

‘It depends on us’

**The experiences of fifteen young Burmese migrants
living in the border town of Mae Sot, Thailand.**



By

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Cover image was captured and titled “The Sky Moves” by participant Thant (2014b).

Title of this thesis is an excerpt from the following quote from Win Win (2014a):
“I think I have no barrier because it depends on us. You know, if we would like to do something, we have many opportunities here and we have people that supports us.”

ကျွန်မအနေနဲ့ ဒီစာတမ်းကို
ကမ္ဘာအနှံ့မှာရှိတဲ့ မြန်မာရွှေ့ပြောင်းလုပ်သားတွေအတွက်၊
အထူးသဖြင့် ဒီစာတမ်းဖြစ်မြောက်ရေးမှာ ပါဝင်ကူညီခဲ့တဲ့
မြန်မာရွှေ့ပြောင်းလုပ်သားတွေအတွက် ရည်ရွယ်ရေးသားခြင်းဖြစ်ပါတယ်။
သင်တို့ရဲ့အဖြစ်အပျက်တွေကို တချိန်မှာ အားလုံး သိမြင်နားလည်နိုင်ပါစေ..

ရီဘက်ကာ ရော့စ်

I write this thesis for young Burmese migrants the world over, particularly those with whom I collaborated in this research.

May your stories one day be heard by all.

Abstract

The Burmese diaspora in Thailand attracts significant academic attention. However, the voices of migrant Burmese children are largely unexplored and often ignored altogether. On arriving in Thailand young migrants find themselves located within a new cultural, social, and linguistically different geographic space. Underpinned by the recognition that migrant youth actively engage with the world around them, this study challenges the idea that young migrants are passive bearers of circumstance. Rather, as they seek education in Thailand they exercise their agency in unique ways by performing their cultural traditions, creating their ‘own place’, navigating opportunities, voicing critical political opinions, displaying resilience and setting future goals.

Using the participatory method of ‘photo-voice’ this research explores the everyday experiences and stories of fifteen Burmese migrant children living in Thailand as they present them through photography. The participants, most of whom crossed the border unaccompanied, have assessed the relative opportunities available to them in Burma and Thailand. They have chosen to endure the hardships associated with living in a marginalised space away from their parents, culture and country in order to gain an education in Thailand. Technically considered ‘illegal’, these young migrants are facing their present challenges, setting life goals and bending the rules in order to receive an education and establish successful futures.

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Acronyms

CCC	Child Crisis Center
CPPCR	The Committee for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
DKBO	Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
EFA	Education for All Act [Thailand, 2005]
HIV/AIDS	Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome
HEC	Human Ethics Committee
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
MLC	Migrant Learning Center
NEA	National Education Act [Thailand, 1999]
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
NHSO	The National Health Security Office
NSSC	The New Social Studies (or sociology) of Childhood
NV	Nationality verification
NZ	New Zealand
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
RBV	Refugee-background Youth
SAW	Social Action for Women
SCI	Save the Children International
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC)

A note on terminology

Burma/Myanmar returned to the historic name of ‘Myanmar’ in 1989 under the ruling regime.¹ While there are numerous debates over how to refer to the country appropriately, generally, those who do not accept the authority of the unelected military regime use the name *Burma* as an act of defiance. Many Burmese, including my participants, do the same. I therefore refer to the nation as ‘Burma’ in solidarity with my participants.

When referring to the participants collectively I use “Burmese”, irrespective of ethnic group. “Burman” however, is used when describing Burmese citizens from the dominant Burman ethnic group (Burman Burmese) and “Karen” for those from the Karen ethnicity (Karen Burmese).

I use the terms young people, young migrants and youth to refer to all participants (whom range from 14–20 years of age). The UN definition of youth is 15–25 (Curtain, 2001). I use the category of ‘youth’ for convenience but also to discourage prejudice against the 14-year-old participants whom participated in the research.

Glossary

(Burmese words used in thesis)

Chinlone – Translates to ‘Cane Ball’ in English. Chinlone is Burma’s national sport. However, it is often considered an art form, as the main goal is to keep the ball aloft in graceful and elegant way. The participants played well into the evenings most days after school.

Daw – The equivalent to Mrs or Aunt in English, Daw is an honorific used before the names of mature women or women in a senior, respected position (e.g. participants referred to Aung San Suu Kyi as Daw Suu Kyi)

Karen – The Karen peoples are one of the largest ethnic groups in Burma. The Karen state is on the border with Thailand (pronounced Ka-Rin).

Kyat – The Kyat is the Burmese currency.

¹ The regime was then called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), but was renamed in 1997 to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Ruea Hang Yao – Long-tail boats used to transport people across the Moei River

Tatmadaw – ‘Burma Army’ (also known as the Myanmar Armed Forces)

Thanaka – An ancient method of face painting where a chalky white paint is made from ground-down tree bark and applied to faces.

Lu phyu – Burmese term for white westerner or foreigner. The literal translation is ‘white human’ (*Lu*, Human and *phyu*, white).

Mae La – The largest of the nine refugee camps along the Thai/Burma border. It is also the closest camp to Mae Sot.

Muba Htaung Htung – This is the name given to the migrant community in Mae Sot. I was told it means ‘Gold Bag Village’ (or literally village gold bag). It was often shortened to *Htaung Htung* in the participants’ accounts.

Moei River – The Moei River, or ‘The Moei’ as it is often colloquially termed, is the river separating Myawaddy and Mae Sot (see figure 4.2)

Myawaddy – This is a Burmese border town, and the closest town to Mae Sot in Burma. Most Participants crossed the Moei from Myawaddy (see map page 14 or figure 4.2).

Interview referencing table

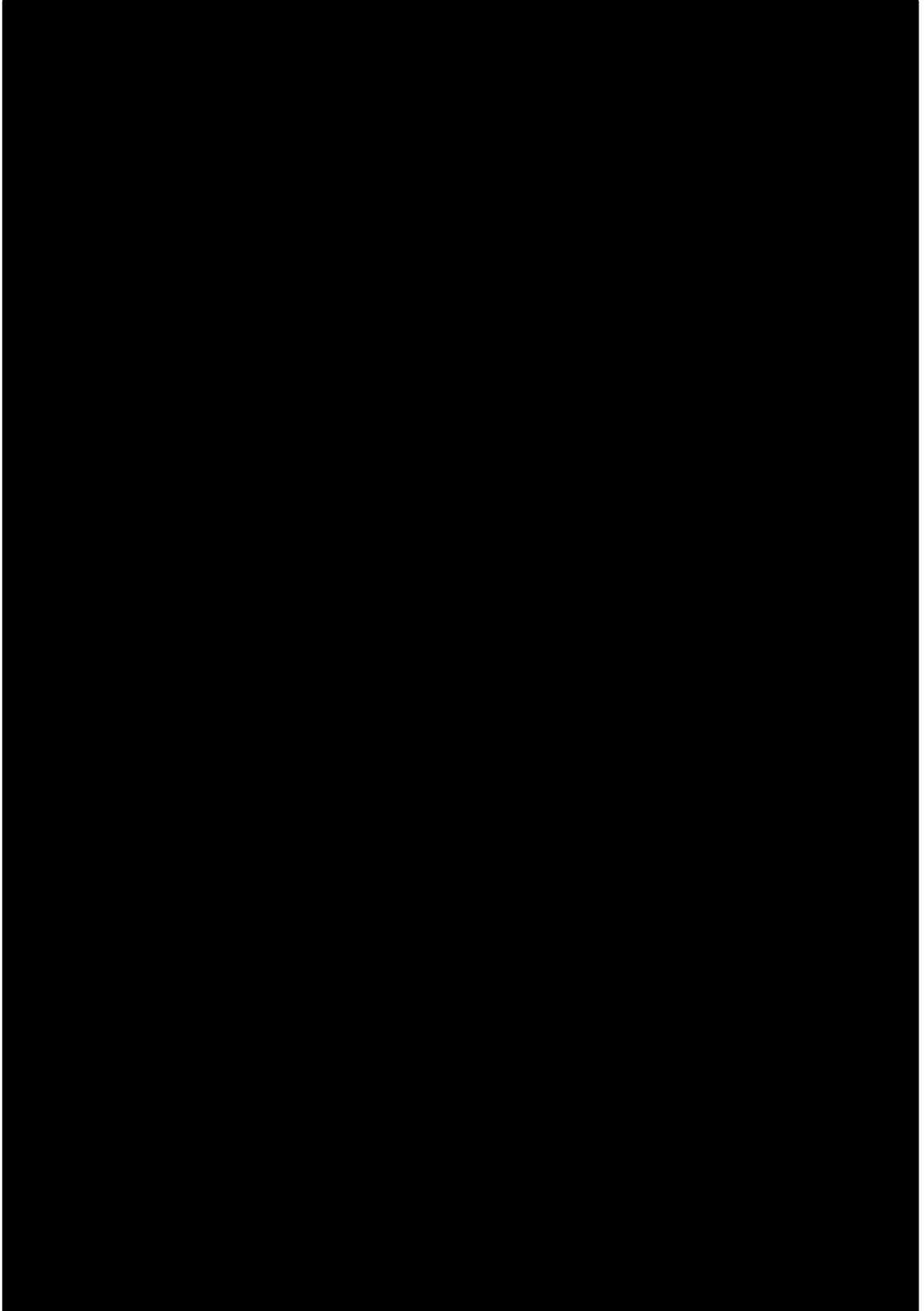
Due to the frequency of direct quotes referenced throughout this thesis, all personal interviews with participants will be referenced as either 2014a or 2014b referring to the interview dates provided below.

Name	Interview One (2014a)	Interview Two (2014b)
Chaung Pow	2 nd June 2014	19 th June 2014
Paw Htet Htet	10 th June 2014	19 th June 2014
Eh Htoo	1 st June 2014	19 th June 2014
Naw Htet	4 th June 2014	19 th June 2014
Ko Ko Win	2 nd June 2014	19 th June 2014
Law Law	2 nd June 2014	17 th June 2014
Law Eh	10 th June 2014	17 th June 2014
Si Thu	4 th June 2014	20 th June 2014
Eh Say	5 th June 2014	20 th June 2014
Thant	1 st June 2014	23 rd June 2014
Thi Zaw Lat	3 rd June 2014	17 th June 2014
Aung Nuing Win	4 th June 2014	17 th June 2014
Win Win	3 rd June 2014	17 th June 2014
Zao	5 th June 2014	--
Zin Zin	10 th June 2014	19 th June 2014

Map of Thailand

Map of Thailand showing locations mentioned in thesis.

Source: UN Department of Peacekeeping (cartographic section, 2009)



Prelude

The danger of a single story

In the very first week of my masters-degree journey, a group of students and I were asked to give a presentation on ‘the discursive creation of the third world’. While preparing for the presentation I was introduced to Nigerian Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and her 2009 speech titled “The danger of a single story”² in which she begins with the following passage:

I'm a storyteller and I would like to tell you a few personal stories about what I like to call ‘the danger of the single story’ [...] I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. [...] She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove. What hit me was this: she had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.

Chimamanda’s talk moved me deeply and I re-watched it several times, questioning the ‘single stories’ with which I was complicit in. Almost exactly a year later, I found myself in Mae Sot, Thailand, conducting research for the thesis that lies before you. While spending time with the young Burmese migrants with whom I collaborated, discussing their everyday lives and engaging in the creative photovoice process together, my mind often wandered to the dominant story presented about them in literature. I would return to my room in the evenings, after a day of thought provoking

² “The Danger of a Single Story” was presented by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in October 2009 as a TED talk and can be viewed in full here:
http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

and inspiring interviews to read academic literature about other young migrants in Thailand. In these articles, quite unlike the people I was working with, the young migrants' were discussed in association to suffering, poverty and hopelessness. It puzzled me how I could be reading such different things about similar people to those with whom I was working. Then Chimamanda's words echoed in my mind. It became clear that I was reading the single story written of young migrants in academic literature.

Of course, the young migrants' I worked with also spoke of struggle and hardship in their lives, some of which seemed unfair beyond belief. These are important aspects of their stories and I also engage with them in this thesis, but to write only about negative stories ignores the many other stories very much present in their worlds – their agency, courage, humour, creativity and knowledge. It flattens their experiences, boiling them down to one single story. As Adichie (2009) articulated in her talk:

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. [...] Stories matter, *many* stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

Dangerous single stories are everywhere but, as post-development scholars have taught us, they are especially observable in the fickle world of development. For qualitative researchers, story telling is at the essence of what we do. In this thesis I have (and the participants have) a platform to produce different, equally important stories of young Burmese migrants in Mae Sot. Stories based on possibility and hope rather than constraint and limitation contributing to what Chimamanda calls for: “a balance of stories”.

Importantly however, I do not claim this thesis to be a complete story. Rather, I urge you to think of it as a window into a certain section of these peoples lives in a specific place, at a specific time. A window that I hope will encourage readers to seek diverse stories about the people of Burma, particularly the young people and direct that “well-meaning pity” into an informed *meaningful* solidarity (Adichie, 2009, n.p).

Chapter One

Introduction

Debates surrounding the effect of migration on development have, to borrow de Haas' (2012, p. 8) description, "swung back and forth like a pendulum" from the post-war "brain drain", to the "brain gain" of the 1970s and more recently the "brain waste". At the dawn of the millennium development organisations and practitioners began praising migration as having the potential to stimulate the development of developing nations, particularly through remittances. Kapur (2003, p. 2) famously questioned if remittances were the "new development mantra" arguing they offered "the most stable source of external finance [...] providing crucial social insurance in many countries afflicted by economic and political crises". Nonetheless, the question of whether migration encourages or hinders development remains unresolved.

Due to the large volume of international and internal migration in Southeast Asia, the region has held a prominent position in migration/development debates and Thailand is no exception. The past two decades have seen unprecedented migration from Burma into Thailand. Although Burmese labour migrants, and the Burmese diaspora in Thailand in general, attract significant academic attention, the stories of young Burmese migrants' are largely unexplored and often ignored altogether. Based on a three-month participatory photovoice project with fifteen young Burmese migrants (14 to 20 years of age) living in the Thai border town of Mae Sot, this thesis contributes to this gap in scholarship by re-presenting their lived experiences and engaging with their everyday worlds.

This project seeks to challenge 'single stories' of young migrants as passive bearers of circumstance or 'victims needing rescue', which are ill appreciative of their strengths and capabilities. Rather than focusing solely on vulnerability, this research is underpinned by the recognition that migrant youth are actively engaged with, and shape, the world around them.

The participants, most of whom crossed the border unaccompanied, assessed the relative opportunities available to them in Burma and Thailand, choosing to endure the hardships associated with living in a marginalised space away from their parents, culture and country in order to gain an education in Thailand. On arriving in Thailand they found themselves in a new cultural, social, and linguistically different geographic space. Despite technically being 'illegal', these young migrants are facing their present challenges, setting life goals and bending the rules in order to receive an education and establish successful futures for themselves.

Yet, few studies have asked young migrants what they perceive to be the strengths, or barriers, in their lives they feel could use fostering or support. Perhaps this is because 'development practice' is often seen as the work of adults or possibly because development discourses often focus on deficit and lack. Regardless, as the prelude at the beginning of this thesis suggests, I entered this participatory research project with the aim of listening to young migrants and their stories. As such, I was apprehensive about arriving in Mae Sot with pre-written research questions that would drive the direction of the research, rather than allowing the participants to take control of the wheel. In light of this I entered the field wanting to answer the following research questions:

1. *What are the lived experiences of some young Burmese migrants' in Thailand?*
2. *How do these young people understand and practice belonging?*
3. *What are their hopes and aspirations for the future?*
4. *What can be learned from listening to young migrants' experiences and how can this contribute to a better understanding of how best to support their strengths and needs?*

While broad, these questions provided me with a starting point without restricting the participatory nature of the project. They also gave me the freedom to explore the topics discussed by the participants or presented in their photographs without forcing the direction the research took. Question one acted as the over-arching question and the foundation of the research project as a whole. Question two allowed exploration into the young migrants' understandings of their environment and their place within it. Question three was important in terms of identifying their aspirations for the future and

looking at how to best support them to reach their goals. Question four is largely for reflective purposes, allowing consideration on all aspects of the project and what the outcomes mean for future development practice.

Beyond remittances, brain gains and brain drains, what does migration mean for development and the well being of young migrants? And further, what if migration was harnessed by individuals to take control of their circumstances and improve their own lives? While I aim to answer these and other questions throughout this thesis, I will start by introducing myself and the participants as well as the location and context in which the research is situated.

Personal Rationale

Choosing a research topic and site was as much a matter of the heart as of the mind. Many people questioned why I chose a group of people so removed from my life in New Zealand. Thailand, more specifically northern Thailand, has always held a special place in my heart. I have a certain affinity for the culture, the people and (admittedly) the food. I also find the relationship between the government, the kingdom and the people fascinating. What continually tugs me in the direction of Thailand is that it is a place I feel happy and I feel safe – the emotional ‘fit’ always feels right.

I chose to focus on Burmese migrants stories, and young people in particular, because of my previous experience volunteering in a Children’s Home, Baan Unrak³, with Burmese children in Thailand in 2011. I had travelled to the border town of Sangkhlaburi, in the province of Kanchanaburi on the Thai/Burma border, laden with a mosquito net, rain ponchos and hand sanitiser. However, nothing I packed could have prepared me for the reality of the situation and the influence it has had on my life since. Arriving in Baan Unrak Children’s Home, where I was to live and work for the following month, I expected to be greeted by Thai children. Instead, over 70 orphaned Burmese children and single mothers lived in the home. Many of these children and women had been orphaned or widowed as a direct result of migration and the challenges that came with being a migrant in Thailand.

³ Baan Unrak (Thai) translates into House of Joy.

Looking back, this brief but inspiring time in Thailand was instrumental in changing the direction of my life and my research. The friendships I formed with those children and women, as well as the knowledge I gained from them, stayed in my heart, my thoughts and importantly my studies when I returned to university in New Zealand. After this experience I reorientated the focus of my undergraduate degree towards the Burmese diaspora in Thailand, a topic that held my academic attention for the remainder of my studies. The more I learnt about the circumstances and experiences of Burmese migrants, the more I felt motivated to turn my informal study I had undertaken into academic research and to share the stories of these inspiring young people. What is more, similar to Rogers (2014, p. 8), I reasoned that a formal academic research project “would benefit from grounded experience with a place that has held my memories, passions, and attentions” since 2011.

How the participants and I crossed paths

Initially, I had wanted to work with Burmese migrants’ children because of my prior connection with Baan Unrak children’s home. When I imagined this project I envisioned myself back in Sangkhlaburi, at Baan Unrak, working with the young migrants I already knew there. However, once I handed in my research proposal and started thinking and discussing with others about how and where my research would take place, people began coming out of the woodwork.

I was put in touch with Hannah,⁴ who worked for Social Action for Women (SAW), an organisation in Mae Sot. Despite having moved home to London, Hannah and I began discussing (through email) the possibility of running my research as a project through SAW. The Director of SAW, sharing my enthusiasm for photography as a method for gaining awareness and promoting change, approved the photovoice project a week after my arrival in Thailand on the 26th of April 2014.

I then met Aung Htun Lin (or ATL as he introduced himself). ATL became my translator, co-researcher and friend. He had crossed the Thai/Burma border as a young migrant and worked for SAW, living in the shelter full time and acting as a mentor and older-brother figure for the children. I presented the research proposal to him and we

⁴ Name has been changed.

discussed the best ways for the research to reflect the children's aspirations and to be suitable for their other commitments (e.g. school). ATL then explained the project to the children and asked for volunteers to participate. Twenty teenagers were interested in being involved and so in early May we began, all twenty-two of us.⁵

Introducing the participants

As a key aim of my thesis is to provide a space for Burmese youth to share their stories it is important for me to introduce them here, allowing you to get to know the five girls and ten boys with whom I collaborated on this research.

The project I initially proposed was to include "young people living in Thailand born to Burmese parents, either in Burma or in Thailand" (Ross, 2013, p. 8). However, all the fifteen young people who participated in this project were born in Burma and migrated either alone or with family members. As such, this study does not represent the experiences of young people born in Thailand to Burmese parents. Although children born in Thailand to Burmese parents do attend the SAW school, all my participants lived in the CCC shelter as a result of not having parents in Mae Sot. Ages of the young migrants spanned from fourteen to twenty years with the majority being sixteen to seventeen years of age.

All the young people were born and raised in small villages located in the rural areas of the Karen or Mon states.⁶ Of the fifteen migrants, four were Burman; the largest ethnic group in Burma and the remaining eleven were Karen a minority ethnic group. Importantly, all of them crossed the border informally. Consequently, none of the participants held the identification needed to access Thai education, health care or to live freely within Thailand's borders. I have used the participant's real names (I explain why in Chapter Three) however; I have excluded their last names, in order to keep them somewhat unknown. Here is a brief vignette of each young migrant:

⁵ Unfortunately, after Phase One (the first of five phases, explained later in this chapter) five participants decided the commitment was too much. Although they still participated in the workshops and were given a camera along with the other fifteen participants they opted out of the pre-photography interview (Phase Two) and the post-photography interview (Phase Three) due to study commitments in the evenings and weekends. These older participants spent all day at school, came home to group study lessons for their GED university entrance exams, which was then followed, by English lessons in the evening.

⁶ Fourteen participants were from the Karen state and just one was from the Mon state.

Eh Htoo was a twenty year old from the Karen state. When he was seventeen his village was attacked by rebels, forcing his family to flee to the border. Eh Htoo had lived in Mae Sot for three years. He is the youngest of seven siblings; they were all still living in the Mae La refugee camp at the time of research.

Win Win was an eighteen-year-old Karen boy. He was the only member of family living in Thailand. He had been in Mae Sot for six years after his parents recognised the lack of opportunities for him if he were to remain in Burma.

Thant was a seventeen-year-old Karen boy. His mother had brought him to Thailand to seek an education that she was unable to afford in Burma when he was twelve. He had been living alone in Thailand since then as his mother and sister remain in Burma.

Chaung Pow was a sixteen-year-old Karen girl who had lived in Thailand for five years. She came from a large family of six sisters of which she is the third youngest. Chuang Pow crossed the border with her uncle because she was unable to attend school in her village. At the time of the project her goal was to teach primary school in her village when it is safe for her to return.

Ko Ko Win was of Burman ethnicity. He was sixteen-years-old and had been in Mae Sot for three years after crossing the border alone seeking an education.

Law Law was from the Karen ethnic group. She had lived in Thailand for four years after crossing the border aged twelve with her younger brother and two younger sisters. All the siblings lived in the SAW shelter and her younger sister Zin Zin (14- years-old) also participated in the project. Their mother sent all her children to Thailand for school after their father passed away as she was unable to support her large family.

Si Thu was the sixteen-year-old brother of my translator ATL (20). All of their seven brothers and sisters also lived in Thailand, having migrated for education. He had been in Mae Sot for three years and was the last sibling to migrate. Si Thu was an avid reader and aspired to be a journalist when he grew up.

Eh Say was a sixteen-year-old at the time of the project. He was a Karen boy who crossed the border with his brother when he was just eleven. He had a total of seven siblings all whom lived within Thailand. His parents however, remained in Burma.

Aung Nuing Win was a fifteen-year-old of Burman decent. He lived in the SAW shelter with one sister. His parents lived in Phop Phra (a different district within the Tak province) where they worked as farmers.

Fifteen-year-old Thi Zaw Lat was a Karen boy who migrated to Thailand when he was twelve with his older brother. Both his parents remained in Burma. His goal was to return to Burma one day as a professional photographer.

Law Eh was a fifteen-year-old boy from the Karen ethic group and lived at SAW with his younger brother. Their sisters and parents all remained in Burma. He came to Thailand when he was just ten years old to seek education.

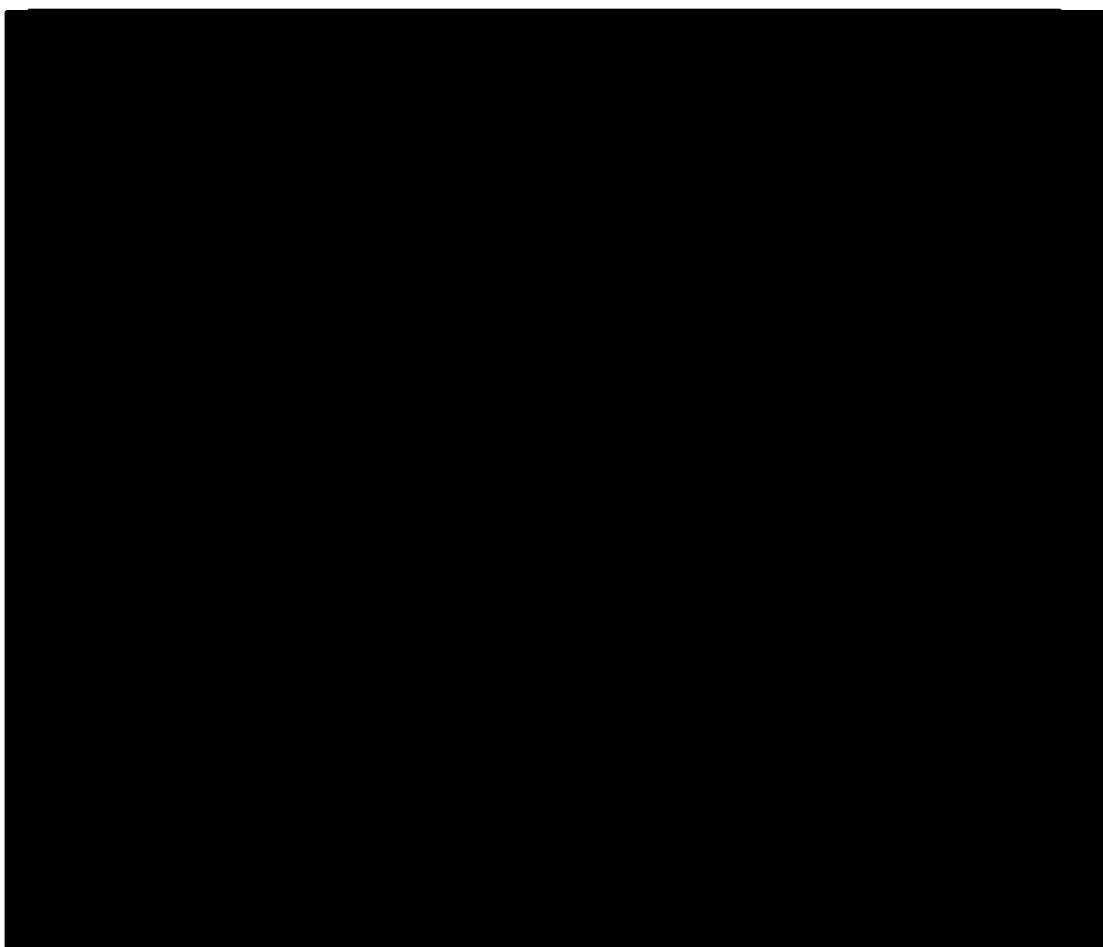
Paw Htet Htet was fifteen years old and the only Burman girl in the project. Paw Htet Htet migrated to Thailand for education purposes when she was ten years old. Her mother crossed the border with her and then returned to Burma after a few days.

Naw Htet was a fourteen-year-old girl who had migrated from the Karen state. She has with seven siblings who live on both sides of the border. All of them migrated after their father passed away nine years ago causing an economic crisis in the household.⁷ She had been in Thailand for the majority of her life—the longest of all the participants.

Zao was also aged fourteen. He was a Burman boy who had been in Thailand just one year. He crossed the border with his uncle when his parents grew fearful that the military would recruit him as a child soldier. Unfortunately Zao was only able to participate up to Phase Three of the project. He returned to Burma before we could interview his photographs because of a crisis in his family.

⁷ Naw Htet and other participants often used the term ‘economic crisis’ to describe their households’ income shortages and/or falling into poverty.

Research setting: the border town of Mae Sot



The research was conducted in Mae Sot; a Thai border town in the Tak province. It is located four kilometres away from the north Western Thai-Burma border. The town centre is said to be located next to one of the most porous sections of the border with many migrants crossing the nearby Moei river undetected (Meyer, Robinson, Abshir, Mar, & Decker, 2014).

Mae Sot is a common destination for migrants as it is a designated export-processing zone and consequently job opportunities in manufacturing, construction and agriculture are ubiquitous. It is also close in proximity to the largest Refugee Camp in Thailand: Mae La, home to over 45,000 refugees from Burma (of which Karen make up 97 per cent) of the people living in Mae La. Mae Sot has a population of 120,000 with the majority being Burmese or of Burmese decent. Mae Sot has developed significantly in the past twenty years essentially as a result of a large, cheap and mostly illegal Burmese labour pool (CPPCR, 2009). As one refugee background man explained “I

have been here 16 years. Back then it was a refugee city, now it is Hollywood! We have Tesco!” (Thant Win, pers. Comm., 15th June 2014).

Mae Sot is also home to a large non-governmental organisation (NGO) community as well as numerous support and activist groups run by refugee-background Burmese people. Many migrant learning centres (MLCs) scattered around the town to cater for the numerous Burmese children whom are ineligible for a Thai education. These are run and funded by NGOs, Burmese activists and other private donors (CP, 2012). In fact many of the people who established the MLCs and clinics in Mae Sot were the people who (as students) were involved in the 1988 uprising and subsequently fled in fear of persecution (Pearson & Kusakabe, 2013).

During the research period (April, May, June, 2014) Thailand transitioned from a fragile democracy to a military led coup d'état. The military imposed a nation-wide curfew of 10pm to 5am (8pm – 6am for migrants), seized radio and television stations, and banned groupings of more than four people in public (BKP, 2014). Many irregular migrants returned to Burma and the military presence in Mae Sot increased exponentially.

Context: Between Two Worlds

I feel obliged to recognize that the research ‘context’ is not static, it is rather an ever-changing, fluid and relational phenomenon yet, I also think some background knowledge is needed to fully appreciate the stories of my participants. Thus, in order to contextually place their stories I will briefly describe the social, economic and political climate in Burma that the young migrants left, and of Thailand where they arrived.

Burma

After more than half a century of brutal military rule, Burma has just recently started opening its doors to the international community. The regime has been accused of a myriad of crimes against humanity including torture, rape, forced labour and forced recruitment of child soldiers (Kusakabe & Pearson, 2010). However, Burma is now showing marks of democracy, freedom of speech and perhaps most significantly,

change. In 2010 the nation held its first democratic election in over twenty years that, while initially considered a sham, led to a dialogue between the president Thein Sein and political activist Aung Sun Suu Kyi (Rogers, 2012). The country holding the disreputable record for longest military dictatorship in history appeared to be amidst a period of transformation. Those who (like myself) have followed Burma's political situation from afar need not cast our thoughts back far to when this seemed incomprehensible. Yet, many political writers and activists urge the international community to remain cautious in their optimism. As Rogers (2012, p.xviii) notes, despite positive reforms of late, "fear and suspicion prevail, particularly among the ethnic nationalities [...] behind the scenes, the military is still in power".

Burma became an independent country in the 4th of January 1948 following a century of British colonial rule as well as several years of Japanese occupation (South, 2008). The nation experienced a "fragile birth" into democracy and a decade later General Ne Win performed a military coup d'état, ruling the country since. "With Ne Wins promotion, Burma's decades-long nightmare began" (Rogers (2012, p.6). Burmese history has long been coloured by two different, though interlinked conflicts: the peoples struggle for democracy and non-Burman ethnic peoples fight for autonomy (South, 2008).

As the largest country in the Southeast Asian block,⁸ Burma is home to a population of approximately 55 million as well as 135 different ethnicities (South, 2008).⁹ The minority ethnicities have long fought an armed struggle against the Burman majority who have dominated the government both historically and to this day. While conflict between these groups can be traced back centuries, today they fight largely over equal rights and self-determination (Rogers, 2012). Ironically, considering he rules one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world, General Ne Win was racially opposed to any non-Burman ethnic groups and was fiercely anti-foreigners. General Ne Win alienated and clashed with several ethnic groups in his attempts to "Burmanize" the country, contributing to the mass migration of many non-Burman ethnic to bordering nations (Pangsapa, 2009, p. 2).

⁸ Burma has a land area of 678,000 square kilometres.

⁹ Including eight main groups: the Burman, who make up the Burmese-speaking majority as well as the Karen, Karenni, Shan and Mon in the East and South (bordering Thailand); the Chin in the West; the Rakhine on the western border with Bangladesh and the Kachin who inhabit the far North.

