

Tani Sebro

Burmese in Hawai'i:

"Voting with our Feet" and Speaking for the Silent

TANI SEBRO

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tani Sebro is a researcher and PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Her most recent research centers on conceptions of space, aesthetic expression and the production counter-discourses to the nation by clandestine Burmese immigrants residing in Thailand. She has been working on issues related to refugees in the Thai-Burma border zone since 2005, and has worked as an Immigration Consultant to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tani Sebro has conducted ethnographic research with exiled and expatriate Burmese individuals living in the United States, as well as Tai migrants now living in Northern Thailand. She is also an avid dance practitioner and is currently exploring how kin-aesthetic methodologies both disrupt and enhance traditional ethnographic methods.

Based on the collection of oral narratives and ethnographic fieldwork amongst Burmese and Sino-Burmese individuals in Hawai'i, this study brings to light their experiences as transnational migrants. The oral narrative approach taken in this study has the potential to pluralize 'official' versions of Burmese history by providing new insights into the events that spurred the Burmese diaspora. I argue that Burmese in Hawai'i are uniquely situated to evoke cultural and linguistic capital in order to achieve social and economic success within a political economy of Asian settlers in the Hawaiian Islands. As a "community of practice," Burmese in Hawai'i organize social and religious events to maintain a sense of common origin and a continued understanding of a shared past. This paper asserts that through the collection of oral narratives it is possible to map motivations for diasporic movements ethnographically. However, in the Burmese example, problems of self-censorship and fears of imparting the past pose serious challenges to the oral narrative methodology.

Official histories can never capture all of the diversity of individual experiences; the study of personal narratives, on the other hand, multiplies the voices that reach us from the past.

- Roxanna Waterson¹

Even though we voted with our feet and left Burma many years ago, we still have emotional bond to the people of Burma and want to help.

- Mg Lu Lay²

There are manifold histories longing to be told about the Burmese³ diaspora; some are about exile, war, and displacement, others are about hope, reconciliation and belonging. Most stories will never be told out of fear of imparting a painful past, or because there exists

few avenues through which to talk about history, identity and the experience of being a migrant. This project began with the idea that life histories and historical narratives of Burmese refugees living in Hawai'i could be recounted and recorded by the ethnographer; that they would not be cloaked by the assumption that elaborate life narratives (akin to Paul Radin's *Crashing Thunder*)⁴ would emerge in the ethnographic encounter. Rather, I was hopeful that I could bring to light what Ranajit Guha⁵ has termed the "small voices of history". In the life narratives of Burmese émigrés in Hawai'i we find individual trajectories that are inextricably linked to the experience of carrying the Burmese past into the present. In considering a Burmese past mired by decades long colonial and military subjugation

tion, interethnic tensions and the suppression of free speech, multiple complexities arise in the attempt to establish a Burmese identity in Hawai'i.

This study explores the veiled histories of Burmese and Sino-Burmese peoples, who in the aftermath of the military takeover of Burma in 1962 and student uprisings in 1988, immigrated to the United States. Burmese émigrés now residing in Hawai'i share a unique assemblage of historical narratives and embodied experiences that provide multi-vocal insights into the events that spurred the Burmese diaspora and the conditions they face as transnational migratory subjects in foreign arenas. This project is based on participant observation and interviews with the Burmese population in Honolulu, Hawai'i from 2009 to 2010. While the life narrative account may pluralize versions of history⁶, this paper deals with the many limitations of the oral narrative approach in interviews with Burmese living in Hawai'i.

In particular, I look at strategies for generating cultural capital, the organization of community events, the religious lives of diasporic Burmese, self-censorship in the interview encounter and how the structure of the American immigration system conditions the daily lives, aspirations and goals of Burmese in America. Aihwa Ong's notion of "flexible citizenship" informs this analysis as it neatly captures the intersubjective meanings enacted by the transnational flows and settlements of Burmese overseas.⁷ As Thomas Hylland-Eriksen notes, "[t]he tension between diasporas and nations is obvious;" however the tension between diasporic identities and settler identities is not as obvious.⁸ The narratives herein tell the stories of the unfolding histories that are taking place in America as an immigrant community of practice establishes its place in the multicultural milieu of Hawai'i.

The research scope of this project comprises the systematic collection of oral narratives obtained from eighteen Burmese research collaborators in Honolulu, Hawai'i and Daly City, California. The collection of these narratives was informed by fifteen months of participatory observation in private homes and in public spaces such as restaurants, cafes, shops, and cultural festivals. Comparable work on Southeast Asian diasporic groups residing in the United States has informed this study. Nancy Smith-Hefner's *Khmer American*,⁹ a study of Cambodian refugees in Boston,

Waterson's collection of *Southeast Asian Lives*,¹⁰ and Aihwa Ong's *Buddha is Hiding*,¹¹ which details her fieldwork with Khmer Americans in the Bay Area, have served as guides on doing research amongst Southeast Asian immigrants in the United States. Central to these studies are the themes of war, poverty and oppression in the context of the diasporic experience. Many Burmese live with the social memory or experience of violence, war and fear. These are themes for which further explication is sought in my research; as these embodied memories condition the daily lives of Burmese abroad.

Lila Abu-Lughod employs the life history approach in her writings on Egyptian Bedouin societies—an approach that destabilizes notions of cultures as fixed structural entities with established binary and archetypal categories.¹² Instead of using notions of culture as fixed or reified entities, she argues that anthropologists ought to "write against culture" by examining what it is like to *live culture*, as a dynamic process in which individuals must navigate and negotiate life worlds and events that become a "part of the history of the family, of the individual involved, and their relationships."¹³ The life history interview, despite its problematic frame and scope, becomes an alternative to the *observed* versions of cultures by providing diachronic narratives.

Burma has a long and arduous past as a former British colony, and until very recently, suffered under a military regime, which exerted violent authority over its subjects. As Hanna Arendt relates in her discourse *On Violence*, "the loss of power becomes the temptation to substitute violence for power."¹⁴ The military's system relies on a rationale based on *violence* to maintain its hegemonic role, and the Burmese State is but an extreme case of the standard rule for government's maintenance of illegitimate power over citizens.¹⁵ An emphasis on suffering and victimhood arises from post-structuralist discourses on migration, violence and war.¹⁶ This research however, primarily deals with middle-class Burmese citizens who have left Burma as economic refugees or to find opportunities for study abroad, and as a consequence, may not identify with many of the normative characterizations of the refugee experience as a process of victimization.

Following Aihwa Ong's work with re-settled Cambodian refugees in California, she describes the "latitudes of citizenship" embedded in the new economic

spaces of a global neoliberal logic of entrepreneurship and transnational labor.¹⁷ According to Ong's model of citizenship formation, migratory groups organize laterally to provide "freedom from narrow limits (of nation-states and legal regimes) as well as the scope and flexibility to combine disparate combinations of rights, privileges and labor conditions in a geography of production."¹⁸ However, characterizing the transnational migrant from Burma, Cambodia or elsewhere in the Global South, as entering into a lateral system of labor and access, masks the internal hierarchy of migratory subjects – where equal access to opportunity comes with groups who value entrepreneurship and move for the sake of profits and prestige and not only because they are fleeing war and oppression. These are so-called "economic refugees," and are seen to only be searching for "greener pastures" according to a research collaborator. The experience of exile conforms to an international hierarchy of identities, where individuals simultaneously belong to one or several nation-states – where they reside, where they work, where their families live – whilst concurrently belonging to a kin-group, ethnic-group, speech community, with additional political, social and economic affiliations *ad infinitum*.¹⁹

