

The Sound of Loss and Hope: Pop Music of Karen Refugees from Burma/Myanmar¹

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In good time and in bad time, in joy and in sorrow, in lost and in pain, I will keep singing because my songs are part of my life. (a Karen singer in Melbourne speaking to his fans in his concert, March 21, 2015)

Since late 2011, I have made contact with Karen refugee communities in two geographic locations – one on the Thai-Burma border and one in Melbourne, Australia, which has provided me opportunities to observe and participate in a number of activities organized by those displaced residents. During my three-year engagement, I have come across many Karen refugees who have enthusiastically taken part in the production as well as circulation and consumption of Karen pop music, especially in the form of music CDs or DVDs and audio and video files shared through online media platforms such as YouTube. Some explain that music offers them opportunities to enjoy themselves and to ‘hang out’ with like-minded fellow Karen. Moreover, I have found that music involvement helps some Karen individuals to cope with and to make sense of situations of displacement, oppression and alienation. Notably, the sentimental charge of song lyrics and melodies as well as the visual representations in music videos become a source of a sense of Karen identity and solidarity, and thereby make it possible for the producers as well as their audiences to maintain connections with their counterparts in different countries.

Exploring music and media practices of Karen refugees from Burma, this paper demonstrates that the engagement with pop music, particularly with music production, is part of broader Karen socio-political and cultural movements underpinned by a sense of multi-locality or an awareness of being a diaspora. Music and media practices enable a number of Karen people who are displaced from their homeland to maintain their ethnic and national identity and accordingly, to resist being assimilated passively into dominant societies and cultures. Significantly, music engagement plays an integral role in promoting the wellbeing of the Karen, particularly young people, and in helping them to deal with constraints and obstacles incurred by forced migration and displacement situations. In this instance, this paper manifests the agency of a group of people in forced displacement situations who cannot be oversimplified as ‘defenseless victims’ or ‘mute victims’. Rather, these people endeavor to be proactive social actors by taking advantage of mediated communication and their transnational connections and networks.

To begin with, the section that follows provides a background to the emergence of displaced Karen communities and illustrates a range of media practices that play a part in the maintenance and

¹ The government renamed the country Burma to Myanmar in 1989. The names of cities and places in the country were also renamed (e.g., Rangoon became Yangon and Karen state became Kayah state). This paper uses the pre-1989 names given the preference of Karen refugee communities as well as displaced Karen media with which I engaged during the course of my PhD research titled ‘Media Practices, Displacement and Transnationalism: Media of and by Karen Refugees from Burma’. This paper is extracted particularly from Chapter 3 and Chapter 6 of the thesis.

consolidation of a sense of Karen identity and community solidarity. After that, I present the way in which Karen refugees engage with pop music making in relation to situations of migration and displacement the Karen have faced.

1. The Karen from Burma and Their Media Practices

Burma has a population of around 55 million and two thirds of the population are the ethnic Burman (also known as Bamar). In the country, there are also a number of ethnic groups divided by languages, cultural patterns and political aspirations, and one of the distinct groups is the Karen (or Kayin as recognized by the central government). Exact figures for ethnic minority inhabitants in Burma are unknown, yet Thawnghmung (2008, p.3) estimates that there are between 3 and 7 million Karen people who reside in Ayeyarwady Region (formerly Irrawaddy Division), Bago Region (Pegu Division), Tanintharyi Region (Tenasserim Division) and Kayin State (Karen State).

Over the past three decades, hundreds of thousands of Karen people have been displaced from their home country because of political and economic situations. Since the 1990s in particular, many Karen people have fled fighting and violence resulting from the ongoing conflict between the Burmese military government and the Karen National Union (KNU) and other Karen armed groups or secessionist organizations. Besides, given the harsh economic conditions caused by the mismanagement of the government, the numbers of Karen people crossing the border to Thailand have been increasing constantly. Notably, it is estimated that there are more than 100,000 Karen refugees in border camps located in 4 provinces including Mae Hong Son, Tak, Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi. Mae La camp in Tak Province is the biggest camp with best facilities and it accommodates over 40,000 refugees. Given that Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, the Thai government has dealt with the displaced populations only on a minimum humanitarian basis. There are also a large number of Karen refugees living outside the camps. Those self-settled refugees have relative more independence and greater freedom of movement, yet they risk being arrested and deported by Thai authorities.

