Blood, Sweat and Tears: The Political Agency of Women Activist-Refugees of Burma

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Introduction

1. Women activist-refugees from Burma, displaced to Burma's borderlands with India and Bangladesh, have been working to create networks of women's political and social welfare organisations from their position of effective statelessness. The formation of the Women's League of Burma (WLB) in 1999, an umbrella organisation consisting of twelve border-based women's organisations, has facilitated a dramatic increase in women's participation in Burma's opposition movement. The production of reports documenting systematic gender-based human rights abuses in Burma by WLB organisations has particularly embarrassed Burma's ruling military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in international circles and has raised the profile of the organisation and its members.[1]

2. Increasingly, interest is emerging in post-positivist international relations (IR) theory concerning the subjectivity and agency of people in refugee-related situations that the site of refuge provides valuable insights for understanding contemporary ethical and political life and how it is transforming.[2] Political philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, suggests a starting point for understanding and exploring new forms of political agency and subjectivity, that moves beyond the stifling logic of sovereignty, lies with the figure of 'the refugee.' This figure, he argues, is banished by regimes of sovereign power exception, a zone where distinctions between inside and outside, law and fact, exception and rule break down and lose their meaning.[3] In these ambiguous spaces, where the judicio-political order is permanently in suspension, refugees are subject to power/knowledge regimes that depoliticise their agency and cast them as 'bare life.'[4] As Agamben argues, however, '[i]t is on the basis of these uncertain and indistinct terrains, these difficult zones of indistinction that the ways and forms of a new politics must be thought.'[5] It is such a zone of indistinction—namely, Burma's interstate borderlands—that women activist-refugees from Burma inhabit and from which Burma's first modern women's movement has emerged.

3. In this article, I theorise how women activists displaced in Burma's borderlands are understood as political agents. I identify the ways in which sovereign power attempts to capture and depoliticise these women and how, over time, they develop strategies to renegotiate violent sovereign relations to reinstate the possibility...
non-violent political resistance. Women activist-refugees of Burma represent new forms of political agency and subjectivity. These new forms are significant because they disrupt the state-centric categories of agency and subjectivity through which sovereign regimes of power—the Burmese military dictatorship and the international humanitarian and refugee regimes—gain authority and exercise control.

Central to this argument is the claim that Burma's interstate borderlands where women activist-refugees live, are structured, in an Agambian sense, as states of exception, as zones of indistinction.

4. In this I study apply concepts of trauma, sovereign relations of violence, and transversal political practice to women activists located in the interstitial position of interstate borderlands and between boundaries of human-citizen, ethnicity and gender. So, I contribute to the field of feminist IR in two ways. First, through an empirical focus on women activist-refugees of Burma, I draw attention to a gendered set of political practices in which refugees as political agents engage in a broader way than has been previously discussed. Secondly, this discussion reinforces a feminist IR argument that a more fluid concept of power and politics is necessary to capture a fuller range of power relations and appreciate the agency and power of both dominant and non-dominant actors.

5. This article is structured into four main sections. First, a brief background of Burma and the WLB is provided. Second, I draw on Agamben's concepts of 'bare life' and 'state of exception' to show how ontological categories associated with sovereign power are imposed on women activist-refugees of Burma to limit their capacity for political agency. Third, I focus on transformative dimensions of trauma and the significance of constituting one's identity to explain how women activists reform their political subjectivity. And finally, this new subjectivity is discussed as a line of flight beyond hegemonic control of sovereign relations of power. Two examples of transversal political strategies are given to illustrate this new political subjectivity and agency.

6. The substantive data is derived from interviews with twenty-four women activists located in the Thailand-Burma borderlands between 1999 and 2001. The participants, aged between 20 and 55 years, identified themselves as belonging to nine ethnic nationalities from Burma: Karen, Karenni, Shan, Mon, Pa-O, Padaung, Burman, Kachin, Tavoyan and Burmese. These women have lived on the borders for varying lengths of time experiencing a variety of circumstances. They each have their own paths to becoming activist-refugees in Burma's borderlands, but they are brought together by their common gendered experiences of political violence and 'bare life' as well as their common decisions to act to address these injustices.

