Queer Counterpublics in the Queer Time (2011-2023) of Burma

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Burmese queer people apply old and new strategies in different temporalities of queer time (2011-2023). Reading an adoption of the term *LGBT*, by Burmese queer people can fall into the traps of "homosexuality" as "a Western import" [by local homophobes] or "Western imperial imposition" (Massad 2007). Taking a decolonial stance, this research will show that Burmese queer people are not "passive agents of the West". Building on the interview data with ten interview subjects, a discourse analysis on publications of an LGBT NGO, and slogans and protest writings within the Spring Revolution, I will highlight the tensions and frictions between global and local discourses. Identifying a decade of 2011-2023 as queer time in Burma (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011) based on the abrupt changes of the internet freedom (2011-) and the military coup (2021-), oddly erotic experience of identity formation in Burma will be shown. Throughout nascent queer activism, Burmese queer people "dubbed" (Boellstorff 2006) some Western sexualities, and tactics such as identity politics but went beyond binarism of "puppets of globalization" and "veneer over tradition". They also managed to curate queer counterpublics (Berlant & Warner 2005), inviting other subordinate fellows. Lastly, this thesis will also highlight that Burmese queer people succeeded to delink the ideals of manliness with heterosexuality.

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I dedicate this thesis to Burmese queer people who manifest resistance and resilience since the beginning of the Spring Revolution (2021-onwards). As queer folks, resistance, and resilience must have been part of their lives, since before the revolution, I believe. Without them and my interview subjects, this thesis would not exist at all.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

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Signed : Aung Zaw Myo

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"The Beginning of the Beginning"

It was on the morning of the 1st of February 2021. I woke up late that morning and when I unlocked my mobile phone, there was no mobile telecom connection. But the Wi-Fi connection was not down yet, I scrolled down my Facebook newsfeed and saw a post saying, "Yes, it's true. It's announced on Myawaday TV [a television channel owned by the military]. Aunty Su [Aung San Suu Kyi] was arrested." That was how I recalled of me hearing the news of the military coup. I was so naïve that I did not expect a coup (again). I even shared a military propagandized song on Facebook on the midnight 31st of January 2021 as a mockery, not knowing what would happen the day after.

The military accused that there were electoral fraud and erroneous voter lists in the November 2020 general election. Two months later, the military led by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, staged a coup and arrested President U Win Myint, the state counselor, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, writers, activists, and union leaders. Hundreds of thousands of people, including me, marched on the streets across the country to show their disapproval of the military's takeover. The military cracked down on the protests with force. According to the Assistant Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), 22894 people were arrested, 4320 people were released, 18574 people were still detained including sentenced and 3604 people were killed by the junta, as of 1 June 2023 (*Assistance Association for Political Prisoners*, n.d.) As an opposition, on 5 February 2021, 298 outcasted parliamentarians from the 2020 election set up the "Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)" and later formed the parallel government named National Unity Government (NUG), in coalition with some activists and scholars, on 16 April 2021.

As a civilian movement, civil servants, initiated by health care workers at first, later joined by other civil servants, started a movement named Civil Disobedience Movement (locally known as CDM). This mobilization included a series of campaigns such as civil servants refusing to run the government machinery, banging pots and pans at 8 pm every night as a sign of defiance, refusal to pay government bills (so that the military had less money for arms), boycotting state-sponsored lottery and military-owned products and lastly "social punishment" on those who sided with or affiliated with the military.

On the military side, after several months, many youths realized that the military would not step down with peaceful protests therefore they went to the border area and got military training from ethnic armed organizations. The parallel government formed the People's Defence Forces (locally known as PDF) on 5 May 2021. Out of those who received the military training, some operated urban guerillas and the others served as PDF under the command of the Ministry of Defence, National Unity Government. There are some local PDFs that run their operations autonomously.

This is a sum-up of the post-coup situations in Burma. I take this anti-military resistance movement, as we call it, Spring Revolution (နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေး in Burmese) as an entry point because, at least in the beginning, we believed that this social movement was not only a call to end the military dictatorship but also an inspiration to address other forms of oppression such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism, etc. This thesis will examine if some of these expectations are met (or not, unfortunately). While I was doing interviews, I found out that my interview subjects were informed by discourses that flowed within the Spring Revolution but also by those which were circulated before the revolution. Therefore, I will include a sub-section of 10 years before the revolution.

"Wind of Change?"

I gave this song title by Scorpions as a sub-section not to index the end of the Cold War but to refer to the optimistic belief of the end of the military dictatorship in Burma. Retrospectively thinking, the decade before the military coup was the time of "the optimism epidemic" which I borrowed from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). But many underlying events spread this optimism epidemic across the country. Let me go through them chronologically.

In 2008, a referendum for the Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar was held just a few days after cyclone Nargis hit the delta region of Myanmar. Following this constitution, a general election was held in 2010. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi could not participate in it because she was still under house arrest. She was released six days after the election and got into the parliament through 2012 by-elections. A retired military man-turned-a civilian, U Thein Sein, was named as President. He was thought to be a reformist, not just for the release of the oppositional leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and many other political prisoners, but also for some actions such as the suspension of the Myitsone Dam project, a jointly invested project between China and Myanmar, as a nodding sign of respecting the people's will, in 2011. Internet censorship was significantly reduced in 2011. International news media such as BBC, Voice of America, and Radio Free Asia,

which were blocked before, became accessible without the need for proxy websites. Printed media censorship was abolished in 2012. In November 2012, Barack Obama became the first American President to visit Myanmar, showing appraise for the democratic reforms done by the quasi-civilian government. The state-owned Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) sold mobile SIM cards for thousands of dollars when they were first introduced in the country. They reduced the price to $200 in 2013 when they had potential competitor companies such as Qatar's Ooredoo and Norway's Telenor. In 2014, the three companies sold mobile SIM cards for $2 (Ferrie, 2015). The list can go on.

I am not here to make a political science analysis of this decade (2011-2021). I just would like to showcase the background context of the time when my interview subjects lived through. More importantly for my thesis, this decade was also a time when LGBT NGOs such as Colors Rainbow (which I will discuss in detail in the second analytical chapter) were relocated to Burma from exile (Thailand). I have mentioned that I would not relate this with the cold war (in which Burma was part of the non-aligned movement during the cold war and later quit), but I found the analysis of the construction and conceptualization of sexuality and LGBTQ activism in contemporary Central and Eastern European countries by Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielinska (2011) useful for my whole thesis. In their book, *De-Centering Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives (2011)*, they compared and contrasted Western and Eastern geo-temporal modalities. Whereas "the end of communism" was another event in the Western timeline, it was a sharper and more abrupt change for CEE (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011, p. 15). For this reason, they used the term 'queer time' for CEE, in comparison with 'straight time' of the West, not only as a wordplay on different meanings of queer and straight but also to "highlight the erotic dimension of time, the oddly erotic experience of identity formation in CEE" (ibid. p. 16). I can see a similar pattern in my case where Burmese (queer) people encountered an abrupt change from military dictatorship/isolation from the outside world to democratic reforms or "disciplined democracy" as the quasi-civilian government called it, which let us enjoy (a little bit of) internet freedom and mobilization of LGBT activism. It was a "queer time" (ibid) for Burmese queer people indeed. This research will explore how Burmese queer people challenge heteronormativity (Warner 1991) and create queer counterpublics (Berlant & Warner 2005) within a decade (2011-2023) of queer time in Burma, amidst global and local tensions.

Methodology

In this chapter, I will share how I picked up their journeys of queer time. First, I asked around my gay friends and colleagues at my former work if they ever knew any queer/LGBT/gay at the front of the revolution. I wanted to focus on queer members of the People's Defence Forces. After several weeks, I realized that it was not feasible. Then I extended my scope from queer People's Defence Forces members to any queer person who was in any part of the revolution. Therefore, out of ten interview subjects, four are part of the People's Defence Forces and the rest take part through fundraising for the revolution, Civil Disobedience Movement, or sending food and female hygiene products for political prisoners. I only knew three of them personally already and with the rest seven interview subjects, I learned their stories through snowballing method and during the interview process. I asked them for semi-structured questionnaires online. For security reasons, I could not go back there in the summer and had to do the interviews online. I let them choose the platform and schedules they were most comfortable with. The interviews happened through Telegram, Signal which became popular in Burma after the coup, and Facebook Messenger which was one of the most commonly used apps in Burma. One of my interview subjects is deaf, with him, I had to type up the question, and he answered me back by typing and I conducted an interview with him by writing back and forth over two days. I asked for consent from him, through texting and with others, verbally. As Boellstorff et al reminded me, I was very much aware that there was power asymmetry and benefit imbalance between the investigator and investigated. While I could get an opportunity for jobs or academic recognition from this research, the best they could get was the pleasure of talking about their lives and culture to me (Boellstorff et al 2012, p. 129). The authors warned us that because of this power asymmetry, we should "take good care" of informants. Care, in this case, was beyond "do no harm" principles but ensuring that the informants got some rewards from the research (ibid. p. 130). The least I could do for this cause is that I promised myself to sum up the analytical chapters in the Burmese language and have a dialogue with them so that this production of knowledge would not only be circulated in Global North universities. I was told by some interview subjects that they were glad to be interviewed because they wanted to let the general public know that LGBT/queer people were taking part in the revolution. Speaking of "good care" (ibid. p. 130) again, I took their safety as my priority. I used pseudonyms for everyone even when some of them were okay with using their real names.

I took inspiration from Alison Rooke who defined queer ethnography as "not merely ethnography that focuses on researching queer lives; it is also a matter of taking queer theory seriously to question the conventions of ethnographic research, specifically the stability and coherence of the ethnographic self and the performativity of this self in writing and doing research (Rooke 2009, p. 150). I started this thesis with a stubborn stance that Western LGBT NGOs were preaching to local queer people to follow their liberal "rights-based" approach but through doing a queer ethnography with my interview subjects and in the writing process, I learned to appreciate the strategies they applied against the backdrop of local Vs global/western contestations.

To reflect my own positionality, I am a middle-class Burmese queer person from a small town near Mandalay, the last capital of the monarchy. I am not a straight non-Burmese person and therefore communications with my interview subjects were so smooth but this affinity between Burmese queer people did not necessarily grant me an "insider" position. Because positionality and subjectivity can be changed, spatially and temporally and neither stable nor fixed (Farhana 2007, p. 382), I, a master's student at a European/American university in Vienna, without any fear of the possibility of the police knocking on the door and arresting (or shooting me, in the worst scenario) me, found myself as an outsider whereas my interview subjects have been living within precarity, even though they did not say it out loud. The boundary between "outsider" and "insider" got blurry (ibid.). I noticed that while I introduced myself to my interview subjects, I mentioned the fact that I got into this master's program before the coup and had to defer a year because of the pandemic. I was (maybe unconsciously) trying to get back into the "insider" circle.

Another part of positionality, my working experience at a small local NGO informed this research too (I will discuss it later in the second analytical chapter).

I will use a combination of two methodologies in this thesis. For ethnography, I have conducted interviews with nine participants, age range of 21 to 36 years, from across the country. (I will give their background info in the first analytical chapter where I mentioned them the most.) Interviews lasted from one hour to one and a half hours each. There were laughs, silences, disruptions by the internet connection, frustrations, and hopes in our conversations. I collected rich and dense raw data from them. But the quotes from them often will not speak for themselves. Discourse analysis will fill the gap. I will analyze not only quotes from my interview subjects but also publications of Colors Rainbow, the leading LGBT NGO in Burma, and protest slogans from the revolution. Therefore, as a second methodology, I will use Norman Fairclough's framework. Fairclough categories three main types of assumptions which are existential assumptions (assumptions about

what exists), propositional assumptions (assumptions about what is or can be or will be the case), and value assumptions (assumptions about what is good or desirable) (Fairclough 2003, p. 55).

A note on terminologies

Before we fully dive into the analysis, I need to clarify some terminologies first.

The first one is Burma/Myanmar. Burma was changed into Myanmar in 1989 by the military, reasoning that the British colonialists named the country Burma after the major ethnic group, Burmans/Bama but Myanmar can include other minor ethnicities such as Kachin, Karen, Mon, Rakhine, etc. Bertil Lintner cited the Hobson-Jobson Dictionary (1979) which said, "The name [Burma] is taken from Mran-ma, the national name of the Burmese people, which they themselves pronounce Bam-ma, unless speaking formally and empathically" (ibid. p. 131). He pointed out that all education systems are in the Myanmar language which is Burmese. Therefore, there is no such thing as the Myanmar language (Lintner 2003, p. 189). He also argued that "Burma was Myanmaficated by replacing the Union of Burma which visioned building a federal state with a new concept of nationhood, Myanmar" (ibid. p. 187). "Towards a federal democracy" is one of the most chanted slogans in the Spring Revolution, meaning this debate between Burma and Myanmar is an ongoing matter, even though most of us use Myanmar nowadays. This terminology is a double-edged knife for me. I am not siding with British colonialism or with the military. Therefore, I will use both of them interchangeably until people in this geographical area find a name, they all agree on and are happy with. The same goes for Burmese/Myanmar.

The second terminology is the Spring Revolution. This anti-military resistance movement is now known as, the Spring Revolution, locally and internationally. Before this, general strike leaders from Mandalay proposed another name, *Tha-byay-nyo Revolution* (သပြေညိုတော်လှန်ရေး). Tha-byay-nyo means brown-reddish Eugenia. When the green leaves of the Eugenia plant turn brown-reddish, Burmese people take it as a flower and offer them to Buddha. This *Tha-byay-nyo* is regarded as a national victory flower. It goes back to a poem with the same name written by national poet, Min Thu Wun. This poem was written on January 4, 1938 (coincidentally exactly 10 years before the independence) while he was studying at Oxford University. The poem implies that people, wearing brown Eugenia flowers on their heads, are hoping for a better, sunny day. The protesters in Mandalay even wore those flowers, indexing that they were fighting for independence from the military this time. But the majority of the people picked up the name, the Spring Revolution. It

could be inspired by the Arab Spring, but the timing also was a reference. In Burma, the winter is saying goodbye and the spring is on its way in February. Although the terminology of this social movement does not play an important part in my thesis, I believe it is worth mentioning because it also speaks for the contestations between global and local discourses (which is the theme of my thesis).