In addition, since refugee resettlement schemes initiated in the mid-2000s, Karen refugees have been scattered across North America, Europe, Asia and the Pacific. There are more than 70,000 Karen residents in 13 resettlement countries, notably the United States and Australia, the most and second most common receiving countries respectively, followed by Canada, Norway, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Japan (Huguet & Chamratrithirong, 2011; Thawnghmung, 2012). It is undoubted that resettlement in the developed countries has much improved the lives of the Karen, yet it has brought about many challenges for them as well. Some examples are an inflexible and unfamiliar education model, socialising and health care, cultural and language barriers and financial difficulties (Bodde, 2011; Power & Pratt, 2012; Swe, 2013).

Despite the prolonged displacement and the constant scattering of the Karen, it is evident that many of them do not cut off relations with their cultural and political roots or with their dispersed fellows. In particular, elite and grassroots Karen alike are concerned about preserving their heritage in the form of language, traditions and cultural artefacts and importantly, hope to convey this Karen

heritage to their descendants, especially those who were born or grew up in foreign countries. Many of them also feel a strong sense of Karen nationhood and associate themselves with the ongoing struggle for self-determination led by the KNU and its affiliated organizations (Horstmann, 2014; Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008). Importantly, they try to sustain cross-border connections and communication with communities back home as well as with fellow Karen who share similar migratory routes (Brees, 2010; Brooten, 2008; Cho, 2011; Wilding, 2012). This brings about a range of political, cultural, educational, religious and economic organizations and activities within Karen communities on the Thai border and in many resettlement countries. Put simply, while living on the soil of others, the displaced Karen have brought with them language, cultural rituals, social networks, political aspirations and also media practices.

In the past several decades, Karen groups and individuals fleeing their home country have enthusiastically involved in the development of diverse media outlets. Such media development has initially set out to oppose the so-called 'Burmanization' policy (such as a ban on ethnic-language schools and ethnic-language media production and circulation) and the strict media censorship inside Burma. Two pioneering and well-recognized Karen news media in exile including *Kwe Ka Lu* and Karen Information Center (KIC), for instance, have been operated in Thai border towns as part of the Karen struggle for self-determination since the late 1990s. Also, there has been the production of Karen songs for justifying the revolutionary cause which have been popular among Karen nationalists and soldiers as well as refugees in Thailand and other countries. These Karen media products commonly circulate political and anti-government messages which are restricted in their home country.

From the 2000s, media produced by Karen refugees have been gradually growing given the expansion and affordability of media technologies and equipment. Some examples include newsletters and news websites produced by Karen organizations or activist groups based on the Thai-Burma border; community media projects in some resettlement countries; and online social media that are used by Karen individuals as well as formal and informal Karen-based groups to share stories, photos and videos through their transnational networks. Significantly, in the age of digital media and the internet, many Karen refugees on the Thai border and later in resettlement countries have tried to learn and master advanced media and communication technologies in order to link together Karen people across the globe and to foster a sense of Karen identity and community solidarity.

Media produced and used by Karen refugees are prominent cultural products that present a collective Karen identity considering that most of them use written and spoken Karen language to tell stories about the Karen people, their tradition and history, as well as their current situation. Especially after the rise of electronic and online media, political, cultural and social issues concerning Karen people in Burma and other countries are discussed widely. Many print and online articles promote Karen customs and values including aesthetic cultural patterns such as traditional Karen performances, cultural rituals and musical instruments. Some of them (re)discover and acknowledge Karen myths. A number of news and documentary videos present contemporary narratives such as refugee life and resettlement. Karen national symbols are also ritually circulated both in news and informative media as well as in entertainment media. In this instance, Karen media play an integral role in helping displaced Karen groups and individuals to resist dominant or foreign cultures. This is a

crucial point considering the fact that being refugees in Thailand and refugee-migrants in third countries tends to restrict their opportunity to participate or 'have a voice' in the public spheres of other nations, particularly mainstream media.

