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Chapter 6

Cross-border transitions: navigating conflict and political change through community education practices in Myanmar and the Thai border

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6.1 Introduction

While conflict is still largely unresolved in Myanmar, in the form of both ethnic civil wars and intercommunal violence, the country is edging its way through processes of reform led by a nominally civilian government after over fifty years of military rule. Amongst the most controversial and perhaps the most publicised of these reforms are the dual quests for a nationwide ceasefire agreement and the national education sector plan, both of which remain unresolved in the build up to elections in November 2015. Although there has recently been renewed negotiations between government and opposition groups, the fact that both peace and access to state recognised education have proved elusive for many has contributed to a lack of confidence in the transition by those who feel excluded from the rhetoric of change. As a result, alternative approaches have continued through community education practices that circumvent state authority and prioritise an alternative subject formation. Additionally, refugee and migrant populations that have fled fighting, poverty, persecution and instability across Myanmar's borders are affected by interruptions and limited access to education provision. Alternative education practices have therefore emerged to respond to these varying needs, particularly amongst the enduring refugee and migrant communities in Thailand. This chapter therefore looks more closely at the responses to political change and conflict in community education in the Thai-border region and Myanmar's eastern states bordering Thailand and suggests that the context of this border region and the access to international influences that it allows amplifies this alternative construction within community education. The

question is posed: to what extent do cross-border movements affect community education practices, in what ways, and with what consequences? I begin by proposing an outline of nomadic theory which informs the study which builds on conceptualisations of educational space highlighted above, followed by an exploration of the context of conflict and the environment for education both within Myanmar and along the border. The remainder of the chapter then highlights the practices of those within community education, drawing from the experiences of practitioners and participants in education programmes and organisations to illustrate the varied influences involved.

As discussed later in the chapter (*6.7*), a number of community education projects are led by ethnic women's organisations and consequently their role within community education practices and the potential for these spaces to contribute to endeavours to promote gender equality is also explored. While many of these groups are ethnically aligned, the community education initiatives treated here do not include the parallel ethnic primary and early secondary systems that are seen as an alternative but formal system of schooling. The initiatives considered here range between peer lead instruction, community learning centres and locally-supported community-based and civil society organisations which often make use of adapted international training material.

6.2 Nomadic theory and the smooth learning space

Extending the conceptualisation presented in Chapter 4, this study draws from Braidotti's nomadic theory (2011b) and Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualisations of smooth and striated space (2013/1988) to suggest that sites of community education within displaced groups represent a dual occurrence of smooth space which promotes the formation of nomadic subjects. As outlined above, striated space is characterised by delineation and the hierarchisation of the state which seeks to contain and create boundaries (Deleuze & Guattari 2013/1988; Livesey 2013: 181; Bayne 2004: 302-3). In comparison, smooth space is understood as a more fluid site associated with nomadism and informality, in which hierarchy may be contested (Deleuze & Guattari 2013; Hodgson & Standish 2006): "smooth space emphasises the journey, the line of movement through shifting territorialities" (Livesey 2013: 181). However, these two sites are not to be taken as mutually opposing, but interact and inform each other in dialectic movements "sometimes causing a passage from the smooth to the striated, sometimes from the striated to the smooth" (Deleuze & Guattari 2013: 552).

Borderlands, as sites of refuge, of hybridity and as 'contact zones' (Pratt 1992), are by their nature spaces of flux, the inhabitants of which being confronted with multiple renegotiations of relationships, identities and practices. In Deleuzian terms, this smooth space wedged between striated nation states can be both a site for innovation and ingenuity in response to constraint and also a site of consolidation for alternative constructions. This is a fluid space "constructed by local operations involving changes of direction" (Deleuze & Guattari 2013/1988, 566) and as such priorities for these communities shift as they respond to changes in the striated space which confines them to "confront new obstacles, invent new paces, switch adversaries" (581). These are therefore deeply political spaces (Lysen & Pisters 2012, 1) which are always in dialogue with each other, although they "do not communicate with each other in the same way" (Deleuze & Guattari 2013/1988, 562). Likewise, the spaces cannot be truly taken as separate but are relational, informing each other and reacting both against and in parallel whereby striation may encroach on the smooth and simultaneously be dissolved or remade by it.

Rosi Braidotti extends Deleuzian ideas of nomadism to emphasise a nomadic subjectivity that rejects "a unitary vision of the self" (Braidotti 2010: 408), and instead emphasises the multiple dimensions and influences that affect subject formation. Following Braidotti's vision of a "collectively assembled, externally related and multi-layered subject" (Braidotti 2011b, 210), the nomadic subjects who populate this border space navigate multiple influences and impressions, resulting in reformulations of the identifications and affiliations associated with home, citizenry, residency and culture. Such processes are brought to the fore in education settings where learners are exposed to varied practices and contacts which influence both their learning and their own subject formation.

As previously highlighted, I suggest that community education can be similarly characterised as a smooth site of learning, in contrast to the striated nation-building endeavours of formal state education systems, promoting the formation of such nomadic subjects through the multiple points of contact in relationships within the classroom and in the teaching material used. Learning environments are therefore both the result of a nomadic experience and simultaneously maintain nomadism in teaching practices which sustain this alternative subject construction. The need to react to geographical changes and to constraints in infrastructure can promote simultaneous yet at times diverging responses, both to stabilize and regularise those areas within control (language, curriculum, cultural practice) and conversely to allow for

reorientation and adaptation. Potentially therefore, non-formal or informal education initiatives promoting community development social change may support this inter-relational subject formation through allowing a flexibility and creativity that is sensitive to diverse learner experiences within a shared context of displacement.

