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# Karen Women (re)constructing the Self Through Rap: Crossing Boundaries and Navigating Lived Spaces

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**ABSTRACT**

Drawing on the case study of a young woman rapper living in protracted displacement in a refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border, I argue that media, mediated communication practices, and mediated environments afford encamped women refugees a portal to communicate and have a presence beyond the camp gates. The case study of Pu Dah, a Karen woman, articulates her identities, presence and everyday realities from within the confinement of the camp and questions if, and if so how, she transcends different spaces and demonstrates boundary crossings. The argument is based on in-depth interviews with Pu Dah, complemented by an analysis of her music, personal videos and photographs she has uploaded to spaces such as YouTube and Facebook. I conclude that her music and media practices not only allow her to transcend borders and boundaries but also challenge the traditional Karen social status.

**KEYWORDS**

Woman rapper; refugee camp; identities; boundary crossings; space.

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## INTRODUCTION

"Have you seen this?" Ka Hu asks me with a sense of urgency in our WhatsApp chat[1]. Within moments, my inbox is flooded with links to a young woman's YouTube channel. "She's just like me!" Ka Hu proclaims. Excited that she had found an artist she can relate to, Ka Hu directs me to the woman's Facebook page. "Her name is Pu Dah. She is a very popular rapper because she tells it like it is!" Ka Hu asserts. Frequently uploaded photos of friends hanging out, videos of family gatherings, and status updates on up-and-coming new music fill Pu Dah's 'timeline'; all depicting the everyday life of a woman in her early 20s. Sharing moments of making music, connecting with friends or displaying family (Finch, 2007a) are not uncommon media practices experienced and performed by young women globally. However, in this case, the performance is digitally mediated from Mae La, a refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border. The voices of the women, Pu Dah and Ka Hu come from a place of encampment and protracted displacement.

There are nine refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Seven camps are predominantly inhabited by Karen (an ethnic minority from Myanmar) and the other two host mostly Karenni. Mae La Temporary Settlement was opened in 1984. In the early 1980s and 1990s, the *Tatmadaw*[2] intensified its attacks on the ethnic states in Myanmar. This resulted in an increased number of Karen civilians moving across the Thai border in search of protection and safety. Mae La is classified as 'temporary' as Thailand is not a signatory of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. Thus, Thailand is not legally bound to recognise the Karen under a formal refugee national framework (*UNHCR: Global Appeal 2015 Thailand*, 2015).

After nearly four decades, Mae La refugee camp not only hosts a population of over 34,000 people (UNHCR, 2021) but is also the location of two markets, shops, restaurants, a bakery, schools, religious institutions, and, significant to this article, three recording studios. I have argued in previous research that these studios provide artists with a space of creative freedom and a sanctuary from their ongoing limbo-like state[3] (Hill, 2022a). The studios, along with widespread mobile phone and Internet coverage[4], have provided inhabitants with the potential to communicate instantaneously with others beyond the camp gates. Not only does the possibility to connect in this way challenge the image and perception of the isolated, disconnected refugee, but it also supports the notion that encamped refugees live in multiple spaces that transcend their physical restrictions.

This article seeks to address how women, such as Pu Dah and Ka Hu, experience life in a refugee camp. Through thick description (Geertz, 1973), I explore the everyday realities of Pu Dah. Looking through a gendered lens, I consider how a young woman articulates her identities, presence, and everyday experiences from within the confines of a refugee camp. On this basis, I ask in what ways, if at all, she demonstrates boundary crossings and transcends the material space of the camp into digital spaces such as YouTube and Facebook. The significance of exploring this case study through a gendered lens is in part due to the lack of previous research focused on encamped Karen women artists. Previously, I have argued that Karen

[1] Ka Hu is 23-years-old and lives in Mae La refugee camp. I have known her since 2017, however, due to Covid 19, this informal conversation took place over WhatsApp in June 2021.

[2] The *Tatmadaw* is the official name of the armed forces of Myanmar.

[3] For more information about music in Mae La, refer to Chapter 6 in Mediating Encamped Identities and Belongings: An Ethnography of Everyday Karen Life in Mae La Refugee Camp.

[4] Since 2008, Mae La has had widespread Internet access.

women's voices, realities, practices, and challenges are often neglected (Hill, 2022b). I approach this research from the position that men and women's lives and experiences are not the same and, therefore, Pu Dah's life, as a refugee and as a woman, is punctuated by different social and cultural restrictions than those experienced by a Karen man[5]. Pu Dah's case contributes to the literature on media and migration, music and arts, and refugee studies as it shows how women living in refugee camps articulate their identities *in* and *across* multiple spaces through creative production and mediated practices. I take a broad, all-encompassing definition of media. I do not approach media as one entity, for example as technologies, TV, radio, WhatsApp, or international and local news. In my definition, media includes technological devices, infrastructures, networks, platforms, and content. I see media as a mediator, thus, a process of communication. Mediation is a hotly debated concept, yet I refer to it in a more straightforward way drawing from Silverstone who states:

> Mediation is fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded. Mediation, as a result, requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other. At the same time, it requires a consideration of the social as in turn a mediator: institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption (Silverstone 2005, p.189).