Regarding music production, there are a number of music and video CDs and DVDs produced by professional and amateur Karen singers and musicians in various countries. Their songs present content ranging from love and relationships, to religious beliefs, nationalist aspirations and encouragement of cultural preservation. Importantly, those Karen songs portray Karen stories from the Karen's own viewpoint and literally in Karen words, practices different from those of most mainstream media. The past few years have also seen many young Karen refugees involved in the creation of pop music and relevant media products, making use of equipment such as computers, digital video cameras, sound recording and video editing software that are now more affordable and easy to use. Moreover, several Karen refugees have managed to establish small recording studios in Thai border towns and in refugee camps and more recently, in some resettled Karen communities, which allows more Karen pop music to be produced.

Alongside the expansion of Karen media products, media circulation and consumption have become popular among Karen refugees around the world. In some refugee camps such as Mae La and Umpiem Mai in Tak Province, electricity is provided for camp residents and television sets and CD/DVD players are present in many houses. There are also several internet shops run by Karen refugees in the camps. These resources have become available in the past decade due in part to the connections between Karen nationalist elites and Thai authorities and contributions from NGOs and the Karen in third countries. This allows the circulation of many Karen media products, especially Karen music albums and movies, within the camps as well as in several border towns.

For the Karen in countries of resettlement, economic advancement and freedom of movement undoubtedly make it more convenient for them to take part in media circulation and consumption. Most Karen families in Australia, for instance, can afford modern entertainment and computer appliances including the internet. I have found that many Australian Karen residents have regularly monitored Karen news websites and also have used online social media, such as Facebook, for the discussion of Karen nationalist movements and other social and cultural issues concerning the Karen people who remain on the border and who have resettled elsewhere. Karen entertainment products are also popular in the resettled Karen communities. Most Karen grocery shops in Melbourne, for example, have for sale a collection of Karen music CDs and DVDs as well as tickets of Karen concerts performed by artists from local and overseas Karen communities. Thus, even though their homeland is not just across a borderline, the Karen in Australia as well as other third countries find it possible to consume a sense of Karen-ness provided by numerous media products from their fellows in their local communities and beyond.

In the past decade, YouTube has become popular among Karen music lovers. This online media platform allows Karen individuals, and young Karen refugees in particular, scattered across continents to celebrate a sense of being Karen. The keyword 'Karen song' can be used to discover many thousands of Karen pop songs and music videos uploaded on the video-sharing website. Many of them obviously are made 'just for fun' but a number of videos are well-produced. Impressively, many of the Karen pop music videos have already been viewed more than 50,000 times (some even

100,000). Also, there are a substantial number of comments from Karen viewers on each of the videos, which becomes a space where their ethnic and national identity is explicitly projected.

Considering the encounter of Karen refugees with their migration and displacement situations, and particularly their media engagement, the Karen can be regarded as one of the transnational communities that informs and is informed by a sense of multi-locality and of dual/multiple political and cultural orientations, or “diaspora consciousness” (see Vertovec and Cohen, 1999, p.xviii). As Sinclair and Cunningham (2000, p.1) point out,

it is clear to see that the traditional “national culture” of many major nations no longer fits (if it ever really did) substantial proportions of the people who now actually inhabit the nation. Rather, these people’s cultural horizons are turned toward those they see as their kind in other nations, and (possibly) to their nation of origin, but also to the challenges of negotiating a place in the host culture.

Karim (2003, p.3) further maintains that

[f]orced or voluntary migrations diminish the physical links of those who leave their homeland, but they take with them the mythical and linguistic allusions to the ancestral territory, which they invoke in nostalgic reminiscences. Some hold on to hope of eventual return. This creates the demand for cultural products that maintain and ritually celebrate the links of diaspora with the homeland. The dispersed settlements of transnations also exchange symbolic goods and services, including media content, among each other, thus sustaining global networks.

In the following part, we take a closer look at the relationship between pop music and the Karen diaspora consciousness.

2. Making Karen Sound in the Diaspora

For 12-15 Karen singers and musicians whom I have met between 2011 and 2015, most of them are in their 20s or early 30s. Commonly, these people have been interested and involved in music making from a young age. Dominated by male individuals, this group of Karen music creators is reflective of broader Karen pop music society inside and outside Burma and, in fact, of the global pop music scene (see Bennett, 2001; Harrison, 2009). Like other women across the globe, unequal opportunities for social, educational and vocational participation as well as expectations of appropriate gender roles (e.g. responsibilities for taking care parents or children) are factors that constrain female Karen refugees from taking part in pop music production.

