operated as such. In those early days, as Ben, one of the long-time foreign staff members at Kaw La recalled to me, “the
camps were almost paradisical.” This stood in stark contrast to the hunger, suicided ridden “open
air prison” (Giannacopoulos and Loughnan 2019) filled with trash, crumbling infrastructure and
despair, recurrently ravaged by fires, that I had come to know. In conversations I had with
several people during my fieldwork including Mimi, staff members at Kaw La, and faculty
mentors at Chiang Mai University and Payap University, various explanations were given to me
for why it is unlikely the camps will ever become a village despite policy recommendations
urging such a shift (Long 2015). These explanations included concern on the part of the Thai
government that if they were to turn the camps into villages, including granting camp residents
freedom of movement and other human rights similar to those of Thai citizens, that the flow of
migrants from Myanmar would become a tide that could not be stemmed. According to this line
of thinking, many of those who would come would not be “legitimate refugees” but rather
undocumented migrants. This is a worry has also been voiced by NGO workers in Mae La
(Human Rights Watch 2012).

This Flood imagery is frequently and widely invoked in the media and in nationalistic
discourses to assert a need to maintain and protect the nation from a “wave” of ethnic others
threatening to overtake it (Dempsey and McDowell 2019; Dunn 2017, Chapter 8). Thailand is no
exception. Similar “inundation” narratives have been present in the country for decades (Rajaram
and Grundy-Warr 2004). I encountered such fearful metaphors (Appadurai 2006) the very first
day I arrived in Mae Sot for my preliminary research in 2017. I was engaged in casual
conversation with a middle-class Thai woman staying at my hostel who had come to Mae Sot for
bargain shopping. I was taken aback when she warned me to avoid the “dirty and dangerous
Burmese” who, according to her, were “everywhere” in Mae Sot.
In addition to this more generalized, xenophobic rhetoric present among some members of the Thai population, there is also the issue of jealousy on the part of local Thai people, as Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2004) and Katy Long (2015) have noted. Many Thai farmers living near Mae La camp are themselves very poor and may feel that the “foreign” refugees have unfairly received assistance from the government above and beyond what they themselves have been given (for a similar context see Hromadžić 2020b). Rajaram and Grundy-Warr note reports of ill will between Thai villagers and refugees in the newspaper the Bangkok Post, while questioning how widespread these actions might actually be on the part of refugees. The authors note that, “apparently, small numbers of refugees were accused of encroaching upon forest reserve land, collecting wild products “illegally”, and stealing from nearby farms” (2004, 53).

Another perspective given for why Thailand does not bring the nearly 100,000 refugees still warehoused in camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border into the national fold of rights and protections, is that, as a faculty mentor in Chiang Mai put it succinctly to me, “every rich country needs a poor country.” This, he told me, was a sociological principle a colleague had shared with him years ago. Since then, he said, he had seen it play out again and again across the various contexts and continents where he has worked, including in other protracted refugee situations. He told me that I should understand the relationship between relatively “rich” Thailand and, by all standards, objectively “poor” Myanmar as just such a situation. In other words, the flow of undocumented migrants from Myanmar into Thailand will not be permanently stemmed any time soon. This is because it is favorable to Thailand’s economy to have a mass of uprooted and easily suppressed laborers. Meanwhile, the Myanmar military is content to continue making war and expelling the non-citizen inhabitants of its ethnic borderlands in order to access the lands, waters and valuable resources in these “biodiversity hot spots” (Paul et al.)
They do not mind having them occasionally “thrown back” from Thailand into these borderlands, where in the absence of State infrastructure, their wounds of labor are cared for by those members of Indigenous communities who still remain. Like the situations described by Gordillo (2004), Holmes (2013) and Anastario (2019), Indigenous wild foods of home, or what Gordillo refers to as “bush” foods nourish the bodies and souls of Indigenous farmers turned migrant laborers and thus reproduce the conditions of their labor. This too, it turns out, is sa(l)vage accumulation.

**From Biodiverse Commons to Plantation Ecologies**

In this chapter I have engaged the existing work on neoliberal political economy and struggle in the Mae Sot SEZ, as well as human rights reports on the conditions of refugees on the border. Building upon these literatures and in dialogue with theories of shifting relational ontologies and regimes of value and property (Sassen 2014; Tallbear 2019; Tsing 2015; Verdery 2003), I have argued that the transformations taking place within Mae La camp prime residents to transition from subsistence-based livelihoods, rooted in Indigenous Karen relations ontologies (Paul et al. 2021), to precarious forms of labor within plantation ecologies. Embedded in this process, I suggest, is a flattening of biocultural diversity and more-than-human “caretaking” (Tallbear 2019) relations. This phenomenon unfolding within the camp, while geographically and historically specific, is perhaps illustrative of a wider pattern of alienation and intergenerational forgetting around more-than-human relationships occurring in protracted humanitarian situations and other contexts of displacement throughout the world (see Anastario 2019; Castellanos et al. 2020; Kimmerer 2013; Pugliese 2020).  

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60 Omata states, “At the end of 2015, at least half of the world’s refugee population was estimated to be in protracted exile, with the average length of time spent in exile estimated to be approximately 26 years (UNHCR 2016)…”[and]
I have presented the case for how the camp effectively prepares Indigenous Karen refugees to become members of the global precariat (Campbell 2018; Standing 2014). Most Karen refugees in the camp were previously small-scale subsistence farmers and agroforesters, and, as such, important stewards of biodiversity. However, through their protracted stay in the camp, often across generations, they have been subject to deskilling and resocialized. The outcome of this resocialization combined with the pressures of humanitarian abandonment have turned many refugees into rootless migrant laborers within the deathly monoculture of plantation ecologies. Fighting is ongoing in Kawthoolei, and Karen refugees in Mae La are still largely unwilling or unable to return “home.” As such, if and when the camp is permanently closed, or when the conditions become too unbearable, camp residents will likely flow out of the camp to find acutely underpaid work as an undocumented laborers in the Mae Sot SEZ or beyond, as many already have.61

Following Sassen’s theory of the deepening of global capitalism, I have shown how conditions on the Thai-Myanmar border are in line with broader patterns of intensified accumulation and inequality. These new manifestations of late capitalism break with past forms of capital accumulation that were predicated on market expansion. Rather, as the lives of Mae La residents illustrate, this intensified phase of capitalism is marked by violent “expulsions” (Hromadžić 2020b; Sassen 2014). Such expulsions render whole groups of people warehouseable, temporarily usable and ultimately disposable (Sassen 2014). Furthermore,

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61 This, in fact, is already a rapidly occurring phenomenon that has been documented numerous places (Campbell 2018; UNHCR 2006; Women’s Commission for Refugees 2006), although statistics are hard to obtain, and this was often described to me during my time in Mae La.
because these are people who are mostly stateless and thus, in the words of Arendt, lack “the right to have rights” (1951), there is no obvious recourse against their dehumanizing treatment and subsequent expulsion. As Sassen states of displaced populations:

this systematic shift signals that the sharp increase in displaced peoples, in poverty, in deaths from curable illnesses, are part of this new phase. Key features of primitive accumulation are at work, but to see this it is critical to go beyond logics of extraction and to recognize the fact of systemic transformation, with its system-changing practices and projects—the expulsion of people that transforms space back into territory, with diverse potentials (Sassen 2010, 46).

In this chapter I have argued that the expulsion and “savage sorting” (Sassen 2010) of refugees is bound up in Mae La camp and its spaces of local and transnational entanglement with the work of “salvage accumulation”, as articulated by Tsing (2015).

Furthermore, I suggest that as has been the case for dispossessed Indigenous populations in various historical contexts, and as well documented in the ethnographic literature (for example Gordillo 2004; Taussig 1980; Tsing 2015), former camp residents are intentionally chosen for such alienated labor because they have been made newly, forcibly rootless. Because of this and the fact that, as migrants, they are not tied to the specific place and land where they are required to work, individualized and stripped of collective power (see Kimmerer 2013, Chapter 1), they are unlikely to pose a serious threat of resistance to those who seek to accumulate value from their alienated labor. Such dispossessed Indigenous persons turned uprooted migrants become “doubly” valuable to global capitalism and colonial states. On one side of the border they are dispossessed by settler colonialism, their land and its “resources” taken from them. While on the other side their newly alienated labor is appropriated by extractive colonialism (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013). As Tallbear (2019) states of the enduring harms of such ruptures caused by colonization, “the issue is not only that material dispossession of land and “resources” builds the settler state, but also that “dispossession” undercuts co-constitutive relations between beings”
(32). Relevant to the camp and the argument I make in Chapter Two of this dissertation, Tallbear goes on to emphasize that “moments of transition bring about crisis, uncertainty and even opportunity.” This poses the question, “What factors shape whether a transition is a crisis or an opportunity and in whose eyes?” (34). Indeed, the crisis of Karen refugees displacement presents a tremendous opportunity for corporations on both sides of the border and the Thai and Myanmar states.

In light of all this, it can be tempting to side with Rajaram and Grundy-Warr when they sum up, depressingly, that on the Thai-Myanmar border, “the refugees and undocumented migrants are voiceless pawns in the wider geopolitical chessboard and machinations of sovereign states” (2004, 57). However, to this I would add that while refugees and migrants on the Thai-Myanmar border are coerced into oppressive conditions, they are far from voiceless about these conditions and their dreams for the future. Although their voices do not easily rise to the ears of policy makers or even the leaders of international NGOs (INGOs), they are nonetheless forcefully present. I know this because I heard them clearly during my time in the camp, even across the challenge of language barriers. The voices of my students and friends in Mae La—sometimes incisively critical, other times hilarious, and still other times determined and hopeful—reminded me repeatedly of the fact that, in the words of Arundhati Roy, “There's really no such thing as the “voiceless.” There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard” (Roy lecture, November 3, 2004). As I explore at length in the following chapter, despite the dehumanizing conditions they find themselves in, residents of Mae La camp can indeed “speak” (Spivak 1988). They do so with power.
Chapter Five
Stories Against Dispossession: Nurturing Memories of Other Worlds

- “Life in the village is—we talk about freedom—it is freedom. We can go anywhere. Here, there is no freedom.” -Thara Ta Tha Wi (Teacher in the camp)

Introduction: Countering Alienation with Food and Memory Across Borders

The cuts in aid and everyday resocialization occurring in the camp described in the previous chapter, combined with the fact that most refugees feel it is not safe to return home yet, influences how young people in Mae La imagine their futures. Through my interviews and friendships with young people in the camp, I found that in some cases this situation leads refugee youth, like Saw Khay Thu, who I will introduce further, to contemplate the possibility that they will become migrant laborers in Thailand. This is because they feel they have no better options. In contrast, other young people such as Naw Thi Klo Po reminisced fondly about their home village and dreamed vividly of their eventual return. These stories highlighted agrarian and land-based dimensions of village life, filled with more-than-human relationships as well as a pervasive sense of greater togetherness than life in the camp.

These same students, many of whom would come visit me in the evenings to chat and drink tea, described to me their dreams and plans for one day returning home to their villages. It was their common goal to contribute in different ways to their local communities and build their futures in the village.\(^\text{62}\) As such, even while pressures towards precarious migrant labor and expulsion (Sassen 2010; 2014) are real, many of my young friends pushed back against the seeming inevitability of their flowing out of the camp to become alienated migrant laborers in

\(^{62}\) This is despite their also naming multiple benefits of life on the border compared to life in the village—the most important being the opportunity for education.
Thailand. Here, I detail the ways in which these students enact a “politics of refusal” (Simpson 2014; 2017) through narrating affect-laden memories of their villages, as well as through sharing foods from home, sent across borders in defiance of settler state logics and boundaries (Simpson 2014). Indeed, both sides of the border were Indigenous Karen territory long before the states of Thailand and Myanmar (attempted to) extend their administrative reach and put up a border there. Similar to the process described by Audra Simpson in Mohawk territory bordered by the U.S. and Canada, the work of settler expansion and its refusal by Karen communities is very much ongoing. It is in this context that students further enacted refusal through their detailed imaginings of future “returns” (Nazarea 2021) to homelands left behind. This was even as such returns remained necessarily far off or forestalled.

Finally, in this chapter I argue that these young adults should be understood as anthropologists in their own right. I highlight the important contributions they make to collective understanding of the transformations taking place for Karen people on both sides of the border and globally. It is from their unique vantagepoint as political and ontological “border crossers” (Hromadzic 2011, 276 [Feuerverger 2001: xiii]; Simpson 2014; 2017) that these young people find potent ways of rejecting the power of both settler states and humanitarian regimes. In doing so, they reject the implicit inevitability of their flowing out of the camp to become part of the global precariat (Standing 2011). As I illustrate in this chapter, some of the primary ways refugee youth enact refusal are through affective engagement with food and plants tied to home. I explore the means by which my young interlocutor’s push back against alienation, dispossession and biocultural simplification in the following sections: “We Have to Live the Life of the Refugee,” “Sensory Politics and Students Counter Acts,” “Foods from Home,” and “A Student’s View: The Power of the In-between.”
“We Have to Spend the Life of the Refugee”

As funding for the camp dries up and it remains unsafe to return to homelands in Myanmar and Kawthoolei, many young people from the camp have become undocumented migrant labors in Thailand or elsewhere as a means surviving and supporting their families. As Norum and colleagues describe, Mae La is positioned as a complex liminal space between Indigenous Karen homelands and spaces of intensified labor exploitation in the Mae Sot SEZ, characterized by the temporality of late capitalism (Norum, Mostafanezhad, and Sebro 2016). Adding to this, I argue that paradoxically life in the camp helps transition Karen refugees from the lived reality of the village to that of the SEZ. This is because, no matter how terrible the conditions were that caused refugees to flee their villages, it is in the camp that they first become accustomed to, toiling to survive without freedom of movement or rights outside the context of armed conflict.

One teacher at the school where I taught, Thara Ta Tha Wi, had been a member of the “orphan” dormitory when he was a student in the camp. He now runs his own student dormitory, located a short walk from the college where we both taught. During an interview one afternoon, reflecting on the uncertain future of the camp and the challenges facing camp residents, he remarked to me that “In 2019, 2020, something like that we know that we will all have to go back [to Myanmar]”. We sat in turquoise plastic chairs on the stage of the empty school auditorium where daily morning chapel is held, my iphone recorder running on the table in front of us. The afternoon light slanted in through the patterned concreted blocks and a scrawny chicken pecked around the neatly spaced plants at the threshold. Thara Ta Tha Wi continued, “That’s what we heard. We will all have to go back. They will stop the refugee kinds of things.

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63 The majority of these young people are not eligible for resettlement, having arrived in the camp after the cut-off date for resettlement in 2005, set by the UNHCR.
Food is becoming decrease—that is very true. That has happened already. That was last year
[when there was a cut in rations.]”

When I asked Thara Ta Tha Wi how people were coping with the decreased amounts of
food, and he informed me that “So far, people can still manage, but they know the food is
decreasing. Maybe some of them, they earn a little bit, you know. They buy rice, so they can still
survive. As long as they can survive in the camp they will stay here. But if they cannot really
survive here, I think they will go...somewhere else, in Burma or in some Thai Karen villages
here. So, when people go, this place will remain as a village...not as a refugee [camp] anymore.”