For the refugee and migrant communities between Myanmar and Thai state authority nomadic subjectivity has additionally been shaped through impressions of conflict and alignments have been influenced by significant political upheavals in the last seven years, with resultant implications for education providers. These include: refugee camp schools operating at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels through ethnic education committees; migrant learning centres that take the place of state-affiliated formal schooling for migrant communities in the border regions; largely informal vocational learning sites, and post-secondary community education programmes run by community based organisations, women's networks, NGOs or charities, and, increasingly in Myanmar, by individuals returning from the border areas. The weakness of state education in conflict areas as well as its opposition by groups who reject the legitimacy of state control undermines confidence in the value of formal education (Davies, L. 2011). The authoritarian nation building endeavours on both sides of the border have therefore facilitated the creation of an alternative education space by those who do not feel an allegiance with either state model. The additional dimension of international contact and influence, which is much more prevalent in Myanmar's eastern border region than other parts of the country, has contributed to this hybrid learning environment. Consequently, in addition to Myanmar, Thai and ethnic constructions of identity and citizenship, students have been prepared for potential resettlement or scholarship opportunities in the US, Europe and Australia with western models of 'active citizenship' prevailing in teaching material. Similarly, the lack of formal legitimacy in the form of identity documents and citizenship claims reinforces the nomadism of such communities and further troubles the proposed repatriation to an unknown 'homeland'. The point is made therefore that the south-eastern states of Myanmar navigate a distinct experience of learning and subject formation precisely because of the transnational movements which result from the proximity with Thailand resulting in a space of "political and social separateness and otherness" (Laungaramsri 2011, 100). States such as Rakhine, Chin and to a certain extent Kachin that do not benefit from such multi-directional cross-boundary movements, and which are subjected to divergent conflict patterns, occupy an altogether different landscape both in

terms of the immediate constraints posed by insecurity and the opportunities for non-state education provision.

6.3 Research Methods

This chapter draws from data collected from 24 education organisations, of which 7 were based on the Thai side of the border and 17 based within Myanmar. Of these, seven now operate on both sides of the border and eight organisations had either moved entirely or expanded from Thailand to Myanmar since the 2011 inauguration of the civilian government. A total of 55 interviews were conducted across these organisations and more widely, and 12 site visits to community schools were conducted. Additionally, data is drawn from 5 group discussions conducted within community education settings, four with post-secondary course participants and one with teachers. 52 course participants took part in the four discussion groups, two taking place in Thailand and two in Myanmar, with two discussions being all female groups. Owing to the ethnographic approach adopted throughout my research, the interviews included here range from short, informal discussions (of at least 20 minutes) to semi-structured interviews of up to two hours. Data was analysed in two stages: initially the information from community education groups was mapped according to location, target group, language and content of courses; interviews with individuals and discussion groups were then thematically coded based on the recurrent themes that emerged. For educators, issues of education practice and how and why practices are employed (including for example the language of instruction) were prioritised. Amongst the young adult students, focus was given to experiences of education, both formal and non-formal. All data has been anonymised and the only organisations named in this article are those whose information is in the public domain and/or who have consented to be named.

On the Thai side of the border, focus was given to community educational initiatives specifically for Myanmar refugees and migrants as well as organisations that brought participants (either teachers or students for training programmes) to Thailand who would then return to Myanmar on completion of the course. On the Myanmar side of the border, participants included education practitioners, organisations that had relocated from Thailand to Myanmar, and individuals who had returned from the border region and were now engaged in community education work. Teachers and students engaged in the group discussions included those who had undertaken cross-border movements themselves and those who had not. Interviews and

discussions focused on the experiences and movements of participants (educators and students) across the border and the motivations behind these movements as well as the experiences of education, practices within education environments and the way participants felt their education experiences had prepared them and/or their students.

While the research aimed to include a wide range of experiences of education movements and learning trajectories, it is recognised that the data presented here cannot be taken as representative of all experiences. Similarly, the quotations included have been selected to illustrate common themes that were encountered as well as variations in perspective, however unavoidably this will result in some generalisation. Nonetheless, the aim is to highlight how within this context of flux we might better understand the different positions within which education practitioners operate. The focus of this study was on non-formal community education practices and therefore as highlighted above largely did not include formal systems of education in either Myanmar or Thailand. Likewise, attention remained on the construction of Myanmar identities and therefore the research largely did not engage with Thai students' experiences of learning and exposure to contact with refugees and migrants. Such extensions offer fruitful sites for potential future research.

6.4 Repositioning education in politicised territories

Since elections were held in November 2010, Myanmar has been moving from over fifty years of restrictive military dictatorship towards a more democratic model of civilian-led government, although the extent to which the current political context might be deemed democratic is a matter of debate. The elections were unsurprisingly won by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) who took office the following year under the leadership of President Thein Sein, leading to the common utterance amongst civil society members that the only thing that had changed in government was the rulers' clothes. Nonetheless, Myanmar's *roadmap to democracy*, originally outlined by the military over ten years ago, accelerated in pace with the elections triggering a rapid process of sectoral review and legislative reforms. Although military and intercommunal violence has not decreased since 2011 (Walton & Hayward 2014; Horton 2014; Bhatia 2013) the political shift has triggered a so-called 'opening up' of the country to both international and local, civil involvement (Huang 2013; Hlaing 2012). The subsequent years then have seen rapid increased engagement with the newly legitimised USDP on the part of international governments, donors and private companies, as well as

national opposition parties, civil society and non-state armed groups who see political and economic opportunity in the newly semi-democratic state. This strategic engagement on the part of actors and groups previously (and in many cases continuing to be) opposed to authoritarian state led and military dominated processes, is illustrative of the new climate of concession which is finding some space to temper previously inflexible stances lured by the hope of political and financial reward. So we have seen the lifting of sanctions on the part of the US, Europe and Australia, despite the continued detention and re-arrest of prisoners of conscience; the 2014 Chair of ASEAN going to Myanmar, despite ongoing human rights abuses and intercommunal violence; new ceasefire agreements signed in 2012 with 14 out of 17 of the major non-state armed groups (BNI 2014, 4), despite the lack of movement towards a federalist union; and the NLD manoeuvring to secure presidential candidature for the upcoming 2015 elections, despite a quarter of parliamentary seats still being reserved for military appointees (GEN 2012, 1). The extent to which these concessions are unidirectional in favour of state consolidation is a matter of concern for civil society and ethnic minority rights proponents alike.

