Introduction

Spaces of Solidarity

The lives of the porters are unlucky, no chance to survive
We have to carry unfair heavy loads
We have wounds on our shoulders and heads
We have to climb mountains and are beaten like cattle
We have to suffer from this powerlessness
They tortured us cruelly
All these problems are caused by the military government
Escaping to survive
Their power depends on their arms
They killed many porters
Many porters have sacrificed
We, the escaped porters, have hearts filled with hatred…
They beat and injured over one hundred of us porters
Don't cry porters
Together we will carry our loads until we reach the frontline
Along the way we saw many dead porters
Who died from landmines when they tried to escape
When we think of them we feel pain in our hearts
Porters run to escape and the soldiers try to shoot them
When we escape we feel grief for the porters who cannot escape
When we think of this we want to fight back to the military government…
Together we will struggle from now on!
 —Eh De Li, a prison porter[1]

In November 2003, a group of prison porters arrived at the Thailand–Burma border. Their most immediate journey had begun in various Burmese prisons where they had been incarcerated for offences ranging from receiving stolen goods to buying illegal lottery tickets, murder and desert-

ing the Burmese Army. These porters ended up in Burma's eastern border area of Karen State, where they were used as human labour to carry heavy loads of machinery, ammunition and food for the Burmese military. The porters told stories of being used as landmine sweepers (walking in front of Burmese military personnel to activate landmines), of beatings when they became too tired to walk and of experiencing the malignancy of war. Many porters who attempted escape were killed, while a few made it back to their villages or to the Thailand–Burma border. Those who made it to the border were afforded temporary security. A number of these porters then did something that was only made possible by their current location: tell their stories to a wider international audience. They wrote a poem about their experience and spoke it to camera. The porters were entrusting that their story would be told and their message heard, but with little idea where it might end up or how it might be used.

An act such as this highlights some of the key themes that frame this book. In a straightforward sense the book examines the significance of what is being said and where it is being said, and the relationship between them. While fairly standard questions, an in-depth analysis shows that the answers are of course much more complex. At one level, what is being said is a personal experience of persecution. At another level, it shows a conscious reflection on the effects of armed conflict, and in its delivery an awareness of the place in which it is voiced. The poem is spoken and projected from the perceived safety of the Thai side of the Thailand–Burma border, an action that could not have taken place inside Burma. In its public projection, the porter's story became part of a larger narrative of political injustice that is produced in relation to Burma. In the poem the porter's talk of their persecution in terms of killings, beatings and being forced to carry heavy loads. They do so in critical terms: 'Escaping to survive, their power depends on their arms.' The porters know who is responsible for their persecution and that the perpetrator's power lies in the threat of their guns. The poem also frames the porter's experiences in a way that promotes solidarity with others who share similar stories, ending with a cry to action: 'Together we will struggle from now on.' This is a story of persecution that is shared by many and in its telling, it becomes part of the larger body of activist material that helps shape the identity of displaced Karen in the borderlands.

The location of this voicing of persecution is a key preoccupation of this book. Burma is one of Southeast Asia's frontiers. Its southern border faces the Bay of Bengal, but on all other sides its borders are landlocked, shared with Bangladesh, India, China and Thailand. From the time of a military coup in 1962 until the early 1990s, these borders kept Burma politically and economically isolated, a position largely achieved through the so-

cialist path pursued by the military dictatorship and the enforcement of a policy of national unity that denied democratic reform and isolated the population from the rest of the world (Callahan 2003; Fink 2009; M. Smith 1999; Taylor 2009). With more than 52 million people and over 130 ethnic nationalities, successive military governments have largely attempted to contain and control the population through authoritarian rule, and with little tolerance for political plurality or ethnic diversity (Silverstein 1997; Steinberg 2001; Taylor 1982). The ramifications of these policies are particularly evident in Burma's border areas where ethnic populations are concentrated and armed ethnic groups opposing the military dictatorship are typically based. Particularly since the 1970s, these policies have seen large numbers of people displaced within Burma and many hundreds of thousands forced to flee across borders and into neighbouring countries (BERG 1998; HRW 2005).[2]

One consequence of this is that the Thailand–Burma border has become a place of refuge and reprieve for those fleeing persecution in Burma. The porters mentioned above not only found a safe and relatively familiar place at the Thailand–Burma border, but were also afforded an open informal hospitality and access to resources not found inside Burma. There is some historical continuity to this as, despite state regulation, people have moved back and forth across this modern international border for over a century. But in constructing and projecting their poem from the Thailand–Burma border, the porters are distinguishing the place from which they choose to tell their story; the location of this act of cultural resistance is no random coincidence. So what gives the border this perceived status of refuge? How does this largely invisible line on the ground come to represent differing states of security? Why did these porters tell their story here, on the Thai side of the Thailand–Burma border? And, more broadly, what impact does the telling of such stories have, particularly in terms of identity, agency, cultural reaffirmation and solidarity?

The central argument of this book addresses these preoccupations. I argue that the Thailand–Burma borderlands is the setting for modes of social practice that critically inform Karen activism. The borderlands is a distinct space characterised by a tension between a modern territorial domain, which is characterised by the modern demarcation of the Thailand–Burma border and the consolidation of state control over it, and the intersection of a particular form of social relations, typified by a fluidity of movement (of information, resources, ideas, culture and identity) that intensifies the possibilities available to displaced Karen, particularly in terms of political agency and mobilisation. These social relations take on the form of an interchange that occurs across the national border. This interchange is defined by the nature of sociality in conjunction with a

territorial domain (the Thailand–Burma border) and is framed by three modes of social practice conducted by displaced Karen and specific to the space: patterns of activism and resistance, networks of solidarity and processes of cultural recovery. These points are elaborated upon across the remainder of the book, but it is first necessary to provide some context to the borderlands space and the displaced Karen who inhabit it.