Apart from that, Karen pop music production, both in Burma and in the diaspora, appears to be dominated by Christian Karen. This phenomenon is straightforwardly related to the fact that Christians outnumber their Buddhist and animist refugee counterparts. Notably, around 50% of the total population in refugee camps in Thailand and more than 80% of the Karen residents in Australia belong to Christianity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; The Border Consortium, 2013). Consequently, networks and opportunities among Karen Christians are far better. Specifically speaking, Christian Karen music makers on the Thai border and in Australia as well as other countries

have benefitted substantially from material and other support provided by their churches and fellow Christians (both Karen and foreign). Some examples include opportunities to: learn and practice western music instruments regularly; experiment with basic sound recording equipment; and promote and distribute their music CDs/DVDs (both secular and religious songs) at weekly church services. For non-Christian Karen, fewer opportunities to access this support limit their engagement with pop music production to a certain extent.

Most Karen singers and musicians I interviewed similarly stressed that music was their passion and thus music making was considered their favorite hobby. Nonetheless, they realized that music could not become their profession considering their subordinate status, namely that of refugee, stateless person or ethnic minority. They were also aware that when they were older, had family and children and had to take more responsibilities for their family or community, they might have less time to do and enjoy their hobby – composing songs, practicing instruments, singing, making music videos, organizing concerts and so on. More particularly, music production is not treated as an income-generating activity for these Karen music enthusiasts. I have commonly found that Karen individuals who invest time, money and energy in producing their music CDs or DVDs usually are satisfied if the projects just break even or generate a small amount of profit. There are very few Karen refugees who make a living from music and most of them are based on the Thai-Burma border. A dozen Karen youth in Australia in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth who have already produced and launched their albums have also been studying and then finding ‘proper jobs’ for their livelihoods in Australia (and for investing in their hobby).

One of the Karen music enthusiasts in Melbourne, for instance, have already produced three solo albums since 2005. He took approximately 2 years and invested around 1,300-1,600 AUD per album for music arrangements, sound mixing and other post-production processes like cover design and printing (500 copies for each albums). Despite the fact that he got back the money he spent after distributing the albums, as he never paid himself for the songs he composed and the time he invested in organizing the projects, his music-making work was clearly not profit-based. He further told me that after the distribution of some of the music CDs and DVDs, he would concentrate on (and enjoy) thinking about his next music projects. He sometimes even gave the remainders to fellows in his community or sent them free to friends overseas (interview, August 10, 2013). This non-profit-based practice is common among other Karen singers and musicians I know. Most of them have never made a decent business plan regarding the distribution and promotion of their CDs and DVDs. Literally, they regard themselves as music hobbyists, yet they commit their time and money to the processes of music creation and the production of good quality creative work.

2.1 Dealing with Loss and Displacement

A question then is what are the reasons behind the enthusiasm of these Karen music hobbyists. Put simply, why do the Karen make pop music? Surely, the motivation for taking part in music production varies from individual to individual. Yet, I have found that musical creativity and artistic expression are used by many Karen refugees, especially Karen youth, to distance themselves from unattractive or negative aspects of their lives, which is similar to music involvement of many other young people around the world (see Bennett, 2001; McFerran, 2012). Some of the Karen explain that taking part in pop music production allows them to ‘have fun’ and to temporarily escape from the

difficulties of refugee life. In other words, music practices give them a chance to 'feel good' about themselves, particularly in response to their subordinate status. Two Karen singers in Melbourne comment:²

Karen like to sing and make songs because they will show what talent that they have. Like you know ... if other people can sing, Karen can sing too ... like they are catching up the modern. Before, they may never hear pop, rap. But later when they hear, they like ... we are going to sing the rap too ... we are going to do like that. It is for showing that they have talent like other people as well. Karen can do like other nations do even though [we are] in hard situation like in the camps or to go to other countries. (interview, August 10, 2013)

One of my purposes for making Karen albums is I want to let the Karen know that our Karen people have talent. We can produce albums. We can make music videos. (interview, August 11, 2013)