The lengthy civil wars and unresolved issues of ethnic auto-determination have been characterised by violently oppressive responses from the state military (*tatmadaw)*, and although new ceasefire agreements have progressed with the change in government there is still a tension between the slow pace of peace agreements, ongoing active combat in Kachin and northern Shan States and the rhetoric of peaceful unification employed in the government's engagement with the international community (President Thein Sein in TBC 2013b, 2; Horton 2014). Similarly there is a growing disillusionment as the ceasefire agreements in the Eastern states (particularly Kayin and Kayah States) have failed to be accompanied by demilitarisation while many areas have seen increasing *tatmadaw* presence consolidated. Such tensions have been evident in hostile community responses to perceived international pressure for those displaced to return (despite UNHCR maintaining that conditions are not yet conducive to large-scale repatriations), with international projects coming under fire for overly promoting a rhetoric of reconciliation as yet unmatched by changes in practice on the ground (KCSN 2014; WLB 2014)[22]. The mix of competing government, international and

[22] For example, a recent Karenni Civil Society Network (KCSN) report heavily criticised the Norwegian and Finnish-sponsored MSPI projects for over-attributing progress towards peace, with communities underlining worsening land confiscations and the increased military presence in resettlement sites which remain a threat to their safety

ethnic agendas therefore creates an uneasy landscape for community education, as distinct from state education provision, which is both subject to these multiple influences and may be complicit in their reproduction (Davies, L. 2011).

Within this climate of shifting alignments, current Myanmar education reform in the shape of the Comprehensive Education Sector Review is a highly politicised endeavour. In a country with 135 officially recognised ethnic groups and several more demanding recognition, ethnic identity plays a significant role in political manoeuvring and can run counter to the espoused discourse of national unity. This has also been further complicated in recent years by the government's reification of ethnic categories, reinforcing ethnic identities as being territorially rooted (TNI 2014). Those communities excluded from these categories, such as the much contested Rohingya, are left without either a territorial home or a legitimised identity construction and therefore further excluded from reform dialogues. As one educator identified, "*labels like Shan, Karen, Bamar create barriers to education. The [notion of] identity, that's the biggest barrier*" (Community educator and activist, interview, Yangon, 2015). Issues of self-determination and representation within the education sector have therefore been central to the conflicts: the singular state curriculum imposed across the country has long been a point of contention and has resulted in parallel education systems operating in certain ethnic states, including Mon and Kayin States (Lall & South 2013). Major concerns include issues of mother-tongue instruction, autonomy of teaching curricula and flexibility to respond to local needs including training and timetabling. However, ethnic educators and exiled activists on the Thai border have felt excluded from the education reform processes, as publicly expressed by the Karen Education Department (KED):"the work that we have been doing over decades does not exist in their knowledge" (Saw Law Eh Moo, KED, interviewed in the *Irrawaddy*, Michaels 2014).

Alternative education systems, including non-formal community education practices, have provided a means of opposition to a ruthless state system of schooling as a manifestation of government authority that has for decades espoused indoctrination and obedience as a tool for maintaining a pliable population, at the expense of critical thinking skills and individual development (Maber 2014, 146). Likewise, for the pro-democracy movements, community education and training initiatives provided a platform to foster

and are more illustrative of the desire to protect economic interests than to foster sustainable peace (KCSN, 2014).

support for democratic change and promote awareness of human rights violations. Particularly at the post-secondary level, community education has therefore historically taken on a wilfully subversive position through the teaching of civic engagement, social justice, human rights, environmental protection and gender equality. From the Thai side of the border, this position has been more overt. In addition to the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the destruction of their homes and livelihoods, the Thai border region also provided refuge to many high profile political exiles fleeing persecution in the aftermath of the 1988 student protests, and the successive political crackdowns of the 1990s. These exiles, including pro-democracy 88 Generation activists as well as human rights monitoring groups and women's rights networks along with those political leaders associated with the non-state armed groups, have remained highly politically engaged and have taken advantage of transnational networks and the increased internationalisation through media and telecommunication channels afforded in Thailand. Many amongst them are educators themselves, continuing to teach either through migrant learning centres or informal education groups, and have therefore been active in promoting social and political activism as a dimension of training practice. Such practices have reinforced the association between community education and alternative citizenship ideals which run counter to the government's own. However, as educational reforms are being formulated, this oppositional stance may no longer serve the interests of ethnic education providers and democracy campaigners alike. Strategic choices in the education sector over alignments and geographical positionings therefore mirror those taken in political dialogue.

6.5 Dislocation and a new space for becoming

On the Thai side of Myanmar's Eastern border those who have fled the ongoing violence and civil conflicts are sheltered in 9 official refugee camps and unofficially in migrant communities that span the length of the border. These number up to 130,000 living in the refugee camps (TBC 2013a, 16; UNHCR 2014) just over 50% of whom are officially registered with UNHCR. Additionally, close to 850,000 legal Myanmar migrants in Thailand have participated in the limited opportunity for nationality verification and documentation (TBC 2013a, 19) and a further estimated 1.5 million

undocumented migrants are working illegally in Thailand (TBC 2013a, 19), particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation[23].