After a moment, Thara Ta Tha Wi added, “They cannot force, if the refugee is not willing to go
back. If they force, it is some kind of human rights abuse. That’s what I heard. If the refugees
want to stay—they have to let them stay. But the pressure will come. With the [cuts in] food—
they will give them pressure that is for sure. That will make a refugee not feel like staying in the
refugee camp. Those kind of pressures already started, and the feeling already started. So, some
of them already went back. But a lot remain.”

A teacher in his mid-thirties, Thara Ta Tha Wi has more stability and options than most.
He lives and teaches in the camp as a chosen vocation and is able to return to his Karen village,
located almost directly across the border, where it is now safe to go because the fighting there
has subsided. Unlike many in the camp, he does not have to worry about retribution from the
Burmese military if he goes back to his village because it is in a Karen-controlled area. His
mother still lives in the village where she keeps a cow and his relatives have durian and betelnut

64 He is here referring to the principle of non-refoulment, a precept of international law that forbids a country from
retuning asylum seekers to a country in which they would be in danger of persecution based on specific grounds.
orchards there. The products of these orchards are widely known in the camp and prized for what is regarded as their superior taste. Selling betelnut to camp residents provides Thara Ta Tha Wi’s relatives with a significant source of income.

Furthermore, students from the school were sometime able to informally leave the camp to take weekend trips to his village—again, something not possible for most camp residents. They went to renew their spirits (Kantor 2021) in the verdant rural setting, to hike into the woods and go durian picking (and eating)—a special treat indeed. This I learned early on in my stay at the camp when Ruth mysteriously disappeared for a weekend. She returned looking refreshed and with stories to tell and pictures to share of lush rural scenes, everything slick and emerald from the abundant rains. Apologizing that she had not been able to tell me where she was going before she left, she explained that she been invited to join the excursion to Thara Ta Tha Wi’s home village at the last minute, being told to “get in the truck now if you want to come!”

Ruth let me travel vicariously with her and the small group of students through her vivid stories and images, taken on her galaxy phone with high image resolution. She told me about how her legs and back ached after hours of hiking. But how it was “totally worth it,” as the durian they picked in the orchard was, “Some of the best tasting durian I have had in my life!” This was high praise coming from a durian connoisseur and all-around food enthusiast who did not mince her words. With animation she described the serenity of village, the animals, and the agricultural fields, the forest, and the clear streams running down from the hillsides. Despite being geographically proximate, the village represented a stark contrast to the camp, with its over-crowdedness and stinky brown water that made our skin itch. She showed me a video clip of the students laughing by the edge of one such stream, a small foot bridge over it. In the photo they leaned on each other and gleefully showed off their haul of rotund, spikey durian, reveling
in how muddy they had gotten along the way. From these images and Ruth’s descriptions, it was apparent there was much longing among the students for such rural settings that mirrored the home villages most of them had to leave behind.

However, the social safety net and connection to village life that Thara Ta Tha Wi has in his home village—which he is able to share to some degree with the students—is not available to the vast majority of those living in the camp. For most people in Mae La who lack a clear path home (Dunn 2017) the dire reality and uncertain future of the camp is perceived clearly. It is felt viscerally in the everyday where there are progressively fewer recesses in which to take shelter from the constricting difficulty of their circumstances. Squeezed by what C. Nadia Seremetakis describes as the “im/possibility” of daily life (2019, 4) under such conditions of contraction, young people in the camp such as Saw Khay Thu, a student in my sociology class, reflected perceptively on the forces affecting their experience of simultaneous confinement and precarity.

The phenomenon they described to me parallels the empirical reality and theoretical concept of “emptiness” elaborated by anthropologist Dace Dzenovska. Writing from the context of an “emptying” countryside in Latvia, near the Russian border, Dzenovska transports her reader to her quiet field sites: whole villages that have been abandoned by the circuits of global capital. Here, tellingly, even promises of future development are no longer made by officials. She describes how residents of these places fear that soon their villages will cease to exist on the map (Dzenovska 2020). So too, some young people in Mae La camp like Saw Khay Thu fear they may lose their connection to their homes and their Karen identity which lends meaning to their lives. This is also due in large part to the routes of global capital which concentrate in some places and create abandonment in others (See Anastario 2019), and which force labor migration on a scale that is arguably unprecedented in world history.
I talked with Saw Khay Thu one evening after his long day of dormitory chores and classes and before an evening drama performance. During our conversation, he related to me with surprising frankness and vulnerability, for a young man who usually exuded certainty and leadership in the classroom, his vast uncertainty about the future. He confessed to me the loneliness he felt living in the camp, far away from his family in a mixed control border area of Myanmar. He told me somberly how his mother had to proclaim to local Burmese officials that he “already died” so that his family would not get in serious trouble for him going to the camp. An enthusiastic student in my sociology class, Saw Khay Thu related to me incisive critiques of his and other refugees’ treatment at the hands of the Thai government, NGOS, and other groups which made decisions about their lives for them. In so doing, he exhibited the keen perspective of a social scientist: a disposition I had picked up on from his serious and sometimes impassioned contributions to class discussions.

During our conversation he reiterated the overwhelming constraint he felt at never being able to leave the camp and his despair at having no clear path forward for his future. He told me, “day by day, week by week, years by years, we have to spend our life in the camp. We have to spend the life of a refugee.” Below is a transcribed portion of our conversation in which Saw Khay Thu reflects on the uncertainty of his future and his feeling of being squeezed by a lack of options as well as the impossible conditions of daily life in the camp. In response to my asking how he maintains a sense of connection to his home, Saw Kay Thu told me:

SKT: I want to go back to my village, to my native place, but I cannot go back. If I go back I will face many problems...because I have already been here [in the camp.] We make up our mind. We want to go back to our native place but we cannot go back because of the problem, the social problem.

65 The dormitory students days began at 5am with prayer, singing and then cleaning, cooking and hauling water, and end at midnight after a full day of classes, study time and evening drama and choir activities.
66 Relevant scholarship on the effects of unimaginable futures include Dunn 2017; Dzenovska 2020; Norum et al. 2016.)
T: What things about your village make you want to go back?

SKT: Because we stay here but everything is not okay (*laughs sadly) because we stay alone. Sometimes we think and we imagine about the problems in here, because in here no one support us, so we cannot go forward and we cannot go back. And we have to stay here, stay in the dormitory. As my problems, after I graduate college, I don’t know: “where will you be? where will you go?” Very difficult to like, make a plan. We cannot plan serious our own right decision. We have to spend the life of the refugee. We cannot move. We have to stay here.

When I asked Saw Khay Thu if he was involved with the student’s dormitory garden for his college, he told me:

SKT: Yes, because we cannot go outside. So we have to spend the life in the camp. We have to grow the plant. The camp commander didn’t give us the permission letter to go outside [the camp], so we have to stay. Also, like work or help to support their family. Only, we got the rice. When I started to live in the camp [five years ago] one person got 12 kilos [of rice.] Right now we get only 8 kilo [per month.] So, I am young. My stomach is very big. 8 kilo per person yes (*laughs) especially Karen, we can eat that in one week! So very big problem. Refugee people they want to get a little bit to support their family, to buy the rice or to get any food. They want to go outside to make the farm, but they didn’t have no choice. They have to stay to grow the plant in the camp.

When I asked Say Khay Thu how he felt about living in the camp, if it felt like home to him, he told me:

SKT: Yes (*long and drawn out with a sigh) frankly, in my reality sometimes when I stay in my bedroom I lay down in my bed and I also cry and I think about that. I don’t know how to do it. We stay here and we don’t have nothing. For example, we don’t have the place to stay. We don’t have the secure place to spend the life. (*A loud bell suddenly rings in the background and someone walks by singing.) I don’t have anyone to be close with me. I just feel alone and sometimes I am depressed. I feel so... (*voice trails off) sometimes it is very hard to think about that and I am sad. And then I think like, “Oh, God loves me,” so I be happy. Because we are Christian, so we think “Oh, God loves me.” So we live the comfortable life. But I don’t know what the future will become, what will happen to me. If I will stay in here or move, go, we don’t know, I don’t know…

T: It must be hard not to know. If you had to think about the place that feels the closest to home, what place would you say?

SKT: As for me, I don’t know exactly where to stay. If I had a choice…the authority in the camp or the UNHCR, they recommend us, “Oh, the refugee people can go to work”, like at the other place in Thailand, yes, then I will follow them. But if they say, “Oh, you cannot go, you are refugee” so, we have to stay. But I am interested to go outside [the camp] to work.
The perceptiveness that young people have about life in and beyond the camp, as illustrated by my conversation with Saw Kay Thu, is partially due to their perspective as political and ontological “border crossers.” Integrating two separate theoretical concepts of “border crossing”, I mean that these young people travel between different groups and lived realities (Hromadzic 2011, 276 [Feuerverger 2001, xiii]). And also that in the process of doing so, they enact sovereignty by moving themselves, along with food and stories, across settler colonial
borders and boundaries on the landscape (Simpson 2014). It is from this unique vantagepoint as border crossers, in the double sense, that the young people I befriended find potent ways of rejecting the implied inevitability of their flowing out of the camp to become part of the global precariat (Standing 2011). Some of the primary ways I witnessed refugee young people rejecting conditions of dispossession and alienation were through affective engagement with food and plants tied to home. This includes narrated memories of food and agricultural practices in their home villages, such as working on their families’ farms, and foraging and fishing in the company of friends.

**Sensory Politics and Students’ Counter Acts**

The counterpoints to the difficult stories I heard from young people like Saw Khay Thu were the subtle but subversive counter-acts and counter-narratives (Arampatzi 2017) I encountered among young people in the camp. Through sensory and embodied engagement with food and plants tied to home, these acts and narratives contested the dispossession, alienation and forgetting (see Seremetakis 1994; 2019; Sutton et al. 2013; 2021) occurring in the camp. Students’ counter-acts included foraging in the forest around the camp for wild foods such as herbs and wild ginger, as well as for leaves from teak trees, used for roof repair, and bamboo for house repair. This was even while foraging in the forest is strictly prohibited by Thai authorities at the penalty of steep fines as well as the possibility of harsh beating or even death. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there have been instances of refugees who were found cutting bamboo being shot on site (Human Rights Watch 2013). Other counter-acts included young people cultivating food against the odds of limited space, irrigation, etc. as in the case of the “boarders’ gardens”, cultivated by

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67 Many of the students I taught had come to the camp in the last five to ten years from homelands Myanmar and Kawthoolei (Yeo, Gagnon and Thako 2020).
high school students living in communal dormitories. In such borders’ gardens (pictured in Figures 2A, B and C), students grow a significant portion of their own food despite severe limitations on space and resources. Here, agricultural knowledge is perpetuated by being shared peer-to-peer.

Furthermore, on a daily basis students overcame the alienation of their situation, which framed food as a biopolitical tool for survival (Trapp 2016), by finding joy through cooking and eating together. This was despite a chronic lack of sufficient quantities of nutritious food. In this context, the acts of harvesting wild foods, gardening, cooking, and tasting food all in the company of others within a shared field of experience countered alienation by connecting students with inter-generational memory and the landscapes of their rural home villages. In these unspectacular moments, the reinforcement of sensory and embodied memories rooted in Karen homelands were filled with quiet potentially. This was the potentiality to restore linkages to home even within broad conditions of dispossession and forgetting, which I suggest should be read as a form of refusal (Simpson 2014). It is true that these counter-acts and counter-narratives are limited in what they can change about the current political reality and conditions of life in the camp. However, their sensory and embodied nature, tied to landscape and the lives of more-than-human beings, makes them portable and durable sites, or rather seeds of sovereignty…primed and waiting for future openings (see Simpson 2014; Thomas 2019).
Figures 2A, 2B and 2C: Students work in the dormitory or “borders’” gardens in which they grow some of their own food to supplement reduced rations and share agricultural skill and knowledge.
Foods from Home

Talking and spending time with young people in the camp, I came to understand that there was ubiquitous nostalgia for the foods and more-than-human relationships embedded in their fraught rural homelands. This longing was coupled with their biting critiques of “unhealthy,” “flavorless”, “too sweet” and “chemical” foods in the camp. One day, sitting in the school café and taking advantage of the slow-moving electric fan that drew students and teachers there, a young man, Saw Hey Su Law, told me about the pros and cons of life in the camp versus life back in his village. His father, back in Karen State, was an alcoholic and abusive. Coming to the camp had finally allowed him freedom from his father’s control. On the other hand, he told me, the quality of life was not good in the camp. The food there, he explained, was not fresh like it was back home. It lacked flavor or had a bad taste and it provided him with little energy, he said. Additionally, the food in the camp was full of chemicals that caused his skin to break out, something that had never happened in his village. There, he said, the food was incredibly fresh, flavorful and gave him lots of energy—most of it being grown locally or harvested from the forest. In his village, the water and the vegetables smelled “sweet” and “fresh” unlike the water and food in the camp which already smelled “old” or “sour” as soon as one got it.

On a different occasion, interviewing a student at the kitchen table of our dormitory, a group of other students sitting around taking part, the young man I was speaking with, Saw La Say, asked me if I liked Thai food. “Yes,” I replied. He told me that even though it was his goal to open up a food stand in the camp in order to make money—and that he planned to specialize in Thai food, because it was easy to cook and popular—he did not himself like Thai food but greatly preferred Karen food. He explained that this was because Thai food was far too sweet for him. Karen food, on the other hands was filled with different kinds of wild herbs and the pungent
fermented fish flavor of Nya U Ti, anchored by complex notes of bitter, sour and spicy. These were only two instances of the numerous times that young people criticized the food in the camp in front of me and contrasted it with the fresh, flavorful and healthy foods from their homes.

Both the nostalgia for foods left behind and critiques of food in the camp parallel Mike Anastario’s findings in his work with rural Salvadoran migrants to the United States, some of them lacking documents. In his monograph Parcels (2019), Anastario investigates the transnational movement of packages of food and seeds from home to migrants in places such as Colorado. The parcels Anastario tracks are, for the people who receive them, weighed with the memories of agrarian lifeworlds and Indigenous/campesin ways of knowing: the tastes, smells and textures of their contents interwoven with the rural landscapes of home. Anastario recounts how his interlocutors frequently called U.S. food “disgusting.” Writing during the Trump years, he observes, “some members of the Trump administration doubt whether all Salvadoran migrants deserve to be referred to as human, while some Salvadoran migrants doubt the integrity of what U.S. Americans call food” (2019, 1). This resonates with my students’ bold critiques of food in the camp—a space in which their humanity is also perpetually called into question.

Taking this critique of food in the camp a step further was a young woman students’ damming characterization of all of Thailand as “cheap.” Reflecting on how she missed her old village in Karen State and found relationships shallow and artificial in the camp, one student wrote in her Facebook story, “I miss my old school and my old friends. No wonder people only come to Thailand for readymade clothes and cheap things.” I read this as an affect-laden rebuke of the dehumanizing treatment she had faced in Thailand and the ways individualized life in the camp caused a breakdown in feeling of togetherness. Life back home had been objectively bad in numerous ways for these young people. Most notably, it was marked by periods of violent
conflict as well as continuous oppression, some combination of which had driven them all to the border. Yet, this did not mean Thailand was immune to their scalding critical assessments.

