

The Slash Between:  
In/authenticating Burmese American Literature

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English at Brown University

Providence, RI

October 2023

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This dissertation by Ashley Aye Aye Dun is accepted in its present form  
by the Department of English as satisfying the  
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Maymay, Paypay, and Maung Maung Lay: my success would not be possible without your love and support. Thank you, for everything. I dedicate this work to our family.

This dissertation owes much to the guidance of my phenomenal committee: Daniel Y. Kim, Dixa Ramírez-D'oleo, and Ada Smailbegović. In addition, I express my sincerest gratitude to the friends, colleagues, teachers, and students who have shaped my intellectual journey throughout graduate school, some for over half a decade: Noah Brooksher, Kiran Saili, Mark Tseng-Putterman, Thedoe Nyunt, Jennifer Wang, Olivia Anne Lafferty, Ravit Reichman, Denise Davis, Wendy Lee, Tamara Ho, Aye Min Thant, Kerishma Panigrahi, Jessica Zisa, Christina Gilligan, Marah Nagelhout, and many more brilliant people.

“I use ‘Burma’ throughout this book out of habit, because as a Burmese speaker it’s awkward to refer to the country using an adjective, because I think ‘Burma’ sounds far better in English, and because of the nativist underpinnings of the name change.

I use ‘Burmese’ to refer either to the ethnic majority people, who speak the Burmese language and are overwhelmingly Buddhist, or to the state. There is no satisfactory term, at least not yet, for referring to all the peoples of the country.”

—Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma* (2020)

“Indeed, it is ‘Burma’ that is actually the new (and foreign) term, likely created only in the nineteenth century and the British period. It is certainly not an indigenous word and cannot be found as such in either the national language or any minority languages of the country prior to that era.”

[...]

Although the word ‘Burma’ may have been phonetically derived from the Burmese word Bama (the colloquial equivalent of Myanmar), ‘Burma’ per se is still English, and still a colonial term imposed on the country’s people without their knowledge and/or consent.

—Michael Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times* (2012)

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## FRONT MATTERS

### The Mutilation of Authentic Burmese-ness

#### I. The Scalpel

Ethnicity is a matter of vivisection. And the first incision is rarely ever a delicate one. I know because I have been a specimen many times before. I have been shrunk down and had my limbs spread on that metal pan. I have shifted nervously under those clinical eyes roaming my every physical feature. I have felt that cut—the one that splits you straight down the middle, delivered by a blade in the form of a simple question: what kind of person are you?

They want to see what my insides look like.

Seven years ago, I traveled to Yangon: the city where my parents were born and the old capital of Myanmar, still known to many today as Burma. During my trip, I visited a library with a close friend who, like me, was Burmese American. Unlike me, they could speak, read, and write in Burmese quite well. At my most self-conscious, I speak Burmese in a stilted manner that is near incomprehensible. At my most confident, I can carry on conversations with a limited vocabulary and passable accent. All that said, I understand my parents' first language much better than I can express myself in it. Other Burmese people are frequently unaware of this. Or, they feign unawareness.

I remember overhearing my friend speaking with the librarian, who asked them while aiming a sidelong glance at me: “Thu bar *lu-myo* le?” The Burmese term “*lu-myo*” refers to ethnicity, and it is also used interchangeably in reference to “race” and “nationality”—blurring the lines between these three categories of identity. While the librarian had not spoken to me directly, I knew she was inquiring about the “*lu-myo*” to which I belonged, because it certainly could not be Burmese.

I am often informed by people, both within Burma and among its diaspora, that I do not “look” Burmese—a statement that typically fans out into claims about how I do not “act” Burmese either. The reasons they use to justify such statements shift constantly. First, it’s how I dress, my hairstyle, or how I do my make-up. If these more superficial traits aren’t factors, then it’s the angle of my jaw, the set of my eyes, the shape of my figure, or the shade of my complexion. It might also come down to part of my name—“Aye Aye *Dun*? That doesn’t sound very Burmese. Are you sure it’s not *Tun*?” There’s always something.

I remember how my friend, noting the awkwardness of the situation, responded to the librarian’s question. Without missing a beat, they stated in Burmese, polite but firm: “She’s Burmese, like me.” I knew that the woman didn’t believe them for a second, but still, I was comforted by my friend’s inclusive gesture. It was a refreshing disruption in a long trend of strangers constantly reminding me of my fundamentally un-Burmese nature. A confusing, simultaneous matter of defection and impurity: I have somehow been “made” incorrectly from the start *and* tainted from a prior immaculate state.

My un-Burmese nature evidently exists as a clear deviation from, and poor imitation of, a cultural truth, a biological truth, some combination of both, or neither at all. Following this line of thought, I find the direct translation of the words that constitute the term “lu-myo” quite interesting. “Lu” translates to “person,” and “myo” is frequently translated as “type” or “kind.” Therefore, “lu-myo” literally means “kinds of people.” So, to my ears, the librarian’s inquiry into my background sounded more like “what kind of person is she?”

Though it might be used to scrutinize a person’s identity according to an always-shifting standard of correctness, “lu-myo” nonetheless comes across as an unabashedly verifiable and rigid category of identity. In such usage, it feels implicated on the idea that one’s exteriority

gives evidence of a fixed, pre-existing, and predetermining interiority. Perhaps, then, I am not shocked that “myo” can have several other meanings: “breed,” “strain,” “gene,” and “seed.”

The incident with the librarian was not the first time an inquiry into the kind of person I am had split me open, and it has not been the last. Time and time again I find myself lying face-up against cool metal, put in the position seemingly out of nowhere by keen onlookers. Invasive glances and sweetly-worded curiosities about my insides twist together into a fine point, which proceeds to bifurcate my anterior. My flesh sighs open, blood spilling out in rivulets, and the vivisection begins once more.

Successive incisions are often made: “Where was she born? Who are her parents? Where did she grow up? Oh, so she’s not Burmese. She’s *American*.” This type of occurrence is so drastically un-unique, so common for Asian Americans, that just putting it into words here feels banal and masturbatory, even as I entertain each cut. I lie still while my synthetic American covering is then peeled and pinned back with little care, exposing organs that glisten and pulsate invitingly. The hands of my vivisectors are quick to dig into me, cracking my ribcage apart in hot pursuit. They eagerly begin shoveling out all the unnecessary parts from my thoracic cavity. Minutes, years, pass as the hands dig deeper and deeper, and arms become coated up to their elbows in my slick, shiny innards. Finally, it stops. The hands rescind, holding fistfuls of me that drip and dangle from between clenched fingers, and I assume my vivisectors have found what they’ve been looking for.

Now comes the observation stage. I don’t know what they’re observing, exactly, or what they are thinking as they observe it. But I like to imagine looking through their eyes. I imagine seeing it: that indispensable, indubitable thing they’ve been after this whole time. I see it, not a plastic core. I see it, pure and bearing no signs of infection, mutation, or contamination by alien

influences. I see everything, deep inside myself. A previously hidden network of veins and arteries grows from a seed of untouched origin. Suffice to say that we can finally refute all those accusations of how I've "lost my roots." Or, more hurtfully, that I am a "fake Burmese."

But you've caught me in a lie. Such visions stay only in the realm of imagination. I must confess that I know exactly what my vivisectors are thinking as they gaze into this cavernous wound, reopened once more. I also know that they didn't find what they were looking for at all. They never do. In fact, they know from the start every time that they will never find it. So, you ask, why conduct the vivisection in the first place? Because. It isn't the findings of the procedure that really matter; it's the tradition. My body is transparent, and its clear surfaces must be broken to "discover" what can already be seen quite clearly, or known, from the outside.

Vivisection must be maintained for the ages. It must be maintained by everyone ranging from a stranger at the library to supposed friends, peers, colleagues, and allies. Let them, while wearing the warmest of smiles, run their scalpels through you, sans any anesthetic, searching mercilessly for what they know they will never find. Because in making this search routine, they've really found everything.

It is fitting that another Burmese term, "sit sit," can mean both "pure" and "real," and is applied to objects as well as people. For example, "nwar noa sit sit" means "pure cow's milk," or cow's milk that is all-natural and free of artificial substances.<sup>1</sup> Then there is the term, "Bamar sit sit." "Bamar" refers to the majority ethnic people, language, and culture from which the names "Burma," "Burman," and "Burmese" were derived. Thus, "Bamar sit sit" means "pure Burmese." The phrase is often used to differentiate from Burmese of mixed-ethnic or multi-ethnic ancestry, or those who are not "genuinely" Burmese, like knock-offs of originals.

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<sup>1</sup>I thank my friends and colleagues Aye Min Thant and Chu May Paing for these linguistic clarifications.

I use the word “vivisection” in particular because it deals the right pain. Especially with regards to a most visceral fact: we are obsessed with ethnicity. Specifically, we are obsessed with its authenticity. We probe, prod, and slice each other—and ourselves—to ribbons in the name of measuring and maintaining just that. But who is “we,” exactly? I am not sure. I’ve split myself in half again by just asking. Nevertheless, I have come to put one thing together: the grisly, and typically very dogmatic, process of distinguishing who is or isn’t truly Burmese reflects a fixation with being authentic that is at once very authoritarian. And the space—or rather, the slash—between the words “authenticity” and “authoritarianism” is teeming with body horrors.

A vivisection is in order to authenticate Burmese-ness, to categorize the pure and real Burmese from the fake and tainted Burmese. Authentic Burmese-ness matters because origins matter. Thus, I have taken care to mutilate it from the start.

The cut—the wound, the gap—is also a blade.

## **II. The Terminology**

*The Slash Between* is an exploration into a relatively understudied body of writing: Burmese American literature—a subset of Asian American literature authored by “Burmese” Americans. I have initially put the first half of the aforementioned identity title in quotes to acknowledge its contested nature as a label applied to the entire diaspora of Burma/Myanmar and their descendants in the U.S. Though it is the term most frequently used by Asian American scholars in reference to these communities, as well as the official term used by the U.S. Census, many who are categorized under the title “Burmese” in the U.S. do not identify as such. This is chiefly because Burmese often reads the same as “Bamar” (also spelled “Bama” or “Bamah”), the identity structurally privileged in Burma/Myanmar. Bamar is an umbrella title for the predominantly Theravada Buddhist ethno-linguistic group of peoples from which the name

“Burma” is thought to have been derived in the age of British imperialism. Additionally, it is the same term for the language spoken by this group and the lingua franca of the country, also referred to in English as “Burmese.” While Bamar peoples make up the majority population in the country of “origin,” significant numbers of those counted as Burmese or Burmese American in the U.S. are part of ethnic minority groups from Burma/Myanmar—both diasporic (Burmese of Chinese descent, Indian descent, etc.) and indigenous (Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Rakhine, Shan, Mon, etc.)—many of whom were forced to leave due to the exclusionary policies and violent persecution of the ethno-nationalistic military regime, which seeks to maintain Bamar dominance.

There is also much mystification as to what the difference is between the names “Burma” and “Myanmar.” The widely-accepted explanation is that Myanmar is the more “literary” or formal version of Burma, and Burma is alleged to be a colloquial Burmese pronunciation of Myanmar (Dittmer 1), or rather, a name derived from the colloquial pronunciation: Bama or Bamar. Michael Aung-Thwin describes the origins of the name “Myanmar”: “[f]irst, spelled Mranma and Myanma in Old and Modern Burmese script respectively, it is not a noun but an adjective that modifies the noun that follows it” (7). Similarly, Thant Myint-U, explains that the word “Myanma” first appeared in inscriptions around a millennium ago, apparently describing a language and people native to the valley of the Irrawaddy River; over hundreds of years, Myanma kings referred to their kingdom as “Myanma pyi” (“the Myanmar country”) or “Myanma naing-ngan” (“the Myanma conquered lands”) (xvii). He goes on to say that during the late 16th century and through the 17th century, “the word was colloquially pronounced Bama,” and arriving European settlers are said to have referred to the country in variant forms of this pronunciation—for instance, the Portuguese referred to the country as “Birmania,” and the

French referred to it as “Birmanie” (xvii). Under the British colonial administration, which occupied the country from the early 19th century to its independence in 1948, the country’s official name in English was Burma.

The country remained as such until 1989, when the ruling military junta officially changed the name from the “Union of Burma” to the “Union of Myanmar,” and later still to the “Republic of the Union of Myanmar.” The justification for this change was that the name “Myanmar” was more inclusive of the country’s indigenous minorities, as opposed to “Burma,” whose usage in English apparently corresponded to Bamar (Charney, 2009: 185). This, of course, has been heavily criticized, since etymologically Burma and Myanmar refer to the same ethnic majority. The more honest justification might be that the name Burma was evocative of the era of British rule, and the military, seeking to further enhance their maintenance of ethno-nationalistic ideals and continue their tradition of “wiping clean” traces of the colonizer, believed its use should be eradicated. Many within and outside the country continued to refer to it as Burma, either out of habit or a refusal to recognize the military’s authority. Although in our contemporary moment, both names remain disputed for various reasons, as does the usage of Burmese as a term and category for identity.

In American academic usage, including within Asian American studies, the English-language term “Burman” is often used to refer to the dominant ethno-linguistic group in Burma/Myanmar. In this context, Burman is the English-language equivalent of Bamar. The usage of Burman is different from the usage of the term Burmese, which is used to refer to all people from, or with ancestral ties to, Burma/Myanmar; however, the reverse has been observed in British academic usage (Aung-Thwin 8). Overall, the terms Bamar, Burman, and Burmese are at times used interchangeably in various traditions of scholarship and also in casual conversation.

Again, this is not done without much contestation—and confusion, at that. Unless otherwise specified, this dissertation will abide by the following naming conventions.

In casual conversation, I prefer to use the name Burma, but as shown already, from this section onwards my project does not choose one name over the other when referring to the country after its official name change in 1989. I am actively choosing to use both Burma and Myanmar, enjoining them together with a slash: “Burma/Myanmar.” If the two quotes from Aung-Thwin and Thant Myint-U—both Burmese American historians of Burma/Myanmar—that appear at the beginning of this dissertation serve as any indication, I use both names because I find the tensions and slippage symbolically fostered by the slash to be intellectually productive for my project.

As a national modifier post-1989, this dissertation uses the term “Burmese/Myanmar”: i.e., “the Burmese/Myanmar military regime.” Again, note that the name Myanmar (which comes from and is used synonymously with “Myanma”) is used both as a proper noun and an adjective; I personally do not recognize any validity in the term “Myanmarese,” despite its usage by some English-speakers. When referring to the country before its official name change in 1989, this dissertation uses the name “Burma.” Similarly, as a national modifier pre-1989, this dissertation uses the term “Burmese”: i.e., “the Burmese state in the era of the Cold War.” When referring to the majority ethnic people, culture, and identity privileged in Burma/Myanmar, this dissertation uses the term “Bamar.”

When referring to the language spoken by Bamar peoples (referred to by the same name: Bamar) and the common language spoken in Burma/Myanmar, this dissertation also uses the term “Burmese.” Note that in general, the Burmese language system of naming does not traditionally adhere to a “first name” and “last name” model; names are created as some

combination of parent or family names (often drawing from both sides of the family) as one entity, e.g. “Thant Myint-U” or “Aung San Suu Kyi.” Frequently, people have multiple names and titles in multiple languages. The term “U,” as in “U Nu” or “U Ne Win” are formal, masculine prefixes akin to “Mr.” or “Uncle.” Similarly, “Daw” is a formal, feminine prefix. However, Christianized/Westernized names are also common, such as “Wendy Law-Yone.” In this dissertation, I do not split up traditional Burmese names—as in, I choose to refer to Aung San Suu Kyi as such and not according to the first-name last-name model, with “Aung San” being her “first name” and “Suu Kyi” her last, which would be erroneous. However, I maintain the first name-last name model for the names that adhere to it, such as Wendy Law-Yone.

Lastly, this dissertation retains usage of “Burmese American” not as a foolproof, exhaustively inclusive descriptor of ethnic identity and literature, but instead as a literary object in itself, from which one can employ Asian American critique to recognize Burmese-ness as a literary form, cultivating a Burmese American criticism and sub-genre of critique—all of which encompasses my project of inauthenticating Burmese American literature. While I challenge Burmese American and Burmese American literature as representational signs and coherent formations, I am nevertheless invested in them, still, as formations—ones substantiated by previous scholarship in Asian American studies. Because this dissertation addresses and contributes to such scholarship, I find it necessary to keep with how the identity and literature in question has been made legible and theorized within the field, as opposed to arbitrarily deciding to put terms like “Myanma(r) American” and “Myanma(r) American literature,” or “Burmese/Myanma(r) American” and “Burmese/Myanma(r) American literature,” etc., into motion, since these terms do not possess the same (or any) relevant genealogy.

### **III. The Operation**

Through an analysis of works by Wendy Law-Yone, Charmaine Craig, Maw Shein Win, and Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint, this dissertation deconstructs Burmese American literature as a formation that has become more distinct in the past thirty years—particularly during the late 2010s, wherein there was a significant “boom” in North American literary works by writers belonging to, or descended from, the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar. Such growth and readerly interest has occurred in tandem with the U.S.’s increasing awareness of various political and humanitarian crises taking place in Burma/Myanmar, the most well-known to date likely being the genocidal persecution of the Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority living in Rakhine (Arakan) State, and the 2021 military coup. Naturally, the deconstruction of Burmese American literature cannot occur without the simultaneous deconstruction of “Burmese” and “Burmese American” as ethnic categories deployed by governmental and academic entities, necessitating a scrutiny of how ethnicity, race, and nationality—as institutionally defined and systemized in Burma/Myanmar—(mis)translate and become redefined under U.S. power structures.

In the following introduction, I situate the historical complexities of ethnic identity specific to the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar within larger Asian American literary debates on identity categories and politics, representation, and aesthetics. By doing so, I am able to theorize how Burmese American literature confronts an obsession with ethnicity and the stabilization of “authentic” Burmese-ness—an obsession conditioned by both the ethnonationalism of the Burmese/Myanmar military regime and U.S. multicultural nationalism, which is sustained by the liberal multiculturalism of the American university. I argue that the literary works studied in this dissertation express their confrontation through scenes of the constricted body, at once bringing

into relief the pressures of the body's own representation *and* the text's own representation, thereby illuminating a slippage between authenticity and authoritarianism.