**Burma and woman activist-refugees**

7. Space for political activism in Burma is all but closed given that opposition to regime is a life-threatening pursuit. In Burma, a state of emergency where the political order is suspended has been the rule for several generations.
the ethnic minority groups and the Burman-dominated state quickly deteriorated into violence shortly after Burma's independence from Britain in 1948 and insurgent and counter-insurgent warfare has been on-going around Burma's border areas ever since. A military dictatorship permanently installed itself as the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) in 1962 and in response to the 1988 civil uprisings a state of emergency was declared. The national constitution was suspended and a 'temporary' military currently called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), continues decree.[13]

8. While ethno-political and pro-democratic resistance (as opposed to violent resistance) in Burma continues, these activities are treated by the state as criminal. Politicians and activists are detained under decrees of martial law. Leading political opposition such as the National League for Democracy's (NLD) Aung San Suu Kyi and Tin Oo and the Shan National League for Democracy's Khun Htun Oo are either jailed or imprisoned under house arrest. NLD members are surveilled and harassed, driving most pro-democratic political opposition underground. Imprisonment is to be expected for political activists, as this woman activist explains recalling a visit to her friend NLD member.

Her first question was, 'What do you think about prison for political activists? Are you afraid of prison?' My answer was, 'Yes, I am afraid of the prison, I am afraid of being arrested by the military'...She encouraged me not to be afraid...That is the normal life— the normal life for politicians and activists.'[14]

9. The emergence of a rights-based women's movement of Burma, as I have argued elsewhere, has only been possible in Burma's borderlands. This is particularly the case in the Thailand-Burma borderlands, because of their political, social, geographic and historical characteristics.[15] Many women's organisations have emerged or reinvigorated amongst the displaced communities located in Burma's borderlands have their beginnings as the women's branches of the traditional ethnic political leadership structures; others have developed in relation to conditions of on-going conflict and life-threatening poverty in Burma. In a triple, sometimes quadruple, sense and politics merges in the subjectivities of these women activists: as women, members of politicised ethnic minorities and pro-democratic opponents to the Burmese military regime. The WLB focuses on building cooperation and understanding across ethnic and political differences, and developing programs on peace, women and violence, capacity building and political empowerment.[16] It has a particular advocacy campaigns designed to link global, international and local activities.

Women Activist-Refugees and Sovereign Relations of Violence

10. Women activist-refugees of Burma are mostly located in Burma's territorial and political borderlands. As areas involved in armed conflict, mass human displacement and the creation of special economic zones, Burma's interstate borders are intensely politicised. For those displaced by state-related violence in Burma, interstate borderlands
extreme states of exception; they are ontologically structured as spaces of permanent anxiety and liminality. These are spaces of exclusion, confusion, uncertain indiscriminate violence, where nothing is resolvable, fixed or sure. Pressure on individuals and communities caught in these zones is amplified by the permanent suspension of the normal state of affairs; or, in other words, a permanent 'state of exception'. The relational characteristics of borderlands overflow into the socio-political lands more broadly span interstate borders.

11. The position these women occupy within the nation-state system is exemplary of a gendered form of Agamben's figure of 'bare life' or *homo sacer*. Banished by sovereign power to the state of exception, the *homo sacer* is one who:

is excluded from the religious community and from all political life: he [sic] cannot participate in its rites of his gens, nor can he perform any judicially valid act. His entire existence is reduced to bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide. He can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditional threat of death. He is pure *zoe* but his *zoe* is as such caught in the sovereign ban and must reckon with it at every moment, finding the best way to elude or deceive it. In this sense, no life, as exiles and bandits know well, is more 'political' than this.