Economy

Ne Win's xenophobia also influenced his policy. He banished foreign business, teachers, doctors and journalists. He also expelled educational organisations and teaching English was forbidden (Rogers, 2012, p.11). This isolation led to a rapid economic decline and Burma's once booming economy deteriorated. As growth rates fell, and the Kyat¹⁰ devalued, opportunities for skilled workers diminished. Out-migration increased, contributing to a significant and continued 'brain drain' which Mon (2005, p. 131) states "...has become a virtual flood since the late 1980s". By 1987 Burma, once the richest country in Asia, was classified as a 'Least Developed Nation' by the United Nations (Rogers, 2012). The once thriving rubber industry decimated and the people of Burma, a country renowned for being self-sufficient in rice production, were now starving (Pearson & Kusakabe, 2013).

Education and Health Care

The education system in Burma, once considered a model for other Asian countries, is a major reason Burmese people migrate to neighbouring countries (CPPCR, 2009). Having deteriorated under military rule, all curricula taught in Burma (including at the tertiary level) must now be pre-approved by the military. Similarly to the prohibition of teaching the English language, the military junta also banned teaching ethnic languages in government schools (Campbell, 2013). While Burma has several universities due to the militaries fear of student uprisings, they have only opened sporadically since 1988, further contributing to the brain drain (CP, 2012). I will explore education (as both a push and pull factor) in Chapter four to accompany the young migrants' accounts of why they left Burma.

The health system in Burma is privatized, putting it out of reach for many of the population (B. Rogers, 2012). It also lacks funding and as a result many clinics in minority states operate under-staffed and under-equipped. Additionally, the urban concentration of clinics and hospitals has made healthcare unaffordable for much of the rural population, "a reflection of this is the fact that the majority (87 per cent) of

¹⁰ Burmese currency.

deaths in children under 5 years of age are recorded in rural areas” (CPPCR, 2009, p. 23). As with education, many Burmese travel to the Thai/Burma border in order to receive health care. Due to Mae Sot’s (research site) close proximity to the border, trucks crossed from Burma daily delivering patients to the Mae Tao Clinic, driving them back after their treatment.

The plight of the ethnic minorities

While the political and economic turmoil in Burma since 1958 has resulted in the exodus of many labour migrants and political asylum seekers fleeing Burma, many of the refugees living in Thailand have migrated as the result of civil conflict. General Ne Win’s ruling regime is the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Shortly after independence the Tatmadaw (Burma Army) began suppressing any separatist movements by ethnic groups or ‘insurgent’ groups (South, 2008). Both the military regime and the various rebel groups have inflicted crimes such as the use of human (and often child) land-mine sweepers, forced labour, as well as widespread and systematic use of rape as a weapon (B. Rogers, 2012). Some areas have experienced such a severe loss of life the regime has been accused of ethnic cleansing and “attempted genocide” (B. Rogers, 2012, p. xxi).¹¹

The regime’s nation-wide imposition of Burman rule has led to many ethnic uprisings against the government and minority ethnic groups have long been fighting an armed struggle against the regime. To explain all of these different conflicts, armies and rebel groups in Burma, would fill an entire thesis. However, as the majority of the participants with whom I collaborated in this research were Karen, I will briefly outline the conflict in the Karen state here.

The Karen people

For Burmese populations living in the East, Thailand’s border is by far the most

¹¹ The Rohingya ethnic group in North Burma is currently one of the most persecuted groups in the world.

accessible. This is especially true of the Karen people, as the Karen state straddles the Thai border. As a result of both proximity to the border, and the ongoing civil conflict in the Karen state, the populations in Thai border towns and refugee camps in Thailand are predominantly Karen. In 1984 the Tatmadaw encroached “into territory customarily held by ethnic Karen rebels” sparking a conflict which has continued to this day (Campbell, 2013, p. 3).

The different army outposts and rivalries within the Karen state are incredibly complex. In addition to the Tatmadaw, there is also the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU), formed after independence in 1949 (HRW, 2002). The KNU fight for the creation of an independent and autonomous Karen State. In 1994, after growing dissatisfaction with KNU leadership, members split into a separate armies, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and its political wing the Democratic Karen Buddhist Organization (DKBO) (HRW, 2002). In an unlikely twist the DKBA then formed an alliance with the Tatmadaw (who supply them with food and weaponry) to help them fight against the KNU, attacking their former comrades and fellow Karen people (HRW, 2002)¹². Currently, the KNLA fight against both the DKBA and the Tatmadaw.

Additionally, there are also multiple rebel units controlling different areas in the Southeast and East of the country and within villages as (typically male) family members fight to protect their families and homes. Despite multiple attempted ceasefire agreements between the KNU and Tatmadaw,¹³ “periods of relative calm alternating with bursts of intensified fighting” has characterized the Karen territories in the East of Burma for the past 25 years (Campbell, 2013, p. 1). The time period when the participants in this study migrated to Thailand (between 1996 and 2011) was particularly devastating. The Tatmadaw was confiscating private farmlands and over 3,700 villages in Eastern Burma were destroyed and over a million people internally displaced (Rogers, 2012).

These armies are renowned for their use of child soldiers. Tatmadaw in particular is

¹² SLORC made an agreement with the DKBA promising them their own autonomous Karen state if they eradicated the KNU. Further fueling conflict and dividing once united Karen ethnic group.

¹³ An additional ceasefire agreement between the KNU and Tatmadaw were in discussion in September 2014.

notorious for forcibly enlisting soldiers as young as ten. A 2002 report by the Human Rights Watch¹⁴ stated the Tatmadaw had more than 70,000 children conscripted, with children under 18 years contributing to 20 per cent of the total army, making Burma home to the most child soldiers in the world (HRW, 2002).¹⁵ Parents therefore often send their children, particularly boys, over the border in fear of their forced recruitment by the Tatmadaw.

During the research period

While Burma's history is marked by political turmoil, numerous conflicts and humanitarian crises, it's also coloured by the immense bravery and courage of a people who have fought an on-going struggle against the government for democratic leadership. Notably, is the contribution of university students which, writing as one, is both humbling and shocking.¹⁶ Currently, for the first time since 1962, the government is promising a future marked by peace and change. Yet, for the people of Burma – who lived under an oppressive and violent regime for over half a century – “talk is worth nothing” (Thant Win, pers. comm. June, 2014). Burma may be in a transformation period but only time will tell. And for now, refugee camps in Thailand are still growing and migrants continue to cross the border into Thailand every day.

Thailand

Currently, there are between two and three million Burmese people in Thailand. Including 80,000 registered as living in refugee camps, with a further 50,000 assumed to be living in them unregistered (Saltsman, 2014; TBC, 2014). Since refugee camps were first established on the Thai-Burmese border in 1980s the forced migrant population has grown into “one of the world's most protracted refugee situations” (Saltsman, 2014, p. 461). Additionally, as a result of the conflict and subsequent downturn in the Burmese economy, the labour migrant population has increased steadily. Yet, when migrants (whether refugees, asylum seekers or migrant workers) arrive in Thailand, they face perplexing immigration policies where the laws are messy

¹⁴ Recent statistics are scarce due to the difficulty in accessing the rebel groups and child soldier contingents.

¹⁵ Note: this number is likely to have increased since 2002 (Rogers, 2012).

¹⁶ A discussion of the civil agency of the youth in Burma is beyond the scope of this context section despite being an important and interesting aspect of the nation's history (See B. Rogers, 2012).

and undefined. This state of affairs has led to a deep confusion and frustration felt by enforcers as well as the migrants.

Most migrants living outside the refugee camps are undocumented with little over one million having completed the arduous and costly process of registration (Kusakabe & Pearson, 2010). According to a recent report by Saltsman (2014, p. 461):

The lack of status determination and the multiple legal categories for Burmese nationals in Thailand is a product of the Thai government's ever-changing political and economic relationship with the government of Burma. A lack of coherent policy has led to a series of ad hoc measures that treat different groups of Burmese forced migrants differently, based on ethnicity, when they came to Thailand, and where they settled in Thailand.

Since the early 1990s Thailand has struggled to control and regulate the mass influx of migrants into the country from neighbouring countries (Punpuing, Caouette, Panam, & Zaw, 2005). Migrant categories can be roughly divided into five as shown below (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 Migrant Categories

1	Professional and skilled workers (including irregular)
2	Low- and semi-skilled workers
3	Community migrants
4	Refugees, displaced persons and asylum-seekers
5	Students, Married (spouses) and retiree migrants

Source: Huguet, Chamrathirong, and Richter (2011, p. 8)

In Thailand most migrants are considered by the government as temporary, despite many having lived there for decades with no plans to return to their country of origin (Huguet et al., 2011, p. 8). Notably, however many of these groups overlap. For example, there is confusion around group two and four as many labour migrants initially moved due to conflict or natural disasters. Additionally groups two and four frequently combine as refugees “often work outside the camps, contrary to regulations

but with tacit authorization” (Huguet et al., 2011, p. 8). Similarly, those who are trafficked across the border could comprise a separate category however they are often found throughout all categories above (Huguet et al., 2011, p. 8). While not explicitly included in the typology, children born to migrant parents within Thailand adopt the classification of their parents. Therefore, most migrants’ children in Thailand are officially classified as international migrants despite having been born in Thailand.

Thesis Structure

This thesis contains eight chapters as well as four photo-essays which are woven between some of the chapters. The photo-essays are a selection of the young peoples’ photographs and captions that I discuss more thoroughly in Chapter Three. This chapter (Chapter One) has introduced the aims of the research project, situated the participants and myself within the research, and has located the project geographically and contextually. Chapter Two considers literature relevant to this topic, framing the research and presenting the ‘gap’ I aim to fill. Divided into two parts, Chapter Two begins with an extension of the context section (from this chapter) highlighting how the experiences of young migrants’ living in Thailand are presented in literature. Part Two looks to the sub-discipline of Children’s Geographies and ideas of young agency, drawing on empirical migration and refugee literature for examples.

Chapter Three deals with my epistemology, methodology and the ethical issues involved in writing and representation. Photovoice (the participatory research method the participants and I used) forms a large part of this research, as such, I break down the project, looking at each phase and reflecting on issues I grappled with along the way.

Chapter Four looks at the participants’ experiences of migration; their memories of leaving Burma, crossing the border and arriving in Thailand, also dealing with themes of belonging and exclusion exploring how they made a place for themselves within Mae Sot. Chapter Five turns to their lives in Mae Sot with the main theme of agency. I look at the narrow way ‘agency’ is currently defined and draw on Michel de Certeau’s (1984) notion of the everyday as political to stretch the definition to include young people’s everyday acts. As such, Chapter Five engages with the ways participants’

exercised their agency through their negotiation of opportunities, critical social knowledge and resilience. Chapter Six, the final analysis chapter, looks forward to the young people's aspirations and goals for the future. This chapter is shorter in length, in a sense, acting as a conclusion for the previous two analysis chapters and a taster for the final chapter, which looks at the future and outcomes of the research. By way of conclusion, in Chapter Seven I reflect on the whole research process – from the fieldwork, to writing, to possibilities for dissemination, offering suggestions for further research. Importantly, I also question the outcomes for development practice and consider what the migrants' stories tell us about how to better contribute to supporting their strengths and needs.

Chapter Two

A Review of Relevant literature

As noted, very little research acknowledges the perspectives or experiences of young migrants. Despite several authors identifying the unique and complex issues facing young migrants, their voices remain largely unexplored and often ignored altogether. Consequently, this literature review has two parts. Part One examines the literature available on migration from Burma to Thailand and the situations relevant to my participants (young Burmese migrants in Thailand). Part Two turns to the growing sub-discipline of Children's Geographies, exploring young people's presence within academia and drawing on literature surrounding youth agency to provide a relevant conceptual framework for this study.

Part One: Youth migration, Burma to Thailand

As discussed in Chapter One, there are multiple push and pull factors which, alone or combined, are determining factors in Burmese migrants' decisions to leave their country of origin. Yet, while many Burmese migrants have fled extreme economic hardship, conflict and political oppression in their homeland, their new life in Thailand is often fraught with difficulties (Mon, 2005). As has been extensively noted by previous research, the foremost problem facing migrants in Thailand is the lack of access to Thai identification and citizenship documentation (Chantavanich, 2011; Hall, 2011; Huguet & Chamrathirong, 2011; Mon, 2005; Pangsapa, 2009; Pearson & Kusakabe, 2013; Saltsman, 2014; among many others). Despite the wealth of literature surrounding the important issues of human rights abuses and violations of working conditions for migrants in Thailand, literature regarding migrants' children or youth who migrate alone is limited. This situation follows a wider tendency where, as Hatfield (2010, p. 244) notes, "children have tended to be cast simply as 'baggage' in migration studies". This conjures up a vision of young people as objects carried around by their adult counter-parts that are neither active in, or implicated by, the migration process. Dobson (2009, p. 356) writes that children and young people have also been portrayed in migration literature as "objects that might weigh on an adult" as they are seen as "passive non-persons" unable to protect themselves. Although scholars

implicitly mention the experience of migrants' children as being influenced greatly by that of their parents, very few *explicitly* focus on children and their specific experiences.

Many studies have looked at the effect of parental migration on children left in Burma (Bryant, 2005; Jampaklay, 2006; Schaprio, 2009). With bleak economic opportunities in Burma, the decision to migrate is often dictated by a household remittance strategy (Kusakabe & Pearson, 2010). Consequently requiring migrants to leave their families in order to financially support their dependent households from abroad. Jampaklay (2006) and Schaprio (2009) both note that the children left behind face increased household responsibilities and stress as a result of parental absence, and they link parental absence to children's lower school attendance. Jampaklay (2006) found a correlation between the prolonged absence of mothers and reduced educational opportunity of the children they leave behind. A study of rural to urban parental migration in India highlighted that daughters were less likely to stay in school in their mother's absence, as they were burdened with the increase in domestic chores (Srivastava & Sasikumar, 2003).

A commonly held argument is that the economic benefit and increase in standard of living as a result from parental migration through remittances is said to offset the impact of parental absence (Jampaklay, 2011). Writing on the situation in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, Bryant (2005)¹⁷ posits that households receiving remittances from a labour migrant use the money to cover education costs. He argues that parental migration leads to better educational outcomes for their children. Further, Bryant (2005) suggests that while children left behind are separated from their parents, the parental void is usually filled by extended families.

A Thai study concluded that during a six-month period no direct link could be made between migration of parents and the well-being of children in terms of health or nutrition (Nanthamongkolchai, Mohsuan, Reungdarakanon, & Isaranurak, 2006). Jampaklay (2011) has argued that while remittances may keep children left behind in school, they may also act as motivation to migrate overseas to work themselves. Of course, every situation is different, therefore approaches to spending remittances (as

¹⁷ In a study comparing Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines

well as numerous additional conditional factors) and the subsequent impact on children almost certainly varies from household to household.

Some suggest that children and young people who migrate alongside their parents are ‘the lucky ones’ as they maintain contact and retain a sense of family (Salmon, Thanwai, & Wongsaeapaiboon, 2012). However, this view ignores the numerous different challenges associated with occupying “marginal positions in society” (Bryant, 2005, p. 23). As Salmon et al. (2012, p. 9) argue, “lacking social protection and legal status, migrant children represent one of the most disadvantaged groups in Thailand”.

Where labour migrants work in seasonal sectors of the agrarian industry they often move around Thai regions following the season. Consequently, Burmese children can also be ‘left behind’ by parental migration *within* Thailand. In these cases, parents will usually send remittances back to where their children are living (CPPCR, 2009). However, The Committee for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights (CPPCR) (2009) in Mae Sot note that in some cases the separation may become permanent, if parents are offered permanent jobs or form new relationships in different regions.

Migrant Children and Children of Migrants

Determining the difference between children of migrants and migrant children is important to this research, precisely because much of the literature has failed to do so. *Children of migrants* have either been born in their country of origin and have migrated with their parents, or have been born in the destination country to parents who have migrated. *Migrant children* is a wider term incorporating both the *children of migrants* as well as children who have migrated to the destination country alone. As these ‘children’ are as old as twenty-three in some studies, I will henceforth refer to them as ‘migrant youth’ or ‘young migrants’, unless the issue is exclusive to ‘migrants’ children’.

While the exact number of migrant children and children of migrants in Thailand is unknown, it is estimated to exceed 377,000 (Huguet, Chamrathirong, & Natali, 2012). Although studies suggest that almost half of these young people were born in Thailand to migrant parents, under Thai immigration policy they fall under the same category as their parents and are therefore not entitled to long-term residence or Thai

documentation (Salmon et al., 2012; Schaprio, 2009). Consequently, in a flagrant disregard for their human rights, these young people have limited access to government support for healthcare and education.

The literature suggests that the challenges migrants' children face are predominantly attributed to their legal status as migrants, with authors agreeing that limited access to civil rights, government health care and education are crucial issues (Bryant, 2005; Huguet et al., 2012; Salmon et al., 2012). Most acknowledge it is the combination of migrant status and "sheer poverty" that causes many problems (Bryant, 2005, p. 13). A common example is poverty forcing both parents to work while preventing them paying for childcare. Having migrated from their homelands, such families typically lack relatives who could provide childcare. This can expose children to the additional hazard of accompanying their parents to work, often in hazardous environments (Bryant, 2005). Alternatively, when children cannot be taken to work with their parents, child protection becomes a primary concern. Salmon et al. (2012) discuss children being left without adequate care for long hours and playing outside alone, vulnerable to road accidents, child trafficking and abuse.

The CPPCR released a report in 2009 highlighting concerns of local teachers in the border town of Mae Sot, Thailand, regarding paedophiles preying on unaccompanied children in the migrant communities. The report also stated that these young people are at increased risk of being exposed to habits such as drugs, alcohol, gangs and violence from a young age (CPPCR, 2009). By the same token, if a family needs extra income, or there are many mouths to feed, migrants' children (especially older siblings) are often themselves employed to supplement household income, and as a result are also unavailable to care for their younger siblings (Bryant, 2005, Salmon et al, 2013).

Trafficking

Trafficking is a common occurrence within and between Southeast Asian countries. Save the Children UK (2006: 4) describes trafficking for exploitative reasons as "one of the worst forms of violation of dignity and human rights". The International Labour Organisation (ILO) state that "moving or receiving [youth] for the purposes of exploitation is trafficking regardless of whether any force, threats or coercion were involved" (in Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 919). Due to Thailand's standing as

economic hub of the Southeast Asian region, and it's growing sex industries, Thailand has grown into a major destination for this "lucrative trade" (Caouette, 2001: 19). Young people are trafficked into many different situations, but most commonly into service industries (which include indirect sex work and domestic labour), factories or begging rings (Caouette, 2001). These young people are undeniably forced into horrible situations. They are often denied a happy childhood and suffer immense physical and psychological abuse however, in the context of my research 'trafficking' does not necessarily have a negative connotation, nor is it inherently connected to the sex industry.

In their article on trafficking in Laos and Thailand, Huijsmans and Baker (2012, p. 919) question if child trafficking is: "the worst form of child labour, or worst approach to young migrants?" They argue that as most child laborers experience some form of exploitation they are, by the ILO definition, trafficked children. Taking a critical stance towards the tendency to view all child migration through a trafficking lens, Huijsmans and Baker (2012, p. 126) claim that definitions of 'trafficking' are based on a series of binary constructs, such as the "adult-child" and the "migration-trafficking". They argue that these lead to misaligned development interventions that discourage or remove young people from migration rather than focus on stopping exploitation in migrant work:

Young migrants are by no means passive, but actively negotiate these structural relations. They aim to mitigate the risks of migration and to negotiate exploitation, and it is mostly young migrants themselves — and not anti-trafficking interventions — that terminate unacceptable forms of migrant work (Huijsmans & Baker, 2012, p. 942).

Other studies also note the use of "carriers" to help migrants cross the border (Punpuing et al., 2005, p. 10). As carriers are third parties paid to clandestinely transport youth over international borders, young migrants using carriers to access work or greater opportunity across borders also often fall within the grey area of trafficking. As Huijsmans (2008, p. 334) writes, not all young migrants are "tricked, cheated or lured into exploitative labour conditions". He notes that they often "have their own rationale for their migratory project and in many cases successfully deal with the various challenges and problems their migration project involves" (Huijsmans,

2008, p. 334). These ideas are especially relevant to my own research and will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

Education

Education is often presented as the most probable route to a successful future free from exploitation or abuse for migrant youth by development organisations. Aside from children who migrate specifically for academic opportunities and scholarship, international migration usually affects children's access to education negatively (Schaprio, 2009). Schaprio (2009) highlights that this is especially true for illegal or undocumented young migrants and youth migrating alone.

In 1999 the Thai government passed the National Education Act (NEA), providing the right of basic primary education to all children in Thailand for the first twelve years, regardless of legal status (CPPCR, 2009). This was reinforced by the 2005 Education for All (EFA) Act and a cabinet resolution the following year extending the right of children in Thailand to education from kindergarten to tertiary level, irrespective of legal status or nationality (CPPCR, 2009; Salmon et al., 2012). Despite progress in access to education for Thai youth, the policy was poorly implemented in migrant communities and thus progress in education access was disproportionately low for migrant students (Caouette, 2001; Salmon et al., 2013). After research in migrant dense areas of Thailand,¹⁸ Salmon et al. (2012) identified several barriers to education for Burmese children in Thailand including low household income, parent working conditions, fear of discrimination, language ability and (lack of) legal documentation.

As with many social welfare services in Thailand, an underlying factor in young migrants' poor access to education is poverty. Youth are predominantly dependent on their parents' incomes and usually these incomes are needed to cover necessities such as food and rent, often leaving little for school fees (CPPCR, 2009, p. 56). As Huguet and Punpuing (2005) note, even where migrant children are eligible to attend free government schools, additional costs such as uniforms, travel and other learning resources prevent enrolment.

¹⁸ Bangkok, Mae Sot, Phang Nga and Ranong.

Arguing from a legal perspective Yuan Fu Yang (2007) claims that the greatest barrier preventing migrant children obtaining education in Thailand is a widespread lack of knowledge about Thai law. Some migrant parents aren't aware that their children hold the right to education in Thailand, nor are they aware that primary education will be free of charge (Yuan Fu Yang, 2007). Furthermore, even some immigration officers and government agencies are ignorant of the fact that migrant children are within their legal rights to attend Thai school (Yuan Fu Yang, 2007).

In addition to cost, discrimination and fear of discrimination are significant factors discussed in relation to education for Burmese children in Thailand. While the NEA and EFA provide the opportunity for Burmese youth to attend school, Thai schools receive 40 per cent less funding for a migrant student than for a Thai national (CPPCR, 2009). Thus, there is little incentive for schools to take on large numbers migrant children and when (or if) they do, the learning resources to support migrant children's education are often insufficient or less than their Thai peers receive (CPPCR, 2009). In addition to these barriers, a recognised form of identification documentation is required for enrolment in a Thai school, which many migrants simply do not have (CPPCR, 2009).

Some authors noted that students need to be "proficient in Thai" to enroll in Thai schools (CPPCR, 2009, p. 29). While there is no explicit definition as to what level of language ability 'proficient' constitutes, some Thai schools have been found to refuse enrolment of Burmese students due to their limited Thai language ability (Huguet & Punpuing, 2005; CPPCR, 2009). Some speculate that language levels are commonly used as an excuse to decline Burmese students entry due to the partial funding the schools receive for them (CPPCR, 2009).

Another aspect of discrimination can relate to young migrants' lower levels of literacy. Owing to Burma's ongoing conflict and economic situation children's learning is often interrupted for long periods of time. Migrant youth are often a few years behind Thai children of the same age. This is frequently not communicated to teachers and the children placed in classes exceeding their ability. Alternatively, older Burmese children may be put in classes at the appropriate level—with children significantly younger than themselves. Both these scenarios leave children feeling slow,

embarrassed and overwhelmed. These situations also increase the likelihood of bullying from their peers (Caouette, 2001; CPPCR, 2009). A participatory project with migrant children in China, Burma and Thailand found feelings of insecurity, hopelessness and despondent attitudes, of “formal education not leading to a better life”, as significant barriers to education (Caouette, 2001, p. 84).¹⁹ One participant stated that “education is useless and expensive” (Caouette, 2001, p. 84).

Literature has noted that the personal preferences of both parents and students is often to attend Migrant Learning Centres (MLC’s) or Burmese operated learning centres, where they felt more comfortable and less vulnerable to bullying from both children and teachers (CPPCR, 2009; Kusakabe & Pearson, 2010). Parents often consider that MLC’s run by Non-governmental Organisations (NGO) and Burmese diasporic communities provide a higher quality of education. A major reason for this perception is that MLCs have a tri-lingual curriculum. Parents believe that learning Burmese, Thai and English will be valuable to their children’s future (Kusakabe & Pearson, 2010).

Health and health care

Common health problems seen in migrant children include malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea, dengue fever, tuberculosis and anemia (Caouette, 2001; CPPCR, 2009). A major cause of these illnesses is poor living conditions. Over-crowded environments often lead to sanitation and water problems, increasing the risk of water-borne and gastrointestinal diseases such as diarrhea and cholera (Baker, 2011).

In 2001 Thaksin Shinawatra, then Prime Minister of Thailand, adopted the ‘30 Baht Health Scheme’.²⁰ The nationally implemented health scheme sees Thai patients only paying the initial 30 baht of their medical service and the Thai government covering any costs above this (Yuan Fu Yang, 2007). The 30 baht scheme was proclaimed as “health care for all” yet, as with the education system, access for migrants has been significantly less proportionate (CPPCR, 2009, p. 51).

A number of writers recognise that migrants and their children struggle to obtain the health care they need. Low levels of education and poverty are the most commonly

¹⁹ Notably the only participatory study I reviewed.

²⁰ Baht is Thai currency. 30Bht is equivalent to around NZ\$1.07 or USD\$0.90 at the time of writing in May 2014

cited barriers. There is generally poor knowledge regarding health and disease in the migrant population (Bryant, 2005; Vungsiriphisal, Auasalong, & Chantavanich, 1999). One report stated that a combination of language barriers, literacy levels and strong traditional beliefs make it difficult for Thai doctors and health workers to communicate health messages (CPPCR, 2009). Other studies note that employers often act as a barrier to medical care by illegally holding onto migrants' public health cards or workers' registration (Limanonda and Peungposop, 2009 in Baker, 2011). By withholding health cards employers prevent migrant employees from leaving their job, but also deter them from seeking health services, as patients are required to present documentation when seeking services (Baker, 2011; CPPCR, 2009). Additionally, without their documentation, migrants worry that hospital workers will notify police who may detain or deport them (Baker, 2011).

Exemplifying this situation, the *Bangkok Post* recently reported that over 95,000 people had been removed from the health care system due to "dubious citizenship" (Wangkiat, 2014, p. 1). The National Health Security Office (NHSO) claimed they were non-Thai citizens, however the group was said to have included Thai-born Chinese and Burmese residents who lacked identification proving their family history (Wangkiat, 2014). While it was reported that prior to this crackdown migrants and their children were usually provided with treatment, the NHSO insisted these migrants must have been mistakenly included on the list of eligible Thai citizens when it was launched in 2001 (Jampaklay, 2011; Wangkiat, 2014).

Discrimination is also a barrier mentioned in the literature. Due to the popular, media-driven dialogue that migrants are dirty, "polluting" and exhaust Thai public welfare systems, many Thai citizens blame migrants for high incidences of disease, claiming they bring them from their origin countries (Kusakabe & Pearson, 2010, p. 15). Baker (2011) points out that this stigma is largely unwarranted and the majority of migrant health problems occur due to marginal living and working conditions. Migrants generally occupy peripheral areas of towns and cities, often polluted by industrial waste or close to mosquito-infested 'marshy' locations (Baker, 2011). Their homes tend to be overcrowded and access to clean water, latrines and waste disposal is often limited (Caouette et al., 2006).

Another form of discrimination towards migrant communities surrounds the presence of HIV/AIDs. While the stereotyping connotations of migrant populations and HIV/AIDs is unhelpful, migrants have been found to have a significantly higher proportion of HIV/AIDs infection than other populations (Caouette, 2001; Baker, 2011). HIV/AIDs among the Burmese population is a contributing factor to high numbers of orphans in migrant communities and in Thailand generally. While there are no reliable statistics on the total number of orphans, it is widely agreed that the number is high (Salmon et al., 2013). There are especially high incidences of orphaned migrant children living in Thai border communities. Often this is due to the loss of parents to conflict, especially for Karen children where violence is ongoing (CPPCR, 2009). Other reasons for parental death include illness where treatment was too expensive, too far to travel to, or simply not available. If orphaned young people are not taken in by extended family they are sent to organisations that support and house orphans (CPPCR, 2009). Many NGOs and charities around the Thai and Burmese borders have established orphanages to meet this growing need.

The CPPCR (2009) discusses the abandonment of children, which is said to be increasing, largely as a result of economic difficulty. In some cases, where parents' economic situation renders them unable to care for both themselves and their child, a parent will send their child to an orphanage or children's home in order to ensure their mutual survival. Another common story within refugee camps and migrant communities is that of young men who leave their families and flee Burma to avoid being forcibly conscripted into the military junta as child soldiers or as human "minesweepers" (Rogers, 2012, p. xviii).

Conclusion

In 2001 Caouette wrote, "the vulnerabilities of migrant children are the result of limited understanding and lack of insight as to how best address their realities" (p.9). A decade later the Thailand Migration Report asserted, "...Migrants' children are a growing phenomenon ... [the] well-being of these children warrants serious attention" (Huguet & Chamrathirong, 2011, p. 62). Yet the experiences of migrants' children, articulated by themselves, remain scarce. During my review of literature regarding the Burmese diaspora in Thailand, young peoples voices were noticeable by their absence. Similarly, while many studies document the 'vulnerabilities' and 'lack' migrant youth

in Thailand face, very few explore their strengths and capabilities. As Huijsmans & Baker (2012, p. 927) state, the portrayal of child migrants as “victims in need of rescue, whose childhoods need to be restored” fails to appreciate their abilities and agency.

I therefore argue there remains a noticeable ‘gap’, a lacuna, in the literature regarding young people’s perspectives and lived experiences, especially as they express them. While this ‘gap’ has not gone unnoticed — a recently Salmon et al. (2013, p. 15) described Burmese youth in Thailand as “invisible” and Jampaklay (2011, p. 103) called for researchers “to focus on the children’s perspectives” — there remains little awareness of their realities, concerns, strengths or needs.

While this project is modest, I intend it to contribute to the understanding of these young people’s lives, answering this ‘call’ by listening to and sharing some personal accounts of life in Thailand as Burmese migrants’ children. I also hope to challenge the largely negative perspective of current literature by showing that migrant youth actively engage with the world around them rather than being passive bearers of circumstance.

Part Two: Seen but not heard? Locating young people (and their voices)

Despite multiple authors identifying the unique and complex issues faced by the children of migrants as noted above, children’s voices remain largely unexplored and often ignored completely in the literature. Few authors spoke directly to children and even fewer quoted them directly. As such, the perceived challenges of migrants’ children are typically communicated through adults’ accounts. Highlighting the neglect of children in Lesotho and Malawi, Ansell and Blerk (2005, p. 256) note that while migration literature principally focuses on the movement of adults, children’s experiences of migration differ from those of adults and are therefore “worthy of consideration”.

Part Two of this review is dedicated to children’s voices within the literature. I endeavor to locate where childrens’ voices are (and where they are not) within

academic research. I question the reason for their absence in literature, followed by a discussion of theoretical frameworks such as the Children's Geographies, the New Social Studies of Childhood and the 'Geographies of Exclusion'.

Globally, the past twenty-five years has seen a push to promote and include young people within the development sphere. This shift was underpinned by numerous critiques of social intervention and development projects that were seen to be taking a paternalistic approach to child protection. As Bordonaro and Payne (2012, p. 366) assert, many of these interventions obscured young peoples' capacity for action by portraying youth as "passive victims" and acting in their "best interests" yet excluding them from participating or decision-making. Furthermore, there was a growing realisation that children had not been afforded the same rights as adults (Matthew & Limb, 1999). Many point to the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) as an initial bid to reposition young people within international political and development agendas (Ergler, 2011; Matthews & Limb, 1999; Vanderbeck, 2008). In addition to promoting the rights of protection and care for young people the UNCRC calls for youth to be consulted on all issues that affect their lives and have their voices heard independently of adults (Vanderbeck, 2008). This emphasises the right of children and young people to participate as full citizens in all aspects of social, political and economic life.

Since its conception in 1989, the UNCRC has influenced many further international development agendas, policies and strategic plans. An example of this influence has been the Children's Charter for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). The charter was launched by the UN in 2011 and consists of five priorities for DRR as identified by over 600 children living in hazard-prone countries throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America (Folkema, Ibrahim, & Wilkinson, 2013). This charter now influences the work of many development organisations exemplified by Save the Children International's (SCI) work in the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan (SCI, 2014). SCI consulted children to discuss their experiences of the typhoon as well as their recommendations and priorities for response, assistance and future disaster risk reduction (SCI, 2014).