Such a focus on Burmese American literature, as well as a focus on Burmese American identity as an inherently literary object, is vital to evaluating intellectual problems existing at the crossroads of Asian American studies and Burma studies. Within the former, scholars have directed heightened attention to Southeast Asian diasporas amid the rise of critical refugee studies in the past decade—framed largely by the American war in Vietnam and dominant narratives of an overarching Cold War politics. Due to the obscured, or what some might view as nonexistent, connection Burma/Myanmar has to American imperialism, its diaspora remains understudied in the aforementioned contexts, prompting me to consider a different relationality between Burma/Myanmar and U.S. empire. Within Burma studies, scholars from Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora have increasingly protested the white colonialist engagements that dominate the field. These dialogues should not neglect Asian American studies, particularly Asian American literary approaches, in such decolonizing efforts. I argue that Burmese American literature challenges the corporeal terms of identity dictated by nationalist structures belonging to both Burma/Myanmar and the U.S., terms which are married when foregrounding “underrepresented” Burmese American literature in the Asian American canon. In response to the intersecting gazes seeking to authenticate Burmese-ness by reading texts as bodies, and bodies as texts, for the purpose of apprehending a pre-existing truth of ethnic identity, Burmese American literature *inauthenticates* itself. Simultaneous with its own inauthentication, Burmese American literature inauthenticates, or reads back, the authoritarian gaze.

## INTRODUCTION

### Forwarding the Cut

#### **I. Burmese American Literature, in the Flesh**

Nolana Yip states that the “paucity of Burmese American literature may be due in part to the later arrival of Burmese immigrants and refugees to the United States than other Asian groups” (154). Her words appear in an entry titled “Literature and Folklore,” which is part of an overarching section titled “Burmese Americans” in the *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife* (2010). The encyclopedia is divided into sections of over 600 entries describing 23 Asian American communities and subgroups, with each group’s section being introduced by a historical overview followed by entries on topics which include, in addition to literature and folklore, family and community, food, arts and crafts, home decorations, and so forth. Described by editors Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau as “the first encyclopedia of its kind” (xxix), the compilation of writings is meant to contribute specifically to Asian American folkloric studies, with the editors asserting that Asian American folklore consists of the narrative history of Asians in the U.S., and Asian American folklife consists of the “totality of Asian material cultures, religious traditions, performances, celebrations, social relations, etcetera, used to produce individual and collective Asian American identities and communities” (xxxvi). Stating that the encyclopedia’s audience includes “established scholars, graduate and undergraduate students, policy makers, and the interested general public” (xxxi), Lee and Nadeau claim to have been as “exhaustive as possible in terms of covering all the different Asian American cultural communities, especially those traditionally underrepresented in the literature, such as new immigrant communities,” (xxix)—which, as indicated by Yip, include Burmese communities in the U.S.

“Burmese Americans” are listed in the preface with other underrepresented Asian American groups: “Afghan Americans,” “Cambodian Americans,” “Sri Lankan Americans”—to name just a few. Again, the “Burmese” in Burmese Americans is not used by the encyclopedia in limitation to only those of Bamar descent, but rather in application to the entire diaspora of Burma/Myanmar in the U.S. and their descendants irrespective of ethnicity. Yip describes how the “writers of Burmese American literature are reflective of the ethnic diversity of Burmese people both in their own backgrounds and in the content of their stories,” and that the “bulk of Burmese American literature presently published is of the memoir genre” (155). Her entry lists several different writers and their memoirs:

Kenneth Wong is a Burmese-born ethnic-Chinese American who writes in *A Prayer for Burma* about his first trip back to Burma since leaving. In *Twilight over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess*, Inge Sargent, who has been living in Boulder, Colorado, since 1966, explains in a third-person voice how she went from being an Austrian student in Colorado who married a fellow international student from Burma, to becoming a widowed princess when her husband, prince of a Shan ethnic group in Burma, is taken captive by the Burmese military regime. Thant Myint-U, born in New York to Burman parents, intertwines in *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma* with his Burmese genealogy and his own personal narrative. Readers of these memoirs learn about Burma through the authors’ experiences. (155)

The entry acknowledges the genealogical work an author such as Thant Myint-U undertakes in his respective memoir, which embarks on the author’s own study and tracing of Burmese/Myanmar history as simultaneously woven with a narration of personal experience. Genealogy and narration invoke the mediatedness of language and thus the question of discursivity and the aesthetic, which “signifies the *constructed* dimension of the literary” (Sue-Im Lee 2). However, instead of seeing opportunities to consider the text through its literariness and constructed nature, the entry values his memoir, like the rest of those mentioned in the entry, primarily as a means for readers to “learn about Burma.”

Burmese American memoir is here assigned the function of providing readers direct access to the experiences of Burmese Americans—experiences equating to working social, political, and historical knowledge of Burma/Myanmar. As Dorothy Wang states: “[w]hen [critics] read a literary work [...] by an Asian American writer, they almost inevitably assume that the work functions as a transparent window into the ethnographic ‘truth’ of a hyphenated identity and an exotic ‘home’ culture,” that is to say, “as if there were no such thing as the mediatedness of language” (23). Such truth is fixed and precedes the text, predetermining its “meaning” and therefore its worth for the task of, in this case, “knowing” Burmese Americans and Burmese American identity. The study of Burmese American literature, like the study of Asian American and ethnic literatures in general, is utilized here under a neoliberal logic of multiculturalism as a container of information waiting to be retrieved, with the author’s racialized identity being of utmost importance since such information retrieval, according to Jodi Melamed, is tied to “gaining voice” and authenticity (36).

Since liberal multiculturalism’s rise in the 1980s and 1990s as an ideology upheld by the American university, literary works by Asian American authors, African American authors, and other authors of color have largely been framed and studied as “authentic, intimate, and representative.” The representative capacity of ethnic literature was originally meant to facilitate white students’ knowledge of racial difference: enforcing the “capacity of books to stand in for people” (37). Therein, self-evident truth/information and its retrieval, namely reading for authenticity value, discursively produces a text as a body. Wang also states—“since the racialized [...] person is often apprehended in terms of the bodily, the material, and the political,” her writing is “inevitably [...] posited in opposition to the abstract, the intellectual, the literary” (22). Authenticity then, if Wang and Melamed’s diagnoses are any indication, is a distinctly corporeal

matter—yes, a *matter*. In other words, authenticity is associated with, and characterized by, the materiality of the body, a static and fixed entity of “brute givenness,” to borrow from Elizabeth Grosz, frequently collected alongside or made stand-in for intimate feeling and experience, content and “about-ness,” the “real” and immediately accessible, the social and political, and the historical. As such, the corporeal matter of authenticity becomes part of a somatophobic, gendered and racialized mind/body split wherein it is the enemy of language-based inquiry and the discursivity of intellect, which, on the other side of the binary, is often grouped or synonymized with abstraction, form, aesthetics, the constructed and theoretical, and literariness.

With all that said, the tendency to value Asian American texts for their purported authenticity—or as what Kandice Chuh calls “objects of knowledge”—and thereby epistemologically accessing Asian American bodies themselves, has not only historically been prevalent among the predominantly white culture of American literary study described by Wang and Melamed, but also within Asian American studies itself—as evinced in part by the above excerpt. Reading for authenticity is useful for the encyclopedia’s corrective ethos of making knowable, “as exhaustively as possible,” various Asian American ethnic groups and identities to simultaneously advance Asian American folkloric studies and supply ethnographic knowledge to various levels of society. And yet, despite the encyclopedia’s aims towards intelligibility, the information provided by Yip’s entry is, in several key ways, actually quite unintelligible.

Though it may upon first glance illustrate the forenamed ethnic diversity of the authors and titles categorized under Burmese American literature, it also seems to obfuscate coherent notions of ethnicity altogether with respect to Burmese American identity, along with a broader Asian American identity. Kenneth Wong, a “Burmese-born ethnic-Chinese American,” is presumably distinguished from Thant Myint-U, someone born to Burman parents in New York

City—though both authors are still regarded as Burmese American; as established prior, Burman is synonymous with Bamar. The go-to external clarification for the above excerpt might simply be that which has already been reinforced thus far: not all Burmese Americans are Bamar. Some, like Wong, are descended from one of the many diasporic groups who have lived in Burma/Myanmar for generations since the era of British colonialism, such as Burmese Chinese/Sino-Burmese.

Nevertheless, based on Yip's entry alone, one remains puzzled about the series of ethnic labels applied to Wong; it is unclear, for instance, if "Burmese-born ethnic Chinese" is meant to be read as a distinct ethnic identity that modifies "American," or if "Burmese-born" is simply a modifier for "ethnic Chinese American." In the case of the latter, how does usage of the specific description for Wong's ethnic identity relate to its categorization under the larger umbrella of "Burmese American"? How does it distinguish itself from, say, "Chinese American" as another category of ethnic identity, also included in the encyclopedia, discrete from Burmese American? Furthermore, how does "Burmese American" then relate to the even larger ethnic umbrella of "Asian American" and the other groups, like Chinese American, it is meant to contain?

The easy answer would be one that most Asian Americanists are well aware of: our systemized categories of ethnic identity, whether deployed through governmental or academic means, are never really discrete or stable, and ethnicity is quite fluid between identity categories as well as manners of self-identification: all actively shaped and reshaped by Asian Americans themselves under differing social, political, and historical circumstances. As such, I am not rendering a judgment on the language Wong himself uses to identify, if this description is indeed his mode of identification. Rather, I pose these questions to probe the lack of coherence in a description that is literally intended to be coherent. The encyclopedia is, by the claims of its own

editors, already striving for an accurate language of categorical uniformity and clarity in order to necessarily fill as best as it can field-specific gaps of knowledge on Asian American groups and identities, especially those most underrepresented. But upon a close reading, the confusion that arises in response to what is being expressed here may be indicative of how the text is, in this particular instance, itself confused about, or at the very least actively *confusing*, the referentiality of the descriptor “Burmese American.” Though it is an informational resource that makes clear the “what-ness” or “about-ness” of Burmese American literature and identity, as if such an answer is a pre-existing, the entry provokes the *question* of Burmese-ness, which I put most vulgarly: exactly *what about* the listed authors makes them “Burmese” in a U.S context?

The phrase “Burmese-born” seems to make the fact of Wong’s Burmese-ness contingent, as does the description of Thant Myint-U’s identity for that matter: “born in New York to Burman parents.” The Burmese-ness of Wong’s identity is evidently determined by how he was born and grew up in Burma/Myanmar before immigrating to the U.S., whereas the Burmese-ness of Thant Myint-U’s identity is evidently determined by how he is descended from an ethnic people (Bamar) considered native to Burma/Myanmar; though, like Wong, his parents were also immigrants from the same country. Adding to this confusion, the tiny canon of Burmese American literature also seems to include the memoir of a white Austrian woman, Inge Sargent, who is evidently Burmese American by marriage, her husband being a “prince of a Shan ethnic group”; the Shan are, alongside the Bamar, one of the eight indigenous groups or “national races” recognized by the Burmese/Myanmar government.

Though it sounds like an indictment, my evaluation of the entry serves to illustrate a discursive element in the encyclopedia’s execution of its aims that is actually vital to this dissertation. Before one can even get to the topic of Burmese American literature, one is struck

by how “Burmese American,” as an identity title and category forwarded by Asian Americanist discourses, is already literary object. In the following section, I seek to link such literariness with the corporeal matters of authenticity by tracing relevant Burmese/Myanmar and U.S. histories of identity formation as they relate to notions of authentic Burmese-ness.

## **II. Historicizing Purity Politics, “Authentic” Burmese-ness, and the Concept of *Lu-myo***

As a representational sign of identity, “Burmese American” exhibits severe distortion between signified and signifier. This perplexing nature is ultimately not lost on Yip herself, who also authored the entry “History, People, and Culture,” appearing before “Literature and Folklore,” under “Burmese Americans” as the section’s first entry. In this entry, she states, “Burmese America is itself a multiethnic and multicultural part of an already diverse United States. The Burmese diaspora is also multicultural because Burma is a country that is multiethnic,” with a Bamar ethnic majority and “over 125 ethnic minorities, in addition to sizable populations of Chinese, Indian [...] and other immigrants” (110). Yip compares Burmese Americans to similarly heterogeneous Asian American communities with varied languages, backgrounds, ethnicities and migration circumstances, such as Chinese Americans; like other groups who feature a significant degree of ethnic heterogeneity, “Burmese Americans struggle with an individual as well as collective identity and experience” (127).

Yip then sharply traces various pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial histories of Burma/Myanmar relevant to Burmese American identity formation. She details the early emergence of the Burmese/Myanmar military dictatorship and successive regimes, along with their impact on immigration from Burma/Myanmar to the U.S.: conducting a more thorough break-down of different ethnic groups in the country, the distinctions between them as enforced by the government, and how such distinctions filter into the fragmented make-up of Burmese

American communities and identity. I view this fragmentation to be, in many ways, a direct result of the military regime's ethno-nationalistic persecution of minorities for the maintenance of Bamar dominance, a state of rule that has, over the course of various changes in political party names and regime personnel, endured for decades.

Throughout the majority of the country's history post-independence, the Burmese/Myanmar military dictatorship has utilized Bamar-centric education systems, religious conversion, economic exploitation, and lethal force to either outright erase the cultural identities of ethnic minorities or assimilate them into docile positions subordinate to Bamar identity: a process known as "Burmanization." The first era of direct military rule in Burma began in 1962 after the military, under the leadership of General Ne Win, seized power from the parliamentary democratic government. Fundamental to the young military regime was an austere maintenance of national belonging and un-belonging: a legal adjudication of what was Burmese and un-Burmese premised on the reestablishment of Bamar hegemony after the country liberated itself from British colonialism. Ne Win's rule normalized a standard of Burmese-ness always in construction around, or in proximity to, a purified Bamar identity. The regime's efforts to reverse the socio-political and economic disempowerment that the Bamar had suffered under the British inevitably took the form of persecuting non-Bamar ethnic peoples and institutionalizing a language, rooted in "British colonial ethnology,"<sup>2</sup> used to correctively signify ethnicity and ethnic difference: invoking what Jini Kim Watson might call a "paradoxical aim to advance decolonization by reproducing elements of the colonial state" (6). Speaking very broadly, it can be said that the origins of modern Burmese/Bamar nationalism and related concerns over pure or authentic Burmese-ness can be traced back to the period of anti-colonial struggle in Burma.

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<sup>2</sup> See Jane Ferguson, "Who's Counting? Ethnicity, Belonging, and the National Census in Burma/Myanmar" (2015).

Perhaps the most well-known nationalist organization of this era was the Dobama Asiayone (“Our Burma Association” or “We the Burmese Association”), formed in 1930 by a group of nationalists seeking to promote what they viewed as Burmese culture, which was, according to Matthew J. Walton, “in reality, Burman culture” (8). Although occasionally expressed as inclusive of all the people within Burma’s borders, in general, the nascent Burmese nationalism “was really a Burman nationalism that gradually began to equate elements of Burman culture and Burman history” with a broader ‘Burmese’ identity (Walton 8; Brown 45)<sup>3</sup>. Central to the ideology was the revitalization of shared Theravada Buddhist identity—exemplified by the old nationalist Burmese adage, “To be Burman is to be Buddhist”—and the desire to fight the British colonial administration’s established socio-economic ethnic hierarchy, which placed Bamar peoples at the bottom. Such subordination spurred the demonization of minority populations, both indigenous and immigrant/diasporic, in Burma, along with mixed-race/mixed-ethnic unions between them and Bamar people.

During their rule, the British encouraged Indian and Chinese immigration into Burma with the promise of enterprise and work opportunities, and they also allied with indigenous minorities against the Bamar majority—all of which sowed seeds of resentment and animosity.<sup>4</sup> Amid this tumultuous climate, political discourses on ethnic purity became more prominent. In 1939, the established left-wing nationalist press *Kyi pwa yei* (“Progress”) published what, according to historian Chie Ikeya, is “probably the most extensive and elaborate Burmese-language diatribe against intermarriage and miscegenation.” The 350-page text was titled *Ka bya pyatthana*, which can be translated as “The Ka bya Problem”; the Burmese term

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<sup>3</sup> See also the following article cited by Walton: D. Brown “The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia” (1994).

<sup>4</sup> For example: in 1930, a series of riots between striking Indian dockworkers and Bamar laborers, who were brought in to break the strike, erupted in the colonial capital of Rangoon. Eight years later, arguably the most intense and protracted outburst of communal violence during the colonial period occurred in the form of Islamophobic anti-Indian riots snowballing from a rally at Shwedagon Pagoda.

“ka bya” (also spelled “ka pya”) refers to people of mixed-race or mixed-ethnic identity. In *Ka bya pyatthana*, author U Pu Galay claimed that marriages between ethnic Bamar women and Indian men, along with the children birthed from these unions, threatened a catastrophic dissolution of Burmese culture and race. He detailed further his philosophy of the dangers posed by ka bya, stating:

It’s worse to be *ka bya* in mind than to be *ka bya* in body; even if a person happens to be *ka bya* in body, if he or she lives in Burma and will die in Burma, it would be fitting for him or her to think like a Burmese person. ...[E]very person who lives in Burma and dies in Burma ought to share one blood, one soul, with Burmese people; he or she should not stray from or get in the way of the struggle for Burma’s independence. (1939, pp 11-12; quoted in Ikeya 2020)

What seems to underwrite Pu Galay’s articulation of the Burmese nationalist cause is a porousness between cultural and biological essentialisms that employs a variant of mind/body dualism. The body serves to bear the natural “fact” of mixed ancestry, and yet the terms of mixedness in Galay’s argument are not at all straightforward, since his logic is not wholly derived from a distinct rubric of biological or genetic classification, as is often the case with essentializing deployments of the body in discourses of race and gender. While Walton describes the emergent formation of Burmese nationalism to be dependent on the superiority of Bamar culture and identity alone, the ethno-nationalistic rhetoric used to dictate the threat of mixedness here does not seem quite consistent with that description, or even consistent with its own overarching argument. One can of course be “mixed” in body, something defined by an interracial or interethnic parentage that perhaps corresponds with a “mixed” phenotype (though obviously there is no absolute standard of appearance for mixed persons, or “unmixed” persons for that matter), but one can also be mixed in mind, and that is evidently much more deplorable.