The third terminology is the usage of pronouns. In the Burmese language, the third-person pronoun is gender-neutral. We use the same pronoun, *thu* (သူ) for males, females, and animals. But since 1960-70, some writers started to add *ma* (မ), which indexes femininity, and use *thu-ma* (သူမ) to refer to women, in cases where there was more than one third-person pronoun. Some others put *ma* in the brackets without losing the original pronoun. This is for the written language. In spoken language, we use one pronoun, *thu*, for everyone. Therefore, it was new to me when I was asked which pronoun I would prefer to, in Gender Studies classes and elsewhere. But at the same time, I have to write this thesis in English, and I would like to show solidarity with Anglophone queer people who prefer the gender-neutral pronoun, *they*. How do I assign pronouns to my interview subjects? Would I ask my interview subjects which pronouns, *he*, *she,* or *they*, they would like to be addressed? (Some of them might be aware of this pronoun issue happening in the English-speaking world.) Would this be burdening them with Anglophone/First-World problems? Would this put me in the same situation as the LGBT NGOs I criticized (in the second analytical chapter)? I found myself in another double-edged knife situation. At first, I thought I could assign them pronouns, depending on their first-person pronouns. Because first-person pronouns in the Burmese language can be gendered such as *kya-naw* (ကျွန်တော်) for males and *kya-ma* (ကျွန်မ) for females or gender-neutral such as *ngar* (ငါ), *kyoat* (ကျုပ်), etc. Then, I found out that one of my interview subjects used both *kya-naw* and kya-ma. I might be misusing their pronouns if I go with the decision of the first-person pronoun approach. Finally, I decided to ask them directly how they would like it to be written. I have to narrow down the power asymmetry between the investigator and investigated (Boellstorff et al 2012) as much as I can. One of them told me that they would like to be addressed as "they", the other preferred to be used their name only, the other one insisted that males should be referred to as "he/him" and females, "she/her", and the rest of the group went with "he/him". While I was writing this down, I noticed that the Burmese alphabet would be bigger if I kept them the same font size as its English counterparts. I had to downsize them for the sake of aesthetics. Then, I think of the pronoun issue in the same manner, not as an epistemic

dominance over my interview subjects. This also speaks to the frictions between global and local which will be discussed later in the second analytical chapter.

The last terminology I will clarify is queer, LGBT, LGBTQ, etc. Queer is defined in the Anglophone world differently, from "strange," "odd," "peculiar" or "worthless". Siobhan Somerville traced the different definitions of queer. In some cases, it is "an umbrella term that refers to a range of sexual identities that are "not straight" or "a term that calls into question the stability of any categories of identity-based on sexual orientation" (Somerville 2005, p. 187). Most of my interview subjects identify as "gay" and they could not afford the second definition provided by Somerville (we will see more in the analytical chapters). Therefore, I will use the term, queer, as an umbrella term for people with non-normative sexualities. I will use LGBT or LGBTQ when I analyze LGBT NGOs in the second analytical chapter. In other parts of the thesis, I will use them both interchangeably and as in the sources.

In this chapter, I have laid out some background context (geographical and mostly temporal) that needs to be introduced to understand what is happening in the analytical chapters. I have discussed how I collected data, my interview subjects' journeys of queer time, and how I took ultimate care, regarding ethics and positionality. I have to admit that there are limits to the data collection methods and the whole thesis. Since I conducted audio interviews online (the internet connection was terrible on the other side), I could not see their faces and could not console them enough when they told me about traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse or how one of their family members was arrested by the military, etc. Another limitation is that only one out of nine interview subjects is biologically female, meaning it will be male-dominated research, even though I do not intend to be so.

Thesis Overview

My thesis will be divided into five main chapters. The first chapter lays out the entry point of the research, provides background information on the decades on which I focus on, describes an overview of the research methods, data collection and analysis, my own positionality, ethical (especially taking good care of my interview subjects) and epistemological considerations (explanation of relevant terminologies) of the research. In the second chapter, I will review the literature, relevant theoretical and conceptual frameworks that will support my arguments. The last three chapters will be analytical chapters on research findings. The third chapter will deal with local subjectivities such as *a-pone*, *a-pwint*, *thu-nge*, and *homo*, how my interview subjects define these subjectivities, and how the watermarks tell us about the tensions between local and global

discourses. In the fourth chapter, I will identify how my interview subjects and an LGBT NGO negotiate global discourses to challenge heteronormativity. The fifth and last chapter is a continuation of the challenge to heteronormativity but in a different political and socio-economic context. I will conclude this thesis with the implications of the research findings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

As I have described briefly in the introduction chapter, I will identify a decade of 2011-2023 in Burma as queer time (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011). During this queer time, the contestations and tensions between global and local discourses will be seen among Burmese queer people. I will identify five groups of literature that inform the whole thesis. I borrow the first one from Tom Boellstorff (2006). In the second group, I find theories such as competing publics (Fraser 1990), queer counterpublics (Berlant & Warner 2005), and heteronormativity (Warner 1991) useful. The third group deals with the Gay International (Massad 2007) and its critiques. The fourth group addresses the relationship between social movements and slogans (Van De Velde 2022). The fifth group will include literature on nationalism and sexuality such as Mosse (1985), Nagel (1998), and Peterson (1999).

2.1 "Dubbing Culture"

In *Categorizing Gender in Queer Yangon*, David Gilbert (2013) traced the logic behind *a-pone* and *a-pwint* subjectivities. He acknowledged that he experienced difficulties in unpacking Burmese practices of subjectivity because "both external factors such as appearance and behavior and internal ones such as mind/heart[/soul] may or may not be consistent with each other" (Gilbert 2013, p. 245). He located three core elements of Open [*a-pwint*] and Hider [*a-pone*] subject positions which are the external, involving image and resemblance, the internal, involving mind/heart, and past karma (ibid. p. 250). According to him, appearance and mannerisms define the image of Open and Hider subjects (ibid. p. 251). He identified the manner of speaking, manner of going, manner of eating, manner of sleeping, and manner of being in how Open and Hider enacts or suppresses femininity (ibid. p. 253). He appreciated the contested and unstable nature of Burmese queer vocabulary by referring to The Homo dictionary, a project of a Burmese social networking site (ibid. p. 254). I identified discrepancies between his research and my interview data. To understand this gap, as a conceptual framework, I will borrow Tom Boellstorff's (2006) framework of "dubbing culture". In his book, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (2006), he investigated the history of homosexuality in Indonesia and explored how *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities are shaped by mass media, nationalism, the state, and globalization. He developed this framework of "dubbing

culture" to be able to account for "a contingent, fractured, intermittent, yet powerfully influential relationship between globalization and subjectivities, about *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians" (Boellstorff 2006, p. 58). He reminded us of "two additional elements of his framework which are that contingency cannot be mistakenly taken as an absence of power but it only means the relation of domination and that domination cannot be translated into determination but there is a space for *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians could transform this contingency in unexpected ways" (ibid. p. 58). He interlinked this framework with the agency. He argued that the framework questions "both deterministic theories which take a stance of ideology over persons and voluntaristic theories which assume persons can "negotiate" their subjectivities through structures of power" (ibid. p. 58). He claimed that it resulted in "a more processual understanding of subjectivity" (ibid. p. 58). According to him, "To "dub" a discourse is neither to parrot it verbatim nor to compose an entirely new script. It is to hold together cultural logics without resolving them into a unitary whole." (ibid. p. 58).

Whereas "dubbing" is not a common practice in Burma, I can locate similarities between Indonesia and Burma such as both countries having a past of being colonized (by Dutch and British colonialism, respectively), comprising multiple ethnic groups, being under military rule, etc. His "dubbing culture" will let us see how Burmese queer people deal with their subjectivities and find new strategies when they encounter globalization in the queer time (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011).

2.2 Counterpublics and heteronormativity

Internet freedom provided Burmese queer people including my interview subjects a space to mobilize their desires and needs and challenge negative connotations around their bodies and sexualities. To identify these spaces, I will use Nancy Fraser's (1990) critique of Jürgen Habermas' the public sphere, *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*. She first nicely summarized Habermas' account of the public sphere as follows: "the idea of the public sphere is that of a body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest" (Fraser 1990, p. 58). Her critique was that the ideal of accessibility in the public sphere was not realized in practice, historically. But she was optimistic that the ideal can still be unaffected because it is very much possible to eliminate gender, race, and class exclusions (ibid. p. 63) To achieve this aim, she recommended a plurality of competing publics to guarantee participatory parity among every group (ibid. p. 66). She argued that social inequalities in the public sphere led the disadvantages for subordinate groups (ibid. p. 63). Then, she extended her argument by saying these disadvantages would worsen when there was only a single,

comprehensive public sphere. Having no alternate arenas for their own needs, their voices were silenced and absorbed by a false 'we' of the dominant group (ibid. p. 66-67). Hereby she backed her argument by referring to the revisionist historiography of the public sphere which showed subordinate groups such as women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians benefited from alternate publics. She proposed to call them subaltern counterpublics to "signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (ibid. p. 67). She gave an example of how feminists invented terms such as "sexism," "sexual harassment," and "marital rape" and claimed their needs and identities (ibid. p. 67). She clarified the dual character of subaltern counterpublics in stratified societies. "On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics" (ibid. p. 68). She argued that we can find out their emancipatory potential in the dialectic between these two characters (ibid. p. 68).

Lastly, she deconstructed the "public concern" or "common good" part of the public sphere. "Concerning to everyone" can be translated into "what affects or has an impact on everyone, as seen from an outsider's perspective, on the one hand, and what is recognized as a matter of common concern by participants, on the other hand" (ibid. p. 71). She pointed out that the first translation did not make sense for the public sphere which was created as "an arena of collective self-determination" (ibid. p. 71). For the second translation, everyone within the public sphere will deliberate over what is and what is not of common concern. But the drawback here is that we cannot be sure that all of them will come to an agreed point. She gave an example of how domestic violence against women was taken as a private issue and later a counterpublic comprised of feminists succeeded in turning it into a common concern through continual contestation (ibid. p. 71). Through, her framework, I will locate how my interview subjects built subaltern counterpublics to reformulate the interpretations of their needs and interests.

As feminists invented terms such as "sexism," "sexual harassment," "marital rape," and "domestic violence" (ibid. p. 67), the counterpart term for queer people would be heteronormativity. In *Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet* (1991), Michael Warner introduced the concept of heteronormativity. He argued that "every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth, and trust, censorship, intimate life, and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural

norms about the bearing of the body" (ibid. p. 6). He pointed out the hegemonic privilege of het(heterosexual) culture to interpret the society as itself. Through this way, heteronormativity has a "totalizing tendency" which will marginalize non-heterosexual sexualities (ibid. p. 8). Reproduction becomes "the logic of sexuality and the means of self-transcendence" (ibid. p. 9). This normalization of heterosexuality subordinates those who do not fit into heterosexual norms and sexual relations. While Warner developed this concept of heteronormativity in the context of the United States, my interview subjects can attest to this concept too. They do not dare to show public displays of affection towards their queer partners, at least for example. Warner came back to heteronormativity in his book, *Publics and Counterpublics* (2005), in which he and Lauren Berlant defined as "more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture" (ibid. p. 194). To challenge this normalcy and rightness of heterosexuality, they proposed queer counterpublics (ibid. p. 187).

The term "counterpublic" refers to a social space or community which opposes the dominant wider public sphere. Their modes of communication are often excluded from the bigger public sphere (ibid. p. 56). Queer counterpublics, according to Berlant and Warner, are not limited to a physical space. They can be spread through unconventional registers. It could be a novel or an after-hours club or an academic lecture (ibid. p. 198). They are also not limited to biological sex, can include more people than the counterpart general public, and transcend referential points such as geographies (ibid. p. 198). Queer culture develops different forms of intimacy "that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, or property, or the nation (ibid. p. 199). They argued that these intimacies belong to a (queer) counterpublic that is conscious of its subordination position. This reflects not only the creativity of queer world-making but also its fragility (ibid. p. 199). Whereas some counterpublics built by some of my interview subjects fit into the framework of the subaltern counterpublics (Fraser 1990), some others qualify to be queer counterpublics (Berlant & Warner 2005).

2.3 The Gay International and its Critiques

While I appreciate Colors Rainbow as a subaltern counterpublic which serves as a basic ground for agitational activities directed towards homophobia of the wider general public (Fraser 1990), I can see the oriental gaze in their discourses at the same time. This is when I find Joseph Massad's framework of the Gay International (2007) useful.

In his book, *Desiring Arabs* (2007), Joseph Massad coined the term, the Gay International, referring to Western male, white-dominated organizations such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (GLHRC) and their discourses (ibid. p. 161). According to him, these discourses originated from the Western gay movement in the last twenty-five years and come with the intent of the universalization of "gay rights". (ibid. p. 160). He argued that the Gay International assimilated sexual epistemology in the Arab World by "producing" homosexuals, including gays and lesbians, and repressing same-sex acts which cannot be assimilated in their Western hetero-homo binarism (ibid. p. 163). Influenced by his mentor and friend Edward Said's (1978) conceptualization of Orientalism, Massad read the Gay International as the "more enlightened" Occident "re-orienting"/educating the resistant "Oriental" desires (ibid. p. 164). But he claimed that the majority of Arab men do not identify as "gay" nor desire a need for gay politics while engaging in same-sex acts (ibid. p. 173). Therefore, he accused that what the Gay International tried to achieve was a political struggle to divide the world into those supporting "gay rights" and opposing ones (ibid. p. 174). However, contrary to its "liberatory" mission, the Gay International ended up "forcing men who are considered "passive" or "receptive" parties in male-male sexual contacts to have one object choice and identify as homosexual or gay, limiting men who are the "active" partners to have their sexual aim to one object choice, either women or men" (ibid. p. 188) meaning less sexual freedom for Arab men who practice same-sex acts (ibid. p. 184). Consequently, he concluded that "by inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is *heterosexualizing* a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary" (ibid. p. 188)

Although Massad's framework lets us see the colonial and oriental tensions between Europe (West) and the Arab World (non-West), he gives Western discourses too much power and does not allow any space for local activism/people. This leads to a heated debate between him and Ghassan Makarem who is a founding member of HELEM, a LGBT NGO based in Lebanon, over the website named Reset Dialogues on Civilizations. This website published a post of Massad talking to Ernesto Pagano. In this interview, he posited a Foucauldian understanding of the formation of homosexuals by medical and juridical discourses of the second half of the nineteenth century. He accused HELEM attempted to assimilate into the Western gay movement (*The West and the Orientalism of Sexuality*, n.d.). Makarem responded to Massad on the same website. He pointed out that the narrative that homosexuals are agents of the West, they are "imposing Western values" and they belong to the upper classes, employed by Massad, was also applied by Khomeini to execute homosexuals. He accused Massad back that he [Massad] is "ignorant of the realities of the issues of sexual liberation in the region" (*We Are Not Agents of the West*, n.d.). This critique comes

from the activist circle. Massad received critiques from academics as well. Sahar Amer (2010) criticized that Massad failed to acknowledge there were abuses and executions in the West (for example, in Eastern Europe) too. She pointed out that he treated Arabs as passive and put them only in a reactive position towards the West. She added that while criticizing the violence of the Gay International, he committed another form of violence which was denying Arabs the category of homosexuality. She drew attention to the fact that Massad defined homosexuality through "exclusivity in sexual object choice" (Amer 2010, p. 652).