The inclusion of youth has not been without critics. Some argue that despite the increase in discourse relating to youth participation within the charters, resolutions and projects run by international organisations largely take on a “pervasive perspective of children as adults in waiting” where their participation is considered merely “preparation for future behavior in adulthood” (Skelton 2007, p. 177, in Bosco, 2012). Nonetheless, there has been a noticeable rise in attention to the ways in which youth are active and involved in development. As a result, the conventional boundaries for youth within this sphere are widening and efforts to include children in development agendas are visible and encouraging.

Children’s Geographies

The introduction of children into the academic sphere can be traced back to the 1970s when human geographers began paying increasing attention to groups on the periphery of society and bemoaning the lack of children in research and academia (Holloway & Valentine, 2000a). Geographers such as (Bunge, 1973) exemplify early in-depth observational accounts of children’s behaviour and experiences. However, these early works have been critiqued by newer waves of children’s geographers who argue that these early studies (unintentionally) objectified children within the research process. For example, childhood geographer Bunge (1973, p. 336 in Ergler, 2011, p. 83) claimed observing child behaviour was “similar to bird watching”.

This criticism of the objectification of children within research, and other critiques, led to the more recent approach referred to as ‘children’s geographies’ (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Nayak, 2003; Ergler, 2011). While ‘children’s geographies’ only started gaining momentum in the early nineties, awareness of issues concerning children, childhood and geography have expanded remarkably since (Vanderbeck, 2008, p. 393). Influenced by feminist and critical theories, this newer wave acknowledged that children are, in fact, experts in their own lives and thus research should be framed more by research *with* than research *on* children (Cele, 2005; Christensen, 2004). This school of thought also critiques mainstream knowledge as “adultist” and calls for researchers to recognise children’s perspectives as credible and deserving of empirical research (Ansell & Blerk, 2005, p. 423). This new focus on the

experience of children, requires researchers to work with young people to reveal insight into their environments as a means to complement the wider disciplinary discussion of exclusion (Ergler, 2011; Matthew and Limb, 1999).

The ‘Geographies of Exclusion’ create a space for understanding how marginal groups within society are excluded on the basis of multiple dimensions of difference, such as of race, gender, age and social class (Vanderbeck & Dunkley, 2004). Sibley (1995, p. xi) explains that power is expressed through the “monopolisation of space” by certain prominent groups and the exclusion of other minority groups to less desirable spaces within society. He states that the degree to which a certain idea succeeds or fails is affected by the context within which knowledge has been constructed (Sibley, 1995). This brings to the fore the way understandings of space(s) and place(s) are privileged over others (Sibley, 1995). Central to this argument is the role power plays in the process of knowledge production. For Sibley (1995), power in academia is reflected through hierarchies and the ranking of knowledges where some views, for example, adults, are privileged over others, such as children. In a concept I will return to in Chapter Five, some authors have noted, that ‘excluded’ groups also feel connected to wider place-based concepts, such as communities, in positive ways. Vanderbeck and Dunkley (2004) discuss the complex entanglement of exclusion, inclusion and belonging, arguing that young people often create their own sense of belonging and inclusion while actively excluding others.

Children’s geographer, Cele (2005, p. 34) notes that the discipline of children’s geographies has developed a focus of “how children’s perceptions, experiences and opportunities are socially and spatially structured”. Some researchers remain wedded to psychological development theories of childhood and thus exclude youth from participating as independent, thinking human-beings. Others support a sociological perspective viewing children as social actors and focusing on giving children a voice in the adult world (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Cele, 2005).²¹ In short, children’s geographies are interested in the everyday lives of children, empowering their narratives and opinions in academia and society, concerned with how ‘childhood’ has been constructed within adult society and how these constructions impinge on children’s lives (Holloway & Valentine, 2000).

²¹ It should be noted here that this concept of ‘giving voice’ is now considered problematic

However, a number of geographers have recognized that the very existence of a sub-group of 'children's geographies' reflects an exclusion of children's experiences from mainstream geography, "mirroring broader patterns of social relations which peripheralise young people's perspectives" (Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2004, p. 178). Vanderbeck (2008) echoes this sentiment and claims that despite having a robust body of work it is possible children's geographies will only infiltrate mainstream perspectives at a superficial level. He contends that while research with children frequently "appears in mainstream venues", it does so "without its messages really sinking in" (Vanderbeck, 2008, p. 394). This relates to Silbley's (2002, p. 122) "compartmentalising knowledge", which holds that academia is characterised by specialisms that keep different knowledges in separate, bounded spaces insulated from challenging ideas. Similar to this argument, Nayak (2003) notes that while the children's geographies is expanding outside of this sub-field literature still typically prioritises adults opinions. Exemplified through his studies on landscapes of crime and fear, Nayak (2003, p. 303) notes that children's insights would provide a "sharper, place-specific analysis of crime and community safety" yet young voices remain scarce in the field.

Perhaps this links to a further critique of the sub-discipline: the lack of self-critique. While the children's geography agenda was founded as a critical project, a common sentiment is that the field appears to lack *internal* critical reflection with critical energies principally directed outward at adultist society and the academic exclusion of children (Vanderbeck, 2008).

Spyrou (2011) states that the preoccupation with the 'voice' of children has distracted the field from being critically reflective about the representation of children's voices. The representation of voice is especially poignant considering the agenda of children's geographies is to 'empower children' by respecting the authenticity of their voices. Spyrou (2011) questions why researchers don't attend to the research context as an influencing factor as to how children's voices are produced, when so much power is bound in the relationship between adult/researcher and child/participant. Others query why children's geographers are often uncritical when reflecting their own representation (and possibly misrepresentation) of children (James, 2007).

Allred (1998, p. 147) has questioned, “what claims to represent children’s voices can adult researchers legitimately make?” For Komulainen (2007) researchers must critically reflect on their use of children’s voices in order to avoid the tendency to individualise voice, divorcing it from its original context. Children’s geographers must, therefore, pay closer attention to these methodological and ethical dilemmas, which I too will grapple with and address these dilemmas in my own research with children.

I will now explore two main concepts within children’s geographies, which inform my own research with children: the social construction of childhood, followed by considering children as social actors. In doing so I draw on examples from refugee and migration literature and focus on the notion of ‘the everyday’.

Social construction of childhood

A common goal within the sociology of childhood is to recognise and account for the ways in which childhood has been constructed by adult society. Early writings from Qvortrup (1985) draw parallels between societal change since the late 19th century and the construction of childhood. The industrial revolution, increases in urbanization, decreases in birth rates and significant medical advances in maternal health are all cited as profoundly influencing the way Western society came to think of ‘childhood’ (Qvortrup, 1985). Continuing on through much of the twentieth century, assumptions held by psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists (predominantly in the West), about childhood and children have shaped discourse and approaches in wider disciplines (Greene & Hill, 2005).

During this time, prior to the emergence of children’s geographies, authors agree that children had been rendered dependent by adult society and academia, relegated to “waiting rooms” to develop into adulthood (Brannen & O’Brien, 1995, p. 730) (Brannen & O’Brien, 1995, p. 730). Children were considered “incompetent and incomplete”, as “adults in the making rather than children in the state of being” (Brannen & O’Brien, 1995, p. 25; Holloway & Valentine, 2000, p. 763). This idea was based in the theory of socialisation, where social processes were viewed as shaping children, or ‘pre-adults’, into adults. Therefore, these forces of socialisation (such as schools, families, and religion) were the focus of studies rather than children themselves (Holloway & Valentine, 2000b; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). However, as

James et al. (1998, p. 207) emphasise below, the change in perspective to viewing children as ‘beings’ in their own right, has become central to children’s geographies:

The child is conceived of as a person, a status, a course of action, a set of needs, rights, or differences – in sum, as a social actor... This new phenomenon, the ‘being’ child, can be understood in its own right. It does not have to be approached from an assumed shortfall of competences, reason or significance.

Writing in 1999, Mathews and Limb discussed the paradigm shift internationally where children were starting to be seen as human beings rather than human-becomings. This, they argue, mirrored growing recognition internationally that children had not yet been afforded the same human rights as adults due to age discriminating classifications.

By the same token, studies have also noted that researchers must resist assuming a homogenous broad brush approach to studying ‘childhood’ or ‘the child’ (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012; Pauliina & Häkli, 2010). Greene & Hill (2005, p. 3) call for researchers to contest ‘automatic discourses’ used when endeavouring to research ‘the child’, instead, recognising the multiplicity of children’s perspectives deriving from the different ways in which they relate to their worlds (James et al., 1998) (James et al., 1998). Their worlds themselves are all different. As Brannen and O’Brien (1995, p. 736) succinctly note, “few sociologists would take as their task the study of the whole of adulthood”.

In what has been described as an “epistemological break”, James et al. (1998), offered a further paradigm commonly referred to as ‘the New Social Studies (or sociology) of Childhood’ (NSSC) (Pauliina & Häkli, 2010). The NSSC drew particular attention to the ways children and young people are skilled social actors whose political and social agency should be acknowledged and included in decision-making procedures (Pauliina & Häkli, 2010). Many researchers have followed and developed NSSC, with mounting arguments about children and young people’s agency. Efforts to theorise about youth agency have led to a particular focus on the ‘everyday’. Authors are thinking beyond young people’s everyday experiences as evidence of youth as knowledgeable ‘experts in their own lives’ and viewing these as sites of their politics (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012). The cross-fertilisation of these two strands of scholarship (agency and the

everyday) are of particular importance to my study: consequently, I explore the relevant literature more deeply below.

Young people as social actors

Much of the driving force behind the NSSC is political and there is a noticeable vein concerning children's rights: particularly about how children and young people negotiate their autonomy and exercise agency. Some have even called the idea of young people having agency "a type of mantra within social science" (Jeffrey, 2012, p. 245). This transforms previous notions of youth as passive, unable to care for themselves and dependent on adult protection (Skelton, 2007). There has been a growing recognition within the literature surrounding youth agency that children and young people have often been portrayed as disinterested in formal politics. Many children's geographers refute this, arguing that young people *are* concerned with matters political in nature and rather that the way politics is conventionally understood by adults is problematic (Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002). This popular critique sees NSSC scholars destabilising the adultist approach to agency, which they argue leaves little room for youth agency as it sits beyond the boundary of existing political theory. As Kallio (2008, p. 286) highlights, youth are rarely seen as political actors because "childhood is not considered self-evidently political". Bosco (2010) links this preconception to a common view of political spaces as only appropriate for adults. As Henn et al. (2002, p. 167) write:

Studies of political behavior have tended to contribute to an understanding of politics that is far too narrowly to the domain of elections and parliamentary activity...young people *do* take part in various types of 'political' activity, although this action is often discounted from being 'political' by conventional political science and by young people themselves.

Following this, Elwood and Mitchell (2012, p. 1) note the "challenge of recognising dimensions of political formation and agency that are excluded and unrecognisable". Pauliina and Häkli (2010), agree that what it means to be political is typically based on adult conceptions of 'the political'. Therefore, they argue, this sustains perceptions about children and young people as objects of socialisation (becomings) rather than as active members in society (beings) (Pauliina & Häkli, 2010). Consequently, scholars such as Bosco (2010, p. 388), call for a more youth-inclusive definition of agency:

More recognition [is needed] of the political possibilities that emerge out of a consideration of the many different spaces that children occupy and produce in contemporary societies.

In their Australian study, Harris and Wyn (2009, p. 329) use the term “micro-territories” to describe the local, everyday spaces and networks that are most relevant to young people such as schools, neighborhoods and the home. While claiming that young people’s micro-territories are neglected sites of their political engagement, Harris and Wyn (2009) also argue that these sites result in confinement of youth agency to the micro and the local. As such, they suggest that micro-territories “limit their [young peoples] sense of political efficacy and does not override the broader issue of young people’s continued containment at the outer borders of the formal political arena” (Harris & Wyn, 2009, p. 327). In their study, Harris and Wyn (2009, p. 335) found their young participants were more inclined to discuss social issues such as public transport, neighborhood violence or drug use, “what they knew, saw and sense, the familiar, everyday”. However, the young people didn’t perceive these issues as ‘politics’, rather as local issues relevant to them (Harris & Wyn, 2009). By the same token Henn et al. (2002, p. 169) write:

Young people tend to think of ‘politics’ merely as what goes on in parliament rather than ‘things that affect my life’ and so to discount their own political involvement and activities ... when they are encouraged to talk about politics in their own terms a wider definition of politics emerges and there is evidence of a much higher level of interest and activity.

These debates surrounding youth agency have opened up greater possibilities for theorising ‘the everyday’ as “certain everyday acts, behaviors and forms of knowledge [acting] as arenas of children’s politics” (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012, p. 2). Some have noted a divide between what is considered “the sphere of ‘real’ politics and the everyday issues taking place in the micro-territories of [young people’s] daily lived experiences” (Harris & Wyn, 2009, p. 335). For example, childhood geographer Jeffrey (2012, p. 247) highlights the “myriad, often subtle, ways in which young people exercise resistance on an everyday basis, engage politically with family members, and politicise aspects of developing their identities” which are often

forgotten as being ‘real’ political acts. By understanding the everyday as politically significant the agency performed in young people’s daily worlds become credible.

Many studies have documented disinterest among youth when it comes to mainstream political notions of civic engagement such as voting, volunteering, and joining collectives. However, in her study with school-age youth (14-18 years old) living in New Zealand, Wood (2012) explored less adult-centric, traditional measures of social action in which her participants *were* interested and involved. In doing so, Wood (2011, p. 45) has drawn attention to practices of ‘the everyday’, she recognises:

[...] the importance of excavating the mundane, habitual and taken-for-granted arenas of everyday life as an appropriate and empowering site to investigate political and social actions and perceptions of young people.

Wood (2012, p. 8) considered young people’s definitions and interactions of civic agency in the everyday realm and exemplified how young New Zealanders “(re)imagine and (re)define citizenship”. When the young participants were invited to discuss citizenship and agency on their own terms there was much more of evidence regarding their involvement. For example, as one participant stated “it doesn’t have to be anything big”: actions such as coaching a netball team or planting a tree were identified as less formal, but equally important, civic action (Wood, 2012, p. 12).

Following the vein of everyday agency Payne (2012, p. 403), who conducted a four-year long study with youth in child-headed households in Zambia, poses the question “extraordinary survivors or ordinary lives?”. Payne (2012, p. 399) moves beyond those perspectives that consider youth agency as inherently connected to crisis and competency, or as “something extraordinary, coming to the fore as young people survive”. Rather, she writes that her young participants viewed their actions as a normal aspect of their daily lives, as “simply getting on with things”, rather than through a “coping lens” which implies vulnerability (Payne, 2012, p. 403).

Payne’s (2012, p. 401) argument is important when writing about everyday agency, as the circumstances where youth agency frames young people as “survivors” focuses on notions of *need* and *coping* rather than the ways they *adapt* and *manage* their circumstances. A common manifestation of young people adapting and managing is

through their everyday resourcefulness (Jeffrey, 2012). Theime (2010, in Jeffrey 2012) for example, demonstrates how young people in Nairobi, Kenya, responded to an economic downturn by becoming involved in garbage collection and toilet cleaning in their community.

Bosco (2010, p. 385) too writes about everyday acts of agency which, while ‘micro’ in scale remains important “micro-political work”. In his research with young Mexicans from immigrant families living along the United States/Mexico border, Bosco (2010, p. 384) points out that young people often take on influential and socially active (adult) responsibilities and combine them with ‘child-like’ activities such as play. He frames children activities as activism, rather than agency. He writes that using the term ‘activism’ frames their activities not as challenging hegemony but as an “affirmation of children’s capacity to do more” (Bosco, 2010, p. 385).

The capacity, and desire, for youth to ‘do more’ can also be viewed through the lens of ‘caring’. Defined as “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world”, Bartos (2012, p. 161) applies the notion of care to youth agency. During a year-long study with young New Zealanders, Bartos (2012, p. 161) demonstrated how her young participants’ embodied elements of “caring for their ‘worlds’ in an effort to define their political agency”. The first dimension, “maintaining” refers to how young people protect what they have and know; the second, “continuing” indicates consideration of how “things continue, stay the same, or change”; the third, “repairing” relates to young peoples efforts to repair their worlds, showing a concerted effort to improve their environments (Bartos, 2012, p. 161).

Everyday social action, examples from young migrants and refugees.

Importantly, the idea of ‘everyday’ action of youth is also prevalent within both refugee and migration literature. While most of these studies are from third country resettlement (rather than the undocumented migration of the participants in my research), they remain helpful to contextualize the stories and agency of the participants I worked with. Particularly in relation to resettlement and navigating cultural difference. The young migrants in my research, similar to refugee-background youth (RBY), have experienced trauma or loss in their homeland yet also exemplifying

resilience and resourcefulness in their new homes. Further, even when young people may not be involved in the decision to migrate (for example forced migration or resettlement), they must still be understood as active agents in the process, rather than as passive ‘baggage’ as discussed earlier (Dobson, 2009).

Young refugees and migrants arrive in a new country and find themselves in a new cultural, social and geographic space that is often at odds with the culture and way of life they are used to. In their qualitative study on RBY from Sudan now living in Australia, McMichael, Gifford, and Correa-Velez (2011) describe the RBY’s difficulty in negotiating the newly acquired freedoms afforded to them in Australia compared to the more conservative culture with which their parents were accustomed. Navigating this disjuncture between old and new cultural values can itself be considered a form of agency within society.

The resilience exemplified by RBY is also often interpreted as a form of social action. As RBY seek to establish futures within a new country they exercise their agency in different and unique ways (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, & Westoby, 2003). Also working with RBY in Australia, Brough et al. (2003, p. 194) state, “young people from a refugee background [...] face not only the stresses related to sudden changes in language and culture, but they must also contend with a past that is often filled with extremely traumatic experiences.” As Wyn and White (2007, p. 25 in Brough et al., 2003) add, the social agency of RBY should not be measured as a “relational concept”, but rather as one that accounts for the “diverse ... ways in which they negotiate their transitions.” In comparison to their non-RB peers, young people with refugee and migration backgrounds often take on more responsibility within the household and family context because of their ability to navigate cultural differences more easily than their parents and elders. RBY often play a dominant role in integrating their families into the new community for example; acting as a ‘cultural brokers’ and translators, looking after younger siblings or the elderly and contributing to financial support with part-time jobs (McMichael et al., 2011). Dobson (2009) writes that school can often be a source for social networks for the parents and families of RBY. Bosco (2010) discusses agency in regards to bilingual children (who often pick up new languages faster than older relatives) helping their parents to participate in everyday social life. Additionally, further research with young refugees in Australia found RBY felt they

needed to stay strong for their families, not wanting to burden their parents with additional stress (Brough et al., 2003).

If parents have a reaction to the trauma experienced prior to, or during the migration, children are often called on as the major form of support. “Parents [...] often needed the support of their children as much as their children needed the parents support” (Brough et al., 2003, p. 202). RBY are forced to balance these various roles with responsibilities outside the household such as their schoolwork and important pursuits such as making friends. As one RBY describes, dealing with a parent’s post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) “... makes it difficult to cope, because I attend school and try to get things done around the house to make it easier for her” (in Brough et al., 2003, p. 202).

Migration literature also brings the idea of young agency to the fore, especially in the form of resourcefulness (Jeffrey, 2012). Swanson (2009) demonstrates, young Andean migrants from rural Ecuador are moving into urban centres to earn money through begging in response to the lack of employment opportunities in rural regions. In her study, the young migrants were exercising their social agency through establishing informal begging networks in order to fund their education (Swanson, 2009). Similarly, Punch (2007) describes the experience of Bolivian seasonal laborers who migrate to Argentina due to limited job opportunities in Bolivia (Punch, 2007, p. 106). Migration is seen as an important aspect of youth identity: migrants return to Bolivia as “symbols of modernity” enjoying enhanced social status. In this sense migrating is a resourceful coping strategy “...which facilitates young people’s participation in a more consumer, and sometimes global, culture as well as enhancing their social and economic autonomy” (Punch, 2007, p. 109).

The topic of children and young people’s social agency is surrounded by ongoing debate regarding the responsibilities of children in the face of their acquisition of rights (Brannen & O’Brien, 1995). Vanderbeck (2008, p. 397) provocatively states that whilst there is much discussion of children as competent actors the “theoretical/empirical/political case for maintaining aspects of adult authority” remains a point of ‘non-discussion’. Matthews and Limb (1999) have observed that while the theme of children’s participation and agency runs through much of the literature, it is

tarnished by the underlying right of a parent to overrule their child's decision (Matthews & Limb, 1999).

Children's geographies has in fact had precious little to say about many 'big contemporary issues', and that some of these silences may be related to hesitancies regarding the implications of how we have conceptualized children's agency and 'competence' (Vanderbeck, 2008, p. 398).

In making this argument Vanderbeck (2008) cites several public and academic debates such as voting ages, drinking ages, sexual consent and compulsory education levels as areas where, if given the chance, children would be making decisions that affect the rest of their lives. These are issues, he argues, that children's geographers have been mostly silent about and which, if discussed, would bring attention to the inconsistencies and ambiguities between childhood agency theories in comparison to the realities (Vanderbeck, 2008).

By a similar token, Ansell and Blerk (2005, p. 423) argue that while children's geographies are "mushrooming", the presence of children in academia remains largely confined to the experiences of children in the West. In the context of developing countries, where young people represent a very large yet relatively neglected proportion of the population, "geographical research has focused mainly on children in exceptional circumstances" while the everyday experiences of children have received relatively less attention (Ansell & Blerk, 2005, p. 423). Comparatively, much of what has been addressed in studies with children in the West engages their ordinary, everyday experiences in places such as the street (see Cahill, 2007), the playground (see Ergler, 2011) and the workplace (see Mizen, 2005) as well as notions of citizenship (see Wood, 2012). In line with the geographies of exclusion, other authors highlight the need for enquiry into children's perspectives from the world over, not just those close to home (Vanderbeck, 2008; Brannen & O'Brian, 1995). This critique is comparable to Part One of this chapter: much of the writing pertaining to the experiences of Burmese children in Thailand focuses on child labour, child prostitution, trafficking, orphans and so forth while the everyday realities of Burmese children and young people are generally excluded.

Ansell and Blerk (2005) have written on the experiences of children living in rented

accommodation in cities such as Lesotho and Malawi. They note that everyday observations of *all* children are important if children are ever to be recognised in the academic landscape as social actors. And, considering the frequent assertion that children are ‘experts on their own lives’, research has seldom offered them the opportunity, especially those in less developed countries, to comment on external processes influencing their lives (Ansell and Blerk, 2005, p. 426).

Conclusion

In Part One of this chapter I reviewed literature related to migrant children and young people, specifically around the Burma/Thai border area. I identified a ‘gap’ regarding young people’s perspectives and lived experiences, especially as they express them. This gap has lead to a single story of young Burmese migrants. A story based on vulnerability and lack rather than strength and support. Part Two has thus examined theoretical frameworks I will apply to my own research, such as children’s geographies, as well as research conducted with RBY and young migrants surrounding youth agency.

It is undeniable that children are “on geography’s agenda more than ever before” and recognising the active role children and young people play in constructing their own experiences calls for exploration of new modes of inquiry (Vanderbeck, 2008, p. 394). It is an exciting prospect to be “keep[ing] the conversation going” by working in solidarity with young Burmese migrants (Bennett, 2009, p. 249 in Evans, 2009, p. 18). However, many questions remain surrounding methodological and ethical implications of working with young people, these will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Three

My methodological route

Introduction

On the 1st of June 2014, I sat in the humid heat anxiously anticipated the arrival of the first interviewee. I had been in Thailand a month, and had conducted several photography workshops with the group of participants. Despite building relationships with the young migrants throughout these workshops, I had never been more nervous in my life as I waiting in the outdoor area of SAW Child Crisis Center where the interviews were to take place.²² I mentally fumbled through the brainstorm of how to ‘best’ conduct participatory research with young people acquired from months of planning and reading. As a first time researcher, I felt that I had thrown myself in the deep end: a participatory photovoice project with twenty young Burmese-speaking migrants living in the Thai border town of Mae Sot. This is not to say I was unprepared: I had thoroughly combed through other researchers’ experiences and methodologies reading as broadly as I could while also planning appropriate qualitative methods for research with young people.

When the first interviewee, Eh Htoo, sat down with a grin from ear-to-ear, informing me that he wouldn’t need a translator, as he wanted to practice his English and my nerves settled as I was forced to ‘go with the flow’. Our semi-structured interview quickly departed from the schedule I had spent months fussing over as we wove organically through Eh Htoo’s migration story, perceptions of life in Mae Sot and his aspirations for the future. Like many – I subsequently found – he had questions of his own *he* wanted to ask *me*, flipping the typical interviewer/interviewee dynamic back and forth throughout our discussion.

From this first interview I realised that, as a qualitative and participatory researcher, planning is only possible to a certain point. Beyond that the research takes on a life of its own. While I constantly referred back to the reading I had previously earmarked, my carefully planned research project changed constantly during the three months I

²² SAW (Social Action for Women) is the NGO I worked alongside.

spent ‘in the field’²³ at Mae Sot. Following Pink (2013, p. 49), I learned “we cannot predict, and should not prescribe in advance, the precise methods that we will need to use in any one ethnographic research project”. Rather, we must view “methods as having biographies we can trace and understand how they change temporally and contextually, how they evolve in each application, and how they are redeveloped in the light of new [...] experiences” (Pink, 2013, p. 52).

In this chapter I will look at both my epistemological biography and my methodology and methods – all of which played fundamental roles in the development and redevelopment my research project (Pink, 2013). I will then turn to the practical issues that I faced both in the field and once home in New Zealand such as ethics, ‘writing-in’, and representation.

Tracing my epistemological and methodological biography

Phenomenology and engaging with the ‘everyday’

In line with both my feminist and phenomenological leanings (discussed below) it is important for me to share some personal understandings of what has influenced my ‘ways of knowing’ and how these have affected my assumptions, motivations and methodological becomings. This project was explicitly qualitative, founded on relationships with the participants fostered during my time with them. Subsequently, my decisions, positionality and indeed epistemology shaped the way I designed and undertook the research as well as the way in which I have (re)presented my participants and have shared their stories (both spoken and visual) here.

My ways-of-knowing are tangled within my personal history, things I have seen, read, felt and learnt prior to this research. Thus, in line with Evans (2010, p. 6) “I feel incapable of declaring a definitive epistemology for this project”. Rather, I will attempt to ‘piece-together’ my own messy and complex “bricolage of representation” in order to acknowledge my own understandings and what I see as constituting knowledge (Evans, 2010, p. 6; Palomino-Schalscha, 2011; Pink, 2013).

²³ I’ve referred to ‘the field’ in scare quotes here because I think the term ‘the field’ alludes to a scientific-like extraction of data rather than a collaborative project of which I too was entwined (Scheyvens, Nowak, & Scheyvens, 2003).

In line with my phenomenological orientation, I understand that our lived, embodied experiences shape the way we see and interact with our world. This is visible in my endeavour to capture the complexities of these overlooked and sometimes “hidden” spaces of the ‘everyday’ with my participants (Wood, 2012, p. 3). Phenomenological theory looks at how an individual’s perception of the world influences the way they experience it (Langdridge, 2007). Thus, research through a phenomenological framework endeavours to interpret and examine how individual’s lived experiences impact on their ways of meaning-making (J. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Unlike other theories that render time as ‘discontinuous’ and ‘spatialised’ the phenomenological agenda holds that we, as individuals, experience an endless stream of conscious states or ‘*durée*’ (Schutz, 1967).²⁴ This constant state of flux cannot be dissected into mutually exclusive parts or experiences except through conscious and considered reflection (Husserl, 1927 in J. Smith et al., 2009). As Schutz (1967, pp. 45-49) asserts, “there is no side-by-sideness [...] when I immerse myself in my stream of consciousness, in my duration, I do not find any clearly differentiated experiences at all”. Phenomenology maintains that all experiences are entwined, influencing and influenced by each other. It then questions how individuals perceive, and attach meaning to certain experiences. The theory thus forms a suitable foundation for my study of young peoples’ experiences, providing a framework to discuss how participants’ lived experiences impact upon their reflections on the past, interactions with the present and perceptions of the future. Two particular phenomenological ideas that influence my epistemology and have greatly impacted this research are ‘life-worlds’ and the assertion that every-day ‘mundane’ experiences are important.

The phenomenological concept of ‘life-worlds’ is characterised by the belief that lived experiences are situated within an individual’s subjectively experienced world (Husserl, 1970 in Dowling, 2007, p. 132). Phenomenologists hold that an individual’s “world of experience [...] always bears upon it the mark of a particular moment from which it is viewed” (Schutz, 1967, p. 98). Therefore, similar to the concept of situated knowledge (discussed below), the way in which we perceive experiences is contextually based and fluid, changing from one moment to the next. For Seamon

²⁴ Term *durée* was coined by Henri Bergson (1931 as cited in Schutz, 1967: 45) to describe the ‘inner stream’ of duration constituted within human consciousness.

(1979 in Backhaus, 2009, p. 137), ‘life-worlds’ are situated at the “taken-for-granted level of meanings, experiences, behaviors, and events” relative to space, place and environments. This reflects my proclivity to explore the ‘everyday’ experiences of the young migrants with whom I collaborated.

For Relph (1985, p. 15) phenomenology is “a way of thinking that enables us to see clearly something that is, in effect, right before our eyes yet somehow obscured from us” – something so obvious that it is ignored or “disguised by a cloak of abstractions”. For Relph (1985) this *something* is simply the way in which we experience the world. In this sense we can think about phenomenological studies as the study of familiar everyday experiences. For example, Heidegger (1970 in, Dowling, 2007, p. 133) coined the term ‘being-in-the-world’ to describe the ways individuals exist, be, act and relate with their surrounding places and spaces.

Similarly, Wood (2012, p. 3) has acknowledged the prevailing inclination of research “to ensure that the noisiness and unpredictability of the everyday are excluded” and calls for a commitment to the “nitty-gritty nature of everyday life.” Following this, I too have attempted to engage with the ‘everyday’ through this research. The concept of life-worlds is a key influence on why I discussed past, present and future with my participants. I am aware that how these young people experience in the present is very much mediated by what has happened to them in the past (Brough et al., 2003). In agreement with what Husserl (1970 in Dowling, 2007) calls a ‘meaning endowing’ experience of consciousness, Brough et al. (2003, p. 206) emphasise that “the past mingles with the present in terms of the meanings and interpretations young people give to life events as they unfurl.”

Relating to ‘being-in-the-world’, phenomenologists claim that for an individual to be aware of an (otherwise passive) experience, they must consciously lift it out of the continual stream of *durée* through active reflection. This has implications for my research, which tried to learn about the young migrants’ lived experiences. Schutz (1967, p. 53) contends that “the ‘How’ of the experience can be reproduced only in recapitulative reconstruction”. Therefore, when I asked my participants to describe their *experience* of crossing the border to me, they re-told it to me by recreating or

summarising the experience. This has obvious implications for accurate representation, which I interrogate more deeply in section 3.3 below.

Feminist values and research

Feminist geographers have developed an epistemology that challenges conventional concepts of knowledge and validates alternative sources such as autobiographical accounts, life histories and subjective experiences (Kitchen & Tate, 2000). Considering research as a space for socially-silenced groups to “be heard”, feminist epistemologies are motivated by heterogeneity and plurality of voices, including the stories of ordinary people (Alldred, 1998, p. 150; Fraser, 2004; Lykke, 2010). This motivation also sees feminist research placing marginalised voices, such as young migrants, at the centre of the research. However, it is important to note that I did not see my research as ‘giving’ a voice to these young people (for me to extract and then dissect). Rather than being complicit in the discourse of ‘giving voice’, which constructs participants as passive subjects, I viewed this research as a joint project where knowledge was created in the spaces of collaboration in-between ‘my’ perspective and ‘their’ perspective (Khan, 1996).

Feminist research is often focused on the micro-level of meaning-making, so as to create knowledge through information about certain topics rather than universalising, wide-sweeping claims (Rose, 1997). Similarly, feminist scholars reject claims of objective research, calling for researchers to recognise all knowledge as situated, partial and power-laden (Haraway, 1988; Palomino-Schalscha, 2011; Rose, 1997; Sultana, 2007). In line with this, I do not claim to have discovered the truth or experience of *all* child migrants in Mae Sot; rather I am concerned with the fifteen voices of my participants, acknowledging this research project as being situated in their own perspectives and experiences as well as the context within which the knowledge was created.