Many of these communities, particularly those in the refugee camps, are well established having been resident for up to 30 years and consequently community organisations have an established membership base engaged in activism, as well as an enduring young population in need of educational provision across all age ranges. Others in the migrant sector are more transient and take advantage of the porous borders (or are taken advantage of) to traverse between sites of (perceived) financial advantage. Several authors have previously drawn critical attention to the misassociation of refugees with "dependent victims" (Zeus 2011, 256) and the policies of refugee camp structure that reinforce dependency to the detriment of community development (Oh & van der Stouwe 2008). This article emphasises the additional need to recognise the plurality of refugee and migrant experiences and motivations, and the variety of ambitions that can be found amongst those who have undertaken these journeys. This section highlights the multiple influences that communities along the border experience, many of which are beyond their control, with the aim of illustrating the ways in which a nomadic subject formation is fostered not only by the simple act of movement but in the expanded contact points that this movement provokes. While these experiences vary for different individuals and communities, they share the commonalities of nomadism and affect the goals of community education practices.

Along the Thai border the delineation of refugee/migrant categorisations may seem haphazard and has resulted in varying pathways for education. Those residing in the refugee camps may be registered with the UNHCR, or may not, while those beyond the official camps are deemed migrants while usually fleeing the same conflicts and persecution as those within. For many, particularly since the cessation of major third country repatriation programmes (Kaspar & Saw Yan Naing 2014), the need to find employment, however insecure, has prompted a move away from the temporary shelters which restrict independence of movement and livelihoods. Some ethnic groups, such as the Shan, have in the past been denied refugee status in Thailand despite their forced displacement and instead been deemed illegal migrants (Laungaramsri 2011):

[23] Given the fluid nature of the refugee and migrant communities and the difficulties in accurate monitoring, these figures are liable to variation.

> *For Shan we don't have any official refugee camp, so the children either have to go to the Thai school or the community school, but the Thai school doesn't allow them to go so they go to the community school. And when they finish from the community school they have no-where to go.* (Community educator, interview, Chiang Mai, 2014)

Additionally, ethnic identities and conceptual territorialisations for both the Shan and the Karen span the geographical boundary of Myanmar and Thailand and consequently allies and tensions may be found in parallel communities (Purkey 2010). Such distinctions between refugee and migrant, legal and non, direct the trajectories of learners of all ages: prior to 2012, for those young registered refugees who had hoped for third country resettlements, English language and international cultural exposure were broadly prioritised, while options for formal tertiary education were restricted on the assumption that young people would be able to take advantage of these opportunities once resettled in the USA, Australia or Europe (Zeus 2011). For those in the migrant sector schools, emphasis was often placed on learning Thai language and vocational skills that would support opportunities within the border towns, but similarly limited access to Thai tertiary education systems through interruptions in schooling and the limited possibilities for accreditation available through the migrant learning centres (Nawarat 2014; Purkey 2010). As one border community educator highlighted:

> *These young people, some are born on the border so they have no documents, no papers so they have nowhere to go [to school]. So these schools' objective is to provide education for those who won't be able to go to higher education in Thailand.* (Community educator, interview, Thai border, 2014)

The nomadism of individuals and communities without legal recognition in the form of identity documents and citizens' rights is then further reinforced by the lack of access to formal schooling systems. Since 2005 the Thai government had made attempts to promote alignment in the migrant learning centres that serve the primary and secondary education needs of transitory communities along the border, so that students might ultimately be able to transfer to Thai institutions (Nawarat 2012). Learning centres however have varied in their enthusiasm to this alignment, with teachers, many of whom have been politically engaged in advocating for democratic change in Myanmar, being seen to be more "interested in creating a new public knowledge for Burma"

(Nawarat 2014, 873) than to commit to delivering Thai state lesson plans. A priority of learning in the migrant sectors remains the construction of Myanmar-focused subjects, despite some efforts to align with Thai state institutions to allow some transfer between them.

In higher education, similar tensions in (re)positioning are evident. Efforts to support locally-led formal education institutions within refugee settings beyond the secondary level have not always met with support, as they are largely seen to represent a manifestation of ethnic nation-building in opposition to Myanmar and Thai state authority (Zeus 2011, 265). International partnerships, however, have gained traction in recent years with the Melbourne-based universities of ACU, Deakin, and RMIT offering combined distance and on-site diplomas in social sciences or 'Liberal Studies' (ACU 2013; Purkey 2010). These international interventions are seen as more palatable to outside audiences (donor and state alike) and hence more transferable, by circumventing the politicised associations of ethnic autonomy.

Consequently, in the two decades prior to 2012 many young people over the age of 16 found themselves with very limited possibilities for continuing education while simultaneously facing few prospects for secure employment (Oh & van der Stouwe 2008). Post-secondary community education, with its emphasis on community development and project management instruction, has provided an alternative space to build confidence for such young people, simultaneously providing a daily preoccupation to ease the monotony and uncertainty for those in confinement as well as supporting greater independence through encouraging (what is intended to be) transferable skills-building (Thako 2014). In so doing, such education programmes promote an adapted curriculum that reinforces the hybrid character of nomadic subjectivity:

> *These schools' objective is to provide education for those children who won't be able to go to higher education in Thailand. So in that school they have developed a lot of modules, but mainly it's taught in English. They teach English and social sciences, in English. But one of the subjects they have in Burmese in human rights. For human rights subject they teach in Burmese because the teacher is able to explain more and explain in the context of Burma than the foreign teacher.* (Community educator, interview, Chiang Mai 2014)

The issue of language as well as cultural exposure is a key feature of this learning environment, where refugee and community schools attract

international volunteers who contribute varied expertise, most typically in areas of social science with a distinctly ideological agenda:

> *On the border side in the refugee camps, for the Karen and the other ethnic groups as well, they have been taught in English so they are more flexible to use English than Burmese. So in the past 10 years the training has been running in English, and people who want to enter the course they have to have some kind of English level. For the material, there's a lot in English, but to run the training there are only a few staff available.* (Community educator, interview, Chiang Mai 2014)

> *And also because on the border we are more exposed to other country's situations and systems and there's a lot of models there we can learn, that's also part of it.* (Community educator, interview, Thai border 2014)

The influence of international actors and agencies complicates this space inserting a new raft of political agendas: so on the border we find right-wing American religious associations donating textbooks promoting creationism; celebrities, such as Angelina Jolie and Lilly Cole, visiting refugee camps and schools; private European donors demanding reduced teacher salaries as a condition of funding. However, once the moral benefits of supporting an alternative to the military junta appear to reduce, so too does funding along the border[24] as donors have shifted to increasingly funding projects within Myanmar.