12. Sovereignty's production of 'the refugee' as subject, Jenny Edkins argues, not only produces an order of governmentality but also an order of sovereign power. In 'the refugee' as outside but simultaneously entrapped by the logic of sovereign regimes, sovereignty is produced. Those banned from political community by a sovereign regime because they challenged its legitimacy must also be prevented from challenging the same regime from the 'outside.' Hence, strategies to capture and forcefully reassert their control over individuals. When people in refugee-related situations attempt to define their and, more radically still, act upon it, they run the grave risk of exposing the arbitrary and contingent nature of sovereignty's architecture. They risk exposing the violence inherent in sovereign regimes' strategies to maintain the status quo. Women refugees embody, in this South-Southeast Asian context, the very figure of 'bare life' upon which Agamben argues modern sovereignty is founded.

13. While crossing beyond the territorial limit of Burma may have been a relatively straightforward (though neither easy nor safe) task for these women activist-refugees, beyond the limits of sovereign power regimes is not. Sovereign regimes of power work in multiple ways to capture and forcefully reassert their control over individuals. Those who qualify as 'persons of concern' in neighbouring states, for example, may register to live in camps on the condition they do not pursue political activities. Those excluded for political reasons from receiving humanitarian support, such as the Shan, must survive as migrant workers who are at constant risk of arrest, detention and deportation.

14. Through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), individual
refugees can apply to resettle to third countries and eventually gain citizenship. In this way, the UNHCR—by its nature an inter-state agency—functions as a *de facto* the nation-state system's regime of belonging. An effect of these programs is a undermine the growth of political activism by people displaced in Burma's bc As Anne McNevin highlights in the case of non-status migrants in the United radical potential of activist-refugees' political agency becomes significantly diffused once they are returned to the 'legal fold.'[25] Women active within the 1988 student described the Thai Government's attempts to dissolve Burmese student politi: through resettlement programs. Consequently, decisions by some individual a: settle in third countries caused tensions within some border-based organis: As this woman activist recalls:

At the beginning, we didn't like the UNHCR policy. At that time, we were trying hard to bu: organisation. But the UNHCR gave the chance to go to a third country. Many of our friend colleagues left. So we hated the UNHCR.[27]

15. Living in refugee camps, and outside, decisions about life and death in the bc become arbitrary. As Agamben appreciated, when living in this state of except 'whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civili ethical sense of the authorities who police them who temporarily act as sovereign. Moreover, the lack of official political status leaves activist-refugees vulnerable forms of physical and psychological violence committed by anyone with impu way, people in this void are forced to confront the fact of their own naked, unhumaness. As a woman activist explained in the early days of her displaceme

On the border I found myself fighting for my own existence, just because I was of a differ from the locals and just for being a woman. I felt more in fear of my own personal securi Fear of being raped by anyone—it could be my own friends, Karen soldiers, BSPP soldie Thais.[29]

16. As Edkins and Veronique Pin-Fat point out, the relation of sovereign power to not a relation of power in any political sense, but a relation of violence.[30] The power affords no meaningful space for activist-refugees to express their politi but instead, responds to their presence with various forms and degrees of for violence is explicit or immanent in the state's dealings with women activist-refu in Burma and in the borderlands. Their narratives resound with incidents of t gendered, often intensely sexualised and even fatal, character of encounters b agents of sovereign power regimes and these women's politically unprotected Inside Burma, these acts and threats include the use of rape and other forms o violence as weapons of war against women of ethnic minorities.[31] Pro-democracy activists have testified to the gendered and sexualised techniques the military dictatorship uses to interrogate and torture women political prisoners.[32]

17. Women activist-refugees move to the border areas to escape the authority and the Burmese military regime. Many come specifically in search of space to pu political activism. In neighbouring countries, women activist-refugees are no
sought out as direct targets of state violence as they are in Burma. Instead, they are seen as aliens whose movements require containment and control. They have been recast, no longer as citizens of a state in pursuit of a political cause, but as 'refugees,' 'illegal aliens,' and 'undocumented migrants.' The discursive power carried through these state-centric categories is highly successful in presenting people in these refugee-related situations as voiceless, passive and helpless on the one hand, or errant and deviant on the other.