In a further aspect of ‘situated knowledge’, feminist epistemologies call for researchers to look beyond the ‘researched’ and emphasise their own experiences within research outcomes (Haraway, 1988). Haraway (1988) acknowledges that researchers cannot produce an objective depiction of the world; rather a story within which they are

enmeshed. This was an important aspect of my project as both the feminist and the participatory nature of the research required locating myself within it and recognising that “...both participants and researchers produce interpretations that are ‘the data’” (Olsen, 2011, p. 135).

Working within such an understanding required adopting a reflexive approach to my ‘positionality’, analysing how the participants may have perceived me and how this affected the research. Positionality refers to aspects of one’s identity such as age, race, gender, sexuality, religion that indicate a person’s position in society (Chacko, 2004). While I can never fully know how the participants perceived me, I can (from a reflexive point of view) identify multiple aspects of my positionality that differed from theirs’. As an educated young female *Lu Phyu*²⁵ from urban New Zealand I was aware of the power-laden aspects of my positionality and worried about the potential impacts this would have on the research project. As Sultana (2007) acknowledged in her own fieldwork, even subtle acts such as carrying a digital camera and using a laptop were symbols of my privileged and educated background or ‘position’. Having said this, during my time in Mae Sot with the participants I became somewhat disillusioned with the broad-brush approach I had originally taken to qualities intrinsic in my positionality. Instead, I came to believe that more attention should be paid to certain combinations of attributes which acted as “markers of [my] *relational* position in society” (Chacko, 2004, p. 4). As Chacko (2004, p.5) notes, it is the “permutations of these essentialised groupings [that] produce multiple identities that may mesh well or tangle awkwardly in any given setting”. As with knowledge, positionality is also contextually situated within the “multi-dimensional geography of power relations” (Rose, 1997, p.308) .

In line with the hybrid and situated approach I have taken to my positioning, there were aspects of my positionality that I perceive to have ‘meshed well’ in my research context and actually helped me to relate to and build rapport with the participants (Chacko, 2004). Firstly, during my time in Mae Sot I was twenty-two, just two years older than some of my participants. In terms of age and the UN definition of youth (15-24), I was well within the same cohort as the participants. Still being considered a

²⁵ *Lu phyu* is the Burmese word for white westerner or foreigner

‘young person’ helped me to relate to the teenagers and, I believe, made it easier for them to accept my presence within their space. They expressed surprise when first hearing my age and would often invite me to play football with them in the evenings after interviews or chat casually with me about their day while I waited for ATL to arrive. Arguably of course, this may have had nothing to do with my age and rather a result of the informal time I spent ‘hanging out’ with my participants. However, I feel my age helped to build friendships that made me feel like less of an ‘outsider’ but also, I sense, helped the participants to describe delicate experiences.

Secondly, I must note the common insider/outsider tension often described by feminist researchers. ‘Field work’, especially in a cross-cultural context, usually alludes to a change in location. When a researcher embarks on a project and enters a study area outside of their own space they are encroaching on someone else’s (Katz, 2013). In my research however, I was working with people who, like me, described feelings of exclusion. I am by no means claiming to be an insider, and people definitely ‘othered’ me. However, in a reflection similar to Palomino-Schalscha (2011) I found that the lines between who was an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider’ were blurred. Burmese migrants in Thailand have a long history of displacement within Thailand and none of the young migrants I collaborated with were legally registered. They too expressed feelings like outsiders in Thailand — in both a real and imagined sense. While I wasn’t Burmese, not being *Thai* was an aspect of my positionality that I believe contributed to the young migrants openness with.

Interestingly, during my time in Thailand the country spiraled into political turmoil. The military enacted a coup d’état, ousting the Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. A curfew was put in place (10pm—5am), meeting in groups of five or more was banned and foreigners were required to carry their passport and a visa at all times (just as migrants do in Mae Sot), due to routine checkpoints. I too found myself experiencing feelings of fear and anxiety the young migrants recounted to me. Of course my experience was very different as I had the assurance of a reliable embassy and a ticket home. However, it did create a sense of common ground and rapport between us. The teenagers often joked that I ‘better bike fast’ to get home before curfew (even if it was several hours away).

Despite the aspects of my positionality I perceived as helping build rapport and friendship, I was cautious not to overstate our ‘sameness’ in full knowledge it was outweighed by our differences. As Rahnema (1990 in Ivantiz, 1999, p. 54) argues:

Although we recognize some of our difference with ‘them’ in terms of education, social position, and economic privileges, ‘we’ take pride in transcending these, basing our interaction with ‘them’ on many things ‘we’ think we share in common [...] neither the commonalities nor the differences are what we think they are. They rather represent intellectual constructions, often aimed at legitimising our intervention.

While I do not agree that interrogating my positionality is self-indulgent or a mark of academic elitism, I think ‘we’ as researchers need to be aware of the potential dangers associated with power imbalances, even in assumed spaces of commonality (Ivantiz, 1999; Sultana, 2007). Evaluating where the participants and I were situated in relational “grids of power” and how these expressions of unequal power influenced knowledge production, required constant negotiation (Sultana, 2007, p. 376). Acknowledging uneven distributions of power, Moss (1995, in Rose, 1997, p. 311) asserts that researchers must “struggle to distribute power more evenly”. This ‘struggle’ was one I often found challenging, especially as I worked within a participatory model and aimed to keep research relationships with the young people as equal as possible.

After grappling with the power-laden aspects of my positionality for some time, I took solace in the reassuring words of Gallagher (2008, p. 147) who contends that, “power is dangerous, but it is also full of possibilities, the instrument both of oppression and of liberation.” I adopted a reflexive approach and negotiated imbalances where I could. Feminist geographers emphasise that reflexivity is to be undertaken throughout the research, rather than retrospectively (Sultana, 2007). I kept a diary during my time in Mae Sot reflecting on aspects of my positionality in relation to the participants. I also wrote a blog to keep friends and family up to date with the project, as well as my own everyday observations and experiences. This ‘therapeutic scribbling’ also lent itself to the iterative cycle of action and reflection as held by Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology (discussed in the following section) (Katz, 2013). I transcribed my interviews in the field, which helped support a flexible approach whereby I could

reflect on the ways participants and I exercised our power, helping to remedy and support the research process as we went.

I found it reassuring that the young migrants, too, yielded considerable power as the proprietors of knowledge. I refute the misconception of the researcher as an all-powerful expert and the researched as “a vulnerable, powerless group” (Beazley & Ennew, 2006, p. 189). I found the experience of power between us as far more fluid, interacting within our researcher/participant relationship rather than dictating it. I relied on them to provide me with *their* experiences, a gift they chose to share with me and one they had the power to withhold, censor or edit as they pleased.

Participation and collaboration

With my epistemological footing planted firmly in phenomenological and feminist thought I was driven to use participatory methodologies and methods as they enable a framework where participants take on the role of collaborators shaping the research rather than simply informing it. While there are many variations of PAR, all share the common tenet of research *with* rather than *on*, acknowledging that participants “are capable of representing themselves” (Kindon, 2012; Palomino-Schalscha, 2011, p. 33). This sat well with my aversion to ‘giving voice’. Participatory approaches thus take a critical stance on *how* data is collected, *who* it impacts and what *actions* or *change* will come from it (Kesby, Kindon, & Pain, 2009).

Participatory action research [...] is a collaborative process of research, education, and action explicitly oriented toward social change. It involves academic researchers [...] and nonacademic co-researchers and participants [...] working together to examine a problematic situation in order to change it for the better on participants’ own terms. (Kesby et al., 2009, p. 90).

Adopting a participatory methodology and working within a PAR framework requires commitment to a collaborative approach as well as engagement with action. While (unfortunately), the action component of my research has not yet been fully realised, collaboration was central in the participatory research project. Appropriately, PAR (as with the New Social Studies of Childhood [NSSC]) methods aim to “widen the boundaries for children’s conventional involvement as research informants”, paying attention to “the co-production of knowledge between an interviewer and an interviewee” (Solberg, 2014, p. 233). Researchers working with the NSSC theory and a

PAR framework advocate youth as ‘experts in their own lives’ a foundational concept of this project (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). However, participation is not without anxieties and critique. Skelton (2007, p. 169) for example, questions whether youth participation can be “genuine and effective or rather simply symbolic, a form of [...] tokenism or decoration”. Others warn participatory methods should not be viewed as a panacea for the exploitative aspects of research with children and young people (Ergler, 2011). I confront some of these relating to my own experience of participatory research below.

De-idealising participation

“I intended to conduct this research in a way that could modify the power relations and inequalities of traditional research, but this was complicated since its beginnings” (Palomino-Schalscha, 2011, p. 38).²⁶

Like the above reflection, I entered the field enthusiastic to apply the participatory project I had planned. However, this somewhat naïve endeavour was fraught with difficulties from the outset. Academic and human ethics procedures at Victoria University required a detailed research proposal prior to entering the field. As a result, I had planned the project from Wellington months before arriving in Thailand; ideally all the details of the project would have been designed collaboratively. This led me to consider ‘how participatory can I *really* claim this project to be?’ — a question I continued to ask during my time in Mae Sot. Although I still hold participatory methods as paramount to doing ethical and relevant research, having now facilitated a ‘participatory’ project I sympathize with the geographers who have begun to think critically about the practicality of participatory methods in the field (Gallagher, 2008; Kindon, 2012; Palomino-Schalscha, 2011).

While this project was ‘participatory’ in the sense that data collection was collaborative, in no way can I claim that *all* aspects of the research, from inception to dissemination, were participatory. In the first meeting with the participants we discussed the project, I explained it was malleable in an attempt to create the foundations for collaborative work and they made suggestions and amendments.

²⁶ ‘De-idealising participation’ is a term borrowed from Palomino-Schalscha (2011, p. 45) in her collaborative PhD research which explored a Mapuche-Pewenche community the engaging with tourism in Southern Chile where she too describes a disillusionment with idealistic notions participatory research.

Despite this, a number of constraints to the ‘participatory’ nature of this project can be identified. For example, time presented a central challenge. In addition to school, evening English lessons and daily chores, the amount of time the youth could dedicate to the research was limited, and (not surprisingly) the spare time they did have was devoted to having fun. Moreover, to put it frankly, the tedious aspects of planning research would have been burdensome and probably quite boring to the young energetic participants. Even when Eh Htoo indicated he would like to take on a larger researcher role by conducting some of the interviews himself, he was simply too busy and we ran out of time.

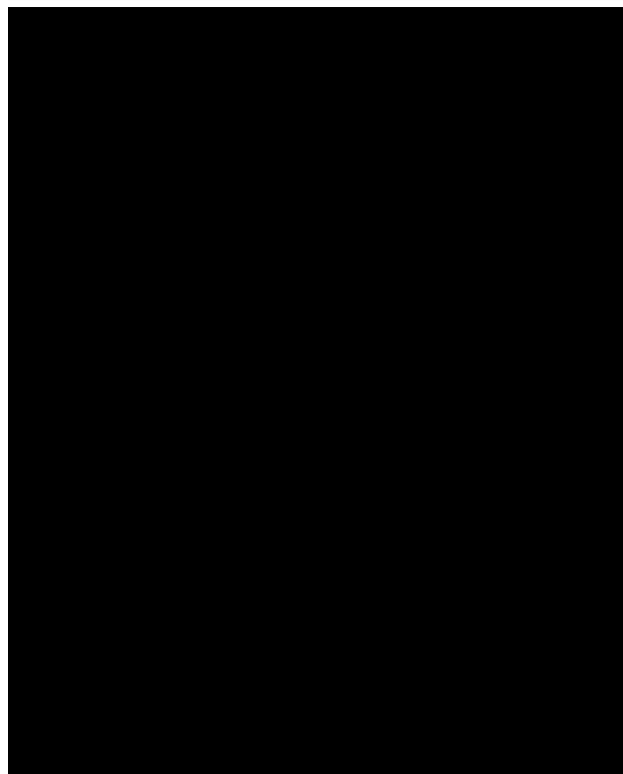


Figure 3.1 The Ladder of Participation
(Hart, 1992, p. 8)

Confronting my idealistic and perhaps romanticised ideas about the participation of the young migrants, I decided to build the project in a manner more suitable to the participants’ capabilities and interests. I became aware that it had perhaps been presumptuous to assume that the young migrants *needed* to participate and instead found it helpful to conceptualise the participants and myself as partners with different capacities but also different purposes and outcomes. For me this project was largely academic: while I was also emotionally invested, the fact remains that this thesis was to be written and submitted for completion of my Masters degree. For the participants,

motivations may have ranged from learning about photography, to sharing their stories, to simply having fun. Consequently, I found participation to be a dynamic space where collaboration was a flexible interaction, rather than a fixed ‘tick-box’ category that is either participatory or not. Take, for example, ‘The Ladder of Participation’ designed by Roger Hart (1992, p. 8), where participation is seen as a continuum ranging from “manipulation” to “child-initiated shared discussions with adults”. The participants (and I) moved in and out of the ‘researcher’ role, ascending and descending Hart’s (1992) ladder employing context-appropriate research strategies.

At some stages the level of participation was easily identifiable. For example, during ‘the photography phase’ (phase three) I was very much hands—off, leaving the participants to conduct the research themselves. In comparison, in phase one I conducted photography workshops, although I had designed these as participatory (albeit in a limited sense). In which they saw me take on a pedagogic and thus leading role. During the interviews these boundaries were more blurred. Although I wrote and piloted the interviews, they often asked me questions transforming the ‘interview’ into a two-way (and sometimes three-way with ATL) discussion, indicating a dynamic space of participatory and collaborative interaction.

(Participatory) visual methods

We *shoot* cameras and *capture* photographs, extracting moments and documenting them with the click of a finger. The very language of photography suggests the power we sense within it. When cameras were first invented many cultures found them extremely unnerving; they were viewed with suspicion and alarm. Some felt their souls were being captured within the undying relic that is a photograph (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001). Yet we now live in a time where many people have a camera in their hand, pocket or purse all of the time—anyone with a camera-phone has the ability to transform themselves into a photo-journalist simply by being in the right place at the right time. The ‘visual’ is also deep-rooted in the field of Geography, as Aitken and Zonn (1994, p.7 in Kindon, 2003, p. 142) note:

The very heart of geography – the search for our sense of place and self in the world – is constituted by the practice of looking, and is, in effect, a study of images.

As a keen photographer I aimed to harness the power of photography and merge it with social research. Not surprisingly then, visual methods are at the centre of this research. I adopted the method of ‘photovoice’, a participatory approach to community-based photography Wang (1999 among many others; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice involves providing participants with cameras as a creative medium of personal expression, opening a space to portray everyday realities from their own perspective. As my research project sought to explore young migrants’ experiences, photovoice provided an ideal way to ensure their opinions were put across through their *own* “visual stories”, words and reflections (McIntyre, 2010, p. 483). The use of photography also allowed the young migrants to *show* their ‘everyday’ experiences in a unique and visual way, illuminating aspects of their worlds which may otherwise have remained unseen (Pink, 2007). Photovoice aims to give participants a greater sense of ownership over the research process, placing their ideas at the centre of knowledge production, shaping and creating the data (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). This, I argue is the beauty of visual research methods, especially in a participatory environment.

Some ethical considerations

Ethical research is something that occurs within the relationships of those participating; no method alone can ensure this. However, I do believe that by using less hierarchical, collaborative research with a PAR—based method helped me to work through some ethical issues. As Thomas and O’Kane (1998, p. 337) suggest:

The ethical acceptability of research with children can be augmented by an approach which gives children control over the process and [is] in tune with children’s way of seeing and relating to their world.

Solberg (2014, p. 233) advocates participatory methods for working ethically with youth because they widen the conventional boundaries for involvement “... equipping them with technical devices to collect data [...] and to take part in the data analysis.”

The use of a participatory photography both complicated and complemented my ethical obligations as a researcher. For example, requiring the youth to *take* photographs was beneficial, keeping the young people unidentifiable as they did not appear in their own images (Pink, 2013). However, it also created an ethical risk

regarding what and who would appear in their photographs. As Pink (2007, p. 59) writes “...if photographic images have been produced in collaboration with informants, the collaborators may use the images in ways that the researcher feels are unethical.” Wang and Burris (1997, p. 178) describe the authority placed on a photographer when “wielding the camera.” I facilitated a discussion (prior to distributing cameras in phase three) regarding the inappropriateness of photographing people and the potential ethical implications this could raise. Nevertheless, many identifiable faces are in the young people’s photographs. While I tried to steer clear of ‘blacking out’ eyes in the participants’ photographs (a method I find negative and criminalising), due to the prearranged HEC agreement I was ethically obliged to. The process of obscuring the participant’s faces saddened me deeply. I felt torn between respecting my participants (and including their faces) and protecting them. However, I will discuss this and further limitations regarding ethics in the concluding chapter (Chapter Seven).

Ethical issues such as ownership were discussed prior to any photography taking place and I clarified that participants would own every photograph they took. They had the choice to share or withhold their images and the right to deny me publication rights. All the participants gave me verbal permission to publish their photographs in this thesis as well as allowing me to show them in an exhibition if one were to eventuate. The addition of participatory visual methods was just one element of an ethically complex project. Therefore, I will discuss ethics further in the final section of this chapter.

The project and learning to ‘go with the flow’

Aware I was taking up participants’ free time – after school and in weekends – I wanted to make the experience of this research project as fun and worthwhile for them as it was for me. I planned and facilitated a five-phase project that included photography ‘weekend workshops’, interviews, and a group reflection. However, as mentioned, I soon realised that doggedly adhering to a pre-planned project within a participatory framework is largely unrealistic. As Wax (1971, in Burgess, 2004, p. 116) remarks “strict and rigid adherence to any method, technique of doctrinaire position may, for the fieldworker, become like confinement in a cage”. Rather I found

myself slipping ‘through the bars’ and taking a more organic go-with-the-flow approach.

In order to explain the iterative project I undertook alongside the fifteen young participants, and with the help of my translator ATL, I will outline each of the phases below; exemplifying how this project took on a life of its own, flexing and changing with the participants’ ideas and involvement.

Phase One

Phase One was an initial meeting between myself, the other participants and ATL. I introduced myself and explained my motivation to learn about and share their daily experiences and perspectives of life in Mae Sot. This first meeting also served as the first lesson of three ‘weekend workshops’ where we workshopped photographs and practiced photography techniques.

Photographs held an important place in my childhood, my mother bringing out the camera was the mark of a special occasion, and photographs adorned mantelpieces and lined the walls of the house in which I grew up. Yet, the presence of visual images and media in my life was an aspect of my positionality I had not paid attention to until the first ‘weekend workshop’. When I asked the group of twenty young migrants before me if any of them owned photographs of themselves or their families only one boy raised his hands. Thant had a small album containing photos he had collected since arriving in Thailand. These young migrants often crossed the border suddenly and without warning, sometimes with only the clothes they were wearing. For others, owning a camera and having the ability to print photographs was either economically or geographically out of reach for them and their family. When I asked if any had taken a photograph themselves, two of the older boys said they had, but timidly disclosed that this was only on a friend’s camera-phone. These initial interactions with the participants highlighted that they were less familiar with photography than I had expected. I decided additional photography workshops would be beneficial, especially as I positioned these ‘training spaces’ as my contribution to the project (Kendon, 2012, p. 173) . Subsequently, over a two-week period I facilitated three ‘weekend workshops’ covering how to use a camera, photography techniques and camera angles.

In the first workshop I presented the participants with various types of photographs: portraits, self-portraits, documentary images, still-life and landscapes. Beginning with portraits, we looked and thought about what the images were illustrating, assessing what we could learn about the subject(s) from their expressions or clothing (Crang, 2010; Wood, 2012). Applying a technique Ewald and Lightfoot (2001, p. 19) called ‘visual literacy’, I found it useful to ‘read’ each photograph with the participants. I asked them to look beyond the obvious and connect the image with a message or emotion the photographer may have been trying to convey or evoke. As Ewald and Lightfoot (2001, p. 18) note, “in reading this way, we’ve laid the groundwork for the children’s more nuanced examination of other images, and for their thoughtful planning of their own photographs.”

Once we had addressed all five types of photographs, the group was divided into smaller groups and each group was given turns with a digital camera to take photographs. Each group took five photographs, one example of each type of photograph we had previously discussed. I encouraged them to plan and discuss the subject they were going to photograph (shown in figure 3.2 below) — a helpful way to organise their thoughts and picture-taking prior to their turn with the camera (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001).



Figure 3.2: A group of boys plan their photographs before their turn with the camera.
Source: Rebecca Ross, June 2014, Mae Sot

Taking photographs served as a fun activity to finish the lesson, also helping to establish rapport with the children as we laughed and joked our way through the task. After all groups had taken their turn with the camera we sat together on the ground, huddled around a small laptop screen and reviewed the photographs as a group, putting our 'visual literacy' skills into practice.

The following day I introduced techniques such as composition, use of diagonal lines and shapes, the 'rule of thirds', framing and camera angles (high and low angles, close-ups, 'birds eye view'). As with the previous workshop we looked at photographic examples of each technique, discussed how the photographer used the techniques to communicate a message, finishing with the participants taking their own photographs applying the techniques.

Ewald and Lightfoot (2001, p. 31) emphasize that "framing is perhaps the most difficult and important lesson in teaching photography". Accordingly, I made a conscious effort to explain the concept as clearly as possible. Noting how engaged the children had been the day before when it came time to 'do' photography, rather than merely discuss it I decided to take a practical approach. I made black cardboard frames for each participant (and myself), which we used to practice looking at surroundings through a frame (see figure 3.3 below). The exercise was particularly helpful as it sparked a discussion surrounding the choices a photographer must make when taking a photo. For example, thinking about the best way to portray (within a frame) the message or idea you are trying to communicate to an audience.



Figure 3.3: Participants experimenting with their cardboard frames during a workshop. *Source:* Rebecca Ross, June 2014, Mae Sot

Phase Two

The second phase involved the pre-photography individual interviews. Interview questions were loosely categorised into past, present and future. This helped to situate participants' experiences in time and space while allowing a fluid discussion starting with their memories of Burma, their experience of crossing the border, life in Mae Sot and finishing with more free-wheeling discussion such as where they saw themselves in ten years time and their future goals. I assumed some of these topics might bring up sensitive and potentially traumatic memories for the young people, in keeping with children's geographers I tried to keep an open mind about what the participants would be willing to disclose (Solberg, 2014). In saying this, respecting the young peoples' boundaries was paramount: when I sensed a participant was becoming uncomfortable or upset I was careful to redirect the discussion.

I worked to avoid power imbalances between us through multiple means. For example, I asked the participants to choose where they would like the interview to take place; all participants chose their home, the CCC shelter. I remained aware as to how I asked the

questions, not wanting the interviews to come across as interrogations. When conducting research with children, child geographer Mayall (2000, in Spyrou, 2011, p. 155) positions herself as an adult that lacks knowledge about childhood that only children hold. Similarly, in order to recognise the young peoples' expertise I framed questions in a way that highlighted my desire to learn, for example 'I find [...] really interesting, could you tell me about it?' or 'I don't know about [...], would you be able to explain it to me?'

A strategy I found particularly helpful during these interviews was "guided co-production" (Solberg, 2014, p. 244). Rather than leading the entire interview in the direction in which I wanted it to move, I aimed to follow the young peoples' paths, anchoring their stories in context by asking questions such as "who with?", "where did this take place?" or "how did that make you feel?" This helped me to manage rather than direct the interview while situating their experiences in time and space (Solberg, 2014). When participants were hesitant at the beginning of interviews I found that this strategy also helped to draw out more description of their experiences.

Consistent with the spirit of co-producing knowledge, many of the children also asked me questions about my life and experiences. As Chacko (2004, p. 60) also reflected on her research, "women asked me questions during the interview itself, [and]... I often let the respondent take on the role of interviewer." I found that participants often acted as gatekeepers to their own experiences, asking me questions to 'prove' my intentions before sharing their opinions with me. The interviews with two boys, Thant and Eh Htoo, are good examples of this. I finished all the interviews by asking if the participants wanted to share anything else or clarify any points we had discussed. Thant's interview concluded with him taking over the interviewer role. Exercising his power as the proprietor of knowledge he bargained with me:

Thant: I would like to share about myself but before I tell you this one thing, I would like to know what kind of job do you do?

Rebecca: What kind of job do I do?

Thant: Yes

Rebecca: I am a student at University and I am writing about young Burmese people in Thailand to tell people in NZ. Because some people in NZ know about labour migrants from Burma in Thailand but less people talk about

migrant children from Burma like yourself and I think it is important to share your inspiring stories!

Thant: Really? *[laughs]* Also, how many siblings do you have?

Rebecca: I have one brother he is younger than me, he is 21 his name is Matthew. He is a chef in a restaurant in New Zealand. *[Pause]* Anything else? *[Thant, ATL and Rebecca laugh]*

Rebecca: You're interviewing me now! *[laughing]*

Thant: There are so many conflicts. The civil war between the Karen National Union and also the Burmese union they are fighting so we have to move place to place very often. Yes, *[pause]* and also some time the soldier come to our village, they want to destroy our village, but we have no place to stay so we have to move to Thailand and immigrate to Thailand to stay, to live in the Refugee camp.

(Thant, 2014a)

Although Thant had previously withheld this information about the conflict he witnessed in his village, he felt comfortable telling me after I had answered his questions, sharing my motivations for the research and telling him about my brother. In an interview with Eh Htoo I asked if he had dislikes about living in Mae Sot. He stopped the interview and asked "I want to ask, this program ...why are you doing it?" I sensed he needed validation as to why I was asking potentially provocative questions about Thailand.²⁷ Once he felt comfortable that I was 'on his side' so to speak, he began a discussion of exploitation (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

Phase Three

Having reflected on the participants' photography in the previous two workshops and their first interviews, ATL and I thought it would be beneficial to emphasise that symbols can be useful when conveying a memory through photography. ATL was also worried that students, in an excited frenzy, would take all their photographs at once, without considering the subject. Thus, Phase Three started with a third workshop highlighting that photography called for more than just pointing a camera and clicking; taking time, standing still, contemplating the subject (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001).

The brief workshop concluded with handing out each participant his or her own disposable cameras. My decision to use disposable analogue cameras rather than

²⁷ The *Lese Majeste* law in Thailand prevents people speaking out against the monarchy. Often this also results in a fear of speaking against Thai rule as punishment for the crime is jail time.

digital was largely due to cost and availability. I also favoured disposable cameras because they have just 27 shots, unlike digital, where the capacity is limitless. I hoped this would result in more thought going into each photograph, making for a considered collection of images. Practically, it also meant participants would not have more than 27 photographs each, and with fifteen interviews (discussing each photograph individually), this made the task more manageable and realistic. All the participants had the option to keep a written and/or visual diary to further illustrate their ideas and reflections (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001). I explained how to hold a camera, where the lens and viewfinder are and how to use the flash. I left the cameras with the participants for a week. Giving them uninterrupted time to explore their lives through photography.



Figure 3.4: “Aung Nuing Win taking a Photograph” *Source:* Naw Htet, 2014b

Phase Four

Phase Four involved another one-on-one individual interview with each young migrant after their photographs had been printed. We discussed all their photographs and also followed up on points from their original interviews. We put the ‘visual literacy’ skills from the weekend workshops into action, by asking the participants to ‘read’ their own photographs and explain to me each image, their reason for taking it and any messages it was trying to portray (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001).

The use of images in these interviews inspired conversations about aspects of their lives we hadn't previously discussed. As Pink (2007, p. 4) states, "just as an image might invoke a memory of an embodied affective experience, experiences also inspire images." The participants' images acted as visual prompts for them to explain and *show* me their everyday experiences in Mae Sot and to recreate memories they had of their culture, food or family. The use of images as prompts also highlights the importance of captioning the images. Take Figure 3.5 (below) for example, I could not have known that this certain road reminded Zin Zin of her childhood. Researchers championing the photovoice technique stress that the *voice* is as important as the *photo*; thus while a picture may tell a thousand words, depending on your 'ways of knowing' (and seeing) those thousand words will vary (Wang, 1999).

I found that the photovoice method allowed participants to express themselves more easily compared to the pre-photography interviews in Phase Two. As Crang (2010, p. 213) has discussed in relation to research with children "using pictures as the basis of discussion [...] offers a means to express their own ideas not so keyed to verbal skills". Some of the young migrants had difficulty expressing sensitive or traumatic experiences to me in the pre-photography interviews of Phase Two. When describing their photographs to me, they found it easier to discuss these sensitive "unsayable" memories (Spyrou, 2011, p. 153). At the time I had thought this was because we had spent more time together and perhaps they felt more comfortable divulging these difficult topics. However, after further reflection I considered that the photographs added a means through which to focus this emotion – almost like a receptacle to hold and share this personal and emotional voice.

For example, one of the youngest participants Zin Zin, started to cry during our Phase Two interview when she spoke of the death of her late father.

When I was a child, ah [welling up with tears] when I was very young, my father passed away so my mother has to work for our siblings (Zin Zin, 2014a).

Not wanting to cause her any distress, I decided not to ask about her late father unless he came up on her terms, which he did through her photograph ‘The Road’ (below Figure 3.5):



Figure 3.5: “The Road”. *Source:* Zin Zin (2014b)

Rebecca: Can you tell me how this photo relates to your life?

Zin Zin: This photo is the road. I remember when I was little, when I was a baby, before I could stand up, my father and my mother teach me how to stand up and how to walk on the road. I remember this. Reminds me of the childhood.

Rebecca: Ah that’s very nice, so when you walk down this road in Thailand does it remind you of your childhood in Burma? And maybe your father? (Zin Zin, 2014b)

Zin Zin: Yes [grinning] it makes me remember. It reminds me.
(Zin Zin, 2014b)

Previously Zin Zin had been brought to tears at the mention of her father, but during this exchange she expressed happiness at the memory of him. As shown here I think the photographs acted as a connection between the participants’ “inner and outer worlds” (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001, p. 43).

Phase Five

My initial plan was to facilitate a final group meeting. This fifth phase was designed to provide an opportunity for the group to share all their images with each other. While

this phase never formally came into fruition (as my visa expired, forcing me to return to New Zealand), I later discovered that the participants had done this by themselves. When I expressed my disappointment in abandoning the fifth phase to ATL he told me that all the participants had shared their photographs with each other, as well as with other children living in the shelter who weren't involved in the project. In an act that could be likened to Hart's (1992) eighth rung on the ladder (see Figure 3.1) the young people initiated their own shared exchanges without any of my input. I drew solace from the interpretation that perhaps this final step also reflected the participants' ownership over the process as well as their agency within it.

Ethical considerations and 'writing in'

Contract vs. culture

"Your country not like my country, none of this paper and none of that contract... no! You just call up say 'hey my sister can we do this?' and it's okay" (Thant Win, pers. comm. May 2014).

One rainy afternoon I was in the courtyard of a traditional teashop drinking warm, sweet Burmese tea chatting to a friend of mine, Thant Win.²⁸ I told him the participants had expressed apprehension at the idea of creating pseudonyms and sheepishly asked if I was missing something. He explained the importance of names in Burmese culture, describing a common tradition where parents seek guidance from Buddhist monks for names that will lead to a prosperous future for their baby. For my participants, the requirement of ethical compliance to make up a 'fake name' was completely foreign and potentially culturally offensive. I was thankful for having a Burmese friend such as Thant Win to explain these cultural nuances for me, and was embarrassed at my ignorance and oversight. It occurred to me that finding a balance between ethical commitments as contractually defined (by my approved research proposal)²⁹ and what was ethical within this cultural context would be challenging.

Pseudonyms provide the perfect example of this tension. I had an ethical obligation to

²⁸ Name has been changed

²⁹ The Victoria University Human Ethics Committee approved this research April 2014.

keep my participants safe and their identities confidential.³⁰ But, not only did the participants not want their names changed, they also did not want their names omitted. I took this as a token of their investment and pride in the project, which delighted me. In keeping with my collaborative method we (ATL, the participants and myself) discussed this and negotiated an acceptable middle position. We decided that I would use first names only, remaining culturally respectful as well as confidential. At this point I gained consent verbally, asking ATL to read the ‘information sheet’ I had written and I asked each participant individually if I could record our discussions and make copies of their photographs. Problematic here was the model of ethics that I — as a Victoria University student — was forced to work within. Following feminist researchers, I understand knowledge as situated. Therefore, it makes sense to view ethics as a practice also embedded within a certain time, situation and context. As my experience suggests, there is a need for “situated ethics” rather than the single model applied to all varied research projects currently (Ebrahim, 2010, p. 290).

Of course there is more to ethics than consent forms and confidentiality. Researchers, particularly when working with young people, have an obligation to protect participants from any potential distress that may arise from being involved. As Solberg (2014, pp. 233-234) writes “the boundaries of young informants must not be crossed [especially] when research issues are sensitive and informants are under age”. This was something I negotiated and navigated during the interviews, first gauging a participant’s response then determining whether or not to inquire further into different points he or she made.

