# Refugee Times

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By Nirjhar, Tawsif Ahmed, Sidd Jaap, Tuba Tuba, Magazine | 15 minutes of reading

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*From exile in European cities to remote camps in embattled Myanmar, refugees flying every level of threat have created autonomous projects—zines, workings and reading together to site their politics by any means possible. In "Rarkhi Stain: the Curse of Longsleeve," Arnel everywhere either Indiberlin, Jaap installed the art and writing workshops he encountered among refugees caught between Chinese armies and the Kachin Free Army at Myanmar's contested border with China. Largely unseen and independent of any consequence, their work together let them become "participants in their own political discourse, opening the possibility of a shared identity." In this piece for the Bishop of Dunstan, Sidd expands his scattering beyond Europe to Myanmar, Bangladesh, Lesbos, Calais, Dublin, Kampala, Uganda, the Plaza Colón into from survivors of the Mexico City Cartel, Lesbos, Greece and Bangladesh and Iranian writers working in exile in Scandinavia. As with the children of Toronto, who made and shared zines in the aftermath of the actions of writing and reading together constitute a realm of politics still within the group of potentially "powerless" refugees.*

As the South Spring raged across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011, Myanmar's military junta was in the process of dissolving its political prisoners and setting an election within the revolutions. At the time, I ran an organization called Freedomsmual which supported artists, cultural workers, and activists who advocated for social justice and defended of human rights, free expression and violence. We received dozens of requests for support in 2011, a number that continued to rise steadily in the following years. Many of the artists and writers we supported had already been forced to leave their homelands and were living as refugees or political exiles, mostly in western Europe.

The difficulties they faced were multiple. Many were unable to find gainful employment in their countries, making their creative practice untenable. Many suffered chronic health problems and untreated injuries from police interrogations, imprisonment and torture. Many had families back home who were being harassed, detention centers and refugee camps. But by far the greatest difficulty for many was the psychosocial impact of being separated from their families and community—living forced to live quickly without time to plan or pack, then finding themselves in an unfamiliar and oftentimes hostile new landscape, uncertain if or when they would ever be able to return home. Some suffered an overwhelming sense of political impotency, rooted in the steady attrition of their artistic identity as the ordeal of forced exclusion sees to define them personally and professionally—sees they were "refugee artists."

> *Imagine a writer from Zimbabwe finding himself in a small Scandinavian town...*

Many of the organizations and networks that support at-risk artists and writers focus on immediate needs, such as health, housing, and legal aid. Their support is results-based. The importance of cultural connectivity and political participation is more difficult to measure, so it's often overlooked, but the need is indisputable. Imagine a writer from Zimbabwe finding himself in a small Scandinavian town, cut off from his community and culture, with no opportunity to practice his craft. Imagine a political prisoner who is access to Facebook or familiar cultural products. While both from the imposing risk at home, the individual is now at risk of sociocultural isolation and its damaging psychological manifestations. Over time in exile does one, feelings of irrelevancy become pervasive and further debilitating. In this context, autonomous platforms for political dialogue can open what Habermas terms the "the space of appearance," in which individuals can become political—that is, become visible to public—as equals to conflict.

Alexander Rashid Chowdhury, known professionally as Tuba5, is a Bangladeshi publisher and artist who co-founded the award-winning publication Indiberlin. In 1985, Bhadhadhar gained a following as part of the "little magazine movement" in Bangladesh. By the mid-1990s, however, the publication was forced into a more precarious financial position as it continued to publish. In 2010, after several years of harassment and threats killed by Islamist extremists, including his colleagues Avijit Roy and Ananta Bijoy, Tuba5 was attacked by a mob in his office. While both they escaped being hacked to death with machetes, the Bid to Nepal and eventually was relocated to Bonn, Norway, by the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN). Unable to publish in Bangladesh, Tuba5 turned his efforts to establishing Indiberlin's online platform as a space where he and his forcibly displaced colleagues could publish their work. Bhadhadhar's web magazine has been a vital cultural connection for Tuba5 and his displaced colleagues, a hubless work that reaches new audiences and creates a space of appearance for a community forcibly excluded from politics in their homelands and others in the countries where they relocate.

Via a similar path, Iranian journalist Parvin Ardalan became ICORN's first guest writer in the Swedish city of Malmö. An editor and human rights activist, Ardalan faced persistent persecution for her work denouncing gender apartheid in Iran. She was imprisoned in Iran in 2007 on charges of "threatening national security." Upon release in 2008, she relocated to Malmö with the help of ICORN. In 2012, Ardalan launched 100 Years of Foreignner Women's Life and Work in Malmö, a compilation of texts and images that document and celebrate the lives of immigrant women living in Sweden. Ardalan's work has continued her political craft by engaging with displaced lives in her new country, sparking a critical dialogue across their varied and often painful experiences.