My students’ critiques, issued through the language of sensory politics, also resonate strongly with various other ethnographic accounts from around the world (Gold 2009; Gordillo 2004; Kantor 2021; Seremetakis 1994; 2019; Sutton 2008). Among these are ethnographies of other protracted refugee situations such as those detailed by Elizabeth Dunn (2017) and Micah Trapp (2016). Dunn, in her monograph, describes how Georgian refugees who she worked with called humanitarian macaroni “not food” (2017, 95). Trapp’s interlocutors at Buduburam Liberian refugee camp in Ghana creatively derided their rations as, “Drip” and “You-Will-Kill-Me beans” (2016, 417). Reflecting on this, Trapp remarks that “In the biopolitical domain of the refugee camp, food is a site of gustatory discipline” (413). As she observes, and as my young friends in Mae La proved to me, food is also a fertile terrain for critique and refusal within this humanitarian biopolitical sphere.

In Mae La, I found that students rejected dispossession and alienation through small, subversive acts and also by telling stories tied to food and plants from their homes. These sensory, embodied acts and narratives helped them re-member (as in reassembling of a body) more-than-human relationships embedded in and transmitted through the “sensible sphere” (Rancière cited in Trapp 2016, 432). These same young people used the “grammar” (Hromadzic 2020) of sensory politics tied to taste in order to refuse the less-than-human status they were assigned in the camp. In the stories refugee young people told, they recast themselves as members of a generation enacting continuity, connection and return to Karen homelands. These narratives actively refused their dehumanization and the erasure of Karen sovereignty by
surfacing the sensory politics of everyday life in their homes—such as the embodied joy of “getting fresh air” while fishing and foraging in the company of friends.

However, students’ acts of refusal were not limited to breaking the rules about foraging, cultivating gardens communally in a context that demanded self-reliance, or sharing narratives laden with sensory politics. Additionally, and impressively, students moved food across the border erected by Myanmar and Thailand—which crosscuts traditional Karen territory—to maintain connections to their homes left behind. This became a way for students to maintain relationships with family members and with the unique biodiversity in their “native places.” Like the students themselves, these foods from home crossed the settler colonial border created by the states of Thailand and Myanmar. In so doing, they refuse this boundary and the erasure of Karen people and sovereignty it perpetrates.

Making their way through the jungle on the Karen side of the border to students in the camp—carried by a network of people traversing this route or by the students themselves when returning from visits home on holidays—these foods connected my young friends to the bodies of their parents and to their longed-for landscapes of home. Similar to Seremetakis’s discussion (lecture November 2017) of care packages of food sent to Greek University students from their homes in different parts of the country, which carried different regional food products and culinary specialties, these familiar foods were not only immensely enjoyed but also graciously shared. Rather than being eaten alone in one’s shoebox-like dorm room, they were consumed in commensality with others, including me.

In this context, foods from home prompted the remembering and retelling of stories centering on experiences of farming, foraging, fishing and caring for animals (see Dunn 2017, 97-99). These stories highlighted the social relationship and feelings of joy and freedom imbued
in performing these activities in the company of others. They revived in the consciousness of students the forms of labor connected to these foods—labor that was not necessarily categorized as “work” (Tsing 2015). These foods evoked the reality of more-than-human caretaking relations that persisted in students’ home villages. This was even as students frequently remarked that they didn’t miss the hard, sweaty labor of farming. A young friend of mine, Paw Wa, a woman in her mid-twenties with frizzy curly hair (something we bonded over), and a soft but animated way of speaking, told me one day while vividly describing what it was like to forage and fish in her home village, “when we are foraging in the forest with our friends, or when we are fishing in the river, we get fresh air—and we feel so much joy!” In the realm of Paw Wa’s vibrant storytelling, even the dreaded daily drudgery of walking the long distances to bring food to “mother’s pigs” took on a humorous and nostalgic sheen. This was as opposed to feeding “father’s pigs,” located close to the house. The discrepancy in distance resulted in hotly contested debates about division of labor among her and her siblings, which she smiled and laughed telling me about.

Memory-laden foods from home that students received and shared, which prompted them to recount vivid narratives of their villages and culinary, agricultural and foraging practices there, included Laphet (pickled tea) and G’ney Saw (honey). As the students made sure I understood, this was not just any pickled tea, but the pickled tea made by their family member, thus having a distinct recipe and taste. Likewise, the honey was not just honey, but “pure” wild honey captured from bees in the forest of Kawthoolei. They remarked upon the wonderful distinct taste that G’ney Saw from Kawthoolei has and told me that it could not be touched in comparison with any kind of store-bought honey. Not only were these foods, they were also medicines for body and the spirits (see Gordillo 2004) of students who had lived for years far from home and from their families. Often students were not even able to make a phone call back
to their parents because the places they came from still did not have cell signal. In the absence of other forms of connection, foods that moved across borders were carriers of “traveling memories” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013). They provided comfort to students who longed to go back to their “native places” and to the people they loved.

Naw Thi Klo Poe was a brave student who always came to visit me, Sema and Ruth in the teachers’ dormitory. Because of her persistent visits she became a friend and one of my few consistent confidantes during my time in the camp, especially after Sema and Ruth departed. One evening, Naw Thi Klo Poe came to our dormitory with a plastic jar in her hand.

She said, “I brought something for you! Here, try this.” She then made her way over to the kitchen counter built from a piece of plywood, and began unscrewing the top of the container and mixing it with the leftover rice from our dinner. As she lifted the top off the pink plastic rice bowl, I wondered what she was doing. Then she brought a dish over to where Sema and Ruth and I sat. It was a plate of *Laphet Tho May*, or pickled tea with rice.

“This is from my home, she said. My mother sent it to me. Here, have some.” Knowing how special this food must be to her, I protested saying, “You can’t just give it to us! I know how much it must mean to have food from home.”

“Yes”, she said smiling, “it tastes like home.” Nevertheless, she insisted, “I want you to try some. My mother makes it really good.” Overwhelmed by her generosity, I took a bit in my spoon and tried it. It truly was wonderful. A rich pickled tea aroma filled my nose and the pungent notes hit my tongue with their acidic punch of flavor. More significant than being an especially delicious version of a dish I had

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68 As the “foreign teachers”, we were told we were intimidating to students both because we were foreigners and also because they would be asked to use their English with us, which many were shy to use.
learned to love (and my stomach learned to crave) was knowing that this pickled tea had been prepared by the hands of Thi Klo Poe’s mother, who she sees only once a year over the school holiday and who she was separated from for several years after coming to the camp.

Naw Thi Klo Poe’s words about how comforting it was to have the flavors of home remind me of Seremetakis’ description of the importance of food parcels from home for Greek students studying in Athens. As Seremetakis (2019) describes, these care packages filled with food items from home arrived at the University of the Peloponnese for students who came from all parts of the country. She relates how these foods are not consumed alone in one’s room. Rather, the packages are torn open immediately to be shared with friends. Seremetakis theorizes these organic moments as havens of commensality and community within the far-reaching effects of neoliberalism austerity in Greece, including what has been described as “social cannibalism” (Arampatzi 2017). Similarly, for young people in Mae La, this space of communal enjoyment and sharing, drawn out by food from home, represents a sanctuary of memory (Nazarea and Gagnon 2021, Introduction) within the increasing individuation of life brought about by the ethos of self-reliance imposed in the camp.

On a separate occasion, food from Naw Thi Klo Poe’s home also emerged as significant. This time it brought new understandings for me about the place she came from and the values and affects tied to home. It provided me with a window into the more-than-human relationships bound up with food, which in this case was also medicine: wild honey. In the early months of my time in the camp I had become sick and feverish and slept for the better part of three days.69 During this time, Sema suggested I drink a remedy that she made with hot water, lime, and wild honey.

69 In hindsight I understand that I was in suffering in large part from the psychosomatic effects of the death of Mimi’s baby and my visceral realization of the general hardships of life in the camp.
honey (*G’ney Saw*). The *G’ney Saw*, she told me, was from Naw Thi Klo Poe’s village, which she had brought back at Sema’s request.

The honey was in a slender plastic container that looked like a water bottle, with the logo of the NGO “Save the Children” on it. Ruth, who grew up in Yangon, asked about the veracity of the honey. She warned that “In Burma some people will try to pass off sugar water as honey. So it’s good to be sure.” Sema reassured her that Naw Thi Klo Poe said it was “pure,” that it had come from her village. Curious about this, I later asked Naw Thi Klo Poe about the honey and if it had really come from her village. Her face lit up. “Yes!” she said, “my father caught the hive himself by climbing the tree and bringing it down in the middle of the night. It is wild honey from the forest. This is why it is so delicious. It is totally different from the honey you can buy at the shops in the camp, or even at Robinson’s [the big, fancy supermarket in Mae Sot].” In this moment, honey from home surfaced as important not only for its unique, prized flavor, but also for its sensory and storied re-calling of the activities relating to the honey’s procurement that wove place and identity. Strikingly, these are all features shared with Elisabeth Dunn’s account of the last spoonfuls of honey from home being shared and eaten, drunken tearfully, by her interlocutor and friend Aleko. An ailing resident of a Georgian refugee camp, Aleko proclaimed with pride upon bringing out the honey to share with her, “It’s mine! It’s from my bees!” (Dunn 2017, 97). In both these instances, honey (a food with flavors that are highly localized and seasonal due to pollen from specific flowering trees and plants that is also portable and non-perishable), crystalized sympoetic elements of placemaking that bound refugees, Naw Thi Klo Poe and Aleko, to the longed-for landscapes and social fabrics of their homes left behind. In this vein, Dunn recounts “Eating the food that boomeranged back to the displaced—honey, jam, bottled fruit, and even homemade “white lightning”—became a ritual in many cottages I visited.
Almost always they were accompanied by beautiful, idealized and elegiac descriptions of the house and the land they had come from” (2017, 98).

Like Dunn, as well as Anastario, Seremetakis, Trapp and several others, I am interested in the ability of food to open up the political as it is tied to the terrain of home and memory, experienced through the senses. I am intrigued by the ways in which food allows for critique to be lodged that otherwise would be hard to articulate because they hover at the realm of the affective (see Stewart 2007)—that is, as structural forces that are felt more than seen, acting on and between bodies. Trapp (2016) discusses Rancière’s notion of aesthetics as “the entire distribution of the sensible.” Here “sensible” does not simply refer to reason or common sense but is a matter of perception: “what is perceived and perceivable” (433). Building upon this, I am particularly interested in the sensory politics of transgressive movements of food across borders (see Garcia, DuPuis, and Mitchell 2017). I read the putting-into-motion of foods, accompanied by their embedded sensory memories, as acts of refusal (Simpson 2014), which link fraught sanctuaries (Nazarea and Gagnon 2021) with “edgy” (Tsing 2012; Tsing 2015) spaces of exile. In the process, these foods and the students who receive them refuse the settler colonial border between the so-called states of Thailand and Myanmar, which on both sides of the border has actually long been Karen territory.

Late Night Pancakes as Method

As mentioned previously, Naw Thi Klo Po, Paw Wa, and other students would come and visit me at my dormitory most evenings. During these cherished visits with the students in the open-air kitchen, the pulsating sounds of cicadas would fill the velvety darkness as massive stick-like insects circled the bare florescent bulb making thunking noises as they hit their exoskeletal
bodies against it. We had to speak loudly to be heard over the din of the insects coupled with the deep, resonate croaks of the frogs coming from the creek just behind us, where men wearing LED headlamps waded with rolled up pants and caught fish with their bare hands. These evenings, the students would sit around and chat with me, sometimes for hours until their eyelids began to droop and they would finally say *Ni Lu a Gay, Tharamu* (goodnight, teacher.) As they departed around the corner they would say a final, *Mi Mu Mu*—a phrase they taught me and which became a favorite of mine—“sweet dreams.”

Our evening chats were vital for my spirit during the frequently isolating days in the camp, especially in the final months after Sema and Ruth departed back to their home countries. In addition, these chats turned into wonderful opportunities for informal conversations related to my research. During these gatherings around the kitchen table, I was their captive audience, listening intently as they recounted stories about their villages and families back home. Some students also described the experiences they had growing up in different refugee camps before coming to live and study in Mae La. These evenings also provided opportunities for formal, recorded interviews. Early on, I enlisted Naw Thi Klo Poe to help connect me with students who might have interesting stories to share, especially those who came from agricultural backgrounds and who would be willing to sit down for a recorded interview. Naw Thi Klo Poe did a brilliant job of this and soon I had a steady stream of students coming to be interviewed; these students also appreciated as an opportunity to practice their English, even if they were shy at first.

As a humble thank you for their time (in addition to giving them small gifts like turquoise ceramic mugs or canvas book bags with notebooks and pens), and as a gesture of hospitality, I would often cook pancakes for the students. Due to the central role of pancakes in my family rituals growing up—featuring in the tradition of Saturday “big breakfasts” in the sun-light
kitchen—they hold special significance in my own sensory memories. They are, in many ways, one of my important “foods from home.” Pancakes, it turned out, were also one of the few things I found I could make on the temperamental hot plate with the one pan I had, and given the limited ingredients available to me. To my surprise, when I first made them for a group of students, they were a big hit. They were a bit exotic (pancakes and waffles featuring prominently in hip cafes around Chiang Mai), and also warm and sweet enough to make a good late-night snack for the students at the end of their long days.

Taking a que from Sema and Ruth, and the other students also, I had fallen into the habit of showering early in the evening, right after finishing my rice, to remove the stickiness of the day and feel fresh in the cooler evening air. This meant that I was usually in my green floral print cotton pajamas, with an additional layer of floral print cotton on top, in the form of my favorite bathrobe. Thus, when they came to visit, students would find me in my florid camouflage, usually sipping hot tea and seated in front of my laptop catching up on fieldnotes or pouring over student papers that needed grading, pen in hand. We would then playfully argue as I would try to get up to put water on to make tea for them, or to make pancakes. They would urge me to sit down and let them serve me instead. In this manner we went back in forth, expressing our mutual feelings of *ana*, or *anaday*: a Burmese word that has to do with feeling ashamed by someone else’s generosity, and which is notoriously difficult to translate (see Cole 2020).

On the occasions I won out, I found myself in the tower of the “Tharamu Galowa” (white woman teacher’s) dormitory, overlooking a darkened refugee camp filled with the sounds of night fishing, the croaking of frogs and the whirring and thudding of insects. I found myself making pancakes in my pajamas to serve Karen refugee college students who had become my friends. Their bright faces, laughter and stories were among the things that saved me from total
despair during those long months in which I attempted to digest, and in the processes partially internalize, the pain of incommensurable inequality and exclusion: the exclusion of people I had come to love from the realm of humanity.