In *Orientalism and Feminist Middle East Studies*, Lila Abu-Lughod (2001) highlighted that the feminists from the region faced a double-edged knife situation. They were caught between "the sometimes incompatible projects of representing Middle East women as complex agents (that is, not as passive victims of Islamic or "traditional" culture), mostly to the West, and advocating their rights at home, which usually involves a critique of local patriarchal structures" (Abu-Lughod 2001, p. 107) When choosing a thing meant rejecting the counterpart, they were trapped between the Arab heritage and the West. Therefore, she recommended refusing the traditional/Western modernity divide (ibid. p. 110).

While my interview subjects are not from the Middle East, these critiques to Massad are useful to prove that they are not passive agents of the West and also that the imperial tension is still there.

2.4 Social Movements and Slogans

Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton, Jr (2001) appreciated the power of slogans, how they can "encapsulate an intolerable situation in a few striking, memorable words' and therefore can have a considerable impact on movement mobilization" (Stewart et al 2001, p. 176) even though they are usually short.

In *The power of slogans: using protest writings in social movement research*, Cécile Van De Velde (2022) highlighted that every slogan and protest writing is a public expression and voice which carry a political message through a visual medium. These protest writings pointed out that social movements not only can be spaces for speeches and gestures but also can act as stages of the written word (ibid. p. 1). She reminded us that since the protest writings do not always reflect a collective voice, we cannot reduce them to a homogenous block. She identified banners (collective signs, posters, flyers, stickers, visuals on the walls), carried by activist groups, unions, and parties as collective writings. On the other hand, signs (individual prints, visuals, graffiti, and words on bodies and clothes), worn by participants and activists were individual writings (ibid. p. 4).

She argued that distinguishing protest writings between collective and individual is not enough. Consequently, she made four categories based on their functions. The first one carries a 'demand' function. Such protest writing refers to political claims or expressions of refusal, directed towards the authorities. The second has a 'proclamation' function. It usually comes in the form of contested messages, directed towards a wider public. The third one aims for 'mobilizing' and internal cohesion to the protest. It can come out as encouraging messages or rallying slogans (ibid. p. 6). The last one acts as 'bearing witness' to the protest. Empathic messages for the cause, words of support, and personal testimonies belong in this group (ibid. p. 8).

This set of literature is useful when I analyze protest slogans and writings from the Spring Revolution in the last chapter.

2.5 Nationalism and Sexuality

This group of literature deals with nationalism, gender, and sexuality.

In his book, "*Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*," George Mosse (1985) traced the relationship between nationalism and respectability. Respectability refers to a term "indicating decent and correct manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude toward sexuality (Mosse 1985, p. 1). He took a special interest in sexuality in the framework of nationalism and respectability because "it was basic to human behavior and preoccupied the moral concern of respectability" (ibid. p. 2). Focusing on the historical developments in Germany and Great Britain, he showed how nationalism and respectability allied at the beginning of the nineteenth century (ibid. p.2). The middle class kept a distance from the aristocracy and the lower working classes through moral superiority which respectability provided (ibid. p. 4-5). Sexual intoxication of any kind such as same-sex relationships, premarital sex and extra-marital affairs were regarded as "immoral" or "indecent" (ibid. p. 10). "Homosexuals provide a particularly useful example of how the line between normal and abnormal was to be ever more closely drawn through the rise of respectability and its emphasis upon manliness. They were thought to symbolize not only the confusion of sexes but also sexual excess – the violation of a delicate balance of passion" (ibid. p. 25).

V. Spike Peterson in "*Sexing Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism*," (1999) exposed the heterosexist presumptions of state-centric nationalism. She defined heterosexism as "the institutionalization and normalization of heterosexuality and the corollary exclusion of non-heterosexual identities and practices" (Peterson 1999, p. 39). In "*Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender*

and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," Joane Nagel (1998) traced the interplay relationship between microcultures of masculinity and nationalism. She argued that masculinity was constructed within the nationalist discourses, attaching it to the ideals such as honor, bravery, patriotism, and duty (Nagel 1998, p. 251-252).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to bring together five groups of theories on which I will build my thesis. These groups of literature help me to connect pieces of three analytical chapters and consequently and more importantly to argue how Burmese queer people dub some Western discourses and use them as strategies to challenge heteronormativity, to build queer counterpublics, amongst the tensions and frictions between global and local discourses, and lastly, within the masculinist nationalist agenda. In the following chapters, I will apply relevant theories to back my arguments.

CHAPTER 3: MAPPING OUT THE LOCAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF NON-NORMATIVE SEXUALITIES THROUGH SUBJECTIVITIES SUCH AS *A-PONE*, *A-PWINT*, *THU-NGE*, AND *HOMO*

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet;"

William Shakespeare wrote so in *Romeo and Juliet*. In its context, Juliet was saying that if he were not called Romeo, he would still be a man with perfection and be her love. In a broader context, we use this phrase, A rose by any other name would smell as sweet, to mean the names of the things do not affect the essence of what they really are. A rose may smell as sweet by any other name but in the case of people, especially those who are marginalized, different names or even a single name can carry different meanings.

In this chapter, I aim to discuss the fluidity, tensions, and logic behind the subjectivities such as *a-pone*, *a-pwint*, *thu-nge,* and *homo* and their implications. To this end, I will use "dubbing culture" (Boellstorff 2006) as a conceptual framework to understand and interpret the tensions between global and local discourses during a queer time (2011-2023) in Burma.

A-pone, A-pwint, and their watermarks

First, I need to lay out some Burmese terms for non-normative sexualities. They are *a-chaut* (meaning "dry" referring to a need for lubricant in anal sex), *nha-pine-ta-pine* (meaning half and half, referring to half male and half female), and *gandu* (originating from the Hindi language, a derogatory term for receptive partner). They carry shame and disgust therefore all my interview subjects showed a desire to distance themselves from those terms. The (supposedly) non-derogatory terms are *mein-ma-shar* (a woman-to-be, referring to biological men with non-normative sexualities) and *yauk-kya-shar* (a man-to-be, referring to biological women with non-normative sexualities). Here, I would like to contest three local categories of non-normative sexualities before globalization: *a-pone*, *a-pwint*, and *thu-nge*.

A-pone literally means someone who is hiding. Lynette J. Chua (2019) defined *a-pone* in her book, *The Politics of Love in Myanmar*, as "somebody who was assigned male at birth, identifies to some degree as feminine, and is attracted to men but appears and acts masculine" (Chua 2019, p. xv). The counterpart, *a-pwint* is more nuanced because *pwint* in the Burmese language could mean open or blossom which leads *a-pwint* to be indexed as someone who is open or who is super flamboyant (blossom). Chua listed it as "somebody who was assigned male at birth, identifies to some degree as feminine, is attracted to men, and appears and acts feminine" (ibid.). According to her, *a-pone* and *a-pwint* can be differentiated through the way they appear and act, masculine or feminine. But the interviews I have done revealed that these two terms cannot be simplified as such.

My first interview subject was Zaw. He graduated from the University of Dental Science, Mandalay. The conversation was smooth from the beginning because of the affinity between us (because we have similar medical backgrounds). Having access to higher education in Burma means he is from (at least) a middle-class family. In medical universities in Burma, we read English texts, and do presentations in English, written and oral exams are in English although daily conversations between teachers and students themselves are in the Burmese language. This explains why he sometimes used English words in the interview, but it also means that he has access to texts about LGBTQ in English. He worked at a government hospital as a dentist and now he is part of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

When I asked him to define *a-pone* and *a-pwint*, he was silent for five seconds (I counted this from an audio record) and laughingly said, "If someone dares to let the people know who they are, they are *a-pwint*. If not, it is *a-pone*." Then, I asked him a follow-up question on to what extent should the public know because he told me he "selectively came out" [he said it in English] to some people. He acknowledged that it was a tricky question. He positioned himself in the answer saying that when someone asked him if he were gay, he dared to say yes. Later, he gave me an example of someone he knows who broadcasts live on a gay dating app named Blued without showing his face (the live sessions were neither for pornographic purposes). This person let some of their friends know, but not the public. Therefore, he is a-pone in Zaw's eyes. Zaw himself showed his face and revealed his identity in his live sessions which were consultations with other members of Blued (I will expand his story in the next chapter where I discuss LGBT activism). Therefore, for Zaw, *a-pone* and *a-pwint* can be defined through out-ness, and being out to some chosen people is not enough to be *a-pwint*, you have to be out to the whole community, or at least to the queer community.

Another interview subject, Bobo, is a writer from a small town in central Burma. Some of his short stories have been published in some Burmese magazines. From the interview, I learned that he had to work as a waiter at the teashop in Yangon, the former capital when he was a kid. This indicates that he is from a lower-middle-class family. Writers are usually regarded at a high(er) social status, along with medical doctors and teachers, in Burma. This affects what kind of treatment he receives from his community (in a positive way). Now he takes the role of making hand bombs and fundraising for a local People's Defence Force in central Burma.

When I asked the same question, he exemplified someone he knows. According to Bobo, this friend knows that he is gay, but he always tells his friends that he is going to marry a woman when the time comes. When someone mentions something related to same-sex things, he gets sensitive and provoked. Bobo named this friend *a-pone* because he is a hider not only from the public but also from himself. From here, I will conclude that Bobo added another element, self-acceptance to Zaw's definition. When it comes to *a-pwint*, his definition is different. For Zaw, *a-pone* and *a-pwint* are binaries but Bobo interpreted *a-pwint* through the way people dress and if they wear make-up. When he defined *a-pone*, he explicitly said that it had nothing to do with the way people dress. Later, he said that when someone starts to wear women's dresses and make-up, they become a-pwint. Hereby we can see Bobo defined *a-pwint* through trans-ness.

Both of them agreed that *a-pone* and *a-pwint* have nothing to do with masculinity or femininity. This is the opposite of Chua's definition which is based on the way people appear and act, masculine or feminine.

Thein, another interview subject, is in KNU controlled area. Karen National Union is a political organization for the Karen people, one of the minor ethnic groups in Burma, and has an armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army. The KNU took arms since after the independence and has been fighting with the Burmese junta, off and on until now. Thein runs a rubber farm; therefore I assume that they [a pronoun chosen by the interview subject] are from a middle-class family. Now they are part of the local administrative committee, under the parallel government, National Unity Government.

They first told me that they heard these terms, *a-pone,* and *a-pwint* since they were a kid. They defined *a-pone* as someone who cannot accept himself and pretends to be a "man" because of the probable tension between the family and him if they found out. What is different from Bobo's definition is that self-acceptance alone is the criteria for differentiating *a-pone* and *a-pwint*. For Thein, one does not necessarily have to be out to the public. They said that when someone changes the way they

act, the public will notice what they are, whether they declare it or not. When I asked them to elaborate on "the way they act", they told me that someone becomes *a-pwint* when they change their tone, care about body aesthetics, become neat and tidy (from being scruffy before) and lastly act more feminine. They added that these subjectivities, *a-pone,* and *a-pwint*, cannot be interpreted by the way someone dresses, like a man or woman. Which means they do not define the subjectivities through trans- identity. We can conclude that they see *a-pone* through self-acceptance and *a-pwint* through masculinity or femininity.

The other two interview subjects, Than and Shinn, who are humanitarian workers and university students respectively, define *a-pone* and *a-pwint* based on the concept of "coming out". If someone is closeted, they are *a-pone* and if someone is out, they are *a-pwint*, regardless of masculinity/femininity or trans-ness. Being familiar with LGBTQ NGOs (which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter), their litmus test is "coming out" but when I questioned Than whether someone who came out to a selective group of people (the question which popped up several times in my previous interviews) belongs in *a-pone* or *a-pwint* category, he admitted that it is a good question [he said it in English], consequently acknowledged the limitation of "coming out" concept and the fluidity of *a-pone* and *a-pwint* subjectivities.

The last interview subject I will mention in this chapter is Nyo. He ran a family business before the coup. His brother was arrested for his involvement in anti-military campaigns. For security reasons, he is now in hiding somewhere in central Burma and has good relations with the local People's Defence Forces in the area.

He started off answering my question on *a-pone* and *a-pwint* by pointing out how the public misinterprets these two categories. He said that people think someone is *a-pone* if/when he acts and appears as a [cis]man. He proposed that if someone says out loud that he is attracted to men, he is *a-pwint*, even if he appears as a [cis]man. He exemplified the case of someone who was residing in the same village as him. His friend who was obviously gay [according to him] told him to keep a distance from him in public although this person acted in a very much gay character when he met his fellow [gay] friends. His excuse not to be seen together with gay people was that he wanted to be respectable in the community. On the other hand, my interview subject claimed that the community has seen many young guys [*thu-nge*] entering this person's house. This person is *a-pone* according to Nyo's definition even though he appears feminine. When I posed Nyo the question of the extent of out-ness, he did not give me a direct answer. He started off by saying he can sympathize with such gays who came out to a selective group of close ones. He added that such people did not cause problems but people like his friend were annoying because they would act

overly feminine while they were with gay friends but would "pretend" like a straight person and attack the gay-ness of the others in the presence of the strangers. He remarked that *a-pone* and *a-pwint* are categories that create tensions among the gay community. He cited a quote from a [gay-themed] short story he read online, saying whether someone is *a-pone* or *a-pwint*, he is *a-chaut* [he was very much aware that this was a derogatory term, but he used it as a dry/dark sense of humor]. He wanted to break down the wall between *a-pone* and *a-pwint* for the sake of solidarity or to put them under an umbrella term. In the end, to stand firmly on his standpoint of defining *a-pone* and *a-pwint* through out-ness, he said someone who came out to a few is *a-pone*.