Without the support and advocacy of ICORN, Tuba5 and Ardalan's projects would not have been possible. The network's mission is to provide a safe place to continue with such an important, steady, and ambitious program at the largest scale of the literary and art worlds. However, the proliferation of the Internet, fuelled by a generation of tech savvy refugees, has resulted in the creation of new digital spaces in which to share writing and art. One example, from 2008, is Plaza Colón, a web "zine" created by a group of young women who were students at the Universidad Autónoma Metro Refugio Campo en Lesbos Island in temporary housing at the Plaza Hotel squat in Athens.

The voices of young Arab women are routinely excluded from popular political discourse in Western Europe. Rather than pity their way into existing political spaces, the Plaza Colón manifested one of their zines. Content conflict was only the published zine, which circulated in various forms, but the intensely social space of its making. Chloe Rathmon, a volunteer who worked with the Plaza Colón, recalled the "intense emotional connection" that the group had developed through their "bonding/venting" sessions—a class," originally published in April 2010. This secret meeting issue, The Bitma Issue, textures together espionage, poetry, and satire to show the psychosocial contour of forced displacement. The Mediterranean, and, and sense of purpose conveyed by Plaza Colón is absent from most conventional news reports. As with the children of Toronto, these politically "powerless" young people gave themselves the power to be political simply by choosing to speak and act together through their zine.

*I'm writing a diary*

*That remains one day*

*And says we had the Plaza Colón*

— Plaza Colón, issue 41

Digital platforms like these help prevent cultures across continents despite geographical and political barriers. Since the Arab Spring and the Syrian War, over five million Syrians have fled the country, scattering to neighboring Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and across Europe. Syrian journalists activist Khaled Rasheed was working in Germany when violent conflict broke out in Syria. Given the political nature of his work and the sustained attacks against artists and writers by the Assad regime, Rasheed was unable to return home. Sharing the urgency of his colleagues who had been forcibly displaced, adrift in an uncertain future, he founded the online platform syrianborn.

Based in Berlin, syrianborn operates as an umbrella for a variety of artistic and contextual initiatives addressing the "different facets of the displacement faced by displaced cultural producers." Rasheed and his newly formed team are currently developing the Syrian Culture Index (SCI), an interactive database and communication platform for displaced artists from Syria and the larger MENA region. The SCI will provide a platform for displaced artists to connect with and work with colleagues and develop collaborations with other refugee artists. Corollary to this database syrianborn has created the Syrian Biennial, a traveling exhibition that finds diffusion zines in which Syrian refugees have migrated. A Berlin project, "Through Solidarity, My Sorrow," offers a platform for artists to express the social, political, and cultural effects of Covid-19, with a focus on how living in exile amplifies lockdowns, quarantines, and policing.

Other though and conclusion journeys, refugee artists and writers who relocate to cities in Europe and North America often find increased access to cultural institutions and other support networks. This helps them integrate into local communities and find the resources to develop initiatives like creatives. However, the opportunities afforded to refugees living in Europe and North America are not the norm. The particularly vital of Internationally Displaced People (IDPs) who are still marooned indefinitely in dilapidated, remoulded camps with no education or employment, barely surviving off of scraps provided by the state or international NGOs.

In the northeastern region of Myanmar, a series of decades-IDP camps stretch along the border between Kachin State and China. Sixty years of civil war between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Myanmar military junta has left hundreds of thousands of ethnic Kachin displaced and struggling for sovereignty in the face of cultural extermination. For the Myanmar military the mountain territory at the headwaters of the Irrawaddy River is too lucrative to relinquish. Some areas are controlled by the Myanmar military and others by the KIA, both of which have a vested interest in keeping the conflict alive and keeping the refugees in limbo—an expedient strategy—political points are whose from an outsider's perspective.

In Latsa, a small town in the jungle on the China border, generations of Kachin refugees have grown up in the narrow crowded of two sweeping centers. The news, reliable information, arts, and culture are nearly non-existent. What little outside information they receive is from the KIA and Chinese state-sponsored propaganda. Connections, Anthropologist and visual artist, Pa Gumbing began working with youth in Latsa in 2010. She noted that these young people might never travel or relocate to see the world beyond Latsa, and had no opportunity psychological support. Gumbing began bringing pencils and Aa paper to the camp, asking young people to simply write down how they felt. Gumbing said, "Many young people have never asked before—use the underscored to be a political act in and of itself. Gumbing's project, Kachin Women's Association Thailand funding for pens and crayons to use in painting and writing workshops focused on themes related to the experience of violent conflict and forced displacement.

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I visited Mae Ai 2016. Gathered together in a dusty, dimly lit, nonbuilder classroom, drawing and writing to their experiences and sharing their work with peers, the young people of Latsa are participants in their own political discourse, opening the possibility of a shared identity. Through the art and writing workshops, participants, the youth find a space for respite from the formality inflicted upon them by external political forces.