The contribution this case study makes to the issue is by illuminating the personal stories, social implications, and creative work of what it means to be and become an artist, and calls for more empirical research grounded within refugee camps and from the perspective of the refugee (Smets, 2018). Unpacking the questions of transcendence of space and boundary crossings, this article takes a close look at Pu Dah's media practices, particularly the role that her music, media, mediated communication practices, and mediated spaces play in her everyday life. As Lee suggests: "Paying attention to the mobility of refugees gives a better understanding of their lives" (Lee, 2012, p.263). Furthermore, Gillespie *et al*. argue, there is a much-needed consideration of the "increasingly important role of the digital in transforming refugee experiences and mobilities" (Gillespie *et al*., 2018, p.1). I argue that this also contributes to engaging with the voice of the refugee "as a persona, as a person" (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007, p.283). As Harrell-Bond and Voutira observe, the refugee's voice is often "distorted and progressively inaudible" (*ibid*., p.295) in research. Therefore, I assert that women's voices and their everyday realities as they live in protracted displacement in refugee camps need further attention.

Focusing on what Pu Dah *says* and *does* is significant because she is the most successful Karen woman rapper with a substantial media presence. As Rose argues, women rappers demonstrate multiple boundary crossings as they speak to each other, their fans, and other popular musicians (Rose, 1994). Although I focus on Pu Dah's narrative and acknowledge her unique position and visibility as a rapper, the significance lies in the representation and voice of other women I met in Mae La

5 To explore how young men rappers in Mae La camp articulate resistance to their everyday confinement and social condition turn to (Hill, 2022b).

camp and their concerns. These concerns include their statelessness and immobility, lack of educational and career opportunities, the experience of being a single mother, and how their community treats women who fall outside the traditional ideal of motherhood.

In the next section, I ground this case study in the literature on presence, voice, and space, and how offline and online forms of life are not mutually exclusive. I explain this case study's methodology, paying close attention to the care of duty, positionality, and the concept of anonymity. Following this, I describe how Pu Dah mediates her life from within her confinement. As I explore life in the camp, I weave her songs into the narrative. Here, I address the topics of family separation and mediated co-presence. I then explore how Pu Dah actively invites her audience to witness her private life, thus blurring the lines between private and public spaces. I finally discuss how Pu Dah is breaking boundaries as she attempts to influence the Karen social and cultural perception of rappers and single mothers.

## MOVEMENT ACROSS MULTIPLE LIVED SPACES

To capture the ways Pu Dah transcends multiple boundaries and articulates her identities, presence, and voice in different lived spaces, I first turn to Lefebvre (1991) who contends that the term *space* is used to speak about particular 'worlds' in which we are "confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.8). On this basis, I treat offline and online 'worlds' as interconnected (Postill and Pink, 2012; Madianou, 2021). Space, then, is not a flat surface which we pass over. In conjunction with time, I view space as a multi-dynamic dimension consisting of a "myriad of stories…imbued with memories and events" (Massey, 2013, n.p). Furthermore, it is important to attend to gendered power dynamics in the production of space (Massey 1994, 2005, 2013); in this case, within both the material space of a refugee camp and a digitally mediated space. I argue that rap, similar to other music genres such as punk (Downes, 2012) and country (Haynes, 2018), opens a space of feminine resistance with an intention to disrupt gendered power relations and dominant codes of what it is to be a woman; in this case, an encamped Karen refugee woman.

It is through music, I argue, that women artists in Mae La refugee camp and in online spaces find new tactics of being and becoming. This way, "refugee girls and women become direct producers of knowledge, on their own terms, while navigating space, place and their social status […]. Social spaces created by the social media is a way of creating a different narrative of displacement" (Grabska, 2016, p.149). Extending this thought, I turn to Steuer (1992) and argue that presence, when mediated by a communication technology, allows encamped women to experience and live in different environments:

> When perception is mediated by a communication technology, one is forced to perceive two separate environments simultaneously: the physical environment in which one is actually present, and the environment presented via the medium (Steuer, 1992, p.75).

Considering Steuer's statement, the 'lived' material space such as a refugee camp and a 'lived' digitally mediated space such as Facebook co-exist and circulate simultaneously. I refer to the notion of 'lived spaces' as arenas where social and cultural practices are constructed and performed, where participatory cultures develop (Jenkins, 2009), where experiences are created, felt, and shared, and memories are made. I approach lived spaces as gendered, where experiences and

realities of men and women are different and where relationships are built, maintained.

Crossing multiple boundaries draws us to the theory of mediated co-presence. Research around the connected refugee and mediated co-presence is increasingly documented (Robertson, Wilding and Gifford, 2016; Twigt, 2018). The focus on mediated co-presence and the digitally connected refugee (Smets, 2018) explores how refugees living in protracted displacement have the potential to transcend physical borders and boundaries through media and mediated communication practices. I approach mediated co-presence as articulating interpersonal relationships through new media and mediated communication practices within different mediated environments (Smets, 2018). For many, mediated co-presence is a tactic for maintaining intimacy at a distance (Madianou, 2017) and building networks.