Theoretically, someone who is part Indian and part Bamar, or part Chinese and Bamar, and so on, can be more authentically Burmese than someone of “pure” Bamar descent, so long as

they “think” like a Burmese person. By Pu Galay’s own admission, “a person who is not mixed is truly rare,” and all human beings are mixed in one way or another; perhaps the authenticity of Burmese-ness then is merely based on one’s commitment to anti-colonial resistance and Burma’s struggle for independence. What then determines whether one is unmixed of mind and “thinks like a Burmese” would be participation in a collective political investment and duty. However, the diatribe’s main stance protests unions between Bamar women and Indian men, therefore, the overall “purity” and enshrinement of a strictly Bamar ethnic identity matters on some basis in Pu Galay’s project of defining “Burmese” thought and authentic Burmese-ness, as well as the country’s “one blood” and “one people.” Pu Galay presents a seemingly dogmatic system of reasoning scaffolded by a stark binary between mind and body, wherein the body’s fixity is known but can easily be overcome in a mental capacity. But, in doing so, his words actually present the corporeal matters of authentic Burmese-ness as they pertain to a common national flesh and blood to exist in a state of abstraction and distortion.

I find the dynamic observed here to be key, because while my conceptualization of authentic Burmese-ness requires a crucial understanding of the manner in which it has been and is housed by aspirations of Bamar purity and supremacy, it also contends that authentic Burmese-ness is not completely contained by those ideals.<sup>5</sup> Enforcements of authentic Burmese-ness, as carried out through discourses on identity among those in Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora, shaped by decades of nationalistic and authoritarian domination, do not only operate by discerning who is or isn’t of “pure” Bamar parentage or ethnicity—the standard of

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<sup>5</sup> Perhaps one evidence of this is how the *dobama* (“We Burmese” or “Our Burmese”) slogan of Dobama Asiayone was positioned in opposition to *thudo-bama* (“Their Burmese” or “Those Burmese”), with the latter not necessarily being synonymous with non-Bamar ethnic groups, but instead “an array of social figures that members of the Dobama Asiayone saw as collaborating” with British, and later Japanese, colonizers (Nemoto 2000, 1). Thus the phrase “dobama” is “both capacious (by welcoming new people into the fold) and paranoid (by also making it clear that there are internal enemies that must be rooted out)” (Campbell and Prasse-Freeman 182).

which is also always shifting.<sup>6</sup> As I conceptualize it, the nationalistic tendencies with which authentic Burmese-ness is policed are more amorphous and subject to reconstruction and redefinition based on certain ends, though that is not to say their contents and discontents are any less of a corporal matter.

Moreover, the histories of Burmese nationalism and the struggle against British colonialism in Burma are, like the histories of any ideology or movement, filled with divergences and disagreements among some of its most prolific leaders. Though Walton discusses in-depth the exclusionary nature of early Burmese nationalism, Nyi Nyi Kyaw explains that by the 1940s, the xenophobia that had peaked in previous decades became significantly less uniform. A younger generation of more secularly-minded nationalists sought to cultivate a more inclusive civic identity. Among these were Dobama Asiayone members Aung San—the “Father of Modern Burma,” who was instrumental in the nation’s liberation from British rule, but assassinated before independence in 1948—and U Nu, who represented the country at the historic 1955 Bandung Conference, which Burma had a large role in organizing, as the first Prime Minister of the Union of Burma (352; U Maung Maung, 1990)<sup>7</sup>. By the mid-1940s, many Burmese nationalist sects became conscious<sup>8</sup> of the “need for a more inclusive civic identity for

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<sup>6</sup> As Thant Myint-U explains, “Burman-ness” itself was neither eternal nor pre-formed, but rather further constructed through socio-political struggle (20).

<sup>7</sup> According to Nyi Nyi Kyaw, there were three main reasons for this: “First, the separation of Burma from British India in 1937, which quelled some of the anti-colonial resentment; second, the entry into the Indo-Burmese Immigration Agreement (1941) which enabled independent Burma to restrict Indian migration as it was no longer being part of British India; and third, the stipulation of the Buddhist Women’s Special Marriage and Inheritance Act (1939), which addressed concerns that native Buddhist partners of Indian Hindu and Muslim men were losing their legal rights to inheritance and child custody upon marriage” (352). See also the work Nyi Nyi Kyaw cites by U Maung Maung, *Burmese nationalist movements, 1940-1948* (1990) and also U Maung Maung’s earlier work, *From Sangha to laity, Nationalist movements of Burma, 1920-1940*.

<sup>8</sup> Kei Nemoto highlights how the ideals of Dobama Asiayone transformed from enforcing a superior nativized Bamar Buddhist sensibility to embracing both “natives and non-natives,” as long as they identified with an overarching national Burmese identity (79). An inclusive civic identity was also Aung San’s foundation for a future independent Burma and the political alliance he led, called the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League, of which U Nu also held a leading position. The shifting stage of international politics, the outbreak of World War II, and changing views in the colonizing nation were favorable conditions for nationalist efforts towards autonomy and Burma’s eventual independence in 1948.

postcolonial Burma in place of the exclusive Buddhist national/ethnic identity constructed in earlier decades” (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 352). The new identity was framed by the younger generation of nationalists as “embracing of natives (both Bamar and non-Bamar) and hospitable to long-staying foreigners” (352). For this new generation of nationalist organizers, many of whom went on to directly shape the young Burmese state post-independence as politicians, common political interest provided a grounds for unity.<sup>9</sup>

The first constitution of Burma (1947) outlined a somewhat inclusive citizenship policy, compounded by the 1948 Union Citizenship Act. This legislation<sup>10</sup> remained untouched for decades, until the early 1960s. On March 2 of 1962, General Ne Win, who had also previously been a member of Dobama Asiayone alongside Aung San and U Nu, led a military coup overthrowing U Nu’s civilian Union Parliament, replacing it with the Union Revolutionary

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<sup>9</sup> Though it should not be a source of romanticization or used to disprove the violent, deep-seated structures of ethnic-based prejudice and racism in Burmese/Myanmar society, one should note that anti-colonial efforts did include significant interethnic and interfaith political alliances. Aung San’s leadership in particular recognized the desirability of the thousands of Chinese, Indian, and mixed-raced peoples who wanted to remain in Burma, and he also sought to ally with members of the country’s indigenous minorities. Among the cabinet of his pre-independence government was: U Razak, a Bamar Muslim of Tamil ancestry who was Minister of Education and National Planning, along with the Chairman of the Burma Muslim Congress; Mahn Ba Khaing, the minister of industry and one of few Karen politicians who had not boycotted involvement in Aung San’s government; and Sao Sam Htun, a Shan Prince and the Minister of the Hill Regions, whose leadership was crucial in convincing other ethnic minorities to join the struggle for Burma’s independence. See also the Panglong Agreement (1947). Furthermore, many colonial-era Burmese nationalists were of minority descent, and there are multiple kinds of nationalisms in Burma/Myanmar, including Karen nationalism, Shan nationalism, etcetera.

<sup>10</sup> Nyi Nyi Kyaw explains that the first constitution of Burma (1947) accorded citizenship to those born in Burma who had at least one grandparent who belonged to a “native race” (section 11(ii)) and to those who were born and had lived in British occupied territories—including Burma and India—for at least eight years (section 11(iv)) (353). In theory, mixed individuals “had one or more native grandparents so they were already eligible for citizenship under the first provision.” The second provision would also “naturalize foreigners and their non-mixed children for whom the Union Citizenship (Election) Act (1948) detailed provisions for citizenship.” Kyaw explains that the citizenship status of certain diasporic groups and *ka bya* was equal to “native” citizenship held by those peoples deemed indigenous to Burma (section 13 of the 1947 constitution) (353). Additionally, the Union Citizenship Act (1948) gave citizenship to “those born in Burma whose parents were also born in Burma and whose grandparents had made Burma their permanent home (section 4(2)).” The act also naturalized those individuals born in or outside Burma if one of their parents was a citizen. However, Jayde Lin Roberts offers a different description of the 1948 law, stating that while it did stipulate that anyone who was “part Burmese by blood, inclusive of the recognized ethnicities” should be granted citizenship, these ethnicities were restricted to the “‘indigenous races of Burma’ [which include] Arakanese, Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah, Mon or Shan race[s] and such racial group[s] as [have] settled in any of the territories included within the Union as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1823 A.D” (7-8). The citizenship status of certain diasporic groups were insecure; for example, descendents of Chinese immigrants in Burma were defined as non-indigenous or alien residents, whose citizenship was subject to question.

Council (URC) and ushering in an era of one-party rule. The URC established the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) and adopted the “Burmese Way to Socialism,” an ideology characterized by isolationist, nationalist, and xenophobic policies, along with a heavy dependence on the military. With the BSPP in power, the military regime assumed a primary role in working towards the structural dominance of ethnic Bamar Buddhist identity over the public. The regime employed the same divide-and-conquer tactics of Burma’s colonizers over majority and minority ethnic populations to engage in armed internal conflict, incite riotous violence, and orchestrate mass expulsions of people from Burma, efforts which have been sustained over decades. Throughout its extensive rule, a key tool the regime has utilized to distinguish who and what is Burmese or un-Burmese, as well as foster a cultural obsession with the authenticity of ethnic identity, is the descriptive capacity of language. Deployed via forms of state documentation—not only laws, but also national censuses and National Registration cards—such language, in my view, is a technology that discursively produces the body as a text that signifies, and *should* be extracted for, ethnic truth. Bodies are thus “authenticated” as documents.

The term for ethnicity in Burmese is *lu-myo*, which can be directly translated as “type” or “kind” of person (Ikeya 1,996).<sup>11</sup> *Lu-myo* is also the term for “race,” “nation”/“nationality,” and can even refer to one’s religion—thus confusing the distinctions between various planes of identity, which, as Nyi Nyi Kyaw states, have all “been intertwined in the political, social, and

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<sup>11</sup> This text by Ikeya appears in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification* (2020), which was accessed in iBook format. Regarding the concept of *lu-myo*, Walton contends that the challenge of distinguishing race from ethnicity is “compounded by the fact that speakers of Burmese often use the same word for both categories” (23). He goes on to explain that *lu-myo* is “a much more inclusive term with flexible content that appears to have changed along with common English categorisations” and “[m]ost Burmese speakers would respond to the question ‘*Ba lu myo le?*’ [‘What race are you?'] by stating their ethnicity (or sometimes adding to the confusion, their religion),” suggesting that there is an indigenous categorization system that does not neatly map onto the race/ethnicity distinction as one might normally understand it in, for example, English language contexts. There might also exist multiple systems of categorizing ethnic/racial/national/religious identity, since members of different ethnic groups might also understand the word differently) that does not neatly map onto the race/ethnicity distinction.

historical construction of identities in Burma/Myanmar” (346). Michael Charney explains that “myo” is an elastic term that has potentially different meanings in a precolonial versus colonial context, but “today, [lu-myo] describes a category, a class, a type, a kind, a breed, a species, a strain, and even...a seed” (2004: 2-3): definitions that resonate with Mary P. Callahan’s evaluation of the phrase “national races” or *taing yin thar lu-myo*—often defined as referring to the concept of indigeneity and indigenous peoples. Callahan posits that *taing yin thar lu-myo* and *lu-myo* more generally, as utilized by forms of state language and documentation, is underwritten by a belief in the biological nature of identity. The specific notion of the “biological” she raises can be seen as interchangeable with the materiality of the body, and thus also synonymous, on her terms (not mine), with objectivity, verifiability, fixity, and a “blood-borne nature” (Callahan 9).

In 1982, a citizenship law was promulgated, stating that those belonging to alleged national races or *taing yin thar lu-myo* automatically qualified for full citizenship. The law also requires citizens to obtain a National Registration Card while non-citizens are given a Foreign Registration Card.<sup>12</sup> The registration card system is typically understood as a micro-management of identity and citizenship according to the state’s ideological utilization of *lu-myo* (Ferguson 15). Before the promulgation of the law, Ne Win, though a *ka bya* of mixed Bamar and Chinese ancestry, was quoted in the state-owned paper *Working People’s Daily*: while the government does not mean to imply that all those individuals with “mixed blood” are disloyal to Burma, still—“[w]e must consider whether we should accord the same opportunities to [them] as we do to the offspring of our own citizens. [...] the loyalty of those with mixed blood in certain cases

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<sup>12</sup> However, according to Jayde Lin Roberts, while there is a system of registration cards, the 1982 law, along with the preceding 1948 law, were never “fully implemented” or enforced with consistency, and in the era of military rule there have been instances of citizenship being attained through “legal and illegal measures,” including bribery of government officials (100-101).

may be questionable.”<sup>13</sup> His statement strongly resonates with Pu Galay’s colonial-era logic, also voicing a paranoia about the “ka bya” problem in a way that is not necessarily straightforward, but still expressed through the corporeal terms of a common “national blood” threatened by the “literal” “mixed blood” of certain individuals.

Ne Win’s words ambiguously thread together normative ideas of the figurative and literal, cultural and biological, whereby it is difficult to distinguish one from the other or trace where one ends and the other begins with respect to scale. To recall Galay’s diatribe, Ikeya asserts that what the text finds troubling is that the existence of ka bya “undermined...the existence of a stable and ‘easily identifiable’ community of Burmese” (1,986). One might infer from this that the stability of a unitary Burmese identity—not necessarily rooted in the absolute consistency of ethnic purity alone but certainly informed by it—and the clean, simple, and accurate *signification* of that identity, was (and is) of utmost importance to the most virulent strains of Bamar/Burmese nationalism.

Those with “mixed blood” were identified by the 1982 law<sup>14</sup> as the offspring of “foreign races”—European, Indian, Chinese, and other “Asiatics”—and national races/taing yin thar or taing yin thar lu-myo. In my own evaluation, the concept of lu-myo, as it is broadly used within Burmese/Myanmar governmental and cultural discourses, is predicated on the idea that an individual’s “outer” body signifies or gives proof of an “inner” pre-existing and predetermining

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<sup>13</sup> The following quote appears in translation in Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Under the 1982 law, the eight recognized national races, which also appeared in a similar iteration in the 1948 law, are the Bamar, Karen, Kachin, Kayah, Chin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. Jayde Lin Roberts states that the law declared three classes of citizens: (1) full citizens—those descended from residents who lived in Burma prior to 1823 or those born to parents who were citizens at the time of birth; (2) associate citizens—those who acquired citizenship through the 1948 Union Citizenship Act; and (3) naturalized citizens—those who lived in Burma before January 4, 1948, and applied for citizenship after 1982. Chinese and Indians who had obtained full citizenship under the 1948 law were demoted to associate citizens and lost their official positions in government as well as access to the most prestigious majors in universities: medicine and Engineering (100). As it has become more well-known in the past decade due to mounting international concern over the genocidal persecution of the Rohingya, this law also revoked the Rohingya of their citizenship.

condition of identity—which in turn facilitates the processes of authentication under the authoritarian gaze. Based on the ideologeme of *lu-myo*, the body is a text. The body-text schema serves as a means of reading for authenticity value, wherein the authoritarian gaze may extract an innate truth of ethnic identity. Knowledge of ethnicity, specifically ethnic authenticity, is negotiated and apprehended via distinctly corporeal matters and emerges here as a regime in itself.

The military regime has periodically—in 1973, 1983, and 2014—“counted” the *lu-myo* in the country via censuses modeled after British colonial methods of recording, categorizing, and narrativizing ethnicity and ethnic difference. Jane Ferguson states that the British “bureaucratically solidified the idea of an intrinsic, mappable connection between a ‘people’ and a ‘territory’,” carrying out a census that demanded respondents give single, discrete, unqualified answers for their race, and these would fit into a prescribed categorical scheme (6). To focus on the 1983 census in particular, one should note a key aspect that differentiated it from its 1973 counterpart: the process introduced a new scheme for categorizing ethnicity and ethnic groups—a list of 135 sub-categories within the eight national races. The government’s reasoning for the number 135 is unclear.<sup>15</sup> However, what is clear is that the list was presented as an *expansion* of the eight official races—an implicitly more correct and accurate reflection of the ethnic diversity in the country.

In analyzing the list, Ferguson states that there are numerous confusions among the ordering of signifier and signified; “[f]or example, some groups are listed according to

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<sup>15</sup> One argument suggests that they acquired the number from the 1931 British Census, which lists 135 languages spoken in Burma (Ferguson 15). However, according to Ferguson, informants in the country have suggested that the number came from Senior General Saw Maung, eventual founder of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the party that replaced the BSPP after Ne Win stepped down in 1988. When Saw Maung was questioned as to why the military was having difficulty with “ethnic” insurgencies, referring to the armed groups in the country warring with them, he responded that the problem was “partly due to the large number of ethnic groups: 135” (15). After this statement, the government institutionalized the number 135.

exogamous names, whereas others are listed by endogamous names”; alternatively, multiple groups are listed according to the name of their language, whereas others are named based on their location or principal town (15).<sup>16</sup> The sheer multitude of inconsistencies that Ferguson outlines are pivotal for my following claim: valuing language only in its descriptive capacity—as used to seemingly provide an always-more correct, more-inclusive description to exhaustively recognize the diversity and multiplicity of individual ethnic identities and groups—is a unifying authoritarian tool that simultaneously, perpetually, disintegrates the intelligibility of ethnic identity and difference.