The last facet of different definitions of *a-pone* and *a-pwint* is owned by the trans community. Shinn, the university student I mentioned above, told me that Shinn [the interview subject asked me to refer only by their own name] was surprised to learn that trans sex workers from Hlaingtharyar township in Yangon Shinn talked to saw Shinn as *a-pone* because Shinn acts like a [cis]man and is attracted to men. For them, one can become *a-pwint* only when he is fully transformed into a woman by wearing women's dresses [transgender] or sex reassignment surgery [trans-sexual]. According to this definition, cis-gendered gay men will always be *a-pone*, regardless of self-acceptance, out-ness, or masculinity/femininity and only trans-women are *a-pwint*. They told Shinn that guys like Shinn want to be women but have not become women yet. I would argue that this is a strategic move by transwomen to create affinity through occupying *a-pwint* category as their own.

So far, I have discussed how *a-pone* and *a-pwint* subjectivities are contested and de-stabilized by different sub-groups of the Burmese queer community differently, such as self-acceptance, out-ness, enactment of masculinity or femininity, the concept of coming out, and trans identity. These two categories are dichotomous for some of my interview subjects and not for some. One can be *a-pone* and *a-pwint* at the same time (for/to different people) and one can cross the border through different performances. This is not to romanticize these subjectivities. As Bobo positioned himself by saying, "I am not hiding. I just live my life as I enjoy. If someone asked me whether I am this [gay], I would say yes. Well, if they asked me politely. Otherwise, I am not going to tell others about my sexuality nor pretend as if I were straight." He thought people could guess his sexuality because his tone was feminine enough. But he did not identify as *a-pone* nor *a-pwint*. Furthermore, he gave me another meaning to *a-pwint* by saying "pwint-pwint-lin-lin (can be translated into frankly or transparency)" which is similar but not the same as "open". Therefore, I use *a-pone* and *a-pwint* as political choices rather than Hider and Open (Gilbert 2013) because especially in *a-pwint*, *pwint* could mean open (indexing out-ness) or blossom (indexing flamboyant or [trans]woman-ness) or frank/transparent (indexing self-acceptance, not necessarily coming out to others).

As I have mentioned in the literature review section, David Gilbert (2013) identified three core elements of *a-pone* and *a-pwint* subjectivities. They are the external, involving image and resemblance, the internal, meaning mind/heart, and past karma (Gilbert 2013, p. 250). But my interview subjects define these subjectivities through self-acceptance (or denial), out-ness, frankness, transparency, enactment of masculinity or femininity, trans identity, and the idea of "coming out". How do we understand and interpret the discrepancies between Gilbert's and my research findings? Chronologically, Gilbert has done his interviews before 2012 and I have conducted mine in 2023. Now we can see how, when, and where my interview subjects learned new watermarks of the subjectivities, *a-pone,* and *a-pwint*. This is a result of my interview subjects living through the queer times (2011-2023).

I would like to go back to the dubbing culture (Boellstorff 2006) for the analysis. He used this framework to explain how Indonesians came into *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities through "a series of incomplete and contradictory references [regarding homosexuality] in translation, sometimes openly denigrating and hostile" in mass media (Boellstorff 2006, p. 77). He was struggling with the question of Indonesian *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities without a concrete conclusion at first. The "dubbing culture" allowed him to see beyond the binarism of "puppets of globalization" and "veneer over tradition" (ibid. p. 82). He argued that their constructive agency and subjectivities were constructed through the encounter with globalization (ibid. p. 82). He beautifully framed it by saying: "In other words, *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians "dub" ostensibly Western sexual subjectivities. Like a dub, the fusion remains a juxtaposition; the seams show. "Speech" and "gesture" never perfectly match; being *gay* or *lesbi* and being Indonesian never perfectly match. For *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, as in dubbing culture more generally, this tension is irresolvable; there is no "real" version underneath, where everything fits. You can close your eyes and hear perfect speech or mute the sound and see perfect gestures, but no original unites the two in the dubbed production. This may not present the self with an unlivable contradiction, however, since in dubbing one is invested not in the original, but rather in the awkward fusion. Disjuncture is at the heart of the dub; there is no prior state of pure synchrony and no simple conversion to another way of being. Where traditional translation is haunted by its inevitable failure, dubbing rejoices in the good-enough and the forever incomplete" (ibid. p. 82).

In my case, my interview subjects were not just mimicking Western homosexuals when they defined *a-pone* and *a-pwint* through the concept of coming out or out-ness. They learned these ideas from the internet/globalization and the Gay International (which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter) and "dubbed" Western sexual subjectivities. The awkward fusion can be seen in the

watermarks of *a-pone* and *a-pwint* subjectivities. The inconsistencies in the watermarks between different interview subjects or within one interview subject can be read as irresolvable tension. When translation (of coming out) failed inevitably, my interview subjects found rejoices in "dubbing" (ibid. p. 82).

Boellstorff (2006) argued that in dubbing where the original language it reworks and the moving of lips do not unify, resulting in the rejection of binarism of "totally affirming" or "totally rejecting" the discourse it transforms. In this way, Indonesian *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities are neither imitating nor totally distinct from Western homosexualities (ibid. p. 83-4). I could say the same for my interview subjects who "dubbed" the concept of coming out, self-acceptance, and trans identity while embracing the "traditional" watermark of enactment of masculinity or femininity.

Logics behind *Thu-nge* and its implications

After contesting *a-pone* and *a-pwint* subjectivities, I will move on to *thu-nge*. It can be literally translated into "young lad". Chua defined it as "a person who identifies as heterosexual and cisgender and is the sexual or romantic interest of *apwint* and *apone*. The LGBT movement does not regard *tha nge* as queer (Chua 2019, p. xvii). My interview subjects mostly resonate with this definition. But it is worth revisiting this term because we can trace the border of heterosexuality and non-normative sexualities in the Burmese context through the logic behind this term.

Thein resonated with Chua by defining *thu-nge* as straight young men whom gay men have one-sided romantic and/or sexual attraction. Than, the humanitarian worker, explained that for transwomen, *thu-nge* means straight men but for cis-gendered gay men, it refers to the penetrative partner who is also gay. Like transwomen claim the *a-pwint* category as their own, I would argue that cis-gendered gay men expanded the scope of *thu-nge* and include themselves under that category, according to Than's definition. This also explains the Burmese slang word, "kneading/mixing [boiled]rice with [boiled]rice (*htamin-htamin-chin-nal*)" which means a cis-gendered gay man falls in love and/or has sex with another cis-gendered gay man. Because, as Than told me, transwomen do not have romantic and/or sexual relations with gay men in Burma. For transwomen, every man who has such relations with them is regarded as straight. A renowned Make-up artist, Khin San Win, told a local radio station named FM Bagan that she could not understand that two masculine [gay] men fall in love and/or have sex. For her, if two people are in a romantic or sexual relationship, one must be a *yauk-kyar* (man or masculine) and the other must be a *mein-ma* (woman or feminine). Expansion of *thu-nge* by the cis-gendered gay community could be read as a response to this stance.

Nyo interpreted it differently. For him, *thu-nge* are "real men (*yauk-kyar-asit*)" and will settle with "real women" when the time comes later in life. "Real men (*yauk-kyar-asit*)" here needs to be emphasized because *yauk-kyar* refers to "man/men" but when it is used in conjunction with "real(*asit*)" it is automatically understood as "straight men", not just biological males. This leads to the assumption that all real/authentic men are straight, in other words, naturalized heterosexuality. I would like to quote Judith Butler regarding naturalized heterosexuality. She argued that heterosexuality casts itself as something original, true, and authentic while lesbianism is seen as a kind of miming or a copy (Butler 2004, p. 127). Even though she specified lesbianism here, it could be applied to non-normative (non-heterosexual) sexualities. Butler argued that if gay identities were implicated in heterosexuality, it would not be in the way that heterosexuality is the only cultural network in which the implication occurs (ibid. p. 129).

The call was interrupted while I was talking to Nyo on Facebook Messenger. I was worried about his security but after a minute, he was back online. He said, with a little bit of cheery tone, "It was just a *thu-nge*, *thu-nge*. They always call me when they get back from their [military] mission. Now they are like my little ones. I was like, what would you like to eat?" Then, I realized he was referring to members of the People's Defence Forces. I told him that we could take a break, but he replied we could continue the interview. He explained the definition of *thu-nge* through a metaphor, "it is like give-and-take exchange. I would feed you if you fed me." I was first unclear of what is in the exchange package and asked him if it was a sexual innuendo. He answered, laughingly, that he meant he would feed them [food, snack, money], and they would feed him back with what they have [sex]. Then, I went deeper by asking him if *thu-nge* would show versatility in sex because it could be anything in "feeding with what they have". He responded to me as if my question was ridiculous. He said, "I would never be on the upper floor (indexing top or penetrative role) and *thu-nge* would never be on the lower floor (implying bottom or receptive role)." I asked him why. He replied, "Don't you know, darling. As comedians joke about gay people, you have fucked me, now it is my turn to do you back. If so, *thu-nge* would run away. Then, we would not get laid." I would like to go back to his definition of *thu-nge* before as real/authentic heterosexual men having gay sex with gay people before they could find women for romantic, sexual relations and marriage. In sexual exchange, *thu-nge* always takes the penetrative role. This fits how the state security apparatus in Burma thinks of homosexuality or homosexual acts. Make-up artist Lin Lin told Doh Athan, a podcast organized by Frontier Myanmar (2019), that police only arrested the receptive partner [she used the word, *a-chaut*, implying sissy gays here], not insertive one [*yauk-kyar*, a (real/authentic heterosexual) man], even when both got caught up in the act. Article 377 of the Myanmar penal code, a British colonial legacy, prohibits "intercourse against the order of nature"

and provides imprisonment varying between life and a term not less than 2 years but may extend to 10 years. According to penal code 377, both partners, insertive and receptive, are punishable. *Thu-nge* taking the insertive role in gay sex are not regarded as gay both by the state and the queer community. Nyo drew a line between *thu-nge* and gay people. He added, "If it is only for sex, they are *thu-nge*. If it comes deep from the heart, they are gay."

I would like to make a comparison here. Nyo mentioned his friend who always tried to hide his sexuality but was so obvious that he was gay and was known to take the receptive role in secrecy. One could have gay sex without being gay if they took the insertive role (*thu-nge*) but if one took a receptive role, they would undeniably be gay, they would not be questioned if it was only sex or came deep from the bottom of the heart. Nyo who takes a stance that all are *a-chaut* (gay) whether *a-pone* or *a-pwint*, does not put insertive and receptive partners under one category. If you take the insertive role, appear masculine, and do not have romantic relations with [gay] men, you are excused to be "not gay".

Homo, a strategic "dubbing" move by Burmese cis-gendered gay men

The last term I am going to discuss in this chapter is *homo*. Being not aware of the pathologized history of the term "homosexual" in the West, the Burmese online queer community adopted it directly as *homo* - ဟိုမို. I saw and used this term on Facebook around 2013. My interview subjects gave different timelines for this term. Thein told me that it was popular around 2013-14. Nyo gave me a timeline from 2012 to 2014-15. The beginning of queer time, I would say. Chua defined *homo* as "somebody who identifies as male and is attracted to men, most likely those who identify as homo or gay; the word, however, is often used to refer to *apone* as well" (Chua 2019, p. xv). All my interview subjects gave the same definition. It refers to men who are attracted to men and are not feminine (act masculine). Nyo said, "*A-pwint* do not belong to the *homo* group. Neither do *yauk-kya-shar* (a man-to-be, biological woman with non-normative sexualities.) That is an important distinction." The enactment of masculinity is the most important element here. Because I would read this as a strategic (yet exclusionary) move by cis-gendered gay men to draw a boundary between them and trans people. They claim that they are not *a-chaut* not just because of the negative connotations *a-chaut* carries but also because *a-chaut* can include both gay men and trans people. They "dub" a Western sexual subjectivity/terminology in a way that is neither imitating nor totally

distinct from Western sexualities. Consequently, it rejects the binarism between "totally affirming" or "totally rejecting" the discourse it transforms (Boellstorff 2006, p. 83-4).

I would like to draw a parallel here. In *Desiring China*, Lisa Rofel (2007) challenges David Altman's argument that "self-identified homosexuals" in Asia see themselves as part of a "global community". She did not deny the existence of upcoming (in the case of China) gay identifications or gay liberation extending beyond national and cultural borders (ibid. p. 92). What she did in this book was decentering Euro-American understandings of what it means to be gay. She traced what motivated men and women in China in the 1990s to seek out what it means to be gay in other places. She argued that she saw the answer in cultural citizenship (ibid. p. 94). She identified three sites of articulation of global gay identity appeared: debates about family and kinship, appropriations of linguistic terminology, and the semiotic practices of the term "quality" that divided gay men (ibid. p. 97). She discussed that gay men showed displeasure or anxiety when they talked about *suzhi* (quality). She put it this way: "Gay men who have legal residency in Beijing assume that money boys come from the countryside and that they pollute city life with their transgressions of the social divisions between masculine wealth and masculine love, between urban propriety and rural excess, and between proper and improper expressions of gay identity" (ibid. p. 104). Gay men in Beijing had anxieties that homosexuality would be associated with male prostitution in popular discourses. She identified this rejection of rurality as class subjectivity. She argued that this term, *suzhi*, can show overlapped desires for proper cultural citizenship and transcultural discourses (ibid. p. 105).