While their treatment by sovereign regimes of power in the borderlands is not as intensely violent as in Burma, women activist-refugees are nevertheless still treated as politically unqualified, and life and decisions of life and death remain arbitrary. Incidents of rape, sexual exploitation and other crimes are frequently reported from encounters with security agents and citizens of neighbouring states.[34] Women have no effective recourse to legal protection without risk of arrest and possible deportation.

18. Thus in sovereign states of exception women activist-refugees are faced with sovereign power regimes that mobilise multiple strategies to recapture their bodies and Recast as 'outsiders' of the state and the international political system, women refugees are predominantly treated by state security forces, refugee and humanitarian workers, and local societies as lacking legitimate political agency and identity. Particularly in the early years of the women's movement, women activist-refugees experienced their displacement in the borderlands as a form of trap.

At the beginning we felt [bad] having to stay in the border; we have no country, we have no citizenship...We cannot stay freely in the neighbouring country and we cannot go back to our country. So it was a really disappointing problem, a really big problem for us when we arrived in the border. 19.

19. The recourse to violence by sovereign power regimes in relation to women activist-refugees demonstrates how the logic of sovereign power functions to extinguish the possibility of genuine political relations. Where relations of violence operate, the possibility of effective political resistance is suffocated. This is not to suggest that resistance stops. Rather, it is necessary to find new ways, new paths, or new lines of flight to access political space. For women of Burma in refugee-related situations to continue to be or become activists they must, as Peter Nyers says, make a break from the state of exception.[36] They must find a way to repoliticise their subjectivities and their agency. Rather than running from and trying to forget the traumatic events and realities caused by sovereign regimes of violence, activist-refugees face this trauma head on. Speaking publicly about their experiences and on behalf of those they represent using human rights discourses, they find recognition in international circles that legitimises their narratives of trauma and hence gives them political leverage.

Trauma and hard decisions

20. Whether expressed directly or left unsaid, trauma dominates women activist-refugees' narratives of political struggle. These women have all experienced trauma as a violent encounters with regimes of sovereign power, both inside Burma and in interstate borderlands. Traumatic events and their consequences surround th
have come to structure their daily lives and constitute important dimensions of their identities.

21. Whether acted upon immediately or after some time, experiences of trauma described by Edkins, points of no return. Within the context of fear, insecurity, uncertainty and silence—and across refugee camps, migrant and political dissident communities—women activist-refugees' experiences of violence and powerlessness gradually led to realisations of the thoroughly gendered character of the opera regimes of power. Repeatedly, it was the gendered character of living conditions of statelessness that were cited by the women I interviewed as a primary reason they decided to pursue women-focused forms of activism. This was explained to me by one of the woman leaders.

There are so many big issues. Trafficking and the abusive situation in the work places for migrants and refugees. They have no rights. And domestic violence. All that!

22. Traumatic experiences of 'bare life' sometimes have forced women activist-refugees to make political choices about what to do with memories they cannot forget, accept, or make sense of in relation to their expectations of the way the world should be. As Slavoj Žižek argues, trauma requires the traumatised to confront that which did take place as well as that which did not. The missed opportunities that could have alternative histories are also constitutive parts of what did take place. In traumatic events around which women activist-refugees' lives have formed are political moments where the radical contingency of their existing social order exposed only to be violently reinstated.

23. It is the existential need to remain true to trauma and the knowledge that things and almost were, different—and possibly better—that drives women activist-refugees to overcome the demobilising fear that engenders silence and inaction. Their memories of trauma drive them to overcome the fear that greases the operation of sovereign regimes of power and constitute them as 'bare life.' In this way, they engage in a fundamental political challenge of our time: far from seeking to escape power relations, they attempt to reinstate them, and with them the possibility of politics.