While the military regime seeks to erase the identities and cultures of various minority communities and also enacts violent state-sanctioned campaigns towards assimilation, expulsion, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, it also values the recognition of a categorical unity in “diversity” and the provision of an accurate language to reflect that diversity. The repeated expansion of language in its referential capacity to facilitate “inclusive” representation is actually a key means by which the regime can also justify its other violences and exclusionary policies. As Hannah Arendt states of the difference between tyranny and authoritarian government: a tyrant rules in accordance with his own will and interest, “whereas even the most draconic authoritarian government is bound by laws. Its acts are tested by a code which was made either not by man at all [...] or at least not by those actually in power” (4). At least insofar as what scholars of Burma

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<sup>16</sup> Ferguson sharply outlines other inconsistencies: “[o]ne group, the Mro/Wakim, is listed under both Chin and Rakhine. The preponderance of group names, arguably, has unnecessarily subdivided some races. For example, Kachin political leaders have argued that six of the named twelve sub-groups are but clans within other groups; therefore, there are six Kachin groups, not twelve. The same case has been made for the Karen/Kayin race, with the government scheme placing the number of sub-groups as nine, but Karen leaders saying that there are five. Within the total Chin population of an estimated one million people, the government list specifies 53 sub-groups, but these listed groups are, in some cases, merely alternative spellings of the same name, the name of a variant dialect of one language, or again, clans within another sub-group. In addition to recognized groups finding themselves incorrectly identified or subdivided, the list of 135 excludes a number of groups. A few of the groups not included in the list are: Panthay Chinese Muslims, Overseas Chinese (speakers of Hokkien and Cantonese), Anglo-Burmese (Eurasians of mixed Burmese and European background), Burmese Indians, Gurkha, Pakistanis, and Rohingyas” (16).

studies have pointed out, the thematic continuities between the military government's citizenship laws, registration cards, and colonial means of counting and recording *lu-myo*<sup>17</sup> normalize what I interpret as an obsession with the descriptive and corrective function of language—specifically as employed in an officiating system that at once starkly delineates *and* distorts difference. This obsession is premised on the use of language to name ethnicity as a pre-existing, “natural” fact evidenced by or synonymous with the body, degrading the natural and the body to a state of what Judith Butler calls “that which is before intelligibility” (4). Though they are actively shaping and (re)creating the corporeal terms of ethnic identity, such forms of officiating language present themselves, in a sense, as recognizing and making clear via the “brute givenness” of the body what is merely “already there.”

None of this is to say that only government forces within Burma/Myanmar have taken part in these processes of creation and recreation. During the period of ongoing political transition beginning in 2011, a combination of “official” and “unofficial” forces inside Burma/Myanmar, as well as activists in the diaspora and the international community, were caught up in what Callahan calls “an unprecedented burst of ethnic and political boundary-making” (459). Amid mounting political tensions emerged concerted efforts towards “narrating, counting, classifying, registering, documenting and identifying who belongs in the country and who does not, who is entitled to what, and who represents whom among the different nationalities and peoples” (459). Then came the event of conducting the 2014 Census, an effort supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), who served as the lead technical agency aiding what was then-called the Union of Myanmar Ministry of Immigration and Population (MOIP). The code list of ethnonyms and procedures for collecting data were

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<sup>17</sup> Callahan, in stressing the dangers of the aforementioned census data, and censuses more broadly, states: “[c]ensus results do not produce neutral, unfiltered, true ‘snapshots’ of any country. Instead, censuses distort, reinforce, legalize and freeze for posterity many arbitrary categories of class, citizenship and identity” (7).

recorded by enumerators and not respondents,<sup>18</sup> and the structure of data-collection was controversial for myriad reasons, one of which being that the procedures called for information on respondents' lu-myo based, again, on the much disputed list of 135 "national races" that was almost identical to the one enacted in the previous 1983 census.<sup>19</sup>

The census took place in the politically charged climate leading up to Burma/Myanmar's 2015 elections, in which pro-democracy leader and global human rights icon Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won in a landslide victory. The opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi had been released from house arrest, a detention period that contributed to a total of 15 years, by the government under then-President Thein Sein. His presidency was marked by a series of political reforms and improved relations with the U.S. government, which would eventually proceed in 2016 to lift sanctions on Burma/Myanmar that had been in place for two decades. The taing yin thar lu-myo data from the 2014 census was meant to have been used for calculating which groups met the constitutional threshold for a population count that would give them minority representation in the state and regional

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<sup>18</sup> The Census's "Ethnicity" question was followed by a controversial question on citizenship status. Enumerators were instructed to ask the respondent, "[w]hat ethnic group in Myanmar does [NAME] belong to or for non-Myanmar citizens which country do you come from? [*sic*]" (Callahan 464). Only one code could be recorded for each person, and by law, the enumerators were to ask the head of the household, usually the oldest male, to declare an ethnic identity for all those living and being enumerated in the home. The field manual instructions for enumeration were also contradictory on the issue of respondents' indicating a major race or a smaller sub-group; on the one hand, it insisted that enumerators were to record whatever ethnonym interviewees gave in response to the question. On the other hand, it instructed enumerators to "probe for subgroup identities if respondents named a major race, even if those major races were present on the code list" (Callahan 465).

<sup>19</sup> The list of 135 ethnic groups was also re-animated in the military government's rhetoric during the beginnings of the period of military rule from 1988 to 2011, which succeeded Ne Win's rule. The procedural decision on the part of the UNFPA and the MOIP that the 2014 census would record each individual as being of a single lu-myo "exacerbated the political ramification of imposing the 135 suspect categories on the population of Myanmar" (463). While the UN Statistics Division (UNSTAT) set out a global standard that holds "respondents [should] have the option of indicating multiple ethnic affiliations," and "[e]thnicity is multidimensional and more a process than a static concept, and so ethnic classification should be treated with movable boundaries" (139), there does not appear to be any record that the UN experts aiding the 2014 Census process ever considered modifying data-collecting procedures to reflect the international standard. There was also no official recognition that historically, other documents issued by the Burmese/Myanmar state, such as citizenship cards and household registry lists, have actually recognized multiple identities (Callahan 463).

parliaments. Conscientious of this, indigenous activists attempted to rally their respective communities to answer with a singular *lu-myo* code that would maximize their numbers.<sup>20</sup>

Both Thein Sein's administration and the following quasi-democratic NLD administration withheld the statistics on *lu-myo* from 2014 Census. In February 2016, the director of the census offered one insight when he told *The Myanmar Times* that the release of data on *lu-myo* data might potentially "shatter the state's peace and stability" during the political transition (Nyi Nyi 2012, quoted in Pyae Thet Phyo 2016).<sup>21</sup> Come 2017, the country's Minister of Labour, Immigration and Population announced that the government would add "mixed Mon and Kayin races to the list of 135 indigenous races," again expanding the language and categories used to signify identities to be more inclusive of mixed-ethnic identities.<sup>22</sup>

Discussion of the institutional means used to accurately narrate, count, classify, register, and document ethnicity/ethnic identity, and therefore political representation and belonging, throughout the history of Burma/Myanmar might lend itself to the banal assertion that ethnicity and race are socially-constructed through language and, even more useless, that because of this constructed nature they are not "real." Alternatively, one might assert that what is simply happening in these contexts is that there *are* "real" truths that are natural and given via self-expression, and these state procedures merely provide a language that propagates a false

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<sup>20</sup> Amid the data-collecting process, activists from Chin, Shan, Mon, and other backgrounds formed census committees to conduct surveys to precount their numbers, as protection from being undercounted by the census and thus losing out on potential political representation. Other ethnic groups expressed worry that the census was dividing them into smaller categories in order to take rights away from them; for example, groups of Kachin activists advocated for all Kachin sub-groups to identify not with sub-groups or clan names, but rather with the overarching "Kachin" category. (Callahan 465).

<sup>21</sup> Callahan cites these sources as follows: Nyi Nyi, "2014 Population and Housing Census (Central Census Commission)" (PowerPoint Presentation delivered in Yangon, Myanmar Information Management Unit in December 2012) and Pyae Thet Phyo. "Census Data Could 'Shatter' Transition Stability, Says Official". *Myanmar Times*, 24 February 2016 (<http://www.mmmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/nay-pyi-taw/19137-census-data-could-shatter-transition-stability-says-official.html>).

<sup>22</sup> Ikeya lists these options for hybrid identity categories to officially appear as, for example, "Mon-Kayin" and "Shan-Bamar," etc. In her analysis of this expansion, she asks: "[w]hen told by government authorities that they can be and belong to one and only one *lu-myo*, which one do they choose—or which is assigned by the authorities—and on what basis?" (2,730).

image, when often even the casual question of “bar lu-myo le?” (“what is your lu-myo?”) might result in someone saying a mixed combination of “ethnic” and “racial” identities at one juncture and a “national” identity at the next, or a religious identity, implying that their religion is their race and ethnicity, or any permutation of these responses, or none at all. Of course, state means of coercing and distorting data legitimize corruption and sanctioned violence, and a collective language of identity visible to the state is necessary for political representation and socio-economic distribution of resources at the same time that it is used to withhold them. However, my aim in tracing these histories in connection to the study of Burmese American identity and literature is not to merely end at a point where we posit that progress can be achieved by viewing these formations as sites where one can recognize what was “always” real, true, accurate, and authentic, or reject these formations as reinforcing that which is fake, false, inaccurate, and inauthentic—all according to the binary’s own oppressive logics.

Rather, the fixation with ethnic authenticity fostered by the military regime’s deployment of an always-more corrective language documenting ethnicity and ethnic diversity—which (re)produce bodies as texts inviting the extraction of a “truth” of ethnic identity—informs how I conceptualize the desire for and enforcement of authentic Burmese-ness. The obsession with the descriptive capacity of language to yield inclusion through authentic and accurate representations of ethnic identity, even as it appears to be based on a facilitation of self-identification and self-expression, is also present under U.S. multicultural nationalism. As mentioned prior, multicultural nationalism has been and is sustained by the liberal and neoliberal multiculturalism of the U.S. academic institution, of which fields like Asian American studies are a part.

I should clarify that I do not view the academic institution of one country and the government of a different country to be the *same* (thereby erasing the existence of the academic

institution in Burma/Myanmar and the existence of the U.S. state), nor am I *equating* any university structure to a government structure, authoritarian or otherwise (though of course governmental and academic entities are often connected). I am instead interested in the way notions of authentic Burmese-ness, as *shaped* by the authoritarian logics of the ethnonationalist Burmese/Myanmar military regime, risk being reproduced in the academic study of Burmese American literary texts—at least insofar as they are seen to be interchangeable with Burmese American bodies, and therefore merely containers of information waiting to be extracted in order to “know” Burmese American identity, all for the purposes of remedying field-specific gaps in representation. The academic study of Burmese American literature is the site where both nationalistic tendencies clash, becoming a combined critical storm. In the following section, I venture into the eye of the storm, eventually returning to Lee and Nadeau’s encyclopedia.

## **II. Searching for “Burmese American” Identity**

While one might view “Burmese America,” to use Yip’s phrasing, as being fractured along the lines of ethnicity in a way that somewhat replicates the manifold cracks and crevices running deep within Burmese/Myanmar society, one might also consider the irony of how many, if not most, of those counted as “Burmese American” were made to leave Burma/Myanmar because they were not counted as “Burmese enough” by the ethno-nationalistic military regime. As Bakirathi Mani states: “Asian American diasporas are created through histories of war, nationalism, and decolonization in Asia” (298).<sup>23</sup> In its dealings with various marginalized ethnic populations, the military regime under Ne Win capitalized on enduring ethnic and racial tensions in his efforts to restore Bamar hegemony, encouraging violence that prompted many to leave the country. This early period of military rule coincided with the passage of the U.S. Immigration

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<sup>23</sup> See Mani’s essay, “Diasporic Longings” in *Asian American Literature in Transition, 1965-1996* (2017).

and Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Act), which changed the face of Asian America by amending previously racist legislation banning immigration from several Asian nations, including Burma.

The first major wave of immigration from Burma to the U.S. began in the late sixties and early seventies. This wave consisted mainly of Chinese diaspora leaving in wake of the brutal 1967 anti-Chinese riots, compounded with the massive reduction of professional opportunities that came with the regime's wholesale nationalization of private ventures under the Burmese Way to Socialism.<sup>24</sup> Smaller numbers of Burmese Indians—who had been victims of violent anti-Indian sentiment since the period of the First World War and lasting well into the late colonial period—also immigrated to the U.S. during this time. Similar to the Chinese, many Indians lost their businesses and became targets of increased discrimination after the coup; the prejudice aimed at them was exacerbated by how their physical appearance, the most prominent being their generally darker skin color, had long been construed as a sign of alien otherness and threat to Burmese society.<sup>25</sup> Sino-Burmese American scholar Joseph Cheah states that most of the immigrants from Burma constituting this first wave were “‘pushed’ by political and socioeconomic oppression in their native Burma and ‘pulled’ by economic and political incentives offered by the more liberalized American immigration law” (2011: 115). Those who arrived in the U.S. were members of relatively privileged classes, educated professionals, entrepreneurs, and technically skilled workers, and they were therefore the kinds of immigrants sought after by the 1965 law.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The nationalization of the economy adversely affected most of Burmese society, including Bamar people, but especially affected those who did not possess full citizenship, which included large immigrant populations. Many Burmese of Chinese descent were prohibited from obtaining business licenses, owning land, and practicing medicine. Ne Win's government also banned Chinese-language education and whipped up conflict between Bamar peoples and Burmese Chinese in the capital of Rangoon, creating hostile conditions that eventually erupted into the 1967 riots. See Roberts, *Mapping Chinese Rangoon: Place and Nation Among the Sino-Burmese* (2016); I thank my friend and colleague Aye Min Thant for recommending this resource.

<sup>25</sup> See Ikeya, “Belonging Across Religion, Race, and Nation in Burma-Myanmar” (2020).

<sup>26</sup> This gave rise to the inherently anti-black rhetoric of Asian Americans as “model minorities” in the U.S. As described by Asha Nadkarni and Cathy Schlund-Vials, the model minority stereotype is “an appellation of

The second major wave of immigration began during the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, consisting of various ethnic groups, diasporic and indigenous—Chinese, Karen, Kachin, along with Bamar people. Of the thousands who arrived were university students from Rangoon (Yangon) fleeing the military's crackdown on the pro-democratic resistance movement known as the 1988 or 8888 Uprising. A third wave, which began in the mid-2000s and is still continuing now, has primarily consisted of refugees from Burma/Myanmar and the Burma/Myanmar-Thai border fleeing longstanding internal conflict between the military and armed ethnic groups in the country fighting for the self-determination of their respective indigenous peoples.<sup>27</sup> The Karen arguably make up the majority of those who have been resettled, though there are also significant Kachin, Chin, and other ethnic communities in the U.S. In the past decade, increasing numbers of Rohingya refugees have been resettled as well.

It should be noted that the publication year of Lee and Nadeau's encyclopedia is also the same year the ethnic identity category "Burmese" appeared in the U.S. Census. As the work of scholars such as Y  n L   Espiritu and Michael Omi have shown, the politics of Asian American identity and racial formation in the U.S. have historically been shaped by the Census. State methods of categorically assigning racial identity is a key component in theorizing and forming

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ambivalent praise that has also (as many Asian Americanist critics have noted) been used as a weapon against other ethnic and racial groups, particularly African Americans" (2). For historical scholarship on the model minority myth, see Ellen Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origin of the Model Minority* (2013). For scholarship on the model minority paradigm with respect to Burmese American communities and identity, see the chapter "The Assimilationist Paradigm and Burmese Americans," in Joseph Cheah's *Race and Religion in American Buddhism: White Supremacy and Immigrant Adaptation* (2011).

<sup>27</sup>Even when the British Empire had begun to retreat from Burma during the late colonial period, many Burmese nationalists turned against the ethnic minority groups they had deemed disloyal to the project of Burmese nationhood. State-sanctioned campaigns of Burmanization facilitated further conflict with political organizations representing different indigenous peoples, such as the Karen National Union (KNU), and their armed wings fighting for political self-determination and autonomy. During the Ne Win era, armed uprisings proliferated against the military regime, an internal conflict that continues to this day and is known globally as the world's "longest-running civil war." See Robert H. Taylor, "Do States Make Nations?: The Politics of Identity in Myanmar Revisited" (2005). Note that there are multiple divisions and organizations that could be fighting in the name of the same ethnic group/subgroup. The interests of these organizations and armed wings are also not equivalent to the interests of civilians, political leaders, and activists. See also Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle Without Arms* (2011).

Asian American ethnicity and panethnicity, and Asian Americans have been affected by, and in turn have actively shaped, census classification and categories—thereby creating and recreating ethnic and racial identities as they are mobilized in various types of discourses. Racial categories have been significantly transformed by the advancement of Asian American political claims, illustrating how specific forms of classifications are the result of dynamic and complex negotiations between state interests, panethnic demands, and ethnic specific challenges (Espiritu and Omi 1).<sup>28</sup> The case of how “Burmese” was established as a category in the U.S. Census is, in this respect, no different. The effort was driven by organizations such as the Burmese Complete Count Committee, whose chairman Aung Naing<sup>29</sup> traveled the country explaining to various immigrant groups from Burma/Myanmar the importance of self-identifying as “Burmese” to make visible serious socio-economic vulnerabilities in the eyes of the federal government. Hence, the appearance of “Burmese Americans” within the encyclopedia does coincide at a time of slowly increasing and necessary visibility for the group in question.

In his own entry under “Burmese Americans,” titled “Identity,” Cheah states:

The identity of Burmese Americans cannot be essentialized or oversimplified. The identity *spaces* into which Burmese Americans are subsumed are determined in part by the premigration experiences of Burmese immigrants and their postmigration adjustments to an American context. The Karen, Chin, Kachin, and other indigenous minorities of Burma have had to suffer at the hands of the coercive military regime [...] Consequently, when these indigenous groups resettled in the United States as political refugees, they considered themselves neither as Burman nor Burmese but rather Karen, Chin, or as being members of a local ethnolinguistic and cultural group to which they always belonged.

The ethnonationalist policies of Burma, which compelled people of Chinese and Indian ethnicity and descent to adopt an essentially Burmese identity for the sake of economic and political survival, have played a role in the formation of identities of nonindigenous minorities of Burma. An ensuing impact of this experience is that many Chinese and

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<sup>28</sup> See Espiritu and Omi, "Who Are You Calling Asian? ": Shifting Identity Claims,. Racial Classification, and the Census (2000).

<sup>29</sup> See the following *TIME* article archived online:  
<https://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1912772,00.html>

Indians, after immigrating to the United States, reaffirmed the cultural aspects of their ethnicity that had been lost or given up. [...] As a result, many Chinese Burmese and Indian Burmese Americans have reethnicized themselves by emphasizing the linguistic and cultural aspects of their Chineseness or Indianness, which, in turn, has led them to classify themselves as “Chinese” or “Asian Indian” on census forms. (153)

Here, Cheah takes a strong stance against the essentialization of Burmese American identity—a stance that resonates with my own concerns. Because Burmese frequently comes across as equivalent to Bamar, assigning “Burmese” to all immigrants, refugees, and descendants of those from Burma/Myanmar risks reinforcing Bamar-dominant definitions of ethnic identity, which is largely what forced many of those categorized as “Burmese” in the U.S. to leave Burma/Myanmar in the first place. Reading “Burmese American” representations, literary and otherwise, for authenticity value and authentic Burmese-ness might also legitimate that definitions of the “Burmese” in “Burmese American” is or should be equivalent to, or at least inflected strongly by, the terms of identity propagated by Bamar ethno-nationalism and reinforce a Bamar-dominant norm.