A Karen musician on the Thai-Burma border also observes that pop music is a tool that helps young people not to feel useless. For example, when they take part in singing or playing music, they usually get positive feedback and emotional or financial support from Karen communities, locally and globally. As he puts it,

albums made in the camp, for people who resettled, they usually buy it to support these young people, young musicians. Even though they may not like the songs, the videos, they just buy to help the young artists to grow up ... you know. It is one of the reasons ... to help and support. (interview, July 22, 2013)

The border musician adds that involvement in pop music can play a role in connecting scattered Karen communities together:

Songs are very important to the community here [refugee camps] and those who resettled. For those who live here, actually they feel very lonely. They feel separate from other Karen. Music can connect people. It is a good way to open someone's heart. So when they hear the songs, they really reconnect each other again. (interview, July 22, 2013)

Importantly, I have found that creative processes relating to music making such as song writing have become a tool for some Karen refugees to deal with difficult situations and emotional disturbance. A Karen refugee in Melbourne, for example, began to write his first song when he was 15 years old. At that time, he had recently returned to Mae La camp after visiting his relatives in Burma. He got the bad news that a Karen girl whom he liked had passed away as a consequence of armed violence. Wanting to express his grief at the girl's premature death, he wrote a ballad song in memory of his first love. He once sang the song "You Left Me Behind" in a Karen concert in Melbourne to represent the bitterness of loss caused by armed political conflict in his home country and as a result, the displacement and suffering of Karen people.

*You are gone, you left me behind
In this world, how can I go on by myself?*

² All interviews with Karen refugees were conducted in English.

*I love you the most in my life
I hoped we could keep being, going together
But it cannot happen anymore*

*The days that're gonna come in the future, only me
I have to go on, I'm mournfully missing you
I can still hear your whispering voice
That says you're gonna love only me
And you're gonna be only mine*

*When I close my eyes, I see you all the time
And when I open my eyes, you just disappear again
In my dim memory of what we went through
It sometimes makes me laugh and sometimes makes me cry
And my tears keep flowing – again and again*

*Even though you left me behind – you disappeared
I'm always holding and still keeping your love
The greatest love I've ever had³*

He recalls his feeling at the moment when his first song was written more than 10 years ago:

I just was thinking about the memory of what we spent time together in Sunday school, youth seminar ... We used to go to summer school together. I liked her. I sometimes wondered why she died very young. I didn't even have any of her pictures ... She was too young to pass away and I can imagine how hard it was. She was very sick, got malaria, hid in the cave until morning. It must be very cold ... It made me cry ... Not only her, I imagined the other Karen people's experience as well. There are quite similar stories like that. Karen people hide from enemy and get sick. (interview, August 10, 2013)

He adds that “start from there, I liked to write songs. I expressed my feeling through songs”. He goes on, “I had feeling. I did not know how the tunes and lyrics come out ... like the tunes the lyrics naturally coming” (interview, August 10, 2013). Additionally, after living in Australia for almost 10 years and attempting to make sense of situations of migration and displacement, he recently wrote a song about a question he sometimes asks himself. “Which Land is My Homeland?” is the title of the song.

*The place where I was born, I want to go back there
But there is war and conflict
When can I go back to the place
The place where my great grandparents belong?
How can I go there?*

³ Songs presented in this paper are composed and sung in Karen, translated into English by the songwriters in cooperation with the researcher.

*I grew up in the place where people seek refuge
The life that I experienced was vulnerable
Is that my home? I cannot understand
Where is my country?
Where is my real home?
Until now, I cannot understand
My birthplace, my childhood place
Which place do I really belong?*

He explains the feeling he has about the song:

I still have confusion about three countries I have lived. That's why I wrote the song. I was born in Burma in a village and I move to refugee camp in Thailand and now I move to Australia. Which Land is My Homeland? ... just a simple question. My feeling asks the question. Which land is my home? Which land does really belong to me? It is really hard to answer. (interview, August 16, 2013)

The refugee music creator then concludes that music making is one of the important tools that he can use for coping with difficulties in his life:

Making songs helps my feeling. Like when you have difficulties, it is like you have a counsellor, a close friend who you can talk to or can share. Singing, composing songs is one of my friends who stay with me. When I am sad, I hurt and have difficulties, I compose songs, sing the songs. It is like I have quiet time. I am writing my journals. When I finish one song, I feel very happy. I am proud of myself too. I always write down the date when the songs are composed and write why I compose them. It has a story. Composing songs is like a friend ... like I have someone. (interview, August 16, 2013)