To use her framework, *homo* can be read as Burmese cis-gendered gay men's attempt to stick with proper cultural citizenship through the enactment of masculinity. A suicide case of a gay librarian from a private university because of the alleged bully against his sexuality in 2019 prompted Koe Bwae Ya Sayadaw, a renowned Buddhist monk to say that a man (*yauk kyar*) should behave like a man and a woman (*mein ma*), like a woman, there should not be somewhere in between. Cis-gendered gay men fit into this category of cultural citizenship by being men who behave like men even though they are attracted to men. Chua mentioned that *homo* is often used to refer to *a-pone*. But I would argue otherwise. I would read it as a strategic move by cis-gendered gay men to distance themselves not just from *a-pwint*, *a-chaut*, and trans people but also from *a-pone*. Because *a-pone*, in hiding, means coward-ness to them and they are out to each other therefore they do not belong under the category of *a-pone*. In this sense, this self-identification is exclusionary.

My interview subjects told me *homo* was taken over by an umbrella term, LGBT around 2016-7 (I will discuss more in the next chapter). Therefore, this term, *homo*, had a short lifespan. But it was

one of the subjectivities Burmese queers "dubbed"/adopted through an encounter with globalization in the queer times.

Conclusion

In this chapter, using "dubbing culture" developed by Boellstorff (2006), I have discussed how in defining subjectivities such as *a-pone* and *a-pwint*, my interview subjects "dubbed" some Western sexual subjectivities such as self-acceptance, out-ness, the concept of coming out and trans- identity without giving up on the original watermark, enactment of masculinity or femininity. We have seen that these two subjectivities are not always dichotomous, and one can move in and out of one category. It shows not only the fluidity of local understandings of non-normative sexualities but also the tensions around them and struggles of competing/claiming spaces between cis-gendered (by self-ownership of the term, *homo,* and expansion of *thu-nge*) and trans community (by self-ownership of the term, *a-pwint*) in Burma. Through the term, *thu-nge*, I have also discussed that homosexual acts do not necessarily translate into homosexuality for certain groups (manifesting masculinity, taking an active role in sex, and showing no romantic relations with men) in the eyes of the state and the queer community. These subjectivities are important in my thesis because we can see the fluidity, tensions, cultural logic, and implications around non-normative sexualities through them. We have also seen the tensions and negotiations between global and local discourses in the background. Through the dubbing culture, we have seen "a contingent, fractured, intermittent, yet powerfully influential relationship between globalization and subjectivities" (Boellstorff 2006, p. 58) about Burmese people with non-normative sexualities.

CHAPTER 4: QUEER COUNTERPUBLICS AND THE GAY INTERNATIONAL

"Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."

(Foucault 1978, p. 93).

Introduction

On 24 June 2019, Kyaw Zin Win, a 26-year-old librarian from Myanmar Imperial University, which is a private university in Myanmar, took his life after he was allegedly bullied about his sexuality at his workplace. He posted a farewell letter on his Facebook (which is the most popular social media platform in Myanmar) timeline on 23 June 2019. According to this letter, he was forced to admit his sexual orientation by one of his co-workers after a staff meeting. In a Viber (which is another commonly used messaging app in Myanmar) chat group, his co-workers made fun of his sexuality. His letter said he wished he would not be born again in a country where one's existence(identity) was mocked. He also pleaded with his family to understand that he committed suicide because he could not hold on anymore. In response to his suicide case, a popular Buddhist monk, named Koe Bwae Ya Sayadaw said that he would shoot and kill all the gay people if he were a president. The reference was Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's War on Drugs.

In 2014, a gay couple, Ko Myo Min Htet and Ko Tin Ko Ko celebrated their 10th anniversary as a public ceremony. The ceremony went viral, and the couple faced an investigation by the police. Myanmar Times, 7 Day Daily, and Democracy Today journals supported same-sex marriage while featuring the ceremony. The Daily Eleven Journal condemned all these journals for supporting LGBTQ rights. The title of the feature was, "Is same-sex marriage which is banned in all Asian countries and is still a controversial issue even in the United States of America allowed in Myanmar now?" That article was written before same-sex marriage was legalized nationwide by U.S. Supreme Court (in 2015) and in Taiwan (in 2019).

The Daily Eleven news editor team quoted Magway Kyaung Tike Sayardaw U Parmaukkha (who became a MaBaTha monk in the 969 Nationalist movement which targeted Muslim men) that same-sex marriage was not allowed in Buddhism, it was not appropriate, although the country was

going towards Democracy, he would not support undemocratic processes, it was against Buddha's teachings if desperate things were done misusing democracy, the whole population's morality would become loose, the other things would fall apart with loose morality, it [same sex marriage] was unacceptable both socially and in the religion sense, it should be widely prohibited legally.

They also quoted Nayi Min, a doctor-cum-writer that same-sex marriage was not legal in our country, it was also against Myanmar cultural standards, and such a shameful thing should not be supported, alcohol and cigarette advertisements were prohibited not to encouraging drinking and smoking, putting a homosexual wedding on the headline (here he referred to The Voice, 7 Day, Democracy Today journals) was not appropriate, so he felt that this was like an insult to our society.

I describe the above two stories to show homophobia and heteronormativity among the general public in Burma. I will not analyze them but will note them as responses to an encounter with globalization during the queer times (2011-2023). Instead, I will present three examples that challenge heteronormativity. To this end, I will use competing publics (Fraser 1990), queer counterpublics (Berlant & Warner 2005), and heteronormativity (Warner 1991) as theoretical frameworks.

Queer counterpublic through *Blued*

As I have mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, Zaw, my interview subject broadcasted live on a gay dating/social app named *Blued.* According to their website, this app was launched in China in 2012 and now it has 40 million users worldwide in 193 countries. Ma Baoli, a closeted police officer from China created a message board for gay men. When his supervisors found out about this, he was forced to resign in 2012. He launched the app after he had sought investors in the same year. The app provides three features on it. Out of them, they listed *Live* as the first, along with *Personal* and *Social* on their website. Live is advertised as "Interact with hot guys in fun LIVE broadcasts from around the world or around you. Or go LIVE yourself to get the attention of tons of guys at once" (*Blued*, n.d.).

Zaw started using this Chinese gay app, Blued because a friend of his recommended it to him. He said, "I did not use it for dating. I signed up for it out of curiosity. Then, I found out about this Live broadcasting feature. I gave it a try and got some friends after several sessions. I found some total strangers; some I have seen before, and I found out they are this [gay] only when I saw them here. I wanted to give them mental/psychological encouragement. That is why we created this little community. The aftermath of the coup is/has been horrible. I got through because of the support

I got from my friends in this little community." I asked him a follow-up question about why he thought they needed mental/psychological encouragement. He replied, "Two gay people cannot hold hands nor show affection in public. That's just a very minor issue. As a whole, we have to think first about how other people think of us whatever we do in public. That's why we need mental/psychological encouragement. To be brave." Then, he told me how he became a "counselor" on the dating app. "As I told you before, I got friends through live sessions. I had to listen to their stories. Then, I decided to do 'consultations.' Before I did consultations, I reviewed other live broadcasters, globally and locally. I learned what their selling points were and asked myself what I could do. Back then, there were only a few who dared to show their faces during live sessions in Myanmar. For most users, live sessions were pornographic or explicit sexual purposes. During consultation live sessions, I listened to their stories through comment sections, or sometimes through private messages and I consulted them, case by case. Later, I revealed that I am a dentist, so they asked me questions related to health and well-being."

Hereby, Zaw pointed out the fact that queer folks have to self-censor in society. He provided an example of heteronormativity totalizing non-heterosexual sexualities (Warner 1991). According to Fraser, "In stratified societies, unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles" (Fraser 1990, p. 64). Those informal pressures marginalize subordinate groups and for worse, such pressure can be amplified. She gave an example of how media can circulate the views, the deliberations are privately owned and run for profit. In this way, subordinates will not have equal access to participatory parity (ibid. p. 64). Burmese people with non-normative sexualities, especially from urban, middle-class groups, including my interview subject, Zaw, grabbed an opportunity when the boom of the internet happened at the beginning of the queer time (2011-2023). Fraser did not clarify media in her argument, whether she meant conventional print capitalism or also online spaces, or both. I will argue, in this case, my interview subject succeeded to apply *Blued*, an online space, to contest unequal empowerment in the public sphere in Burma. Let me not be misunderstood. This online media is still "privately owned and run for profit" (Fraser 1990, p. 64) as in her argument. In "*Chinese affective platform economies: dating, live streaming, and performative labor on Blued*," Shuaishuai Wang (2020) studied the Chinese version of *Blued* (it has two versions, Chinese and International) for two years and showed how it accumulated capital through live streamers' sexual, personal, emotional, and affective labor and viewers' sexual and affective labor.

Only after I read this article, I found out users can monetize their labor on the app. I had to ask some follow-up questions to Zaw, a month after the first interview. Then, he explained about the

beans, the digital currency on Blued, to me. It is the same as "like" on Facebook or Instagram, but the difference is that the users/streamers can convert it to cash. He admitted that he received 800,000 Myanmar Kyats (381 USD according to the current exchange rate) worth of beans from the viewers. He took 600,000 Myanmar Kyats (285 USD) out of it. "I transferred 200,000 Myanmar Kyats (95 USD) to someone I know in Indonesia. He works as a security guard." "Is he Burmese?" "No, he's Indonesian. Because he told me he's having financial problems. And I spent the other 200,000 Myanmar Kyats to give out gifts to my fans." It did not seem that money was an incentive to him. The reason could be because he is a dentist which secures his financial status. More importantly, my interview subject transacting his money to an Indonesian gay man who was facing a financial crisis can be read in the framework of queer counterpublic (Berlant & Warner 2005). Intimacies between them (Zaw and the Indonesian gay man) go beyond the domestic space, kinship, couple form, property, or the nations (ibid. p. 199).

"I did not want to reveal my personal data in live sessions. But some were so curious that they searched for my Facebook profile. Some of them even showed up at my workplace. Back then, I did not dare to pick up unknown numbers. One guy called my number and blackmailed me by saying that he would knock on my door and if so, would I sleep with him?" I asked him if he had ever been disappointed by the *Blued* community and thought of leaving it. He replied, "That's why I broadcasted live, off and on, broadcasting for two months and then taking a break for one month, etc. But these experiences [getting stalked and blackmailed] changed me in a good way. I started to talk more about social ethics in my live sessions."

In connection with the "dubbing culture" (Boellstorff 2006), Zaw "dubbed" some Western discourses in his live sessions. He was the one who defined *a-pone* and *a-pwint* subjectivities through out-ness to the whole queer community. He also believed that he received bad experiences such as being stalked and blackmailed on Blued because he was one of the few broadcasters who showed their faces in live sessions in Burma and those people who attacked him in the comment section or through the phone calls could do so because of the anonymity. He told me that he did a "coming out" campaign on Blued so that there would be more people like him and showing his face in live sessions would be normalized. He claimed that after this campaign, some people started to put their own pictures on their profiles. Hereby we can see he is flexible with the definition of "coming out". He did not write an entirely new script but transformed the idea of "coming out" into revealing your identity (at least, a photo) on your profile which (according to him) will consequently be of help in building a respectful queer community on *Blued*. With Zaw's activism, I have shown

how he formed a queer counterpublic on a Chinese gay dating app and he "dubbed" some Western ideas in his counterpublic formation.

Queer counterpublic at a University campus (and beyond)

The second story I am going to showcase is Shinn's activism at his university. Shinn studied at Dagon University. At the university, he started his journey of activism by discussing from an "LGBT point of view" [exactly his words] at the reading club. He created a Facebook page named Active Rainbow and posted articles such as "What is LGBT?" This can be read as online, subaltern queer counterpublic, like Zaw's. But what's different from Zaw's is that Shinn extended this counterpublic into the university campus. "An organization with a focus on youth development approached me through the Active Rainbow page. In collaboration with them, I organized a seminar on the topic of LGBT, inviting well-known LGBT activists. It was the very first seminar on LGBT issues within Myanmar university circles. Other universities did similar events after this. Well, to go back to the seminar, the university did not grant permission to hold this event. One of the university authorities personally came to the event and told me not to proceed with it. When I refused to stop it, they cut out the electricity. I faced all these kinds of challenges. Despite these challenges, I would say it was successful. Being the first LGBT talk at a university, we had an audience of over 1000 people, not only from my university but also from other universities. Most of them were women and gay people. At the seminar, the panelists talked about, and the audience want to know about their daily [queer] experiences, how they first realized that they were gay, how they overcame [internalized and the general public's] homophobia, and how/if they could help the younger generation of LGBT people with same challenges. I hosted three LGBT events, including a gay-themed short film festival, in total, during my university life." When I asked Shinn about the responses of the general public towards Shinn's LGBT activism, Shinn replied, "The professors singled out the volunteers at the seminar by saying, you people hosted an "*a-chaut*" event. In the Facebook groups of the university students, some straight guys showed disapproval by saying this event is just following a trending issue." Shinn's professors took heterosexuality as normal and right and marginalized a-chaut(s) and queer people as deviant and wrong (Berlant and Warner 2005).

To put Shinn's story in Fraser's framework, Shinn applied online space, university life, freedom to form associations, and freedom of expression as tools to counter bracketing social inequalities, achieve participatory parity, and lastly challenge heteronormativity. Moreover, Shinn succeeded to form a competing subaltern counterpublic against this informal exclusion of queer people at the

university and elsewhere, in a broader sense. They, panelists, organizers, and the audience, together formed a counterpublic where they circulated counterdiscourses to redefine their identities and needs (Fraser 1990, p. 67). Shinn's activism, being not only online but also in-person seminars and events, can be read as both a regroupment of subordinates and a training base for agitational activities towards/against the wider public sphere (ibid. p. 68). We can see discursive interaction between the larger public sphere and the subaltern counterpublic, in the encounters of cutting off of electricity, refusal to grant permission by the university authorities, attacking the volunteers with a derogatory term, *a-chaut*, by the professors, disapproval of straight peers. In terms of Geoff Eley's framework of the public sphere, it is a structured setting where 1) a variety of publics including the subaltern queer counterpublic exist, 2) dominant groups such as the university authorities have more advantages over the subordinate group, the students, and queer people in this case, and 3) contestatory relationship between unequally social empowered publics as a form of deliberation for the common good (Eley 1990, p. 11). Shinn's activism takes in women too therefore it qualifies to be a queer counterpublic where biological sex is not a limitation and referential points are transcended (Berlant & Warner 2005, p. 198).