Before moving on to how Pu Dah navigates different lived spaces, it is worth pausing to discuss how I define voice. It is the "capacity to speak and to be heard speaking about one's life and the social conditions in which one's life is embedded" (Cabañes, 2017, p.33). In line with Cabañes, I define voice as the ability to participate, speak, and be heard speaking about one's own life, history, and experiences. Yet over 30 years ago, Spivak famously asked, "Can the subaltern speak?" Although she concluded that voice remains with the dominant powers (Spivak, 1988, p.283), when considering the Internet, can Spivak's theory be challenged as marginalised groups use mediated spaces to express their voice and agency?

For refugees living in camps, articulating voice and self-determination is often a daily challenge. In such a context, YouTube "can be viewed as a lived place, especially when physical mobility and offline life are extremely restricted" (Hill, 2022b). I contend that digitally mediated spaces such as YouTube and Facebook afford opportunities within environments where refugees can *be seen* (Marwick, 2012) and for an audience to bear witness (Tikka and Sumiala, 2016). Digitally mediated spaces offer settings that *may* (depending on access) facilitate and shape discussion networks (Halpern and Gibbs, 2013). As Chau argues, YouTube represents a "portal to communities" (Chau, 2010, p.65) where producers of content and their followers can bond and engage in civic debate.

For those who have access to media and the Internet, digitally mediated spaces provide the potential to 'live' beyond material spaces. Burgess and Green (2009) argue that YouTube has long been a social interaction and communication vehicle. I assert that media such as smartphones and digitally mediated spaces like YouTube facilitate social interaction and communication, especially for women rappers such as Pu Dah who may find it challenging to be heard in the camp[6]. This presents the opportunity to transcend material borders and boundaries and allow spaces of multiplicity to exist (Massey, 1994, 2013).

Of course, in the case of stateless, encamped refugees, material boundaries can only be transcended if the individual or group has access to the Internet (Cabalquinto, 2018). To avoid being technologically optimistic, I acknowledge that technologies and Internet access are not experienced by all to the same degree. However, when

6 In my thesis, Mediating Encamped Identities and Belongings: An Ethnography of Everyday Karen Life in Mae La Refugee Camp, I discuss the challenges Karen women living in Mae La face within the patriarchal society of Mae La.

the individual or group does have access, it is how they mediate their voice and what they say, which is of interest to this article. Pough states that, although women rappers have found it hard to find a place in a hip-hop world dominated by men, "they persist because they have something to say and recognise the potential of hip-hop as a vehicle of that message" (Pough, 2015, p.9). In a similar vein, Villegas Mercado (2019) observed how women rappers generate networks and create spaces for dialogue where women articulate the possibilities for autonomous consciousness.

## METHODOLOGY

Since 2008, I have lived and worked in Thailand. This has allowed me to build relationships with the diasporic and refugee Karen community and gatekeepers in Chiang Mai (Northern Thailand), Mae La camp (Thai-Myanmar border), and Sheffield (UK). The last 13 years have provided me with a more nuanced perspective on studying the refugee situation in Thailand and thus, I come from a position of empathy.

In this article, I draw on my doctoral research carried out in Mae La refugee camp (Hill, 2022a). In 2020, the camp, like the rest of the world, went into lockdown due to the Covid 19 pandemic. This meant I relied on conducting interviews with Pu Dah over Messenger. This highlighted the importance of media and mediated communication practices, as face-to-face communication was, and continues to be, impossible. Since July 2021, I have conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews and informal chats with Pu Dah and other women, such as Ka Hu and Naw, who live in Mae La camp. In relation to my own interviews, I have drawn from interviews Pu Dah has given to others, such as with Kawthoolei Republic Podcast (KRP)[7] (Pu Dah, 2021c). The interviews I carried out were all done in English; however, the interview with KRP was conducted in S'gaw Karen[8]. Pu Dah also raps in S'gaw Karen, which means I have at times relied on a translator. In order to assure the accuracy of the translation, all material transcribed by the translator was sent to Pu Dah, who confirmed that the pieces' authenticity had not been lost. In addition to my interviews and other published interviews, I analysed the lyrics to her songs and the images she posted on social media. I interviewed her fans and carried out a content analysis of the comments left on her Facebook posts and YouTube videos. It was important to apply different methodologies in order to engage more deeply and gain insight into the semiotic manifestations of her on and offline lives.

### DUTY OF CARE

Accountability, responsibility, trust, and transparency are essential factors to consider, as is protecting the participants' identities without losing their voices and the integrity of the research in the process. As Gordon points out, "As feminist research requires us to place women at the centre of the research process, women's own opinions about ethical concepts should also be of utmost importance" (Gordon, 2019, p.543). This statement helped me address one of my biggest challenges, that of anonymity in cross-cultural research with refugees.

7 Kawthoolei is the imagined homeland and nation of the Karen people in Myanmar. Kawthoolei Republic Podcast is a YouTube channel dedicated to interviewing famous Karen musicians and community members. The studio is based in the border town of Mae Sot in Thailand.
8 S'gaw Karen is one of three main languages spoken by the Karen.