Figure 3: Saw Khay Thu’s Facebook post, showing the power of food and conviviality for refugee students amidst conditions of want.
A Student’s View: The Power of the In-between

My own emotional processing of the realities of life in the camp was distinct from how students understood themselves. Despite being seen by many people throughout the world as those most deserving of pity—as refugees living in a camp in the context of the world’s longest civil war—my young friends did not see themselves in this light. Time and again the poetic justice of their words struck my ears when different students would exclaim, “teacher, I feel so pity for you!” They would say this for various reasons, for example because I was staying by myself, “only one,” in an all-but-empty dormitory, or because I was far away from my home and my family. The students said this to me regularly, and with so much sincerity that I could not detect even a hint of irony. I noted the shock I felt at the reversal of our presumed emotional registers. Shouldn’t I be pitying them and not the other way around? The shock I felt spoke more profoundly of my perception than theirs. The students were keenly aware of the injustices they faced in their lives. Yet, they did not see themselves as victims.

This was driven home for me one day while I was visiting one of my star students at her dormitory. Naw Do Ta Gay was so enthusiastic in class she would hardly let other students answer. As it turned out, she was equally as earnest when telling me about her plans for the future. Chatting as she prepared dinner, and speaking so rapidly I was afraid she might run out of breath, she told me that her goal in life was to “become an international social worker.” Her plan once becoming this kind of social worker, she said, was to go to Africa and “help the children in the refugee camps.” After that, she said, she would continue her work in other parts of the world. She said this with all the starry-eyed self-assuredness of one of my freshman undergraduates at Syracuse University. The view in which she herself was that poor child in the refugee camp in need of help, clearly, did not occur to her.
In addition, to not see themselves as victims but rather as people in a position to give pity and aid, the students also had potent insights into the movement of capital and lived experiences in different locations across the Karen diaspora. Due to their position as “border crossers” between rural Karen villages and the camp, the students uniquely understood what was at stake as traditional subsistence livelihoods slipped into the background and as precarious forms of labor loomed large. Additionally, a window into the wider world of resettlement was available to them at the swipe of a screen. There was decent 3G data coverage accessible in the camp, along with sim cards sold in the camp market at rates inexplicably lower than at kiosks in Thailand. This provided students with all they needed to gain insight into resettlement life in the various countries around the world that had accepted Karen refugees.

The fascinating nature of students’ global view from the camp became clear to me while observing the daily video chat habits of Naw Thi Klo Poe. She would regularly come to “visit” me in the afternoons. Living up to her membership in Generation Z, this meant keeping me company with her physical presence while catching up with friends, relatives and crushes scattered across the globe via Facebook video chats on her phone, propped up on the kitchen table. This included talking with her aunts and cousins in Norway and friends now resettled in Australia, Canada and the U.S. Reflecting on what she learned from her contacts about resettlement life in these different countries, Naw Thi Klo Poe told me one day, “Some people really want to go to the U.S., but not me, hu-uh! I would Not want to go there.” This led to a long discussion in which she relayed to me much of what she had heard about how “people have to work so much in the U.S.” She told me, “I heard that in the U.S., if you lose your job you will end up under the bridge.” It took me a moment to understand what she meant by this. Then I realized that she was describing homelessness.
It struck me as profoundly paradoxical that this young woman who had fled from her home and grown up stateless in a refugee camp was feeling sorry for people who lived in one of the wealthiest, and supposedly most developed, countries in the world, where I was from, and averring that she would not want to live there. Rather, she commented, “maybe I would go to visit, but not to live there.” She showed me a YouTube video that had been created depicting Karen homeless people in the U.S., something that I knew had become a kind of mythology among the Karen diaspora.

The phenomenon of homelessness seemed to shock most Karen people, who were horrified that such a breakdown of social support could happen. She then asked me if it was true, like she heard, that U.S. undergraduate students had to “pay so much money just to go to college” and also if it was true that they have a lot of debt. I told her that it was as bad as she had heard. She also showed me photos of gasoline receipts that a friend had photographed and digitally circled after filling up his pickup truck. It was a lot of money for a fill-up by U.S. standards, but it was a truly absurd amount on the scale of refugees in the camp. Naw Thi Klo Poe’s friend had explained that he has to pay all this money just in order to go to and from his work every day, and that he works six days a week in part to pay for this. This fact clearly scandalized her.

Naw Thi Klo Poe’s pointed analysis of resettlement in the U.S. resonates with Retika Desia’s findings, that Nepali Bhutanese refugees anticipate and physically rest for resettlement life in the U.S. marked by working “day and night,” even before they have left the camp. By doing so, she states, “refugees critically engaged the idea of American refuge…revealing that disillusionment with resettlement precedes their arrival in the U.S.” (Adhikari 2021, 11).
Informed by her experiences growing up in Nu Poe refugee camp, attending elementary school at a migrant school in Mae Sot, moving back to her village in Burma for several years of her secondary education, and then moving to Mae La camp for college Naw Thi Klo Po offered striking insights into the differences between life on both sides of the border, and beyond. Her current position was a liminal one, as she lived in Mae La for her studies but contemplated on a daily basis her as-of-yet-undecided future, which might take her in one of several directions. From such “edgy” perspectives, Naw Thi Klo Poe and her peers regularly delivered up pert judgments on the state of social life in Burma, Thailand and elsewhere. This happened both in face-to-face conversations and also over social media. Examples included Naw Thi Klo Poe hilariously crossing her eyes and pretending to be a zombie, when trying to explain to me what education under the Burmese government school was like. Such education was notorious for rote learning and eschewing critical thinking.

Most memorable perhaps, was the day in our sociology course when I taught a lesson on social hierarchy, class and power. When I asked the student to apply the concepts we were learning to their lives, the students exploded with recognition, powerful insights, and even impromptu emotive speeches. I was not prepared for the passion of their collective response. This response included students decrying their confinement in the camp and their unequal treatment, as they discussed the unjust hierarchy in the camp. To illustrate, they drew diagrams showing, from their own understanding, the power hierarchy of camp governance. At one point, like a scene from the film The Dead Poet’s Society, Saw Kay Thu stood up in the seat of his desk and gave an impassioned speech) in which he decried the injustice of their situation. He pointed out that Principal Jacob and camp Section Leaders could, as he said, “leave the camp anytime they want to!” for trips into Mae Sot, but that they and other ordinary camp
residents could not leave. He even enlisted the other students in a call and response, asking them “If principal Jacob wants to go into Mae Sot right now, do you think he could?” “Yessss!” the class roared back. “Can we?” he asked, pointing at himself and the others. “Nooooo!” they responded in unison. That afternoon in our dim classroom with the roughly fifty students packed person-to-person, their normally concealed rage with the total institution that kept them pinned rose quickly to the surface in emotional waves. Later, after the class, when I reflected on the lesson with Naw Thi Klo Poe, telling her how impressed and surprised I was with the students’ response she told me with a smile “you asked us to talk about oppression. So we thought to ourselves: we know about this. Now this is something that we can talk about!”

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70 In fact, the students who had very limited mobility in and out of the camp had much greater opportunities to leave the camp than those who were truly ordinary, poor camp residents.
The anthropologist Paul Stoller theorizes the liminal as a privileged space of insight and potentiality, refers to this space as “the power of the between” (Stoller 2009). Just as it has repeatedly been invoked as the primary currency of anthropologists, the liminal perspective or “insider/outsider” view, I argue, likewise affords refugee students special understandings of transnational connections and possibilities. I suggest that it also allows them privileged insight into the currents of global capital, with its concentric sites of intensity and abandonment (Dzenovska 2020). Here, I want to consider the ways in which such an edgy view, which is to say, “the point of view from disordered but productive edges—the seams of empire” (Tsing
provides Karen youth in Mae La with a distilled awareness of the exploitation and oppression experienced by Karen people in multiple locations across home, exile and diaspora. This is because they are educated in Karen language and learn about Karen history and culture at schools in the camp. Meanwhile, Burmese, which is seen by many teachers and other leaders in the camp as the “enemy” language is de-emphasized. In some cases students are even sanctioned for speaking Burmese. (Indeed, I was reprimanded by a teacher on one occasion for speaking Burmese.) These topics of Karen history and culture are starkly absent from the curriculum in Myanmar government schools and indeed taboo in Myanmar generally (Yeo, Gagnon, and Thako 2020). I have heard a handful of claims from people working in development in Myanmar, most based in Yangon, that the so called “border Karen” are myopic, misinformed, or even “stuck in the past” when it comes to understanding the political reality of their county and their own people in Myanmar. On the contrary, however, I found that young people in the camp, in particular the more mobile border crossing students who I befriended, had keen insights into the broad array of possible futures facing them. They also voiced poignant reflections on life back home. Their ability to reflect in such a way was aided by their having some distance from those places and experiences. I suggest that such broad understandings of Karen peoples’ situations on both sides of the border and beyond are not readily available in the same ways to young people inside Myanmar. Neither are they accessible to older generations who have lived in the camp for many years.
Figure 5. My sociology students’ depictions of power in Myanmar society and in the camp. Photo by author.
Conclusion

Engaging with literatures at the intersection of food and sensory politics, dispossession and migration, and sovereignty, in this chapter I have argued that Mae La camp is a liminal space. I have presented the camp as a space where the severing of Karen Indigenous sovereignty and de-linking from homelands is enacted. However, I have also shown some of the ways in which this rupture is viscerally felt and refused (Simpson 2014) in creative ways, particularly by young people.

Alienation from Karen homelands and socialization into new forms of laboring in the camp prepare residents to become precarious laborers in the Mae Sot SEZ and beyond. This is beneficial to the nation-states Karen refugees are caught between—Thailand and Myanmar (Pongsawat 2007). It is possible that Thailand and Myanmar stand to profit from Karen refugees’ precarious labor, or their attempted total erasure, through the enactment of extractive colonialism and settler colonialism respectively (Altamirano-Jimenez 2013). In light of this, I suggest that the bundle of regulations, NGO programs, and wider circuits of capital that shape life in the camp creates conditions wherein refugees come to be gradually alienated from homelands and the ability to make a living there. During this process, many camp residents are socialized into a new *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) of laboring. However, I also found that these constraints and forms of re-socialization were bitterly commented on by the people I came to know and care for. Such critiques of life in the camp were often articulated through the fiercely poetic language of sensory politics.

Embedded in many of the micro-level critiques of food and other sensory and embodied aspects of daily life in the camp, were macro-level commentaries on the conditions of their lives. These critiques, implicitly or explicitly, laid blame at the feet of the wealthy and powerful: be it
the UNHCR, the Myanmar government, The Thai government, or even the leaders of wealthy foreign countries of resettlement. Taken together, the most consistent overarching critique that I heard from my interlocutors could be condensed as [in the camp] “we are not able to decide our own life.” Indeed, several people I spoke with, including Saw Daniel (an education and political leader), Saw Kay Thu and others, explained it to me in exactly these words.

As I have detailed in the previous chapter, the simplification playing out in the camp may seem to paint a totalizing or “hopeless” picture for Karen refugees and their companion plant species (Haraway 2008). This is as more-than-human caretaking relations transition to precarious labor and plantation ecologies. Yet, at the same time, students in the camp remember and keep alive complex practices, knowledge systems, and indeed love for biodiverse species from home. Here I have argued that Karen young people in the camp engage in sensuous conservation through memory work (see also Aistara 2014; Anastario 2019; Barthel, Crumley, and Svedin 2013; Dunn 2017; Gordillo and Project Muse 2004; Nazarea 2005, 2006; Nazarea, Rhoades and Swann 2013; Seremetakis 1994).

Put another way, I have suggested that students living in the “in between” (Stoller 2009) space of the camp, preserve the sociality and biodiversity of their rural homes through the sensory-rich and embodied stories they tell one another—and which they told to me. These memory narratives, much like those described by Dunn and Anastario, were almost always anchored in sensory engagements with food, plants and landscapes of home.

In addition to elaborately narrating memories of foraging, fishing, and farming in the company of friends and family members in their home villages or “native places,” my young friends dreamed about what plants they would go and pick in the forest at that very moment if they would not be severely punished by the Thai military police (Palad,) for doing so. And, of
course, some do anyway. These same students also fought back against the biocultural simplification playing out in the camp by consuming foods from their home villages (Seremetakis 2017 lecture), including wild honey (g’ney saw) (see Dunn 2017) and pickled tea leaves (lappet tho), while narrating the embodied delights connected to those foods. In this way even seemingly inconsequential memory narratives (Simpson 2014) became a tool for students to resist the biocultural simplification they witnessed unfolding around them.

For the students who I came to befriend, these memory narratives and moments of sharing food came to be a means of refusal (Simpson 2014; 2017). They provided a way of reminding each other that a more biodiverse, sensory-rich world still existed, and it was their home, Kawthoolei. Through counter-acts, sensory memories, and detailed imaginings of future returns to “native places”, young people in the camp actively refused the erasure of Karen people and lifeworlds. In so doing, they challenged the sweeping regional transformations that threatened to uproot them from place and alienate them from the practices that have historically made Karen sovereignty possible.
Part II. Seeding Sovereignty
Poems

Hugging the Night Road

There are many ways to rub silence
Backwards like velvet
To suck pain
Between your teeth. For example

I have been riding the Green Bus
Between Mae Sot and Chiang Mai now
For multiple orbits of the Earth
Still carrying the same load.

A heart that weighs of lead
Is good for keeping you on track
As you ride rings round
The third planet.

And even afternoon can feel
Like outer space
It is not so much that it is hard
To let go of the soulheft

But rather that it is easy
To slip your body back into

Like a thick night robe

Or pond water in June.

It tastes like a Sufjan song

Played on repeat

And wanting to sleep

Without sleeping.

No, time is not linear and

Yes, we are just traveling spirals

Around and around the mountain

Deeper into the center of things.

This feeling is not something

You can outrun with headlights

But like the August night—

Something you learn to listen to

For example, when wading ankles deep

Into the creek at midnight

To ask one big question

Of the moon between mountain laurel
Pink Plastic Teacups

Sometimes we think our sorrow is an ocean

Sometimes we feel our heart can hold an ocean
Reflections on Research Courtesy of D&D

Unleash the blunder-beauty of a maelstrom of chaotic good?

Do I dare?

What if, in the face of all this shit, I am really just neutral-neutral

Drinking the corporate coffee for 45 minutes of free Wi-Fi

And a disposable cup

Consoling myself that in the end I am being some sort of difference?
Chapter Six
Refugia, Refusal and Returns:

Biodiversity and Political Imagination in a Border Conflict Zone

Introduction, The Salween Peace Park as Biocultural Refugium

In this chapter I unpack efforts by local and transnational networks of Karen people to maintain and resettle homelands in the autonomous Karen territory of Kawthoolei. Specifically, and significantly, my research is situated within the Salween Peace Park (SPP), an Indigenous and Community Conservation Area (ICCA). The SPP has provided a groundbreaking vision for Indigenous-led conservation and peace within this conflict resource frontier, where struggles over control of resources have long been at the center of armed conflict (see Woods 2018). The Salween Peace Park is comprised of 546,000 hectares situated along the banks of the Salween River: the last major undammed river in Asia. The Salween River Basin, where the Peace Park is located, is a biodiversity hotspot of global significance. Not coincidentally, this biodiverse and resource-rich landscape has been marked by armed conflict for seventy-two years (The Goldman Environmental Prize 2020; KESAN 2017a; 2020).