Reflecting on ethics in my journal I wrote: “ironically, while I’m fretting about consent forms and pseudonyms the attitude here is very much ‘just do it’ and if you do it with kindness, empathy and the best intentions people are appreciative and receptive” (Ross, personal diary 17th May, 2014). Thus, I adopted the approach of Evans (2010, p. 33), asking myself ““what is the most respectful and least harmful thing I can do right now?”... and doing *that* as well and as often as I am able”. This helped to ensure I provided the safest environment I could; respecting, supporting, and appreciating the youth and their opinions. Despite this I often felt deflated and unable to help when my

³⁰ As the participants were (mostly) under 18 years and were all undocumented migrants their guardian and the HEC agreed on confidentiality of names.

participants shared personal and emotional experiences with me. This experience is also described by Palomino-Schalscha (2011, p. 38) who writes that in most cases she “could only offer being there, listening attentively and empathetically, which although [...] important, usually frustrated me.” The participants were so open about their lives and opinions I often left our meetings and interviews worried I had little to offer in return. One approach I found useful during the second workshop was to share my own photographs (of friends, family, New Zealand) and then discussing them with the group.

Reciprocity, a recurring concern within feminist discourse, often troubled me. When I was handing out the cameras, a participant yelled out “*can I have the laptop instead?*” ATL assured me this was a playful response and although I laughed and joked back at the time, I biked home that evening questioning if this project had any real value to the participants and if I was ‘giving enough back’. For Pink (2007, p. 23), researchers’ claims of ‘giving-back’ are not satisfactory or ethical solutions to the extractive nature of some ‘traditional’ research. Thus, rather than compensate, which suggests I ‘took something’ from the participants, I intended the collaborative nature of this research to engender a shared sense of reward for the projects’ outcomes. I initially designed the workshops to act as my contribution to our collaboration by introducing a new creative medium and, crucially, having some fun. In the first workshop, some participants voiced confusion when I asked them to tell me about their everyday life. I sensed they did not feel their daily life was special or worth memorialising.³¹ Therefore, I hoped the photography might contribute to a “re-imagining” or “sociological imagination”,³² of the community and their place within it (McIntyre, 2010, p. 47; Wood, 2012, p. 7).

In my second interview with the boy who had asked for my laptop, I asked “Do you have any questions about the research project, or the process I can help you with?” to which he replied:

I have no question but I would like to say one thing, I really appreciate you to coming here to teach us to take the photo. Taking this photography has made

³¹ This is shown in the section of Thant’s interview on page 26 where he expressed disbelief, questioning “really?” and laughing when I told him that I thought his stories were inspiring and important.

³² Engaging with their ‘sociological imagination’ is a process which offers people a fresh gaze on mundane, ordinary and everyday aspects of their lives and viewing them in as significant aspects of their worlds (Wood, 2012).

me free and has made me feel happy. Sometimes we feel the depression, sometimes we feel very tired but this made me relax when I take photo, I came to this realisation when taking the photograph (Win Win, 2014b).

While I had worried about my ability to ‘give back’, in this interview I realised that perhaps I had over-scrutinised his comment from the workshop, and what Denzin (2004, n.p. in Kindon, 2012) calls the “sting of memory, the insult, the slur”.

Analysis and ‘writing-in’

I returned to Wellington in July (2014) and sat at my desk feeling overwhelmed at the task that lay before me. While I had transcribed the interviews in the field, I faced the daunting task of writing about all the experiences I had shared with the participants, what I had seen and heard (on and off the record) then attempting to categorise it into chapters (Cupples & Kindon, 2014). This seemed an insurmountable task. I felt blinded by my fondness for the participants; I wanted to share *all* their stories and *all* their photographs. Moreover, the youth had trusted me with their stories and I felt responsible, from a space of reciprocity and respect, to share them in an appropriate way.

In line with both phenomenology and the notion of situated knowledge, Berg and Mansvelt (2000) reject positivist notions of *writing-up* and call for qualitative researchers to *write-in*, a concept I found particularly helpful. Recognising that writing shapes the research as much as reflecting it, writing-in acknowledges the inability of researchers to reproduce their participants’ perspectives by unproblematically writing-up the ‘simple truths’ of the research (Berg & Mansvelt, 2000). Viewing writing as the final phase of the project is therefore problematic, resulting in disembodied academic work that is “monolithic, universal and totalizing” (Berg & Mansvelt, 2000, p. 165). Following this, rather than merely viewing my writing as a method of presenting the research findings, what I learnt during my time in Mae Sot constitutes both what I knew and how I chose to write about it.

Coming from a feminist methodological orientation I was less than enamoured by the concept of coding and categorizing the participants’ ideas in demarcated boxes. I felt that coding in this way viewed their words as the complete ‘single story’, ignoring the fact that this knowledge is partial and situated. So, I avoided computer programs such

as *NVivo* opting for a ‘Post-It’ note method, what I consider to be a more creative and involved approach to coding (Woods, 2006). Having left Mae Sot with a large stack of photographs taken by the participants, I got to work combining the photographs with our discussion of them (see Figure 3.6).³³ Along with the interview transcripts, I had these printed and bound into a book to draw from and refer back to throughout the writing process. In a similar process to what Maclure (2013, p. 174) describes, I then began “annotating, describing, linking, bringing theory to bear, recalling what others have written, and seeing things from other angles”. I enjoyed doing it manually – scribbling on the book with pens and highlighters. In line with Maclure (2013, p. 174) I felt there was “something about embodiment in all this, which turns away from assisted qualitative analysis programs”.

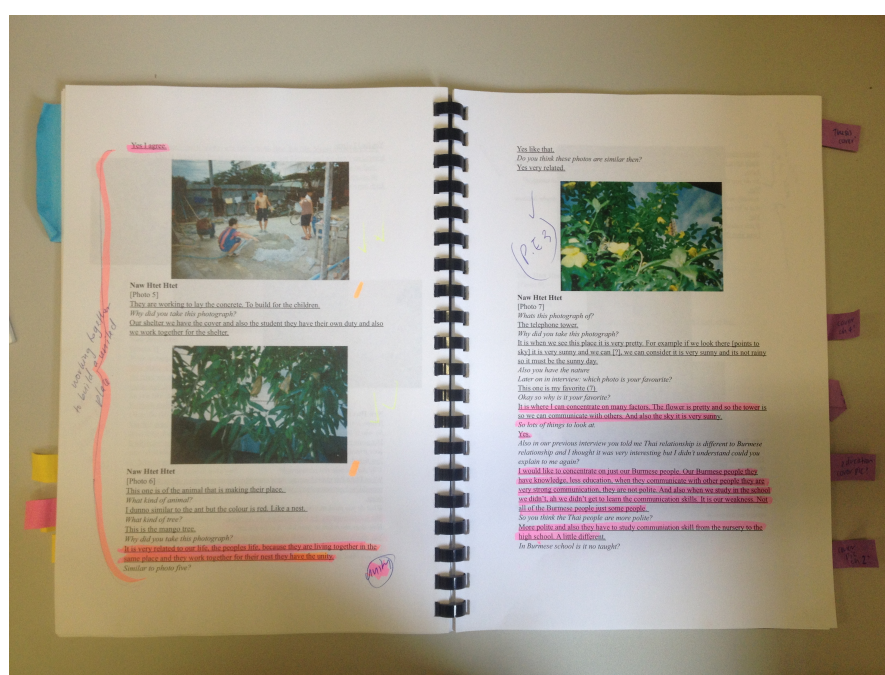


Figure 3.6: My manual coding. *Source:* Rebecca Ross, 2014, Wellington.

Having read through all their stories (visual and otherwise) and identifying common themes and ideas, arranging them into mind maps followed by chapter plans. During the complex method of writing-in I worked through a messy process of jumping back and forth between writing, reading and contemplation, drawing out commonalities and

³³ The young people kept the originals and, with their permission, I took copies back to New Zealand.

conclusions. Notably the iterative process did not finish when writing commenced and I spent much time revisiting the participant's stories and photographs making sense of what they had told me as I wrote.

Re-presentation

Childhood geographers Aitken and Herman (1997, p. 64 in Matthews & Limb, 1999, p. 64) refer to a "crisis of representation" arguing the study of young people is beyond (adult) researchers' grasp. Although this is an extreme position, it does highlight the deeply problematic assertion of some researchers who claim to 'represent' the voice of children and/or young people. Rather than be complicit with this attitude, I have chosen to position myself and this work as a vessel through which I re-present their stories or "messages" as ethically and responsibly as possible (Wood, 2012, p. 15).

'Re-presentation' (distinct from representation) is a term borrowed from feminist geographer Alldred (1998) that acknowledges that my research is actively produced by me and consequently embodies my own perspective. Also speaking to the negotiation involved in writing-in, the concept acknowledges that I am not simply presenting findings but re-presenting them through my own way of thinking. By sorting and presenting the 'data' I was placing their stories within my own interpretive frameworks: I therefore adopted a reflexive approach to analysis, considering how I included and attached meaning to their 'voice' (Berg & Mansvelt, 2000; Spyrou, 2011, p. 158).

In relation to re-presentation, visual methods have come under scrutiny for conflating the 'visual' with 'truth' (Crang, 2010; Kindon, 2003; Spyrou, 2011). Though I believe the use of photovoice enabled "more naturalistic spaces for communication", it did not overcome the problems associated with re-presenting young peoples voices (Wood, 2012, p. 5). Kearns (2000, p.333 in Crang, 2010) describes the tendency of researchers to rely on the 'obviousness' of vision, succumbing to a false sense of realism that assumes photographs are "raw data" and overlooks inherent issues of power and knowledge. For Kindon (2003, p. 142) the tendency of researchers to detach their own "gaze" is problematic as it ignores the involvement of the researcher producing "voyeuristic, distanced and disembodied claims to knowledge". Adapting Trinh Minh-

ha's notion of 'speaking nearby',³⁴ Kindon (2003, p. 149), suggests the challenge for researchers is learning to "look nearby" as opposed to "looking at". This 'indirect gaze' requires a "looking that reflects on itself and comes very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it" (Kindon, 2003, p. 149).

Despite the obvious advantage of participants making the images themselves it would be wrong to view these images as "visual facts" and overlook the effect my 'gaze' had on their creation (Kindon, 2003, p. 147). The situated nature of these images means – consistent with the concept of 'scopic regimes' – that we should view them as partial depictions of the young peoples' worlds constructed within the context of social relations (Crang, 2010; Kindon, 2003). For example, the project took place within the same room I facilitated the workshops.³⁵ It is possible the participants' responses were being "channelled toward providing what they thought I wanted to hear, and what was deemed 'acceptable' within such pedagogic contexts" (Wood, 2012, p. 15).

Explicitly confronting my researcher's gaze required consideration not only of who controlled the cameras in the field but also the power I held back in Wellington through what I included, excluded, emphasised and underplayed in the writing of this thesis. In an attempt to keep my viewpoint fresh and open, as well as remaining true to the participants' stories, I have chosen to present four photo-essays between chapters (three to six). Rather than discarding data which, in line with Wood (2012, p. 8), was "interesting but unnecessary for the 'real' part of my research." The photo-essays provide an opportunity for readers to 'get to know' the participants beyond the realm of Chapters Four to Six. In some places the photographs relate to the following chapter, helping to contextualise the discussion. I adopted a fairly random approach to curating these photographs, reluctant to select those that 'fitted' together and then forsaking the rest. I have also included *all* photographs (regardless of quality) to encourage an engagement with the 'everydayness' of the young migrants' visual narratives, allowing "its noise, randomness and interruptions – to interfere in the research" (Wood, 2012, p. 5).

³⁴ Trin Minh-ha is a filmmaker and cultural studies/post-colonial academic (Chen & Minh-ha 1994 in Kindon, 2003).

³⁵ Except for the photovoice aspect of the project allowed the participants to move beyond this space.

As mentioned, I am ethically obligated to ensure any photographs published in this thesis do not show any young peoples' identifiable faces. Yet, I found obscuring the faces of the participants' – the stories of whom I am trying share – a challenging and problematic task. In terms of re-presentation, tampering with photographs felt wrong and removing faces seemed to de-humanise and objectify the young people. In a critique of blurring photographs Wiles et al. (2008, p. 23) argue:

Viewing images with faces obscured can be disconcerting. Without faces people appear not as people at all but as objects, this does not accord with a duty to treat people with respect.

I questioned why I bothered using visual images if I couldn't even show them in their original state. However, upon realizing the alternative was not presenting any photographs including people, I (in what I see as a compromise) decided to blur the participants' eyes only. In doing so, their facial expression and gestures are perceivable but my responsibility to protect the participants is also upheld.

Translation



Figure 3.7: Key ideas I had translated. *Source:* Rebecca Ross, 2014, Mae Sot

A

significant limitation to my research (adding a further layer of re-presentation) was the language barrier between the Burmese youth and myself (a native English speaker).

Although the use of visual images helped to lower the language barrier in some situations, translation was an ever-present aspect of this research that often left me feeling extremely frustrated. In terms of confidentiality and mistranslation, the use of a translator was also a contentious ethical issue.³⁶ However, I found the presence of another person and the power that came with a third positionality, to be more salient.

Some geographers have questioned the limited attention given to the impact of translation in research, noting that the discussion of translation rarely finds its way into final academic work (Bujra, 2006; Smith, 2009). I find this surprising, particularly from a feminist point of view, considering the importance given to voice, power and questions of representation, all of which are inherently entwined (and potentially skewed) in the process of translation. As Bujra (2006, p. 172) argues “translation is more than a technical exercise; it is also a social relationship involving power [...] and the imperfect mediation of cultures”. As such, I had to consider not only the impact of my own positionality, and how it related to the participants, but also whether ATL’s positionality ‘meshed well’ or ‘tangled awkwardly’ within interactions that required him to translate (Chacko, 2004, p. 5).

ATL was not just a translator; he took on a much larger role as both a co-researcher and friend. While I had naïvely assumed ATL would take a neutral role, he often contributed an opinion, an experience of his own or clarified a participant’s point if I had not understood. Initially, his impact on the data concerned me, until I began to appreciate his input as simply another facet in the process, generating rich collaborative knowledge. To address his input, I have acknowledged where ATL is translating and where he is speaking for himself in the following chapters.

Jacobsen and Landau (2003) highlight the risk of using a translator known by the participants, arguing it influences their willingness to discuss personal experiences, especially where they are socially or politically delicate. It was not simply the fact that ATL lived with the participants that presented challenges, but also the combination of elements such as his gender, age, ability to speak English and role as a mentor within the CCC shelter that could have made his positionality influential. For example, I

³⁶ I had my translator sign a confidentiality agreement.

sensed some of the younger boys looked up to ATL as an older brother figure, no doubt affecting their participation in our discussions. Similarly, in a culture where women are often polite, demure and respectful to both elders and men (Rogers, 2012), I often wondered if, as an older man, ATL might have shaped my discussions with the girls simply by being present. However, ATL's familiarity with the participants also aided the research process. Not only did his presence as a third party reduced the 'interrogation' type of dynamic of one-to-one interviews, but as a trusted figure in their lives, his endorsement of the project (and of me), validated it for the young people and made them feel more at ease.

Practically, I have left out most of the interjections made during the interviews, as it was often hard to tell whether these were the participant's or ATL's. As mentioned I transcribed all the interviews in the evenings directly after they were conducted. This allowed deeper immersion with the minutiae of our interviews but was also necessary in a practical sense because many of the participants used hand gestures and actions to aid their story telling.³⁷ They also often emphasized words – leaning forwards and drawing out the syllables – when making an important point. For these words I italicize in their narratives and for clarity I often repeated their statements back to them to ensure I had correctly understood their answers.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to make sense of my messy 'bricolage' of an epistemology, as well as detailing my methodological route and describing the speed-bumps I encountered along the way. I have also dealt with important practical issues of analysis, writing-in, ethics, representation and translation. A common thread throughout this chapter is power. I agree with (Gallagher, 2008, p. 147) when he states "power is not evil", however, it did play a fundamental role in every stage of my research; from planning the project in my Wellington office, to implementing it in Thailand and returning to Wellington to write-in. Thus, while this complex

³⁷ This is exemplified below in this excerpt from Thant Win (per. Comm. 3rd June, 2014) trying to describe Thai authorities realizing the effect of deporting migrants was having on their income (due to lack of bribes): "They say '*Ohhhh*' [puts finger to chin and looks up acting confusion]. You know? So there was no profit that time [claps three times] because they all went broooooom [motions people leaving in direction of Burma on motorbikes]. Then *bang* (whacks table with clenched fist and smiles) they stopped sweeping migrants."

combination of theories and ideas may seem disjointed, they provided me with a toolbox to draw from during my time in the field in Mae Sot, helping me to be aware of and to challenge the ever-changing power dynamics I confronted throughout the project.

Photo Essay One

Photography was at the heart of this project. Watching the young people look through their images for the first time, delighted, bemused or confused, I knew I had a commitment to share them. In the photo-essay that follows (the first of four) I represent participants' visual stories to contribute to the wider story of their daily lives. Please note that those photographs without captions were taken by the participants who were unable to complete the project. I felt they too should be included.



Source: Zao, June 2014, Mae Sot.



Source: Ko Ko Win, June 2014, Mae Sot.



I really wanted to take a photo in the rain. It is of me — my friend took it — so that when I meet people in the future I can show them a documentation of my life (Thant, 2014b).



This photo is of my favourite place in Mae Sot. In the morning I like to get up really early at a time when there are not many people around (Aung Naing Win, 2014b).



This is us working at school. We are going to grow some plants in our school garden (Si Thu, 2014b).



I climbed on the roof of the shelter to take this photo so that you can see over the gate. That place [beyond the fence] is still safe for me but it's safer inside it (Law Eh 2014b).

Chapter Four

Leaving, arriving and finding ‘our place’



Figure 4.1: This photo represents the place of my life. *Source:* Aung Nuing Win, 2014b.

Introduction

Finding my way to the SAW shelter I got lost twice.³⁸ Bike riding from my guesthouse in the centre of Mae Sot to the periphery of town proved an exercise in orienteering reminiscent of my high-school days. I biked across the chaotic main town, through streets lined with roti-vendors and samosa stalls, past the large hospital until I eventually reached edge of Mae Sot. This is where, each day, I would find the Burmese migrant community or *Muba Htaung Htung*,³⁹ as they have named it. The punchy rhythm of traffic faded, the paved roads blended into gravel and the collections of stalls and shops disappeared into thirsty amber fields which, come the rainy season, would turn into lush greenery. The SAW shelter itself was located off the main road,

³⁸ SAW child crisis centre which was referred to as the ‘SAW shelter’ or simply the ‘shelter’ by participants.

³⁹ *Muba Htaung Htung* or ‘Gold Bag Village’ name given by Burmese migrants’ for their community in Mae Sot, often shortened to *Htaung Htung*. See *Glossary*

surrounded by fields brimming with children playing football and *chinlone*.⁴⁰ This, to me, was a happy place. I enjoyed my time in *Htaung Htung* and always looked forward to returning. However, for the participants the shelter represented conflicting emotions: they expressed feeling safe, but missing Burma; made their own fun, but felt restricted; were saddened by their limited rights, but happy to be receiving an education.

In this chapter I re-present the young migrants' stories of life in Burma, leaving Burma and then arriving in Thailand. Following this I explore the participants' perceptions of life within the shelter, attending to the ways in which they transcended their (physically) confined space by building a culturally familiar place within it and cultivating ties to their homeland.

Leaving Burma

Life in Burma

In line with my phenomenological orientation I felt it was important to explore the young migrants' memories of life in Burma prior to their journeys across the border. These form the background stories as to why they migrated and also helped create an understanding of the ways they interacted, perceived and related to their surrounding space and place in Mae Sot (which I explore later in this chapter). When describing their daily lives at home in their villages, the young people recounted school, friends and helping their parents around the house or through income generation:

I was studying at the school; on the other hand I was helping my mother to sell snacks. We sold to them other people; it was always different things to sell, for an income. I was happy, especially when our village celebrated the Buddhist tradition in the morning. But it is very different for children in Burma [compared with Thai children]. For example the Thai citizen 15 years old, they do not need to work when they are studying at the school. For our Burmese kids, even when we are studying at the school we have to also work, we have to help our parents. It is very different in Burma. We cannot concentrate just on the study. We have to concentrate on many other things (Eh Ku, 2014a).

I remember when I was living in my village I was studying, I had many friends, I attended the school, from the nursery to grade two. During the day I had

⁴⁰ The game *chinlone* (cane ball in English) is Burma's national sport. See *glossary*

chores, I was helping my parents to bring in the water. I have the happiest memories of Burma. I was very happy (Paw Htet Htet, 2014a).

I was studying at the school and I helped my mother cooking for other kids in the home. When all the students had the school break I was always feeling happy on those days (Zin Zin, 2014a).

Unfortunately, a widely-reported consequence of the stresses associated with poverty and crisis is domestic violence (Caouette, 2001). One participant mentioned violence within his household when explaining his least favourite memory of Burma:

I have seven siblings. When I lived in my village I attended the school just to grade two because I had to work. When I was staying with my mother and father I was feeling happy. But sometimes I felt sad because my parents beat my younger siblings because they didn't listen, they didn't pay attention to my parents. When I saw them I always felt sad (Eh Say, 2014a).

Interestingly, while Eh Say later explained that he still missed Burma, he was one of the few participants to associate positive emotions with arriving in Thailand:

I was feeling happy because I get to stay in other country. This is a new country for me, new climate for me, new geography for me, yeah, it was exciting! (Eh Say, 2014a).

Supporting the phenomenological thought that our lived experiences shape how humans see and interact with the world (Schutz, 1967), I found that the young migrants who had fled from exceptionally traumatic or difficult situations in Burma often described feeling positive towards Mae Sot and their move to Thailand. For example two of the young boys who witnessed ethnic conflict in their village noted “I am happy I am able to stay in the shelter because I feel this place is safe for me, more safe than Burma” (Thant, 2014a) and “I wanted to come to live in Thailand, I feel more safe in Thailand so I am happy” (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

Reasons for migrating

The decision to migrate was complex and multi-layered. Although I received a variety of responses when exploring why participants had left Burma, all the young migrants viewed the move to Thailand as a gateway to greater opportunities and future success,

particularly in the form of education. A combination of factors usually contributed to their (or their parents) decision to migrate. As Thant (2014a) told me, “the children here they left from Burma for all different situations, different crisis”. Education, poverty and conflict in particular were identified by the young migrants as the main barriers to accessing education in Burma.

Opportunities for education

The main factor driving participants to migrate were the barriers to, and quality of, education in Burma. In 2012 the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) of Burma spent just 1.3 per cent of its annual budget on education, compared with the 40 per cent it spent on the military (CP, 2012). UNICEF (2013) statistics indicated that while most children attended school at the primary level, just 30 per cent completed primary education and only half of that 30 per cent continue onto secondary level.

Education was particularly difficult for those living outside the main cities. While the participants’ villages all had schools, they only taught up to grade four.⁴¹ Moreover, if teachers or students heard that military junta was nearby they would often hide at home or flee to nearby villages disrupting education for weeks at a time (Rogers, 2012). As one boy noted “they are fighting all the time so we have to move place to place very often” (Thant, 2014a).⁴² If students wanted further education they had had to travel into cities and bigger towns where transport, accommodation and school fees were more costly “even for example the Karen state or the Mon state have would have to travel to capital city for school” (Si Thu, 2014a). This internal migration was out of reach for many families in rural areas, as was transport cost of children commuting for school – particularly in large families with multiple children to support.

Due to the prevalence of local and international NGOs in the refugee camps and towns on the Thai side of the Thai/Burma border, education was more accessible than in the villages and usually free of charge. Additionally, the curricula included learning Thai, English as well as Burmese and the organisations co-ordinated curriculums ensuring all students learnt at a similar level. Thus, for young people seeking further education,

⁴¹ Equivalent of Year 4 in New Zealand when a student is aged nine to ten years old.

⁴² BY ‘they’ Thant is referring to the Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

especially those who lived close to the border, crossing into Thailand to continue the schooling unavailable in their villages was not uncommon (usually post grade four) (CP, 2012).

A further reason for migration into Thailand given by the participants was a perceived lack of opportunity if they were to stay in Burma. Win Win (2014a) acknowledged that “main reason is for education” but also identified the likelihood of finishing school *and* graduating university *and* finding employment was slim, “even if we will finish [school] and we will graduate from the university, we cannot get jobs. Here we can get more opportunity”. Naw Htet (2014a) noted, “my mother thought we would get more opportunity for education here [Thailand]”. Chaung Pow (2014a) also told me that even if her parents had been able to afford her secondary education, her opportunities were limited beyond high school, “I cannot continue my education in Burma for example I cannot attend the University”.

Escaping economic crisis

Many young migrants described what they termed an “economic crisis”.⁴³ One boy explained this as the term they learned at school to describe when their families could not afford basic necessities: “most of people in Burma they are very poor, very poor, they have to fight even for their food.” (Aung Nuing Win, 2014a). The effects of a family’s economic crisis combined with the discontinuation of village schooling past grade four created a significant barrier to participants furthering their education, as Thant (2014a) explained:

I have left from my village because of my family have economic crisis and I would like to attend the school so I decided that I come. I really wanted to stay there; to live in Burma but because of economic crisis my parents cannot support me to attend the school. In my village there is one school up to grade four. But after grade four the students have to go, they have to move to the city or another town. But if they want to go to high school in the town it costs a lot. For example, they have to pay the tuition fee and the boarding house fee, they have to use a lot of money for their education. But for our rural people we cannot afford this arrangement.

⁴³ Term “economic crisis” was referred to by the following participants during individual interviews with Aung Nuing Win (2014a), Paw Htet Htet (2014a), Law Law (2014a), Thant (2014a; 2014b).

Many participants described similar circumstances, for example:

I came for an education. We [in Burma] have some schools but the best quality is mostly around the capital city and the main towns. In the countryside and the Karen parts its not as good. And also I have so many siblings my mother cannot support all of our educations. That's why my mother decided to send me here (Naw Htet, 2014a).

We cannot get education easily in Burma and my parents couldn't find work so they couldn't pay for my education. My older brother and sister, they are still living in Burma. They only attended to grade four and then had to work to help our parents. For example, when my parents get sick they have to take care of them and cook for them (Aung Nuing Win, 2014a).

Chaung Pow's parents were hesitant for her to move to Thailand alone at such a young age. Thus, initially she moved (alone) from her village to a bigger town nearby which had a school that taught up to grade seven. Once she completed her seventh grade her parents decided she was old enough (then twelve) to make the move to Thailand so she migrated for a third time into Mae Sot:

I was attending in Burma I was attending from primary to grade four in my village. After the grade four I moved to other town to continue my education to the grade seven. Then I left [Burma] for because I cannot attend [school] anymore, so my parents decided that they would send me to Mae Sot to go to school (Chaung Pow, 2014a).

For sisters Law Law and Zin Zin their family's economic crisis was the result of their fathers death, the main income earner for the household. Their mother decided to send the children across the border, where they would receive shelter, food and education that she was unable to provide. The youngest, Zin Zin (2014a) shared:

When I was very young, my father passed away so my mother had to work but when my sisters and I grew up we had to attend school. But we have four siblings in my family so my mother cannot support, cannot provide for all of us.

Law Law (2014a), unlike her sister, spent most of her childhood in Burma, remembered the many crises her family faced and noted that she felt unsafe.

We moved because my mother cannot afford the money to support us for our education. Even though I want to stay in Burma, I cannot because where my

family is there are so many crisis, economic crisis, social crisis, and also sometimes we have to face the political conflict there, the civil war. Yes I have seen, I have seen the fighting before. Here in Thailand, I think it is more safe.

Avoiding conflict

Although Burma is a nation now widely presented as a nation on-the-mend, participants' accounts highlighted that ethnic conflict remained a visible and traumatic aspect of life for minority ethnic groups in the rural areas (B. Rogers, 2012). As Law Eh (2014a) described, "Sometimes, not very often, but sometimes the people are fighting each other, I feel the war, I feel the fighting". Thant (2014a) also shared:

There were so many conflicts, the civil war between the KNU (Karen National Union) and the Burmese Union. Sometimes the soldier came to our village, they wanted to destroy our village, but we have no other place to stay so we have to immigrate to Thailand and live in the refugee camp.

In a similar experience Eh Htoo (2014a) describes a group of rebels opening fire on his village:

Yes, I remember some things from leaving my village. The Burmese enemies came and shot at villagers so we ran away from the village. They were shooting everywhere. I don't know if other people [in the village] were okay, I did not see them again but everybody [in my family] was okay. But yeah, all my family, we all left together. I want to go back.

Zao (2014a) was sent over the border because his family feared for his safety; his parents worried that he would be recruited as a child soldier:

Sometimes the military come into our village to arrest the small kids, to bring them into the military camp and they want them to be child soldier. I was afraid and my parents were too, this is why I left.

Crossing the border and arriving in Thailand

Mae Sot (as mentioned in Chapter One) is located on the borderline with nothing but a narrow section of the Moei River separating it from the Burmese town of Myawaddy. In fact, the border is so accessible that some young migrants noted that labour migrants often crossed in the morning for work and return in the evening. ATL explained how easy it was to cross the border undetected:

You can see the river between the Burma and Thailand, the whole day the Burmese migrant workers cross. They just go back and forth. Some of the migrant workers they come for the day here in the morning to Mae Sot looking for jobs and then in the afternoon they go back to Burma. They cross the river the whole day. If they got stopped [by police] nothing would happen. (per comm., ATL, 6th June 2014)

While it is not uncommon for migrants as young as thirteen to cross the border unaccompanied, most of the youth I spoke with (some of whom were less than ten years of age at the time of their migration), crossed with their parents or older siblings. All crossed illegally, through unofficial channels and networks and often sought out someone living in Mae Sot, or a nearby town, to meet them and arrange their travel and accommodation upon arriving.

The most common route taken by the young migrants on their journey was travelling from their village by car to the border town of Myawaddy in Burma (see figure 4.2 below).⁴⁴ From there they crossed the Moei River into Mae Sot, where they caught a *Ruea Hang Yao* (long-tail boat) across The Moei River into Mae Sot. All of the young migrants informed me that they had crossed the border without documentation. Consequently, they were required to pay one of the many *Ruea Hang Yao* drivers along the riverside to ferry them across the river covertly, rather than take the legal route of crossing the 'Friendship Bridge' (bridge location marked by orange triangle on Figure 4.2) that connects Myawaddy (in Burma) to Mae Sot (in Thailand). This boat trip takes less than five minutes and costs relatively little. However, once reaching the Thai side of the river they arrived into a busy marketplace around two hours' walk from the center of Mae Sot and an additional forty minutes from the Burmese community on the periphery of town where they now reside.

⁴⁴ All participants crossed from Burma to Thailand over the border in the area highlighted green on Figure 4.2.



Figure 4.2: Map of Burma/Thai border showing area where the young migrants crossed (in green)
Source: Rebecca Ross

Many of the young people were accompanied over the border by parents or relatives who knew of SAW or had contacts in Mae Sot. As Law Law (2014a) recalled:

I came by car driving from my small village to Myawaddy, the border town in Burma, then I crossed the river, boating across, between Myawaddy in Burma into Mae Sot. When we arrived in Mae Sot, firstly I go to live in my relative, my uncle's, home. I stayed for one month and then moved to SAW.
 (Law Law, 2014a)

Naw Htet's (2014a) mother also dropped her off in Mae Sot, stayed for five days to help find her accommodation and then returned back to their village, "she [mother] was living here just a few days, five days maybe, after that she went back". Naw Htet was ten years old at the time and found this distressing, she explains:

I remember I was driving from my village to Mae Sot. I came straight to SAW. I was feeling sad because I didn't get a chance to stay with my family anymore, I was feeling very sad. (Naw Htet, 2014a)

Aung Nuing Win's (2014a) whole family crossed the border together but his parents later migrated internally, leaving him and his sister in the care of SAW. While leaving Burma saddened him he mentioned feeling fortunate to have his whole family in Thailand:

We drove across the border. We came here from my village to Mae Sot and then my parents, they lived here for two or three months then they moved there Phop Phra⁴⁵ because they got a job working on a plantation at a migrant learning centre, growing the food for the kids. Because we have to stay in a different country [Thailand] I feel sad. But, fortunately I can stay with my parents here [in Thailand] so that makes me happy, when I get a holiday I visit there [Phop Phra], very often.

Zin Zin (2014a) added that their mother and brother also accompanied them on the journey settling them into their uncle's house and saying goodbye before she returned to Burma.

I came here with my brother and older sister and also my mother. She brought us here and was living in Mae Sot for three days and after than she went back. My uncle then brought us here [to SAW], he already live in Thailand.