That being said, while most of those who are categorized as Burmese or Burmese American in the U.S. might be ethnic minorities from Burma/Myanmar whose identities were repressed in some way by the regime’s Burmanization policies, the above excerpt shows that among these various communities, there exist different modes of disidentification with the assigned term at hand. Refugees who belong to indigenous groups like the Karen or Kachin might prefer to self-identify as being members of “a local ethnolinguistic and cultural group to which they always belonged” instead of as Burmese, though these terms largely do not appear in reference to a separate ethnic category from Burmese (or at all) on forms of state documentation like Censuses. Regardless, many still adopt the term “American” in conjunction to their ethnic identities, as especially evident in the formation of community organizations such as the “Karen

American Communities Foundation,” “Chin American Association, “Kachin American Baptist Association,” and so forth. Furthermore, individuals or certain community organizations might retain reference to a multi-ethnic identity that includes “Burmese” —such as in the case of the “Burmese Rohingya Community of GA.” In the case of the “formation of identities of nonindigenous minorities of Burma,” such as immigrants of Chinese and Indian descent, ethnic identification in the U.S. is affected by the opportunity to “reethnicize” and make one’s self visible in the eyes of the federal government by selecting the existing ethnic categories “Chinese” or “Indian” when filling out Censuses.

But while they might be interrelated, one should obviously not define the concept of ethnic/racial identity as a whole, either in an American or Burmese/Myanmar context, via the selection, non-selection, or absence of a term on governmental or institutional forms, applications, identification papers, and other types of everyday “interpolations of social interaction,” to borrow from Linda Martín Alcoff (92). As mentioned prior, the matter of ethnicity in general and accordant self-identification is extremely fluid and situational, and it is also shaped by issues of community and socio-political collectivity. Speaking solely from my own personal experience, many people will ardently reject the term Burmese in reference to themselves in one context and vehemently claim it in another.

And yet, as my previous discussion of Yip’s entry demonstrates, forwarding “Burmese American” through Asian American scholarship so that the field can attend to its underrepresentation in whichever sub-field at hand involves trying to distinguish the parameters of who or what is signified, referenced, and represented by the aforementioned term. In doing so, as Cheah makes evident, one is forced to confront the massive range of ethnicities controversially boxed into the modifier “Burmese.” What then does one make of how the title

“Burmese American” is used to signify thousands of immigrants and refugees from Burma/Myanmar when a large majority validly objects to, or simply does not find relevant, the signifier as it is forwarded by Asian American discourses?

Cheah continues:

Immigrant Chinese and Indians rarely use the generic representation of “Burmese” to signify themselves as an individual within the immensity of any cultural calculation. This is particularly true for those who were among the first wave (from 1967 to 1988) of Burmese immigrants to the United States who generally employ the hyphenated connotation of selfhood as being either “Chinese Burmese,” “Indian American,” “Chinese Burmese American,” “Asian American,” or within the classification of one of these descriptive categories. The same can be said about the 1.5 (those who were born in Burma but grew up in the United States) and second-generation Burmese Americans.

[...]

Hence, while the adjective “Burmese” in the title of this entry serves only as a unifying inscription for denoting people from Burma, it can also be limiting in that it does not explain a justificatory account of the apparent slipperiness range in the diversity, permeability, and/or shared cohabitation of ethnic groups from Burma in the United States today. (153)

The above excerpt prompts me to articulate the following: examining how the already fragmented diasporic and indigenous ethnic identities in Burma/Myanmar are variously re-rendered over and over again through the *also* ethnic and diasporic identity “Burmese American” seems to increasingly dissolve it, so much that “Burmese American” begins to feel like it doesn’t “really exist” and never has. As such, one is faced with a dilemma—one cannot close her fingers securely around “Burmese American” as an identity title without also letting it go before first touch, always flagging its imperfection or inaccuracy as a term, and implicitly looking to a more corrective term that accurately reflects what Rachel C. Lee calls “historical or live bodies” (12). And, if the title is constantly dodged by those who it is meant to refer to, whether in “official” or “unofficial” capacities, does it, can it, truly exist in the scope of Asian

American study and in academic discourses beyond the field? My gut reaction is to vehemently protest the offensiveness of such an inquiry and insist that the groundbreaking work of Burmese American scholars like Cheah and Tamara Ho supplies the obvious answer. Still, for my project, such questions concerning what endures in the afterlives of colonial and postcolonial violence are unavoidable, and formulating them is vital to a deconstructive spirit, pushing me towards a kind of reading that Gayatri Spivak reminds us is “unaccusing, unexcusing, attentive, situationally productive through dismantling” (81) and leads me through a necessary exercise.

As I see it, “Burmese American” becomes a microcosm of how Kandice Chuh famously analyzed the evolution of the broader term “Asian American.” “Organized around identity,” she explains, “[Asian American] homogenizes diversity such that recognizing ‘differences’ among fractures its intelligibility” (30). Attempts to resolve fragmentation by expanding its designated referents (“Asian American literatures” or “Asian American histories”) while able to indicate multiplicity, seem to only recognize plurality while not accounting for difference in any meaningful way (30). Chuh continues, saying that “[s]uch adjustments, through pluralizing or through expansion, as in ‘Asian Pacific Islander American,’ are clearly corrections designed to enhance the term’s accuracy, its reflectiveness as a representational sign”; assuming a purely descriptive mode, the various permutations of the term serve as a positivist identity category—“correcting the term’s inaccuracies indicates an understanding of the nature of language as referential and of identity as more than less stable” (30). This understanding of “Asian American” implies a normative subject, and as such generates dead-end debates about whether or not someone is a “real” Asian American or if a particular representation is “authentic.”

Ultimately, one arrives at the realization that the notions of the material “real,” “actual,” “true,” and whatever constructions of language that are dualistically deemed as incongruent with them—“fake,” “false,” etc.—does not constitute an adequate apparatus for attending to the previously-discussed dilemmas that arise when searching for the “Burmese American” within the “Asian American.” Having encountered the same dilemma in the previously discussed histories of ethnic/racial/national identity formation in Burma/Myanmar, one must recognize, as Butler states, the paradoxical nature of how “inquiry into the kinds of erasures and exclusions by which the construction of the subject operates is no longer constructivism, but neither is it essentialism” (Butler 8). For while there is an “outside,” which I believe should be acknowledged and valued as an excess, of what is produced by discourse, this is not “an ontological there-ness that [...] counters the boundaries of discourse,” i.e. an outside that exists in absolution or fixity (8).<sup>30</sup> In their most extreme iterations, such an apparatus has enforced its own corporeal regime of ethnic authenticity and inauthenticity in Asian American studies.

However, traversing contradictions and multitudes of internal fragmentation, cracks, and crevices is what makes Chuh’s reflexive assertion of the inherent “literariness” of the term “Asian American” so profound—“as a deliberate and self-reflective term of representation, [‘Asian American’] calls attention to the workings of language, to its structures and functions.” (30). Her argument here, which is to date more than two decades old and (allegedly) well-tread territory in the field, is still incredibly relevant, perhaps now more than ever. With regards to my project, it inspires how I also approach the “Burmese American” within the “Asian American” as

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<sup>30</sup> As Butler goes on to say, specifically with respect to sex vs. gender: “[t]he debate between constructivism and essentialism thus misses the point of deconstruction altogether, for the point has never been that ‘everything is discursively constructed’; that point, when and where it is made, belongs to a kind of discursive monism or linguisticism that refuses the constitutive force of exclusion, erasure, violent foreclosure, abjection and its disruptive return within the very terms of discursive legitimacy.” (8)

an inherently literary object, since “Burmese-ness” already “precedes” “Burmese American” as a literary matter. An inquiry into Burmese-ness is an inquiry into literariness.

In order to engage, but not bind myself in absolutism to, the anxiety that the “Burmese” of “Burmese American” is a mere, imperfect construct of language or discursivity and therefore not “real”—i.e. inaccurate or inauthentic to its referent, which is the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar and their descendants in the U.S.—I attend to the distortion of referentiality itself, or what Elda E. Tsou calls the “referential aberration of an Asian body without a corresponding linguistic authority” (15). While scholars such as Christopher Lee have asked how the field can better understand Asian America as simultaneously “material and discursive” and criticized attempts to “deny the referential capacity of Asian America,” citing Iyko Day’s claim that there are “real-life referents of the term ‘Asian American,’” I believe that these critiques miss the point of scrutinizing referentiality altogether. The question of “real-life referents”—as in individual histories or material realities that somehow exist completely independent from the discursive realm—is often raised in a way that thinks itself novel, as if those ideas haven’t already crossed the mind of anyone inquiring into the dissonant relationship between signified and signifier—as if it is not a major factor *motivating* such inquiries. Furthermore, the constant harkening back to the “real” of Asian America’s “real-life referents” writ large is itself ahistorical and homogenizes difference (frequently reinforcing the East Asian-hegemony of the field) and often cannot think through the historical and/or material particularities it professes to care so much about.

With respect to Burmese-ness and the specific term “Burmese American,” one might say that the history of the “real-life referents” at hand is a *history of referentiality* and referential aberration. An attendance to referentiality is not a denial of it, but a necessary task in denaturalizing the “historical or live bodies” pre-supposed to come before “Burmese American”

in a given capacity: as if “history,” “lived experience,” “material realities,” or any other entities associated with, or synonymized with the body, are always immediately accessible and not also incredibly discursive, abstract, and literary matters. This is especially pertinent in the interchanging of Burmese American bodies with Burmese American literary texts—a project that I view as grounded in the U.S. university’s ethos of (neo)liberal multiculturalism, sustaining multicultural nationalism by employing authoritarian logics in how it reads Asian American literature and representations for authenticity value. To expand on this claim, I return to Jonathan H.X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau’s encyclopedia vis-a-vis Cheah’s concerns and the editors’ own words.

The previous excerpts from Cheah warn of the essentialism that could arise in a blind embrace of the term “Burmese” and in association “Burmese American,” which I find relevant in challenging desires to extract and acquire knowledge of authentic Burmese-ness. His concerns resonate with long-expressed suspicions and criticisms of ethnic authenticity-as-such in Asian American studies; R. Radhakrishnan takes up a similar problematic in the familiar quandary of first generation immigrants complaining about the absence of cultural authenticity in their second generation children, who therefore attempt to replicate fixed and stable notions of national cultural heritage in them, which end up mimicking the narratives that supply grounds for religious and political violence in the immigrants’ countries of origin. He presents as an example continuities of Hindu nationalism and its inflected ideas of a national culture in Indian American identity formation (“Is the Ethnic Authentic in Diaspora?”).

Likewise, Cheah’s entry exemplifies an interesting and very productive tension from within the text that contains it—whose editors strive for progress through inclusive and informative representation, using language as merely a descriptive instrument to accurately

describe and define the encyclopedia's constituent items, which is, after all, typical of the encyclopedic form. The text deploys the language of identity to describe and apprehend pre-existing referent bodies, thereby allowing readers to "know" racial and ethnic difference. Put in other words, the method with which the editors seek to fill gaps of knowledge on underrepresented Asian American ethnic groups and identities operates on a familiar logic that the information filling them "is already there" in a predetermined nature that then predetermines ethnic identity, merely having been previously unnamed. This can then be remedied by categorically deploying and sustaining a language that names this pre-existing information in exhaustion, which I problematize in the following section.

#### **IV. Transnational Regimes of Ethnic Authenticity**

The spirit of progress through corrective inclusion and representation that the encyclopedia's editors herald in their contribution to Asian American folkloric studies appears to be rooted in the activist origins of Asian American studies more broadly. Lee and Nadeau end their introduction to the encyclopedia with the following paragraph:

Asian American studies was founded four decades ago out of struggle. It was fueled by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and it demanded an alternative definition of what it means to be American. Being an American was not limited to the normative white, middle-class, Protestant, heterosexual image and ideals. Instead, the Asian American movement demanded that Asians living in the United States, past, present, and future, have the right to express themselves as fully American. Regardless of degree of acculturation, this demand rejects the totalizing model of assimilation. Asian American folklore and folklife practices affirm the Asian American experience, which is shared among the Chinese gold miner, the Punjabi farmer, the Sikh taxi driver in New York, the mother who only speaks Lao, the Cambodian monk in Lowell, the Vietnamese American writer, the Burmese refugee, the Thai restaurant owner, the young Asian Americans who immigrated as kids, the undocumented Filipina, fourth-generation Japanese Americans, and the Asian American civil rights activists. Each group, each generation will express themselves in manifold ways, and their stories, once told and recorded, will become part of the folkloric traditions of Asian America, and, by

extension, part of American folklore and folklife traditions. Asian American folklore and folklife is not “exotic” and “other,” rather, it is American—naturally, comfortably, and rightly. (xl)

The editors anchor their method to the oft-recited story of Asian American studies’ radical roots in civil rights-era activism, framed here as part of a grand progress narrative in which a past struggle against inequality and racism in the U.S. has linearly, and successfully, worked towards a multicultural “American” present. In the above excerpt, the singular “struggle” of the past does not extend to the level of structural oppression—with no mention of its multiracial coalitions, solidarities with Third World resistance movements, or heterogeneous intra-movement tensions over identity politics and masculinist cultural nationalisms—and is recast as only being on the level of individual self-expression. This self-expression does not wish to challenge U.S. hegemony or a national fabric of belonging and promise of equal citizenship (see Lowe, 1996), but instead desires to take part in it as “fully American.” Despite citing a rejection of the “totalizing model of assimilation,” Lee and Nadeau portray the activist origins of Asian American studies as being deeply attached to and valuing of Americanness—an allegedly “natural” and “right” American-ness—assimilating into the norms precipitated through liberal and neoliberal multiculturalism and therefore functioning to sustain multicultural nationalism.

Following the ascendancy of neoliberalism and a multicultural ethic in the 1980s and 1990s, the notion of Asian American studies’ incipient civil-rights era formation became subsumed by university initiatives towards celebrating diversity that inevitably furthered the ends of liberal multiculturalism and multicultural nationalism, “as opposed to meaningful anti-racism” (Nadkarni and Schlund-Vials 3). Vis-à-vis Minoo Moallem and Iain Boal, Chuh defines multicultural nationalism as the following: an iteration of liberal ideology functioning on the fault between (1) “a universalism based on the notion of an abstract citizenship that at the

same time systematically produces sexualized, gendered, and racialized bodies” (Moallem and Boal 245, qtd. in Chuh 26) and (2) specific calls for recognition and justice by marginalized and minoritized communities. The U.S. university is tasked with generating citizens who belong to a multicultural national fabric, a unity in diversity that works democratically to further American nationalist ends on the basis of liberal ideology as opposed to the nationalist ends furthered under fascism and/or authoritarianism: ideologies that liberalism abhors and considers anti-democratic.

Accordingly, the academic institution expends efforts to “prioritize and protect difference,” and as such “must negotiate structural elements designed to herald the possibilities and promises of abstracted citizenship” (26). Jodi Melamed contends that American literary studies and its white hegemony—not individual literary texts—has been a foremost cultural technology for “producing, transmitting, and implanting” knowledge of racial difference and liberal anti-racist knowledge, playing a hugely effective role in producing post-World War II “commonsense notions about race in the U.S. [...] for better or worse” (15). The racial liberalism of the 1960s designated a privileged relationship between literature and difference, specifically in how it repeatedly institutionalized the idea of literary texts as practical and effective tools to recognize and know difference.

Beginning in the eighties, this idea definitively entered the university and, as part of its institutional structure, was enjoined with a preexisting imperative for literary studies to “socialize citizens by teaching them a national cultural tradition presumably embodied by canonical American literature” (32). Amid the canon wars and calls to diversify lists of staple literatures, works by authors of color were inserted into a canon of “multicultural literature,” among which they stood in for the experiences of racial others, and were produced as commodities consumed for the acquisition of antiracist knowledge. Melamed explains that a

work included in the canon of multicultural literature was perceived to be an example of the “value of different racialized cultures and a commodified form of racialized cultural property”; the “idea of culture as property [..],” she states, “functioned within a consumer economy in which antiracism could be expressed by a desire for diversity” (36). Consuming racialized cultural property presumptively fulfilled this desire and remedied racism, characterized as a matter of “irrationality, feeling, or habit,”—all traits that have been historically relegated to the feminized realm of the body (17). Liberal antiracisms “liberal antiracisms [...] have simply presumed that the antiracist values ascribed to literature are immanent in literary texts themselves,” manufacturing a transparency of the racialized text and racialized body, which are apprehended as one and the same.

The aforementioned transparency is characteristic of liberal modes of institutional power, “where norms confer legibility and illegibility and seem to operate uncoercively, apolitically, and in private” (16). I see the corporeal matter of authenticity as being key in Melamed’s framework; because multicultural literature was presumed to be “authentic, intimate, and representative,” white students with little to no knowledge of or proximity to racialized communities “could nonetheless presume enough familiarity to legitimate their managerial-class position” (37). In the outset, and evolving maintenance, of liberal and neoliberal multiculturalism, literary works by authors of color were/are perceived to testify to and educate readers about a race-differentiated history but also affirm the kind of multiculturally-developed present moment of American experience outlined by Lee and Nadeau’s mission.

More specifically, the pedagogical narrative of liberal multiculturalism plied the study of ethnic literatures to stay within the bounds of a “master narrative about the civil rights movement that described the triumph of formerly oppressed minorities (symbolically African Americans) in

defeating racism and gaining individual fulfillment and group dignity” through full inclusion in U.S. democracy (36). This is echoed by the ethos of the encyclopedia, whose editors posit the story of Asian American studies’ origins in civil rights activism to have proceeded on a linear path towards group dignity and individual fulfillment through self-expression in the U.S. As I stated, totality is very important to Lee and Nadeau’s encyclopedic aims, and it is again evidenced in the above excerpt through an aspirational vision, articulated through the present, of a massively collapsed temporality wherein all Asian Americans—across every ethnicity, religion, class, gender, profession, and time period—freely and fully take part in individual folkloric expressions that “affirm the Asian American experience.” Instituting such expressivity into the “folkloric traditions of Asian America” requires “recording” a preexisting expression, again invoking the referential function of language.