I was initially drawn to conducting research in the Peace Park as a means of understanding the geography from which many of my Karen friends and interlocutors in Mae La and the United States had come, and to understand the present situation in this territory that holds tremendous significance for many members of the Karen diaspora globally. What I found was a vision of Karen Indigenous sovereignty as well as a glimpse into the power of spaces of biocultural refugia (Barthel et al. 2013). Such a vision facilitates Indigenous resurgence, both through the physical return of displaced people and through the repopulation of Karen biocultural diversity and political imagination globally, through the Karen diaspora.
Building on themes of refusal explored in the previous chapter, here I lay out how the Salween Peace Park presents creative possibilities for the preservation of refugia (Tsing 2015 lecture) by enacting a politics of refusal (Simpson 2014). I also draw on Virginia Nazarea’s conceptualization of ontological “returns” (2021) to place, sensory memory, and biodiversity to consider the opportunities and challenges posed by efforts to resettle this fraught territory and to reestablish interwoven food and political sovereignty there. Foreshadowed by outbreaks of fighting and the stalling of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) during my fieldwork, at the time of writing the Salween Peace Park is once again embroiled in all-out war, including the Tatmadaw’s repeated arial bombing of Karen villages, targeting villagers’ homes and agricultural fields as a means of destroying their livelihoods (Saw Kha Pay Mu Nu 2021a; 2021b). These bombings have led to the displacement of over 50,000 civilians and represents the worst fighting the area has seen in over twenty years.

This chapter is deeply informed by my close relationships and interviews with Karen college students at the college where I served as a volunteer teacher within the Peace Park. Many of these students had returned to Kawthoolei from different refugee camps on the border. Others came from various brigades of Karen State and other areas of Myanmar. My discussion in this chapter is also animated by conversations and time spent with my fellow teachers at the school; adult farmers engaged in revolutionary struggle; internally displaced people (IDPs) attempting to become self-sufficient again; and Karen leaders. My interactions with people from these different groups collectively shaped my understanding of this distinctive space, which is at once an unrecognized state (Bryant and Hatay 2020) and a unique case study of intertwined Indigenous sovereignty and biocultural refugia (Barthel et al 2013; Tsing 2015 lecture). Building on my exploration of the politics of refusal (Simpson 2014) among border-crossing youth in the
camp, here I employ refusal to understand the stance of people living within the Salween Peace Park towards the Myanmar “military-state” (Woods 2011, 748) and forces of transnational capital. It is this stance of refusal, I argue, that has allowed the Peace Park to remain a biocultural refugium.

Kevin Woods (2011; 2018) has demonstrated how, through military-private partnerships, the Myanmar military-state strategically undertakes development projects that generate wealth for military leaders and crony capitalists, while at the same time facilitating Myanmar state territorialization in ethnic-controlled areas. He explains that such development should be understood not as attempts to forge peace through development, but rather as battlefield tactics (Woods 2018). These Myanmar military-private development partnerships that have been employed elsewhere in Myanmar’s borderlands would turn the virgin forests and pristine waters of the Salween River Basin into sites of large-scale resource extraction. Such extractive development would result in deforestation and habitat destruction. They would also lead to the displacement of local communities, whose traditional claims to land are unrecognized by the Myanmar military-state. This displacement along with extractive destruction would result in the loss of sustainable livelihoods and Indigenous relational ontologies deeply rooted in place (KESAN 2017b; Paul et al. 2021).

In contrast to military-state development that auctions off communal and traditional lands to private companies, the Karen National Union’s (the Karen administration that controls most of the Peace Park territory) recently revised their land and forest policy to formally recognizes villagers’ communal and traditional land (Paul et al 2021; Woods 2018). This represents a significant step in codifying Karen relational ontologies into law, and towards realizing an Indigenous Karen approach to nation-building. Furthermore, the Salween Peace Park provides a
system of checks and balances that limits extractive development projects. As such, the Peace Park provides a pathway for 21st Century Indigenous resurgence and biocultural refugia within this area that has been affected by armed conflict for seventy-two years. As Andrew Paul (2018) and Robin Roth (2019 lecture) have discussed previously, Karen Indigenous resurgence in the Peace Park is achieved in large part through an active refusal of the Myanmar state. Adding to this, I explore the relationship between this politics of refusal and the Peace Park as a refugium (Barthels et al 2013; Tsing 2015 lecture) from which biocultural diversity can be revitalized, both within Kawthoolie and globally.

Informed by the critical work of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) and that of other scholars (Allison and Cho; Cole 2020; Hsa Moo 2017; Long 2019; Paul 2018; Paul et al 2021; Roth 2019 lecture), I have come to understand the Salween Peace Park as a refugium for interwoven biodiversity and political imagination. Building off the concept of refugia from the natural sciences (refugium singular) and Anna Tsing’s use of the term in a broader, more anthropological sense, I conceptualize this place as a refuge that serves as a unique and important case study for the preservation of refugia throughout the world. In addition, I draw from Barthel and colleagues who have applied the concept of refugia to agrobiodiversity and the food system. They demonstrate the importance not only of maintaining spaces of refuge for genetically diverse populations, but also space that nurture the practices and forms of collective memory that support and build convivial livelihoods in engagement with such diverse species in-situ as well as ex-situ. Additionally, following Nazarea, and the example set by my Karen friends, I would add to that trans-situ.

Like the Salween Peace Park, many important global refugia are situated within conflict-affected landscapes. Tsing posits that the inflection point between the Holocene and the
Anthropocene may be marked by the wiping out of most of the last spaces of refugia on earth ([Tsing 2015 lecture] Haraway 2015, 159), from which biodiverse populations might go forth and repopulate degraded landscapes. The Salween Peace represents just such a fraught haven for biodiversity as well as interlinked Indigenous ecological knowledge, agricultural memory, and political imagination.

The political imagination that has brought the Peace Park into being, and which has maintained its lands and waters as a space of refuge, conceptualizes human-environmental relationships otherwise (De La Cadena and Blaser 2018) in a world over-determined by the forces of global capital. The Peace Park enacts a uniquely Karen vision of Indigenous sovereignty, rooted in relational understandings of human and non-human relationships (KESAN; Paul et al. 2021). The SPP also sheds light on the generative relationship between Indigenous refusal and biocultural refugia more broadly. In this chapter I briefly introduce the Salween Peace Park and then move across the landscape through storytelling. In narrative form, I highlight interactions I had with different groups of people in the territory that shaped my understanding of this unique place. I use these ethnographic vignettes as means of opening up intertwined themes of 1) “Refusal” 2) “Refugia” and 3) “Returns” within this fraught and fertile territory.
Refugia

According to KESAN, an organization that has been instrumental in the formation of the SPP, “the Salween Peace Park project is a vision for the creation of a space that promotes peace, cooperation, cultural preservation, and environmental and natural resource conservation through a bottom-up, people-centered approach…The project also aims to expand the conversation around “governance” in Burma beyond mere management of resources, but to address issues of militarization, conflict, displacement, resource capture, and destructive development, and though this contribute to conflict transformation” (KESAN 2017a). In line with this description, I have come to understand the Salween Peace Park as a biocultural refugium (Barthels et al 2013; Tsing 2015 lecture). This is because it maintains biodiversity, interlinked sustainable livelihoods, and political imagination rooted in Karen relational
ontologies (KESAN 2017b; 2020; Paul et al 2021). Such refuge and persistence occur in the face of the attempted systematic removal of Karen communities from the area by the Myanmar military (see Woods 2018), and indirectly by transnational corporations and foreign nations that seek to control and profit off the resources contained within this landscape. Such natural resources include but are not limited to valuable Teak wood and other hardwoods used for timber, gold and other minerals, and water from the Salween River to be dammed and used for hydropower that would primarily flow to major urban areas in Thailand and China.

I see the SPP as paradigmatic biocultural refugium because, along with nurturing threatened biocultural diversity and political imagination within its territory, the SPP facilitates their going forth to repopulate and revitalize in other locations, via the highly networked global Karen diaspora. Thanks to an ongoing outflow of seeds, plants, and agricultural knowledges from the SPP territory to Karen diasporic communities globally, Karen gardens are cultivated, and more-than-human caretaking relations reconstituted within marginal pockets of possibility in resettlement locations around the world.

Such pockets of possibility are constructed even within (and despite the constraints of) deeply capitalist countries like the U.S., and within post-industrial “blasted landscapes” (Tsing et al) of resettlement, as I discuss in the introduction and conclusion of this dissertation. As such, places of refugia such as the Salween Peace Park are important for agrobiodiversity and food sovereignty on a global scale because, in the words of Barethel et al.:

The rate of biodiversity loss due to agricultural practices associated with chemically intensive monocultures is alarming and threatens to erode the capacity of entire landscapes to produce regulating ecosystem services. Simplified landscapes of food production are increasingly subject to climate change, related disturbances, and other shocks of globalized society that challenge food security. Bio-cultural refugia protect vulnerable species and simultaneously produces food, and it is here that smallholders are still important. They can counteract such vulnerabilities and play an essential role in building resilience in landscapes of food production…” (2013, 1149).
What follows is a series of ethnographic vignettes that, in narrative form, illustrate the ways in which the Salween Peace Park territory is a refugium of global significance. These vignettes show how this territory—before being designated as the Salween Peace Park officially in 2019—has been maintained for seven decades through a politics of refusal on the part of Karen villagers, Karen civil society operating in the border areas and the Karen administration the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Most recently, this same politics of refusal has been employed in dialogue with Indigenous Conservation discourse, and in partnership with environmental activists, to envision the territory as an ICCA. Finally, these stories show how returns of displaced people to this territory, despite ongoing tensions and armed conflict, along with connections to the Karen global diaspora facilitate the repopulation of diverse species in-situ (in place conservation), ex-situ (external conservation, such as in a gene bank) (Bartel et al 2013) and “trans-situ”, a term that Nazaea et al. (2013) employs to highlight the perpetually dynamic movement of seeds and plants in biodiversity conservation. Such returns to this place and networked engagements with the global Karen diaspora also facilitate the resurgence of political imagination, and understandings of sovereignty, rooted in Karen relational ontologies.

Seeds and the General

I am on my way to Deh Bu Noh, the district seat of Karen State’s Mutraw District (Papun in Burmese) to join my students and fellow teachers as they mark the 70th anniversary of the start of the Karen Revolution, which began on January 31, 1949. The holiday is known as “Revolution Day.” It is now late January, 2019 and, despite bilateral ceasefire agreements signed in 2012
between the KNU/KNLA and the Tatmadaw, and the multilateral Nationwide Ceasefire
Agreement (NCA) signed in 2015, militarization has increased in the area as the number of
Tatmadaw army bases have grown dramatically within the ceasefire period, and within what has
been more generally referred to as Myanmar’s “transition” period. Yet, the implied transition
(towards peace? towards democracy?) has been shaky and elusive at best.

Skirmishes have continued between the Tatmadaw and KNLA forces in Mutraw district,
especially as the Tatmadaw has violated the terms of the NCA in an attempt to construct a road
across KNU territory that would allow large vehicles (read heavily artillery) to pass to the district
seat, which has historically been unreachable by ground for the Tatmadaw. Telling of peoples’
view of the Peace Process in this contested territory were the flip-flops belonging to a student
that I found waiting with the other shoes outside of one of the classrooms one evening. The
students would often carve messages and designs in their flip-flops as a form of personal
expression. This pair of artistically carved flip-flops caught my eye and made me pause. Their
message read, “A Bad Peace is Even Worse Than War.” I thought about what it meant for this
student to walk around with this message below the soles of his feet all day.
Figure 2. A student’s hand-carved flip-flops read “A Bad Peace is Even Worse Than War.” Photo by the author.

To get the Revolution Day commemoration, my students, some of the other teachers and leaders from the school and I are traveling by longtail boat down the Salween River. At one point in our journey, we stop along the banks of the river and get out. I am unsure what we are doing, as is often the case but am told to come. So, I follow along. We climb up the steep sandy bank. Come
to find out, we are meeting with the general. We will be having lunch at his house. I am tired and
groggy and in no state to meet a general: I keep falling asleep while we are having our audience
with him, sitting in a small circle on turquoise plastic chairs.

Multiple times I find myself nodding off, only to wake with some embarrassment, and
then hopelessly nod off again. When we go to have lunch in the house of the general’s sister, I
notice that on a low table next to where we are being served, there are seeds spread on a piece of
cloth—seeds that it appears someone is saving for planting. This is not Mae La, after all! Things
are different here. Funny perhaps that what I looked for high and low but could not find in the
refugee camp, I find right before me in this conflict-affected area.

Indeed, everywhere I went in the Salween Peace Park, I encountered saved seeds, along
with old vegetables being kept for seed; these were strewn in beautifully with the banality of
everyday life. And so it was in this moment, where seeds and small Asian eggplants, bitter
melon, gourd and other vegetables, all shades of paler or darker green, mingled with a sponge,
cooking boles, a meat cleaver, a wooden spoon and a bottle of cooking oil. This is that what I
had been looking for but never finding in the camp, and here it was everywhere and so
unexceptional that it took my breather away. I asked if I could snap a photo of the seeds there on
the table before we ate our lunch of delicious, locally grown stewed pumpkin and upland rice. I
am sure the general’s sister looked at me strangely, wondering why on earth I would want to take
a picture of such a quotidian still life splayed on the table. But she said to go ahead. My heart
leapt, not knowing fully why I felt so much joy at seeing these seeds but knowing that I did.
Figures 3a, 3b and 3c. Seeds being saved at the house of the general’s sister and seed saving at the farm belonging to my friend Paw Lay Lay’s mother, in the Peace Park. Photos by the author.

Going to Ei Tu Hta: An IDP camp becoming a village

The air was crisp and light as we made our way down the long staircase from the school on the hill to the bank of the Salween River. It was early in the morning, before six am, and we were quiet as it was not long ago that we had been bundled in firm plywood beds with layers of thin
fleece blankets to keep out the January mountain chill—so different from the blistering dry season heat Chiang Mai and Mae La that time of year. Waiting at the river’s sandy edge was one of our students who would accompany us on the trip, along with the wife of the security personnel who lived in the hut at the bottom of the hill and kept watch at the river’s edge. Her hair was wrapped neatly in a cloth and her baby hoisted high on her back. The warm sun hitting their faces, they looked ready for the journey. The student explained to me that the woman and her child were going to visit the woman’s mother who lived at Ei Tu Hta, the Internally Displaced Person’s (IDP) camp along the Salween that I had heard so much about the past few years, that was our destination today. Friend and colleagues in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, knowing my interest in gardens, seed saving, and food sovereignty, had often told me about Ei Tu Hta because they thought that it would interest me and be relevant to my study to see what was happening there, as it was an IDP camp that after years of humanitarian aid had had its funding totally cut and was not having to transition being a village. Or as the same people who told me I should visit would invariably say, “Ei Tu Hta has to learn to stand on its own two feet again.” I was nervous and excited about finally having the opportunity to go there today, and not sure what to expect.