What follows is an attempt to situate the Overseas Burmese as settlers in the U.S.; they are minorities among minorities in Hawai'i and individuals with intersubjective longings, ideals and motivations. Following Luke Eric Lassiter's *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*, I refer to my informants as "research collaborators," rather than informants and I provide them with the option to review and amend transcribed versions of interviews.²⁰ As a result, interviews take on new meanings in editing process, and research collaborators are given a greater degree of assurance that their words will not endanger them or their relatives in the future. I owe much gratitude to my research collaborators – I have strived to protect their identities through pseudonyms and have been careful not to disclose information that could be used to identify them.²¹

Changing Socioscapes : From Yangon to Honolulu

The late model Mercedes taxi cab sped through the streets of Yangon passing vendors, temples, school

children, men clad in traditional *longyis* and billboards advertising Chinese goods. On this dimmed and grey afternoon, my first day in the sweltering heat of Burma's former capital city, I labored to absorb everything new that my body was sensing. The smell of golden *thanaka* – the apple wood bark paste used to protect one's skin from the sun, the cracked and aged leather of the taxi-cab, the fresh white ginger lei hanging from the rearview mirror, the cacophony of the motorized city, and the oppressive gray palette of the skies blending in with dilapidated buildings. Sudden flourishes of gold appeared in the city-scape, and as the car drew nearer I could see them taking the shape of magnificent *chedis* and pagodas. Everywhere the geospatial hierarchy of power is evidenced in the city, where the only well maintained buildings are Buddhist temples and government military complexes. The car downshifted to a slow crawl as we approached the Shwedagon Pagoda – the largest and most famous pagoda-complex in Burma. The golden bell-shaped pagoda dominates the skyline, and as I pressed my face against the window to get a better look, I saw a figure hurling towards me, a man banging his fists against the window where I was sitting. He wasn't much of a brute, but rather a slight figure dressed in rags and leaning on a crutch that was acting as a substitute for his missing leg. He held his free hand out towards me with a desperate gaze fixed on my face. I scrambled in my purse for cash, but couldn't make sense of the bills I had just exchanged at the airport. My tour guide instructed the taxi driver to drive off with haste before I could give the man a single *kyat*. Then the guide turned to me and said, "I am so sorry about that. We don't *really* have beggars in Yangon – he must have been crazy!" I looked back as the emaciated beggar-man hung his head and limped away.

The beggar-man, the protesting monk, the ethnic minority, the political activist or any other individual considered marginal in Burma must lay low to survive. They must not be visible in the 'socioscape,'²² especially not when foreigners might see them and draw conclusions about the state of affairs in Burma. Modern day Burma is silently governed by a regime that habitually demands of the people forced labor, army recruits, supplies, money and compliance. Philippe Bourgois characterizes the "every-day" nature of this sort of structurally enabled violence as something that "runs rampant around us in a terrifying conspiracy of silence."²³ The banal character of violence and public

humiliation in Burma often manifests erratically, as one research collaborator explains:

One incidence was while I was driving on the so-called highway in Burma and one of the, I think a colonel who was following from the back. I didn't know he was at the back of my car. I just kept on going and all of a sudden the guards come in front of my car stopped it and he was scolding at me: "Why you don't move or stop?" Like this, so I.... really make me upset and was so I... say you know "you can't do that to me".

I was not aware of a military convoy escorting a colonel was at the back --- all the cars, etc must move to the side to make way for them --- I continued driving. Suddenly, the policemen, military personals all surrounded my car and shouted, screamed, scolded and about to beat me up for not moving to the side.²⁴

People in Burma must be careful not to attract the watchful gaze of military personnel when entering the public realm. Michel Foucault notes that the panopticon, or the all seeing eye, when exercised by an institution of power, is the ultimate and most convenient form of control, it is "a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorisation to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself."²⁵ Foucault's concept of the panopticon is the internalization of an omnipresent gaze. It is that knowledge-complex which maintains the walls of the prison-state Burma has come to be: an interior prison, or an 'exit inwards' for Burmese people living on the margins. The above story, about military personnel claiming absolute right-of-way even on the public highway and punishing anyone insolent enough to be driving when a colonel approaches from behind, elucidates the kinds of everyday state-sanctioned bullying that occurs. As a submissive subject in the military state, you must at all times show compliance in the face of the all-seeing sovereign.

The violence in Burma can also be explicit, immediate and haunting. In a recounting of the theatre of violence that gripped the streets of Yangon in 1988, a research collaborator is witness to the crimes of the military, for which he still bears the burden of memory:

In 1988 was the student uprising and the ... I saw the military people... and I saw the military people killing all the students and the innocent people who were demonstrating peacefully. I mean just shouting ... and they killed everybody.²⁶

The streets of Yangon are on an average day deceptively tranquil, a slumbering public stopped in its momentum of promised prosperity, peace and development that never came. But beneath the surface lies a powerful tension between Burma's half a million military personnel and a civilian populace that overwhelmingly resents the autocratic rule of the Tatmadaw or the Myanmar Armed Forces²⁷. In Burma, people are living with the social memory of violence following the protests of 8/8/88. An event, that proved through its terrifying spectacle of violence, that no matter how loud their voices cry, or how long they protest "the military would reassert its power."²⁸

To disrupt this image of the post-colonial come neo-militaristic frame of the Burmese city, the Burmese migrant, through the transnational flow of people in the Pacific, also known as the "Pacific shuttle", has made it to the Hawaiian Islands of the mid-Pacific.²⁹ As the world's most isolated archipelago, the Hawaiian Islands with its lush tropical landscape and strategic geographic position is a premier global tourist attraction as well as cosmopolitan hub for the trans-Pacific movement of people, goods and ideas. Hence, it is not surprising that among other South-, East- and South-east Asian immigrants, Burmese are also settling here.

With approximately 75% of the population considered minorities, Hawai'i is the most diverse state in the U.S.³⁰ Compared to U.S. averages, where Asian-Americans are only 5.1% of the total population, in Hawai'i this group numbers at 38.3% of the population and when counting people with Asian ethnicity in combination with one or more ethnic "race", Asians in Hawai'i number at 55.3% of the total population.³¹ The presence of peoples with Asian backgrounds in Honolulu, is evident in the city's various East and Southeast Asian cultural centers, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist temples and a plethora of Asian culinary institutions that make up today's diverse cultural landscape on the island of O'ahu.

Burmese tend to create cultural enclaves and social spaces of 'ethnic' or national group interaction when living abroad, which is common amongst migrants everywhere. This is seen in Daly City, California, home to the largest grouping of Burmese outside of Burma and in Mae Sot, Thailand, a city principally comprised of Burmese refugees. However, mapping this ethnic landscape in Honolulu becomes problematic, as there are no institutions where one can go and encounter

Burmese, in contrast with other more dominant groups such as the Chinese, Japanese and Filipino community and cultural centers. My research collaborators estimate there being approximately 100-150 Burmese households in Honolulu and around 300 individuals of Burmese descent, but the exact numbers are difficult to obtain. Most of my research collaborators are of Burman (the dominant Burmese ethnic group) or Sino-Burman (Chinese) descent, but there are also some that report having mixed Shan, Mon and Karen ethnic lineage. Today Burmese émigrés in the United States total at about 100,200.³² But the figures are believed to be much higher due to the significant number of Sino-Burmans who tend to identify themselves as Chinese or “other” in census reports.³³