Alongside the Chinese gold miner, fourth-generation Japanese Americans, Sikh taxi driver, and Asian American civil rights activist is the Burmese refugee, whose identity and folkloric expression, as referenced via the section on “Burmese Americans” and its constitutive entries, help comprise the totality of Asian American folklore and folklife—which exists “naturally, comfortably, and rightly” as American. The tiny and understudied canon of Burmese American literature, as part of this totality of material culture among which endless multiplicities are recognized but all differences are collapsed, is read for authenticity value to affirm the Burmese American and broader Asian American experience, and ultimately the American experience, “rightly” and “naturally.” But what then defines authentic Burmese-ness in these respects?

I approach the following intellectual juncture by disclaiming that what I am about to say should not be conflated as speaking to each and every one of the hundreds of entries that

comprise the encyclopedia, since an entry like Cheah's provides a sense of internal contradiction that is very much in the spirit of my own framing. Even Lee and Nadeau establish at the very beginning that Asian American material cultures produce Asian American identities, implying that these cultures do not necessarily reflect identities in pre-existing truth. That being said, the above excerpt, along with several of their other assertions, all but beg to be troubled. Therefore, I still want to problematize their mission as being a prime example of how certain Asian American efforts towards inclusion that incorporate the study of Asian American literature—in trying to fill representational gaps through utilizing language as merely a descriptive, corrective tool to recognize any and all “differences among”—inevitably reinforce the creed of multiculturalism and multicultural nationalism.

By itself, such an observation is not groundbreaking. Asian Americanists have for decades criticized the field's imbrications in multicultural nationalism, as maintained by liberal (and now neoliberal) multiculturalist appropriations of the field's “radical roots” narrative—a narrative religiously enforced by many Asian American scholars themselves, as several literary critics in particular have pointed out (see Chuh 2003; Nguyen 2002; Christopher Lee 2012). They have also long-problematized how, as it became more and more evident in the scholarship of the late twentieth century, the utility of “Asian American literary criticism in the larger sphere of American literary studies has been dependent upon its ability to represent the material realities of its marginalized constituents” with little attention to aesthetics or form (Sue-Im Lee 2); such was a central engagement in much of the “new” formalist scholarship that emerged in the early to mid-2000s. However, with regards to Burmese American literature, it seems that most non-Burmese scholars' perception of the aforementioned body of writing remains “stuck” in the mindset of utilizing it to recover “missing” material realities, if it is acknowledged at all.

The specific problem, then, that my project impresses is this: reading Burmese American literary texts for authenticity value—i.e. seeking to extract a given “material reality”—in order to “know” bodily Burmese Americans themselves, thereby remedying their underrepresentation in the field, only values language in its descriptive and reflective capacity—a tool utilized by the authoritarian regime of Burma/Myanmar to enforce ethnic authenticity and authentic Burmese-ness while privileging diversity and inclusion. I urge Asian American literary scholars and those in Asian American studies at large to deepen their awareness of the field’s ongoing incorporations into multicultural nationalism by more rigorously engaging with the concept of ethno-nationalism and the authoritarian metrics that maintain it, especially in the current race to center Southeast Asian literatures and diasporas. I believe this is doubly pressing in advancing the study of Burmese American literary works, many of which I view as thematically inheriting a deep suspicion of the potentially authoritarian politics of identity altogether.<sup>31</sup> The project of reading Burmese American literature for authenticity value according to the academic institution’s multicultural ethos supplies a nexus where the authoritarian standards of authentic Burmese-ness are potentially reproduced, one nationalism begetting the other.

Under the ethnonationalist rule of the Burmese/Myanmar military, ever-corrective forms of state language, documentation, and their discursive continuities foster cultural norms wherein bodies are produced and authenticated as texts. They are “read” for ethnic authenticity value under an authoritarian gaze seeking to extract a particular truth of ethnic identity. Authenticity is constructed as that which can never be constructed because it is signified “naturally” by the body, a fixed entity that is also natural and unconstructed. I contend that the aforementioned logics normalize a nationalistic and authoritarian tendency to police authentic Burmese-ness, an essentializing dynamic that is not singularly loyal to either biological or cultural essentialisms. I

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<sup>31</sup> I thank my advisor Daniel Kim for inspiring this wording and also helping shape much of this project in general.

caution Asian Americanists of the dangers in approaching the understudied status of Burmese American literature by reading literary works for authenticity value in a project of corrective knowledge. Reading for authenticity value in this way, whether for the end goal of a utopic multicultural present or the knowledge of authentic resistance that inevitably still confirms a liberal multicultural ethic, to “know” Burmese American identity and Burmese Americans themselves, produces texts as bodies—and veers towards replicating the authoritarian logics that govern authentic Burmese-ness.

Instead, I pose that one might approach the study of Burmese American literature through what Chuh terms “strategic anti-essentialism” by valuing the inherent literariness of Burmese-ness. Doing so confronts the corporeal terms of authenticity by calling attention to how the materiality of the body is also a matter of discursivity and construction, because the body is *constructed*. The literariness of Burmese-ness simultaneously calls attention to, and challenges the legitimacy of, how authenticity constructs itself as that which is “natural” and unconstructed—thereby challenging nationalistic structures belonging to both Burma/Myanmar and the U.S.; as Butler states, “[t]hinking the body as constructed demands a rethinking of the meaning of construction itself” (xi). Rethinking the body requires dissolving mind/body dualisms by attending to how inquiries into the bodily, the material, the experiential, the historical, content-based, etcetera are at once also inquiries into the intellectual, the discursive, the abstract, literary, and formalistic—and vice versa.

## **V. On In/authentication: Methodologies, Key Terms, and Chapter Summaries**

The tensions between the necessary attendance to the understudied status of Burmese American identity and the potential essentialization of Burmese American identity, or the identities of those who make up the communities identified as Burmese American, guide the

trajectory of this project. Because while I hold that a collective language of identity can never signify or represent each individual referent body in its absolution (nor do I believe that language even functions as such in any respect), I also recognize that such language is still necessary to make visible the marginalization of certain groups of people, advancing their academic study—in the case of Lee and Nadeau’s encyclopedia and Asian American scholarship in general—socioeconomic needs—in the case of censuses—and, of course, political causes and calls for institutional equality and justice, and often matters of life and death—in the case of identity politics, activism and resistance movements, from Burma/Myanmar to the U.S. and beyond. In a field such as Asian American studies, all of these concerns are tightly intertwined.

There is nothing inherently fascistic about an interest in “what comes before” or following the desire for a deeper social, political, and historical knowledge of a particular Asian American identity formation with respect to a particular Asian American literary formation, and vice versa. In fact, that which “comes before” is vital. At the same time that I emphasize an aware-ness of the long-standing tensions undergirding the various disidentifications with the term “Burmese” as an accurate signifier of identity, I am nevertheless invested in “Burmese American” because I do not consider its value to be defined by a goal of referring to ethnic identity in fullest accuracy. I do not seek to define and assign a uniform use of “Burmese American” as an identity, nor police its individual identifications or disidentifications. To me, “Burmese American” is a term that is deeply concerned with identity, but this concern does not make it equivalent to identity as essence or even as positionality. “Burmese American” is instead an analytical framework that, in fact, via the inherent literariness of Burmese-ness, can engage with related histories of disidentification while also engaging with ongoing projects of nationalism guided by authoritarian logics, whether employed by the rhetoric of the

Burmese/Myanmar military regime, the extensions of U.S. empire as they animate the American university, those within Asian American studies, Burma studies, and beyond. Such engagement is carried out not by authenticating Burmese American literary works but by *inauthenticating* them, or rather, analyzing the ways in which they *inauthenticate themselves*.

My theory of inauthentication does not begin with a point-blank rejection of how authenticity is not “real”; rather, inauthenticating Burmese American literature explores how selected texts meet and confront their own study at the level of a *desire for* authentic Burmese-ness, entertaining the corporeal matter of authenticity only insofar as it highlights how it is crafted and cultivated. This confrontation is expressed through scenes of the constricted, afflicted, and lacerated body but also scenes of the constructed, reconstructed, and transformative body—which simultaneously highlights the (re)constructive and transformative nature of the text and Burmese American identity itself. By inauthenticating the body and themselves, these works also inauthenticate, or read back, the vivisecting authoritarian gaze—exposing and cutting into the trans-nationalistic institutional hypocrisies and violences of reading for authenticity to extract the body for a truth of Burmese American identity. My theory of inauthentication and process of inauthenticating Burmese American literature involves valuing the literariness of Burmese-ness by (1) reading Burmese-ness as form and (2) contributing to a genre of Burmese American literary criticism and critique, one that intervenes in not only the Asian Americanist study of Burmese American literature but trends in Asian American studies more broadly, Burma studies, and other intersecting fields. I advance my inauthentication process across three chapters, situating my argument more intimately within these evolving currents.

In my first chapter, I analyze *The Coffin Tree* (1983) by Wendy Law-Yone, the study of which has been crucial to the emergence of Burmese American literature as a critical formation

in the field during, and in the wake, of the transnational and diasporic turn. I argue that the novel prompts a reading of Burmese-ness as form—constituted by the elements of repetition, rebirth/cyclicity, and an instability/tension within—intrinsically linked to corporeality. I begin by tracing my own genealogy of the study of Law-Yone, revisiting it alongside and against another figure who has been crucial to literary studies of Burmese American identity formation—Aung San Suu Kyi: Nobel peace laureate and dissident, State Counsellor and de-facto leader of Burma/Myanmar during its democratic transition, former and now current political prisoner, “icon” of human rights and democracy and “traitor” of those ideals.

In my second chapter, I analyze *Miss Burma* (2017) a work of historical fiction by Charmaine Craig. Set during the Cold War, *Miss Burma* is a novelization of the life of Craig’s grandparents and mother, Louisa Benson Craig, a beauty queen of Sephardic Jewish and Karen ancestry. In the novel, Louisa is crowned the winner of the 1956 “Miss Burma” pageant; in later years, she becomes wanted by the military after joining a rebel political organization fighting for Karen self-determination and freedom from ethnic Bamar hegemony. Analyzing how the novel raises questions of not only Burmese-ness, but also (global) indigeneity and blackness, alongside discourses in Burma studies, I employ my previously-established concept of Burmese-ness as form to read it in three formal incarnations: “problem,” “parallel,” and “pretense.” By reading for these forms, I develop a Burmese American criticism and critique that works with and against the novel, which not only raises concerns relevant to Asian American studies, but also ones relevant to black studies and indigenous studies, as white scholars of Burma studies have increasingly begun to consider race/ethnic relations in Burma/Myanmar through a U.S. framework, erasing not only the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar in the U.S. but appropriating, flattening, and commodifying theorizations of blackness and indigeneity in U.S. contexts.

In my third and final chapter, I return to the idea of the body-as-container that began this dissertation by analyzing lyrical depictions of *nat* possession. *Nats* are deities belonging to a multi-ethnic pantheon in indigenous spiritual practices syncretized with Theravada Buddhism in Burma/Myanmar. The two texts I analyze in this chapter are Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint's lyrical post-apocalyptic novel *The End of Peril, the End of Enmity, the End of Strife, a Haven* (2018) and Maw Shein Win's experimental poetry collection *Storage Unit for the Spirit House* (2020). Both texts utilize nat mediumship and its genderqueer associations in Burmese/Myanmar culture to mediate how ethnic and gendered otherness are mutually constructed. I analyze how the texts' use of nat figures and their possession within human and nonhuman bodies prompt us to reevaluate the body-as-container and displace it from its typically oppressive and essentialist deployments, which can contribute to larger studies of Asian American poetics and objecthood.

## CHAPTER ONE

Living Things: Reading Burmese-ness as Form in Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree* and the

“Post-Aung San Suu Kyi” Era

Recounting the event of her half-brother's birth, the unnamed narrator of *The Coffin Tree* describes how his mother pushed out her first child, stillborn, while squatting over a banana leaf during a terrible storm, as “[p]ain tore in and out of her body.” (Law-Yone 20). As she placed the baby on the leaf below her, she fell to her knees: a “tide was turning in her womb again, heaving and swelling between her legs” (20). The narrator states:

*Lord God. Another head.*

Afterwards, the mother of twins lay on the floor of her hut and the village women muttered, “Madwoman! Going out into the storm like that!” while an old crone sat in a corner and sang, *Doom doom! Two is a bad omen. Never mind. The first was dead, thank the spirits. Pretend it's one child. Give it a strong name. And pray.*

What could be stronger than a mountain?  
And so they named him Shan.

Though the narrator was born ten years later and not alive to witness these events, she narrates them in great detail, emphasizing elements of internal tension, repetition, and cyclicity—all of which contribute to how I theorize Burmese-ness as form in *The Coffin Tree*.

As illustrated by the above excerpt, the event of Shan's birth is extremely disturbing. For venturing outside in the middle of the pouring rain to give birth, his mother is labeled a “madwoman” by the other villagers. The narrator proceeds to say that her brother inherited from his mother a primitive madness, a “curse of lunacy” to which her people seem biologically predisposed. He is the illegitimate son of the siblings' father and a woman from the “Hill tribes”: an indigenous minority native to the rural and mountainous northeastern region known as the “Hill States” in Law-Yone's Burma. The Hill tribes are persecuted by the country's military,

based in the lowland urban capital, Rangoon, from where the siblings' father originally hails and attends university before falling in with dissenting Hill tribe radicals, joining their revolution in a leading role against the military's oppression. Eventually,

The excerpt detailing Shan's birth is grotesque, typical of the novel's penchant for graphically depicting afflicted and festering bodies. What I find interesting here is that Shan is the "second" of a pair of twins, but the "first" twin was stillborn. Thus, Shan's birth is simultaneously a repetition of a prior birth—in that sense a *re*-birth—and also differentiated from that prior birth, since the first twin's birth is also a death. The old crone, seeing two as a bad omen, insists that the mother and villagers should pretend Shan is "one child," which would imply that there was never a previous child or birth, even though one could interpret that Shan is the only child who was "born" in the sense that he exited his mother's womb alive, and thus would also be the "first" of any other children. This repetitious back-and-forth and cyclical dynamic that is intrinsically tied to the body, along with the presence of a great tension *within* the body (evinced by the pain tearing "in and out" of the mother) disfigures the maternal and feminized *natal*—which is often symbolically used in narratives of *nativity* and *nation* via a nationalistic language of a clear, pure, and singular origin.

Here, the text distorts notions of what comes "before" and what is "original," indicative of how Law-Yone's novel both entertains and obfuscates ideas of authenticity, particularly with regards to the text's existence as a *fictional* memoir. This scene of *re*-birth is also symbolic, not of any one future or past event in or outside the novel, nor the issue of any one character, but for the novel's form itself: symbolizing its perpetual state of (re)writing. If Burmese American literature, whose predominant form happens to be memoir, is read primarily for knowledge of authentic Burmese-ness—an extractive method that apprehends texts as bodies containing a

fixed, preceding truth of ethnic identity—then the formal nature of *The Coffin Tree* proves troublesome to this end by constantly highlighting the un-fixed nature of the body. Just as the corporeal form is always deconstructing and constructing itself, so is the text. In this sense, the novel does not just prompt a reading for Burmese-ness as form—the novel *is* Burmese-ness as form. Seeming to invite the authoritarian gaze probing for authenticity, the novel brings into relief the pressures of its own authentic representation through scenes of afflicted, constricted, and unstable bodies while simultaneously reading back the gaze and destabilizing it.

Reading Burmese-ness as form is the first task in my project of inauthenticating Burmese American literature, but it is one that I can only fully realize after tracing a genealogy of the novel's small but powerful presence within Asian American literary studies. Scholarship on Law-Yone's fiction in general, while scant, has been pivotal in the field, and it has contributed to Asian Americanist studies of Burmese American identity formation more broadly. My genealogical work involves analyzing another figure who has also been central to this formation, as well as the limited study of Law-Yone's writing: Nobel peace laureate and Burma/Myanmar's former State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi. In conjunction with my eventual analysis of the novel, I analyze how the previously-mentioned elements—repetition, cyclicity, and internal tension—appear in the cultivation of her icon, her own writing, and the trajectory of her global image between the late 1980s and late 2010s, which I assert constitutes the dominant form of Burmese-ness “read” for in a Euro-American context. I then revisit *The Coffin Tree*, arguing that a formal reading of the novel *as* Burmese-ness facilitates a deeper engagement with how the figure of Aung San Suu Kyi dominates registers, academic and otherwise, of the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar in the U.S. Ultimately, I propose that an understanding of Burmese-ness as form can displace that dominance in a larger Burmese American analytical framework.

## **I. The Literature of Wendy Law-Yone and the Transnational Turn**

This dissertation's archive has literally taken shape during my years in graduate school. The 2010s saw the emergence of many different North American writers belonging to, or descended from, the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar. The literary works that have been published in the latter half of the past decade and early 2020s encompass a wide array of genres. In addition to those already being studied in my project, these include novels—such as Charmaine Craig's *My Nemesis* (2023)—memoir—such as U Kyaw Win's *My Conscience: An Exile's Memoir of Burma* (2016), Alex Wagner's *Futureface: A Family Mystery, an Epic Quest, and the Secret to Belonging* (2018) and Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint's *Names for Light: A Family History* (2021)—and collections of poetry—such as Maw Shein Win's *Score and Bone* (2016) and *Invisible Gifts: Poems* (2018) and Onjana Yawnghe's *Fragments, Desire* (2017) and *The Small Way* (2018). Such a staggering variety of literature authored by the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar—appearing against an intensifying backdrop of global news coverage on the military regime's political repression and mass atrocities against civilians—might prompt a mainstream readership to think this body of writing comprises only a very recent formation. However, one can trace it back to the early eighties, as the first author belonging to the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar to publish literature in English was Wendy Law-Yone.

Law-Yone's premier novel, *The Coffin Tree*, was published in 1983 and can be considered as part of a cohort of other notable postmodern Asian American literary works by women writers appearing in the same decade, including two works that appeared in the two years before its publication—Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981) and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* (1982)—along with two works that it actually predates—Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989) and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989). The scholarly discussions around the aforementioned

works are robust and have been field-defining to Asian American literary studies: integral to progressing Asian American literature as a critical formation in the 1990s and 2000s. They have also been integral in their own respective ways to the scholarly visibility of Japanese American literature (Kogawa), Korean American literature (Cha), Chinese American literature (Kingston), and Indian American literature (Mukherjee). Meanwhile, “Burmese American literature is a relatively unknown category compared to other ethnic American literary traditions” (Ho, 2014; 244).<sup>32</sup> With regards to a non-academic American readership, Tamara Ho explains that the novel was not popular upon release because of their unfamiliarity with the “Burma setting” and eventually went out of print (2001:109). Still, while the previously mentioned subsets of Asian American literature include a vast array of widely read and studied authors, for decades, much of the Asian American scholarship that defined the early study of Burmese American literature was focused around Law-Yone and her writing, which has grown into an astonishingly diverse body of work.