A Borderlands Space

In October 2005 I travelled by *song tiaew*[3] through the early morning mist and was deposited in front of a bamboo gate flanked by a razor-wire fence. Strangers emerged to meet me. We walked the 'highway'[4] of the refugee camp, passing bamboo houses and shops, herds of goats and groups of chatting villagers. We traversed the tricky terrain of battered paths and slippery crevices, exposed roots and rocky outcrops. At the end of this uneven path, at the base of tall white cliffs and in the shade of a canopy of trees, we reached our destination, a Karen friend's wedding, a refugee camp wedding.

I mention this wedding because it represents how confusing and ambiguous the Thailand–Burma borderlands can be for an outsider. The wedding was held in a refugee camp. Special arrangements ensured I could get into the camp and attend the wedding. The groom was Sgaw Karen, the bride Pwo Karen: he is Christian and she is Buddhist. Traditional protocol suggests they should never have met, let alone marry. A Karen National Union (KNU) leader cum Christian pastor presided, and the ceremony included Animist and Buddhist traditions despite its Christian directive. The speeches were in many ways familiar: respect the sanctity of marriage; work on the partnership; be prepared to compromise; do not go to bed angry. The bridesmaids wore the traditional *hse* (Karen dress) and *hko peu* (headscarf). A young Karen man dressed in jeans and with a rock star mop of hair brought out a guitar and amplifier, and sang a Karen rock song so loudly the veins in his neck protruded.

The groom told me he drank 'five fingers' of whisky to calm himself. The bride's family paid 'bribe' money to be allowed to travel from a different refugee camp to attend the ceremony. Afterwards, the wedding party ate the meat of three slaughtered pigs, as well as goat, ribs and curries, all washed down with beer and whisky. It was 10 a.m. in the morning and when you looked around, you could see people from different countries, religions and languages laughing, talking and eating.

In married life the couple spent their time between a house in the camp, where they raised their pigs, and a share house in Mae Sot, where

they documented human rights abuses against Karen people back inside Burma. To contact them in the camp, you rang a communal number and left a message, and an hour to a few days later, they would call you back. In Mae Sot they had mobile phones and the internet. They communicated through discussion forums and online chats, talking with people from the other side of the world who they have never met. This wedding is typical of the type of social relationships that I explore over the course of this book. Social settings such as this one represent a point of intersection, where at times complex and seemingly contradictory activities and messages develop the fabric of social relationships particular to the place in which they are occurring. In the example mentioned above, these social relationships are numerous: interethnic, familial, political, cultural, gendered, interreligious and communal, and enabled by technology, shared languages and historical ties. The wedding mirrors the complex contributions both individuals bring to the relationship, differing religious orientations, gender roles and ethnic traditions, but it is also influenced by the space in which it takes place, the restrictions of a refugee camp, the inclusion of Western culture and technology, and the ability to move around freely. My point of interest is not that these relationships occur, for they are replicated in some way across the world every day, but rather that at their point of intersection, we get an analytical account of the space in which it is occurring. As a researcher, a key concern is how best to capture and present this dynamic in terms of an academic argument.

The concept of borderlands will be elaborated in more detail in Chapter 1, but it is necessary to lay out some of the key components of the term here. The location of acts of cultural and political resistance such as the porter's poem mentioned at the beginning of this introduction occurs in a complex political space that highlights a key thematic concern of this book: the composition of the Thailand–Burma borderlands space. In this book a 'borderlands' domain is a space defined as having two intersecting components: loosely bounded geographical places where people live and interact with both state and nonstate institutions associated with the mechanisms of a nation-state boundary (Gupta and Ferguson 1992), and a space where the social interactions across the boundary give meaning to the borderlands as a space of cultural significance (Donnan and Wilson 1999).

This definition incorporates two important elements that shape my understanding of the borderlands. First, I take a social constructionist perspective of the Thailand–Burma borderlands, in that I argue that the borderlands is a manifestation of space that is produced in and through the social relationships that occur across the border (Massey 2005; Soguk 2007; Staeheli 1994). This concept of a 'borderlands' allows me to map the

interchange that occurs across a broader space that is informed by the Thailand–Burma border, rather than seeing the border as purely delineating two distinct autonomous spaces. This interchange is defined by the nature of sociality in conjunction with a territorial domain. In the context of this book, the interchange is broadly mapped through the operations of the nation-state and the practices of displaced Karen, and manifests as a point of tension between attempts by the nation-state to create a homogenised space delineated by the border and the intersecting social relations of displaced Karen that tend to map more fluid activities across the border.

Second, this definition of borderlands allows me to retain the importance of the geographical place that plays an integral part in the shape these social relationships take. While I will speak of places throughout this book, such as Mae Sot, Mae La refugee camp or the strip of 'no-man's land' that sits between the two nation-states, this is a process of orientating the reader in terms of a geographical location that is treated by locals and others as distinct from other places. In this definition, the borderlands is distinct from the Thailand–Burma *border*, which is used here to describe the national boundary, as marked on a map, that separates Burma and Thailand, and that is an outward manifestation of the political power and territorial sovereignty of the adjoining states (Donnan and Wilson 1999; Newman and Paasi 1998). The border is part of the borderlands and as a manifestation of state power, the Thailand–Burma *border* should also be viewed as a spatial social construct (Newman and Paasi 1998), though encompassing a more homogenised sense of space than applies to the borderlands.

Within this definitional framework, the term 'borderlands' is used as an analytical device to account for the social relationships that occur *across* the geographical boundary that is the Thailand–Burma border and that can also account for the notion of the contested social interaction that occurs in the space. This relates directly to the spatial arguments made in this book: that the borderlands exists at the nexus of tension between state and nonstate actors; it has both geographical and conceptual qualities, both of which are often highly contested; and it is often a site of discursive contestation and struggle, and as a result is conducive to a process of formulating new identities.

The Karen

While the origins of the Karen are contentious, the claim most commonly accepted by early colonial administrators and missionaries was that the Karen originally came from present-day China (Cross 1854; Saw Aung

Hla 2000 [1939]; Marshall 1997 [1922]).[5] What is more evident is that after a period of migration, the Karen settled in areas that cover present-day Burma and Thailand. In Thailand the Karen are predominantly found in the hills of the country's northwest, as well as around major northern cities like Mae Sot, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son. Many Karen also live along the Thailand–Burma border, a result of either earlier migration or forced displacement caused by conflict inside Burma. Within the territorial confines of Burma, Karen people are predominantly found on Burma's eastern side, in the Tenasserim Region and the Karen State,[6] but also in the Irrawaddy Delta to the west of Rangoon.[7] Karen in these areas are predominantly engaged in agriculture, forestry, fisheries and livestock, and, for many in the mountainous areas, subsistence farming. Many Karen are also found in urban areas like Rangoon and Pegu, where they largely participate in the urban economy and lifestyle.