Ko ko Thett, writing for the online journal *Burma Digest*, explains that “Burmese living abroad can be divided into two major groups, exiles and expats.”³⁴ Exile Burmese refers to those who emigrated in the wake of the 1988 student uprisings due to persecution by the military. Expatriate Burmese refers to those who resettled abroad during the Ne Win era to escape the hostile economic and social milieu, but also students who, as Kin-kin explains it, are “looking for greener pastures.” Expatriate or overseas Burmese who have left Burma for economic reasons or to take advantage of educational opportunities in the United States are often highly educated and economically well-off. Most Burmese settlers in Hawai‘i could be categorized as being a part of an “Asian settler colonialism,” which according to Candice Fujikane, “implies being in possession of the political power to colonize.” The following section details how Burmese and Sino-Burmese settlers in Hawai‘i have come to occupy a bifocal status as (1) immigrants escaping the harsh conditions in Burma and (2) socio-economically successful Asian settlers.³⁵

Evoking Cultural Capital: Making it on the Asian Settler Island

On a warm and clear Sunday morning during the fall of 2009, I set out to join an informal gathering of Burmese expatriates. I was invited to join gathering Burmese families at a public park for a picnic and in looking for the park I overlooked the signs pointing towards a hillside private gated community. Slightly bewildered, I turned around and found my turn, bring-

ing me to a large wrought iron gate with a manned security station at the foot of a grandiose hill with even more grandiose mansions atop it. “ID card please. Who are you here to visit?” I fumbled around my bag for my identification card and answered the security inspector nervously, “Uhm.. I am meeting some Burmese people in the park”. The inspector did not look pleased, but after scanning my driver’s license and taking note of my license plate number, he allowed me passage. As I drove up the hillside I passed splendid mansion after mansion until I reached the private park at the apex of the gated hillside community. A spectacular view overlooking the ocean, foot paths leading into the pleasant forest and a parking lot filled with top-line model cars made this seemingly casual picnic gathering in the manicured private hillside park a rather telling affair about the socio-economic status of many Burmese who have settled in Hawai‘i.

Most literature on refugees and immigrants attends what Liisa Malkkii refers to as the “universal language of human suffering” by engaging in a refocuses on the psychological trauma of the itinerant individual.³⁶ This speaks to the many pitfalls of doing fieldwork amongst Burmese abroad, where the researcher imputes a socioeconomic status upon a group, not based on empirical evidence, but upon popular discourses which depict the Burmese person as poor and destitute. Although Asian Americans are the so-called American “model minority”, according to Ong, one could easily assume that in comparison with business-savvy and entrepreneurial Chinese, Japanese and Koreans who have been living in Hawai‘i for generations, the Burmese population would not be of comparable status.³⁷ However, contrary to exile Burmese on the mainland, Burmese expatriate research collaborators in Hawai‘i occupy a comfortable socio-economic status where most are entrepreneurs, doctors, professors or business owners. This calls for an examination of how Burmese in Hawai‘i have come to obtain a level of relative high socio-economic status despite the adversity they faced while living in Burma? Some research collaborators stress that living in Hawai‘i is easy because the climate is similar and Burmese are not treated in the same way as on the mainland. In Hawai‘i, Burmese blend in with other minorities like Filipinos, Vietnamese and Chinese. However, those who are able to stay in Hawai‘i must have salient careers, be pursuing an education or have a supportive kin-network.

The majority of the expatriate Burmese that have settled in Hawai'i are of Chinese heritage from wealthy families in Burma, where they owned shops or traded goods with Chinese merchants. Much has been written about the Chinese business character and their astute ability for success in foreign business.³⁸ Ong makes the argument that we must be careful in pegging Chinese as operating solely in an Asian business mode, while recognizing their historic role in driving the mechanisms of late capitalism:

Indeed there may not be anything uniquely "Chinese" about flexible personal discipline, disposition, and orientation; rather, they are the expression of a habitus that is finely tuned to the turbulence of late capitalism."³⁹

When General Ne Win came to power in 1962, he instated a discriminatory policy against all non-Burmans. This policy especially targeted wealthy Chinese merchants living in Yangon. Military officials set out to destroy Chinese shops, shut down their schools and Mahayana Buddhist temples. This was done in the name of Gen. Ne Win's "Buddhist Socialism" programme, which initiated a hegemonic plan to reclaim Burma for Burmans. Most of the Sino-Burmans expatriates in Honolulu and elsewhere in the U.S. were victims of this discriminatory policy and it has been a major factor in the outflow of Sino-Burmans from Burma during the Ne Win period.

Two Sino-Burmans interviewed have been very successful after leaving Burma in the 70's. They left as a reaction to General Ne Win's 1962 military coup d'état and subsequent discrimination against Chinese or Sino-Burmans living in Burma as merchants. The Chinese in Burma were seen as elites and Ne Win's strategy for nationalizing the nation's assets, dramatically reduced Chinese economic and cultural influence – so much so, that many second generation Chinese or Sino-Burmans, who had been educated and brought up as elites, silently revolted and finally decided to leave Burma.

Mg Lu Lay was born and raised in Yangon. His family originally hailed from China and he had some minority Mon heritage. After the 1962 coup by General Ne Win, Mg Lu Lay decided that he and his wife needed to leave the country due to the difficult circumstances for Sino-Burmans. They were both studying medicine and saw no future for themselves had they stayed in Burma. So

they prepared to leave for Hong Kong. They were only allowed to leave with \$5 and arrived in Hong Kong with barely enough provisions to survive. With some help, they were able to continue their medical studies in Hong Kong. In 1997, when Hong Kong was to be delivered back to China from Great Britain, Mg Lu Lay decided he did not wish to stay there any longer. Meanwhile, his siblings and parents were granted residency status in the U.S., and he therefore applied for an immigrant visa and was eventually granted citizenship. He took up residency in Hawai'i, while his wife worked in Hong Kong and they are now reunified and are running a successful medical practice in Honolulu. The following is an excerpt of his personal narrative:

Initially, the living conditions were really good [in Burma], we had a big house, chauffeur, gardener. Everything was good. But then we look at outside, the people are getting poorer and poorer, there is no freedom of speech, assembly.

[...] they [the military] were very oppressive. When I graduated and decided to leave Burma. It took us about two years to leave Burma. We had to bribe every step to get a passport to leave Burma. So, in [the mid 70s] I left Burma to Hong Kong and started life. When I left, we were allowed to take only a very small amount. I think five US dollars only. And we start from five dollars until now. In [the 90s], I moved here to Hawai'i to escape from the Chinese takeover of Hong Kong.

[...] So, we voted with our feet and we left Burma. At that time we were young and aggressive, and there was no future for us because the education, medical facilities, everything was deteriorating. The time clock was stopped since 1962. Whereas the neighboring countries are slowly progressing, Burma is not making progress anymore.⁴⁰

Candice, a middle aged mother from Yangon who lives in Daly City, California, says she came to America through a family reunification in her husband's family, but had nothing upon arrival. She worked in a garment factory in San Francisco in sweatshop conditions before she was able to find work in a Chinese bank. She could speak fluent Mandarin and some Cantonese, in addition to her English speaking skills, which gave her the proficiency required to work in one of San Francisco's banks that catered mostly to Chinese-Americans. She gives the following narration of her experience in a phone interview:

My parents, my mom and my dad they all emigrated from China. After Ne Win takeover, the business went down. And it went downhill and the government closed the businesses. The Burmese hated the Chinese – they would go to Chinese businesses and destroy them, they would come to your apartment and say “this is our house.”

[...]My father envisioned living abroad and moving to the US. So, my father arranged for me to become engaged when I was 15 to a man whose family had plans to go to the US. At that time, my sister-in-law had already gone to the US and she petitioned to have the family come over.