Acting politically

24. Resisting subjectification by a powerful outside force simultaneously involves of creating one's own new subjectivity. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Žižek theorises this process as the act of 'self-constitution' as subject. In contrast to action of a more ordinary rule-following nature, Edkins identifies this as the most intense political act. The political character of these acts of self-constitution as polity derives from 'the burden of decision in a situation which, so to speak, forces the agents to invent new solutions and make unheard-of moves without guarantee in "general laws of historical development"' [original italics]. It is in these impossible moments of openness and undecidability, with the force of history pushing down, that the
subject, which Žižek calls the 'unfathomable X,' is called upon to be responsible and accountable for urgent decisions that establish new political realities. In those moments when they are faced with seemingly impossible decisions of whether to remain silent or speak out about political trauma from a position of effective statelessness, the new subjectivity of the woman activist-refugee is formed.

25. This process, Žižek explains, involves the self presupposing the existence of the symbolic or social order that has not yet come into being but which one must imagine in order to make sense of one's actions. In contrast to ordinary rule-following acts, 'the political act' is a move that defines its own conditions and then retrospectively defines the grounds that justify it. As Edkins writes, '[t]he act has to take place without justification, without foundation in knowledge, without guarantee or legitimacy. It cannot be grounded in ontology: it is this "crack" that gives rise to ethics.' Speaking out from the depoliticised position of statelessness necessarily breaks the rules of sovereign power but is driven from within the subject by a need to remain true to traumatic experience. In making this break—in speaking out about injustices perpetrated by sovereign regimes—actors crack through the barrier of the sovereign account of the political to bring forth a new form of political subjectivity. The ethics this ontological 'crack' gives rise to is deeply appreciated by those forced to inhabit the sovereign state of exception. This state has been eloquently described by one of the women activist-refugees.

There are other words—stateless, illegal, guilty or not guilty, against the law. But no one right or wrong, you know. People talk about rules and regulations, yeah, but is it right or rights to be or no rights to be? People don't talk about it like that! We talk about dead or: against the rules, illegal, stateless...People should think about it more. They could get a better approach to things.

26. Significantly, activist-refugees' assumption of an identity as legitimate subjects of political rights, articulated through drawing on a specific language of human rights, enables them to assert a new status. It is on the basis of this self-defined identity and not on the terms of the state that they claim a right to be recognised as legitimate political actors prior to any formal recognition by the state. Further, as McNevin argues, it is their substantive integration into (globalised) society while remaining technically 'illegal' that inspires the radical potential of their non-state identity.

27. Women activist-refugees displaced from Burma assume multiple and complex identities which take little account of their legal status: political activists, human rights and women's rights and empowerment activists. They act and identify themselves in ways other than those expected of 'refugees' or 'illegal aliens.' A mixed sense of naivety and defiance towards, the rules of sovereign power regimes is conveyed in the way to their work. As this Burma activist notes:

There is a certain naivety in what they [activist-refugees] do, how they approach things. I still get affronted when the Thai authorities crack down on them. It's like the rules don't them.
28. The radical nature of the political act, as Žižek points out, is by definition illegal as it necessarily violates the laws of the existing social order.[53] Prioritising their gendered political cause and all it entails, sovereign rules that exclude women activist-refugees from realising their rights are seen as logistical problems, as this woman leader illustrates:

We selected an organising committee from members of different groups for the next year’s congress. But the women were really afraid to do that. They said we have no passport, no identity cards, no money, how can we arrange a congress?[54]

29. As Jean-Claude Milner has written of the nature of this political act, 'the aim is not to see things correctly, but to blind oneself sufficiently to be able to strike the right way, i.e., the way that disperses.'[55] It is the merging of a new gender consciousness related to the experiences of 'bare life' with a decision to act in resistance to sovereign power regimes that forms the basis of emerging gendered, non-sovereign forms of political subjectivity and agency in Burma's borderlands. Through their decision to act on their trajectory of tremendous constraints enforced by sovereign regimes of power, women activist-refugees are forced to create new paths to pursue justice outside the conventional sovereign state framework. And further, they are forced to do so without precedents, role models or clear paths laid before them.