This collection of displaced people from multiple places who had banded together on the banks of the Salween for years and amassed into a community now had to find a way to regain food sovereignty after years of dependence on aid. This would not be an easy transition. They also had to learn to imagine themselves as a village: one that was self-reliant (like the individualizing programs in the camp promoted) but rather, more collaboratively, self-sufficient. After my time in the camp and the desolation it had instilled in me, I was keenly interested to
experience what this kind of transformation might look and feel like. Was such a transformation possible, I wondered, as we squinted into the bright sun and prepared to embark on our trip.

The sun warmed the cool sand on the bank as we looked out over the dancing water of the Salween River, the longtail boat that would take us to our destination waited at the shore. I normally avoided being close to the water as it was a more exposed position within this beautiful yet menacing landscape that was filled with threats I only partially understood. However, in this moment, embraced by the fresh air blowing in off the river and the fresh morning light, in the reassuring company of my young smiling friend, I felt drawn to the river and the sense of wonder and possibility it held. With some caution and lack of grace on my part, lacking the ability of students to mount and dismount skillfully and smoothly, I boarded the longtail boat by standing on a small boat docked nearby. Its fresh paint in crisp shades of sage green, red and blue looked sharp and ready for travel. The young man at the stern pushed us off with a long oar—the boat moved, and we began our travel down river, clouds of mist hanging low over the water before us.
Figures 4a and 4b. Views from the Salween River, on the way to Ei Tu Hta. Photos by the author.

**Refusal**

I understand the Salween Peace Park as a refugium because of its special ability, not only to maintain biodiversity and political imagination within its territory, but also to allow biocultural diversity and caretaking relationships to repopulate within other locations, “trans-situ” (Nazare
et al 2013). Crucially, this refugium has been maintained for generations by a politics of refusal (Simpson 2014). In the preceding chapter I discussed some of the ways in which students in the refugee camp use the politics of refusal to hold onto stories and memories of their homes. I analyzed their narratives and counter-acts as having the latent potential to really revive those very traditions. Put another way, I saw them as carrying the “seed” of the political in a space that, if not totalizing, was heavily governed by the state of exception. In the Peace Park, however, the situation is different. This is because it is a space where this political imagination is possible in the present, not only in an imagined future.

This is even though the Peace Park continues to be deeply affected by militarization and armed conflict. The prospect of refugees returning there is highly risky and tenuous, to the point that at times I questioned the judgment of the educational leaders who encouraged my students at the school in the Peace Park to leave the camps where they had mostly grown up, or their home village in other parts of Karen State and Myanmar, to go study there. Indeed, my students often admitted to me that they were afraid because of the unfamiliar jungle landscape, and also because of the presence of Myanmar army bases located only a short walk from the grounds of the school. Yet, in the face of everything they have suffered, villagers within the Peace Park along with the KNU/KNLA and Karen civil society actively refuse the Myanmar State in part though the creation of the Peace Park as a means of asserting an alternative vision for peace and for more-than-human relationships that defies histories of war and top-down extraction. Building off the work of Paul (2018) and Roth (2019 lecture), I posit that such a stance of refusal is what has allowed Karen communities to maintain the Peace Park territory as a biocultural refugium (Barthels et al. 213)
At Deh Bu Noh

When I went with the students and teachers from my school who were traveling to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Karen Revolution, or “Revolution Day”, I came to understand the longstanding Karen struggle for self-determination in a new way. One of the things that made a
lasting impression on me was seeing the number of men with broken bodies from war. As we traveled the winding and treacherous dirt roads by motorbike, which must be carved out afresh each year after the rains wash them out, we passed whole groups of men in uniform walking, who were missing their limbs. Many of them also wore dark, wrap-around sunglasses, like those worn by my friends from the handicap farm in Mae La camp, because they had lost their eyesight from landmine blasts. The toll of 70 years of war was so powerfully evident in their bodies. This is a loss that I cannot reconcile with the preservation of this territory as the critically important refuge that it is. It seems simply incommensurable. This is something I do not yet, and may never have an answer to. I am not entirely sure it is my place to have an answer to or opinion on the cost of this war. I only know that my experience of being there and seeing the cost of war embodied in the missing limbs and lost eyesight of these men, gives me grave pause. I know also that there are so many other wounds, including those carried by women and by my friends living in the camp, and in the U.S, which cannot be seen but are just as much real.

Understanding Statelessness for the First Time

While in Deh Bu Noh I found myself taken under the wing of my students and spending most of my time with them. I saw the district seat, and indeed the vision of the Salween Peace Park, through their eyes. Amidst the extreme human cost of war that was so painfully apparent here, and the numerous difficulties of life in this remote place, the students clearly felt a sense of pride here. They exuded a sense of being “at home” here and took delight in letting me know they
were happy to welcome me to their territory. This was a statement of dignity and belonging that would have been unimaginable in the context of the camp. As I came to see, even though these Karen students came from different parts of the county, and many had grown mostly in refugee camps, they understood that it was a place that was theirs. It was created for them, such a rare experience for Karen people who have grown up in government-controlled areas or in refugee camps, and even those who have grown up in exile.

This feeling of “at homeness” I saw physically embodied by my students within this space stands in stark contrast to a poignant insight into the reality of statelessness that a student shared with me one day. The student told me, “Teacher, we go to the Thailand side sometimes and, you know, we don’t have papers. They ask us, “where did you come from?” and we say, “over there” [pointing to the Karen side of the border.] But because we don’t have any citizenship [in Myanmar or elsewhere]; we cannot go through the process to come to the Thailand side legally. So, what can we do? Sometimes we need to get some things over there. The Thai police, they don’t know what to do with us. So, they throw us into jail for a few days and then send us back!”
Figure 6. At Revolution Day. Photo by the author.
Figure 7. View of the Salween Peace Park hills at dawn. Photo by the author.
Returns

In addition to examining the Peace Park through the lenses of refugia and refusal, I also consider it as a space of ontological “returns”. Here I am building on Nazarea’s (2021) use of the concept of ontological returns in relationship to the revitalization of biocultural memory and sensory, embodied relationships between people and plants. In particular, I find the Peace Park to be a powerful example of returns and Indigenous resurgence because it is a conflict-affected area that Karen leaders, activists and ordinary people are attempting to resettle in order to enact an alternative “people-centered” (KESAN 2017a; 2019) vision of peace and conservation, and to revitalize traditional livelihoods that have historically maintained the vibrant ecology and agrobiodiversity of this landscape (KESAN 2020).

One of the most interesting aspects of my time spent in the Peace Park was witnessing young people who were coming back to Kawthoolie to live, for the first time in years, after having primarily grown up in refugee camps. Part of the reason for their return to this place, despite the challenging and unfamiliar aspects of life there, was to learn about their home and the kinds of livelihoods that people practice, which they had perhaps experienced as young children but which most of them were unable to learn firsthand while living in the camps. Seeing these young adults, who had been alienated from the knowledges that facilitate Karen food and seed sovereignty, reconnecting with traditional agricultural practices, as well as hunting, fishing, foraging and clearing the land for planting, was one of the most heartening aspects of my research.

As I describe in the following vignettes, one young man I spoke with assured me that even though most refugees like him had forgotten how to do upland agricultural, “there are some who have stayed. They can teach us.” This confident statement signaled to me that even
though people have been displaced and there had been some forms of skill and knowledge lost in the process (in addition to physical seeds) (see Bard 2021), it is still possible for much to be regained. For this reason, I understand this space as refugium of biodiversity, where seeds and knowledges have been kept, at a very high cost to those who have lived there. As such, it represents a haven from which biocultural diversity, along with the knowledges of how to carry out agricultural practices, can be repopulated and revivified, within that space and elsewhere.

“There are some who stayed. They can teach us”

Thara Eh Do Wa and I sat talking in the thick jungle darkness, my iPhone recorded running, in the gazebo atop the hill where the school is perched overlooking the Salween River. I asked him about his life history: where he had lived before he came to teach at the school, and before that where he had come from originally, and what had brought him to this place. He told me he had grown up in a small village in Brigade Three of Karen State and that he was one of many children. He told me that his father had passed away when he was still young and that his family was very poor. He had fled to Nu Po refugee camp as a child, around the age of 12, and lived there for many years separated from his family. A couple years ago, then in his early twenties, as he was completing his college education in the camp and contemplating what he might do with his life beyond that point, he was given the opportunity to come and teach at this school in the Peace Park. He told me that he hadn’t known much about the school before coming but was looking for an opportunity, a way to get out of the camp. So, he said yes. He had now been teaching at the school for two years.
Thara Eh Doh Wa’s silent disposition had caused my young friend, Naw Thay, to reflect on his demeanor, saying, “we never know what he is thinking. He is so quiet.” Since she had prepared me for his impervious nature, I was surprised to discover that our conversation was one of the most enlightening and meaningful of my entire fieldwork. He was indeed quiet and because of that he was always observing and thinking. As it turned out, when asked, he had much to say about his experiences and the situation of his people.

Not only did he tell me about his early childhood in the village, his years living and studying in the camp, and about his viewpoints on the possibilities of return for displaced Karen communities, but he also taught me to see all this through his carefully sketched “memory-drawings”. These are images of the various places he had lived and different memories from each of them. I solicited these drawings from him upon learning from Naw Thay that he was a skilled artist, in order to get a sense of what agriculture was like in more remote Karen villages that I had not been able to visit. In the past, I had done the same kind of drawing elicitation with my friend and research participant in Georgia, Ta Hay, and found it to be a powerful interview tool. After receiving from Thara Eh Doh Wa four incredible memory drawings, during our interview I went over the drawings with him, asking him about the details of each one as a prompt for our conversation and to aid my understanding about what life in his home village was like. The drawings depicted his home village with paddy fields, him foraging for wild plants in the forest as a child, he and his family members cultivating Pala (cardamom), one of the few cash crops they grew in his area (along with rubber), and the process of upland rice cultivation. Most memorable and significant was when I asked him if he still knew how to carry out these livelihood practices from his childhood, like growing upland rice, foraging and planting cardamom. He told me that he had some memories but would no longer be able to do it on his
own, due to all the years that he was separated from this work during his time in the camp. However, he said with a steady assurance in his voice, “there are some who stayed. They can teach us.” In this moment, the significance of refugia, not only in terms of the conservation of genetic diversity, but in terms of the preservation of human-plant relationship, or biocultural knowledge, shifted into place for me.
Figures 8a and 8b. Two of the four memory drawing by Thara Eh Doh Wa: the first one showing him as a child foraging for wild foods in the forest and the second one depicting sowing the seeds for upland rice cultivation. Artwork by Eh Doh Wa.

We Get Fresh Air!

The students are hacking with machetes at the thickly tangled green jungle covering the hillside, overlooking the Salween River. They are yelling and laughing and generally having so much fun that you would never know they were doing “work.” The hillside is the one directly above the
red packed clay clearing that serves as the volleyball court, the cane ball court, and the soccer court—the students three favorite pastimes (aside from weaving, playing guitar, and fighting each other for extremely slow cellular data from a distant cell tower to briefly connect to Facebook.). However, now watching them deftly clearing this patch of jungle, in order to make an additional spot for cultivation—watching them fell trees with delight and exuberance and hearing them proclaim, “tharamu, we are so happy because we get fresh air!”--I have to recalculate my assumptions.

Seeing the joy in the students faces and the ease and joy in their movements I think to myself that they look free in some way, even though we are in the middle of a conflict zone. I am reminded of my students in Mae La camp who, when recounting stories of foraging and fishing in the forests of their home villages, and contrasting this with life in the camp, would say, “we loved to go foraging and fish together because we laugh and well feel so happy. We got fresh air—and then we feel so much joy!” Despite the many constraints and complexities of life within the Salween Peace Park, it is certainly a place where students feel that, unlike in the camp, they can get “fresh air.”
Figures 9a and 9b. Students clearing the forest for planting and “getting fresh air”. Photo by the author.
“When I lived in the refugee camp, I lived in a pot”

“When I lived in the refugee camp, I lived in a pot,” my student at the school in the Peace Park told me one evening as we sat around talking in a group. A handful of my students and I were conducting a focus group interview on the porch of my little hut, which was nestled in the forest on the outskirts of the school compound, with a good view of river down below. If it were not for my iPhone laid on the wooden planks of the floor recording, this would have been just a usual evening chat, like the ones I often had with my students there.

Figure 10. Hanging out with students. Photo by the author.
Saw Jake, the one who had been speaking, went on, “we got our education, so that was good. But we had no freedom. We could not go out at all or decide our own life. It was like a prison,” he tells us. The group of students have come from numerous different refugee camps and from various brigades of Karen state, representing a vast swath of experiences and relationship to the Karen revolution that are not often brough together in one place. Indeed, this is part of the design of this school situated in the jungle. Saw November continued, “Here, in the forest it is different. We have freedom. But also, we are afraid. We have to be ready to run anytime. I keep a bag packed” he confided. Another student, Naw Azalia from a mixed control area of Karen State chimed in, “I have learned so much since I have been here at this school.” Before,” she said, “when I lived in my village, I didn’t know anything about Karen history, or about the struggle of our people here in Brigade Five, but now I know,” she told us. “It has changed my purpose in life,” she said.

This stunningly beautiful landscape, along the banks of the Salween River, the last major free flowing river in East Asia, is also where long tail boats belonging to Thai and Karen security forces patrol at regular intervals. Meanwhile, Tatmadaw soldiers have a base just a short distance away from the school, also tucked in the foliage. The natural beauty of the place where the school is situated is a menacing beauty. The forest, filled with edible wild ferns and mushrooms that students harvest to eat with great delight, is also dotted and ringed with landmines planted by the Karen soldiers who previously occupied this site as an army camp years ago, before it was cleared by fighting and later resettled as this school. Students venture off the path in search of wild foods, or to pursue the tantalizing prospect of catching wild birds or deer with great caution.
Figures 11a and 11b. Students foraging for mushrooms and wild ferns on the trail near the school. Photo by the author.
Poems

The Body of War

At Revolution Day, so many men missing limbs

Their fractured bodies

Represent the body of war, seventy years ongoing

Meanwhile, during the military soccer match

At the parade grounds

I met a young soldier holding his baby

Wrapped in a blanket

Snuggled proudly in the crook of his arm

I asked if I could take his picture

And he said yes

Smiled while holding his child

In Kawthoolie

As elsewhere

Life goes on amid war

It has now for seventy years

I try to picture the end of this conflict
What would it look like?

Might we see it in our lifetimes?

Figure 1. A Karen soldier holds his young child during events commemorating the 70th anniversary of Karen of the Karen Revolution. Photo by the author.
Looking Away

Inspired by Lisa Stevenson

The general’s turquoise speedboat
Is going up and down the river
From the floating house we wonder
Is there an emergency?