Win Win's (2014a) had an uncle already living in Thailand who crossed the border back into Burma, picked up Win Win, and took him to Mae Sot.

My uncle had been in Thailand for a long time, a lot longer, he knew the Thailand situation. When I left my village I was feeling sad because when I arrived in Thailand I don't know the people who are living here and I felt scared, a little scared.

The mention of participants' *uncles* was so prevalent it has lead me to question whether they did cross with the help of relatives, or if some were using 'carriers' or 'transporters' and referring to them as uncles. For example, during our interview Zao (2014a) corrected himself stating, "I came here with my uncle ah well, not my real uncle". Of course the probable explanation is that they many participants did have

⁴⁵ Phop Phra is a different district in the same province as Mae Sot (the Tak province).

relatives living in Thailand as migrant workers. Though it is also possible that some participants' parents paid carriers to help their children cross the border safely. However, I would like to emphasize that this is merely an assumption and in the interviews I did not inquire further regarding their possible trafficking.

There were also the young migrants who crossed the border alone or with younger siblings. Law Eh for example, was just ten years old when he crossed with his younger brother. Through networks within Burma his parents knew of SAW but were unable to take the trip across with their children. Law Eh (2014a) described:

The first day I was driving from my village to the Myawaddy town. Then to the river and I paid for a boat to get across the river. The river begins in Burma and then it goes to inside Thailand, to Mae Sot. From there I went straight to here, to Mae Sot. We [him and his brother] came at the same time, directly to SAW. I was feeling sad, well I still feel sad. (Law Eh, 2014a)

Ko Ko Win (2014a) crossed the border by himself aged thirteen:

I was scared when I crossed the border. I came alone, I came directly from my village driving then I crossed the river. I came straight to SAW they [my parents] knew somebody from SAW. When I left my village I felt sad, even when I arrived in Mae Sot I still feel sad sometimes.

Unplanned, sudden crossings

Perhaps the biggest variance in experiences was the difference in planning. The vast majority of young migrants crossed through organized channels, planned in advanced, having weighed up the opportunities available in Thailand compared to Burma. However, some of the participants' experiences of border-crossing were forced. These crossings were extremely sudden, with participants moving out of necessity rather than choice. In this case, there was little time to arrange family members to pick up the children or meet them on their arrival in Mae Sot. Two boys participating in the project fell into this un-planned category; Thant and Eh Htoo. For these boys their circumstance changed quickly as a result of the ongoing conflict between the Tatmadaw (Burmese Army) and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

As described in the previous section Thant and Eh Htoo both fled Burma and sought refuge at the Mae La refugee camp. Thant's mother accompanied him to the border (on the Burmese side) and then he crossed the border into Thailand alone:

We started by leaving the village and going to Myawaddy; this is the border town in Burma. After that I went to the Mae La refugee camp and then I came here [SAW shelter] and my mother went back to our village (Thant, 2014a).

Eh Htoo's family fled in such haste they did not have time to even secure a car to drive them to the border, as he recalled:

We walked in the water. We walked by foot. My family came to Thailand from the village because we cannot live in the village anymore. The walk is very difficult. We walked on the mountain and through the stream. Very difficult. It took one week. One week of walking all the time. I was tired [...] then we arrived in the Mae La camp.⁴⁶ Yes. Mae la is the refugee camp with many many people and many many huts. I lived in Mae la for one year and I attended the school. I liked Mae la, yes better than in Burma. I felt more safe in Thailand (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

Feeling sad and scared

Another theme to be drawn from all the accounts above was feelings of fear and sadness. Whether crossing alone or with family, in a planned or sudden move, the young migrants found the experience distressing. Interestingly some of the youth distinguish not only that they felt "sad" or "scared" when leaving their homes and/or families but also when they arrived: "I still feel sad" (Law Eh, 2014a). Thant, who crossed fled Burma suddenly (as discussed above) explained that arriving in Thailand as a child alone was overwhelming and he found it difficult to access support:

I would like to share an example from me. When I arrived in Mae Sot, the first week, the first year, I didn't know where I could get any opportunities. For example here [in SAW] I have the teacher, I have the older people, I can ask them. For example I wanted to attend the school, I wanted this everyday but I didn't know how to get there. This situation is not good, ya know? (Thant, 2014a).

⁴⁶ As of July 2014 the Mae La camp's population was 43,798, 44.6% of all refugees living in Mae La in 2012 were younger than 18 years of age (TBC, 2014).

In the section above I have re-presented the migrants' accounts of their lives prior to migration as well as their experience of migration and arriving in Thailand. I now explore their experiences and perceptions of life in Mae Sot, the barriers they associated with being labeled an 'illegal migrant' and the ways they challenged them.

Finding space, making place

We feel secure here in this camp
So many people go up and down the street outside
But we are terrified of the world out there
Mum said: "they are different. They are civilians and here is their place. Here is their country"
The place we are right now ...is not our country
Where do I belong?
*Maung Maung Tinn*⁴⁷

As I have previously explained the young migrants with whom I collaborated on this research were undocumented and therefore were not legally permitted to be living in Mae Sot. Although the authorities generally turned a blind eye,⁴⁸ if undocumented youth were caught in the Mae Sot town centre they risked being arrested, deported or both. Consequently, the young migrants were only permitted – and more importantly only felt safe – within the *Htaung Htung* community. My translator ATL explained that the nearby hospital marked the boundary, any further than that point and they risked "getting into trouble" (pers. comms. 2nd June 2014). For an energetic group of young people, being confined to a walled area was frustrating and made them restless. As one SAW worker explained, "the kids are often bored and stuck in the shelters" (pers. email Hannah,⁴⁹ April 2014). Of course, beyond boredom, being "stuck" within a physically-bounded locale also had implications regarding feelings of exclusion, freedom, happiness and agency. However, the young people's narratives and photographs were not constrained by notions of a bounded space. Although they identified with being spatially restricted, and the associated feelings of exclusion, they

⁴⁷ Tinn (2009) is a Burmese artist living in Mae Sot who paints and writes short poems. A collection was published into his book "On The Border" from which I selected this work.

⁴⁸ The legality of the relationship between the police and the migrant children remained unclear during my research. The closest I came to an explanation was from Thant Win who told me: "the police and the SAW have an agreement. Yeah well something, they have a connection. But they [children] still have to stay in the compound [shelter]" (Thant Win, pers. comms. 22nd June 2014).

⁴⁹ Name has been changed

also showed that creating or “performing” their place in Mae Sot was a significant aspect in their everyday worlds (Rose, 1999, p. 247).

This section begins by re-presenting the participants’ views on life in Thailand as an undocumented migrant. I then explore the ways in which the young migrants transcended the space in which they were confined, by drawing on Burmese language, history and traditions (including food, clothing, games) in their everyday lives. I also discuss their involvement with the wider *Htaung Htung* community and how their attachment of memories to places in Mae Sot served as a way to maintain ties to their homeland (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 10).

Finding shelter

Having left Burma, crossed the border and found their way to the SAW shelter many of the young migrants described that they felt relief at having arrived in a safe environment with guardians to care for them. While ‘feeling safe’ was emphasised by participants, they often compared their sense of safety within the shelter’s gates to their uneasiness about being outside them.

The shelter and boarding house, this whole area is safe for me. But for example, other places we cannot go out, we cannot stay outside. We are prey for the police and also there might be a raid by the police so I don’t like to stay out there in the town (Thant 2014a).

I have places I don’t feel safe in the Mae Sot town area. There are people there, a group of Thai people. Not a gang just a group but there is no female. I feel to go alone is dangerous for me. But I think this shelter, this home, this place is the most safe for me (Naw Htet, 2014a).

I only like this place [shelter]. I have no favorite place in Mae Sot town. But, I like this place, the shelter (Chaung Pow, 2014a).

I have fear because of the police, the police issue. I am afraid when they come around here (Paw Htet Htet, 2014a).

I think some places are not as safe for me. I don’t know what it is called, but its outside, when I live here in the shelter it is safe but when I leave here it is not safe for me (Zao, 2014a).

Although there was no physical border separating the migrant community from the wider township, it was evident that fear of the police (whom they associated with deportation) and Thai community members, particularly men, kept the young migrants from leaving the shelter. As Naw Htet (2014a) shared, “I would like to say that in Thailand it is not freedom for me”. Further, a wider exclusionary discourse surrounding ‘being illegal’ created an invisible boundary defined by where was (and where was not) appropriate for migrant youth to be (Cresswell, 2013). In what I found to be a particularly poignant example of how some participants felt, when I asked one boy what he liked about living in Mae Sot he replied, “I don’t really live in Mae Sot” (Ko Ko Win, 2014a).



Figure 4.3 “Migrant child.” *Source:* Thant, 2014b.

By the same token, many participants emphasised that, for the most part, they lived their lives within the confines of the shelter and neighboring fields, an area viewed as their ‘safe’ but nonetheless confined place. Referring to a photograph of the field next to the shelter on participant explained how, “everyday we are in this place, even when we go to school we cross this ground, I spend a lot of time here” (Aung Naing Win, 2014b). Another participant shared the photograph above (figure 4.3) with the following caption: “we can say that the Burma migrant they children have to stay in the shelter” Thant (2014b).



Figure 4.4: Behind the shelter. *Source:* Win Win, 2014b.

This is the place where sometimes we play, when we cannot go outside. If something is happening out there [points to over the gate] we play in here. For example, when the police come we cannot play outside. You know last week already when – you were here – in the migrant community some of the migrant people cannot go outside they have to stay inside. And also our students in our shelter were stuck here in the shelter. So in the community when there is the conflict to play we can go behind the shelter. It is not big just little and narrow (Win Win, 2014b).

One day in early June, not long after the coup d'état was announced, I was conducting a pre-photography interview with Win Win and ATL when I noticed he was fidgety and seemed distracted, constantly getting up and checking over the fence. Once the first interview had finished ATL told me apologetically that we wouldn't be able to complete the other two interviews scheduled for that afternoon. He explained that the military was doing random sweeps for illegal migrants around Mae Sot and he was having trouble keeping the younger children inside the gates.⁵⁰ Later, Win Win took the above photograph (Figure 4.4) and explained it was an outdoor area set up within

⁵⁰ The military had recently raided a nearby village (that was home to 400 Burmese migrants) in the early hours of the morning. They deported the entire village and made them dismantle their huts to ensure they wouldn't return.

the shelter for when police were nearby. Win Win's (2014b) photograph and caption exemplify the unpredictability of living in Mae Sot without documentation. However that day was also a reminder to the young migrants that their place in Mae Sot is uncertain and highlighted their difference from Thai citizens.

Discussing difference

Often participants mentioned differences they recognised between themselves and Thai citizens, noting the things they were unable to do due to their migrant status. Their excerpts highlight a sense of exclusion, for example Eh Say (2014a), who referred to Thailand as "their country":

I have things I would like to do but can't because I am a migrant. We [signaling to all the children] cannot go outside. I would like to buy some clothing or some food in the market but we cannot. We are afraid of being arrested by the police. I am not angry, I am more sad. It is their country (Eh Say, 2014a).

I think the biggest difference between the Burmese migrant person and the Thai citizen people is that a Thai person the same age [as me] they can go wherever they want and they feel free. Burmese migrant children we to stay in the shelter, we cannot just go wherever we want (Aung Nuing Win, 2014a).

As I am not a citizen from Thailand, even if I want to do something, even if I want to go there [*gestures left*], even if I want to stay over there [*gestures right*], I cannot do that like a Thai citizen (Thant, 2014a).

If I want to visit other places I am afraid of going there, the Thai citizen are free to go there (Thi Zaw Lat, 2014a).

Where the young migrants spoke with fondness and joy in relation to memories of Burma, when describing their life in Mae Sot there was a noticeable shift in their narratives to themes of exclusion. Thinking back to the Geographies of Exclusion as discussed in Chapter two (Sibley, 1995), exclusionary discourses are inherently bound with notions of place, particularly where people are labeled "in place" or "out of place" (Cresswell, 2013, p. 5). While some young migrants described feeling out of place in Mae Sot, they also spoke of creating their own place within the migrant community. In the following section I explore the young migrants' perceptions of 'their place' in Mae Sot and the ways in which they engage with it.

Creating their place

Place is essential to phenomenological analysis of lived experiences as, for phenomenologists, body and place are seen as forming the basis of human existence (Dowling, 2007; Escobar, 2001). The world, as an increasingly interconnected nexus of movement and international flows, has led phenomenologists to call for a greater understanding regarding the importance of embodied, meaningful place-based experiences and their effect on our life worlds (Escobar, 2001). The mapping of meanings, memories and imaginations requires a “progressive sense of place” that looks beyond an understanding of place as a bounded or fixed area, instead conceptualising places as ever-changing products of diverse social relations and understandings (Massey, 1991, 2005). For Massey (2005), place is relational and thus the notion that places have a single homogenous identity (based on a shared territorial history) is inherently flawed. By viewing place as progressive, Massey (1991, p. 6) also notes that a sense of place encompasses connections to the wider world as:

[...] relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.

Escobar (2001, p. 143) notes that relegating place to the “realm of the particular, the limited, the local and the bound” disregards the fact that place is “at work”, constructed and imagined. Cresswell (2013) too, argues that place is produced through human action and the ways in which we attach meaning to them. In terms of migration, the idea of place as relational - and as a site for meaning-making - has implications for how these young migrants created a meaningful “own place” for themselves, within the area they were able to safely inhabit (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 12).

Also following this notion of place as relational, Rose (1999, p. 247) conceptualizes the rationalities and attachment of meaning to place as “performed” and thus “constituted through iteration rather than essence.” Thinking about the ways the young migrants made or *performed* their place implies not only ownership but also creativity and emotional attachment (Holloway & Hubbard, 2013). This was especially true in the ways they performed their Burmese or Karen (ethnicity) into their place in Mae

Sot. In doing so, they expanded the size of their otherwise restricted space by constructing and “performing” a transnational sense of place (Rose, 1999, p. 247). Consequently, they not only created a culturally familiar place but in doing so, they disrupted the global-local binary by bringing the ‘global’ into the ‘local’ (Williams, 2005).

Transporting their traditions: ‘We are making our culture here’



Figure 4.5: ‘Thanaka’. *Source:* Si Thu, June 2014, Mae Sot

As the participants were documenting their everyday lives many of their photographs depicted food preparation, eating, school, play and landscapes. Within these topics a prominent theme manifested in terms of the ‘traditional Burmese way’ of doing or relating to these things.⁵¹ A commonly referenced Burmese tradition was *thanaka*,⁵² a century-old method of face painting where a chalky white paint is made from ground-down tree bark. As Si Thu (2014b) explained (captioning Figure 4.5) “in this photo he is applying the *thanaka*, I wanted to show the Burmese tradition to show other people who have never known about our tradition”. Others also photographed and spoke of *thanaka*: “this represents our Burmese migrant students. This is *thanaka*, most of the people to wear it because this is our oldest tradition” (Aung Nuing Win, 2014b); “*thanaka* is used to protect people from the sun and also makes me beautiful, it is a

⁵¹ Quote ‘we are making our culture here’ is from Win Min Aung (2014b) taken from his caption from figure 4.11 below.

⁵² See glossary

Burmese tradition that we keep” (Naw Htet, 2014b). Traditional Burmese food (Figure 4.6) and sport (Figure 4.7) also appeared in many photographs and discussions.



Figure 4.6: “Burmese food’. *Source:* Eh Htoo, 2014b.

Ah this is Burmese food. Chilli. They mix they chilli and also with some of the vegetable. So spicy! It is the Burmese food, it is made it very traditionally. We fry the Chilli and we cook the curry with meat sometimes and vegetable or something. I remember in my village, at home, we had the same food (Eh Htoo, 2014b).



Figure 4.7: ‘Playing in the rain’. *Source:* Aung Nuing Win, 2014b.

Here they are paying the Burmese game called *chinlone*, even in the rain they play!
This is the traditional sport and my favorite sport. (Aung Nuing Win, 2014b)

The importance of religion was also mentioned in the participants’ accounts. Burmese is a very religious country where “religion is not just a matter of belief” but also a way of life (KBDDF, 2011, p. 25). As Law Law (2014b) shared “most children here are Buddhist and it is very very important to us”. Most Karen are Buddhist with around 20-30 per cent being Christian (KBDDF, 2011). All the participants were Buddhist and

there was a small area set up in the shelter where the children would pray, shown below (in Figures 4.8 and 4.9).

Aung Nuing Win (2014b) also referred to Buddha in his photograph (figure 4.9). He simply captioned the image as, “This is our Buddha”. This indicates Buddhism is not only a way they have transported their culture but perhaps also a shared sense of faith as a foundation for their close bonds (discussing in Chapter Five).



Figure 4.8: ‘Our Belief’. *Source:* Paw Htet Htet, 2014b.

This [photograph] represents our tradition, our religion, our belief. Every night we pray around 7pm. Most of the students here believe in the Buddhism. This is my belief so paying is very important for me.



Figure 4.9: Buddha. *Source:* Aung Nuing Win, 2014b.

Aside from photographs Burmese tradition, food, sport and religion many of the young people explicitly explained the importance of practicing and maintaining their cultural and ethnic traditions while living in Thailand. Zin Zin (Figure 4.10) even orchestrated

a portrait of her sister, whom she asked to dress in a traditional Karen outfit in order to show me how important it was to retain their culture. Similarly, Win Win (2014b) identified “our place” in his photograph below (Figure 4.11). He portrayed that although the youth were living inside the shelter they were “making [their] culture” within it (Win Win, 2014a).



Figure 4.10: ‘Our Karen tradition’. *Source:* Zin Zin, 2014b.

It [the photograph] is very related to my life. This is our Karen tradition, our ethnicity. Because of different situations and crisis’ we have come to Thailand but we must keep our traditions and we must understand them. This is the traditional skirt and also the people in my village when they go to school they take their schoolbooks in a bag like this (Zin Zin, 2014b).



Figure 4.11: ‘Nature Forest’. *Source:* Win Win, 2014b

This represents our place. Where we are, including the place we live in here. These trees we can get the food, we can get the fruit, the banana and the coconut. Also the Karen traditional clothes on the washing line; this is our tradition, our lifestyle. We are making our culture here (Win Win, 2014b).

As exemplified by the participants' photographs and accounts above, viewing culture as a "discrete, object-like phenomena" is flawed when looking at mobile populations and diasporas around the world (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 7). Escobar (2001, p. 143) argues that "culture is carried into places by bodies". Consequently, when thinking about international migration, culture and place are less rooted in locations or territories and more in "encultured bodies" (Escobar, 2001, p. 7). Citing Cambodian refugees in America who "take their Khmer culture with them", Gupta and Ferguson (1992, p. 8/10) note that "in this culture-play ... lines between 'here' and 'there' become blurred". It is in this 'blurry area', they argue, where "it becomes most visible how imagined communities come to be attached to imagined places,"⁵³ as displaced people cluster around remembered or imagined homelands" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 10). For the young migrants I worked with, the Burmese community in Mae Sot, or *Htaung Htung*, was very much an intermediate or "blurry space" in-between Thailand and Burma (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

The ways in which the participants re-created their culture in Mae Sot exemplifies the dimensions of maintenance and continuation discussed by Bartos (2012 following Tronto, 2003) in Chapter Two. The youth are maintaining and continuing their traditions "through their efforts to protect what they have, what they know, or what they believe to be true" (Bartos, 2012, p. 160). In her study, Bartos (2012) noted that young people maintained their worlds by protecting their families. Here they are protecting the future of their cultural traditions, as Zin Zin (2014b) described, "we must keep our traditions and we must understand them". Embodying elements of care is also linked to ideas of agency (which I will discuss in the following chapter) as they indicate young people taking their worlds and their culture seriously.

Muba Htaung Htung, a bag of gold

In comparison to the participants' comments above (where they discussed difference and exclusion in relation to living in Thailand), when they spoke of *Htaung Htung* they described feelings of oneness and attachment with the community. Falzon (2003) notes

⁵³ Here Gupta and Ferguson (1992) draw on 'imagined communities' - the influential work of Benedict Anderson (1991). In this work Anderson (1991) explores how people with different backgrounds, who may never interact with each other, view (or imagine) themselves as belonging to a 'community'. Anderson (1991) thus shifted the focus from the nationalist identity to the national imaginary and the way it is formed and reproduced.

that the process of reproducing culture is central to a diasporic imagination, as regenerating the notion of ‘homeland’ serves as a powerful and unifying way to create collective meaning for people in diaspora. In their study with RBY Brough et al. (2003) note that a sense of belonging came from a strong diasporic community, with all their participants citing the community as a positive in their lives.

The place I like in Mae Sot is my community, which we call *Htaung Htung*. It means ‘Gold Bag’. I like that here we can see a lot of Burmese migrant workers and also Burmese children. We all communicate with each other. For me I feel like it is like being in Burma (Ko Ko Win, 2014a).

I like the community because, it supports the children’s futures, we give them food or anything and prepare the children for the future. We support the children (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

The reasons I like living in Thailand is because I can play with my friends in our community, there are so many playgrounds in our community, so this I like. I like the weekends so much [laughing]. On the weekend we have free time, so we can play together whenever we want (Thi Zaw Lat, 2014a).

For the young migrants, *Htaung Htung* was a place they could speak their language, reproduce their cultural traditions and connect with other Burmese people with similar backgrounds. The sense of collective identity and belonging that *Htaung Htung* provided not only acted as a source of familiarity but also as a wider support system to help cope with the trauma of being detached from their family, home and village.

Attaching Memories

As discussed, the young migrants transported aspects of their Burmese culture and heritage with them to Mae Sot. However, the more time I spent in discussion with the participants and ‘hung out’ in *Htaung Htung* it became clear that they also attached memories of Burma to spaces and objects around the shelter. Take, for example, Paw Htet Htet’s (2014b) photograph (Figure 4.12) below, a section of the shelter’s garden she likens to the landscape of her village in Burma. Gupta and Ferguson (1992, p. 11) write that “dispersed people [often] use memory of place to connect imaginatively to their new lived world”. They use the term “symbolic anchors” to describe the way migrants and displaced people attach imaginations of home to their new space to

maintain a sense of closeness (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). In anchoring memories of Burma to places in Mae Sot, the participants preserved a connection to their homeland that helped make home feel less far away.



Figure 4.12: ‘The pretty landscape’. *Source:* Paw Htet Htet, 2014b.

When I see this ground, this place, it makes me remember my village. There are many beautiful kinds of flowers. This photo is my favorite because it is very related to my life. It is related to my native place in Burma, the Mon state. There are so many forests and mountains, I lived in a small village inside the forest. I miss it.

Ansell and Blerk (2006) argue that children’s geographies has placed too much weight on children’s physical experiences of place, disregarding the importance of young peoples’ imagined geographies. In relation to their work with young migrants from Malawi and Lesotho, they explored the importance of familiarity to children’s experiences of migration often constructed through “imaginings” (Ansell & Blerk, 2006, p. 262). Memories and ties to home also create what Conway and Potter (2007, p. 32) call a “much needed territorial fix” for migrants. They further state that the sense of belonging provided by using home as an anchor in migrants’ new homes sustains them during their time apart from their homeland. As demonstrated in this research, by anchoring their memories of home to their new space in Mae Sot, the young migrants

created their own familiar place, which in turn acted as coping mechanism in the face of ‘missing’ home (to paraphrase Paw Htet Htet [2014b] above).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have re-presented the young migrants’ stories of home, experiences of migration and their everyday lives in Mae Sot. The participants all left their homelands for various reasons, however, upon arriving in Mae Sot they all faced a similar dilemma; the restrictions associated with being an ‘undocumented migrant’ in Thailand. In a physical sense the shelter was small and, in terms of the participants feelings of safety, there was an invisible boundary at play as well. However, as I have argued, by maintaining their cultural traditions the young migrants were actively involved in expanding their place by establishing their own culturally familiar place in Mae Sot. Further, by cultivating and preserving ties to Burma, they kept home nearby and in their thoughts (or “imagination”). Having explored the young people’s use of their physical and imagined spaces in this chapter, I now turn to how their everyday environments (as well as their past experiences) have enhanced or encouraged their social and political agency. As such, in Chapter Five I will build on the ways the young migrants were actively engaged in their everyday worlds through their critical knowledge, resilience, and their navigation of opportunities in Burma and Thailand.

Photo Essay Two



This is us eating rice and fish —sharing it in the bedroom for dinner. We share our bedrooms with over twenty people (Win Win, 2014b).



We always play in our bedroom before we go to sleep (Law Eh, 2014b).



This is in the nighttime. The boys are playing with something and the girls are dancing. When I was little, the same age as them, I was playing all the time too. But at their age I was still in Burma so I wasn't always with lots of children like them (Eh Say, 2014b).



This photo represents the beautiful flowers in Thailand (Zin Zin, 2014b).



This is the tree behind the playground. The location is pretty so I decided to take the birds-eye-view style photograph (Thant, 2014b).



They are preparing the fish for lunch which we buy from the market. Everyone has a duty. For example, on this day, these students cooked for everyone. Other days our duty is to clean (Win Win, 2014b).

Chapter Five

Active young migrants: bending the rules and paving their way



Figure 5.1: ‘Make a better life’. *Source:* Aung Nuing Win, 2014b.

Here we can see there are so many of the beautiful flowers. Sometimes we are so worried we don’t want to do anything and for example, when we see this photo, when we look at this photo this makes us to be happy, to be grateful and joyful. When you look at this photo it makes me feel better... I’ll name it [the photograph] ‘Make a better life’ (Aung Nuing Win, 2014b).

As mentioned, this study endeavours to challenge discourses that view young migrants as passive bearers of circumstance, instead, recognising that migrant youth are actively engaged with, and influence, the world around them. Drawing on the young migrants perspectives of their everyday worlds, this chapter explores how they exercised their tactical agency.⁵⁴ A growing number of children’s geographers have recently questioned the way *agency*, and what it means to be politically or socially active, is defined within academia (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012; Harris & Wyn, 2009; Wood, 2012, including many more). Drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau as well as New Social Studies of Childhood (NSSC) literature on young people’s agency (as

⁵⁴ The term ‘tactical’ is borrowed from Michel de Certeau (1984) and will be explained further on in this chapter.

explored in Chapter Two), I adopt a wider approach to agency in the participants' everyday contexts. In doing so I explore their approach to exercising agency and performing resistance, acknowledging the young migrants as active and recognising their range of everyday activities as political work.

Thinking beyond definitions

“I would like to change the political situation”

Eh Say, 2012a

Themes of *young people's agency*, particularly in the area of NSSC (as discussed in Chapter Two), have experienced a surge in interest the past decade. Debates have focused on the sites of young people's agency, particularly the difficulty of analysing the “more subtle processes through which younger people are active” in their everyday worlds (Bosco, 2010, p. 382). Some, children's geographers have called for wider definitions of agency, arguing current definitions are typically “conceived around adult notions of politics and the political” excluding young people's ‘everyday’ agency (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012, p. 2). Elwood and Mitchell (2012, p. 11) argue that there remains a “fundamental problem of recognising practices that are inconceivable within existing political theory”, especially those that “manifest in sites and forms not typically understood as political”. Rendered apolitical and seen as separate to ‘real’ politics, young people have been excluded from narrow definitions of what it means to be politically active. As such, many children's geographers have turned to alternative (and wider, more inclusive) discourses of what it means for young people to be active. They highlight the importance of validating political expression in young peoples everyday lives as sites of ‘real’ politics (Bosco, 2010; Elwood & Mitchell, 2012; Harris & Wyn, 2009; Pink, 2012; Wood, 2012, see Chapter Two for discussion).

Consistent with these geographers, I draw on my work with the young migrants to refute claims that youth are apolitical and to contribute to closing the divide between ‘real’ politics and the equally important (and equally political) acts that take place within the everyday. However, I also identify the ways in which the young migrants described their agency in a mainstream or ‘adult’ sense (exemplified in Eh Say's quote opening this section). While everyday agency was certainly exercised in the participants' daily lives, their expressions of agency extended globally in scale, well

beyond the confinement of their micro-territories (everyday spaces and networks)⁵⁵ and into the realm of the formal political arena.

The everyday

The political and the everyday are isolated from one another. Scholarship suggests that while *the everyday* is associated with the mundane, the ordinary and the hidden, *politics* (and particularly being *politically active*) is generally viewed as more public, linked to the “explicit, explosive and sometimes even glamorous elements of political life” (Pink, 2012, p. 6). As Marsh *et al.* (2007, p.212, in Wood, 2011) argue:

By carrying out an in-depth exploration of young people’s conceptions of politics, rather than surveying young people’s attitudes towards a limited range of political issues and arenas, we can begin to develop a much more nuanced understanding of the relationship between their lived experiences and their engagement and interest in politics.

A focus on the everyday as politically significant (often championed by feminist political scholars) gives credibility to the so-called mundane acts routinely performed in young people’s everyday lives. Transforming everyday acts into what Bosco (2010, p. 385) calls “micro-political work”. This recognizes that these acts, while ‘micro’ in scale, nevertheless scratch away at larger political structures and “under some conditions might completely break down hegemony” (Katz, 2004, p. xi in Bosco, 2010).

Michel de Certeau (1984) who argues less powerful actors wield political agency within wider structures of domination through the use of “tactics” within sites of the everyday, is influential in the theorizing of *‘the everyday’*. For de Certeau (1984), tactics require occupying spaces controlled by powerful actors and behaving in ways that challenge, appropriate, reject or refuse to reproduce the dominant hegemony (de Certeau, 1984). “Tactics” also include the various creative and covert ways less powerful actors resist and transform their situations. They are “the art of the weak”, defined as “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” which

⁵⁵ The term “Micro-territories” as discussed in Part Two of Chapter Two is used to describe the local, everyday spaces and networks that are most relevant to young people e.g. schools, neighbourhoods and the home (Harris & Wyn, 2009, p. 329)

“happens beneath the panoptic apparatus” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37 & 111). Following de Certeau (1984), Palomino-Schalscha (2011, p. 18) notes that tactics enable “subversion not by direct rejection or confrontation, but by [...] transformation and manipulation”. Thus, tactics help with understanding the many ways in which political agency and forms of resistance present during everyday life, despite not being explicitly or overtly discernable. As Cupples (2008, p. 111) identifies, tactics provide a particularly useful framework for examining “how ordinary people, in the interests of creating a better life for themselves, make do with the circumstances in which they live”.

Some children’s geographers have recently used ideas of tactical agency to theorise about the ways that children and youth conduct ‘micro-political’ work in their everyday spaces (Bosco, 2010; Elwood & Mitchell, 2012; Jeffrey, 2012; Pauliina & Häkli, 2010). Importantly, while these spaces may be ‘local’ or ‘domestic’ in scale, as Wood (2011, p. 45) has argued, “excavating the everyday” does not omit processes operating at larger, global scales. Pink (2012, p. 17) also discusses tactical agency as “being opportunistic, mobile and making use of cracks in particular when conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers”. In the following section I explore the ways the young migrants applied their own tactical agency to sneak through the ‘cracks’ of the international border in their search for greater opportunities and brighter futures for themselves.

Negotiating spaces of opportunity

Payne (2012, p. 404) highlights that in much development literature children and young people are portrayed as “intrinsically vulnerable” where “agency is discussed in terms of coping rather than simply getting on with things”. Following this sentiment, the discourse surrounding the migration of youth typically portrays young migrants as passive victims in need of assistance, with very little focus on the ways they exercise their agency in order to build a brighter future for themselves. Ironically, the most prominent theme in this research was the ways the young migrants were actively creating successful futures for themselves, despite larger systems of welfare and governance failing them. For the young migrants, the physical act of crossing the Thai/Burmese border (some alone) itself exemplifies considerable agency. As Elwood

and Mitchell (2012, p. 4) suggest, when young people challenge adult-dominated spaces, whether local or international, this is a form of tactical agency, “these contestations are political [...] because they challenge adult control over spaces, institutions and activities in which children are situated”. In crossing the international border and evading the adult-imposed structures and laws, the young migrants performed what Jeffrey (2012, p. 247) calls “spatial resistance”. In the participants’ narratives of their migration journey they demonstrated further acts of agency in order to take control of their access to an education.

Within the concept of tactics, de Certeau (1984) also discusses the process of ‘construction’. This is where less powerful actors manipulate, reimagine and appropriate oppressive or imposing structures, reworking them to suit their own interests, rather than directly rejecting them. Not only did the participants navigate an international border and subvert the related immigration laws, but in doing so they also negotiated spaces of opportunity on either side of the international border. As discussed in the previous chapter, access to education and opportunity were the most commonly cited reasons for the young people migrating to Thailand. The young migrants contradicted the stereotype that they were victims of circumstance and, instead harnessed migration to improve their social position. Even those such as Eh Htoo and Thant who were forced to flee spoke of their time in Thailand as a means to an end, turning an unwanted situation into one that would be beneficial to their futures.