Such a description may carry the sense that there is a homogeneous Karen identity, even one that stretches across national boundaries, but there is little evidence to suggest that a syncretic nationalist Karen identity integrates the Karen in Burma and the Karen in Thailand. It is an important distinction to make, not only in terms of putting parameters around the displaced Karen I study in this book but also in its ability to illustrate a Karen identity partially formed around nationalist ties to territory rather than a shared ethnicity for all Karen. Differences in culture, religion and language that have formed over time may account for this, but one would also suggest that the mechanisms of the respective nation-states and the notion of the international boundary that now divides them also plays a significant role (Rajah 1990). These are important distinctions that are explored over the course of this book; however, it is important from the beginning to note that the displaced Karen I talk of here do not include Thai-Karen. This is because despite largely conducting their political struggle from Thai territory, the Karen political movement in the Thailand–Burma borderlands has made no real attempt to incorporate Thai-Karen into their struggle (Rajah 1990).

The idea of 'the Karen' of Burma needs further analysis before we begin to understand the group of displaced Karen discussed in this book. Karen inside Burma are thought to number 5–7 million (BERG 1998). Yet putting an accurate figure on Karen population numbers often seems like a futile business. There is little official data available and over the years numbers have often been manipulated for political purposes (Cusano 2001: 141; M. Smith 1999: 30). For example, the 1931 Census, which is considered the last attempt to truly capture Burma's demography and particularly its ethnic population, numbered the Karen at 1.3 million. The 1971 Census noted 3.2 million Karen, but in 1983 the Burmese government put the Karen

population at only 2.21 million (BERG 1998: 7). At the time of publication, ethnic population data from the 2014 Census was still to be publicly released, the 'sensitivity' of the data being cited as the reason.

While an accurate population figure may be hard to derive, so is a comprehensive distinction of the Karen as a cultural grouping. Throughout this book I will argue that Karen identity in the borderlands is projected through modes of social practice that manifest in much more fluid and elaborate understandings of identity than the sole focus on a homogeneous Karen identity would typically allow. There is much evidence to support the argument about the complex nature of positioning a Karen cultural identity and the cultural, economic, linguistic and religious differences between the various people who call themselves Karen (Cusano 2001). There are generally considered to be two major subgroups within the Karen: Sgaw and Pwo. They each have their own dialect and loosely speaking an assigned religion: Pwo Karens tend to be Buddhist and Sgaw Karens Christian.[8] Chris Cusano suggests that a distinction could also be made between lowland and highland Karen (2001: 143), and there is some merit to this categorisation. Lowland Karen are typically involved in the mainstream economy through small businesses or employment in the civil services. As such, they are more likely to interact with non-Karen members of the population, particularly in trade and schooling, and are more likely to take on elements of the Burmese culture and speak the Burmese language. They are also more likely to be exposed to Western and Burmese dress and culture. On the other hand, highland Karen are more isolated from the Burmese culture. They are commonly subsistence farmers living in Karen State's eastern mountainous terrain and generally maintain a strong sense of their Karen language and culture. Highland Karen can be economically isolated and experience low education rates (Cusano 2001).

While the majority of Burma's Karen population is estimated to live in the Irrawaddy Delta (Thawnghmung 2008), the Karen are more commonly associated with Karen State. This is due, at least in part, to two reasons: first, Karen State's eastern hills are remote and Karen communities living there have more easily retained the distinctive features of Karen culture; and, second (and of particular relevance to this book), Karen State is closely linked to the Karen resistance movement, and claims over Karen territory are commonly found in the projection of a Karen identity from the borderlands.

Burma has a long history of ethnic unrest. The main ethnic groups are the Arakan, Burman, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan. Each has its own language and culture. But even within these ethnic groups, one finds a multitude of subgroups with differing dialects and traditions.

It is generally claimed that there are over 100 'national races' in Burma. Finding an adequate system of governance that can accommodate the political needs of the various non-Burman ethnic minority groups has dominated Burmese politics since independence in 1948. Many of these ethnic minority groups were disillusioned with the political landscape postindependence and in turn developed their own political and armed movements (M. Smith 1999). In the absence of appropriate representation in the 1947 Constitution, they were prepared to develop resistance groups against the central government. The KNU formed in 1947 and quickly became a significant armed force against the central authorities, although it was certainly not the only one, with the Kachin, Shan, Chin, Mon and Karenni all waging similar battles against the newly independent government. At times, the KNU controlled considerable territory; in 1949 it famously took control of Insein, an outer suburb of Rangoon, while at other times they controlled a large swath of territory from Mandalay in the north to Thaton and Kawkareik in the southeast (M. Smith 1999).

A political resolution to the ethnic minority issue caused considerable concern for both the postindependence democratic government and the subsequent military regime. When General Ne Win staged his coup in 1962, he justified the act by stating that 'Federalism is impossible; it will destroy the Union', while a spokesman of the new regime went even further, commenting that federalism was a luxury Burma could ill afford (M. Smith 1999: 196). Ne Win saw the *Tatmadaw*[9] as the sole protector of the country's unity and national integrity, and federalism (with its accommodation of ethnic representation) as a threat to this unity. It is a position synonymous with the military regime throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with giant billboards lining Mandalay's fortress stating: '*Tatmadaw* and the people, cooperate and crush all those harming the Union.'