So I lived with my brother-in-law’s family and worked with my sister-in-law at a sewing factory in Chinatown. I was paid by the hour as a seamstress and by how many garments I made. I did not make much – about \$100 dollars a month. I had Chinese speaking skills and had been taking night classes in accounting, so I went to a bank in Chinatown and they give me job – because I can speak Cantonese and Mandarin. A half year later I moved to another bank and after that I got a job with the [X company] for doing bookkeeping and accounting – I have been working in the [X position] for [X] years.”⁴¹

The ascendancy of the Sino-Bumans in the United States and their ability to turn around an otherwise grim situation is not simply due to their capitalist habitus, but is owed primarily to their ability to use Chinese cultural and linguistic capital.⁴² The reason behind the success of Burmese in Hawai‘i is twofold. Firstly, Sino-Burmans have entered into a social semiotic arena where they represent “asianness” to some degree, which is a habitus of cultural capital in an Asian-dominated cultural and political immigrant economy. The example of Candice’s life narrative is an apt illustration of this phenomenon; where she finds her way to the U.S through familial networks and gains access to jobs through her linguistic abilities in Mandarin and Cantonese. Sino-Burmans not only evoke the habitus of the modern Chinese merchant, but also the linguistic cultural capital required to ensure success. Thus, by seeking out members who share cultural, symbolic, linguistic, economic and political modes of exchange, the diasporic person finds herself “closer to home.”

Secondly, Sino-Burmans are reenacting the cultivation of what has been termed *guanxi* networks and regimes that have for centuries been conjured at the edge of the Chinese empire.⁴³ These *guanxi* – or interpersonal and familial networks – have been instru-

mental in avoiding the othering and symbolic acts of violence against Chinese in Southeast Asia that have emerged as a reaction to the rise of the Chinese mer-



CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / CRUSSELL@STARBUCKET.COM
Ma Khin Tint paid respect to her elders yesterday at the Burmese in Hawaii Myanmar Thingyan celebration held at Wilson Elementary School.

Figure 1 Burmese New Year Celebration, 2008 (Photo by Honolulu Star Bulletin)

chant class. By organizing laterally through kin and personal networks, Sino-Burmans have been able to succeed through a “diasporan-Chinese modernity” in overseas semiotic systems, while retaining their Burmese identities, religion and language.⁴⁴ However, it is important to note that not everyone does as well as the Mg Lu lay and Candice. As one research collaborator notes, we must remember that Burmese in Hawai‘i are very different from Burmese on the mainland as “Most of the Burmese that are here are doctors and well-off. But, on the mainland people are still struggling.”

Thingyan: The Festival of Play and Renewal

My first encounter with the Burmese community in Honolulu came with an invitation to attend the annual Burmese New Year’s Festival, *Thingyan*, also known as the Water Festival, which is celebrated throughout Theravāda Buddhist Southeast Asia. During the festival people normally honor their elders, eat together, dance, perform the *Than Gyat* (satire revue) and playfully sprinkle each other with water to “wash away any bad fortune of the past year and “transit” (*thingyan* in Burmese) to the New Year.⁴⁵

There were approximately 50 participants at the gathering; most of whom had an organizational or ceremonial role in the events that followed. The festival began by having the younger generation pay homage to the elders by bowing to them and giving them gifts of water and shampoo. The theme of the festival is to give thanks for the harvest, but also to start the New Year by being cleansed by water and soap. As the festivities went on, there were traditional dances performed, as well as the customary *Than Gyat*, a row of unrestricted social and political satire. The *Than Gyat* was mostly performed in Burmese, but the whole room, including me, was roaring with laughter by the end.

After eating a hearty bowl of “mo-hinga”, the Burmese national dish, made from fermented fish, onion and noodles, the water ceremony was set to begin. I had made friends with some young students sitting at my table and they convinced me to come outside with them to participate (which, I gladly did). Outside on the lawn, large barrels of water were standing ready and before I knew it I was soaking wet from head to toe. I ran, splashed, doused, spritzed and even plunged into the barrel of water with my new friends. For a moment I realized that all the older Burmese were still inside, watching the amusements outside on the lawn and I felt like this may spoil my chances of talking with some of them since I was now soaking wet and had been seen running after teenagers with water bottles like a mad woman. But they were exceedingly kind, and I made numerous new contacts and friends. Many of whom I stayed in touch with over the summer while I was in Thailand and visited Burma. They offered helpful advice about travelling alone in Burma and we scheduled meetings upon my return. For me, making an entrance into my field site meant shedding my research cloak and quite literally taking the plunge.

I returned a year later to participate in the annual *Thingyan* festival. This time, research collaborators displayed the same resounding warmth and hospitality that I experienced the first year, but after a year conducting interviews and attending social events with many of the *thingyan* attendees, my return was marked by a heightened feeling of inclusion and friendship. The *Thingyan* festival – is an organizing social event that promotes symbolic purification before the New Year, but it is also a way of accepting newcomers into the community and strengthening the social bond between Burmese in Hawai'i. Not all Burmese in Hawai'i

attend the *Thingyan* festival, but all are certainly expected and encouraged to come and participate. Most community members had a specific role to fill in the festivities such as making the food, performing dances, emceeing, ushering, cleaning etc. Non-Burmese are also welcomed to attend and to participate in the celebration. I had e-mailed one of the organizers to see if I could help with anything during the festival and he



Figure 2 Mo-hinga. Photo by Tani Sebro, 2010

wrote to me saying that I should perform one of the traditional Burmese dances. I was honored by the invitation, but terrified at the notion of learning a dance that I had no previous experience with on such short notice, so I declined. When the dance component of the festival program began, several research collaborators lamented that I was not dancing with them and promised that by next year's festival they would have me trained and ready to perform.

The *Than Gyat* is a kind of Burmese folk satire where the events of the past year are recapped with joy and laughter through music, poetry and story-telling to a drum beat. At the *Thingyan* festival, the performers along with festival participants went up on stage to take part in the *Than Gyat* that was lead by one of the Burmese uncles. The uncle puts on a silver makeshift hat and he proclaims that this is “the hat of a *bobo*, which means minister.” He proceeds to make a series of jokes and jests, punctuated by the beating of a drum cymbal. Happily he likened the performers to a bowl of

mohynga: “Here we have noodles, egg, beans and fish mixed together in a bowl and together we have a *Than Gyat*.”

As a subversive discursive genre, the *Than Gyat* is often used to lever cleverly disguised critiques at the Burmese military or about greater societal problems. For this reason, the *Than Gyat* is seen as a dangerous form of public “voicing” by the Military in Burma. The

“Buddhism is teachings”: Burmese Diasporic Religious Engagement

The Burmese community in Honolulu is largely Theravada Buddhist, believing in the ‘teachings of the elders’ and adhering to the Buddhist acumen promulgated by the Pali Canon. Buddhism is deeply entrenched in Burmese cultural praxis and makes up much of the spiritual landscape of the nation, where



Figure 3 *Than Gyat* performance. Photo by Tani Sebro, 2010

famed dentist, cum public satirist Zarganar was banned from public performances after criticizing the military government for their oppression (Ko Thet 2006). In addition to banning Zarganar from the limelight, the military also disbanded public *Than Gyat* performance during future Thingyan festivals. Ko Thett (2006), writing for *Irawaddy* says that “*Than Gyat* scripts now have to undergo strict scrutiny by the censors, ensuring that the shows lose all their original sting.” Many knew it was only a matter of time before the government would see this public form of mockery and “double-speak” be deemed as a potentially threatening arena, where the authority of the military could be undermined openly in the form of subversive jests.

over 85 per cent of the population in Theravada Buddhist.⁴⁶ The Buddhist institutions of merit-making and *kamma* (karma), account for the deep religiosity in Burma. In a country that for the past century has experienced harrowing violence, natural disasters, war and poverty – people seek refuge in the three jewels: the Buddha, the *Sangha* (monastic community) and the *Dhamma* (teachings). Buddhist practitioners in Burma told me that it is believed by many that the grim misfortunes of the nation are the result of *karma* accumulated in past lives. Making merit is the way to atone for misdeeds committed in past lives and to ensure an improved status at rebirth.