As with Thi Zaw Lat below (Figure 5.2), many of the participants spoke of their dislike of living in Mae Sot and identified their marginalisation and exclusion in Thai society. Others described frustrations associated with missing their parents and homes. Law Eh (2014b) for example, set up the scenario below to describe the anger associated with his separation from his parents (Figure 5.3). However, they also framed this as the price they had to pay in order to receive an education.



Figure 5.2: ‘The beautiful flower’. *Source:* Thi Zaw Lat, 2014b.

In our country we usually stay in the home. But for our migrant people here we sleep on the ground and also you can see that when we go to school, because we cannot buy a car and we cannot ride the bicycle, we have to walk, everyday. We are closer to the ground (Thi Zaw Lat, 2014b).



Figure 5.3: Unnamed sequence.
Source: Law Eh, June 2014, Mae Sot

This photo (left) represents the small child. He misses his mother and his parents. And here (right) his position is like he is looking at someone and we can see one thing that he is feeling angry and aggressive Law Eh (2014b).

When asked what things they enjoyed or found positive about their lives in Mae Sot *all* participants said education. “I have one thing. If we live in Burma we cannot get education like here” (Si Thu, 2014a). Paw Htet Htet (2014a) too said, “the one thing I like [about Mae Sot] is that we can get more opportunity than in Burma”. Law Law (2014b) presented a diptych to compare students to blooming flowers (figure 5.4 below). Even Naw Htet (2014a), who openly spoke of dislike for Mae Sot and her experiences being intimidated by Thai men reflected:

I would have especially liked to grow up in Burma but I am happy to live here because I can get an education more easily, and the Thailand the education system is better than in Burma.



Figure 5.4: ‘Flowers and students’. *Source:* Law Law, June 2014b.

These photos are similar because the student they are studying and in this one [left] the flower is blooming and here [right] the student is blooming as well. They would like to get education, knowledge, skills and experience and the flowers would like to get the sun and the rain (Law Law, 2014b).

Williams (2005) argues that migration is a way disempowered people are able to 'creatively' reposition themselves. She writes, "migrants have to negotiate ...their place of origin and destination to attain a relatively upward social mobility" (Williams, 2005, p. 404). The conceptualisation of young people's negotiation "over social roles, power relations and resources" as political engagement within their everyday worlds has also been discussed by Elwood and Mitchell (2012, p. 3). While the participants all spoke with affection and longing for their country and their families, they recognised that remaining in Burma would have prohibited their access to education. As Kabeer (1999, p. 438) notes, agency "can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance". By weighing up the opportunities available to them on either side of the Thai/Burma border, the young migrants were, in a sense, bargaining with themselves. They sacrificed all that was familiar back in Burma, enduring life as "undocumented illegals" in a marginalised group of Thai society, for their education, and harnessed mobility to reclaim control over their lives (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

Crossing back

As the SAW school was not recognised by the Thai government as official education, some of the young people expressed concerns about their ability to further their education on into University on graduating from the SAW high school.

I have to face the reality of my problem in applying for the university without having the legal document (Chaung Pow, 2014a).

Even once I have an education I cannot apply for the university in Thailand because I cannot show legal qualification document so I cannot go. There is barriers for me (Ko Ko Win, 2014a).

The Thai people, they have identification and documentation so they have a chance to attend the school and attend the university. For us migrant children, we cannot. So we cannot plan for university in Thailand. That is the very big difference between us and the Thai students (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

As the interviews progressed I discussed the participants' concerns with other Burmese migrants in Mae Sot and discovered that young Burmese migrants often solved this problem in a creative, resourceful and tactical way, by bending the rules. Akin to what

Jeffrey (2012, p. 245) calls the “mischievous character of subaltern action”, Thant Win informed me that it was common practice for Burmese students in Mae Sot to return to Burma and attend a Burmese school (for short period of time) in order to sit the final examinations (pers. comm. 17th June 2014). Once finishing secondary education at the SAW school (MLC) in Mae Sot, the youth would have no *official* education. Despite them having the knowledge, without legal recognition or documentation for their education the youth were unable to enroll in education at the tertiary level. By sitting and passing these exams in Burma, they would receive a high school diploma and could then go onto university with less difficulty (Thant Win, pers. comm. 17th June 2014). In both an expression of tactical agency and a process of Certeaudian ‘construction’, the youth were seeking out an education for themselves, bending the rules and appropriating international laws to open spaces for opportunity and resistance (de Certeau, 1984).

Resistance

The term resistance draws attention not only to the myriad spaces of political struggles, but also to the politics of everyday spaces, through which political identities constantly flow and fix. These struggles do not have to be glamorous or heroic, about fighting back and oppression, but may subsist in enduring, in refusing to be wiped off the map of history (Keith & Pile, 1997, p. xi).

The young migrants’ creative and mischievous tactical agency has led me to explore de Certeau’s (1984) ideas surrounding everyday resistance. Palomino-Schalscha (2011, p. 161/163) looks beyond essentialist views of resistance where “everything has to be forced into the dichotomy of resistance or submission” and smaller tactical or everyday acts go unnoticed. As Cupples (2008, p. 116) notes “de Certeau consistently emphasises tactics that create spaces for practices of subversive agency”. Primarily, tactics are used by less powerful actors to build resistance slowly through subtle, persistent, everyday acts that undermine the hegemonic powers, structures and systems at play (de Certeau, 1984). Scott (1985) has written of the ways ‘weak’ groups of people exercise forms of resistance in their everyday lives. In *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott (1985) discusses the ways in which ‘Malaysian peasants’ (sic) evade the power of dominant actors through small but ongoing acts of everyday resistance. He later described these acts as “*hidden transcripts*” of resistance, in which people wear “the mask of subordinates to read their real intentions” (Scott, 1990, p. 4, original

emphasis). In other words, hidden transcripts refer to acts where people appear to be conforming to domination publically, while resisting ‘powerholders’ more subtle and less obvious ways (Scott, 1990).

Following Certeaudian thought, rather than openly declaring their disappointment with education in Burma, the young migrants (and their families) crossed the international border secretly and subverted the law in order to affirm and regain their right to an appropriate education. By planning to cross back into Burma to graduate, the youth exercise their tactical agency, reconstituting the system to suit their situation. Further, by publically complying with the education system in Burma (through graduating) but appropriating it to suit their own needs (by illegally gaining their education elsewhere), they are engaging with hidden transcripts of resistance (Scott, 1985, 1990). Their tactical and hidden resistance, despite not being one of force, is a refusal to cooperate with immigration laws and a rejection of the regime that has undermined the education of its people. The young migrants’ hidden acts of resistance also existed in less visible ways through their critical discourse and disagreement with the oppressive systems and structures they detected in their everyday worlds.

Critical social knowledge

Some suggest that the reason young people are excluded from the political sphere is because they are viewed as incapable of making “what are conceived within these [adult] frameworks as rational decisions or rational argument” (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012, p. 1). In response to this vein of thought a growing body of literature has emerged regarding young people’s ‘critical social knowledge’ (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012) and/or ‘political literacy’ (Harris & Wyn, 2009)⁵⁶. Here I explore the ways the young migrants exerted their agency and hidden resistance through their critical knowledge, ideas and representations of the “situations” in Burma, from afar, and also Thailand, from within (Win Win, 2014a).

Recently, authors have started theorising about young people’s perspectives as important but overlooked expressions of political agency. Bosco (2010), for example,

⁵⁶ This has also been termed ‘political imaginary’ by Marsh, O’Toole, and Jones (2007) but I will frame the young peoples critical political discussion as their political literacy following Harris and Wyn (2010).

considers that young people's critical opinions and judgments are a vital site for their politics regardless of whether these are followed by a physical action or not. Elwood and Mitchell (2012, p. 1) also argue that children and young people's "dialogues of the everyday constitute a significant (yet under-examined) space for their politics and their formation as political actors". They write that everyday sites are often where they "put forth their ideas, representations and expressions of agreement or disagreement that are crucial to their formation as political actors" (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012, p. 2). Others have focused on young people's critical knowledge regarding their capacity to, for example, distinguish between "friends" and "enemies" on the playground (Kallio, 2008, p. 2), identify strategies for household water usage (Harris & Wyn, 2009) and their engagement in political debates with parents (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012). The young migrants I collaborated with showed critical social knowledge regarding various social, political, economic and environmental issues they see in their day-to-day lives, as well as opinions of Burmese politics and the need for change in their homeland.

Place based

The young migrants shared critical ideas and opinions on various topics related to their place such as rubbish, pollution and hazards. Environmental concerns were also expressed when participants discussed what they thought needed to change about Mae Sot. For example, some participants (such as Eh Htoo in Figure 5.5) drew attention to the rubbish that would often build up in or near the shelter.



Figure 5.5: 'Yellow rubbish bin'. *Source:* Eh Htoo, June 2014, Mae Sot

This photo is of the rubbish, outside the shelter. They have the rubbish truck they come everyday to collect. But Thailand, this place, is very dirty and Burma is *even dirtier* than Thailand! (Eh Htoo, 2014b).



Figure 5.6 ‘School’. *Source:* Si Thu, June 2014, Mae Sot

This photo, this is the SAW high school. [Pointing at smoke cloud in centre of image] this is the pollution, if it go to the clouds it is able to destroy the ozone, this can be very dangerous for the human. At school every morning we listen to the teachers speak about the environment and how to take care of the environment. How to save the world (Si Thu, 2014b).



Figure 5.7 ‘Telephone tower wires’. *Source:* Eh Say, June 2014, Mae Sot

I took this photo because I think the wire is maybe very dangerous for the student. I would like to remember to not go there (Eh Say, 2014b).

Others took pride in the ‘clean areas’. As Naw Htet (2014b) who, while showing me one of her landscape photographs, explained “this place is very clean and we cannot

see any rubbish here, you see?” Si Thu (2014b) considered the dangers of pollution and the need to “take care” of the environment (Figure 5.6). Eh Say (2014b) on the other hand was concerned about the dangers of having an electricity transformer and power lines located within the children’s play area (Figure 5.7).

Education

Not surprisingly, their critical perspectives often centered on education for migrant youth, or lack thereof. The teenagers recognised that many young Burmese people in Thailand were unable to attend school and described feeling grateful to be receiving an education. They shared their desires to change the system, allowing all migrant children access to an education.

I think I really want to change the education for the migrant children. For example, some of the children, they cannot attend the school at all but I really want them to attend the school. The academic year when all of the students can attend the school, this is my vision (Ko Ko Win, 2014a).

I would like to change the education for the kids—the migrant children. I want for all the children in Mae Sot to attend the school. This I would like to change (Thant, 2014a).

Inequality

In their research with young Australians, Harris and Wyn (2009, p. 355) found their participants viewed the political realm as being removed and unrelated to their lives. Yet, when they discussed social and political issues visible in their everyday environment, they “took on real meaning [...] in a local context where they felt they have a lived experience of their impact”. In this study however, the young participants had all grown up in an oppressive dictatorship in a country where the power and activism of the people played (and continues to play) a large role in the resistance and transformation of the political regime. As CPPCR (2009, p. 84) note “the children that we interviewed have experienced difficulties in their life and have seen many things which have served to develop their social consciousness.” In addition, Mae Sot is an extremely political environment. The Burmese population in Mae Sot (along many side foreigners who act in solidarity) is well organised, brimming with support networks and resistance organisations contributing to a vibrant political discourse. Thus, unlike

Harris and Wyn's (2009) research with Australian youth, these young people differed in the sense that 'real politics' were related to their life-worlds. This was apparent in their critical knowledge regarding inequality, human rights and exploitation.

Bosco (2010) asserts that the ability to recognise inequality is a political act. Many of the participants noted their difference from Thai citizens regarding their situation (as noted in Chapter Four) including the lack of human rights attributed to them as "undocumented illegals" (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

I think it is very different for Burmese people [in Thailand]. For example, the rights. Even though we are human beings we cannot make decision for ourselves when we are living in Thailand. I am not angry but sometimes I feel sad, especially when I talk to the Burmese migrants who are working in Thailand (Chaung Pow, 2014a).

Burmese people and Thai people are treated very differently. We are undocumented illegals and they have documentation. Equal, that is what I want to become (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

The main difference between Burmese and Thai people here is human rights. I don't know about the human rights exactly, but I know the rights are different between the Burmese migrant worker and the Thai citizen (Law Law, 2014a).

Here the young migrants' were re-reading normative readings and thinking beyond their label of 'illegal', recognizing they have different 'human rights' to Thai people. Similarly, Naw Htet (2014a) referred to freedom of speech when describing her experiences communicating with Thai girls:

For me, when we are discussing something, the Thai female can talk openly. As for our Burmese people it depends on their religion and their belief if they cannot talk openly.

Politics

Political themes manifested frequently in the interviews, particularly in relation to migrant law, exploitation and corruption. Despite no participants having been employed during their time in Mae Sot, many discussed the exploitation of migrant workers by Thai employers, and some had clearly witnessed this exploitation first

hand. Eh Htoo (2012a) asserted, “I don’t like the law in Thailand, Thai people, they exploit! They exploit the Burmese people. Similarly, Law Eh (2014b) shared:

In Mae Sot I don’t like, well, I would like to change the political situation because the Thai citizens try to exploit the Burmese migrant workers. I have seen the exploitation here. I would like to change this, to stop this and to stop the arresting of Burmese people.

Others, such as Aung Nuing Win (2014a), spoke of politics in relation to changing migrant laws:

I would like to change the politics, especially the laws, specifically the immigration, migrant law. For example, right now if we would like to visit other places we *feel* this is not possible. And we have to be afraid of the police to arrest us all the time.

While no participants spoke of corruption directly related to the authorities in Mae Sot some alluded to it in their discussions about other topics. An example of this was Eh Htoo’s description of his photograph below (Figure 5.8).



Figure 5.8: ‘No Smoking!’ Source: Eh Htoo, June 2014, Mae Sot

This is a photo that I have copied from a poster. He is the ‘no smoking’ man saying ‘don’t smoke’ [laughing] and he is dressed like the policeman. If they [police] see the people drinking or smoking, they will arrest them. He will punish them. Even though he is also smoking he has the power so it doesn’t matter, [laughing] it’s so corrupt! (Eh Htoo, 2014b).

Wood and Cole (2007, in Elwood & Mitchell, 2012, p. 4) have written that young people's critical perception is not only evidenced through their ability to recognise social and political "events" but also in their acknowledgment of "the power relations circulating in and through them". There was certainly a politics to the young migrants narratives on inequality and politics as they identified their position (as well as that of migrant workers) and related this position to those, such as the police, who they perceived as wielding "the power" (Eh Htoo, 2014b).

Burma's influence

During my discussions with the youth I often cast my mind back to the things I was interested in at their age. While I cannot know for sure, I would be surprised if I had been discussing my aspirations to change immigration law, identifying corruption or worrying about pollution in my community. Of course, growing up in suburban New Zealand these issues were not of concern or influence in my life (yet). Thinking about the phenomenological understanding of life-worlds, it is likely that growing up in a political environment such as Burma shaped the way participants experienced Mae Sot. This is especially helpful when considering how their critical perspectives and political knowledge were the products of their prior experiences. As Schutz (1967, p. 98, original emphasis) asserts "*it* [the self] lays down meaning-contexts in layers, building up its own world of experience". Similarly, Harris and Wyn (2009) found that in their research "meaningfulness of key current issues [...] was very much connected to their local environment and immediate experience".

Burma's political history is marked by the persevering courage of young people (and students in particular) whose contribution to the democracy movement has been praised by numerous authors and scholars (see Chapter One). Not surprisingly then, the Burmese political climate also often came up in our discussions, particularly in relation to General Aung San whose portrait hung in the classroom at the SAW shelter (Figure 5.9). Many young migrants paid homage to the "national leader" such as Aung Nuing Win (2014b).

Chaung Pow (2014b), who drew a picture of Aung San Suu Kyi, discussed her hope for Burma to one-day transition into a democracy (figure 5.10). Others spoke of the

insecurity of the Burmese political situation, for example Paw Htet Htet (2014a), who stated “what we [Burmese people] do all depends on the situation in Burma”. Similarly, Naw Htet (2014a) said “I think one day the situation will change but which day I do not know. I think we will be waiting for a long time”.



Figure 5.9: ‘General Aung San’. *Source:* Aung Nuing Win, June 2014, Mae Sot

This is a portrait of our national leader, General Aung San. He is very outstanding; I really respect him, that is why I took this photo. He is the person who helped the country become independent from the British (Aung Nuing Win, 2014b).



Figure 5.10: ‘Aung San Suu Kyi’. *Source:* Chuang Pow, June 2014, Mae Sot

I took a photo of my drawing of Daw Suu Kyi because she is our national leader and I really respect her. She our national leader and also like my mother because she is working for our country, so it will become the democratic country (Chuang Pow, 2014b).

The above photographs and captions clearly exemplify the young migrants critical thinking, knowledge and ‘political literacy’ in with regards to both their everyday worlds and also the wider issues such as immigration and labour migrants in Thailand (Harris & Wyn, 2009). Some children’s geographers have argued the inclusion of ‘critical social knowledge’ may require stretching the normative definition of *agency* (Elwood & Mitchell, 2012; Jeffrey, 2012). However, it is also important to consider how the perspectives put forth by the young migrants in this section (particularly those relating to politics) go beyond ‘child-like’ notions of agency and actually contribute to ‘adult’ discussions surrounding formal politics.

Resourcefulness, resilience and coping

Among the recent proliferation of scholarship on youth agency is the idea that young people’s resourcefulness is a form of their agency (Jeffrey, 2012). The young migrants’ resourcefulness was apparent in many aspects of their lives—from crossing the border and performing their culture (as discussed in Chapter Four) to negotiating spaces of opportunity (as discussed previously in this chapter). However, they also articulated smaller everyday acts of resourcefulness and resilience that helped them adapt to their lives in Mae Sot away from their families.

In Chapter Two I noted the argument presented by Payne (2012), where she asserts that viewing youth agency through a “coping lens” has resulted in an overemphasis on passive themes such as *need* and *survival* rather than *adaptation* and *accomplishment*. I agree that a shift is needed whereby youth living in difficult circumstances are viewed as leading meaningful lives beyond crisis and vulnerability. Yet, the ways in which these young people cope, adapt and demonstrate resilience are also important aspects of their agency which should be celebrated and “recognised as critical elements of contemporary youth politics” (Harris & Wyn, 2009, p. 330). Even the way Aung Nuing Win (2014b) (in Figure 5.1 opening this chapter) described finding beauty in his environment, through the flowers, as making him feel ‘happy, grateful, joyful’ and ‘better’.

Forming important friendships

One prominent coping strategy adopted by the young people were the strong friendships they formed with each other. This theme has also been recognised in youth

migration literature, with scholars noting the importance of support “young people are able to endure hardships, rework structures, and resist oppression precisely through forming bonds with other young people” (Jeffrey, 2012, p. 250). Naw Htet (2014b), described this when sharing a photograph she took of another young migrant living in the SAW shelter:

She is like my younger sister as well as my friend because we are living together. It’s important to have good friends here because we don’t have family.

The idea of friends acting as pseudo family-members came through in many of the young migrants’ accounts. Law Law (2014b) not only noted the other girls in the shelter were like sisters but that they also supported each other emotionally:

They are special friends because we are living together, in the same room and every time when I am depressed they give me counselling and sometimes I give them counseling. We talk about everything in our lives. Sometimes we share our experience; the children here are like another family.

The boys also spoke of their friends being important to their daily lives in Mae Sot, as exemplified in Thi Zaw Lat’s photograph below and our discussion about it (figure 5.11). The older boys in the project noted that the younger boys looked up to them as older brother figures. Similarly, when I asked Eh Say (2014b) why he photographed the same boy in all his photos he laughed and replied “because he follows me around



Figure 5.11: ‘In our bedroom’. *Source:* Thi Zaw Lat, June 2014, Mae Sot

Thi Zaw Lat: This is in the bedroom I share with over ten people but we don’t fight or argue with each other. These are my friends. We can see that they have to go to bed but they don’t want to go to bed so they are talking about some things about their school and their background.

Rebecca: Sometimes do you stay up and talk instead of going to sleep?

Thi Zaw Lat: Not sometimes, [laughing] every time! all the time!”

Working together

When I asked one participant if he could identify a common theme through all his photographs he responded, “These photos represent the daily life of all of us living together in our shelter, for example sometimes we are talking, sometimes we are joking” (Aung Nuing Win, 2014b). The participants’ discussions of their close bonds with the other young migrants was closely linked to themes of unity and working together. Naw Htet (2014b) compared two photographs to explain how the young migrants worked collectively to improve the shelter (Figure 5.12) and Si Thu (2014b) spoke of his responsibility as an older student to care for the younger children (Figure 5.13).



Figure 5.12: ‘Working together for the shelter’. *Source:* Naw Htet, June 2014, Mae Sot.

In this photo [left] they are working to lay the concrete to build an area for the children. In our shelter we all have our own duty and also we work together for the shelter. And this [right] photo is of the bug in the mango tree making their place, their nest. It is very related to our life, the people’s life, because they are living together in the same place and they work together for their nest, they have the unity.



Figure 5.13: ‘Busy road at school’. *Source:* Si Thu, June 2014, Mae Sot.

This photo I took in front of our school. We take care of the children. For example this is the main road, the main highway, there are so many cars on the road so we take care of the children to help them to cross the road. Because we are the older students in the school we need to take care of our smaller student.

The young people all shared the experience of crossing the border and being away from their friends, family and homes. Not only did they “...work together in the school, live together in the shelter and eat together every meal” but they also supported and cared for each other like family (Si Thu, 2014b). Common experiences and coping collectively had formed the basis of a strong bond between the migrants living in the SAW shelter. Significantly, Harris and Wyn (2009, p. 329) include “friendship groups” within their discussion of young people’s capacity for political engagement. They argue that friendship groups (among other groups) within young people’s everyday spaces shape their reflections on and engagement with politics. The participants’ close bonds created a coping mechanism but also undoubtedly influenced their tactical agency, critical social knowledge and political literacy as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Relating to the geographies of exclusion, the migrants also shared the experience of living in a space of exclusion (from Thai society). As geographers of exclusion such as

Sibley (1995) have noted, ‘excluded’ groups often band together to form collective belonging, forming common place-based connections (for example *Muba Htaung Htung* as described in Chapter Four). When discussing the relationship between exclusion and inclusion, others argue young people often create their own sense of belonging and inclusion by excluding others (Vanderbeck & Dunkley, 2004). While there is a definitive ‘us’ (Burmese migrants) and ‘them’ (Thai citizens) mentality present in the participants’ accounts I think this was both the result of their close friendships and tight-knit community as well as their very real exclusion from the Thai community in Mae Sot.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to be flexible in my approach to the narrow, adult-based definitions of agency when looking at the everyday that spaces that the participants occupied and shaped. Rather than simply trying to place young people’s manifestations of ‘agency’ within adult frameworks, I have followed in the footsteps of other NSSC scholars who have tried to locate the political in young people’s spatial practices.

While, I think it is important to note that the participants’ were also navigating power relations, social structures and performing their tactical agency in the same way many adults would in the same circumstance. Indeed, the young migrants were stretching the limited adult-based definitions of agency to include the navigation of borders, tactical and hidden resistance, critical social knowledge as well as resilience and coping strategies such as close friendships.

Photo Essay Three



The children are playing. I took this because when I look at the children I feel they are my heart (Law Law 2014b).



This place is very pretty. We can see it is sunny also there is the flower and the telephone tower behind so we can communicate with each other. But, Thai people communicate better and more politely because they have more education (Naw Htet, 2014b).



Source: Zao, June 2014, Mae Sot.



This is my water bottle and my notebook. When we go to school we need to bring the water bottle and the notebook to take notes. This shows the daily life, the student daily life (Naw Htet, 2014b).



These are my friends; they are talking and laughing in the shelter. I took this to represent our Burmese migrant student (Aung Naing Win, 2014b)



This is the banana tree. They brought them in from the plantation to grow here. We love to eat them (Thi Zaw Lat, 2014b).

Chapter Six

Looking forward and moving back



Figure 6.1: ‘Goal’ Paw Htet Htet, June 2014, Mae Sot

This is a handcraft I made of birds that represents my life. It is very related to me because the birds, they have the destination, they have the goal. They are trying to reach that goal. They have not reached it yet, but are trying to reach it. They are in the process, in the middle, not yet at the impact or the goal. It is like us children. I am learning, I am studying but I am not yet at the goal, I will try but I’m still at the start. My main goals are to be the teacher and also the writer.

Introduction

Having discussed the participants’ memories of leaving Burma, their experience of migrating to Thailand and the ways they created a place for themselves in Mae Sot, as well the ways in which they exercise their political agency, it seems a logical next step to look towards the future. This chapter is focused on looking forward, exploring what the young migrants perceived as their next step, how they pictured their futures would look like, and where they aspired to be in-the-world. Drawing on the themes of agency discussed in the previous chapter as well as notions of care from Chapter Two, I focus on the participants’ goals and aspirations for their futures as well as their desire for a “better Burma” and their plans to return as agents of change (Zin Zin, 2014a).

Looking forward

As may be obvious by now, Burmese people traditionally place, and continue to place, a high value on education. Education is seen as a privilege and the key to a bright and successful future. Therefore, when I began asking questions such as “where do you see yourself in ten years?” the participants struggled to think beyond their graduation from secondary school and, for those who did, it was often only as far as university acceptance. When Zin Zin (2014a) shared, “I do not know the future so I cannot decide” ATL (pers. comms. 3rd June, 2014) turned to me and whispered bluntly, “we do not know the future”. At first I interpreted ATL’s defense of Zin Zin’s response as a signal to cease this line of inquiry, suspecting discussions of the future may be culturally inappropriate. Despite my own aspirations for the future as a young person (which ranged from movie star to scientist to florist), I was also aware of Maori conceptions the future whereby “in order to have foresight you need hindsight” (Evens & Uruamo, 2012, p. 1).⁵⁷ Returning to my guesthouse that evening I asked Thant Win if I was being culturally insensitive without even realising it (as with my prior pseudonym slip-up) and if I should leave discussing ‘the future’. He explained that Burmese people, particularly those without documentation or with refugee-backgrounds, were weary of making long term plans due to the unpredictable nature of Burmese governance and Thai immigration laws (Thant Win, pers. comms. 22 June 2014). This uncertainty was also mentioned explicitly later in some participants’ accounts:

Ten years is a long time away. I think it [Burma] is safe for me but I worry about my education and my future. It depends on the Burmese political situation. When I grow up the political situation changes. Right now they are in transition and if it will be better, I will be there (Win Win, 2014a)

Where I am depends on the situation [in Burma], whether I am able to go back in depends on the country’s future (Paw Htet Htet, 2014a).

After a long discussion, Thant Win and I brainstormed how to re-frame questions in a way that would open up freewheeling concepts such as dreams, goals, aspirations and

⁵⁷ The Maori peoples of New Zealand believe the future cannot be found without looking closely at the ways of the past as the wisdom of our ancestors (*tupuna*) provides us with direction. “*Me hoki whakamuri, kia ahu whakamua, ka neke*, in order to improve and move forward we must reflect back to what has been” (Evens & Uruamo, 2012, p. 1).

hope. Recognising their strong connection to ‘home’ I started by asking what they perceived as strengths and weaknesses in Burma and when, or if, they saw themselves returning. After this I asked participants to ‘tell me the story of their future’. Instead of asking what their futures *would* look like, I asked what they *could* look like, leading to stories based on hope and aspirations.

Recognising problems, enacting change

Burma’s ‘problems’

The young migrants’ narratives of Burma have been woven throughout the previous two chapters. Many spoke of their sadness for Burma in terms of violence in their villages, the limited education system and the limited employment opportunities. Yet, equally as prominent was their hope for “transformation” (Eh Htoo, 2014a) and a political “transition” (Win Win, 2014a). Despite being away from their homeland, Burma undeniably remained in the participants’ thoughts and hearts. Regarding their political literacy (as discussed in Chapter Five), the young people remained up-to-date on the nation’s tumultuous political climate and social situation. Upon discussions around the strengths and weaknesses of the education system in Burma, and its need for reform, participants’ opinions were resounding. Win Win (2014a) asserted: “I think the education *must* change, it *must* be changed”. As Naw Htet (2014a) shared:

Here [in Mae Sot] I have nothing to change. But I want my village to be less [paused] well ... [paused] um...[*extends right arm then whacks it palm down on the table*] I really want the children from my village to get an education like me. I want the education system in Burma to improve.

Many of the young migrants discussed the “big problems” they had experienced before migrating to Thailand, such as poverty and food shortages (Eh Say, 2014a). The problems they identified seemed to build the basis for their desire to return and make change.

I want to talk about Burma. Burma is very poor – some people are *very very* poor and the Karen people are also *very* poor so they often cannot get an education (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

I would like to share my experience for the food. Where we are living in Burma we cannot get enough food. In other countries that can get enough food for themselves (Eh Say, 2014a).

In their research with youth, Harris and Wyn (2009, p. 335) observe that while some young people shy away from commenting on social or political issues, others, if they personally experienced or witnessed them, felt “competent to articulate and enact”. Importantly, beyond recognising what needed to change in Burma the young migrants also provided solutions for *how* to enact change. Further, proving their faith in education many proposed it as a way forward, such as Eh Say (2014a): “There are big problems at home [in Burma] but I think we can solve these problems, I think we can solve with education”.

‘I will go back’, returning to Burma as agents of change

Notions of the “brain gain” and skilled migrants returning to contribute to their country-of-origin’s development—be it social, economic, political or environmental—are not new. In discourses on the migration-development nexus, where flows are typically represented as being between ‘the metropolitan North’ and ‘the developing South’, return migrants are often portrayed as worldly, innovative and skilled groups who return home and invest social and economic capital (Castles & Miller, 2009). Yet, as Hatfield (2010, p. 243) writes:

Migration studies can be guilty of masking two major elements of the experience of migration: first, the experiences of children and young people and second, those of return migrants.

Not only are young return migrants “doubly invisible” in migration literature but little can be found regarding the impact young migrants have on their homeland once returning (Hatfield, 2010, p. 243). As the title of this section suggests,⁵⁸ most participants saw their future in Burma, envisaging themselves as one day contributing to the creation of a “better Burma” (Zin Zin, 2014a).

Bartos’ (2012, p. 163) work combining youth agency with elements of care (introduced in Chapter Two) is helpful here. Much in the way the young migrants ‘maintained’ and ‘continued’ their cultural practices and ties to home (as explored in Chapter Four),

⁵⁸ “I will go back” excerpt taken from Si Thu’s (2014a) in the following section.

their goals for the future seem to align with Tronto's (1993, in Bartos, 2012, p. 163) third dimension: 'repair'. While the notions of "maintaining" and "continuing" suggest caring for the world young people already live within, concepts of "repair" require youth to think beyond the world around them, as it suggests "making their world better" (Bartos, 2012, p. 163). As Bartos (2012, p. 163) writes,

The idea of repairing includes children's efforts at imagining a world that they have no personal memory of, nor personal experience with, but which they believe is possible... Hence, the creative potential in repairing worlds encourages consideration of children's agency at creating their future worlds beyond the scope of what exists today.

Although the young migrants have personal memories and experiences with life in Burma, they had all grown up in a Burma defined by conflict and hardship. Their ability to think beyond 'what they know' to 'what might be' opened spaces for their possibility, imagination, hope and repair. These themes of 'repair' and 'making the world a better place' were present in the majority of the participants' discussions surrounding their goals and aspirations for the future.

Making goals, contributing to a 'better Burma'

The young migrants not only identified "big problems" in Burma and provided solutions in their narratives, but also discussed their role in repairing them (Zin Zin, 2014a). When describing their aspirations, most participants explained that their choice of future occupation was motivated by what they perceived as being beneficial when they return to "help the people in Burma" (Law Eh, 2014a).

After I have got education and experience from Mae Sot I will take my skills and I will take my knowledge and I will go back to my village and share my experience. I will share my education to the children who don't have the chance to attend the school in my village. I would like to teach to the children, the small kids as their teacher (Chaung Pow 2014a).

I want to become a leader. I want to be the best leader and I want to go back to the Karen state and contribute to their experience, education and transformation. I want to help the people in Karen state (Eh Htoo, 2014a).

Once I am finished at school I will go back to my village and I will apply what I have learnt. I will help the children and the women as much as possible (Law Law, 2014a).

In the next ten years I think I will be a nurse or a doctor. I have two missions but I will choose one—either doctor or nurse. These are my two visions and then I will return, I will go back to Burma and make a better Burma (Zin Zin, 2014a).