Nonetheless, the inclusive possibilities of community education as operating outside linear boundaries of state practice as well as the attraction of international support have proved an appealing draw, particularly for those young adults who have experienced disruption in their formal schooling. While the vast majority of refugees are fleeing active fighting, the broader impacts of conflict also provide motivations to take flight. Some young people have sought out residence in the refugee camps precisely for the education opportunities they offer and the possibilities of continuing studies abroad. As one Karen refugee recounted:

[24] Many migrant community centres have seen vast reductions in funding, with many reporting only being able to budget six months into the future. Such shifts away from border funding have affected all social sectors, with the Mae Tao clinic seeing a complete withdrawal of funding by AusAid/DFAT (Mae Tao Clinic, 2013).

> *I became a refugee because I heard you could study [in the camp] and go to America. Actually I wanted to study a degree in America, because our education system is not very good. But I wasn't lucky. When I got there they had stopped relocations. So I stayed and studied there.* (Former refugee, interview, Karen State, 2014)

Such movements are not limited to those traversing the border: one Thai man from Mae Hong Son recounted travelling to Mae La Oon camp to take advantage of the English language classes on offer to refugees there, ultimately spending three years living in the refugee camp before returning to work in Chiang Mai. Others have been attracted to the camps to teach Thai language. While such subjects are a very small number in the camps, nonetheless the effect is to add greater diversity to the points of contact experienced. Additional variations are evident within the refugee experience itself, with one refugee, now a teacher, highlighting the effects on aspirations of differing experiences of confinement:

> *Growing up in the refugee camp is like being blind. There are two types of blind people: those who are born blind, and those who went blind later in life. Those who were born blind do not know colour, they do not dream. Young people who have grown up in the camps do not know how to dream.* (Community educator, discussion, Karen State 2014)

One of the goals of education in this context is therefore to encourage a sense of future, which is perceived to be aided by the use of material on active citizenship, community development and project management and human rights (Larlee 2014). As one teacher described her motivation for teaching such material: "*I would like to make their minds more broad*" (community educator, interview, Chiang Mai, 2014).

6.5.1 Alternative experiences of learning

During focus group discussions on both sides of the border, current young adult participants in community education courses (focusing on community development and youth leadership) emphasised the acknowledgement of and space for difference provided through participatory teaching methodologies in comparison to the authoritarian practices which pervade Myanmar state schools. Traditional learning practices as experienced through state schooling were characterised as producing formulaic, identikit citizens, capable of obediently replicating a predetermined, validated response:

> *It was only rote learning, with no critical thinking. // The government sets training for teachers and the teacher [repeats] to students. Students become literate, but there is no new thinking, we do not discover.* (Course participants, group discussion, Chiang Mai, 2014)
> *There's still a lot of negative discrimination [for ethnic students].* (Course participant, group discussion, Delta, 2015)

Likewise, the relationship between teacher and students was likewise characterised by fear, violence and a clear hierarchy of authority:

> *All students are afraid of their teacher* (Course participant, group discussion, Chiang Mai, 2014)
> *Students are not confident in themselves, they depend on one or two other people.*
> *Only a few students have confidence, so only a few students are elevated. // Students are always afraid and they are shy.* (Course participants, group discussion, Delta, 2015)

By contrast, community-based non-formal courses were highlighted as promoting respect for difference and providing space for discussion and debate between peers, including the freedom to disagree and contest singular authority. Interaction with teachers or facilitators was viewed as friendly with course content open for negotiation and adaptation:

> *We can discuss and ask questions, express ourselves freely. // We can be friendly with the teacher, and we can be the teacher too.* (Course participants, group discussion, Chiang Mai, 2014)

Training participants also drew attention to the singular source of information available through schooling (the state curriculum) in comparison with the variety of source material made use of in their courses, commenting "*We never learn these subjects [citizenship and human rights] in school*" (course participant, group discussion, Chiang Mai, 2014).

Conceding that enthusiastic responses may be expected from those engaged in active training courses, nonetheless the perception that such education practices provide an alternative to unsatisfactory prior experiences is evident. While current processes of education reform within Myanmar aim to break down such dogmatic practices and ultimately update teaching styles and pedagogies, the process is lengthy and subject to much contestation. Less formalised community education meanwhile is seen as more responsive to

diverse learner needs, as well as more connected to international trends in teaching methodologies and material (for better and for worse[25]).

With community education itself being viewed as a more learner-sensitive education experience, the added position of these practices on the Thai side of border allows for increased contact across multiple groups and greater ease of access to material. While there has always been contact across these two sites, the current climate of transition is drawing these communities into closer proximity, the consequences of which are explored further below.