What Ne Win and his military government instigated was a concerted effort to eradicate the ethnic opposition forces, which over the years were increasingly pushed back into Burma's ethnic border areas. In 1974 the Burmese Army implemented a 'Four Cuts' campaign in Karen State,[10] which was an attempt to cut off the insurgent group's access to food, funds, intelligence and recruits. But such a campaign was never going to simply target ethnic armed groups; civilian villagers bore the brunt of this campaign. The Burmese Army conducted a systematic campaign of terror where they attacked villages and burnt crops, tortured and killed those accused of harbouring Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)[11] soldiers, stole food and animals, moved entire villages into relocation sites under military control, made impossible extortion demands, used villagers as porters and for forced labour, and raped and killed at will.[12] The

result was a mass movement of traumatised people, many eking out an existence as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Karen State, and others fleeing to the Thailand–Burma border where they sought refuge in Thai villages or, after 1984, the refugee camps.

This is a perfunctory summary that serves a number of purposes: to give historical context to the conditions that preside in Karen State today, to give a demographic snapshot of the displaced Karen who participated in this book and to give some understanding of the key elements from which Karen activism and identity in the borderlands has formed. The vast majority of Karen currently residing in the Thailand–Burma borderlands, including most of those who participated in this research, would be considered highland Karen from the eastern hills region of Karen State, the area of land immediately adjacent to Thailand. They are typically both Pwo and Sgaw, although Christian Sgaw Karen tend to hold many of the leadership positions of the Karen political movement in the borderlands. Many have a strong connection to the KNU, which has been a significant presence in the hills region of eastern Karen State and the main proponent of the projection of a nationalist Karen identity. Most displaced Karen in the borderlands share a common experience of persecution and displacement as a result of a civil war that has consumed Karen State for more than sixty years. This unresolved conflict continues to have a considerable impact upon villagers in Karen State, and it is this group of traumatised individuals, having fled into Thailand and settled into refugee camps or local Thai communities, that make up the group of displaced Karen discussed in this book. While most tell a story similar to the circumstances listed in the paragraph above, it is their presence in the Thailand–Burma borderlands that is the basis for the arguments made in this book. From the borderlands space, displaced Karen attempt to re-establish some form of community, cultural identity and political agency. They do this through acts that develop an alternative articulation of the sociopolitical space in which they reside, an articulation that often sits in tension with the dominant state discourse of the space. This alternative space provides opportunities for displaced Karen to undertake social practices that critically inform their activism.

The Aims of This Book

While the genesis of this research lay with the arrival of the prison porters mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, its development into a book was an intellectual journey both challenging and invaluable. What one begins with is rarely what one ends up with, and that is certainly true

of this book. The original premise was to explore practices of cultural expression as a form of resistance, to look at the act itself as a means of articulating opposition to the political forces responsible for persecution and displacement in Burma. I would look at these acts of cultural expression from a specific ethnic group from Burma, the Karen, and in a particular location, from the Thai side of the Thailand–Burma border where many had been displaced to because of conflict inside Burma. The acts of cultural expression I initially explored were in their nature public, intended, political acts of resistance, or so I intended to argue. But the longer I stayed in the Thailand–Burma borderlands and the more I spoke with Karen about the motivations and meanings behind their actions, this premise seemed an inadequate account of what was occurring.

Instead, what became quickly apparent was that the act of cultural expression was an outcome of a larger political struggle that was being uniquely articulated from the borderlands. The act could only be understood in the context of the space from which it was being projected and the political influences that shaped its content. The collective weight of these acts of cultural expression also suggested they were being used as a way to explore the parameters of a cultural and political identity that was shaped both by the experience of displacement and persecution in Burma as well as emplacement in a new location in Thailand. In other words, the expressive act was a conduit to what appeared to be the creation of an alternative political space that I contend is made up of multiple, concentrated sociopolitical activities that challenge typical state-centric notions of the borderlands space. Its multiplicity heightens its contestability, and it is this idea of contestation that develops my understanding of the Thailand–Burma borderlands as a spatial form and as a site for the construction and projection of Karen activism.

On reaching this conclusion, I proposed a study that could draw together the place (the Thailand–Burma border), the political act (narratives of cultural and political resistance), and the background of the struggle (conflict, displacement and persecution), through the framework of a borderlands space. For the following reasons, it seemed to be a study that was long overdue. Most existing studies of the Karen on the Thailand–Burma border contain theoretical constraints that limit an understanding of the relationship between the Karen as politically active subjects and the borderlands as a spatial entity. This link is important, first because it more adequately captures the nature of displaced Karen activity in the borderlands and, second (and in a much broader sense), because it sheds much-needed insight on the borderlands as a social construct, shaped by the social relationships that occur there.

There is a significant body of existing literature on the Karen, and while I describe some of the key texts here, a more comprehensive examination of the literature is evident across the entirety of the book. This book is preoccupied with a particular set of themes where the literature can be grouped into three broad categories. The first constitutes literature that focuses on the political and ethnic resistance movement, largely dominated by the practices and doctrine of the KNU and its previous incarnations (KNU 1991; M. Smith 1999; Thawnghmung 2008). There has also been some literature on the identity-making of a Karen nation, in particular literature that focuses on the ethnonationalist political movement (Horstmann 2011, 2014; Rajah 2002; South 2011), the role of religion in the formation of a Karen identity (Gravers 2007; Horstmann 2011) and the development of a pan-Karen identity (Cheesman 2002; South 2007).

A vast majority of the political and ethnic resistance movement literature tends to focus on intra-state relations that privilege a state-centric understanding of Burma and the Karen. While relevant, I want to push beyond the limitations I see in a state-centric discourse. First, Karen in the borderlands are forcibly displaced from Burma and are stateless in Thailand. In many respects, state operations and the state discourse attempt to exclude displaced Karen from the political domain, and so an approach that can account for the way in which displaced Karen engage with this marginalisation is required. Second, a state-centric approach privileges a state articulation of place and this fails to adequately account for differing articulations, particularly those of nonstate actors such as displaced Karen.