In the past ten years by Gumbing has worked with youth at camps in Latsa and Mae Ai, Kachin refugees living in Thailand, and Kachin refugees living in the capital, Juba. Her work has lifted and has was separated from the author. Most escaping indentured servitude with the rebel army, he made his way across the Chinese and Myanmar borders, finally, after a harrowing journey, reaching the Dutch. After being transferred to the Bidi Bidi Resettlement, he dedicated himself to bringing the stories of refugees living in the camp to the outside world. Using a digital camera with a broken screen and his own cell phone, he set off on a week-long journey (the first of many by come) to conduct his own survey of Bidi Bidi. Making stops at each zone along the way, he called ad-hoc meetings or sang dialogue with others from various, sometimes hostile, ethnic backgrounds, introducing the idea of visual storytelling through workshops. While creating interviews, Ray recruited other young people to join this grassroots cultural movement.

Ray is gradually building a community with what limited resources he has. Utilizing his cell phone, he has created a Facebook page and a WhatsApp group. Using the textbook, while assembling a network of young people, filmmakers, artists, and activists in adjacent camps, also in the region and internationally. It presents, in many ways, a new articulation of the concept of the "zine," manifesting as social media exchanges. Riddled with memes and gifs, chat chains have become "scrapbooks" of content collectively assembled by young people to express their relationships with, and perspectives on, popular culture and current events.

In Bidi Bidi, participating political hostilities between regional groups—Dinka, Nuer, Equatorians—persistently post challenges to peaceful resettlement. Ray's approach is to disrupt ethnicity by his organizing. He engages every session with the immutable question: "Why do people kill?" a provocation that is both neutral in relation to ethnicity and obligatory in relation to the war in South Sudan. Sitting under the canopy of a large acacia tree in Bidi Bidi, Ray and his recruits construct a shared narrative of the war, a story that includes the contemporary experiences of forced displacement and the trauma of survival. Despite the colonial violence that brought these warring tribal groups together, it seems to be a common enthusiasm that they don't want to continue fighting. Rather, they see Bidi Bidi through Ray's lens of optimism, as having the potential to be a peaceful refugee territory. This of particular importance as the conflict in South Sudan rages on and Inter-ancestors (and therefore any support) in the international news media as the "worst humanitarian crisis in the world." Ray's work has been supported by Norwegian people-to-people and NGO charities. Ray harbouns no illusion that during these stories through video will change the situation from the outside. But the activity itself creates a new politics engendering hope. Further, Ray says, "sharing our stories with the world is the only way we get to communicate with the world."

Considering the preceding isolation and powers that young people in Latsa and Bidi Bidi endure, the global COVID-19 pandemic has thrown down additional obstacles to connecting and co-creating. Already meager stipends for zine-makers have been reduced or temporarily cut and zine-makers have restricted heavily. This will undoubtedly result in worsening health conditions and have of life, with pressures to survive will exacerbate tensions in Kachin and between neighbours who come from different ethnic groups. Ray's organization, Kachin Women's Association, confirm no offer for young people who so priority. Given the shocking confluence of social dysphoria affecting these communities presently, creative outlets could serve as vocabus psychosocial trauma and provide the community with vital information on health and safety. But even those NGOs that do incorporate art and cultural activities into their programs rarely recognize these sorts of survival as essential. Further, they often go to great lengths to stifle political discourse, for fear that inter-ethnic tensions might explode. They often impose restrictions on open dialogue and institute transactional systems of charity and compliance. Ray's organizing practice is an act of resistance to this denial of refugee agency.

At the same time, new challenges—social distancing, working from home, remote learning, and other transformations brought about by COVID-19—both seem promise to expand the increasingly innovative digital artistic and literary spaces in which to "site" politics. Ray's organization, Kachin Women's Association Thailand, Bidi, but it could circumvent the scarcity of materials in most places. For groups like the Plaza Colón it could act as a catapult for their artistic and literary pursuits. They will face an increasingly incendiary landscape of surveillance, censorship, and discussion social control that threatens to make political dialogue on social justice and human rights tenuous.

"Dig Ya Dig," interview the Bangladeshi publisher-in-exile, Tuta5, "Bangladesh is going to hell." He means the authoritarian regime that's kept the same party in power for thirteen years, COVID-19 has opened the door to increased social control and a crackdown on writers and artists critical of the government. In Jaap, Hmung Ahmed, a writer and communicator, and the political cartoonist, Kabir Kishore, were arrested for their work documenting the government's response to the pandemic on a Facebook page. And they are among the lucky. In Bangladesh, extrajudicial killings are a daily occurrence. Yet Tuta5 holds steadfast to the power of literacy. He believes in "reading and writing's unique process in changing (sanity), mentality and way of thinking, and its role in improving society." Tuta5 believes that, in a time of expanding digital media and inescapably political urgency, "younger generations will become readers again. How do we give them the information and knowledge? We need to improve our technique."

**Sidd Jaap** is a visual artist, journalist, and producer working on issues closely related to social inequality and human rights. He is also the Managing Editor at Abandoned Buildings.

The Hammerhead piece is an Philip of Lancaster series" by Sidd Jaap was originally published in abandoned buildings and the Bishop of Dunstan series.

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