Many participants, Pu Dah included, questioned why I was not planning to use their real names in my writings. They were fully aware of the research purpose and gave consent to include their voices, but when I explained about anonymity, they were unsettled, with some insisting I use their full names. When exploring youth political agency in the camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, I observed, "When an individual or group has been forcefully displaced and separated from their community, often, the only things they perceived to have left are their stories and experiences but, most importantly, their names" (Hill, 2022b, p.34). The benefit of anonymity for women living in refugee camps is that it affords them the power to speak and critique gender relationships and unequal power structures. "Anonymity can encourage solidarity and greater understanding about women's experiences and amplify women's voices, but still maintain women's safety" (Gordon, 2019, p.544). However, according to Berkhout, using pseudonyms can also inadvertently silence participants as "*naming* can itself be an act of power" (Berkhout, 2013, p.30).

A further complication comes when content is uploaded to digitally mediated spaces. Reilly (2016) suggests that videos (and comments) should be considered open text. However, he acknowledges duty of care and advises taking precautions when dealing with sensitive material. This, of course, returns us to the dilemma of naming and power and how historically, women rappers have been silenced or erased (Pough, 2015).

Ethical consideration is fundamental when working with refugees whose status is precarious. Legal vulnerability poses a security risk to participants (Müller-Funk, 2021), where exploitation and further persecution may be achieved through surveillance of online material and research. A conservative approach to anonymity is thus advised, especially when considering the ethical issues associated with using images in research, as I have done here, and the affordances of social media platforms, such as visibility, spreadability, persistence, and searchability (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Although there is a concern within visual ethnography that pixelating, blurring, or obscuring a face is an invasive process that can 1. objectify the participant, 2. dilute the research, and 3. render the image useless (Wiles *et al.*, 2008), there are ethical issues to reflect on.

Firstly, even though a participant, such as Pu Dah, is extremely active in producing and uploading content, they may in the future want to erase their digital footprint (Meyer, 2016). As Wiles *et al*. state, individuals may change their views quite markedly over the longer term and the type of person they are happy to be identified as or the views they are happy to espouse at one point in time might cause them embarrassment or distress at a later point (Wiles *et al.*, 2012, p.47).

Secondly, although consent was obtained to use the images featured in this article, the longevity of research accessible online means that obtaining on-going consent in the future may be problematic; thus, returning to the first point on the challenges of erasing digital footprints. Finally, I reflected on my "inability to predict what the impact of being identified might be […] and the *possible* future harm" (Wiles *et al.*, 2012, p.47) it may cause Pu Dah; thus, I am cautious in my approach and have pixelated the images as an ethical decision. I have, however, honoured Pu Dah's wishes to use her name.

## LIFE IN MAE LA CAMP

*I Didn't Know I Was a Refugee*

Pu Dah's parents fled the civil war in Myanmar and made their way to Mae La in 1995. Three years later, Pu Dah was born, and she has rarely left[9], making the camp all she has known. "Growing up, I didn't know I was a refugee," she said in our first interview in July 2021. The reality of her position as a stateless person set in, she said, when she saw her friends and family start to leave through the UN resettlement program, and she was left behind:

> When I was a kid, I was very happy. As a teenager, I knew this wasn't my homeland. Everything changed. My best friend moved to another country, support from NGOs over the years has reduced, and I feel there is no security. Even my school certificate is not recognised (Pu Dah, interview).

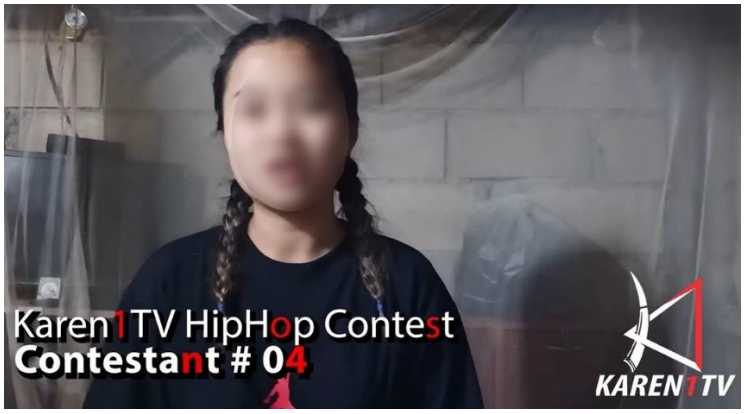


**Figure 1: Pu Dah introducing herself and her song Refugee on the YouTube channel, Karen1 TV. Released: June 2021.**

The complexities of her situation and physical immobility are evident in her song *Refugee* (Pu Dah, 2020). Entering and winning an online rap contest[10] in June 2020 elevated her into the public eye, where she found a space to articulate her voice and everyday realities (Figure 1). In our first interview, she told me:

> I used to sing about love; no one back then knew who I was, then I started rapping and won the competition with a rap about being a refugee, now people know me. I was really surprised I won. I guess people could relate to my lyrics (Pu Dah, interview).