The second category into which this body of literature falls is that which focuses on the large refugee population on the Thailand–Burma border. This literature places particular emphasis on the implementation and impact of refugee policy along the Thailand–Burma border (Banki and Lang 2007; Bowles 1998), as well as the documentation of human rights abuses inside Burma, which tends to follow a human rights discourse.[13] Increasingly, we see writing that explores the political agency of refugees, in particular how they challenge governance and bureaucracy constraints (Lee 2012; Saltsman 2014), the connections between displacement and the cultural constructs of materiality, home and identity (Dudley 2010; Smith 2015), and processes of mobility and sanctuary associated with refugee protection mechanisms (Lang 2002). However, much of the literature on refugees and human rights tends to leave aside the importance of a framework for understanding the Karen as politically active participants in their own day-to-day living, as well as the flexibility to account for what is essentially a complex and opaque set of categories into which Karen in the

borderlands fall, particularly for those who do not consider themselves a refugee and who live outside of the refugee camps.

The last key area of literature is that which falls under historical ethnographic studies, particularly focusing on the documentation of Karen culture and ethnicity. These tend to be fairly orthodox accounts written by colonial administrators and missionaries (Marshall 1997 [1922]; Scott 1924; Smeaton 1920) or early Karen historians (Saw Aung Hla 2000; San C. Po 2001 [1928]). While I draw on ethnographic accounts at various junctures in this book and engage in ethnographic methods, this study differs by seeking to lift the discussions of culture, identity and sociality into a broader sociopolitical framework that moves beyond a *sole* concentration on the immediacy of interaction.

Each of these areas has made important contributions to debates focusing on the Karen in the borderlands, and in a sense I draw on all three and also build upon them. But this book differs in a key conceptual way. It argues for an approach that can account for the geopolitical and the conceptual qualities of the space as they relate to the construction and projection of Karen activism, making an argument that is framed through the concept of a 'borderlands', in part by engaging with material in an interdisciplinary manner. Rather than employing a narrow geopolitical definition of borders and borderlands as respectively representing an outward manifestation of state sovereignty and as grey areas of control, my approach to borderlands draws benefit from a variety of disciplines, including social theory across international and cultural studies, nationalism and refugee studies, political geography, mobilities and anthropology. By blurring genre boundaries, we can move beyond the limitations in the narrower disciplinary approaches to the Thailand–Burma borderlands and develop a more critical apparatus that demonstrates the complexity needed in understanding the space. An example of this genre crossing is to say that the Thailand–Burma borderlands is a loosely bounded geographical place associated with a nation-state boundary, and a conceptual space whose boundaries are associated with subjectivity, mobility and self-identification. At times, the borderlands is a space in which alternatives to the state discourse are practised and creative cultural production is created. At other times, it could be viewed as a site of marginalisation and unequal power distribution. The key to understanding the Thailand–Burma borderlands is not to restrict the view of it from a singular disciplinary perspective, but rather to see the borderlands as a spatial entity that is the accumulation and product of these interrelationships. This is what the concept of 'borderlands' can bring to this book and to studies of the Karen.

Research Methods

Given the complex mix of agents and relations along the Thailand–Burma border, negotiating a method of data collection was a key preoccupation of this research. A large part of my information gathering was conducted through traditional ethnographic practices of interviewing and participant observation. Ethnographic techniques primarily helped me to understand the patterns of social relations and identity formation that occur in the Thailand–Burma borderlands. The book equally draws on document analysis, both historical and contemporary forms, as well as the examination of cultural expression. I will elaborate on these processes below.

Over the period from 2005 to 2011, I conducted a number of field trips to the Thailand–Burma border for up to five months. My knowledge of and connection to the Karen in the borderlands must also be taken in light of my ongoing professional engagement with the border area, reaching back to 2002 and sustained by repeated return trips to the border over the last fifteen years. Over the course of the fieldwork trips, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Karen refugees, displaced persons and leaders. This included a number of Karen leaders who articulated a broader sociocultural picture of the Karen within a historical context as well as Karen working in organised political settings such as nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups. The principal point of reference for my work was that the participants self-designated as Karen, although other forms of identification used included being artists and activists, refugees and migrant workers. These were people who lived in the borderlands out of necessity and who had developed, over time, a unique articulation of its connection to their daily lives and to their political status. This group of people mostly derive from one of the most significant populations in and around Mae Sot: villagers who have fled the conflict inside Burma and sought refuge in Thailand.

Many of the participants had been housed in one of the nine Thai government-recognised refugee camps, which at the time catered to over 140,000 refugees.[14] This particular population of displaced Karen had at least one thing in common: they have all been displaced from Burma. For one participant in the research, displacement had occurred twenty-seven years before; for another, it was only ten months prior to our meeting. While some could not remember the circumstances of their displacement, instead relying on the stories of older relatives, all had been forced to flee their homes due to Burmese military offences or intense and unwanted military attention and persecution. Most are, or had been, considered a refugee at some point in their lives, and many had spent some time in

one of the various refugee camps on the Thailand–Burma border. Of the participants from Burma, all were Karen, with a mix of Animist, Buddhist and Christian religious identifications. All but two participants lived in Mae Sot illegally, meaning they had no nationality, no Thai ID, no formal access to health or education services, and were constantly threatened by the possibility of deportation or imprisonment if they were caught. Over half the participants had lived and been educated in the refugee camps, although all but one now lived primarily outside the refugee camps. Many of my participants also had links to the KNLA. Some were former members of the KNLA and others had siblings or parents who were members. Many expressed a political affiliation to the KNU, although their allegiances in a practical sense were much more complex and included local community identification, pro-democracy identification and affiliations with sociopolitical movements such as globalisation, anti-capitalism and environmentalism.

Early on in my fieldwork, I was in Mae La refugee camp. Through an interpreter, I asked an older Karen woman if she liked to weave. She replied 'I don't like it, but I don't not like it'. The ambiguity and brevity of the answer points to a crucial point of communication in Karen culture. Communication is communal, nondirect and informal.[15] It requires per-

Figure 0.1. Weaving in Mae La refugee camp, 2005. Photo by Rachel Sharples.

sonal interaction, a familiar setting, an interest in the participant's broader story and subtle probing. It is in this type of setting that productive discussions can occur. When a Karen friend joined the group and they began weaving together, I learnt a lot more through their informal chatting. I learnt that the men often left the camp to find work, but that the women could not do so because of family commitments. Weaving alleviated their boredom. It also provided them with an income to pay their children's schooling, and for clothes and food. The problem with my question was that it was framed in terms that were not relevant to the women's lives. It was not a question of liking or not liking weaving; it was a matter of practicality and necessity in the day-to-day living of a refugee camp. It was an important insight – on different forms of communication, but also the need to constantly evaluate and refine your research practices.