New lines of flight: women activist-refugees and transversal politics

30. The process of self-constitution as pro-democracy and gender equality activists for women activist-refugees upon their arrival at Burma's interstate borderlands has been one of constant trial and error they have learnt and continue to learn that a substantial source of their rising influence is grounded in their ability to make new connections across deeply politicised and legalised divides and across time and space. Through the pursuit of these activities from the interstate borderlands, women activist-refugees of Burma are becoming something 'other' than refugees, ethnic minorities, migrants, or activists. Their activism represents a particular process of deterritorialisation, no longer shaped by the boundaries of existing nation-states and sovereign regimes. Activist-refugees straddle the ontological divide between citizen and non-citizen. They blur the barriers between the interlinking sovereign power regimes of the state and nation-state system and as such cannot fit into the symbolic order of either. They, therefore, carry the real potential to reveal the contingency—and hence the insecurity—of both narratives. In this way, they are creating what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari refer to as 'new lines of flight.' This Deleuze and Guattari mean a shift towards another quality of life or life that is lived at another degree of intensity that carries with it revolutionary and emancipatory potential.[57]

31. While women activist-refugees are sensitive to dominant state-centric discourses and practices that work to disempower and depoliticise them, they continue to struggle to find language that can accurately express their new forms of subjectivity and agency. They seek a new language to express their demands and new forms of community to enable them to escape the circuit of power between sovereign power regimes and 'bare life.'
One woman explained this.

If we think we are refugees, all we can do is wait; who will support us? Who will help us? these meanings. We believe everybody should have hope. Every person can try for what very difficult for me to say who I am. I am a Burmese person who wants to support the im[59] our society [my emphasis].

32. Edkins and Pin-Fat argue that depoliticisation and the production of 'bare life' drawing political lines or boundaries and excluding people accordingly. Thus, important form of resistance to sovereign regimes entails a refusal to draw line distinctions between the forms of life upon which sovereign power relies.[60] repoliticisation depends on a refusal to draw those same lines and be exclude relies on this strategy in their activism in three main ways. First, they do not r distinction between citizen and non-citizen—a distinction on which sovereign and the nation-state system depends. Instead, they place the interests of won Burma at the centre, wherever they may be located. Second, they hold complex relationships across ethnic difference. Finally, they depend on activists in glol movements to similarly refuse to draw the same lines.

33. The refusal to draw lines according to the categories that sustain sovereign po opens new opportunities for transversal political action for women activist-rel the borderlands. Roland Bleiker understands transversal dissent as the ability transgress political and mental boundaries erected by international relations, challenge the sovereign political order itself.[61] The merging of ideas, values, i and co-ordinated action across interstate boundaries results in spatial and te reconfiguration of political space, including the reconfiguration of the local ar such that it no longer makes sense to categorise political space in this way. Tr: forms of dissent, Bleiker explains, unleash their power only through a long pro entails digging, slowly, underneath the foundations of authority. Continual, p subtle campaigns of information dissemination gradually transform the basis ideas to prepare them to take action for change. The following examples illust strategies of women activist-refugees' transversal activism that derive their po impact from the subversion of the condition of 'bare life.'

34. With the assistance of women's Non-government Organisations (NGOs) and t operations of the Burmese Opposition Movement, border-based women activ have become engaged in United Nations human rights processes as one meth directly contradict the regime's claims to political legitimacy. UN human righ such as the Human Rights Council (HRC) and the Commission on the Status (CSW) provide a forum where these women can challenge the authority of the One of these activists explains the increasing global interconnectedness of the state system that opens spaces to pressure the Burmese political regime.

The SPDC don't like our delegations being present at international conferences...When t opposition representatives in meetings and conferences, they get really angry. So we are don't want us to come to the international level. We should try to do more of this kind of international level, one country cannot stay separate. So every country tries to commun
35. Developing skills and strategies to attend UN forums has enabled women activists to confront representatives of the Burmese military regime without their own bodies being at immediate risk of violence. In these forums, they are no longer constituted as 'bare life,' but are in a position to exert political pressure on the regime through demonstrating the regime's failure to adhere to international values. As such, they have successfully transformed themselves into legitimate subjects and have reinstated a political relationship with the regime at the international level.