While most research participants I spoke with were Theravada Buddhists, some community members were Christian and some followed mixed Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist practices as a result of their Sino-Burman heritage. In Hawai‘i, there is no Burmese style

Theravada Buddhist temple where the Burmese community members may come and practice their faith. Yet, there are Thai, Laotian and Khmer temples where practitioners go for special ceremonies. Most Burmese in Hawai'i simply practice at home, as this exchange with Kin-kin illustrates:

Tani: Do you practice Buddhism?

Kin-kin: I don't go to the temple or the pagoda... have a shrine in my house – why go out? Some people go to the temple once a week and they believe that if they are good one day it is ok to be bad another day.⁴⁷

Kin-kin finds that Buddhism can be an inward experience and should be incorporated in everyday life. Ma Kyin Mi, who came to Hawai'i as a student, also feels that Buddhist practice is can be done at any instance and in the absence of religious institutions: "You know, you don't have to go to temple to practice – it is in your mind. My own belief is that as long as I have clean mind, do no harm to other and have self-science, I am religious enough."⁴⁸

During my travels in Burma in 2009, I discussed with locals the issue of having a military regime that simultaneously uses violence to maintain power while adhering to Theravada Buddhist principles, within which non-violence is a central tenet. High-ranking military officials regularly erect pagodas and lavishly gild Buddha images with gold leaf for the accumulation of merit. A pagoda in Mandalay had images of the General Than Shwe, Burma's current military leader, prostrating before a Buddha image, during a ceremony where he donated large amounts of gold to be applied to the famous Maha Muni Buddha image. The event was widely advertised, but an informant told me that during the ceremony, no civilians were in attendance. This was partly out of fear and partly stemming from a deep sense of disagreement with the military's actions and their simultaneous adherence to Buddhist morality. Most Burmese do not believe that engaging in conspicuous gift-giving and public merit making will provide atonement in the afterlife for the kinds suffering the Burmese military has caused in the last decades.

Other research collaborators confirmed the trend towards practicing their faith in the privacy of their home, but expressed the desire to have a Burmese temple with Burmese monks where the community can go to observe rituals. There are some efforts underway

to make this happen and the Burmese Theravada Buddhists actively seek out opportunities for Burmese speakers to travel to Hawai'i to give "dhamma talks" about Buddhist teachings.

Dhamma Talk

In late fall of 2009, a research collaborator invited me via e-mail to join him and the Burmese community for a Dhamma talk on compassion and wisdom to be held at a Roosevelt High School in Honolulu. The talk was given by the Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw Ashin Nyanissara, who is a famous abbot from Sagaing, Burma with great repute throughout Burma and the Theravada Buddhist world. He is a well know socially engaged Buddhist, who has established numerous pagodas and hospitals as well as helping eradicate poverty and hunger in Burma. He recently sent 550 trucks with supplies to 3500 villages affected by Cyclone Nargis, in addition to rebuilding 5 High Schools, 12 Hospitals and 2300 monasteries in the area by his own account.



Figure 4 Gen. Than Shwe kneeling before Maha Muni Buddha statue, digital photo by Tani Sebro

The Venerable Sayadaw (chief monk or abbot), as he is referred to by the Burmese in Hawai'i is, however, most famous for his Dhamma talks, which can be found on YouTube and elsewhere online. To hear him speak in person is quite a rare and auspicious occasion. A research collaborator told me he was in Hawai'i for only two days in order to give the talk and collect donations, and he would be flying to the Big Island of Hawai'i after he gave his talk to see the spectacular geological activity at Volcanoes National Park. His sojourn in Hawai'i was a stopover on his way to a Theravada Buddhist monastery he has established in Texas.



Figure 5 A high-ranking military official applies gold leaves to the Maha Muni Buddha image, digital photo by Tani Sebro

The Hawai'i based nonprofit Aloha Medical Mission assists the Venerable Sayadaw in his expansive charity work by sending medical teams to Burma along with equipment and monetary aid. Many of the doctors who assist with the Aloha Medical Mission's efforts were in attendance to hear the talk. Several of the Burmese doctors that live in Honolulu are affiliated with the Aloha Medical Mission and have taken several volunteer tours to Burma in order to provide relief for this impoverished or disaster stricken areas.

Aloha Medical Mission goes to the third world country, to the developing country and then they treat the poor people so in Burma... mostly minor surgeries and they collect all the medicine equipment... and then they ship it to Burma and then they work for about five days and then they go back.⁴⁹

In 2008, the team provided medical services to victims of Cyclone Nargis – being one of the only medical teams to finally be granted visas for entry on humanitarian grounds by the Myanmar Embassy in Washington DC, largely because of the Venerable Sayadaw's endorsement and support of the group.⁵⁰ My research collaborators informed me that there would be another

mission to Saigaing in October of 2010 and that I should apply to join them to document their relief efforts.

The Roosevelt High School auditorium was well suited to host the *Dhamma* talk and the 40-50 visitors barely filled half the auditorium. The event was organized by several key figures in the Burmese community and attended by a diverse crowd of; mostly middle aged Burmese, but also some Westerners with seeming interests in Burma and Theravada Buddhism. In the context of not having a religious temple on island, the presence of this highly auspicious religious figure transformed the lackluster High School auditorium into a religious and social space. There was anticipation and excitement in the air as the Venerable Sayadaw was announced.

He entered from the back of the auditorium, coming down the stairway and making his way up to the stage where he was greeted with prostrations and honorific bows in the Burmese style. A few monks from the Thai-Laotian monastery were given seats to his far left. The Venerable Sayadaw himself wore a reddish-orange robe and entered with a commanding gait. He sat upon a gilded seat-throne atop the vast empty stage. Beauti-

ful flower decorations were arranged around him and he was handed a microphone. He took out a pocket watch and placed it on the small table beside him; he then began his talk by announcing:

Good evening. [some members of the audience press their palms together and bow in reverence]. My name is Ashin Nyanissara. Ashin means reverend or venerable. Nyana – means wisdom. Issara – in Buddhist language also means king of wisdom. So you can call me the king of wisdom. This is my name. I am not going to say much about myself. I came here to share my knowledge, my experience with you. Buddhism is my life. Study for 50 years now. I am 73 years young, not old. Because my mind is always fresh, therefore I would like to say that my mind is fresh.⁵¹

The Venerable Sayadaw spoke eloquently and confidently, building his argument piece by piece, making apt illustrations and recounted anecdotes as he narrated. He spoke of how to keep a compassionate, yet wise mind and in line with the principle set forth by the doctrine of the middle path he promulgated that,

Compassion and wisdom must be balanced. Sometimes someone has a good education, but does not have love and compassion in his heart. Educated man without compassion and wisdom is dangerous for the nation. A hard-hearted man is very dangerous for the nation. Brothers and sisters try to gain quality of the mind – wisdom. Quality of the heart – love and compassion. This is the essence of Buddhist teachings.⁵²

He also claimed that Buddhism is not like other religions, because the Buddha is not a messenger of any God (unlike the messengers in the Abrahamic religions) and because, as the Sayadaw puts it; “Buddhism is teachings, religion is beliefs.”