The Gay International as a queer counterpublic

So far, I have analyzed two stories of my interview subjects' activism. The third example, I will present is a case of discourse by a LGBT NGO in Burma.

Colors Rainbow is the leading LGBT NGO in Myanmar. According to their website, they "began as an LGBT program of Equality Myanmar (formerly the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma) in 2007 and has since grown into Myanmar's leading LGBT rights organization. Colors Rainbow transitioned from Thailand to Myanmar in 2013 where they have expanded their work on enhancing public understanding and acceptance of the dignity and human rights of LGBT people. They work to end discrimination against LGBT people in Myanmar through awareness raising, education, legal reform, and legal protection" (*Home - Colors Rainbow*, 2020).

I would argue that Colors Rainbow is a subaltern counterpublic. In "*Sexual orientation and gender identity minorities in transition: LGBT rights and activism in Myanmar*," Lynette J. Chua and David Gilbert (2015) mapped out the human rights abuses experienced by sexual orientation and gender identity minorities and how LGBT activism flourished at the beginning of the political transition [from 2010 to around the year 2015 when they published the article]. They did fieldwork among Burmese exiles and migrants in Thailand. They documented the achievement of Thailand-based Burmese LGBT rights activists [who later formed Colors Rainbow]. They claimed that before empowerment

programs, potential grassroots leaders regarded human rights abuses as something SOGI minorities had to endure (Chua & Gilbert 2015, p. 22). Than, my interview subject, resonated with them. He received a training session at Colors Rainbow in 2018. He told me that he learned new things such as Yogyakarta principles and realized LGBT people had their own rights too. Through these pieces of training, Colors Rainbow equipped subordinated LGBT people with "human rights," "LGBT rights," and "homophobia" to claim their needs and identities. In this way, it provided not only "a space for regroupment but also a training base for agitational activities intended for the bigger public sphere" (Fraser 1990, p. 68). Therefore, I would argue that Colors Rainbow along with its LGBT allies formed a subaltern counterpublic to mobilize LGBT issues (Fraser 1990).

While I appreciate Colors Rainbow as a counterpublic, I have to show another facet of it. Its donors include UNAIDS, Swedish Institute, MyJustice (part of the British Council), Sweden-based Diakonia, Norway-based SAIH, U.S-based Freedom House, U.S-based TIDES Foundation, Sweden-based The Unstraight Museum, Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands (*Home - Colors Rainbow*, 2020) Therefore, it is part of the Gay International, according to Massad. To understand the Gay International in Burma, I will look into their publications and training. Coincidentally, three of my interview subjects had affiliations with Colors Rainbow.

A pamphlet named "*A Safe and Welcoming Family for LGBT*" which was published in October 2019, uncritically mentioned that "Myanmar cultural standards and norms are so strict. Today people are trying to build a culture where diversity is celebrated" (Colors Rainbow 2019, p. 2). This can be read as an orientalist gaze on Burma/the East through an imaginative geography in which the "civilized" West dominates over the "backward" East (Said 1978). As Massad argued, we can see that a "more enlightened" Occident attempts to re-orient/educate "Oriental" resistant desires (Massad 2007, p. 164). The pamphlet gave out information on how LGBT person and their family should act to build a safe and healthy relationship between them. It described how parents and family members should respond and from whom they should seek advice when their children come out to them and how an LGBT person should come out to their parents. It gave tips on "coming out" and this explains how the watermarks of subjectivities such as *a-pone* and *a-pwint* changed (which I have discussed in the previous chapter) after the arrival of the Gay International. They also offer consultation sessions for "coming out" issues. Among their recommendations, one of them was inviting parents to SOGIE "enlightenment" training. SOGIE stands for "Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression". In their publication of "*General Knowledge about LGBT*" published in 2018, they explained SOGIE in detail. It came with English to Burmese

translation of terms such as sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDoR), homosexual, etc. The subjectivities which I discussed in the previous chapter were not acknowledged in this publication. My interview subject, Than, confirmed this too. When I asked him the watermarks of *a-pone* and *a-pwint* subjectivities, he admitted these subjectivities were not discussed at all in their SOGIE "enlightenment" training. Sexual epistemology of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender was disseminated instead.

This can be seen in another publication, named "*Walks of Life*" (2019). Overall, it was a nicely written book. It was a collection of personal and emotional stories of LGBT people all over Burma. Than was involved in this project, funded by the Swedish Institute. He told me that they traveled to cities such as Yangon, Mandalay, Lashio, Pyay, and Mawlamyaing, collected stories of LGBT people, transcribed the interviews, published them as a book, and lastly did photo exhibitions of the memorable pieces of these LGBT people (they were included in the book too) in big cities. At the photo exhibitions, not only the memorable pieces were shown but also the audio tapes of interviews were available. He claimed that the photo exhibitions received positive responses. I was personally there at one of their photo exhibitions and recalled that it was a touching project. As much as I was touched by this "*Walks of Life*" project, I still have to point out a problematic part of it. One of the interview subjects in it whose name is Make-up artist Nyi Nyi aka Nyi Nyi Thein said, "I identify as *a-pwint-ma*" (Colors Rainbow 2019, p. 37). *A-pwint-ma* refers to *a-pwint* subjectivity, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Sometimes, *a-pone* and *a-pwint* are called *a-pone-ma* and *a-pwint-ma*, with a suffix *ma* which indexes femininity. The Gay International put "Transgender woman" (it was written as Trengender women in the original publication. It was clearly a typo.) with a bracket behind *a-pwint-ma*. It applied the same to the interview subject named Htwe Nyo who answered that she identified as a-pwint (ibid. p. 61) In this way, they did not produce "homosexuals" (as they did in the Arab World, according to Massad) but translated/transformed a localized subjectivity into their own Western category of "transgender woman". Another story is Thant Lwin Khant's. She said, "Before SOGIE training, I thought I was gay. Only after the training, I realized that I am a transgender woman." (ibid. p. 50). Before the Gay International, they could cross the borders of *a-pone* and *a-pwint* subjectivities through different performances such as the enactment of masculinity or femininity. But now they are stabilized as "transgender women". Through Massad's framework, I can say this is the Gay International "*heterosexualizing*" Burma (Massad 2007, p. 188).

Therefore, the Gay International, persuading Burmese queer people to be "out", looking through "an oriental gaze" on Burma, translating "Lesbian", "Gay", "Bisexual", and "Trans" identities into

Burmese and taking an epistemic dominance, finally stabilizing local subjectivities, and translating/transforming them into western categories/identities, fits with Massad's accusations.

Thicker Silver Linings in Burma

Although Massad is helpful for me to see the colonial/oriental relations between the West and the East, I have to say the aftermath is different in Burma, compared to his case study, the Arab World. To do Colors Rainbow's activism justice, I have to acknowledge that it once used *a-pone* and *a-pwint* without assimilating them into Western identities in 2013. The report was called "*Facing 377: Discrimination and Human Rights Abuses Against Transgender, Gay, and Bisexual Men in Myanmar*". On their website, the description said, "To understand the lack of social acceptance towards the LGBT community, specifically towards transgender and gay males, it is crucial to explore how Myanmar Buddhists conceptualize the correlation between karma; cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This study discusses the variety of harassment and abuse that the respondents (transgenders, gay, bisexual men) have experienced in the public sphere and from members of the Myanmar Police Force, and the respondents' understanding of and feelings about the arbitrary application of laws towards them." (Colors Rainbow 2013). We have to appreciate that it was aware to acknowledge the important role of *karma*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth [*samsara*] in the conceptualization of non-normative sexualities. While reporting perceived discrimination in the circles of education, employment, and family/friends, faced by LGBT people in Burma, Colors Rainbow put "MSM" as sexual orientation and "*a-pone* or *a-pwint*" as gender orientation (ibid. p. 37, 38, 43, 44). MSM, referring to men who have sex with men, originating from sexual health organizations, was a commonly used term among Burmese people(men) with non-normative sexualities back then. How did Colors Rainbow metamorphose in the blink of an eye, from celebrating local understandings of sexuality and conceptualizing issues in local phenomena to a full-blown Orientalist? Massad or Spivak would argue that Colors Rainbow, incentivized by the generous amount of aid from the global North, framing/cooking the problem of LGBT people persuasively for the taste of the North, detached from the epistemic and ethical discourse of the native poor below the NGO level (Spivak 2004, p. 527). With my working experience at a small local women's NGO in Burma for two years, I could argue back that local activists' works cannot always be judged through NGO reports. I acknowledge that we have to write proposals to meet the taste of Global North because we need funding from them. However, it does not necessarily translate our grassroots work as one that is detached from the epistemic discourse of the native poor. I would like to remind Massad and Spivak that not everything we have done at the grassroots level goes into our reports to the Global North donor organizations. After all, this may sound like a rant. Therefore, I will provide

empirical data which can shed light on these dynamics between local activists and Global North organizations.

Crowning *"LGBT"* over *homo* in the queer time

I would like to go back to my interview subject, Nyo's answer here. "I recalled we used to use *homo* during 2012-2015. Then, transparent time [read the time when the country's beloved political party, National League of Democracy came to power] came and we started to witness LGBT events. Gay community on the Burmese Facebook circle was divided into two. One group thought *LGBT* refers to *mein-ma-shar* (a woman to-be, a more polite term for biological men with non-normative sexualities) and the other advocated that *LGBT* stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans people, and it is more inclusive. The former preferred to stick with *homo* and the latter wanted to move on to *LGBT*. This battle of debating whether *homo* or *LGBT* is appropriate went on until around 2017. I saw more and more *LGBT* pages on Facebook, for example, a competition for LGBT-themed short stories. In the end, the *LGBT* group won and the term, *homo* faded away. In 2016, the Thai BL (Boy Love) tv series became popular in Burma. Those BL fans identified themselves as gay. That's another group. Then, when the Japanese BL manga series was trendy, some started to call themselves "seme" or "uke". I had to remind them that these terms meant "top" or "bottom" which are sexual positions in bed." There are so many things happening in this queer timeline of terms for people with non-normative sexualities.

My argument will be of two parts. I will go first with the part of the Gay International.

I would like to highlight "timing" here. According to Nyo, *homo* became popular in 2012 (could be earlier) and lasted until 2015, roughly. As I have argued in the previous chapter, *homo* is a strategic "dubbing" by Burmese cis-gendered gay men from the urban class to distance themselves from *a-chaut*, *a-pone,* and *a-pwint* categories. It was happening on the Burmese Facebook gay circle, not under the command of Colors Rainbow. Then, in 2013, Colors Rainbow moved to Burma from exile/in Thailand. 2013 was also a transparent time in Nyo's words when socio-economic reforms and altogether LGBT events were first seen after a military dictatorship of five decades. I will locate this time as the beginning years of queer time. The Gay International was not fully formed when they published the report, I mentioned above in 2013. Having an NGO status in Burma, Colors Rainbow began to organize these LGBT events as an attempt to put epistemic dominance over the *homo*. Now we can see the *LGBT* advocacy group, which Nyo mentioned, and Colors Rainbows are on the same side. From the fact that the debate or the power struggle between homo and *LGBT* lasted for five years (from 2012 to 2017), I would argue that there was a contestatory and dialectic

relationship between collective competing *homo* counterpublic and *LGBT* advocacy groups on Facebook (Fraser 1990, p. 67). The important thing to note here is that Colors Rainbow was just a part of the *LGBT* advocacy group, not a commander. The LGBT-themed short story competition was organized by individual members. (Colors Rainbow itself followed this step and organized a short story competition for public awareness purposes, three times later.) The *LGBT* advocacy group, other than Colors Rainbow, "dubbed" (Boellstorff 2006) Western subjectivities they saw through media coverage such as same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015. These individuals became an aide to Colors Rainbow's reign. On the other hand, *homo* lost its war because its audience was very much limited while the counterpart celebrated inclusivity. (I will expand on this later.) When the term *LGBT* was crowned, Colors Rainbow did not have to include *a-pone* or *a-pwint*, let alone *homo*, and could continue with *LGBT* after this battle.

I would like to go deeper into analyzing Colors Rainbow. As we have seen its dialectic relations with the competing queer counterpublic, the dynamics within the organization itself are worth visiting. I asked Than to expand the workplace dynamics. He worked at Colors Rainbow with a short-term contract for the "*Walks of Life*" project. "The project manager is Swedish. He worked for other South-East Asian countries before. His idea was to create an online museum about LGBT people. It was part of the Unstraight Museum project. At Colors Rainbow, we [interviewers] discussed together which cities we shall go to and collect interviews. I did not receive any strict dos and don'ts from the project manager who worked remotely. During the interviews, we let the interviewees talk as they like. No limitations. No guidance." Shinn resonated with this. When Shinn applied for funding from Colors Rainbow for the second LGBT seminar, Shinn had to write up the aims of the seminar, the topic of the seminar, and what outcomes will have resulted etc. There were no direct inputs from Colors Rainbow. After hearing these two stories, could we say that Colors Rainbow's adoption of the term, *LGBT* was a strategic application?

My interview subjects are not "agents of the West"

For the second part of my analysis of Nyo's interview data, I will focus on the people. Massad pinned down on the upper-class and Westernized middle-class members in the Arab World and diaspora as accomplices of the Gay International (Massad 2007, p. 172). Boellstorff's "dubbing culture" lets me curate a processual understanding of agency for my interview subjects (Boellstorff 2006, p. 58). I would not call my interview subjects "agents of the West". Nyo mapped out a brief historiography of Burmese terms for non-normative sexualities such as *homo*, LGBT, *BL gay*, *seme*, and *uke*. From this, we can see Burmese queer people were constantly looking for what it's like to

be gay outside of Burma. For them including my interview subjects and those from "*Walks of Life*" (2019) publication, *a-chaut* carries negative social connotations and sometimes association with HIV/AIDS. They had nightmarish traumas being called so. They will "dub" or even mimic foreign (read not just Western) categories to run away from *a-chaut*. Even though "homosexual" had a pathologizing history in the West, the "dubbed" *homo* is just a new and neutral word in the Burmese language. With these words having foreign origins, Burmese queer people had an opportunity to paint them as they prefer to. Out of them, *homo* and *BL gay* had a limitation based on the biological part, *seme* or *uke* only referred to sexual positions in bed. As a result, the term "*LGBT*" was crowned. Whereas there may be an oriental gaze in the usage of *LGBT* for Colors Rainbow, adopting the term *LGBT* by the local people including my interview subject can be read as a strategy.