6.6 Educational transitions

As highlighted above, Thailand has provided a location where Myanmar pro-democracy movements, human rights groups, women's organisations and alternative education providers have established themselves from within and beyond the displaced communities. This smooth learning site has therefore been associated with activism and efforts to promote social change:

> *I think the activists along the border also have a very important role to play because during the past 10 years we have been doing capacity building and lobbying and training, all this competency and women are more confident because we have been trained on the border for many, many years.* (Female activist and community educator, interview, Chiang Mai, 2014)

Consequently, many of these organisations have facilitated transits in both directions across the porous border. While the flow of information has always been multi-directional, there has historically been an assumption that the information travelling from Myanmar was largely testimonies of abuse, while Thailand provided the space for sharing knowledge (both internal and external) and learning skills, fomenting ideas and then formulating strategies (including education designs), that were then filtered back into Myanmar. Several civil society organisations, both those operating in Myanmar and in Thailand, have over the last decade brought participants (both students and trainers) out to Thailand for training, in order to take advantage of greater freedom of access to internet, learning material and training support, fewer restrictions on civil

[25] Marie Lall (2011) highlights the interventions of international organisations in shaping teaching practices in Myanmar, drawing attention to the widespread promotion of child-centred approaches to learning amongst cross-national networks as it at times meets with resistance amongst Myanmar practitioners who are concerned over the erosion of traditional cultures of respect for authority.

society advocacy and also reduced operating costs. This has included Myanmar-based post-secondary community education providers sending teachers to Thailand for internationally-supported curriculum and management training, who then return to dispersed regions in Myanmar. Such courses or workshops that bring participants to Thailand from varied regions of Myanmar create a space for contact across diverse ethnic groups where interregional travel within the country would be more challenging and attract greater attention. By placing all in a position of dislocation from familiar territory, attitudes and assumptions may lenify, diffusing potential confrontations. Whereas previously such physical transits tended to be from Myanmar to Thailand, now increasingly trajectories are found in the opposite direction. So community organisations in operation in Thailand and along the border region are now travelling to Yangon for seminars, workshops, networking and publicity events. These movements largely remain directed towards the metropolitan centres of Yangon and Mandalay, and are in part a reflection of the international and donor communities 'shifting base' to Myanmar from the periphery.

However, additional cross-border movements are also being made with more permanent aims. As refugee communities begin to make tentative plans for potential large-scale resettlements, small numbers are returning to the eastern states of Myanmar to position themselves in anticipation of such a move. While Myanmar has experienced incremental movements away from military dominance towards gradually more plural civilian dialogue, Thailand has witnessed the opposite trajectory. Having been subject to 12 (successful) military coups in the last century, the most recent took place in May 2014 with the military wresting power from the battered Pheu Thai government (HRW 2014). The exchange of power, however, looks set to be more durable in this instance with the military consolidating their position and announcing their intention to withhold elections for at least another year. Uncertainties arising from the political changes in Thailand have been evident, particularly as the new Thai Prime Minister and former general Prayut Chan-ocha met with Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing, head of the Myanmar army, to discuss issues of Myanmar repatriations (Saw Yan Naing 2015). Head counts conducted in the refugee camps by the Thai military in mid-2014 and greater restrictions in movement beyond the camps have increased anxiety and in an education context meant that some students have been unable to take up positions offered in community education courses beyond and across the border regions. Concurrently, reductions in monthly food rations within the temporary shelters (UNHCR 2014) have reinforced the precarious nature of

refugee residency and driven many to seek informal work in the border zones beyond the camps.

The change in political rule in Thailand has thus increased the sense of tenuous settlement and has further nudged border educators to look to Myanmar as the most likely site for their students to enact their futures. The last two years have seen a recalibration from it being in the best interests of students to align with Thai state curriculum to allow for pathways of transition in Thailand, towards renewed desire to align with the Myanmar state system in anticipation of return (Nawara 2014). Consequently new discussions around accreditation (for all qualification holders – at school, vocational or professional levels) are now increasingly intended to engage opportunities to return to Myanmar under more favourable conditions. However the prospect of resettlement has communities on both sides of the border concerned:

> *If they want to come back, what will be there for them?* (Education planning advisor, interview, Yangon, 2015)

> *People are talking about whether to send the refugees back, but the main problem is whether the place they are staying is safe enough for them to go back. So the organisations from this side understand very well that even though there is ceasefire, fighting is still going on and people are still moving.* (Community educator, interview, Thai border, 2014)

Refugee groups have consistently made clear their mistrust in the Myanmar government's peace processes (Hui 2013; KCSN 2014; UNHCR 2014). Nonetheless, as conditions in Thailand become less favourable, voluntary resettlements have been slowly increasing (although remain in very small numbers) as those from both the refugee and migrant communities along the border are choosing to return either to their original home communities, to designated resettlement sites (UNHCR 2014) or to urban centres across the country. This is accompanied by evident anxiety over accreditation and recognition for alternative learning experiences, particularly for those returning:

> *Actually from the government there is no plan for that. There's only one or two cases where [returning students] can continue their studies post-secondary [in the formal sector].* (Education advisor, interview, Yangon, 2015)

Consequently a number of young community education practitioners, who have been trained through refugee and migrant learning centres as well as the internationally supported community development programmes on the border, are returning to establish youth education facilities, particularly around the main cities of the eastern states (Hpa-an, Loikaw and Mawlamyine in particular). An assumption underlying preparatory efforts to support repatriation is that all members of the refugee communities will want to return to at least their states if not their villages of origin. However, many of the young people taking part in training courses on the border, who have invested in their education while in exile, express a desire to continue their studies in the metropolitan centres that offer more numerous pathways for their educational development and anticipated professional career:

> *These youth come back with different skills, they don't want to work in the rubber fields. They have soft skills.* (Education practitioner, discussion, Yangon, 2015)

This often means preparation for overseas study in the form of language classes and proficiency examinations, in order to be able to access subject options, such as international development, which are not provided in Myanmar tertiary systems. For some, then, who have been exposed to more fluid and broad ranging learning options and styles, the limited and strictly delineated continued learning options now presented to them, which restrict those with non-linear trajectories, are sufficient motivation to take flight. In other words, nomadic subject formation cannot be easily undone.