My semi-structured interviews ranged from one to two hours. Many involved the sorts of informal chats I illustrated above. Most included multiple return sittings that allowed me to follow up ideas and ultimately engage at a deeper level with the material. In addition to these interviews, I also spoke informally with many other community members throughout the course of my fieldwork and these interactions played an integral role in the development of my arguments. A key element of these interviews and observations was that they gave me an insight into how the borderlands was 'lived in', moving me out of the theoretical realm to provide real experiences and real situations. Direct quotes from these interviews can be found throughout the book, providing a rich context to my own observations and arguments.

The majority of my interviews were conducted in English, the participants speaking adequate, even fluent levels of English due to their education in the refugee camps and their ongoing participation in activist circles where they advocated to an international, English-speaking audience. I gave the participants the option to conduct interviews in Karen or Burmese as well, and as a result some interviewees spoke Sgaw Karen[16] with an interpreter present. These interviews were either recorded or written, and the interpreter sat with us in order to conduct real-time translation. Translation was also required for the cultural artworks, particularly the songs discussed in this book. These songs were originally written in Karen, and I worked directly with the authors to arrive at an adequate translation of their works.

One further note on language and translation: working across languages requires more than just direct translation. Speaking a non-native language gives rise to inconsistencies in communicating and understanding. Participants often relied on pauses, mumbling and prolonged searches when they could not find the right word. For the clarity of the reader, I

have removed these utterances from the interviews presented in this book. Many of the Karen participants actively encouraged me to 'clean up' their English, not wanting to sound uneducated or unclear in what they were saying. Given my ongoing connection with the participants and my work in the Thailand–Burma borderlands more generally, I feel there is a real need to accommodate these wishes. With this in mind, I have tidied up things like grammar, false starts, repetitions and 'umms' and 'errs' from the interviews presented here. I regard these as minor amendments, in keeping with participants' wishes, to keep the focus on the message, not the nuances of their expression.

As researchers, this is a heavily contentious area of ethnographic practice. However, I draw on the work of academics such as bell hooks (1990), who subscribes to the notion that the very act of telling or retelling someone's story, even your own, is an act of construction, as well as Jayati Lal (1999) and Anna Tsing (1993), who warn against the 'othering' of participants, a position that reinforces their being outside the norm while privileging myself as an 'elite observer' representing Western academic ideals (Tsing 1993: 22). In telling the stories captured in this book, in committing them to audio and written formats, we construct a version of the events. And this is OK, because I am not looking for something that is 'true' or 'pure', but rather something that can develop an understanding of how a space is lived in, how relationships are negotiated and what 'messy' articulations can tell us. There is no true version of events, just many ways of seeing these events.

This duality in construction also, I think, highlights the nuances of a cross-cultural relationship that can develop between the participant and researcher (Tsing 1993: 22). Jayati Lal's work on 'situated locations' is a helpful tool here. This is a methodology that attempts to break down the divisions between subject-object, self-other and researcher-participant by recognising that most people 'occupy multiple and fluid locations' (Lal 1999:79), that challenge the assumption of an 'objective outsider' or an 'authentic insider'. In many of the examples I use across this book, I occupy an unfamiliar location; I am an obvious outsider. But it was surprising to me to realise that how many of my participants occupied that space with me (as an outsider in Thailand) or how our roles were often reversed (for example, at a Thai military checkpoint) or were in many cases variable depending on the circumstances (as I became more familiar with and in the space). The ambiguity and fluidity evident in these positions helped break down some of the more traditional assumptions and divisions around researcher-participant roles.

In addition to these informal semi-structured interviews, I produced extensive notes based on what I was *seeing* in the borderlands. Rather than

being a seemingly objective documentation of culture, events, dress, activities or social structure, these notes served a participatory, analytical purpose. They became a useful tool for deepening my understanding of what I was observing. These notes included observations of cultural activities, insights into the interview and research process, daily documentation of living along the Thailand–Burma border and postinterview analysis. This element of observation was incredibly important in validating what I was being told by participants in our interviews and through their artistic expression. It also filled in the gaps that were not covered in the interviews, giving me a more complete understanding of the space I was studying. I refer to these notes directly in the book; at other times, they take a more complementary, less visible role, in that they add another layer to my understanding of what was occurring in the borderlands.

Throughout this book, there are references to stories of people and events, drawings, cartoons, songs and poems. These were initially unexpected contributions to the thesis, but they have since brought a crucial element to the thesis arguments. They are included for a number of reasons. The artistic expression formed a complementary source to participants' personal narratives and became an alternative form of analysis to more conventional sourcing of information such as interviews, participant observation and reviewing existing literature; they also provided rare academic insights in their own right. The analysis of cultural expression is a much-underutilised area of study when it comes to the Karen and the Thailand–Burma borderlands.

I quickly realised that the production of artistic expression was a living contribution to an ongoing dialogue around political and cultural construction. A thought, feeling or experience embalmed in a piece of artistic expression provides a powerful insight into the author's thematic construction in a given time and place and can tell us much about the political and cultural environment in which it was created. More than that, if artistic expression embodies shared cultural symbols (Geertz 1976), then it can also be viewed as a product of collective experiences that contribute to cultural transformation. Anna Tsing states that the stories inherent in these types of production show 'sites of discursive contestation' (1993: 8). In other words, they are comments on the meaning and practices of social transformation, particularly as they relate to the construction of power. The pieces of artistic expression included in this thesis not only document Karen identity, culture and life, but also contribute to a shared experience of cultural and political construction specific to the Thailand–Burma borderlands space.