The way the displaced Karen engage with music-making practice is consistent with Baily and Collyer (2006, p.177) who maintain that “[i]f migrants suffer in various ways from the separation from home, this situation is much more acute for refugees ... They suffer a loss of self-esteem and self-identity, of experiencing oneself as a valuable human being”. They go on to contend that it is evident that music at times can play a role in helping many displaced groups and individuals to deal with such vulnerability. In this regard, “[m]usic in the migrant situation may have important therapeutic uses, for both individuals and groups. This is especially likely to be the case for refugees who have suffered traumatic experiences” (p.177).

2.2 Music and National Belonging

The production of nationalist songs is another instance of the role that pop music plays in the transnational life of the Karen. It appears that such music practice helps some Karen individuals to make sense of their Karen identity which, to a certain extent, interlocks with the Karen nation-making project and the Karen struggle for freedom and justice. For instance, the song “Karen Life” is written by a Karen refugee in Australia to remind himself as well as his peers not to forget their people who have been suffering in Burma and on the border:

*Our nation has been persecuted
Our villages were burnt down
Until now, Karen people have had to flee
Our people have been killed
We, Karen people have been destroyed
Until now, Karen people have fled for survival*

*Karen life, Karen suffering
When I think about this, it hurts my heart so much
Karen life, Karen disaster
Raise your hands to help our Karen people*

*Because the enemy abuses us
Our people have been separated
Until now, the enemy has oppressed our Karen people
I don't want to cry
But I have to cry
Where is our escape?
Where is our hope?*

The songwriter told me that he was inspired by some photos of Karen villagers tortured by the Burmese army. Those photos made him feel very upset and he needed to calm himself down. As he puts it, "those pictures stuck in my eyes, made me cry. I still even can see the pictures until now. When I first saw that, I came back home and I wrote the song about the suffering of the Karen" (interview, August 10, 2013). For him, writing the song made him feel better because at least he could do something for his suffering Karen people.

Similarly, another talented singer and songwriter who found his musical passion from a young age reveals that he sometimes feels guilty when he compares his relatively convenient and 'laid-back' life in Australia with the majority of the Karen in Burma and on the Thai border whose everyday lives involve persecution, injustice and starvation. He said that when his family was accepted for resettlement in 2006, he was about to graduate from a high school on the border. He dreamt that he would study in an Australian university and become a lawyer who could go back to help his Karen people in Burma and on the border. He later found that the dream was not likely to be realized:

My dream was to be a lawyer like Saw Ba U Gyi⁴. Maybe I could help my Karen people and other ethnic groups to solve their problems ... When I arrived here, I was hopeless. My education, my English was not good enough. It was hard to get to the level to be a lawyer. I was very upset. I realized that I could not follow what I dream. I left the dream. (interview, August 11, 2013)

⁴ Saw Ba U Gyi was the first KNU president who graduated from a law school in the UK and came back to join the Karen Revolution. His premature death at the age of 44 helped make him one of the most well-known modern Karen historical figures. His well-known 'Four Principles' (for us, surrender is out of the question; we shall retain our arms; the recognition of the Karen State must be complete; and we shall decide our own destiny) are one of the key symbols of the Karen nation-building project.

For him, among other contributions to his Karen peers (e.g., donating money to a Karen school in Burma and providing some equipment and financial support for his friends' recording studio in a camp), writing songs about the Karen situation is a way of making himself feel unselfish. As he says,

Here we live in a freedom country but many Karen people have no freedom. Like food, I have tasted freedom every day. I want to share it. I want them to taste ... My songs may remind them [Karen overseas] where we are from, who we are, what we become ... what we should do. We should look back. We now stay here with freedom. Please do not forget your people who have to flee every day. (interview, August 11, 2013)

One of his songs inspired by a story of disabled soldiers, for instance, shows his dedication to the Karen struggle for self-determination. He believes that this song would remind his Karen fellows about Karen soldiers who have dared to risk life and limb and sacrificed their own interests for the national cause.