Therefore, I will conclude that even if the Gay International may have attempted to re-orient sexual desires through their "enlightenment" SOGIE training programs but having different political and socio-economic contexts from the Arab World, the consequences have shown thicker silver linings in Burma. Inspired by Sahar (2010), I would refuse to treat my interview subjects as passive and put them only in a reactionary situation towards the West.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the rise of subaltern queer counterpublics in the queer time (2011-2023) through three examples. In all these cases, they challenge heteronormativity in an online space, a university campus, through publications. They apply different strategies and have different outcomes. For example, Zaw creates a queer counterpublic by "dubbing" the concept of coming out, and consequently, he receives fewer attacks (blackmails and verbal abuses) from the online space and manages to form a space where they comfort each other (before, after the coup and beyond). Shinn challenges the normalcy and rightness of heterosexuality and a queer counterpublic is resulted. It is more nuanced in the case of Colors Rainbow. It shows both a hint of oriental gaze and the agentic nature of local activists. The commonality is that they all are informed by their socioeconomic and political background. From the rise of globalization and internet freedom, they "dub" Western discourses differently and adopt the term, *LGBT*, to mobilize their own desires and needs, to reinterpret identities and lastly to distance themselves from the stigmatized term, *a-chaut*. I have not only highlighted the tensions between global and local but also proved that my interview subjects and even Colors Rainbow are not passive "agents of the West". As Abu-Lughod (2001) suggests, we should refuse and deconstruct the traditional/Western modernity divide.

CHAPTER 5: SPRING REVOLUTION: THE NEW OPENING(S) AND THE OLD HETERONORMATIVE NARRATIVES

"Modern problems require modern solutions."

Dave Chapelle (2004)

I start off with a comedian's quote, which is also a source of thousands of internet memes, not to index the oriental divide between "modern," "civilized" West and "backward," "uncivilized" East (Said 1978) nor to make fun of the academia. With due respect, I have two reasons to justify it. The first one is to highlight how Burmese queer people, including my interview subjects, explore new strategies/solutions to mobilize in a new and challenging socio-political situation. The second is to pay tribute to meme culture which came along with the queer time (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011) and reached a peak around 2015 in Burma. Through internet memes, Burmese youths challenged and questioned religion, race/ethnicity, the military institution, the government, the oppositional political parties, the education system, and so on.

In the previous chapter, I have discussed how queer counterpublics by my interview subjects and Colors Rainbow applied different strategies against the backdrop of the internet boom. It happened at the beginning of the queer time. Now I will move to another timeline. I will take the Spring Revolution (2021-onwards) as an entry point. I will showcase new strategies deployed by Burmese queer people to challenge heteronormative narratives found in the Spring Revolution. I will identify these strategies and heteronormative narratives in the slogans and protest writings within the Spring Revolution and my interview subjects' testimonials. To this end, I will use Van De Velde (2022)'s framework as an analytical tool. As a theoretical framework, I will highlight the qualities of queer counterpublics (Berlant & Warner 2005) in the new strategies of Burmese queer people. In the case of the intersection of nationalism, middle-class respectability, and sexuality, Mosse (1996), Peterson (1999), and Nagel (1998) are useful. I will use these theories to build my argument that Burmese queer people make sense of and redefine nationalism, manliness, and honor through slogans and manage to build queer counterpublics on their own.

Spring revolution: a new opening

As I have described in the introduction chapter, the military staged a coup on February 1, 2021, in Burma. It is worth investigating narratives around sexuality in this social movement. In response to the military coup, multiple competing publics such as General Strike Committee, General Strike Committee of Nationalities comprising of many [minor] ethnic groups (which later combined as General Strike Coordination Body – GSCB), Civil Disobedience Movement arose. On the fifth anniversary of the genocide against the Rohingya people (25.8.2022), strike groups across the country chanted a slogan, ဘာသာလူမျိုးမခွဲခြား မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသား which can be translated as "No discrimination against race/ethnicity or religion, we all are Myanmar citizens". Sexism or homophobia was left out in their newly imagined nation. My interview subjects' testimonials and some other slogans, which I will mention later, will fill this gap.

Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir Puar (2016) raised important questions such as "in a context [where permanent and semi-permanent war exist] what kinds of queer organizing, archives, theory, practices, visibilities, institutions, knowledge production projects emerge? The precarity of queer life is not exceptional in these sociopolitical spaces: it is additional precisely because war, genocide, occupation, oppression, dictatorship, terrorism, and killings are part of the everyday fabric of life for many people who live in the region. … What animates the impulse to search for something to call or to theorize as queer? What must the queer body do, or be, to be recognized as such, and by whom? Do we want this recognition, and if so, how and for what purposes? How can we generate theory out of these locations, and if doing so, are these bodies of theory routed through area studies rather than recognized queer theory?" (Mikdashi & Puar 2016, p. 219) Their questions come out against the backdrop of the tensions and frictions between Western "queer theory" and "Middle Eastern studies".

While I cannot answer all of their questions, I will try to cover some of them in my analysis. My interview subjects are very much aware that the precarity of queer life is additional to war, oppression, dictatorship, and killings. This leads Burmese queer people to look for and apply new strategies. Whereas the new political situation does not let them organize "LGBT events" like five years prior, they find ways to incite their demands and proclaim through the Spring Revolution. In this section, I will present and analyze four slogans and protest writings. Through them, I will locate queer counterpublics (Berlant & Warner 2005) and heteronormativity (Warner 1991) of the general public.

“Fearless Revolutionary Faggots”

The primary function of slogans is to persuade and incite (Stewart et al., 2001). They argue that even brief slogans can “encapsulate an intolerable situation in a few striking, memorable words’ and therefore can have a considerable impact on movement mobilization” (Stewart et al 2001, p. 176). In the Spring Revolution, we have seen slogans such as “Down with Dictatorship,” “Respect our Votes,” “Support Civil Disobedience Movement,” “Release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and our President,” and many more. Out of them, I will focus on slogans and protest writings which address and expand queerness.

The first slogan I am going to present is that of the LGBT Alliance – Myanmar. LGBT Alliance – Myanmar is a collective strike committee formed by LGBT groups from Mandalay, Yangon, Monywa, Kalay, Kyaukse, Dawei, and Yinmarbin townships.

They posted a slogan on their Facebook page on May 10, 2022. The slogan said, သေမှာမကြောက်လို့ ပေတရာလျှောက်တဲ့ တော်လှန်နေသော အခြောက်. It can be translated as “Faggot who march on the streets, dare to die/they are not scared of death, and they revolutionize”. In the Burmese language, ကြောက် (scared), ခြောက် (dry or a-chaut), and လျှောက် (march/walk) rhyme. Out of the categories made by Van De Velde (2022), this slogan has a ‘proclamation’ function. It contains a contested message, directed towards a wider public sphere. To put this slogan in Fairclough’s (2003) framework of discourse analysis, the propositional assumption is that these faggots/queer people are not scared of the military’s violent crackdown, they march on the streets and this fearless march alone is a revolutionary act. The value assumption will be that fearless queer people, marching and protesting on the streets, and doing revolutionary acts are good and desirable for this social movement. The existential assumption here will be a proclamation to let queer people into the space of revolution/a dominant public sphere. They did so by proving that queer people have qualities such as fearlessness/bravery and consciousness to perform duty/revolutionary acts. Terms like bravery and duty are attached to the ideals of manliness (Nagel 1998) and the slogan challenged this attachment. I will expand on this part later in this chapter.

In the framework of queer counterpublic (Berlant & Warner 2005), this slogan redefined notions of sexuality and identity through bringing positive connotation to the previously stigmatized term, *a-chaut* and consequently fostered a social change, a future in which queer people can participate in

the public sphere. Queer counterpublics are not limited to physical space therefore I would argue that this visual and verbal slogan is a queer counterpublic.

"District 16 without faggots"

In the previous chapter, I have argued that Burmese queer people dubbed (Boellstorff 2006) foreign (not just Western) terms such as *homo*, *LGBT*, *seme*, *uke,* etc to distance themselves away from *a-chaut* which carry negative connotations. Despite their desperate efforts, they were addressed as *a-chaut* in the Spring Revolution. This time it came out not from the police nor their bullies at school but from their revolutionary comrades. Moe, my interview subject, told me about this slogan which said "အခြောက်မရှိတဲ့ ဆယ့်ခြောက်". When I asked him when and where he saw this slogan, he only recalled that it must be within the first three or four months of 2021 and that the banner was carried by a strike group from Yangon or Mawlamyaing. Whereas I cannot trace the evidence back, I can vouch for my interview subject. I, myself, remember that I saw this slogan on Facebook. The slogan can be translated into English as "District 16, No-Faggot Zone". In the Burmese language, ခြောက် (number six, *chaut*) rhymes with အခြောက် (*a-chaut*). To put this slogan into Fairclough's (2003) framework, the propositional assumption is that there are no faggots in this particular area. The value assumption will be that this revolutionary space or geographic area is free of "faggots" who are sexual "deviants". The existential assumption is that faggots are not/should not be a part of the revolution/new nation.

For the analysis, I will use the relationship between middle-class respectability, nationalism, and sexuality (Mosse 1985). First, I will have to justify why I jumped to the framework of nationalism. Spring Revolution is not an anti-colonial nationalist movement, but I will show some elements of nationalism in it through three examples. In March 2022, a Burmese poet in exile (from the United States) named Aung Way referred to the Spring Revolution as a collective struggle to build a "Fifth Myanmar Nation/Empire". One of the most popular slogans in the Spring Revolution is "Towards a Federal Democracy Myanmar Nation". Burmese people who take part actively in the Spring Revolution usually call those who side with the military "Northern Burmese people". It is not geographically divided but a reference about North Korea being under a dictatorship.

With these three examples as justifications, I will put the protest slogan into Mosse's (1985) framework. The protest slogan, "District 16, No-Faggot Zone", took faggots/homosexuality as unacceptable groups of people/manner. The aim of the Spring Revolution they claim is to end the

military dictatorship and form a newly imagined nation (a Federal Democracy country). In their new nation, they still wanted to impose moral superiority over the lower classes and the aristocracy. To this end, respectability and its emphasis on manliness needed to be maintained. The line between normal and abnormal was drawn through homosexuals who symbolized the confusion between sexes (Mosse 1985, p. 25). In this way, queer people were excluded from District 16/a revolution space/a new nation.

"Min Aung Hlaing would be finished off with LGBT's Hpon"

The third protest slogan I am going to analyze was posted on LGBT Alliance – Myanmar Facebook page on November 11, 2021. The poster said, "With *Hpon* (spiritual status) of LGBT, Min Aung Hlaing would be finished off". This slogan calls for 'mobilizing' and internal cohesion to the protest in Van De Velde's (2022) framework. It means that they/we will end the military dictatorship with a collaboration between LGBT people and other subordinates such as women.

Before I dive into the analysis, I need to lay out some background information for this slogan. Traditionally, Burmese society has a belief that a man's spiritual status and holiness of a man (locally known as *Hpon*) can be lowered by a women's dress. A Burmese scholar, Mi Mi Khaing wrote that "we call it *hpon*, the glory, the holiness of a man, and we respect this not with subservience but with the same feelings as we respect monks and parents" (Khaing 1956, p. 71). It can be read as a localized form of patriarchy. Women do not have Hpon therefore they are not allowed to enter certain parts of pagodas. Because of this belief, *Hpon* and taboo against menstrual blood, women's clothing are separately washed and kept. In May 2019, a group of women activists initiated a campaign to counter this idea of *Hpon* on Facebook. It asked Facebook users to change a profile frame saying, "Women have *Hpon* too". Even though this campaign reinforced the ideology of *Hpon* itself, we could say it tackles the localized pattern of patriarchy. On International Women's Day 2021, the general strike committees challenged this belief and called for a campaign named *Htamein-thabaik* (Women's Undergarment Strike) to put up women's undergarments as flags. Some men participated in this campaign by putting women's undergarments onto their heads (which can lower their spiritual status, and holiness, according to the belief of Hpon) to show solidarity.

After I have discussed *Hpon* in the slogan, I need to decipher Min Aung Hlaing in it. Min Aung Hlaing is the commander-in-chief of the military who staged the coup. In this case, the LGBT Alliance – Myanmar did not refer to the military leader alone, but to the military institution.

The protest slogan of LGBT Alliance – Myanmar can be read as a solidarity move with their fellow women revolutionaries' struggle. Because this belief of holiness, *Hpon*, is solely based on the division between biological men and women. It does not necessarily extend to LGBT people. I would argue that this is a new strategy applied by Burmese queer people with a hint to queer counterpublic (Berlant & Warner 2005). Because I have not seen collaborative campaigns between women/feminists and LGBT activists before. In 2013, the Gender Equality Network (a network of more than 130 civil society organizations, formed with the aim of gender equality and fulfillment of women's rights in Myanmar), together with the Myanmar government and the United Nations, developed a bill named Protection and Prevention of Violence Against Women Law (PoVAW) which reached to the parliament in 2020 but never enacted because of the coup. This bill addressed gender-based violence experienced by women but failed to include lesbians and transgender women in the framework. Mainstream women's rights activists focused on biological women as well. On the other hand, LGBT activism (before the coup) such as the Colors Rainbow was busy with identity politics based on SOGIE. In this way, women/feminists and LGBT/queer people were divided along the line of identity politics. The LGBT Alliance – Myanmar broke this divided line.