Next year I will be finished the secondary school. For the next years I would like to be a journalist, writing stories and books and sometimes the news. I find it interesting. I read some people's writing and I am interested in it. I will be in Burma. I will go back (Si Thu, 2014a).

I have two goals. For the next ten years I would like to be a good teacher and a good writer. Burma I will go around the villages in Burma and teach the children (Paw Htet Htet, 2014a).

Bosco (2010, p. 383) writes that “children's agency (their ideas, their creativity, their everyday doings) is rarely considered an engine from community and social change”. Yet, when the young migrants spoke of returning and repairing Burma they were speaking as a collective body of change-makers. Of course, not all the young peoples' goals included returning to Burma to explicitly enact change. Just like my dreams of floristry and science, some participants mentioned other goals, including engineering and (to my excitement) photography:

I want to be an engineer and also I would like to repair the car, you know? Mechanic, yes. I cannot say exactly where I will be, I think in Burma (Zao, 2014a).

I would like to be the best translator. I will try to study and how to translate (Win Win, 2014a).

I would like to be the educated person and also I would like to be the actor, especially in the movies (Aung Nuing Win, 2014a).

After I finish at school I really would like to be a photographer (Thi Zaw Lat, 2014a).

Notably, participants who had previously shared negative memories of Burma, were less enthusiastic to return. Similarly, the participants who spoke of leaving poor

households, were not as concerned with defining a possible future occupation, content to return home as an “educated person” (Ko Ko Win, 2014a).

I just really want to be an educated person, maybe an engineer. Think I will finish my education here then I will return to Burma (Ko Ko Win, 2014a)

Similarly, Eh Say (2014b) one of just two participants who envisioned their future in Thailand, explained:

I just want to work, I’ll do everything, anything. I will be here [Thailand]. But I guess that depends on Thailand’s economic situation and also my economic situation. But if I get a job here I would like to stay.

Eh Say had previously described his experiences of household violence when living in Burma and his excitement when arriving in Thailand (see Chapter Four). Therefore, his desire to remain in Thailand was not particularly surprisingly. However, he also explained that if he did stay in Thailand, seeing his children grow up in the same marginalised position as he had would sadden him. In many ways this speaks to Eh Say’s past in Burma as much as it does of marginalisation of young migrants in Thailand; he would rather live in Thailand and risk his children experiencing the exclusion he spoke of than return home.

Just one participant spoke of another migration journey further abroad. Despite seeming skeptical about being able to finish school, Thant (2014a) was keen to move somewhere other than both Burma and Thailand neither of which he considered to be “good” countries.

Thant: First of all *if* I will be able to finish school I would like to go to abroad to a good country. Yeah, I want to go to abroad and to apply to the University there. Then I would like to be a doctor.

Rebecca: You could come to New Zealand!

Thant: Yeah [laughing] that *is* very far away!

Kabeer (1999, p. 438) has argued that “[agency] is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them”. All the participants described varied goals and ‘stories’ of what their futures might look like. Whether these included returning as change-makers, achieving their dream occupation or simply striving to complete their education, the act of goal-

making represents agency in itself. Considering what Thant Win (pers. comm. 3rd June 2014) shared regarding the difficulty undocumented migrants have with planning ahead, the fact that most of the participants want to return to Burma speaks to their optimism for the nation's future as well.

Going home

Writing about their work with refugee-background youth (RBY) in Australia, Brough et al. (2003, p. 206) noted their participants "strong desire to construct positive and productive futures" yet didn't explore these "desires". As mentioned above, there appears to be a general lack of research around young migrants (and RBY) returning to their countries of origin in order to help their people and enact change. This gap in scholarship has not been overlooked: King (2000, in Hatfield, 2010, p. 243) has argued that "return migration is the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration". Some suggest this amounts to an assumption that returning home is an unproblematic reversion where migrants slot back into their prior way of living with ease (Hatfield, 2010; Sinatti, 2012). Yet these assumptions view migrants and their homelands as static, making no allowance for the new experiences and perspectives gained from living away from home or the impact migrants will have on the place to which they return (Hatfield, 2010).

The scarcity of literature pertaining to the topics discussed in this chapter moved me to question if it is unusual for young migrants (particularly those who have left conflict situations) to want to return and, furthermore, want to help. Perhaps the young migrants' altruistic aspirations can be linked to Aung San Suu Kyi's presence as a 'beacon of hope'⁵⁹. Suu Kyi has become a symbol for a peaceful democratic Burma and has created a space of inclusion for minority ethnic groups and change (despite being Burman herself). It is also possible that the participants felt safer to return now that Burma is seen as being in a period of transformation and the 2010 ceasefire agreement in the Karen state was holding (or appeared to be). In addition, the participants may have felt a sense of responsibility to their homeland or simply miss their families. Needless to say, I can only speculate about the motivations for the young migrants' desires to return and indeed this would be a beneficial area for further

⁵⁹ Here I used the moniker 'beacon of hope' or 'voice of hope' that Aung San Suu Kyi has been given by news outlets worldwide.

research (which I will discuss more in the concluding chapter). However, regardless of their motivations, the young migrants displayed agency and care in their narratives of the future.

Conclusion

In the photograph opening this chapter (Figure 6.1) Paw Htet Htet (2014b) likened young migrants to a flock of birds, striving for their goals despite being “at the start” of their journeys. Much in the way a flock of birds fly in unison towards a common destination, the young migrants’ shared a common vision of a “better Burma” (Zin Zin, 2014a). While the participants were still in the process of enacting their goals, considering the courage these young people had displayed in their lives so far, as the next generation coming into a transitioning Burma I have no doubt they will contribute to make it ‘better’.

Photo Essay Four



This photo I took at the school. It is our school garden. That building is our school and this is behind. There are so many kinds of plants. The banana and papaya and other things like the grass root. We bring them back to the shelter for the children to eat (Paw Htet Htet, 2014b).



This is of another person taking a close-up photograph of the nature (Aung Naing WIn, 2014b)



These water bottles [points], this is how we get the fresh water. They have two sides. We put in the dirty wear and cannot drink immediately, we have to wait until its clean (Aung Naing Win, 2014b).



I took this to show the big clean. This classroom is very clean in the morning and in the evening. After we finish class we keep the room and chairs very systematic and tidy (Eh Say, 2014b).



They are eating the mango. They cut it into little bits then mix with the sugar. It is so so sweet. We just did it for fun - not for dinner - because they came back from school with many mangos and decided to cook it (Si Thu, 2014b).



This is my friend. I wanted to take an artistic photograph of her not looking directly at the camera. She is wearing the *Thanaka* paint on her face. The flower is not traditional but sometimes we wear them. She likes the pink flower (Paw Htet Htet 2014b).

Chapter Seven

Concluding remarks and final reflections



Figure 7.1: ‘The road to school, it would be better if it was paved’. *Source:* Win Win, June 2014, Mae Sot

It has now been several months since I left Mae Sot and the fifteen young people with whom I collaborated on this research. Yet this project has occupied my thoughts for the past two years and my heart for many more. As such, concluding it in this final chapter seems a challenging task. Looking back at the journey that was this thesis process, on both an academic but also a deeply personal level, I feel overwhelmed at what the participants and I accomplished.

Based on the stories and photographs of fifteen young Burmese migrants living in the Thai border town of Mae Sot I aimed to illuminate the extra-ordinary in the so-called ordinary realm of the everyday. Working in a participatory space, from a feminist perspective, I attempted to re-present the young peoples’ experiences and perspectives of their lives in Mae Sot as well as their aspirations for their futures.

In this chapter, having discussed the young peoples’ aspirations for their future in Chapter Six, I look forward to what lies ahead for this research. Firstly however, I

reflect back over this thesis. Beginning with what I have tried to say in each chapter, interrogating the project's limitations, questioning possible areas for further research, and identifying the potential for dissemination. I conclude with a discussion on the implications this work has for development practice outcomes, and most importantly, I consider how these migrants' stories can contribute to the development community better supporting their strengths and needs, as well as those of others like them.

Looking back

In the prologue opening this thesis, I wrote about the “danger of a single story” (Adiiche, 2009, n.p). As I have argued throughout this thesis, Burmese migrants living in Thailand (particularly young migrants), are often cast by dominant discourses as inactive and hopeless bearers of circumstance who occupy oppressed, poverty-stricken levels of society. Without wanting to belittle the very real and ongoing struggle of some migrants from Burma, I chose to look beyond this single story and focus on what some young migrants are making of their situations by engaging with the ways they are actively building brighter futures for themselves. As such, this thesis posed the following questions:

1. *What are the lived experiences of some young Burmese migrants' in Thailand?*
2. *How do these young people understand and practice belonging?*
3. *What are their hopes and aspirations for the future?*
4. *What can be learned from listening to young migrants' experiences and how can this contribute to a better understanding of how best to support their strengths and needs?*

In answering the first and second questions, Chapter Four began by re-presenting the young people's memories of life in Burma and their stories of crossing the border, then turning to discussions of ‘their place’ in Mae Sot. The young migrants discussed feelings of exclusion and restriction associated with the small area considered safe for them in Mae Sot. However, I argue that by maintaining and performing their cultural traditions, they were actively involved in expanding this confined space by establishing their own culturally-familiar place, within it. They also contributed to the wider Burmese community, *Muba Htaung Htung*, which provided comforting feelings of belonging, routine and ownership. Adopting Massey's (1991, 2005) ‘progressive sense

of place', I mapped meanings, imaginations and memories that the young people attached to their place, particularly of their homeland. In cultivating and preserving ties to Burma, the young people expanded the size of their otherwise restricted physical space by bringing the 'global' into the 'local'. Thinking about the ways the participants were active in making their place implies ownership, creativity and importantly, agency. Agency became the main theme of this thesis and carried on into the following two chapters as I dove deeper into the ways the youth were active in shaping their everyday worlds.

In Chapter Five I drew on the work of de Certeau (1984) and the New Social Studies of Childhood (NSSC) literature to critique the problematic way agency is often conceptualized. Rather than simply placing the young people's expressions of agency within adult frameworks (where they did not fit comfortably), I located the political in the young people's everyday spatial practices. The youth were stretching normative definitions of 'being active' to include the navigation of international borders, tactical and hidden resistance, critical social knowledge as well as resilience and coping strategies such as forming close friendships. All these expressions of agency recognized the way 'real' politics was visible within the everyday and looked beyond notions of young people's agency as limited to the 'micro' and 'local' scales.

The young people's stories and memories of Burma were woven throughout Chapters Four to Six. Many participants spoke of their sadness for Burma's violence, inadequate education systems and limited employment opportunities. However, hope for "transformation" (Eh Htoo, 2014a) and a desire to build a "better Burma" (Zin Zin, 2014a) was also ubiquitous in their narratives. So, answering my third research question, Chapter Six looked forward to the participants' futures. Firstly, re-presenting their recognition of what "must be changed" in Burma, such as the education system and the political environment (Win Win, 2014a). Followed by their goals for the future, which ranged from graduating from school, to becoming doctors, teachers, actors and engineers. They also spoke of their plans to return to Burma and enact change. I therefore applied Bartos' (2012, p. 163) conceptual framework of "repair" to discuss how the young peoples desire to contribute to Burma's brighter future is a way their agency could lead to social change.

Contributions of this thesis

My final research question asks what can be learned from the young migrants' stories and experiences, and how they could contribute to an improved understanding of how best to support the strengths and needs of other young migrants in similar situations.

The world of development – be it literature, policy or practice – is often focused on a single story of lack and deficit, rather than the ways people are resilient, resourceful and make do with the circumstances in which they live. This approach has the tendency to belittle and de-humanize. By engaging with and sharing people's experiences, researchers have the opportunity to create a “balance of stories”, contributing to the rejection of a dominant development discourse, as I have tried to achieve in this thesis (Adiiche, 2009, n.p).

The young migrants' stories, I argue, have profoundly important implications for development practice as, following Adiiche (2009, n.p), I wonder how it is possible “to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person”. Previous literature on young, undocumented Burmese migrants living in Thailand has argued that they should not be living there. Reasoning that life as an undocumented migrant is unsafe, illegal and exploitative. While this is certainly the case for some, the reality of their circumstance is far more complex. The stories I have re-presented in this thesis highlight the need for a more tailored and situated development response that will adequately support Burmese young migrants living in Mae Sot.

As I have exemplified, the participants' experiences were misaligned with their representation in academic literature. By departing from discourses of young migrants as vulnerable, exploited victims – I shifted the emphasis to their agency within the process of migration: the ways they navigated, harnessed, controlled, negotiated and experienced their migration journeys, as well as what they believed their future migration homes (or abroad) would entail. In this respect, I have contributed to a wider and more nuanced picture of their everyday lives.

Of course, the need to transform the discourse must also be mirrored in practice. The organisations I observed supporting young migrants in Mae Sot (while struggling to

obtain funding) succeeded in doing a wonderful job. Nevertheless, I would recommend that any organisation working with unaccompanied young migrants (in Mae Sot or one of the many border towns in southeast Asia) ensures that the young people themselves play a significant role in decision-making – especially when those decisions affect the support they will receive. In fact, this recommendation could be applied to any development organisation working with children or young people.

Moreover, the policy space to address child migration as anything other than negative is limited. Therefore, rather than viewing youth migration as a problem that needs fixing I suggest organisations should place more emphasis on ensuring the channels of migration (regardless of their legality) are safe, exploring the conditions that enable migrants' choice and ascertain the freedom they have to create a life they value.

I have exemplified that the relationship between migration and development extends beyond the remittance, 'brain gain' and 'brain drain' debates that seem to govern the current discourse, by showing how these youth harnessed migration to improve their own circumstances. In the same vein, few studies (outside refugee discourse and literature) have researched young people who, having migrated from conflict areas, want to return home as agents of change. Thus, in their ambition to return to Burma as active change-makers, the young migrant's stories have expanded the current literature regarding return-migration.

This thesis has also contributed to the small (but growing) inter-disciplinary conversation that recognises young people are actively engaged with, and play a vital role in, migration. Migration research has long been adult-centric where, although young people are sometimes included, are often seen simply as 'baggage' accompanying their parents on migratory journeys. Positioning children and youth as Migrants challenges normative discourses of childhood. Engaging with children's geographies, migration studies and development studies expands the important connections between these areas of study – something that I argue is sorely needed.

Regarding children's geographies I have joined other writers in lifting the analysis of youth agency beyond the local scale. Despite arguing that agency within the everyday and "micro-political work" is extremely important, by applying notions of youth

agency to processes of international migration I have also contributed a global example to such discourses (Bosco, 2010, p. 382). The illegal yet chosen migration of young people disrupts concepts of youth agency as *only* local while also destabilising the idea of youth as ‘baggage’ mentioned above. Similarly, the participants’ discussions of Thailand as exploitative and of Burma’s “big problems” also rejects some arguments within children’s geographies of young people as uncritical of global structures (Eh Say, 2014a).

Limitations

Despite its successes, viewing the research project through athro0.2 (t) ofletvive leons hasm

when working with youth (Ebrahim, 2010, p. 290). This shift would also benefit from an understanding of ethics that focuses on maximizing benefits rather than only on risk and harm mitigation.

I think it is important to mention translation here as a limitation to this research. Although I was initially apprehensive, Translator **ATL** proved to be an asset to this project, offering advice and encouragement. However, the need for a third party to translate interviews certainly added an additional layer of representation. As with this reflection, having now re-presented the participants' experiences and photographs it is clear to me that the need for reflexivity does not end when leaving 'the field' (Cupples & Kindon, 2014).

Power is something I have reflected on often throughout the writing-in process (Berg & Mansvelt, 2000). While I was aware of my power-laden role as 'the researcher', it appears I may have underestimated the impact of this positioning when interviewing the participants. One example of this oversight is when the participants mentioned their 'uncles' as helping to transport them across the border. In hindsight I now realize that these 'uncles' may have in fact been 'carriers' (paid to help the young migrants cross the border illegally). I was unable to determine if the participants 'uncles' were their relatives or not before the completion of this thesis, and it is not for me to presume. I recognize that in any situation participants are likely to censor what they chose to share, yet I wonder if I had spent more time with the participants, if they would have felt more comfortable to share these more illicit aspects of their experiences with me. Or, if we had climbed higher on Hart's (1992) *Ladder of Participation* if they would have become more akin to co-researchers rather than participants thus balancing the power more equally between us.

That being said, the use of participatory photography was an instrumental component of the project. In fact, without the use of photovoice the findings of this research would have been difficult to obtain. By creating a space for the participants to direct the research by choosing what to share or withhold, photovoice mitigated some of the power dilemmas helping to balance aspects of the project that were less collaborative, such as the writing-in from afar.

Looking back I recognize my intentions to achieve a participatory project were ambitious for one-year-long Masters research project and unfortunately I think I am paying the price with dissemination.⁶⁰ Despite a great deal of attention to participatory methods, researchers have only recently turned their attention to participatory dissemination. As Ansell and Blerk (2007) have noted, this seems vital should we require our research to effect change and promote the participants' experiences.

I am returning to Mae Sot in the coming months and hope there will be an opportunity to exhibit the photographs and stories in their community. Ultimately it would be great to have the participants present their own photographs, whether orally or through a publication.

Areas for further research

There remain many interesting and important issues that need to be researched. As mentioned, I am uncertain whether the participants of this research were trafficked across the border by paid carriers. While the participants inclusion of 'carriers' may not have dramatically changed the findings of the thesis, it would have allowed for insights into, and contribution toward, current discourses of the trafficking of young people in Asia.

The contemporary trafficking discourse views trafficking as inherently bad and is often associated with child prostitution and exploitation. As Bosco (2010, p. 195) writes, "the child trafficking discourse indeed gives rise to interventions which often contribute to making the lives of children who need or wish to migrate for work worse off". While the migrants in this study weren't migrating for work, if they were being trafficked across the border they were doing so in order to access education and to live safely. I was unable to follow these trajectories adequately, however, if further research engaged with the trafficking discourse in an unconventional way (e.g. as only resulting in exploitation) it would be a meaningful contribution.

Other worthy areas for additional research include working with the participants (and other young migrants) after they have finished secondary school, particularly, those

⁶⁰ In my original research plan (2013) I had planned to facilitate an exhibition for the participants photographs and a report produced collaboratively to distribute amongst organisations in Mae Sot.

who return to Burma as agents of change. Also, I examined the young peoples' agency with the work of (de Certeau, 1984, p. 38) "tactics" and "hidden resistance". As I only discovered de Certeau's (1984) work after the research period in Mae Sot, I was not able to ask the young migrants what they thought of resistance explicitly. Seeing as many were outspoken in their opinions of the ruling regime in Burma and the treatment of migrants in Thailand, discussing resistance on political terms would also be an interesting endeavour.

A final remark

If you, the reader, are to take one thing away from this thesis I hope it will be the agency of these young people. The fifteen young migrants who took part in this project recognized what they were denied in Burma and decided that, rather than simply tolerate it, they would take their future into their own hands and move to Thailand, often without their parents. Despite their standard of living in Thailand and their separation from family, friends and country, they decided the sacrifice was worthwhile given they can return to Burma educated and able to enact change. Within the contested and powerful realm of the everyday they bent the rules, negotiated opportunities and created a space for themselves within Mae Sot.

The title of this thesis '*it depends on us*' comes from the following discussion I shared with eighteen year old Win Win (2014a).

Rebecca: As a Burmese person living in Thailand, do you think there are any barriers to you reaching your goals?

Win Win: I think I have no barrier because it depends on us. You know? If we would like to do something, we have many opportunities here and we have people that supports us.

It was during this interview that I realized the extent to which previous research (and development initiatives) had underestimated young Burmese migrants. And after this interview I became conscious of my own complicity in the dominant discourse. I stopped asking participants about *barriers* and started asking about *possibilities*. The conversation of 'the possible' is one that needs to be sustained and grown within Development Studies, rejecting the single story. *The possible* also needs to be continued in further research if we are to conceive of more just ways of 'doing'

development. It is this conversation to which I hope the young migrants and I have contributed through this thesis.

The young people in this research were active, inspiring change-makers full of possibility with little regard for limitation. They recognized that some challenges lay ahead for them but, as Win Win (2014a) explained, they don't view these as impeding their future success simply as obstacles to overcome. As 2014 Nobel Prize Winner Kailash Satyarthi (2014)⁶¹ stated in a recent interview:

The biggest challenge is to change the mindset. People must realise that children are born with fundamental human rights they should be given a voice, importance and visibility.

Yet, young people's voices are still scarce in development policy at local and international levels. This highlights the need to hear the important perspectives of young people, giving them key roles in the development initiatives that seek to benefit them and in the literature and theories about them. The best that we can do, as the 'development community', is support their future success by trying to lower the obstacles in their way and listening to their stories; ensuring they feel seen, heard and not alone.

Rebecca

"Is there anything you think I should share or tell people in New Zealand?"

Thant

"I would especially like to say, well, thank you for listening"

(Thant, 2014b)

⁶¹ Kailash Satyarthi founded 'Bachpan Bachao Andolan' (BBA) or 'Save the Child Movement' in 1980, which is credited for rescuing over 82,000 young people from trafficking, labour, prostitution and slavery. He often speaks of a larger fight against ignorance and negligence.

Appendix One: Participant Information Sheet



Researcher: Rebecca Ross, School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW)

Begin by asking if they would prefer oral consent whereby this is read aloud.

I am a Masters student at the School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. As part of this degree I am undertaking a research project leading to a thesis. The project I am undertaking is examining the experience of Burmese migrants' children living in Thailand. This research project is driven by a desire to develop the existing knowledge about teenagers from Burma/Myanmar that now live in Thailand, raising awareness and celebrating you and your community through photography.

Please note the project has been approved from the VUW Human Ethics Committee.

I am inviting young people, who were either born in Thailand to parents who have migrated from Burma/Myanmar or were born in Burma/Myanmar and have migrated to Thailand to take part in this photography project. Should you take part, the project will involve you in a 'photovoice' process during June 2014. This process will be divided into five phases.

Phase 1 is an initial meeting with myself and other participants in the project. During this meeting I will provide a short workshop on how to use the disposable cameras we will be using and about photography techniques. This meeting and workshop will take place in the Social Action for Women (SAW) classroom, 72 Prasartwithee Road, Mae Sot. It will begin at [insert time] and finish around [insert time]. If this is a long way to travel I can pick you up before hand.

Following this, Phase two will be an individual interview between you and me about your day-to-day life in Mae Sot. At the end of this interview I will give you a disposable camera and a notebook for you to write or draw ideas about the images you are taking (Phase three). A week later I will pick up the camera from you and have the photographs you take printed.

In Phase four I will return the photographs to you and together we will discuss each photograph you have taken, what they are of and what you were trying to portray in the image. I will then ask you to choose some of your favorite photographs to take to the final group discussion in phase five. Both interviews (phase two and phase four) will take place in the SAW classroom, unless you would rather them be somewhere else. In this case we can choose a location you would prefer.

This group discussion will bring everyone from phase one back together to share images. This will give you a chance to show the photographs you have taken and also to see others' photos. If you do not feel comfortable sharing your photographs you do not have to. Sharing will be optional. In this meeting we will also discuss what we could do next. Where the project could lead and if we could show the images to a wider audience.

Ultimately, I would love to show the photographs to a wider audience, perhaps in your community or they could even be shared with people in New Zealand to promote awareness for other Burmese teenagers in Thailand. However, this is something we can discuss as a group after we see the photographs.

Your participation is voluntary. I will not use your real name, or publish any images in which you can be identified. However, with your permission, your stories about the photographs you take (through interviews in phases two, three and four) will be audio-recorded and transcribed at a later date.

If at any stage you feel uncomfortable you are free to skip a particular question, request that the tape-recorder be turned off, or withdraw from the interview altogether. If you decide you would like to withdraw your images or stories after the interview, you have until July 1st 2014 to let me know.

All your original images, stories and your notebook will be returned to you for personal use. A copy of them will also be stored securely with myself (Rebecca Ross) for five years under the University of Victoria (Wellington, New Zealand) guidelines. All information will be deleted after five years. This research project has received approval from the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee.

Due to the length of my final thesis I am unable to have it translated into [Burmese]. However, I will write and send a shortened report on my findings and have it translated into [Burmese].

Should you have any questions about the project, please don't hesitate in contacting me or my academic supervisor. I would be more than happy to meet up for a chat or communicate over email or phone.

Thank you,

Rebecca Ross

Phone: [Thai phone number]

Email:

Academic Supervisor:

Dr Sara Kindon

Phone:

Email:

[Dr Kindon's Address]

Appendix Two: Parent/guardian informed consent for Participants' Less than 16 years of age



Parent/guardian informed consent for Participants' Less than 16 years of age

Begin by asking if they would prefer oral consent whereby this is read aloud.

I have been given the opportunity to consider all the information presented to me in the information sheet and have had any questions about the project answered to my satisfaction. I understand that [insert participants name] participation is completely voluntary and she/he may withdraw (and any information they provide) at any time up to July 1 2014 without having to give any reasons.

I understand that any information [insert participants name] provides will be kept confidential to the researcher, the researchers' supervisor and the person who transcribes and translates the tape recordings of our interview.

Group Meeting's (phase one and phase five):

- I give my consent for [insert participants name] to take part in the photovoice process and to contribute their photographic images and associated stories. Yes / No [circle one]

Individual Interviews (phase two and phase four):

- I agree / I do not agree [please select one] to [insert participants name]'s interviews being recorded and then transcribed.
- I understand [insert participants name] real name will not be used and he/she will instead choose a pseudonym (pretend name). Yes / No [circle one]

Photography (phase three):

- I understand that all the photographs [insert participants name] takes will be given back to him/her. Yes / No [circle one]
- I give consent/ I do not give consent [please select one] for a copy of [insert participants name]'s photographs and stories to be stored for five years to inform possible articles arising from the project. Yes / No [please circle one]

- I agree / I do not agree [please circle one] to [insert participants name]'s photographs and stories being used in Rebecca's academic thesis and possible articles about her research.

After the project

- I agree to [insert participants name]'s photographs and stories being used in an exhibition in Thailand: Yes / No [please circle one] and/or New Zealand: Yes / No [please circle one].
- I would / I would not [please select one] like to receive a copy of any report produced through this project.
- I agree that [insert participants name], who is under my guardianship, may take part in this research.

Full name [of participant]: _____

Full name [of guardian]: _____

Email (to send report to): _____

Address (to send report to): _____

Signature [guardian]: _____

Date: _____

Please feel free to contact me (Rebecca Ross) at any time to discuss the project or any other queries you may have.

Phone: [Thai phone number]

Email:

Or my academic supervisor:

Dr Sara Kindon

Phone:

Email:

[Dr Kindon's Address]

Appendix Three: Translator Confidentiality agreement



I have discussed the project with Rebecca and have had any questions about the project answered to my satisfaction. Yes / No

I understand that I am to keep any information provided by participants during any aspect of the research project completely confidential. Yes / No

I will not discuss the information I am translating with anyone other than Rebecca Ross. Yes / No

As the research project may deal with sensitive subjects, I will not pass judgment on any participants or react to participant's answers of questions that may infer I am judging them. Agree / Do not agree

Full name : _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please feel free to contact me (Rebecca Ross) at any time to discuss the project or any other queries you may have.

Phone: [Thai number]

Email:

Or my academic supervisor:

Dr Sara Kindon

Phone:

Email:

[Dr Kindon's address]

Appendix Four: Plan for Photography workshop

- Introductions
 - o Introduce myself /share own photos of my family/friends/country
 - o Ask participants to go introduce themselves [name, age, where born/from etc.]
 - o Play a name game/fun game to break the ice.
- Introduce the research project
 - o Go through the information sheet as a group, answering any questions.
 - o Obtain informed consent (give option to take home and discuss with family members/think about it alone).
- Explain the concept/method of photovoice
 - o Emphasize the responsibility and authority placed on the person wielding a camera and open a discussion as to how best minimize possible risks associated with photography.
 - o Facilitate a discussion about this [questions adapted from Wang, 1999]:
 - What is an acceptable way to approach someone to take his or her picture?
 - Do you think it is okay to photograph someone without their knowledge? Or without asking their permission prior to taking the photo?
 - When would you not want to have your picture taken?
- Discuss photography
 - o Begin by discussing the five different types of photographs (I supply examples) for landscapes, documentary, portraits, self-portraits and still lives.
 - o We will 'read' the images together (examining the details and then describing what they see/what they think might be happening/what do you think the photographer might be trying to communicate etc).
 - o Practice taking own portraits, landscapes etc in small groups using digital camera.
 - o Come back as one group and review participants images, what were they of, what type were they etc.
- Complete the above plan twice more with photography techniques (camera angles, composition, 'rule of thirds', and framing) and camera angles (high/low angle, close-up/extreme close-up/birds-eye-view)
- Pose theme for photographs as a group
- Question and answer session. Check if anyone needs clarification about the project.
- Organize time/date when participants are free to meet up for the first individual interview.

End by thanking everyone for coming.

Appendix Five: Interview Schedule One

Pre-photo semi-structured interview

Introductions

- Name/Age/Ethnicity/Religion
- Student status or occupation
 - o [Probe – how many years in school/what is occupation etc.]
- Sisters and brothers [number, sexes, ages, in Thailand?]
- Parents/family make-up [in Thailand?]

Migration experience

- Where were you born in Burma?
- How old were you when you migrated to Thailand?
 - o *If they were very young*: Do you have any memory of your life in Burma?
 - *If no*: Have your family members/guardian told you stories about your early years in Burma?
 - *If yes*: Can you tell me about your what you remember?
[Probe – Did you have some nice friends? Did you go to school? Did you enjoy it? etc.]
- Did you migrate alone or with family members?
 - o [Probe – did some members of your family stay behind? Why?]
- What was the main reason for your (or your family's) decision to migrate?
- Can you tell me you're story/experience of the migration journey?
 - o [e.g. how did you cross/where did you arrive (refugee camp, border town, city)]
- How did you feel about migrating? (e.g. happy/excited/anxious/stressed/sad to leave Burma/live in Thailand, why?)
- How long have you been living in Thailand? (have you moved internally since arriving?)
- How has life been for you/your family since you arrived here?

Life in Thailand

Could you please tell me some things you think are positive or that you enjoy about [border town]? *If struggling maybe ask what their three favorite things are/to do OR how they would describe the [border town] to a person who has never been.*
[Probe: where is this/where does this happen, how does this relate to your daily life, etc.]

- What's your favorite day of the week?
 - o What do you do on this day that makes it so enjoyable?
- What about your least favorite day of the week?
 - o What is it about this day that makes it your least favorite?
- Is there anything you would like to change about [border town]? *If struggling maybe ask what are three things they dislike about [border town].*

- How does this relate to your daily life? Is this something you have experienced/seen/heard of? How does this make you feel? Etc.]
- How do you think these things/situations could be improved?
- Where is the place you feel most safe in [border town]?
 - o What do you think is it about [the place] that makes you feel safe? Do you go alone or with friends/family?

Future aspirations

- Where do you see yourself in ten years?
 - o What will you be doing, will you have a family, where will you be living?
- Are there any things you would like to be able to do but you feel you cannot do because you are a migrant?
- What do you think are the barriers to you doing e.g. citizenship, costs (what kind), parental permission, feelings of discrimination, lack of information]
 - o *If yes:* If these barriers didn't exist where would you like to be in ten years.
- As a Burmese person living in Thailand do you think your life is different to a Thai teenager living here? [why? How?]
- Would you like to raise your family here/grow old here? [*If yes:* Why? *If not:* Where? Why do you think that place will be better?]

Wrap up

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your life in [border town] or your experience of migration?
- Do you have any ideas about what you think would enable your aspirations for your future to be realised?
 - o What about for Burmese migrants/teenagers more widely?
- Why are you interested in participating in this research project?
- Do you have any questions about the research project, or the process I can help you with?

Thank you so much for your time

Appendix Six: Interview Schedule Two

Post-photo semi-structured interview (Questions adapted from Wang, 1999)

All photographs are printed. I will then lie out all the images and give the participant time to look at them all. We will interview all the images with the questions below.

- Can you tell me what you see in this photograph?
- What is happening in the photograph? [Who is in the photograph, where was it taken, are there symbols etc.]
- Why did you take this photograph?
- How does this relate to your life?
- What does this photograph tell people about life in Mae Sot [Do you think this is a positive or negative occurrence?]
- Why do you think this situation/strength/concern exists?
- What do you think can be done to improve this situation/concern? **Or** What do you think can be done to support this strength?

After all images have been discussed:

- When you look at these (3-5) photographs do you think there are any themes/issues that are common to them all?
 - o what can other people learn from this?
- Why did you choose these (3-5) images as the ones, which are most important to share with me?

Thank you for your time

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