*The hands that I use to hug you
The legs that I use to walk with you
All are gone
I wish to see your beautiful face
But I cannot see it*

*I've lost my sight, I've lost my eyes
Only my heart remains
Although every part of my body is destroyed
My soul is still alive for you*

*I would like to hear your voice
I would like to hear you saying you love me
Now I have no chance to hear that*

The songwriter explains:

The song is about a Karen soldier who is disabled ... like some of them lose their eyes, arms, legs. They give their body for our people. They do not care what happens to them because of love. They love their people. They do not want to let their people suffer. They want our next generations to live with freedom, with their rights. They want to see that. So I wrote that song. When Karen people listen to the song, I want them to realize that we have disabled soldiers in our community or on the border. They will feel so lonely, if we do not recognize them. They are hero. (interview, August 11, 2013)

He also composed another song about Karen children who lost their parents due to the armed conflict in his home country.

*Where are my parents? Where are my siblings?
I am lonely and abandoned
The world I have lived in*

I have to face many difficulties

My friends have their parents

As a human being, why do I have to be left an orphan?

Because of what? Why? I don't know

My life in this world is very bad

I would like to see the beautiful faces of my parents

I would like to call you mom and dad

The songwriter reveals his motivation in writing this song:

In our Karen communities, [there are] so many orphans because their parents passed away, because of the situations in Burma like war. Their parents are soldiers, when they went to the front line, they passed away ... I write the song about the way most parents hug their children. Those Karen orphans want that too. They want their parents to hug them before going to bed, but not possible. (interview, August 11, 2013)

He further underlines the role that Karen pop songs can play in fostering Karen nationalist sentiments:

Karen singers can support Karen people through songs and music. Because songs have feeling and words to listen, you can hear the words ... you can hear the feeling as well. So it can encourage them while they are listening to the songs. Songs are a kind of weapons to encourage. Song is powerful, not just for fun ... Songs are very important for our Karen people's life because we can tell stories through the songs. It is like our history I mean ... the stories [have] never gone. (interview, August 11, 2013)

As previously mentioned, many Karen refugees are keen to take part in pop music making because they are passionate about it and they enjoy doing it so much. It is also true that they primarily focus on producing love songs such as those found commonly in youth culture and pop music society around the world. However, what is evident here is that the Karen music enthusiasts also care about the situations of Karen people and they consider their creative work as being able to benefit their fellow Karen and Karen nation in some way. This in turn becomes a way for the Karen to cope with constraints incurred by migration and displacement in that music engagement helps them to feel valuable instead of vulnerable.

3. Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the development and persistence of a diasporic media scene that is neither controlled by the authority of any one nation-state nor predicated upon the market and mainstream media systems. On the one hand, the expansion and affordability of media technologies and equipment in the past few decades make it possible for the Karen, like many other migrant or refugee groups, to establish and produce their own media. On the other hand, it is clear that mediated communication among Karen refugees on the Thai-Burma border and in resettlement countries is associated with concerns about their prolonged displacement situations and the

potential for the loss of Karen culture and heritage and for disconnection between geographically dispersed Karen groups and individuals. Notably, many Karen refugees engage with music- and media-making activities because they perceive their work as being able to promote a sense of Karen identity and community solidarity, especially when their co-nationals tend to be assimilated by dominant cultures and societies.

Significantly, music and media practices of Karen refugees on the Thai-Burma border and in resettlement countries, particularly Australia, manifest that the characterization of the displaced residents cannot be oversimplified as 'defenceless victims' or 'mute victims', the image or perception often rendered and reproduced in politics, mainstream or mass media and also academia, to a certain degree (see Lee, 2012). This reinforces the notion of refugee agency that has gradually been recognized in migration and refugee scholarship in the past few decades (e.g., Marlowe, 2010; Malkki, 1996; Peisker & Tilbury, 2003; Watters, 2001). As maintained by Ferfolja (2011), while refugees have faced considerable personal, economic and material loss, "they have had to remain strong and resilient, not only to forge new lives in different lands, but to survive the contexts from which they have come" (p.1). She goes on to point out that refugees cannot be seen simply as oppressed and powerless people. Rather, they have strengths, knowledge and power, like all other people (p.3). For Karen music and media producers, in many ways, they strive to become proactive social actors. More particularly, the Karen work out ways of achieving their personal and collective interests, notably, by mastering the craft of music- and media-making and by taking advantage of their transnational networks and connections.

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