Born on April 1, 1947 in Rangoon, Burma—the year before the country liberated itself from British rule—Law-Yone describes her “love of language” and writing career as being deeply influenced by her father, dissident Burmese journalist Edward Law-Yone (Bow 185). Edward Law-Yone was founder and chief editor of *The Nation*, one of the most influential English-language newspapers in the history of Burma/Myanmar and the first to be closed by the military regime under General Ne Win after the 1962 coup. In 1963, Law-Yone’s father was arrested by the military regime, after which *The Nation* was shut down and he was detained for

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<sup>32</sup> As opposed to being categorized as a work of Asian American or ethnic American literature, from the date of its publication in the early eighties to the late nineties, *The Coffin Tree* was consistently classified as “world literature” or “books in English from the Third World.” (Ho, 2015: 96) Law-Yone herself has expressed ambivalence about being labeled an “Asian American author.” When asked in an interview with Leslie Bow about how she felt about locating her work as Asian American literature, Wendy Law-Yone replied, “It’s okay, but it’s really not important to me to be located,” (196).

five years. By early 1970, he had found a “pretext”<sup>33</sup> for leaving Burma and soon escaped to Thailand, where he helped form a government-in-exile and lived before immigrating to Silver Spring, Maryland in the U.S. As the daughter of a political prisoner, Law-Yone was barred from institutions of higher learning in Burma and sought to continue her education in music and German studies outside the country. Her attempt to leave Burma in the late 1960s resulted in an arrest and interrogation lasting two weeks, and the government subsequently declared her “stateless,” while the state-controlled press condemned her as a CIA spy and collaborator of Western imperialism (Ho, 2015: 94). In 1973, she arrived in Florida, where she completed a bachelor’s degree; later, she moved to Washington, D.C., raising a family and working as a freelance journalist and essayist, eventually transitioning into writing full-time.

Law-Yone has to her name an impressive and diverse body of literary publications, which carry themes of exile and displacement. These include three novels, *The Coffin Tree* (1983), *Irrawaddy Tango* (1993), and *The Road to Wanting* (2010); a memoir, *Golden Parasol: A Daughter’s Memoir of Burma* (2013); and a biography of Aung San Suu Kyi, *Aung San Suu Kyi: Politician, Prisoner, Parent* (2023).<sup>34</sup> To this day, her novels remain as some of the few—if not the only—works of Burmese American literature to be studied as part of a larger Asian American canon and have been of particular significance in Asian American feminist literary criticism. As Ho observes, through a “deconstructive use of language,” and the atypicality of its female protagonists, Law-Yone’s fiction “challenges the overlapping hegemonies” of both Burma/Myanmar and the U.S. (Ho, 2011: 666). Her premier novel is narrated by an anonymous woman recalling her childhood in Burma and her experiences as a refugee in the U.S. alongside

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<sup>33</sup>For more information, see a 2010 article Law-Yone wrote in memory of her father for *The Guardian* website: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/apr/03/wendy-law-yone-burma-rangoon-nation>

<sup>34</sup>She has also written book reviews for the *Washington Post* and essays for publications such as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Time*, and she also received a David T.K. Wong Creative Writing Fellowship at the University of East Anglia in 2002.

her older brother, Shan. Studies of the novel became impactful in the late 1990s and early 2000s, at a time when Asian American literary studies had become deeply embroiled in what Rachel C. Lee calls “a frenzy of self-critique with regard to the changing parameters of the field” (149).

In her 1997 article on *The Coffin Tree*, whose protagonist is eventually incarcerated in an American psychiatric facility, Lee challenges early reviews commending the novel for its alleged transcendence of any particular geopolitical context to portray a “cosmic” sense of dislocation and “universal” theme of madness, as opposed to its nature as an Asian American novel or a portrait of mental illness in the specific case of Burmese immigration to the U.S. (151). She calls for a closer attention to issues of exile and diaspora, articulating her criticisms alongside and against mounting pressures within Asian American literary studies to resituate itself via ties to other tangential fields—namely area studies, Asian studies, and postcolonial studies—as well as materialist critiques of global capital and other broader global commitments, all of which is characteristic of the field’s transnational turn. It is during, and in the wake of, this era of scholarship that one can see Burmese American literature emerge as a very, very nascent intellectual formation.

Generally, the transnational turn refers to a current of Asian American scholarship, beginning in the late 1980s and proliferating in the following decade, that sought to expand the scope of analysis beyond the U.S. nation-state in order to track the global migrations of “peoples, ideas, and goods,” which would “thereby [call] into question the solidity of national boundaries and national identities, and with a particular eye to the ongoing workings of colonialism and imperialism” (Nadkarni and Schlund-Vials 5-6). Accompanying such approaches were those that challenged the heteronormative, masculinist, and culturally nationalistic and essentialist definitions of Asian American identity valued by Asian American literary studies in its emergent

1970s-era formation—which was largely focused around literature by Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans. The field also leveled a more sharpened focus on the vastly understudied status of writings by Korean Americans, South Asian Americans, and Southeast Asian Americans. This focus was undergirded by a cognizance of changing Asian American demographics post-1965, the year in which the U.S. passed the Hart-Celler Act, amending previously racist legislation banning immigration from several Asian nations, including Burma.<sup>35</sup> Similar to many of those who left Burma in the late 1960s after the rise of Ne Win’s dictatorship, the arrival of Law-Yone and her family members in the U.S.—though not all occurring at the same time—coincided with the influx of Asian immigrants of educated, professional classes arriving during the early part of the post-65 period.

In the following decades, the passage of the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Act and the 1980 Refugee Act precipitated different kinds of Asian arrivals to the U.S.: large-scale waves of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos resulting from the devastation wrought by imperialist U.S. wars. Amid the vastly changing face of Asian America, Lisa Lowe urged for a stronger consciousness of increasing Asian American heterogeneity in reading Asian American cultural texts.<sup>36</sup> The field engaged more critically with transforming Asian American demographics to reckon with questions of ethnic, cultural, and gendered differences alongside questions of differences in socioeconomic status—for instance, the contrasts between arriving in

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<sup>35</sup> Those working in Asian American studies know very well at this point that the Hart-Celler Act and subsequent legislation permanently changed the landscape of Asian America. Before the passage of the Hart-Celler Act, the majority of Asian Americans were laborers and service workers—again, predominantly of Chinese, Japanese, or Filipino descent—but after the 1965 law there came an influx of immigrants from professional and managerial classes and greater diversity in their countries of origin.

<sup>36</sup> Lowe emphasized in her watershed 1991 essay, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” the diverse peoples constituting “Asian America” are “born in the United States and born in Asia; of exclusively Asian parents and of mixed race; urban and rural; refugee and nonrefugee; communist-identified and anticommunist; fluent in English and non-English speaking; educated and working class” (27). Similar to other diasporas in the U.S., the immigrant collectivity of Asian Americans and their descendants are “unstable and changeable, with its cohesion complicated by intergenerationality, by various degrees of identification and relation to a ‘homeland,’ and by different extents of assimilation to and distinction from ‘majority culture’ in the United States” (27).

the U.S. as a refugee instead of an immigrant. Moreover, conversations among the field during this time, of which Lee's article on *The Coffin Tree* serves as an example, encouraged a ponderance on Asian American identity in relation to the country of "origin" and the U.S. through a circulation of diaspora<sup>37</sup> as a more versatile critical framework. Such work also shed light on how diasporic Asian American subject positions are informed by multiple national affiliations and the way in which this plurality complicates normative understandings of gender and sexuality (Nadkarni and Schlund-Vials 6).<sup>38</sup>

Between the more detailed scrutiny of the overlapping spheres of U.S. and British imperialisms vis-a-vis expanded studies of South Asian American literature and an emergent South Asian American studies, shifting focus to Southeast Asian writers and refugee narratives, and an intellectual atmosphere more attuned to women writers and feminist methods of inquiry,

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<sup>37</sup> Having been used since the 1980s, the analytical framework of diaspora arose in tandem with the changing demographics of Asian immigration to the U.S. and "captures another way of thinking about Asian Americans: as immigrants who are subject to multiple projects of nationalism and therefore as immigrants who embody diverse forms of citizenship" (Mani 298). The middle-class arrivals that came post-1965 from Burma, South Korea, and South Asian countries contrasted with the mass influx of refugees from "Indochina" following the U.S. war in Vietnam, along with Chinese and Korean adoptees, as well as an increasing number of Asian immigrants who arrived through family-sponsored green cards during the 1970s and 1980s (298). At the outset of the transnational turn, the framework of diaspora enabled Asian Americanists to think of these multiple forms of immigration and intersecting lines of ethnic, cultural, and class difference.

<sup>38</sup> With this came the effort Lee mentions to position Asian American literary studies in community with other fields exhibiting similar intellectual concerns, as well as utilizing these intersecting critical approaches to focus on previously side-lined bodies of literature. For example, literary studies of South Asian American literature expanded with the appearance of several notable anthologies, and South Asian American studies emerged as its own critical formation, marrying "postcolonial concerns to Ethnic studies ones" and called "attention to the relationship between US and British empires" (Nadkarni and Schlund-Vials 6). In *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature* (2004), Rajini Srikanth names several South Asian American anthologies published in the 1990s offering a wide array of writers; these anthologies include *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (1993) and *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian American writers* (1995). See also the critical anthologies such as *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America* (1996) and *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America* (1998). In addition, the study of Southeast Asian American literature was expanded by anthologies of Vietnamese American literature and Filipino American literature, with the former largely including refugee narratives. See *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose* (1998). Numerous anthologies of Filipino American literature were also published in the 1990s and early 2000s; these include *Philippine American American Short Stories* (1997), *Contemporary Fiction by Filipinos in America* (1998); and *Babaylan: An Anthology of Filipina and Filipino American Writers* (2000). Lastly, the period also saw the publication of a rich variety of scholarship and anthologies "focused on the recovery of women writers" (F. Cheung 198). See *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* (1989); *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1990); *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993); and *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (1992).

one would think that a novel such as *The Coffin Tree* would arise as an ideal object of study to many. Ho states, “[w]ith the transnational turn in [...] Asian/American literature, the gendered refugee has joined earlier emblematic figures (of sojourner, immigrant, racialized citizen, and postcolonial exile),” and Law-Yone’s fiction has received more scholarly attention “from those with an interest in globalization, migration, and alterity” (2015: 96). However, while its thematic complexities have made it all-too-perfect to center in a transnational reevaluation of the field’s analytical bounds and interdisciplinary crossings, the novel and Law-Yone’s work in general remains criminally understudied in the present<sup>39</sup>—but, the academic and non-academic interest that has gathered around it has done so in tandem with the American public’s slowly increasing awareness of Burma/Myanmar’s political turmoil since the dawn of the new millennium.

An essay on *The Coffin Tree* written by Ho appearing in *A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature* (2001) is arguably the first entry on a Burmese American literary work in a major Asian American scholarly volume. The entry speaks to Law-Yone’s authorial background and the early reception of *The Coffin Tree*, Burma’s history under British colonial rule and its eventual independence, minority peoples and movements within the country, the rise of its military dictatorship, and waves of immigration from Burma/Myanmar to the U.S.—all as a broader socio-political context for readers (Ho, 2001: 108-120). Furthermore, she highlights the novel’s portrayal of an Asian female protagonist, mental health, and minority-within-minority issues, as well as its pointed critiques of “masculinist nationalism,” institutional authority at large, and the supposed goodwill of the U.S. from a marginalized perspective.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>There is brief acknowledgement of Law-Yone in some pre-1995 Asian American literary surveys; Ho names literary critics such as Elaine Kim, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, and King-Kok Cheung as recognizing Law-Yone’s work (2015: 96).

<sup>40</sup> Ho draws connections between Law-Yone’s novel and Kogawa’s *Obasan* (child narrator naively taking responsibility for absent mother, abusive male authority figures, etc.), and Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (comparable yet distinct experiences of South and Southeast Asians in America, gendered immigrant narratives of survival, etc.), along with Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* (1990) (nostalgia and displacement in relation to Southeast Asian culture, backdrop of political unrest in country of origin, etc.) (116).

These many textual aspects and resonances “make [*The Coffin Tree*] an important work in Asian American and American literary studies” in addition to postcolonial and feminist studies (110). And yet, none of the forenamed analytical nodes or angles of inquiry have alone comprised the primary manner in which Law-Yone’s work, its role in helping define Burmese American literature, and the subsequent literary study of Burmese American literature and identity, has been apprehended through and beyond the field. In her entry, Ho proposes that growing knowledge from the last decade of Burma/Myanmar’s military oppression and struggles for democracy might draw more interest towards Law-Yone’s writing. She goes on to state:

Because of the scarcity of literature by or about Burmese Americans, *The Coffin Tree* stands as a rare and remarkable achievement. Considering the growing attention in Asian American studies to previously less vocal groups, it is fitting that *The Coffin Tree* should be recognized as an integral part of the Asian American canon. Since Aung San Suu Kyi’s Nobel Prize in 1991, the American public has become more aware of and curious about Burma; perhaps this development will increase interest in *The Coffin Tree* and result in its republication. (109)

The above quote signals how interest in Wendy Law-Yone’s writing and the notion of Burmese American literature, within and beyond Asian American literary studies, is closely related to how the supposed country of origin or “heritage” country inhabits a U.S. cultural and political imaginary—which is not dissimilar to what Asian Americanists have long pointed out about the study of Asian American literature in general. As far as what shapes Asian Americanist’s study of an ethnic subset of the canon and its relevance to advancing formulations and genres of Asian American *critique*—particularly in the case of mainland Southeast Asian nations as well as the cases of Korea and the Philippines—a defining factor is typically the country’s relation to U.S. empire and the historical impacts of American invasions, occupations, complicities with genocide and the rise of authoritarian regimes, and imperialist wars fought within its borders and neighboring countries.

Asian American critique, especially as theorized since the 1990s, has valued Asian American literature for its expansive universes through which, as Lowe argued in *Immigrant Acts* (1996), one can refuse the liberal multicultural fiction of Asian Americans' equal rights, citizenship, and national belonging as generated through a denial of the history of U.S. wars in Asia and a disavowal of the existence of the American imperial project (27). Lowe states that Asian American culture is a site that troubles and signals alternatives to the national terrain and hegemony of the U.S. by "imagining different narratives and critical historiographies" and putting forth "practices that give rise to new forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state" (29). However, in the case of Burma/Myanmar, which is part of mainland Southeast Asia but rarely mentioned in studies of American imperialism in the region and the manner in which generations of its various diasporas experience such imperialism's afterlives, there is no similarly intuitive relation to U.S. empire to be found.<sup>41</sup>

While the U.S. carried out a war in Vietnam, secret wars in Laos, and covertly supported the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia—all events tied together by Cold War interests to fight and contain communism—theoretically, there does not exist a similarly obvious or intuitive history of a large-scale invasion, war, or direct aid to a genocidal government that serves as a critical "way in" for Asian Americanists to neatly analyze and understand Lowe's alternative narratives and historiographies in Law-Yone's writing or Burmese American literature more broadly. Instead, the U.S.'s image of Burma/Myanmar, and the angle by which Asian Americanists have studied Law-Yone, Burmese American cultural production, and Burmese Americans in general, is characterized by the country's histories of political turmoil and human rights violations under

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<sup>41</sup> To this regard: Burma/Myanmar and its cultural production remains understudied in the context of Southeast Asian American studies and critical refugee studies, two closely linked fields that emerged in the mid-2000s and throughout the 2010s.

military rule as *distanced* from U.S. empire, all while the government has voiced a long-standing, impassioned support for Burma/Myanmar's pro-democracy movement. To an American public at large, these histories have been translated primarily through a single, mythified individual: Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of nationalist independence hero and "father of the nation," General Aung San.

In a book chapter<sup>42</sup> on the gendered subject of human rights, Leslie Bow analyzes Law-Yone's *Irrawaddy Tango* (1993): a novel about a beautiful tango-dancing woman from the country of "Daya" (a clear counterpart to Burma/Myanmar) who becomes the tortured and exiled wife of the nation's cruel military dictator; she opens her chapter by analyzing the ascension of Aung San Suu Kyi's icon in U.S. media, stating that figures such as Aung San Suu Kyi "become a means of accessing Asia in American culture" (140). Bow's statement is applicable to non-Asian Americans and Asian Americans alike. In the "Burmese Americans" section of Jonathan H.X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau's *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*, the lives of both Aung San and Aung San Suu Kyi are detailed in an entry titled "Heroes and Heroines" (149-150). Whether to the Burmese/Myanmar public or the country's diaspora in the U.S., support for Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma/Myanmar's pro-democracy movement has been a cause for unified political protest across multiple planes of difference, and as such, the grounds for the formation of collective Burmese American identity.<sup>43</sup>

As Ho touches on in the above excerpt, Aung San Suu Kyi's periods of house arrest and 1991 Nobel win brought her country's strife to the international fore. Ho proposes that Aung San

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<sup>42</sup> See Leslie Bow's *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature* (2001).

<sup>43</sup> Burmese American pro-democracy groups in the U.S. have included the U.S. Campaign for Burma (USCB), Burmese American Democratic Alliance (BADA), Burmese American Women Alliance (BAWA), and Free Burma. The USCB in particular has been one of the most active human rights advocacy organizations committed to bringing "an end to military rule in Burma and to restore the rightful places of Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratically elected members of the NLD" with respect to her periods of house arrest throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Cheah, 2011: 125).