While internally many are arguing that the recent and ongoing reform processes are in fact resulting in relatively little substantial change (Lall 2015), there is a clear perception amongst these community educators that opportunities have emerged within Myanmar and that space now exists to openly teach community development and promote youth civic engagement[26]. Since 2012, these initiatives have begun to grow and include a strong focus on peer-led instruction as well as social enterprises in forms such as a youth-run café or resource centre, which bring together those returning from the border, and further afield, with those who have remained in Myanmar. The juxtapositions where individuals exposed to varying learning experiences overlap reveal evident contrasts in the priorities of their contexts. Most

[26] This is due in part to the relaxing of censorship and also the process of legislative reform more broadly. It should be noted however that this perspective refers to Myanmar's eastern states and not the western Rakhine region where intercommunal violence has resulted in greater restrictions and subordination of minorities.

notably, teachers and peers alike on both sides of the border were conscious of the fact that young people educated in the Thai border zones were stronger in English and in social sciences, particularly civics, while those educated in Myanmar systems were stronger in maths and hard sciences. The contrast provides a summary of the divergent education landscapes and resultant subject formations, and also underscores a potential consequence of nomadic (education) space through the haphazard expertise (and lack thereof) of volunteer, inexperienced and international teachers.

Likewise, such transpositions are not without consequences. Several locally-led community development education programmes operating in Mon, Kayin and Kayah States reported that their course graduates most commonly find employment with the local and international NGOs that are setting up operations in the urban areas of these states. Concerns are immediate over the potential NGOisation of community development leading to "intensified hierarchization", the subsuming of locally defined agendas and the prioritizing of paid community work (Costa 2014, 168-9) with one gender activist lamenting that in urban centres there was "*no volunteer spirit anymore*" (Gender activist and community educator, interview, Yangon, 2014). Additionally, the bypassing of state education systems in favour of a self-perpetuating supply of internationalised recruits risks doing little to support essential improvements in state systems while simultaneously deskilling government affiliated sectors. However, the challenges of providing alternative models are tangible where the state has been unwilling or openly hostile in supporting plural identity development. Questions may also be raised over the extent to which this internationalisation is more prevalent in the south east of Myanmar as a direct result of the cross–border movements and its nomadic subjects who provide an appealing working environment for donor-funded development resulting in uneven attention being directed throughout the country.

6.7 Implications for women's movements

With the assumption that such repatriations within Myanmar will likely continue and ultimately be formalised (TBC 2013a, 19; UNHCR 2013b) the question arises not only of skills recognition but also of how the learning experiences and citizenship ideals that these communities have been exposed to might affect their reintegration into a newly democratizing state as participating citizens. However cross-boundary trajectories are shaping social negotiations in transitioning Myanmar beyond the sphere of repatriations.

Likewise, for relocating organisations, new strategies of working are required. As such practices vary, a final example is drawn below from the women's organisations who have played a key role in promoting community education for social change as an illustration of contrasts that have been evident in both working styles and subject formation.

The feminisation of education, seen as a culturally appropriate occupation for women, resulted in many women activists having gained experience as teachers either in state schools or in the alternative education systems supported by ethnic opposition groups. For women activists, community classrooms were therefore a natural environment for campaigning for gender equality, mentoring young women and raising awareness of women's subordination enacted both through the practices of the military and authoritarian state and through cultural and religious traditions. As a result of the enduring social marginalisation of women, particularly within conflict, women's organisations were often viewed as apolitical within their communities (Laungaramsri 2011) and consequently were able to garner space for social work particularly amongst the young and in these traditionally feminised spheres of education and training, with little acknowledgement or oversight. Organisations were therefore able to gather and share information on what are evidently highly politically charged issues, including the state-sanctioned, if not to say actively promoted, use of rape and sexual violence against women in the armed conflicts (WLB 2014).

Nonetheless, within Myanmar prior to 2012 such learning environments were highly constrained and as a result, exposure to non-formal education seeking to promote gender equality and women's rights was more easily attainable over the border in Thailand. From the Thai side of the border this campaigning has historically been more politicised, taking advantage of the relative civil freedom of Thailand to engage in vociferous transnational activism. For some young women, including the activist quoted below, seeking out knowledge on women's rights and gender equality was in itself a motivation to take flight:

> *it's around 100 organisations that work for human rights and women's rights and different kinds of issues based in Mae Sot border. They always, every month, they organise a women's exchange, a youth exchange, so you can participate in that and we've got the chance more to learn human rights there. Even Mae Sot, under Thai government control, but you have more chance to learn human rights*. (Women's rights activist, interview 2016)

The border regions presented an opportunity for women's activism in supporting an environment of contestation where fixed definitions of gendered subject positions could be undone. These learning environments were also characterised by exposure to new material and discourses, thanks in large part to the availability of resources in Thailand and the presence of international organisations in the border regions, as training texts from varied sources were deployed in women's activist classrooms. As previously highlighted above, the social and physical upheaval that accompanies situations of conflict can result in the reification of social positions, particularly gendered hierarchies, through authoritarian practices that erode alterity. However, this upheaval, particularly in the migrations it engenders through displacement and exile, gives rise to an increased nomadism in the periphery which can offer spaces for the reformulation of gender roles. Nonetheless motivations for and experiences of displacement vary widely (Zembylas 2012, 165; Naples 2009), and opportunities to affect social change remain constrained:

> *In the border I can say it's only women from CSOs who can speak freely and we can practice more our gender equality in the CSO society. I don't think from the women that are not staying in the CSO area, they still have to survive through that discrimination against women, and even in their family, even their job area.* (Women's rights activist, interview 2016)

Likewise, within Myanmar women's organisations operating under the highly constrained environments of authoritarian rule were less able to openly deliver training, and consequently worked in more informal ways to build community relationships, taking a less oppositional stance and offering more individualised support to women seeking assistance, either in response to violence or in seeking leadership roles. Although women still remain vastly under-represented in peace processes, in legislation formulation and in government positions, nonetheless the work that women's community organisations were also able to do within Myanmar away from a political gaze has contributed gradual increases in participation and to their being positioned to now campaign overtly (Lahtaw & Raw 2012).