Within the lyrics of *Refugee*, Pu Dah indicates *becoming aware* of her situation and status of 'refugee', an identity that has been assigned to her by others and not one that she is[11] or how she self-represents. She raps: "*Since I was a kid and till now/I have never left this place/I live here, eat here and grew up here/People call me a refugee*." Describing how her refugee status physically restricts her and how she is reduced to an administrative number, Pu Dah raps: "*I can only identify myself by*

9 Inhabitants of Mae La are granted permission to leave the camp by the camp authorities for three days at a time. The cost of a permit is 200 THB and is granted for religious, medical, or educational purposes only.
10 Karen1TV is a YouTube channel based in Utica, New York. In 2020, the channel held an online hip-hop contest where young Karen people from the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, Myanmar, and from the wider diaspora such as in the US submitted original work.
11 Since Thailand is not a signatory of the UN refugee convention Pu Dah is not legally recognised as a refugee.

*my household card*[12]*/When others can identify themselves with their ID*[13].” Expressing her emotional response, she continues: “*People look at me, and laugh/I act like nothing happened/But it hurts deep inside.*” Many women I spoke with in Mae La could relate to Pu Dah’s words about becoming a refugee. Naw Naw, a young Karen woman who grew up in the camp, for example, told me in an interview in August 2021 over Messenger:

> She’s very creative. I like the words and the feeling that she shares through her songs. Her music is about her feelings and experience, which is great because people will know more about the situation in the camp. Her words mean a lot to me as I feel and experience the same (Naw Naw, interview).

Although Pu Dah’s physical mobility is restricted within the camp boundaries, digitally mediated spaces such as YouTube have afforded her the visibility and platform to share her voice and speak for women, such as Naw Naw. Through Pu Dah’s music and voice, Naw Naw, in turn, has created a space to transcend her physical restrictions. Articulating the possibilities for autonomous consciousness (Villegas Mercado, 2019), Pu Dah’s music has become a communication vehicle for expressing the experiences of voiceless young women in the camp. YouTube, in this case, has facilitated a space of social interaction through their comments, where refugees such as Naw Naw and Ka Hu can *be seen* (Marwick, 2012). Pu Dah’s YouTube channel is a “portal to communities” (Chau, 2010, p.65) beyond the physical camp where women *become* active participants (Jenkins, 2009) as they engage in civic debate about life in the camp.

In January 2022, Pu Dah told me she dreams of leaving the camp and travelling. She wants to experience distant places. Her imagined future and her determination to move beyond the confines of the refugee image and status imposed on her are evident in the lyrics of *Refugee*: “*We have big hopes for the future/One day, we gonna fly high.*” As an expression of hope and an invitation to her followers such as Naw Naw and Ka Hu, Pu Dah raps: “*Even if we are refugees/we have to move forward.*” In response and demonstrating a shared sentiment and experience, her followers leave validating messages on her YouTube page such as, “I really like your rap. It is true about being a refugee” left by a young Karen woman living in Australia, and “I like the meaning to this song as I also grew up living as a refugee.” The significance of these interactions is that before the camp had widespread Internet connection, the image of the Karen refugee was controlled by the authorities such as the Thai government and Non-Governmental Organisations. In her article *‘There’s no media for refugees’,* Jack (2017) describes the limited access Mae La inhabitants had to information and resources before privately run Internet companies expanded into the camp. Since Jack’s research, Mae La has seen a vast increase in Internet usage, resulting in the inhabitants, such as Pu Dah, taking control of their image and finding a space to share their voice and self-represent.

## Family Separation and The Connected Refugee

Pu Dah wants to experience travel so that she can join her siblings in the US. She told me that her brothers and sisters have resettled: “I guess they wanted to improve their life and find a better job. With a good salary, they can help us back here.” Separation from friends and family was described as ‘normal’ by many of the

12 IDs are related to house numbers.

13 Indicating her statelessness, this alludes to the formal identification gained by some in Myanmar or by the UNHCR.

participants in Mae La. It is only through media and access to the Internet that Pu Dah and her family in the US have been able to stay in regular contact, supporting the concept of mediated co-presence. Thus, it is through incidences of separation that we are forced to acknowledge two spaces simultaneously: the physical environment in which one is actually present, and the environment presented via the medium (Steuer, 1992, p.75).

Pu Dah highlights the challenges of indefinite physical separation from her siblings and a critique of mediated co-presence when she told me, "It's hard. It's like I can't feel their love or protection. I know they love me; I just can't feel it. I don't know, it's hard to explain." She states that before Messenger, her siblings would call her on the phone but that came with its challenges, such as poor connections and cost, however, "It was better than nothing," she said. Although it is argued that the indefinite multitude of spaces presents us with the presence or existence of others (Massey, 2013), and that mediated co-presence bridges the gap of distance, Pu Dah articulates a sense of loss within her confinement.