36. As a second example, the campaign centred on Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday, celebrated on 19 June each year, is gaining global recognition because of her continued house arrest by the Burmese military regime. On 18 July 2006, in a Thailand-Burma border campaign took the form of a blood donation drive amongst the local Burmese community. It was organised by a local Burmese health care clinic with support from the local Thai hospital and in conjunction with women activist-refugees. Hundreds of people, mostly migrants from Burma, lined up to donate blood, wearing yellow ribbons symbolic of Burma's pro-democracy movement. At the heart of the campaign were two themes. One was a health concern, as it provided an opportunity for the health institutions to replenish blood supply. The other was an opportunity for these people to express their political desires in support of Aung San Suu Kyi and for positive change in Burma.

37. Constituted by sovereign regimes of power as 'bare life,' the campaign was an opportunity for these undocumented migrants and activists—belonging to the same displaced community—to express their political beliefs and desires through subverting the meaning attributed to their politicised 'bare life.' Donating blood to health care clinics servicing their displaced community, people gave their blood to repoliticise their identities on their own terms. Instead of having their blood spilled in encounters with sovereign regimes, they gave blood—gave life—back to their political community in honour of Aung San Suu Kyi. As these migrant communities flow across the Thailand-Burma border, so too do messages from this joint health and political campaign.

Conclusion

38. In this article, I have theorised the political character of women activist-refugees in Burma's interstate borderlands. They resist their subjection to discursive and sovereign practices that work to ban them from sovereign political spaces and constitute them, in Agamben's terms, as politically unqualified or 'bare life.' Driven by an existential need to remain true to their traumatic political experience in Burma and in the borderlands, they decide not to remain silent but to act. This decision to act diverges from the rules of the sovereign power in two ways. Firstly, it breaks the rules of sovereignty by acting politically from a position of effective statelessness. Secondly, their positioning together. Every country is trying to do that. This is a really big point for SPDC, to contact international community. [62]
also forces them to develop strategies for political action that avoid and negotiate the restraints of sovereign power regimes. The very possibility of emancipatory political practices by women activists of Burma is grounded in their ability to create alternative spaces of collectivity, belonging and recognition.[64] Thus, it is argued, their creation of a new non-sovereign political subjectivity and agency can be understood as an intensely political act.[65] Thus, it is argued, their creation of a new non-sovereign political subjectivity and agency can be understood as an intensely political act.

39. Assuming political identities as activists from the position of 'bare life' merges supposedly antithetical ontological categories into a new subjectivity. Consequently, the distinction between inside and outside sovereign spaces becomes blurred, unsettling the borders upon which sovereign power regimes depend for their legitimacy. In this way, these activist-refugee women become something other than 'refugee' or 'activist'; they become activist-refugees. From this novel position, new forms of transversal political agency are opened up, whereby struggle for change becomes possible. The significance of their activism lies in their demonstration that it is possible to engage in political positions of 'bare life' and the state of exception. Their self-conscious activism represents a subversion of the foundations of sovereign power.[66]

40. There are obvious limits to the degree to which Burma's border-based women can renegotiate the terms of their relations with sovereign power regimes in their various forms. The way to overcome the perpetual temporariness of this alternative political subjectivity has yet to be imagined. State sovereignty remains the hegemonic form of political organisation. This is evidenced by women activist-refugees' desire to return to the 'normal' citizen-state relationship.[67] Nevertheless, the activism of women displaced to Burma's borderlands is one site to examine the intrinsically co-constitutive relation between 'informal' and 'formal' political spaces, and how they can transform each other.

Endnotes

[1] For reports produced by the WLB and its member organisations, see 'Women's League of Burma' http://www.womenofburma.org, site accessed 28 March 2006. Thanks to Anne McNevin, Alison Vicary and two anonymous referees for invaluable and constructive feedback. Thanks also to Jan Jindy Pettman, Richard Devetak, Sue Blackburn, Dave Mathieson and Vicki Squires for important feedback on earlier drafts that shaped the paper's eventual form and Vera Mackie and Sarah Pinto for on-going encouragement.