Through the slogan, "With *Hpon* (spiritual status) of LGBT, Min Aung Hlaing would be finished off", they positioned themselves in solidarity with subordinate women. In this way, they put patriarchy and heteronormativity as the common enemies. As feminists and women's rights activists challenged the patriarchal *Hpon* belief, LGBT activism joined in the same struggle with women, challenging social norms against homosexuality altogether. By this strategy, LGBT Alliance – Myanmar became a site of resistance against both patriarchy and heteronormativity. I would name this as a queer world-making project which Berlant and Warner beautifully described as "a world-making project, where the world, like public, differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies" (Berlant and Warner 2005, p. 198). LGBT activism in the Spring Revolution is not just identity politics (even though the name itself says so) but is creative enough to incorporate other subordinate fellows into it. We have seen this change because this activism/queer counterpublic comes from the people and is not restricted by NGO politics.

“On the day when guardian spirits had homosexual sex”

The fourth protest writing I am going to analyze is a poetry-reading video. On January 1, 2023, a Facebook page named Art Rebel - အနုပညာသူပုန် posted this video. According to the information provided, the page has 81k followers, and it is based in Bangkok, Thailand (since after the coup, many political activists and others went to exile, some to third-world countries such as the United States, most to Thailand). In its intro, the text says, “Down with Fascism”. It usually posts poems and often does fundraising projects for People’s Defence Forces. The video I will discuss has 2600 likes, 116 comments, 614 shares, and 22,000 views. The video lasts two minutes and fifty-five seconds. The title is “On the day when guardian spirits had homosexual sex” and is written by someone with a penname called သွေးစက်နီ (red blood drop). The video is narrated by a male.

The lyrics can be translated as “On the day when guardian spirits had homosexual sex, martyrs were executed by hanging. In a nation crowded with funerals, those who fuck anus and those whose anus got fucked, those uncivilized Tarzans, all felt heated and enjoyed getting fucked by Min Aung Hlaing. Without any respect for the executed martyr who said, ‘Justice will prevail,’ those uneducated people howled. … When guardian spirits enjoyed getting fucked by Min Aung Hlaing, the gun won over justice. Jungle rules, motherfuckers with hungry/horny butts, licking bones given out by their masters. … Hey, motherfucker dogs, Min Aung Hlaing is a motherfucker. Hey, sons of prostitutes, Min Aung Hlaing is a motherfucker. Don’t get regretful only when your mothers are fucked by dogs/soldiers of Min Aung Hlaing. How many poets would have to die so that those of you who are only worth 5,000 Myanmar Kyats (roughly 2.5 USD)? Guardian spirits do not watch over this nation.”

To give some context, this video is supposedly intended to call for all Burmese people, in exile or within the country, to join the revolution and condemn those who side with the military and who (allegedly) take money from the military and take part in protests organized by the military. The martyr(s) mentioned in this poetry reading is(are) believed to be Phyo Zeyar Thaw, hip-hop singer, Kyaw Min Yu aka Ko Jimmy, 1988 Uprising student leader, Hla Myo Aung and Aung Thura Zaw, two civilian political prisoners who were executed to death by the military regime. Phyo Zeyar Thaw was arrested on terrorism charges on November 17, 2021. Kyaw Min Yu was arrested at his home on October 24, 2021, on the charges of inciting unrest with his social media posts. Hla Myo Aung and Aung Thura Zaw were arrested in March 2021 for allegedly killing a military informant. The state media reported the news on July 25, 2022, but the families were told that executed

sometime over the last weekend (could be July 23 or 24). The last time Myanmar practiced capital punishment was in 1988 (Burmese Service and Grace Tsoi, 2022). (The military put more than 100 people on death row for charges such as inciting unrest or killing informants. The reinstalment of capital punishment is thought to be aimed at instilling fear in Burmese rebellions.) It was a shocking news indeed and I can understand the narrator's anger and frustrations, but I have to point out that his rage was misplaced.

To go back to the analysis, the narrator referred to Min Aung Hlaing, the chief commander, and the soldiers as dogs and motherfuckers. Those (guardian spirits and people) who sided with the military were referred to as gay sex enjoyers, uncivilized *Tarzans*, uneducated, prostitutes' sons, dogs obeying their masters, and those whose butts are begging to be fucked. (As Massad (2007) put the equal amount of blame on the Gay International and the upper- and middle-class Arabs who identify as "gay", this protest writing categorized the military led by Min Aung Hlaing and those who could not afford to resist the coup in the same box.) Out of the "deviancies" he accused, I will focus on the parts of homosexual acts and *Tarzans*.

For the narrator, homosexual acts are not "correct" nor "decent" manners and morals at the same level as murdering people or committing war crimes. The same goes for prostitution. Selling your body/sex is an "indecent" manner from the narrator's point of view. Guardian spirits (and people) failing their duties to watch over the nation, bring justice, and not affiliate with the evil [military] is equated with people who have same-sex acts and perform prostitution. In this way, people who have male same-sex relations and prostitutes are excluded. The social hierarchy here can be read as heterosexism which V. Spike Peterson theorized as "a binary coding of polarized and hierarchical male/masculine and female/feminine identities (ostensibly based on a dichotomy of bio-physical features) and denies all but heterosexual coupling as the basis of sexual intimacy, family life, and group reproduction" (Peterson 1999, p. 39). This denial of non-heterosexual coupling and intimacies can be put into the framework of heteronormativity which Berlant and Warner (2005) argued, is "more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture" (Berlant & Warner 2005, p. 194).

After discussing the narrator's disgust towards homosexual sex acts and prostitution, I will move on to the part of uncivilized *Tarzans*. *Tarzan* is slang in the Burmese language to refer to those who come from rural areas. The slang takes its fictional origin in the jungle. Burmese equivalence of

Tarzan is *Taw-thar* (တောသား). *Thar* is a suffix for male and *Taw* could mean jungle or rural area. In the Burmese urban dictionary, people claim that Tarzan (*Taw-thar*) does not necessarily refer to those of rural descent but those who act uneducated or uncivilized, wherever they are originally from. But the wording itself indicates that being uneducated or uncivilized is equated with coming from rural (read poor or working class) origins. While I cannot trace the origin of the adoption of this urban slang, *Tarzan*, (whether it was taken from novel series by Edgar Rice Burroughs, an American writer, or the movie adaptions), it showed a hint of colonial fantasy. But Jules Zanger (1989) argued that there were no signs of white man's burden in Tarzan who carried "no torch of civilization or Christianity to the savages (Zanger 1989, p. 96) whereas Biljana Oklopčić (2017) pointed out that Tarzan represented a white, male equivalent to black rapist stereotype. *Tarzan*, the slang, in the Burmese context, not only carried a colonial remnant but also accounted for class formation. Like Beijing gay men had anxieties that money boys from the rural area would come and pollute their city life (Rofel 2007, p. 104), middle-class people in Burma showed anxieties that working-class people, receiving funds (2.5 USD) from the military, would make the revolution fail. As Mosse argued that "the middle class sought to maintain their status and self-respect against both the lower classes and the aristocracy, through respectability (Mosse 1985, p. 5), the middle-class people positioned themselves as "civilized" members of the new nation while naming working-class people [who took money from the military] as "dogs who lick bones, fed by their masters".

Honor, Good Citizens, and Queers

Like the narrator in the above video, many Burmese people try to persuade more people to join the revolution. The usual tactic is the line drawn between just and unjust, right and wrong/evil, bravery and cowardice, and good citizen and bad citizen. I will unpack the ties between nations and manliness (Nagel 1998) through two testimonials of my interview subjects.

Bobo, my interview subject, told me that he asked his friend, Thura if he would like to be part of my research too. He described that Thura was deaf, and I could not interview a phone call but by typing and chatting. When Thura agreed to participate in this research, I sent him a friend request on Facebook. I interviewed by typing back and forth with him on Facebook Messenger. He worked at the No. 25 Heavy Industry Factory, Myaing, owned by the military. When the military staged the coup, he joined the civil disobedience movement (locally known as CDM). Now he is responsible for the production of hand bombs at a local People's Defence Forces. He is also an "*LGBT* writer" who writes LGBT-themed short stories which have been published in some Burmese magazines. He also won prizes in LGBT themed short story competition, organized by Colors Rainbow.

He told me how he got involved in the People's Defence Forces. He felt guilty for enjoying his life while some other people had given their lives for the country already. He identified this guilt as one of the motivations to join the revolution. "They [referring to People's Defence Forces soldiers] are risking their lives for the country. They do not care about their own interests, they are saints. Unlike those military dogs who are animals." He drew a line at who's doing right and who's doing wrong. Thura's categorization of good men and bad men comes through ideals such as honor, bravery, and duty.

He added, "I joined this revolution because of good citizen's spirit and inability to stand injustice. Because I had a consciousness to perform a citizen's duty without anyone reminding me to do so. Another reason is … some colleagues at my former work distance themselves from me. That's homophobia. Now those straight "real men" do not join the CDM movement. They are scared and kneel under injustice. In other words, they are not manly. I wanted to prove that I whom they called unmanly could do manly acts, compared to those unmanly straight men. Actually, manliness is not related with hetero- or homo- sexuality but all about doing what's right and just, right?"

Thura was not the only one to challenge the ideal of manliness attached to heterosexual men. Nyo, another interview subject shared with me his experience of arguing with someone in the revolution. He was told to "act like a man" because he was a man. Then, he responded, "How do you mean by 'like a man'? Min Aung Hlaing is a man who is married to a woman. But can't you see how much trouble he is giving to the country? Would you call a man like him 'a good man'? How about women and LGBT people who are fighting at the front line? How about those [men] who live off LGBT people's money? Whom would you call 'a man'? Isn't it more important to be a good person [citizen]', whether they are a man or a woman?" Nyo was not naïve. He recalled that a gay friend of his was threatened by two members of the People's Defence forces (who were drunk back then) and asked for "pocket money" on a full-moon day (Burmese calendar is a lunar one and Burmese people celebrate every full-moon day). I noticed that he underscored this event by saying his friends and People's Defence Forces members had good relations back already because he did not want to paint the defence forces or the revolution bad. [This could be a good answer to the question raised by Mikdashi and Puar (2016).]

I will put these two testimonials into Nagel's (1998) framework of the linkage between nationalism and masculinity. She argued that "the culture of nationalism is constructed to emphasize and resonate with masculine cultural themes. Terms like honor, patriotism, cowardice, bravery, and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist since they seem so thoroughly tied

both to the nation and manliness" (Nagel 1998, p. 251-252). She reminded us that the 'microculture' of masculinity was more visible on the militaristic side of nationalism (ibid. p. 252).

Both Thura and Nyo praised patriotic acts such as "risking own lives for the country," "fighting at the front line," and "inability to stand injustice". They saw these acts as "good citizen's spirits". They were very much aware that society attached these qualities with manliness which was automatically translated into "being a heterosexual man". Thura was trying to bring positive connotations towards queer people who are usually thought to be un-manly in the lens of masculine notions of honor, cowardice, bravery, and duty. He saw straight "real men" being scared and kneeling under military power as feminine shame. Both of my interview subjects tried to include women and LGBT people (who are risking their lives for the nation) in the wider public sphere. They challenge heteronormativity (Warner 1991) by decrowning the hegemonic privilege of heterosexual culture over non-heterosexual sexualities. Berlant and Warner argued that queer counterpublics are not limited to a physical space and can be circulated through unconventional registers (Berlant & Warner 2005, p. 198). The testimonials of my interview subjects here are queer counterpublics, indeed.

In this chapter, I have analyzed four slogans/protest writings and two testimonials. Whereas my interview subjects adopted foreign terms to stay away from *a-chaut* (in the previous chapter), they not only encountered this stigmatized term as exclusionary homophobia but also reclaimed the term to include themselves in the bigger public sphere. I have also discussed how they created queer counterpublics by building solidarity with other subordinates such as women and challenging heteronormativity. They managed to unglue the link between ideals of manliness (bravery, honor, duty, etc) and heterosexuality in the nationalist agenda. Most importantly, I have shown that Burmese queer people, including my interview subjects, are not "passive agents".

CONCLUSION

Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielinska (2011) problematized the hegemonic Western temporality which is linear and progressive. They raised an important question which is "Is it possible to do non-identitarian politics (the Western model of queer) without going first through a stage of identity politics?" (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011, p. 18). As much as the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' was a queer time for Central and Eastern Europe, I would identify a decade of 2011-2023 in Burma as a queer time. Burmese queer people an abrupt change not only in 2011, in some way through the

internet freedom and freedom to mobilize, but also in 2021, in some other way through the military coup. Through different times and different socio-political situations, they deployed different strategies to challenge heteronormativity. Inspired by Kulpa and Mizielinska, I do not see queer activism in Burma as "catching up" with the West or "lagging behind" the West (Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011, p. 17). Some of them adopted identity politics (including the adoption/dubbing of Western sexualities) before 2021 and when the military coup came down on them, they had to adopt and adapt some new strategies. We have witnessed fruitful results and also some backlashes.

LGBT NGOs funded by Western donors played as important players in my thesis and LGBT activism in Burma. While I can see colonial tensions (Massad 2007) between the West and Burma, I managed to borrow "dubbing culture" (Boellstorff 2006) to appreciate old and new strategies deployed by local LGBT activists, queer people, and my interview subjects.

Spring Revolution was (and still is) a motivation for me to choose this topic and for my interview subjects to join my journey and for us to challenge heteronormativity. Through this social movement, Burmese queer people succeeded to develop queer counterpublics which were inclusive of other subordinates and managed to challenge masculinist nationalist politics.

We are haunted by the stigmatized term, *a-chaut*. But Aye, my interview subject told me about an encounter in which a queer People's Defence Forces member [who is 'a good citizen'] introduced himself as *a-chaut* [using dry humor] at a meeting with local people and was surprised to receive a remark from one of the local people saying, "You are not *a-chaut*. You are an *LGBT* person".

I would like to conclude with a testimonial of one of my interview subjects. I was on the verge of tears when he confessed to me that he told his close friend, "If I ever died in the revolution, please tell your children that your friend, *a-chaut-ma* [a derogatory term but he used to reclaim the word] did this or that in this movement. Our [queers'] contributions need to be documented. Otherwise, our experiences would be disappeared in the air. I have been doing this because I want the next generations of LGBT kids to sow what we reap. With this documented history, we could hope for a future in which we, LGBT/queer people, could love ourselves, get married to whom we love, and embrace ourselves, equally [as much as non-queer people enjoyed]" I genuinely hope that this research did justice to the lived experiences, resistance, and resilience (or decision to give up) of his, my interview subjects and Burmese queer people.

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