Only later I learn
They were looking for me
The misplaced teacher
The man in the truck says

Actually, we don’t have a security problem
We have a communication problem
I remember the hills were raw red
Where the backhoe cut them

Like the veins of my own Georgia hills
Opened up
When I get to the other side, I eat chocolate
Anger consumes me like I have never felt
Back in the floating house
One of the two students
Who are keeping me company asks
Teacher, Donna Trump: man or woman?
—Oh, sounds like woman, she says

On the wall is a portrait
I think it is El Che
But the owner tells me it is Osama Bin Laden
He tells me something about 9-11

I don’t understand
So much still
Of how the global moves
From spaces such as this

And who are the heroes anyway?
I’m certain I don’t know anymore
I thought I was a pacifist
Now I entrust my life to young men and women with guns

They could be my students
We buy sodas while they stand on the sandy bank
They are guarding the biodiversity
The Tree Huggers are supposed to love

From the opening in my shower slats
I see the cranky boats passing by
One the river dressed in fog
The morning is cold

I am told the river owns the boats

How on earth did I get here?
My breath catches in my chest
How could I be anywhere but here?
After all, the plants led me and I followed

The students shout with joy
As they fell trees with machetes
They are clearing land to not go hungry
They are getting fresh air

In the forest
At the base of the mountain
Controlled by the wild animals
The stream speaks truth

It says the tastiest ferns and mushrooms
Are sleeping next to the landmines
Just off the carefully trodden path
Beyond where the birds are overhunted

A boy shot a deer and sold it for money pocket
Another boy has a permanently wounded leg
From where he fell from a tree and there was no hospital
Like the fall that killed my fierce friend’s father

At night I do not sleep
Because every sound
Is an imaginary Burmese soldier
In the morning the river is resplendent

I am reminded again and again
The world is not principally a text
Some things can’t be written down
Sometimes there is power in looking away
Roselle—one of the plants that led the author on this research journey—growing in the students’ garden at the college in the Salween Peace Park. Photo by the author.
Chapter Seven

Looking at the Leaves: Sensing Diasporic Sovereignty

“If we look at the forest, we see loss. But if we look at the leaves, we see resistance. And we are really rooting for the leaves!” - Monica White

Learning about Power and Politics through Plant-Human Relationships

This chapter culminates the journey of my multi-sited ethnographic research tracing Karen refugees’ movement with their plants, seeds, and agricultural practices in exile: from the Karen homeland of Kawthoolei (bordered by Myanmar and Thailand), to Mae La refugee camp in Thailand, and to the resettlement site of Syracuse, New York. Focusing on this final fieldsite of Syracuse, and reflecting on past research and ongoing connections with Karen gardeners in the state of Georgia, I consider the fraught prospect of re-emplacing and sowing sovereignty in highly imperfect landscapes of resettlement. By way of conclusion, I tentatively explore the possibility of a global Kawthoolei—the imagined free Karen homeland—in diaspora.

My ethnographic methods for research in Syracuse centered on spending time with my Karen interlocutors in their homes, at their community garden plots, and while foraging, fishing and even camping and cooking together in woods of New York state. Based on these experiences, and on 10 years of continuous connection and return visits with Karen friends farming and gardening in northeast Georgia, I weight the limits and possibilities of agricultural remembering, and the revitalization of interlinked food and seed sovereignty in exile. These are complex spaces of resettlement. In post-industrial Syracuse and rural northeast Georgia, my Karen friends and research participants face heavy constraints on their lives as some of lowest-paid workers in a hyper-capitalist economy. They face recurrent challenges as they attempt to forge livelihoods and more-than-human connections within “blasted” landscapes (Tsing 2014),
poisoned by industrial toxins in the soil and water, and other forms of environmental
degradation. Despite all of this, many Karen refugees resettled in North America and globally —
including those I know personally and many others whose stories have been shared with me—
impressively carve out pockets of possibility, in which to engage nostalgia work tied to food
plants, and sensory politics (See Sutton 2010).
Figure 1. A sign along the Erie Canal in Syracuse warns against eating the fish due to toxic chemicals. The sign includes Burmese language as many Karen and other refugees from Myanmar have been known to fish there. Photo by the author.
Figures 2a and 2b. Images of foraging for mushrooms and fishing with a Karen family on a camping trip to the Adirondacks. At moments the landscape looked almost like Kawthoolei. The young son caught a big fish and his mother cooked it over the fire: stewed with fresh herbs and vegetables from her garden in Syracuse, we ate fish soup for breakfast. Photos by the author.

Through this work, they construct havens in which to repopulate biocultural communities (Barthel et al 2013; Nazarea et al 2013) and revitalize more-than-human caretaking relations (TallBear 2019). In the process, Karen refugees gardening, farming, and foraging in places of resettlement also create something that, over the course of years, I have come to understand as a form of Karen Indigenous sovereignty in diaspora. It is not by coincidence that this diasporic sovereignty encompasses seed, food, and political sovereignty. I argue that seemingly small acts of gardening, foraging, and seedsaving and seed sharing in places of resettlement are, in fact,
powerful means of revitalizing biocultural diversity and Karen relational ontologies that structure relationships between humans, other species, and more-than-human persons (Cole 2020; Paul et al 2021). As Karen people I know well have told me, and as I have seen evidenced in many of my Karen friends lives (if emerging in different ways for different people), it is such caretaking relationships that make life worth living.

Imagining beyond the limits of the territorial, Westphalian nation-state (Stevenson 2020), I believe that such interwoven multi-species and embodied forms of sovereignty are fundamental to a more sweeping understanding of what sovereignty looks like, and particularly what sovereignty feels like, as Deborah Thomas (2019) powerfully discusses. Inspired by the work of scholars theorizing sovereignty beyond a western European hegemonic framework and writing against the conceits and deceits of liberal humanism, I see sovereignty as fundamentally tied to sensory, embodied experience, and more-than-human relationships (see Kimmerer 2013; Mihesuah and Hoover 2019; Stevenson 2014; TallBear 2019). I would add to this that historically, and especially in the world presently, these relationships are fundamentally on the move. They transcend territorial boundaries, which themselves are largely a creation of western European hegemony and colonization. This tentative framework for understanding more-than-human diasporic sovereignty arises from visions of a global Kawthoolei articulated and lived by my Karen friends and collaborators.

However, through the process of conducting research, my initially quite hopeful, emancipatory, and agential outlook on Karen more-than-human relationships in exile ran up forcefully against power and politics. The dehumanizing conditions that my Karen interlocutors are forced to live within every day—in different ways in each of these three spaces, but
especially in the camp—was a reality that I had to grapple with immediately and viscerally during my fieldwork. Later, through the process of writing about my experiences and findings, I had to contend emotionally and theoretically with the dehumanizing power and politics operating on such a scale that whole territories could be labeled “illegal” and whole groups of people as less than human—lacking the right to have rights (Arendt 1951).

I have concluded that while caretaking relationships between my Karen interlocutors and their plants present fruitful spaces for political imagination and the construction of seed and food sovereignty even under conditions of civil war, exile, and late capitalism (Tsing 2015)—plant-human relationships fail to rise to the level of liberatory political imagination under securitized encampment. This is because camp residents live within a state of exception. Unlike Agamben, I do not see the camp as totalizing. Nonetheless, the camp, as “the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (Agamben 1998, Section 7), legally and practically excludes camp residents from humanity.

Related forms of dehumanization are present for people living in the Salween Peace Park territory of Kawthoolie, as an unrecognized state that has endured seven decades of war. They are also present for those living as refugees in a racist, xenophobic, and hyper-capitalist country, the United States (see Atakari 2020; Espiritu 2006) that routinely and banally denies the rights of citizenship and humanity to those living within its borders. I do not seek to turn away from these realities but rather to make connections between them.

The global scales of violence between these spaces are deeply connected (Espiritu 2006; Thomas 2019; Wynter 2003). The camp as a phenomenon that has become a permanent way of being—and seen in other instances, such as mass incarceration (see Besteman 2020; Sassen
2014)—represents an intensification of this violence that rises to the surface. On the one hand, the camp exposes this violence by making it visible. On the other hand, more and more people have become displaced and disenfranchised every year due to war and militarization, economic inequality, and climate change. There were 79.5 million people forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2019 (UNHCR 2020). In this context, there is a danger that the camp, in its various forms, is becoming at once increasingly prevalent and normalized. One way normalization occurs is through narratives that naturalize the existence of the camp. An example of this is offered by sociologist Monika White in her discussion of the harm that the term “food desert” does in naturalizing the systematic exclusion of black communities from access to food (Edge Effects Podcast). I have come to sense this danger acutely because I believed and perpetuated such discourses regarding gardens in refugee camps before I lived in Mae La camp for six months. My experience there completely changed my perspective.

**Uncovering the Seeds of the Political**

As I have discovered over time, through countless instances of touching on the same “radioactive energy”71 around Karen diasporic gardens, my experience of them as exciting spaces of possibility was not something I alone experienced. This same enthusiasm, ripe with the spark of world-making (Loong 2020) pervades the myriad of Facebook posts and Youtube videos contributed by Karen folks in diaspora. These joyously document and collectively celebrate—via delighted likes and comments—the continuation of Karen cultivation practices in exile, and the presence of tasty and beloved companion species. I have also encountered this shared sense of Karen gardens as joyfully political spaces in a smattering of books and photo essays written by

71 I use this term thinking fondly of our beloved teacher and dear friend John Burdick, who in his methods course taught us to look for “radioactive” moments in our fieldnotes and other data.
Karen people and non-Karen people alike. What the authors of these publications have in common is that they have been motivated by the sensory political spark of Karen gardens to spread the fertile possibility that is alive there. In so many ways, these gardens point to another world that is possible, a world that, in fact, is already here (Roevink and Gibson-Graham et al.) My own encounter with Karen gardens has shaped my life in no small measure, and in ways I could never have foreseen.

Figure 3. Community garden plot cultivated by a Karen family in Syracuse. The pieces of woods used for stakes and natural fencing, as well as the things being grown and the style of growing make it stand out from its neighbor plots. Photo by the author.
These gardens, which have prompted such enthusiasm and attention around the world, exist throughout the U.S. and in parts of Canada as well as Australia, and in places as unlikely as Norway, where the climate would seem to be prohibitive. I even once heard a story from the principal of the Karen Baptist Theological Seminary (KBTS) in Yangon about how when she visited Singapore she was stunned to meet a Karen woman there, living way up on the 15th floor, who had filled her balcony with plants from home. In this hyper-modern metropolis, famous for its strict regulation of space, extending to hefty fines for mosquitos found near one’s apartment, this woman had nonetheless created a garden oasis that connected her to home.

My experience working in, and doing research on, Karen gardens in Georgia grew out of my friendship with two special Karen families in particular. This experience was transformative. It has shaped my interests and the trajectory of my life in countless ways. I understand now that I was forcefully drawn to these gardens and their attendant kitchens, and to the experiences I had there because I felt in them the seed of something political: I sensed their world-making potential. In the actions of touching plants and pulling up weeds while being taught by Moo Paw and San Nie to sing in Karen, Ya Eh Na/ Eh Ta Eye/ Ya Tha Wi (I love you with the love of the Lord…I see in you the light of the Lord) and working in their kitchens with them, boiling eggs, snapping the ends off long bean and pounding shallots, ginger and garlic together with the Chat’to (the giant Karen mortar and pestle), I felt as much as knew that a generative process of prefigurative politics was transpiring.

It was in part my own biography that drew me to Moo Paw and San Nie and their gardens. The child of Christian anarchist parents, I grew up nestled in woods of the foothills of North Georgia, where I was instilled from an early age with an understanding of the earth and its

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72 KBTS has the distinction one of only three liberal arts colleges in all of Myanmar.
fertility as perhaps the single most potent means of regenerating and imagining that which is politically, socially, and spiritually possible. These understandings of the earth and of cultivation transmitted to me were not limited to narrow ideas of self-survival. Rather, they were deeply informed by principles of radical hospitality and mutualism, rooted in a reverence for the interconnectedness to all different forms of life.

One of my earliest childhood memories foreshadowed the significant role that Karen gardeners and their gardens would come to play in my life. It was not until I became friends with Moo Paw and San Nie and their families and through my friendship with them returned to Jubilee Partners, an intentional community in Comer North Georgia with the mission of providing hospitality to refugees and asylum seekers, that I was able to locate and understand this memory.

In the memory, as a very young child, I am standing in an open field with tall grass. The field is ringed at its edges with tall scrubby pine trees. In the middle of the field is a wooden stage where children, some of them not much older than me, are standing in cotton shirts and sandals, their hair blowing in the breeze. This same breeze makes the heads of the tall grass bend over and on it an electric orange Monarch butterfly floats by. The sounds of the children’s singing and the music they are playing on tin whistles fills the air in the open field and reverberates. Even as a small child, the version of me that lives on in this memory, my skin tingles with the sound. It feels like a metaphysical plane—someplace not quite earth as we know it.
As an undergraduate student of anthropology, I returned to Jubilee Partners, and to this same field which had since been turned into a place for refugees to cultivate, dubbed “neighbors’ field”. I went there to conduct a portion of my undergraduate research with Moo Paw and other Karen refugees who had moved to Comer and were, by that point gardening and farming there. It was at this time that I learned from my parents that the children whose voices had stuck with me across all those years refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala. They were staying at Jubilee with their families, to rest and acclimate to life in the U.S. in the serenity of the Northeast Georgia woods, with the benefit of the supportive environment that Jubilee Partners afforded. At Jubilee, these children and their families were welcomed and treated as relatives, even though their humanity in the U.S. legal system, and in U.S. society generally, was cast into doubt. It was perhaps, on a subconscious level, the impression left by this memory along with other aspects of my upbringing in the foothills of Northeast Georgia that eventually led me back to this same field with Moo Paw and San Nie.

Out of my relationship with Moo Paw, San Nie and their families was born the journey that I have been on for a decade now: trying to understand what I saw unfolding in front of me in those gardens in terms of the interrelationship between memory, the sensory materiality of plants and seeds, and sovereignty. At numerous points along this journey I have glimpsed the potent ways in which sovereignty can be constituted in exile via affective engagements with plants and seeds tied to home. In particular, I have witnessed the social and embodied motions, actions, and transnational relationships that seeds, and plants enliven for my Karen friends across continents and spanning fraught landscapes of home and exile.

As I have come to understand, it is not solely the taste and inherent material qualities of foods or plants which are desired. These matter of course, but so do the movements, emotions
and human and non-human relationships they stir—always tied to home as a physical place—that makes them so powerful. Karen seeds and plants, living with their human companions in exile, constitute a rich sensory world. This world is pregnant with sensory memory that opens possibilities for the enactment and re-enchantment of relational ontologies. For all of us, whether we notice it or not, seed and the plants they give life to populate the multi-textured domain of memory from which meaning is gradually accrued. For Karen refugees—many of whom have left behind rural homelands characterized by diverse ecologies, nurtured through complex systems of care—plant traveling companions encode memories of places that are now inaccessible to them, but towards which they are still very much oriented.

Figure 4. A feast cooked by Moo Paw, upon returning to visit her in Georgia. Many of the dishes included vegetables, herbs, and chili from her impressive garden, as well as meat from her chickens. Photo by the author.
Figure 5. A poignant Facebook post, and responses, about missing home—and what constitutes home. Images from anonymous Facebook user.
The life I received from participating in the world-making space that Karen diasporic gardens opened set in motion a journey that I could not have predicted. This journey led me to volunteer on peasant farms in Europe for nine months, and then to graduate school in anthropology, eventually leading me to Ma La camp. Yet, when I finally arrived in Mae La and encountered the gardens there, which different people had described to me years in advance of my arrival, I found something different than what I had expected. In the context of witnessing Mae La gardens within the broader context of life in the camp, when I experienced them up close, I felt that they were incredibly small.