The Venerable Sayadaw decided to take up residency at a hotel in Waikiki during his stay, even though members of the Burmese community offered to house him. During his talk the Venerable Sayadaw remarked that upon looking out at the crowds of beach-goers in Waikiki from his hotel-room window, it occurred to him that “people go to the beach to search for relaxation and to avoid tension and stress. But dissatisfaction is real suffering.” Greed and the desire for more money make people so stressed that their only mode of relaxation is to lounge on the beach in Hawai'i. His advice was to look for this satisfaction within the teachings of the *dharmma*.



Figure 6 The Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw Ashin Nyanissa. Photo copyright Sitagu Buddhist Vihara

At the conclusion of the talk, the Venerable Sayadaw was asked to give more information about his charitable work in Burma. He stated that meditation and compassion are important for helping others, but in instances like Cyclone Nargis, “action must be taken to save the victims”. Though the Sayadaw has lived for years in seclusion, for the purposes of mediation and fostering the ‘right mind’, he finds that “we cannot live alone – we must help others” and it is in this context that the Venerable Sayadaw founded and mobilized a missionary association to help thousands of Nargis victims. He ended on a pensive note stating that, “this is my donation. My charity is rooted in love, compassion and wisdom.”

Socially Engaged Burmese

Whenever I have a chance, I am not afraid to speak out for the silent majority of Burmese people suffering oppression.⁵³

For many Burmese it is not a political choice to become engaged, but a moral/ethical principle on behalf of those who suffer under the current regime in Burma. ‘Socially engaged Buddhism’ is a concept derived from the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and encompasses the principles of “1) awareness in daily life, 2) social service, and 3) social activism.”⁵⁴ It is a movement away from an inward-centered Buddhist practice and advocates the active use of Buddhist principles for the reduction of suffering in society and in nature. Some have argued that socially engaged Buddhism is based on a mixed set of principles, conflating

Western human rights regimes and environmental concerns with ancient Buddhist principles of non-harming (*Ibid*). Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai scholar and socially engaged Buddhist explains that:

Nonviolence is not only the absence of violence; its meaning is much deeper than that. If one stands by and allows an act of violence to occur without intervening in some way, from the Buddhist perspective this can be considered an act of violence.⁵⁵

Socially engaged Buddhists are often lay people like Mg Lu Lay, who organizes fundraisers for the victims of Cyclone Nargis, helps refugees when they arrive in Honolulu and is trying to establish a Burmese Theravada Buddhist monastic community (*sangha*) in Hawai'i:

Even though we voted with our feet and left Burma many years ago, we still have emotional bandage to the people of Burma and want to help. When we heard the Burmese government refused the foreign aids and many people were dying, I decided to call all my friends to help Burma, thus Cyclone Nargis funding raising was done. The real credit should go to the oversea Burmese and the people of Hawai'i who had dedicated their time, effort and generous donation to raise nearly one million dollars.⁵⁶

The process of community formation for Burmese in Hawai'i involves a great deal of charitable work that is tied to the moral impetus of helping people in Burma that are suffering. Much of the organizing force behind the socially engaged activity of Burmese in Hawai'i stems from the Theravāda Buddhist model of Vipassana Hawai'i, a congregation that organizes regular mediation events and is committed to a number of charity projects in Southeast Asia.⁵⁷ Several expatriate Burmese, who have been in Hawai'i since the 70s, regularly attend Vipassana Hawai'i events such as their *dharmā* talks and meditation sessions. The *dharmā* for socially engaged Burmese in Hawai'i involves a crucial dimension of social engagement and compassion (*metta*) for others, and the organization serves to strengthen the social bond between overseas Burmese in Hawai'i with Buddhist practitioners and communities in Southeast Asia that receive their assistance.

A Karst Ethnography: Self-censorship and the Problem of Imparting the Past

While talking about the public's perception of the military, my research collaborator Ko Htin Aung, a slight man with an astute posture and keen intelligence, began turning in his chair while looking nervously at the recording device placed on the coffee table between us. "And what's the general perception of [X] as a person?" I asked him, wanting to know how high-ranking Burmese officials are perceived. His eyes flickered to the window and on the passersby outside before he fixed back on me. "My perception? Of *this*?" he stared at me in amazement. I realized that I had perhaps gone too far, dug too deep in my interview question. Ko Htin Aung hesitated for some time, as if searching for the right response before he smiled wide and replied: "My general comment will be that [X] is doing good for the country and for himself." This was not the response I expected. I was so puzzled by this that I qualified, "for the country and for *himself*?" He nodded and chuckled until I too smiled and we laughed together, as if we had just shared an inside joke I was not meant to understand. A few moments later he asserted, "But, how are you going to use this information? I'll be, I could be in trouble! Don't forget, I am going back."⁵⁸

This was not an uncommon exchange in my interviews with Burmese research collaborators. Soliciting opinions about the Burmese government is entering into a dangerous discursive arena for Burmese abroad. It was my intention to take the life narrative approach by asking detailed questions about the life history of the interlocutor rather than focusing on a single theme in the semi-structured interview. However, it became clear during the course of my research that telling the life histories of my research collaborators is a dangerous task, due to fears of having their identities revealed. To give research collaborators a greater sense of security about how the interview text would be treated after the interview, I provided each of them with the option of editing transcribed versions of interviews. Most research collaborators opted for this and all agreed that this was the best way to ensure that nothing inflammatory was published that could be of potential harm to them or their families should the military ever discover the text and decipher who the speaker was.

The life history approach, which ideally involves the elaborate and contextualized telling of a person's life narratives over time, needs a wholly different approach in ethics amongst politically persecuted research collaborators.⁵⁹ In interviewing groups whose words are being followed and monitored by government agencies, the life history approach has the potential to harm the research collaborator more than it provides a vehicle that confers "dignity and recognition" of the individual's lived experience.⁶⁰ If the 'pure' version of the ethnographic text is envisioned as being as 'true' to what was actually said during the interview, one could visualize this as a metaphorical plane; a linear landscape without dents or imperfections. My interviews with diasporic Burmese however, took on a life of their own by first being filtered through the subjective lens of the researcher in the transcription process and later the intersubjective lens of the research collaborator, whose motives were primarily to ensure that no inflammatory quotes could be attributed to them, and second, to manage their own personal biography. In some interviews more than 60 per cent of the content was either erased or so drastically altered that it hardly resembled our original conversation. After innumerable edits and deletions, the landscape of my interviews began to increasingly resemble a karst topography.

Monique Skidmore writes about her experiences interviewing Burmese about their political activities when research participants "seemed to feel great personal pressure to tell their "open secrets" about military rule, despite the politically dangerous climate."⁶¹ However, after interviews were concluded and the relief of the secret being told was over, the experience turned into dread over having the information lead back to the interlocutor, and Skidmore reports having to repeatedly destroy notes in front of interviewees who were afraid of military retaliation.⁶² In another interview, a research collaborator, cognizant of the possible dangers and vigilance of the Burmese military apparatus, had me remove any mention of anti-military activity that involved family or friends in Burma. His opinions could get him or anyone affiliated with him in trouble:

I don't have any affiliation to any political organizations, but just speaking on my own I want justice, I want freedom, I want people to come out of poverty and I want to help people as much as I can. But because I speak out and do the things for the

people, poor people, I think the military government does not like it.⁶³

Had I not been willing to share the transcribed version of my interview with the research collaborator and been open to changes to the transcript, I believe he would still be worried about my use of his narrations. Ethnographers need to pay close attention to the stakes involved in the ethnographic encounter for the research collaborator. Ultimately, it is better to omit some quotes and narratives from the ethnographic text if it is suspected that this information may lead to harmful consequences when made public.