The inclusion of artistic expression provides a rich context to understandings of social and cultural formation. First, it visually represents an individual's construction of a theme at a given moment, building the in-

dividual into a collective narrative of the borderlands. Second, it provides an object with meaning because of the symbolic forms that are familiar to the collective who experience it. This meaning is subjected to collective experiences, creating symbols that are familiar to the communal fabric and therefore explicit to cultural construction. Through cultural symbols, we can understand art and through art, we can see a practising culture. A piece of art is therefore a legitimate source of knowledge for understanding the political and cultural constructions that represent both individual and collective portrayals of culture.

The Structure of This Book

Given these first examinations of the terms and literature of this book, it is worth reiterating the main contentions of this book and the structure in which it is presented. This book examines notions of identity, culture, solidarity and space as they relate to the practices of displaced Karen and refugees. It frames these constructs within the context of a borderlands space: the Thailand–Burma borderlands. The book is thematically organised around two key arguments. First, the Thailand–Burma borderlands is a distinct space framed by a tension between a modern territorial domain, characterised by the modern demarcation of the Thailand–Burma border and the consolidation of state control over it, and the intersection of a particular form of social relations, characterised by a fluidity of movement (of information, resources, ideas, culture and identity) that intensifies the possibilities available to displaced Karen, particularly in terms of political agency and mobilisation. Second, these social relations take on the form of an interchange that occurs across the national border. This interchange is defined by the nature of sociality in conjunction with a territorial domain (the Thailand–Burma border) and is framed by three modes of social practice that inform Karen activism in the borderlands.

While modes of social practice constitute a larger theoretical domain than I cover in this book, the phrase is used here as a means of collectively describing key patterns of practice of displaced Karen in the borderlands space. As such, they are examples of modes of practice relevant to this book rather than definitive categories. These three modes of social practice are: (1) scales of resistance and patterns of activism that strengthen Karen agency and challenge institutional forms of governance; (2) paths of connectivity and networks of solidarity, developed through international networking, new media and political consciousness; and (3) processes of cultural recovery, constituting a public projection of 'remembered places', cultural reification and imagining a vision of the future.

This book is therefore organised in the following way. This chapter introduces the book and defines the theoretical parameters and the contextual material of the research. Chapter 1 develops a theoretical framework for the Thailand–Burma borderlands as a space of political and social transformation that challenges the hegemonic message of the state and the bounded nature of state mechanisms. There is a tendency for states to treat borders as static and stable, and to use borders as a means of determining belonging and not belonging. This chapter explores how these theories are applied to the national border and operate as the dominant discourse in which the geopolitics of the border is understood. It pits these traditional understandings against a framework that can better account for mobility and connectivity – the underlying forces that give meaning to the activities of displaced Karen in the borderlands and ultimately the distinctive nature of the borderlands space. I deconstruct the assumption of border politics as matters of nation-states, and the construction of the inhabitants as stateless and deplaced. I set up an alternative theoretical framework in which the borderlands can be understood as a space of activism, connectivity and cultural revival. In borderlands there is an interchange that occurs across the national border – of people, ideas, culture, information, resources and identity. The mobility of displaced Karen in the borderlands, their capacity to construct alternative narratives to the state and establish spaces of solidarity from which to project these is a highly underrated and underexplored aspect of the space.

Chapter 2 develops the conceptual framework by applying it to the modern configuration of the Thailand–Burma borderlands. It establishes the contemporary context of the borderlands as it relates to an intensification of control by the nation-state. The increased penetration of both the Burmese and Thai nation-states to consolidate control over the border has intensified the political nature of the borderlands space. This is achieved through an uneven process of increased militarisation on the Burmese side of the border and increased regulation on the Thai side.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are a pivotal point in the volume. They constitute the empirical chapters of the book and build upon the argument developed over Chapters 1 and 2 to argue that, in sharp distinction to this, displaced Karen create a borderlands space based on an interchange that occurs across the national border, which in this particular context is framed by fluid and contested social relations. For the purposes of this book, I group these social relations into three dominant modes of social practice.

Chapter 3 argues that scales of resistance and patterns of activism emerge from a tension between the operations of institutional governance and a more informal political power that develops through the contested social relations of displaced Karen, namely that displaced Karen contest

these institutional forms of governance because they do not adequately capture the nature of their political self. Instead, they pursue forms of activism and subvert institutional norms of political belonging, and in doing so develop an alternative political space that strengthens Karen agency and mobilisation.

Chapter 4 argues that new paths of connectivity and networks of solidarity are formed through activism that is framed by shared experiences of displacement and persecution. These networks are formed and strengthened where activist practices intersect with particular mechanisms of social power, in this book categorised as international networking, new media and political consciousness. These networks also become a key conduit for the projection of a Karen political narrative based on shared experiences of persecution, thus becoming a major factor in the construction and projection of Karen identity in the borderlands.

Chapter 5 argues that the borderlands facilitates the recovery of a Karen cultural identity that becomes part of a projected Karen identity. This cultural identity is characterised by a selective recovery of cultural icons and origin myths that reinforce the idea of a Karen nation, and are framed through a lens of shared experiences of displacement and persecution. This cultural recovery takes place through three key processes relative to the borderlands space: a public projection of 'remembered places', cultural reification and imagining a vision of the future.

A brief conclusion draws these threads together and reflects on the changeable nature of the borderlands space. If this space encompasses mobility, contestation and transformation, what might this space look like in the future? And how might it change how displaced Karen interact with the state mechanisms on either side of the national border? It is worth reflecting on what impact this may have on the sociality, spatiality and identity constructs that occur there into the future.

While I have begun this book with a strong emphasis on the act of a poem being read, it serves a metaphorical purpose for introducing the broader cultural and political narratives that are evident in the borderlands. The Thailand–Burma borderlands is comprised of complex layers of sociopolitical relations that, upon closer scrutiny, shed insight into why and how a displaced person from Burma residing in the borderlands can construct and project a poem about persecution. This piece of activism is particular to the borderlands space and encompasses many of the arguments I make in this book. The porters spoke this poem from the relative safety of the borderlands. We know about it because the porters were able to speak it, but also because a group of Karen activists were able to access it, translate it into English and further disseminate it through global networks. This process both utilised and was a beneficiary of new technol-

ogies and networks that enable larger connections around human rights material. In voicing their poem, the porters are contributing to a rich contextual canvas that serves to illustrate the complexities of a modern spatial identity, particularly one that is framed by the experience of persecution and displacement and the struggle to have the political self recognised. The fact that these acts, and the form they take, can only occur because of a range of factors that make up the space in which they are constructed and projected illustrates the importance of understanding the nature of the borderlands space.