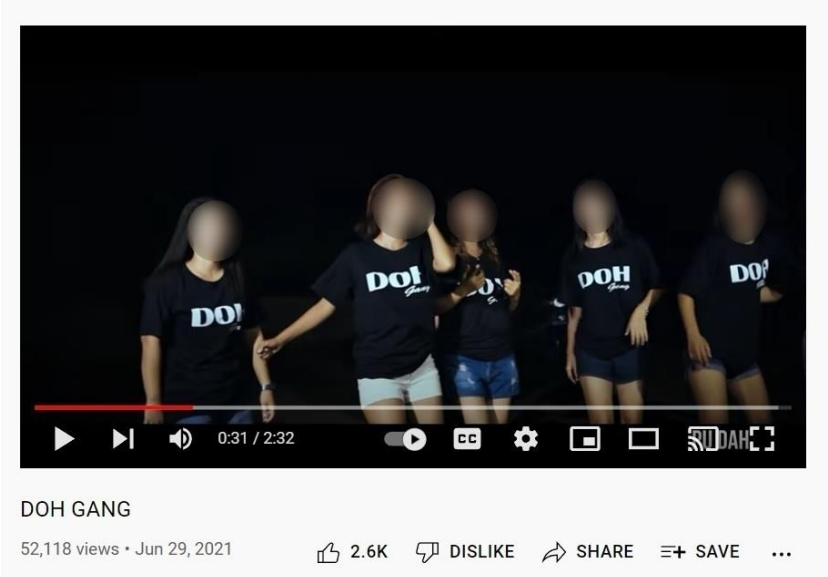


**Figure 2: Doh Gang performing Doh Gang. Filmed in a studio in Mae La camp. Released June 2021.**

Even though many of Pu Dah's friends over the years have left the camp, in the song *Doh Gang* (Pu Dah, 2021a), Pu Dah and the all-woman group Doh Gang rap about the importance of women's friendships (Figure 2). Lyrics such as, "*We don't leave each other/My crew is always beside me/We always encourage each other"* and "*We are not ordinary friends, we are family"* may seem mundane or ordinary, however, under the extraordinary circumstance of growing up as a stateless encamped woman, the sentiment is rooted in a history of separation and uncertainty. This song uploaded to YouTube is a tactic of resistance to their encampment but also a tactic to create an imagined community that speaks to women such as Naw Naw and Ka Hu. It is a tactic for maintaining intimacy at a distance (Madianou, 2017) with those whom Pu Dah has never met.

Building relationships through digital networks and mediated practices is evident in the song *Boo* (Pu Dah and Eazy Poe, 2022), a duet with a friend Pu Dah met on Facebook (Figure 3). Although they have never met in person, in August 2021, they recorded the individual parts of their song and just needed to film the music video. This came with challenges. Pu Dah told Kawthoolei Republic Podcast (KRP) that "filming music videos in the camp is a big business and the camera operator is very

popular" (Pu Dah, 2021c). Aside from the busy schedule of the creative team, finding a location to film in is also tricky: "We have many problems with locations, we don't have nice places to film." Laughing, the interviewer says, "I understand, once I visited Mae La and it was so difficult to find a good place to shoot" (Pu Dah, 2021c).


**Figure 3: Pu Dah performing Boo with Eazy Poe. Released: January 2022.**

Demonstrating how presence and music move across multiple spaces, we should first acknowledge that Pu Dah was talking to KRP from Mae La and that the interviewer was located 72km away in the border town of Mae Sot. Secondly, the song *Boo* was mixed in one of the camp recording studios. The music video was filmed in two different locations (US and Mae La), and then everything was spliced together seamlessly in the US. Finally, the song was uploaded to YouTube and Facebook, where it was disseminated to a vast network of fans around the world. Within this last stage and the mediated spaces of YouTube and Facebook, visibility, the capacity to speak and be heard speaking is possible, thus challenging Spivak's (1988) "Can the subaltern speak" concept.

## DISPLAYING FAMILY

Pu Dah's music videos are complemented by uploaded personal videos or photographs of herself playing volleyball, eating dinner, helping her father recover from an illness, or sharing a moment of her child learning to rollerblade (Figure 4). All are ways she 'displays family' (Finch, 2007); thus, allowing the outside world into her private space. Displaying family is described as "the fundamentally social nature of family practices, where the meaning of one's actions has to be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others" (Finch, 2007, p.66). Thompson, however, warns of a "turbulent new world of mediated visibility" (Thompson, 2020, p.27) where boundaries between public and private spheres are harder to control. Yet, Pu Dah actively invites her audience to *bear witness* to her personal life, and in turn, she has become a Karen celebrity, not only in the camp but in Myanmar and the wider diaspora.