How to say it? They were just as verdant and, for the lucky few who had garden plots along the creek, just as physically large as I had imagined they would be. But there was something more fundamental that was missing from the gardens. It took me over a year after the completion of my fieldwork to understand what it was that was missing. It was the capacity for creating a life worth living, individually and as a group, that is what was missing from the gardens in the camp. Many of my interlocutors told me this directly in interviews, when they spoke of the need for Karen refugees to “decide their own life.” Ironically, however, it took a long time before I understood this as fundamentally connected to my questions about seed and food sovereignty in the camp. The Karen diasporic gardens that I have encountered over the years, despite their numerous challenges and limitations, have always and still do feel like a space of prefigurative politics. In stark contrast, I realize now that the gardens in the camp, while seemingly have all the “same stuff”, felt so small in comparison because they were mostly only a means of keeping body and the spirit together while around them was a void of dignified life.
This is not to discount the role of gardens in helping to facilitate basic physical survival in the camp. Yet, with the suicide rate in Mae La camp hoovering at three times the world average in the two years leading up to my fieldwork there, even this most meager function of gardens as survival is clearly not working well enough. Simply put, there gardens as they exist are far from enough. In the process of writing about my experience in the camp, I grew hyper-focused on the physically “missing” seeds. According to NGO program narratives, camp residents were supposedly saving seeds. However, I could find little to no evidence of this in my meetings with gardeners and visits to their farms and garden plots. I searched doggedly throughout my fieldwork for these missing seeds and much of my dissertation writing on the camp reflects my attempt to make sense of their absence.

What I now realize is that while I was searching everywhere for the missing physical seed, what I was really looking for was the missing metaphorical seed: the seed of the political. Even more than the presence of physical seeds and seed saving, it was finding traces of the seed of political possibility in camp gardens that would make them mean something beyond basic physical survival. As I came to understand, seeds and plants alone mean little when camp residents are forced to live in the state of exception: unable to move freely, without legal recourse and lacking citizenship and rights. In this context the basic act of “deciding one’s own life”, a phrase I heard repeatedly in interviews, became all but impossible.

Like Lisa Stevenson’s (2014) discussion in *Life Beside Itself* and Elisabeth Dunn’s argument in *No Path Home*, the “reason” (Dunn 2017) of humanitarian initiatives supporting gardening in the camp is to keep the body and spirit of individuated refugees alive. But, as both scholars question, to what ends are these bodies kept alive? This both is and is not the reasoning of Karen refugees. The people who I came to know and care about deeply during my time in
Mae La camp, are concerned with survival, theirs and others, of course. At the same time, their lives as bound up with meaning and purpose and only in this way tied to a future that holds in it a life worth living. Struggling for survival then is something that one does because one must, within the context of a greater understanding of one’s place within the world. As Stevenson and Dunn both point out, what matters for the subjects of aid is not simply keeping the individual body alive but doing so for a reason.

Through this dissertation I seek to re-frame the conversations around gardens in refugee camps, and refugees’ gardens in diaspora, to encompass and even expand notions of food, seed, and political sovereignty. My goal is to move the focus from seeing gardens in refugee camps and in resettlement as ends in and of themselves, to being seen as a means of sensory political world-making or, “seeding sovereignty.” In the context of incommensurable inequality and exclusion from rights and humanity in the camp, gardens themselves are not enough. When freedom of movement, citizenship, and the ability to “decide one’s own life” are removed, gardens are only a means of survival. At their most insidious, upbeat discourses surrounding gardens in refugee camps obfuscate the reality of people living without recognition as full members of humanity. In the face of such dehumanization, which is perhaps most evident in the camp, but which manifests in different ways in the lives of people living without citizenship in the unrecognized state of Kawthoolie and also in the lives of resettled refugees, instances of biocultural persistence enact a politics of refusal (Simpson 2014). This is a refusal to be less-than-human and a refusal to neglect ones’ reciprocal, caretaking relationships with people and with other species, including plants. It is this refusal that, I believe, enacts the seeding of Karen sovereignty globally.
Figure 6. With Moo Paw in her garden in Georgia: on our way to see the chickens and goats. Photos by the author.
Poem

Jupiter’s Closest Approach/ On the Imperfect Nature of Departures & Returns
Written June 2018, on the eve of departure for fieldwork

Everywhere things are sprung
Florescent pulsing green
In the way that makes you time travel

Across years via unuttered emotions
Awakened by the ozone-like smell of the liminal seasons
Where the way station of space-time takes you

Back to previous and future versions of yourself
Like when licking ice cream
Like freckled thighs in the damp grass

Soaking up the elation and mellow terror
Of an impending thunderstorm
That darkens the sky and rumbles the earth

Deep down
Worms gyrate their translucent pink bodies
To the rhythm of the spinning world

That is doubling back
And back on itself
With thrilling dysphoria

Always just one misinterpreted law
Of behavior away from
Flying off its orbit

And crashing unfettered
Through the budded constellations
As house sparrows flutter their plump figures

Amidst the twigs
And red-winged black birds shriek their delight
At the ephemerides

Of elliptical returns and departures
Of celestial and human bodies
Tied loosely to everything else by multi-colored bits of string

Each of these bodies blushed now
With specks of fuchsia glitter, pollen, and cosmic dust
Like the powder from a lunar moth’s wings

From coming into such near contact

A still moment while foraging for ferns with a Karen woman and mother along the edge of Blue Mountain Lake in the Adirondack Mountains. Photo by the author.
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——— (Karen/Burma specialist) interviewed by Terese Gagnon (author) November 2016. Via Skype (Chaing Mai Thailand to Syracuse, NY.)


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EDUCATION
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY (USA)
Ph.D., Anthropology, Syracuse University, July 2021, Outstanding TA Award

Certificate in University Teaching, May 2020, The Graduate School, Future Professoriate Program

M.A., Anthropology, May 2018, Qualifying exams passed with high PhD pass

The University of Georgia, Athens, GA (USA)
B.A 2013 Magna Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa, Anthropology, Spanish Minor and Writing Certificate

DISSERTATION RESEARCH
Title, Seeding Sovereignty: Sensory Politics and Biodiversity in the Karen Diaspora

Dissertation Advisor, Professor Azra Hromadžić, Ph.D., Syracuse University, Anthropology

Committee Members: Professor Mona Bhan, Syracuse University; Professor Christina Fink, George Washington University; Professor Ann Grodzins Gold, Syracuse University; Professor Shannon Novak, Syracuse University

Affiliated Researcher
Chiang Mai University (CMU), Research Center for Social and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Chiang Mai, Thailand, Faculty Mentor Aj. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, July 2018 to May 2019

RESEARCH INTERESTS
Environmental anthropology and critical Indigenous studies with a focus on dispossession and refugeehood; food sovereignty; sensory politics; biodiversity; armed conflict; multi-sited ethnography; ethnographic poetry; and Southeast Asia, with a focus on Myanmar (Burma), Thailand and the U.S.

PUBLICATIONS
Books

Articles and Book Chapters

Gagnon, Terese and Hsa Moo. Forthcoming Fall 2021. “Caring in the Struggle: A Conversation Between Has Moo and Terese Gagnon.” In Gender in the Transition: Feminist Politics, Resistance and


Books in Progress

Articles and Book Chapters in Progress
Gagnon, Terese. “‘There are No Seeds Here”: Severing Political and Seed Sovereignty in Mae La Camp.”


Book Reviews

Other Publications


**Hog Hammock.** United States, 2013. Film (available on Youtube.com) Premier Screening at Athfest Film Festival, Athens, GA (July 2013).


**GRANTS & FELLOWSHIPS**
Syracuse University, East Asia Program, Gokjan/East Asia Summer Research Grant, May 2021, $2,000

Syracuse University Department of Anthropology Dissertation Completion Fellowship, August 2020-May 2021, $21,000

Summer Dissertation Completion Fellowship, The Graduate School, Syracuse University, Summer 2019, $4,000

Claudia De Lys Award for Fieldwork in Cultural Anthropology, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University, 2018, $4,000

Maxwell Dean’s Fellowship for Summer Research 2018, $2,000

Syracuse University East Asia Program Gojin Summer Funding 2018, $1,000

Syracuse University East Asia Program Gojin Summer Funding 2017, $2,000

Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs Dean’s Fellowship for Summer Research 2017, $4,000

Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Grant, Intensive Burmese Language Training Summer 2016, (Tuition and Stipend) $6,500

UGA Libraries Research Award, Second Place Senior Division, March 2013, $300

Center for Undergraduate Research (CURO) Summer Fellowship, Summer 2012, $3,000

University of Georgia Department of Anthropology, Steingruber Travel Award, Spring 2012, $900

Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarship, For Study Abroad in Peru, Spring 2011, $4,500

President’s Venture Fund, University of Georgia, Support for production of Hog Hammock documentary, Winter 2012, $1,000

Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, Special Award, for production of Hog Hammock Documentary, Winter 2012, $250

Volunteer UGA Sustainable Service Grant, for establishment of Karen market garden, Winter 2011, $950

HOPE/ Zell B. Miller Academic Scholarship, August 2009-May 2013, $40,500

Rotary Local Academic Scholarship, August 2009-May 2013, $4,000
Non-Sibi Local Academic Scholarship, August 2009-May 2011, $6,000

Sam Walton Academic Scholarship August 2009, $3,000

**HONORS & AWARDS**
Christine Wilson Graduate Student Paper Prize from the Society for the Anthropology of Food and Nutrition (SAFN), for the paper ““There are No Seeds Here”: Severing Seed and Political Sovereignty in Mae La camp”, 2020

Outstanding TA Award (OTA), Syracuse University, 2018

Gordon Bowls, Graduate Paper Prize, Runner-up, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University, 2017 and 2018

Society for Humanistic Anthropology (SHA) Ethnographic Poetry Prize, Third Place, 2013

Phi Beta Kappa, University of Georgia, 2013

UGA Libraries Research Award, Second Place Senior Division. University of Georgia, Athens, GA, 2013

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

*Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Instructor*
Syracuse, NY (USA), September 2019-May 2020
Instructor for the interdisciplinary, co-taught undergraduate course, “Global Community”

**Dr. Tithambyar Christian Institute (TCI) College (Karen-run College), Instructor**
*Kawthoolei*, January-February 2019
Instructor of record for courses: Linguistics and English Idioms and Phrases

**KKBBSC College (Karen Refugee-run College in Mae La Camp), Instructor**
Tak Province, Thailand, July-December 2018
Instructor of Record for courses: Introduction to Sociology and English Speaking and Writing

*Syracuse University, Department of Anthropology, Teaching Assistant (TA)*
Syracuse, NY (USA), August 2015-May 2018
Duties include all grading for 50 assigned students, leading two weekly discussion sections of 25 students each, weekly office hours, running review sections, helping to facilitate lecture, and addition e-mail support and meetings with students

Introduction to Cultural Anthropoogy, Spring 2018, Head T.A.
Global Encounters (Writing Intensive), Fall 2017, Head T.A.
Introduction to Biological Anthropology, Spring 2017
Global Encounters (Writing Intensive Course), Fall 2016
Introduction to Cultural Anthropology: Climate and Society, Spring 2016
Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, Fall 2015

*Syracuse University, Graduate School, Graduate Teaching Mentor*
Syracuse, NY (USA), May 2020- May 2021; May 2019- May 2020; May 2017-May 2018
Duties included helping to lead SU’s new TA Orientation for both international and domestic T.A.s, fulfilling a year-long mentor as teaching mentor. I severed as co-organizer for sessions on “Identity and Diversity” and “Dealing with Challenges in the Classroom” during the TA orientation, and volunteered to co-organize a special panel on “Teaching Power” during spring semester of 2017.

**The University of Georgia, Department of Anthropology, Undergraduate TA**

Athens, GA (USA), December 2011 – May 2013

Duties include all grading for 60 assigned students, weekly office hours, running review sessions, helping to facilitate lecture, and addition e-mail support and meetings with students; also helping to craft the pioneering Undergraduate T.A. Program

Introduction to Anthropology, Spring 2013
Introduction to Anthropology, Fall 2012
Introduction to Anthropology, Spring 2012

**OTHER WORK EXPERIENCE**

Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN), Volunteer
Thailand, June-July 2017

University of Georgia, Department of Anthropology, Research Assistant
Athens, GA (USA), August 20011-March 2012
Research Assistant to Dr. Virginia Nazarea, Director of UGA Anthropology

Ethnobotany/Biodiversity Lab

Duties include conducting literature review on Southeast Asian Immigrant Gardens in the Southeastern U.S.; organizing materials for a book manuscript; lab maintenance and organizing of materials; facilitating meetings of interdisciplinary faculty grant proposal group; coordinating public outreach activities such as a transnational seed swap.

CHIRAPAQ Indigenous Rights Organization, Volunteer Translator and Interpreter
Lima, Peru, May 2011-July 2011

I served as interpreter to international summit of Indigenous Women; translated UN grand proposal from Spanish to English.

Pax Christi USA, Intern and Writer
Washington D.C., (USA), January 2011-March 2011

I wrote weekly articles for national publication; aided in development of intern program; assisted research on nuclear nonproliferation campaign, and work with Iraqi youth; helped to facilitate meetings of Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC) International.

**INVITED TALKS**


CONFERENCES PRESENTATIONS AND WORKSHOPS


**PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

Graduate Student Review Board Member. Excellence in Graduate Education Award for Syracuse University Faculty. The Graduate School, Syracuse University. March 2020.

Duties: As part of this small review committee of invited graduate student I volunteered over 20 hours of my time to review nominations for the EEG award and helped to recommend this years’ faculty award recipients.


President, Anthropology Graduate Student Organization (AGSO), Syracuse University, May 2016-May 2017


Brown Bag Coordinator, AGSO, Syracuse University September 2015-May 2016
ADDITIONAL EDUCATION

Payap University, Institute of Religion Culture and Peace (IRCP), Affiliated Researcher
Chiang Mai, Thailand, May 2017-July 2018

Karen Language Tutoring, with Naw Nancy Wa
Chiang Mai, Thailand, June-July 2017

Okell-Watkins Burmese Course
French Institute of Burma, Yangon, Myanmar, May 2017-June 2017

Southeast Asian Summer Studies Institute (SEASSI)
University of Wisconsin Madison, Madison, WI, June 2016-August 2016
Intensive Burmese Language Study Course

Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú
Lima, Perú, March 2011-July 2011

Semester study abroad at a host university. I took middle and upper division anthropology courses taught in Spanish. As part of a fieldwork course (practica de campo) I conducted a short cultural anthropology fieldwork project on rural cellphone use in La Libertad Province (in the Andes) and wrote a thesis on the research in Spanish. During my five months of study I lived with a Peruvian host family.

Certificate of Interdisciplinary Writing
University of Georgia, Athens, GA (USA), Awarded May 2013

LANGUAGES
Spanish; French; Burmese; S’gaw Karen

MEMBERSHIP
American Anthropological Association
Society for Humanistic Anthropology
Society of Ethnobiology
Society for Cultural Anthropology
Agricultural History Society
Phi Beta Kappa

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