Conclusion

This paper brings to light the historicity of diasporic Burmese narratives by exploring Burmese history through intersubjective interpretations of the past and present. By looking at the genealogy of transformation – from the daily lived experience in Yangon, to the experience of transnational migrations and itinerancy, and finally as a neo-colonial settler in Hawai'i – we see that the often harrowing memories of the 'past' have promoted an ethic of economic and educational success as immigrants in the United States. Organizing as a "community of practice," Burmese in Hawai'i engage in festival making, religious activities, charity events and social gatherings to reify their "common origin," as one research collaborator puts it. Despite the loss of ethnographic data in the editing and censoring process, the complete telling of life histories that underpin each anecdotal narrative has undoubtedly enriched this project. By taking the oral narrative approach, the ethnographer becomes intimately involved with the details of the research collaborator's life and can give a more nuanced holistic picture of the research community in the ethnographic text.

Burma scholars tend to end their reports on Burma on a solemn note. After decades of colonial malaise, military dictatorship, economic degradation and political isolationism there seems little cause for optimism when thinking about Burma's future. Thankfully however, after years of oppressive military rule, in 2010, Burma held its first elections in 20 years. International spectators widely condemned the elections as rigged and a sham – yet, conceding that these historical elections do signify some hope, albeit diminutive, in the possibility that Burma may have democratic rule in the

future. More importantly perhaps to the historiography of Burma – on November 13, 2010, the revered “Lady” of Burma, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was freed from the house arrest she endured for most of the last 21 years. These recent developments signal an emerging horizon for future ethnographic work on a more pluralized and democratized history of Burma. The role of overseas Burmese ought not be overlooked when understanding the changes that are now underway in Burma – changes that would not have come to pass without the activist work of exiled and expatriate Burmese.

Bibliography

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Altonn, Helen. “Hawaii medical team on Myanmar mission.” *Honolulu Star Bulletin*. July 10, 2008.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Verso: London and New York, 2006.
- Arendt, Hanna. “On Violence.” In *Violence in War and Peace: an Anthology*, edited by Nancy Sheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, 236-243. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Au, Laurie. “New beginning soaks in: Isle Burmese celebrate their New Year,” *Honolulu Star Bulletin*, 2008. Accessed March 15, 2009, <http://archives.starbulletin.com/2008/04/14/news/story02.html>
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage Publications Inc., 1990.
- Bourgois, Phillippe. “The Everyday Violence of Gang Rape.” In *Violence, War and Peace: an Anthology*, edited by Nancy Sheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, 342-347. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Eggli, Ann-Vibeke. *Mass Refugee Influx and the Limits of Public International Law*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2002.
- Foucault, Michel, and Colin Gordon. *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980.
- Fujikane, Candace. “Introduction: Asian Settler Colonialism in the U.S. Colony of Hawai‘i.” In *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai‘i*, Edited by Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Okamura. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008.
- Guha, Ranajit. “The Small Voice of History”, In *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society IX: I-12*, edited by S. Amin and D. Chakrabaty. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Hackett, James (ed.), *International Institute for Strategic Studies: The Military Balance* London: Routledge, 2010.
- Hamilton, Annette. “Marking Time: Narratives of the Life-world in Thailand.” In *Southeast Asian Lives: Personal Narratives and Historical Experience*. Edited by Roxana Waterson, 221-252. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006.
- Henderson, Ailsa. *Hierarchies of belonging: national identity and political culture in Scotland and Quebec*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007.
- Hylland-Eriksen, Thomas. *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press, 2002.
- Kirkley, Harriet. “Socially Engaged and Meditating: The Theravāda Buddhist Model of Vipassana Hawai‘i.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 7, no 1 (2000).
- Ko Thett. “Laughing All the Way to Prison.” *Irrawaddy* 14, no 6 (2006). Accessed May 16, 2010: http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=5823
- Malkki, Liisa. “Commentary: The Politics of Trauma and Asylum: Universals and Their Effects.” *ETHOS* 35, no 3 (2007):336-343.
- McNally, Christopher A., Hong Guo and Gaungwei Hu. “Entrepreneurship and Political Guanxi Networks in China’s Private Sector.” *Politics, Governance, and Security Series: East-West Center Working Papers No. 19*. Honolulu, Hawai‘i: East-West Center, 2007.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and The New America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- _____. “The Pacific Shuttle: Family, Citizenship and Capital Circuits.” In *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, edited by J.X. Inda and R. Rosaldo, 172-197. Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
- _____. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999.

- Oo, Zaw. "Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Burma: The Role of Overseas Burmese in Democratizing their Homeland," In *Myanmar's long road to national reconciliation*. Edited by Trevor Wilson. Canberra, A.C.T., Australia: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Asia Pacific Press, Australian National University, 2006.
- Prebish, Charles S., and Damien Keown. *Introducing Buddhism*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Radin, Paul (ed.). *Crashing Thunder: the Autobiography of an American Indian*. London: Appleton, 1962.
- Sebro, Tani H. "Burma: Reproductive Rights in a State of Violence." *San Francisco State University Treganza Museum Anthropology Papers: Human Rights in Global Light* I (2008): 99-103.
- Sivakumar, Chitra. "Inner-City Socioscape: Seeking Selves and Wailing Silences." *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no 38 (2000):3428-3434.
- Sivaraksa, Sulak. *Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing World*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005.
- Skidmore, Monique. "Secrecy and Trust in the Affective Field: Conducting Fieldwork in Burma." In *Women fielding danger: negotiating ethnographic identities in field research*. Edited by M.K. Huggins, and Marie-Louise Glebbeek. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.
- Smith, Martin, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and East-West Center Washington. *State of strife: the dynamics of ethnic conflict in Burma*. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; East-West Center Washington, 2007.
- Smith-Hefner, Nancy Joan. *Khmer American Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Thawngmung, Ardeth Maung. *Behind the teak curtain: authoritarianism, agricultural policies, and political legitimacy in rural Burma/Myanmar*. London/ New York: Kegan Paul, 2004.
- Thawngmung, Ardeth Maung. "Burma: A Gentler Authoritarianism." *Foreign Policy* 139 (2003): 39-40.
- Tasaw Lu, Hsin-Chun. "Festivalizing Thingyan, Negotiating Ethnicity: Burmese Chinese Migrants in Taiwan." *Journal of Burma Studies* 12, no 1 (2008): 29-62.
- US Census Bureau. "Hawaii – State and County," 2012. Accessed May 25, 2014: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/15000.html>
- US Census Bureau. "Race Reporting for the Asian Population by Selected Categories: 2010." Accessed Jan 17, 2012: http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_SF1_QTP8&prodType=table
- Wakeman, Carolyn, and San San Tin. *No time for dreams: living in Burma under military rule*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009.
- Waterson, Roxana. "Introduction: Analyzing Personal Narratives," In *Southeast Asian Lives: personal narratives and historical experience*. Edited by Roxanna Waterson, 1-37. Singapore/Athens: NUS Press; Ohio University Press, 2007.
- Yan, Qinghuang. *The Chinese in Southeast Asia and Beyond: Socioeconomic and Political Dimensions*. Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing, 2008.