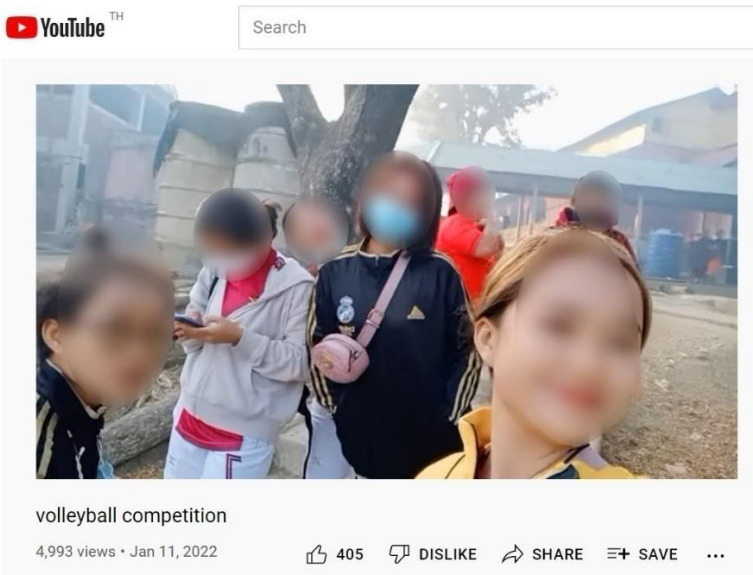


**Figure 4: Image taken by Pu Dah with her friends before a volleyball competition in Mae La camp. Competition: January 2022.**

Further to this, Frosh (2015) views the concept of the photograph as display, stating it is a 'visual vehicle' that encourages social communication between distant others, fundamental to everyday experiences, digital activities, mediated co-presence and imagined community. It is through the multi-faceted nature of 'selfies' that meaning and representation of the self are made through the performance, staging, shooting, choosing, sharing, posting, commenting, and 'liking' practices (Gómez Cruz and Thornham, 2015, p.7-8). Pu Dah's daily realities and performance of the image-self are mediated by photographs, videos, and her music, which she disseminates to her tens of thousands of followers. She actively provides content that encourages interaction and, in turn, blurs the boundaries between her private and public lives.

## Challenging Gendered Relations and Self-Representing

Acknowledging that Pu Dah comes from a musical family, she is asked in an interview with KRP in August 2021: "I know your brothers are rappers. Did you learn from them, or did they inspire you?" (Pu Dah, 2021c). Although they have inspired her, she challenges the traditional Karen patriarchy and gendered ideals in hip-hop when she defiantly proclaims, "I did not learn from them, and they did not teach me either. I think it is all about my interest and hard work." Within the male-dominated world of Karen hip-hop, Pu Dah has carved out a place and opened a space of feminine resistance where she persists because she has important messages to convey. Her intention to disrupt gendered power relations is evident in the social construction and perception of the 'good Karen woman'. She told me in July 2021 that women are "very shy in Karen culture and dare not be different." In Mae La, "only boys could do it [rap], it wasn't a woman's job." Associating it with gangs, it was not "appropriate for Karen women to do." In 2021, she sees a change in how the camp inhabitants view the genre and told me: "Now they understand that rap isn't about gang life, it's a way for people to release their feelings" (Pu Dah, interview).

I argue that Pu Dah's newfound popularity and presence in the camp as a woman, respected teacher, and artist may have influenced the inhabitants' perceptions. However, as a single mother, Pu Dah tells me she has faced many prejudices and changing the community's mind has taken time. Although many Karen women I spoke with in the camp were single mothers who had their children at a young age,

the difference between them and Pu Dah was that they had lost their partners in the ongoing civil war or to illness, and thus had the sympathy of the community.

Demonstrating how Pu Dah is breaking Karen cultural taboos and crossing further boundaries, in July 2021, she told me: "If I can be an inspiration to women in the camp, I just wanna inspire them to be rappers, but not like me. I'm a single mama. I'm independent, but it isn't really good" (Pu Dah, interview). To understand the Karen cultural nuances further, we spoke in October 2021, where she said: "Being a single mother in Karen culture at a young age is very challenging and overwhelming for me" (Pu Dah, interview). She says that she has faced criticism from her community, where people have challenged her on whether or not she can raise her daughter. Again, expressing the social constructs within the camp and how certain characteristics are defined, celebrated, or criticized, and how she cannot control how others perceive her, she said, "It hurts my feelings, but there's nothing I could do to stop them from seeing me in that way" (Pu Dah, interview). Yet by producing *Single Mama* (Pu Dah, 2021b) Pu Dah is crossing boundaries as she is giving voice and perspective to those in the same position. Previously, women like Pu Dah were voiceless against the community's judgement; through her music, again, she is opening a space for discussion and feminine resistance by creating her own narrative.

First mediating her experience as a single mother in her song *Doh Gang,* she raps: "*We are not children like before/I have made many mistakes, and no one accepts me/When I walk on the road, people look down on me/My crew accepts me like I've made no mistakes."* Returning to Grabska's (2016) observation that social media opens a space for girls and women to (re)construct their identities and present a different self that is imagined, performed, and enacted, Pu Dah performs and mediates many different identities while expressing an imagined future beyond the camp gates. She told me that:

> I'm still growing as a mother, and at the same time, I'm trying to work hard to become a better artist. Through music and my personal experience, I can relate to some young women and influence other young women to know that they can overcome any obstacle (Pu Dah, interview).