Recent internationalisation and an increased rhetoric of gender equality at a political level, combined with advocacy efforts on both sides of the border to raise the profile of women's concerns, have created a tentative recognition of the need for gender inclusivity. In the last three years cooperation has flourished between networks on opposite sides of the national

perimeters, which include the Thai-based Women's League of Burma (WLB) and the Myanmar-based Women's Organisation Network (WON) and the Gender Equality Network (GEN), leading one activist to declare "*we've broken that barrier between inside and outside*" (Female activist and community educator, discussion, Chiang Mai, 2015). As community organisations and funders alike have relocated from the border regions to Myanmar, new organisations have also been established, bringing further plurality to activist space with community education and training courses proliferating.

> *The country is moving forward to democracy and also the country is opening up space for both sides to be able to discuss and talk to each other, so the women's groups from this side also have good links now with the Burmese side*. (Female activist and community educator, interview, Chiang Mai, 2014)

The result has been jointly held women's forums, shared workshops and training, and report launches. However, in informal conversations with women leading training courses, it is evident that approaches have not always been mutually compatible. With increasing numbers of community organisations either delivering workshops or relocating entirely from the border regions to Kayah, Kayin and Mon States some local women's organisations have voiced concerns that the overt politicisation of women's issues can deter rural women from participating where there is still a fear of political engagement in militarised areas. The women's groups who have served these communities throughout the last decades have therefore developed subtle mitigation strategies to appease male and military opposition to women's civic empowerment, through building trust and relationships which may be threatened by the greater attention afforded by transnational campaigns.

These varying working practices are illustrative of the negotiations that necessarily take place in overlapping peripheries. While there may be caution or resistance to transposed ideologies, there is also a desire to connect to movements that previously seemed out of reach.

6.8 Conclusions

Paralleling the nomadic space of borderlands, non-state community education operates in simultaneous opposition and relation to the striated Myanmar and Thai state assemblages creating an alternative learning environment which is nonetheless relational. As Braidotti indicates, "margins and centre shift and destabilize each other in parallel, albeit dissymmetrical, movements" (2011a,

9). In the overlapping peripheries of contested spaces incremental movements can be seen in both directions, with relocated citizen ideals extending their reach while being increasingly exposed to striation. In the nomadic space of cross-boundary community education, particularly at the transitional late- and post-secondary age, strategies to subvert this stratification have been evident while also conceding to lenified stances. This nomadic navigation of conflict has therefore resulted in an alternative space for multiple subjectivities and subjects alike, giving way to possibilities for hybridity and "a creative alternative space of becoming" (Braidotti 2011a, 7).

This nomadic space is not however immune from encroachment by state agendas – on the contrary the borderlands are sites of contestations in which subjects are simultaneously claimed and/or delegitimised. This is evidenced in the competing interests in curriculum design and subject choices across migrant learning centres and vocational training sites, where decisions to align with Thai or Myanmar state curriculum or to use alternative material has implications for accreditation and the future direction of educational and professional movements. Navigating the encroachments into these simultaneously disrupted and smooth environments is challenging. The nature of borderlands is in their multiple contact points and intersections of influence, and the possibility for international engagement is explicitly sought out by some community organisations which choose to occupy this space rather than positioning themselves within Myanmar (although their members may). While the constraints are evident for education practices operating in these environments, opportunities are also apparent for alternative modes of subject formation to emerge beyond the boundaries of the state and through the blending of these multiple influences. Beyond the issue of recognition of learning, the kind of education that that students have received has shaped their plans for resettlement. Notions of citizenship formation are central to community education practices as choices are made (both intentionally and not) over the forms of citizenship that want to be represented. This alternative construction results simultaneously in "the unsettling of the old ground and its markers, and the attempt to introduce a range of political practices (democratic and non-democratic) that shape the identity of new polities in the context of its contestation by emerging groups and identities" (Robins, Cornwall & von Lieres 2008, 1073), resulting in the breaking down and reforming of power relations. The implications of these interactions are likely to become increasingly relevant, contingent on the outcomes of the forthcoming elections.

Part III: Feminist Learning and Activism in Transition

"To know whose voice is speaking, is the beginning of one's own voice"
(Bernstein 2000, xxv)

Introducing Part III

The implications of the gendered nature of learning practices in maintaining women's social subordination are met with counterpoints and contestations in the learning environments constructed by women's activist organisations. However, women's organisations are also navigating multiple influences and oppositions which include both national institutions and political transitions and also international development organisations, donors and transnational campaigns. The hierarchies of these influences are illustrative of the ways in which power structures and dominant discourses are replicated where it must be acknowledged that "this distribution of different knowledges and possibilities is not based on neutral differences in knowledge but on a distribution of knowledge which carries unequal value, power and potential" (Bernstein 2000, xxi).

This section therefore extends the analysis of the gendered nature of learning spaces to explore how women's organisations have mobilised community learning as a means of challenging gender inequalities within Myanmar, responding to the research question:

How is women's activism in Myanmar and the Thai border creating alternative spaces for transformative learning during Myanmar's period of political transition?

The chapters further relate to the research subquestions:

- *How are women's organisations responding to shifting constraints and opportunities within the period of transition and what are the consequences of these responses?*
- *What alternative presentations of female citizenship emerge from these learning sites?*

The section begins with extending the theoretical framework in Chapter 7 to conceptualise the position of women activists in contemporary Myanmar as they negotiate multiple shifts in national and international dynamics. Chapters 8 and 9 go on to highlight the ways in which community education practices have been mobilised as a dimension of women's activism and the alternative presentation of female citizenship that is encountered in these settings, focusing particularly on the engagement with and adaptation of concepts such as feminism and empowerment. Additionally, two supplementary Focus Studies highlight the complexities of class dynamics within the women's movements and experiences of leadership training.