EndNotes

- ¹ Roxanna Waterson, "Introduction: Analyzing Personal Narratives," in *Southeast Asian Lives: personal narratives and historical experience*, ed. Roxanna Waterson (Singapore/Athens: NUS Press; Ohio University Press, 2007), 1-2.
- ² Mg Lu Lay, Personal Interview, October, 2009.
- ³ When the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) illegally came to power in 1990, they changed the nation's name from Burma to the Union of Myanmar. Although many Burmese refer to their nation as Myanmar/Myanma (Eggli 2002:230), I choose to continue using Burma in line with Burmese activists and scholars such as Aung San Suu Kyi and Ardeth Maung Thawng-hung. I do however, recognize that Myanmar is the ancient and perhaps more appropriate name for the nation. In my interviews with Overseas Burmese I found widespread disagreement amongst research collaborators about whether to use Myanmar or Burma in academic contexts.
- ⁴ Paul Radin (ed.), *Crashing Thunder: the Autobiography of an American Indian* (New York/London: Appleton, 1962).
- ⁵ Guha, Ranajit. "The Small Voice of History", in *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society IX: 1-12*, ed. S. Amin and D. Chakrabaty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- ⁶ Waterson, Introduction: Analyzing Personal Narratives, 4.
- ⁷ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).
- ⁸ Thomas Hylland-Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 152.
- ⁹ Nancy Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- ¹⁰ Waterson, Introduction: Analyzing Personal Narratives, 3.
- ¹¹ Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and The New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
- ¹² Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
- ¹³ Abu-Lughod *Writing Women's Worlds*, 14. As quoted in Waterson, Introduction: Analyzing Personal Narratives, 16.
- ¹⁴ Hanna Arendt, "On Violence," in *Violence in War and Peace: an Anthology*, ed. Nancy Sheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 35.
- ¹⁵ Tani Sebro, "Burma: Reproductive Rights in a State of Violence," *San Francisco State University Treganza Museum Anthropology Papers: Human Rights in Global Light* 1 (2008): 101.
- ¹⁶ For discussions of victimhood in wartime, see Liisa Malkki, "Commentary: The Politics of Trauma and Asylum: Universals and Their Effects." *ETHOS* 35, no. 3 (2007): 336-343, and Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and The New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), and Nancy Sheper-Hughes and Phillippe Bourgois, *Violence, War and Peace: an Anthology*, ed. Nancy Sheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).
- ¹⁷ Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*, 282.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*
- ¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), and Ailsa Henderson, Ailsa, *Hierarchies of belonging: national identity and political culture in Scotland and Quebec* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).
- ²⁰ A major component of this study involves participant collaboration in the research process and final write-up stage. I adhere to The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography by committing to 1) ethical and moral responsibility to consultants; 2) honesty about the fieldwork process; 3) accessible and dialogic writing; and 4) collaborative reading, writing and co-interpretation of ethnographic texts with consultants (Lassiter, 2005). I see ethnography as a co-interpretive process whereby greater contextualization adds to the merits of research findings.
- ²¹ A pseudonym is used for all research collaborators. With the exception of public figures such as the Burmese abbot the Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw and names of individuals depicted in photos from local newspaper articles. Those individuals whose real names are credited in photos from newspaper articles have not necessarily been interviewed for this project.
- ²² The concept of 'socio-scape' constitutes the social topography of urban life in Chitra Sivakumar's "The Inner-City Socio-scape: Seeking Selves and Wailing Silences." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2000) 35(38):3428-3434.
- ²³ Phillippe Bourgois, The Everyday Violence of Gang Rape. In *Violence, War and Peace: an Anthology*, ed. Nancy Sheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 344.
- ²⁴ Private interview, 2009.
- ²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 155.
- ²⁶ Private Interview, 2009.
- ²⁷ Burma is ranked 9th in the world for the number of military personnel on active duty per capita, according to a report published by International Institute for Strategic Studies; Hackett, James, *The Military Balance* (London: Routledge, (2010), all 492,000 of the armed forces personnel are considered to be on active duty. They also spend about \$1.07 billion per year on the military sector, which is 2.1% of Burma's Gross Domestic Product.

- ²⁸ Carolyn Wakeman and San San Tin, *No time for dreams: living in Burma under military rule*. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 135.
- ²⁹ Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 1999.
- ³⁰ US Census Bureau, "Hawaii – State and County." (2012) Accessed May 25, 2014: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/15000.html>
- ³¹ *Ibid*
- ³² *Ibid*
- ³³ Zaw Oo, "Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Burma: The Role of Overseas Burmese in Democratizing their Homeland," in *Myanmar's long road to national reconciliation*, ed. Trevor Wilson (Canberra, A.C.T., Australia: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; Asia Pacific Press, Australian National University, 2006).
- ³⁴ Ko Thett, "Laughing All the Way to Prison." *Irawaddy* (2006) 14(6). Accessed May 16, 2010: http://www.irawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=5823
- ³⁵ Candace Fujikane, "Introduction: Asian Settler Colonialism in the U.S. Colony of Hawai'i," in *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i*, ed. Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Okamura. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 7.
- ³⁶ Malkki, Liisa, "Commentary: The Politics of Trauma and Asylum: Universals and Their Effects." *ETHOS* 35:3(2007), 227.
- ³⁷ Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*, 2003.
- ³⁸ Qinghuang Yan, *The Chinese in Southeast Asia and Beyond: Socioeconomic and Political Dimensions* (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing, 2008).
- ³⁹ Aihwa Ong, "The Pacific Shuttle: Family, Citizenship and Capital Circuits." In *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, ed. J.X. Inda and R. Rosaldo, (Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 191.
- ⁴⁰ Mg Lu Lay, Personal Interview, October, 2009.
- ⁴¹ Candice, Personal Interview, December, 2009
- ⁴² Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, (London: Sage Publications Inc., 1990).
- ⁴³ Christopher A. McNally, Hong Guo and Gaungwei Hu. "Entrepreneurship and Political *Guanxi* Networks in China's Private Sector." *Politics, Governance, and Security Series: East-West Center* (Working Papers No. 19. Honolulu, Hawai'i: East-West Center, 2007)
- ⁴⁴ Ong, *The Pacific Shuttle*, 174.
- ⁴⁵ Hsin-Chun Tasaw Lu, "Festivalizing Thingyan, Negotiating Ethnicity: Burmese Chinese Migrants in Taiwan." *Journal of Burma Studies*, 12, no. 1 (2008):30.
- ⁴⁶ Charles S. Prebish and Damien Keown. *Introducing Buddhism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 147.
- ⁴⁷ Kin-kin, Personal Interview, October 2009.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*
- ⁴⁹ Mg Lu Lay, Personal Interview, October 2009.
- ⁵⁰ Helen Altonn, "Hawaii medical team on Myanmar mission," *Honolulu Star Bulletin*. July 10, 2008.
- ⁵¹ Personal Interview, October 2009.
- ⁵² *Ibid*
- ⁵³ Mg Lu Lay, Personal Interview, October 2009.
- ⁵⁴ Prebish and Keown, *Introducing Buddhism*, 209.
- ⁵⁵ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing World* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 13.
- ⁵⁶ Mg Lu Lay, Personal Interview, October 2009.
- ⁵⁷ Harriet Kirkley, "Socially Engaged and Meditating: The Theravāda Buddhist Model of Vipassana Hawai'i." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 7, no 1 (2000).
- ⁵⁸ Ko Htin Aung, Personal Interview, February 2010.
- ⁵⁹ Monique Skidmore, "Secrecy and Trust in the Affective Field: Conducting Fieldwork in Burma," in *Women fielding danger: negotiating ethnographic identities in field research*, ed. M.K. Huggins, and Marie-Louise Glebbeck (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), and Waterson, *Introduction*.
- ⁶⁰ Annette Hamilton, "Marking Time: Narratives of the Life-world in Thailand," in *Southeast Asian Lives: Personal Narratives and Historical Experience*, ed. Roxana Waterson (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 223.
- ⁶¹ Monique Skidmore, "Secrecy and Trust in the Affective Field, 306.

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ Personal Interview, February 2010.