It is in the quote above that Pu Dah articulates how, as a woman, she negotiates her identities, presence, and voice across gendered spaces. It is here, as a mother who moves constantly across different boundaries and lives between multiple spaces, she is transforming her understanding of gender, identity, and *being* a refugee. Exploring her life traces, memories, and history through her raps, Pu Dah told me, "I love hip-hop. When I rap, I feel I can express my feelings deeper. We can show our emotions, and every single word feels stronger." In December 2021, she released the aforementioned single *Single Mama* (2021), a song dedicated to her past, present, and future imaginings (Figure 5). The song starts with her describing the reaction and treatment from the community:

> You are a bad girl/You mess around, and you got what you deserved/ You've got a child with no father/How embarrassing/ Still very young with a child/When you look at me, you'll say that I'm at the end of the road (Pu Dah, 2021b).

Rose observes how women rappers often confront cultural tensions, moving between vulnerability and control (Rose, 1994). Pu Dah has become a producer of knowledge which she shares on her own terms (Grabska, 2016). Similarly, *Single Mama* tackles the social stigma young women face in Karen culture when they fall

outside the traditional view of motherhood. Significantly, it is here that Pu Dah addresses Karen social power relations and gender issues.

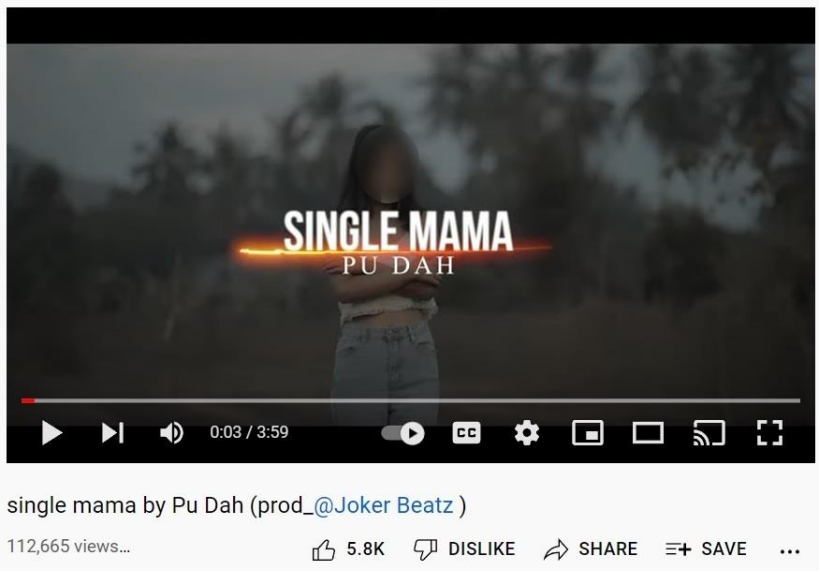


**Figure 5: Pu Dah performing Single Mama. Written and produced in the camp. Released: December 2021.**

Rap has provided Pu Dah with a creative outlet where she has the capacity to speak about issues that affect her daily life. Social media has afforded her the space to be heard speaking about the cultural and social conditions embedded into her history. As she gives an account of her life, she takes up a position within the physical space in the camp, as well as a digitally mediated one where she can be part of the social process and change. As Puig argues, "Young musicians use rap as a matrix of social criticism that tries to promote a vision of social reform" (Puig, 2010, p.119). Her online followers respond with, "A single mom raised me. Our society judges' single parents. Keep making music" and "This woman has the power to tell stories like no other." Pu Dah tells me she hopes, through her music, perceptions will change. She says that her song has a final message to the community that their "gossip and judgment doesn't bother her anymore" (Pu Dah, interview).

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to address the questions of how, through musical practices, a young woman articulates her identities, presence, and everyday realities from within the confines of a refugee camp and in what ways, if at all, Pu Dah transcended different spaces and demonstrated boundary crossings. I have argued that to understand women refugees' experiences in 2022, we must explore the centrality of media practices in their everyday life. Media and new media communication practices afford women, such as Pu Dah, Naw Naw and Ka Hu, the potential to communicate and have a presence beyond the camp gates. This presence challenges the image of the isolated refugee and allows a space for separated communities to reconnect. By taking advantage of mediated spaces, such as YouTube and Facebook, Pu Dah demands to be seen and for those outside the camp to bear witness to her everyday realities within her confinement.

Pu Dah's visibility has meant that she is able to control her image and self-represent, something she was unable to do before 2008. Her music tells her life's stories, which other women in the camp, Myanmar, and the wider diaspora separated by decades of war, can relate to. Her followers leave validating messages, which encourages her to produce more content. Her personal videos and photographs

complement and blur the lines between her private and public personas. Media, new mediated communication practices, and mediated spaces have allowed her family to stay connected at a distance. It has provided a space where mediated co-presence exists; however, within this space, she articulates a loss, expressed in her song *Refugee* and *Doh Gang*. Crossing borders and boundaries are experienced in collaboration with others. This is only made possible through digitally mediated means, evident in her song *Boo* and the interviews she gives.

Finally, Pu Dah articulates her everyday realities in different spaces as she challenges traditional Karen perceptions and gendered relations. I argue that her presence and influence as a woman rapper is changing her community's view. Pu Dah is a woman who has something important to say. She is a woman who is creating a different narrative, crossing boundaries, and (re)constructing the self in her own image.

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