[6] There are very significant differences between the sovereign practices that constitute these two forms of the state of exception. It is not appropriate to attribute a moral equivalence to practices by which th
military dictatorship constitutes its perceived enemies as 'bare life,' and the practices of the humanitarian and refugee regimes and host states to do this to these same people. It is not my intention to conflate forms of the state of exception, but to focus on the nature of both these spaces through which women refugees are subjected to sovereign regimes' attempts to constitute them as 'bare life.' Thanks to Alison Vickery for clarifying this point.

[7] Thanks to Anne McNevin for clarifying this point.


[10] In all cases, the women interviewed were colleagues (and friends). I worked with the WLB as a volunteer between May 1999 and February 2001 and again in 2006. Discussion of issues concerning the research-subject relationship can be found in Mary O'Kane, Borderlands and Women: Transversal Political Agency on the Burma-Thailand Border, Monash Asia Institute Working Paper Series, Working Paper No. 126, Melbourne Asia Institute, 2005.

[11] I refer to 'Burman' as the (dominant) ethnic group of Burma and 'Burmese' as the political identity by which many people from Burma, including Burmans and many whose ethnic heritage is mixed, identify themselves.

[12] Some women had been on the border for most of their lives, displaced by ethno-political conflict-related, life-threatening poverty, arriving at refugee camps or border villages as young Others arrived in the aftermath of the 1988 pro-democracy civil uprisings.


[16] 'Women's League of Burma.'


[18] Agamben's theoretical insights are based on the distinction made in classical Greece between separation of zoe, or 'bare life' common to beings, and bios, or politically qualified life. Agamben, Homo Sacer, pp. 3–4.


[23] As Thailand has not ratified the UN 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocols, the Thai Government does not recognise refugees on its territory. Instead, the UNHCR uses the term 'person of concern' to refer to people displaced from Burma who qualify for refugee status according to the Refugee Convention.


[26] An estimated 10,000 students and pro-democracy activists fled to Burma’s border areas after the Burmese military’s crackdown on nation-wide civil demonstration. Fink, Living Silence, pp. 50–60.

[27] Interview with Mi Sue Pwint, Chiang Mai, June, 2001.


[32] Assistance Association from Political Prisoners (AAPP), The Darkness We See: Torture in Burma’s Interrogation Centers and Prisons, Mae Sot: AAPP, 2005.

[33] Nevzat Soguk, States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999, pp. 4–9; Nyers, Rethinking Refugees, especially Chapter 4.

[34] Belak, Gathering Strength, pp. 57–71.


[37] Edkins, 'Sovereign power, zones of indistinction, and the camp,' p. 3.

[38] Interview, Chiang Mai, 1 July, 2001. Name and pseudonym not given.


[41] Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 189.


[49] Interview Chiang Mai, 1 July, 2001, name and pseudonym not given.


[51] McNevin, 'Non-status migrants, neoliberal geographies and spatial frontiers of "the political."

[52] Interview with Burma activist, Mae Sot, 20 January 2006.

[53] Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, p. 192.

[54] Interview with Mi Sue Pwint, Chiang Mai, 29 June, 2001.


[58] Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p. 8.

[59] Interview with Mi Sue Pwint, Chiang Mai, 29 June, 2001.
Edkins and Pin-Fat, 'Introduction,' p. 3.

Bleiker, Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics, p. 9.

Interview with Mi Sue Pwint, Chiang Mai, 29 June, 2001.

For discussion concerning health issues affecting people in the Thai-Burma borderlands, refer to Clinic, online: http://www.maetaoclinic.org/, assessed 10 May 2007.

Husanovic, 'In search of agency,' p. 225.

Edkins, Poststructuralism and International Relations, p. 137.

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All interviews with activist-refugees conducted between 12 November 2000 and 8 July 2001 in Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son.