Notes

1. This poem was written by Eh De Li on the Thailand–Burma border in 2003 and was translated by Nyi Nyi in 2005. The poem was originally documented by local staff working for a community organisation, Burma Issues, an organisation I also worked with between 2002 and 2004.
2. See also any number of reports produced by the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), Amnesty International or the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) Human Rights Documentation Unit (HRDU), to name a few of the organisations that have documented these abuses and the process of flight over the years.
3. Song tiaew is the Thai word for a sort of taxi. It is a ute with bench seats in the back and an overhead covering. You typically pay the driver to take you to your designated location. It is a common form of public transport in Thailand.
4. Refugees in Mae La camp often refer to the main thoroughfare through the camp as the 'highway'. It is the largest path through the camp and connects the various zones. It experiences heavy foot-traffic and could sustain a small vehicle. However, the word is used in some jest as it is also an uneven dirt path prone to bogs, running water and deep crevices.
5. There is much literary discussion around the origins of the Karen. See Harry Ignatius Marshall's *The Karen People of Burma* (1997 [1922]) and Jonathon Falla's *True Love and Bartholomew* (1991) for extensive accounts of these debates.
6. Across this book I use the names of towns, cities and states that are used by the participants in this book. These mostly constitute the names prescribed prior to a 1989 decision by the Burmese military to change the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar and the names of many of its key cities. There is obviously both a logistical and ideological basis to this. My main reason for doing so is because these are the names used by the participants in this research and out of respect to these participants and in order to provide consistency across the book, I have decided to retain the names they use. However, in the first instance and where relevant, I have put the names used by the Burmese government in brackets.

7. Burma is made up of twenty-one administrative divisions. This includes: seven states – Chin, Shan, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Arakan (Rakhine), Mon and Karenni (Kayah); seven regions – Irrawaddy (Ayeyarwady), Pegu (Bago), Magwe (Magway), Mandalay, Sagaing, Tenessarim (Tanintharyi) and Rangoon (Yangon); six self-administered zones – Danu, Kokang, Naga, Pa'O, Pa Laung and Wa; and the capital, Naypyidaw Union Territory. The states are named after the seven significant ethnic groups in Burma, but while a large portion of the ethnic population may live in the state that bears their ethnic name, they are by no means restricted to residing there. For example, large pockets of Karen people can be found in the Irrawaddy Delta, Mon State and Tenesserim Division, as well as Karen State.

8. Around 60–70 per cent of Karen consider themselves Buddhist, while the remainder consider themselves Christian (25–30 per cent) and Animist (5–10 per cent) (BERG 1998). This is a significant variation to the general population of Burma. The 2014 Census reported 89.9 per cent Buddhist, 6.3 per cent Christian, 2.3 per cent Islam, 0.8 per cent Animist and 0.5 per cent Hindu. The high reported cases of Christianity among the Karen can be attributed to the missionary influence in Karen State.

9. *Tatmadaw* is the Burmese word for the Burmese Army.

10. Similar campaigns were conducted against other ethnic armies such as the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) in Kachin State and the Shan State Army (SSA) in Shan State. These 'scorched earth' campaigns were a strategy employed by the Burmese military as far back as the 1950s and continued well into the 2000s.

11. The KNLA is the military arm of the KNU.

12. Martin Smith (1999) gives a comprehensive account of the impacts of the 'Four Cuts' policy.

13. As an example, there are many reports documenting human rights abuses put out by the Burma Ethnic Research Group (BERG), the KHRG and Amnesty International. There are also studies available on the implementation of refugee policy on the Thailand–Burma border, particularly put out by the Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). For further discussion on refugee policy in the borderlands, see also the April 2008 edition of the *Forced Migration Review*.

14. At the end of my field research (April 2012), the figure supplied by the TBBC, Bangkok, was 140,356. The current camp population is 93,206 (November 2019). TBBC is responsible for providing food, shelter and non-food items to refugees in the camps along the Thailand–Burma border. They compile monthly statistics of the camp populations.

15. Violet Cho is a Karen journalist and refugee, and one of the few people to give some academic form to this type of Karen communication. She does this by articulating a research methodology based on the Sgaw word *Tapotaethakot.* According to Cho, the closest English translation for *Tapotaethakot* would be 'chatting', though this does not entirely capture the nature of the word. Cho's work is a useful step towards a better articulation of Karen communication patterns and associated methodologies. Cho sets out seven principles for

Tapotaethakot, which I summarise here: (1) respect participants and treat them according to the rules of kinship; (2) meet informally and have conversations (including sharing food) rather than having formal interviews; (3) be open, direct and upfront about the research and its purposes; (4) be a community member, involved in and supporting community initiatives; (5) recognise and value people's experience and experiential knowledge; (6) recognise and make use of oral tradition and storytelling as legitimate forms of knowledge; (7) recruit research participants through personal and family relations, and through community leaders in an informal way (Cho 2011).

16. The Karen language has three main dialects: Sgaw, Pwo and Bwe. Sgaw Karen is mostly associated with educated Christian Karen, while Pwo is common among Animist and Buddhist Karen. The creation of the Sgaw Karen script is credited to an American Baptist missionary, Jonathan Wade, in the 1930s, primarily for the translation of the Bible. It is closely based on the Burmese script, as is the Pwo Karen script that was adapted from the Sgaw script sometime afterwards. It is often cited that the Karen have an ancient, now lost script (Falla 1991: 220), possibly called *Leit-Hsan-Wait*, which due to the strange shape of the alphabet markings is often referred to as looking like chicken scratchings. Today, Sgaw Karen remains the most visible Karen language, mainly due to its connection to the missionaries and their domination over the production of written publications in the 1800s, and its adoption by the Karen revolution as their official language.