Suu Kyi's emergence as a pro-democracy opposition leader and the international spotlight received by her, and by individuated representation the Burmese/Myanmar public as they struggled against military oppression, might spur readers to turn their attention back to a work like *The Coffin Tree*. The excerpt underscores the field-specific problems and critical angles for further examination brought into relief in the wake of the transnational turn: the need to study "previously less vocal groups" and the "scarcity" of Burmese American literature in particular—and the ergo significance of Law-Yone's novel, which warrants even more revisitation in the (then-)current moment and hopefully a possible republication.<sup>44</sup> Thus, an American register of the tumultuous political situation in Burma/Myanmar under the military regime, made legible by the praise and accolades received by the shining symbol of its opposition, is the final "piece" completing the entry point for uninformed casual readers and Asian American literary scholars alike to begin to value and make meaning of Law-Yone's writing and Burmese American literature in general.

## **II. Aung San Suu Kyi and the Corporeal Legibility of Authenticity**

The inaugurating time of the transnational turn coincided with intensifying pro-democracy organizing across Burma/Myanmar, beginning in the late eighties and culminating in the 1988 or 8/8/88 Uprising: a series of protests and marches, coordinated largely by college students in Rangoon (now Yangon), peaking in August—during which Aung San Suu Kyi staged her first public appearance in the country and entrance into its political arena. After being educated and living abroad for many years, Aung San Suu Kyi had returned in March to her birthplace of Rangoon, the then-capital of the country, to care for her ailing mother, and found her homeland enveloped in economic mismanagement, widespread corruption, increasing

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<sup>44</sup> Both *The Coffin Tree* and *Irrawaddy Tango* were republished by Northwestern University Press' Triquarterly Books imprint (Ho, 2015: 96)

state-sanctioned brutality and resulting widespread public discontent. Ne Win had resigned in July of that year but continued to control the government from behind the scenes, and many “resented his capricious and oppressive rule” (Ho, 2015: 72). On August 26, she delivered her “Speech to a Mass Rally at Shwedagon Pagoda,” urging an audience of more than half a million people at the holiest Buddhist site in the country towards a nonviolent but adamant course to democracy, a symbolic occasion that recalled the event of her father delivering a speech at the same location decades earlier. Upon the formation of his Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), the dominant political alliance in Burma from the mid-1940s to the late 1950s that led negotiations for the country’s independence from Great Britain, General Aung San also spoke to a crowd at Shwedagon Pagoda during World War II. If Aung San’s words in the 1940s were paralleled by his daughter’s in the eighties, then the entity paralleling the oppressive British colonial administration was now the military regime, who had replicated over their own people Britain’s colonial policies of domination.

The deliverance of her speech marked the point Aung San Suu Kyi became a symbol for the pro-democracy struggle in Burma from the perspective of those living in and outside of the country. Incisive studies by feminist critics like Ho and Bow have analyzed the crossings between Aung San Suu Kyi’s iconization in global anglophone—most prominently Euro-American—media narratives, popular narratives maintained by her supporters in Burma/Myanmar, and state narratives disseminated by the military regime to undermine her legitimacy during her early political career. As Ho states, “[a]nglophone representations construct Aung San Suu Kyi as a feminized symbol of Burmese hope, a universal deity (saint/martyr), and maternal translator” (2015: 65). Many in the country recognized the hope she symbolized as her father’s daughter and cheered on her leadership in its early stages, and in turn

the military regime countered their idealization by highlighting the Oxford-educated Aung San Suu Kyi's intimacy with "men and ideologies of the West in an attempt to undermine her political legitimacy and confirm her immorality within a Myanmar ethnonationalist frame" (65). To combat this, Aung San Suu Kyi had to strategically craft her positionality and image as a leader of the pro-democracy movement in an appeal to her authenticity as a traditional—perhaps the *quintessential*, Burmese Buddhist woman—indigenizing democracy itself as in line with Burma/Myanmar's Theravada Buddhist values. Her lineage played a key role in this construction, as being the daughter of the father of the nation, so to speak, logically made her the "daughter of the nation"—who had now matured into its mother by seeking to pay her respects to, and continue the political tradition of, her father.

To this day, Aung San Suu Kyi is affectionately regarded by much of the Burmese/Myanmar public *and* the country's diaspora as "Amay Suu" or "Mother Suu." Her simultaneous mother-daughter-saint status was and is dependent on a symbolic political feminization that signals a protective familial compassion accessed through the also feminized realm of the body, which, despite being opposed to the military regime, is actually still quite nationalistic in nature—as is her strategic political usage of Buddhism. Though her actual mother, Khin Kyi, was also an accomplished politician and diplomat, scholars, biographers, journalists, and common observers alike have noted how the validity of Aung San Suu Kyi's introduction into politics was recognized through the historical prominence of her father. Prior to her the start of her political career in Burma, her father's image was already prior to this being used as a "flag" of the people in Burma and call to action by the nation's inchoate democracy movement (73). A revolutionary and statesman, Aung San sought to bring together people across ethnic, religious, and class lines in the late colonial era with the vision of an independent Burma

as a democratic union, and was thus associated with democratic ideals by many who were beginning to take a stand against Ne Win's BSPP government after decades of fear. Aung San Suu Kyi's "physical resemblance to her father and purposeful deployment of a 'traditional femininity' (e.g., her preference for Burmese dress, the flowers worn in her hair) was often read as a reliance on patrilineage and a concession to patriarchal power" (69).

Much to the military regime's dismay, images of the martyred hero of anticolonial resistance, who was assassinated in 1947 alongside members of his own cabinet before Burma's independence in the following year, symbolized the "unfinished renaissance" of the 1940s independence movement: reborn in the people's popular desire for freedom from the military regime and a government more responsive to, and representative of, the needs of the public (73).<sup>45</sup> The military sought to delegitimize his daughter's leadership by accusing her of being tainted by "Western" ideals and the democracy that she heralded as an impurity not native, or one "inauthentic," to Burmese culture. Frequent rhetorical ammunition included the fact that she had been educated abroad<sup>46</sup> and was married to a "foreigner": Michael Aris, a white British scholar with whom she had two sons. These factors were utilized extensively to disprove her authenticity, prompting Aung San Suu Kyi to address in bold such accusations upon her crossover into the political sphere. As Gustaaf Houtman notes, the beginning of Aung San Suu Kyi's speech to the mass rally at Shwedagon Pagoda "addressed the uncertainty she thought the Burmese would feel about her marriage to a foreigner, reassuring the Burmese people that in spite of this her love for Burma had been continuous" (289). These lines are translated from

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<sup>45</sup> Worried by Aung San's enduring popularity among the pro-democracy movement, the military regime sought to remove all images of him from their offices, denying his role as an architect of modern Burma.

<sup>46</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi received a B.A. from the University of Delhi, another B.A. from St. Hugh's College at Oxford, and worked towards a Master of Philosophy degree in Burmese literature from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

Burmese by Aung San Suu Kyi herself in her seminal essay collection, *Freedom From Fear and Other Writings* (1991):

A number of people are saying that since I have spent most of my time abroad and am married to a foreigner I could not be familiar with the ramifications of this country's politics. I wish to speak from this platform very frankly and openly to the people. It is true that I have lived abroad. It is also true that I am married to a foreigner. These facts have never interfered and will never interfere with or lessen my love and devotion for my country by any measure or degree.

Another thing which some people have been saying is that I know nothing of Burmese politics. The trouble is that I know too much. My family knows best how complicated and tricky Burmese politics can be and how my father had to suffer on this account. He expended much mental and physical effort in the cause of Burma's politics without personal gain. That is why my father said that once Burma's independence was gained he would not want to take part in the kind of power politics that would follow.

Since my father had no such desire I too have always wanted to place myself at a distance from this kind of politics. [...] Some might then ask why, if I wished to stay out of politics, should I now be involved in this movement. The answer is that the present crisis is the concern of the entire nation. I could not as my father's daughter remain indifferent to all that was going on. (193)

Clearly and succinctly, Aung San Suu Kyi meets each accusation of her inauthenticity with the primary evidence that disproves it: her ancestry as Aung San's direct descendant. Being open with the crowd, she acknowledges her Western education and marriage to Aris but affirms that these parts of her background do not, and will not ever, compromise her "devotion" to Burma. Her credentials for political leadership are also constituted by lineage and familial association; she is deeply familiar with and equipped to take on the country's political situation because her "family knows best how complicated and tricky Burmese politics can be" and how her "father had to suffer on this account." The selfless sacrifice of her father in his efforts towards freeing Burma from its colonial masters is reincarnated in his daughter's efforts towards freeing the country from the military regime.

Like her father, Aung San Suu Kyi has previously tried to keep her “distance from this kind of politics.” She approaches the task ahead not as someone who has studied or practiced politics prior to this moment, with the intention of choosing it as a desired career path; she approaches the task as her “father’s daughter,” establishing a sense of destiny and predetermination by accepting and embracing a subservient, feminized position of filial piety. As such, Aung San Suu Kyi’s cultivation of authenticity in the eyes of the Burmese public relies on putting authenticity forth as something that “naturally” precedes her own individual self, a precedent to which she is subordinate. Conceived of as the “natural,” authenticity is therefore something that should be effortless and logically not require any construction, period. In this respect, her physicality and bodily appearance is crucial.

Amid the setting of her speech, where she speaks while standing in front of a portrait of her father, her recognizable likeness to him in facial features and style of oration<sup>47</sup> constitutes the manner in which her body becomes the site of authenticity construction, or, perhaps her body is constructed and produced as authenticity itself. Because her body and its behaviors “naturally” mimic her father, authenticity is constructed to appear as if it has not been constructed at all, instead seeming to be animated by a preceding, predetermining familial legacy of being the “face” of resistance and democratic ideals, her “destiny.” The speech continues as follows:

This national crisis could in fact be called the second struggle for national independence. This great struggle has arisen from the intense and deep desire of the people for a fully democratic parliamentary system of government. I would like to read to you something my father said about democracy: [...]

We must make democracy the popular creed. We must try to build up a free Burma in accordance with such a creed. If we should fail to do this, our people are bound to suffer. [...]

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<sup>47</sup> Well-known actor and eventual member of Aung San Suu Kyi’s party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), Aung Win recalls the profundity and impact of her performance: “We were all surprised. Not only did she look like her father, she spoke like him also: short, concise and to the point” (Kreager 326). This information appears in a supplementary essay in *Freedom From Fear* by Philip Kreager.

That is what my father said. It is the reason why I am participating in this struggle for freedom and democracy in the footsteps and traditions of my father. To achieve democracy the people should be united. (193-94)

Here, Aung San Suu Kyi confirms that the current struggle for “independence” from the military regime is a *repetition* of a prior struggle, again appealing to preceding events to illuminate the legitimacy of the present. As Ho states, “Aung San Suu Kyi carefully staged her first public appearance in a way that seems conscious of this Burmese *cyclical* worldview and mindful of accusations of inauthenticity” (73, emphasis mine).<sup>48</sup> However, by reaffirming her own authenticity, she is nonetheless reaffirming the *same* logic and terms of authentic ethnic/national identity established by the military regime. While Aung San Suu Kyi criticizes the military for its corrupt inhumanity and accusations of her inauthenticity, she does not in the beginning of her speech deny that a natural, preceding authenticity exists. Rather, her words implicitly confirm that, yes, such authenticity exists and, despite accusations that state otherwise, she embodies it; her authenticity is thus constructed heavily in part on the regime’s own terms. Aung San Suu Kyi’s citation of her father prefaces the declaration that she is following in his “footsteps and traditions,” further bolstering that though she is a worldly individual who has been educated abroad and is married to a non-Burmese man, she is at her core still quintessentially Burmese; her emergent persona is not that of an academic or even an activist, but an uncomplicated Burmese Buddhist woman anchored to tradition, selfless sacrifice, and respect for her culture and parentage, wishing to unite people across ethnicity, religion, gender, and class to end everyone’s suffering under military oppression.

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<sup>48</sup> Ho cites Michael Aung-Thwin, who explains that “this invocation of the past during times of political crisis is predicated on a Burmese temporal perspective that is cyclical rather than linear or progressive” (73). Ho states that such a belief in how the “principles and ideology of the past will provide a purer, more glorious righteous path is a particularly (though not exclusively) Burmese mechanism for coping with social upheaval and political oppression, and one that Aung San Suu Kyi has tactically activated” (76). See Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis* (1999) and Valerie Palmer-Mehta, “Aung San Suu Kyi and the Rhetoric of Social Protest in Burma” (2009).

The 1988 Uprising ended on September 18 after another military coup orchestrated by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which replaced the BSPP as the nation's ruling party. In violent crackdowns on pro-democracy demonstrations, the military murdered thousands, making it one of the bloodiest events in Burmese/Myanmar history. The period during which Aung San Suu Kyi was able to campaign freely extended from her first speech to July of 1989, when she was placed under her first period of house arrest. The same year, the ruling military regime officially changed the country's name from the "Union of Burma" to the "Union of Myanmar," which would later still be changed to the "Republic of the Union of Myanmar." Of the thousands from Burma/Myanmar who arrived in the U.S., many

In the aftermath of the uprising's violence, the National League for Democracy (NLD) was formed under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership on September 27, eventually becoming one of the most influential parties in the country's pro-democracy movement and winning a supermajority in the Assembly of the Union (the national-level bicameral legislature of the country) in 2015, paving the way for the country's first nonmilitary president in 54 years. Despite her detention, the NLD won a landslide victory in the country's 1990 general elections, but the military junta refused to recognize the results of the election. The U.S. had begun issuing sanctions on Burma/Myanmar after the Burmese military's violent suppression of the 1988 uprising, continuing to sanction the country over several subsequent periods<sup>49</sup> in which Congress perceived major human rights violations in Burma/Myanmar. In 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi, while under ongoing house arrest, was awarded for her pro-democracy efforts in Burma/Myanmar the Nobel Peace Prize, which was accepted by her husband and two sons; her essay collection was also published in the same year—all of which cemented her status as a global icon.

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<sup>49</sup> The sanctions implemented from the late eighties and into the early 2000s were also meant to "induce regime change by bringing the military to its knees and forcing it, through economic moral measures, to honour the results of the May 1990 elections" (Steinberg 22).

While my analysis thus far has spoken to Aung San Suu Kyi's cultivation of authenticity to the public within Burma/Myanmar as a response to her military naysayers, one must also be aware of such authenticity's translations, transformations, and reproductions under and by the gaze of the "West." A readable authenticity—aided by a balance of beauty, intelligence, cosmopolitanism, and prioritization of "traditional" values—is intimately tied to how Aung San Suu Kyi has been fashioned as a martyr, saint, and attractive goddess-mother figure—endeared to not only the people of Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora but also neo-Orientalist "Western" media and institutions sustained by liberal ideology. This gendered reproduction of the authentic also structured Aung San Suu Kyi's "fall from grace"<sup>50</sup> and "betrayal" of liberal ideals (democracy, human rights, unity that transcends difference but also capitalizes on it etc.) on the global stage in the late 2010s. For her complicity as State Counsellor during the military's mass atrocities towards the Rohingya in 2017, along with her defense of the regime's accusations of genocide at the Hague in 2019, she was labelled a "fraud" and a "fake"—i.e., the opposite of "authentic"—by much of the international public. These labels also implied that the external front of old she posed was not consistent with her inner self as presently revealed through her actions, despite how they do not illustrate a betrayal of liberalism so much as reflect it.<sup>51</sup>

The exoticized image of a "traditional" Asian woman advocating for democracy and human rights through Buddhist practices of nonviolence—which then became conflated with an entire movement, people, and country—is an image that European and American institutions, including the U.S. government, media, and press outlets, were romanced by, and one they themselves also advanced. Bow inquires cuttingly: "[i]n the case of U.S. media representations

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<sup>50</sup>See, for example, the following online articles: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11685977>; <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/02/what-happened-to-myanmars-human-rights-icon>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/14/world/asia/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-election.html>

<sup>51</sup> See Soe Lin Aung, "Three Theses on the Crisis in Rakhine State" (2017), in which he states: "Daw Suu is not a fraud. This is liberalism" (<https://teacircleoxford.com/opinion/three-theses-on-the-crisis-in-rakhine/>).

of Aung San Suu Kyi, one could ask, what does it mean that a single subject comes to both incorporate and displace the more graphic image of the fired-upon masses?” (143). U.S. media contrasted “evil” images of Burma/Myanmar’s “Oriental corruption and barbarity”—Golden triangle drug lords, child soldiers, and a series of brutally repressive military governments since 1962—with “good” images of golden Buddhist pagodas signifying the country’s ancient wealth and serenity, the “charming simplicity of its peoples,” (Ho, 2015: 67) and Aung San Suu Kyi herself: “the icon of humanitarian and democratic values under threat” (Houtman 277). Ho explains that Aung San Suu Kyi’s unique positioning as both a “Westernized cosmopolitan figure and a quintessential Burmese woman” enabled a global visibility wherein “her luminous courage and fearlessness was juxtaposed against the spectacularly violent masculinity of the Burmese military” (68), whose corruption and violent tactics exemplified the failure of a postcolonial nation-state run by once-colonized, “savage” brown male others.<sup>52</sup>

Interestingly, her political legitimacy under a liberal western gaze and her political *il*legitimacy under the gaze of the military regime both operate(d) on the age-old masculinist feminization of the body as a static container, a penetrable object, which in this case can easily contain and be tainted by the western, liberal ideals. In various Euro-American media, including the literal British biopic of her life directed by Luc Besson, her relegation to the realm of the bodily was married with neo-Orientalist tendencies.<sup>53</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi’s “traditional” appeal

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<sup>52</sup> Barbara Victor propagates this idea of a stark difference most disturbingly—“[o]n one side of the struggle was a graceful and exotic Asian woman wearing a *longyi* and cotton shirt fitted tightly against her slim frame” and “[o]n the other was the opposition, a group of military men wearing [...] starched khaki uniforms” (127). Ziauddin Sardar states sardonically that Aung San Suu Kyi “combines within her person what should be two irreconcilable poles—the old allure of oriental woman and the compatibility of a westernised modernizer” (24-25, quoted in Ho, 2015: 81). To clarify: *longyi* refers to the traditional sarong worn by many people, across genders, in Burma/Myanmar.

<sup>53</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi was cast by press outlets as a fragile beauty in a tragic romance of which the world was witness: a “housewife and mother of two” who was “devoted to family” but inevitably pulled by her ancestral destiny to be Burma/Myanmar’s champion of democracy—to quote trailers of Besson’s British biopic, *The Lady* (2011), where she is played by Michelle Yeoh. Similar biographic forms of media interpellated her rise to prominence as the “mother” of democracy in Burma/Myanmar who exhibits a nurturing devotion to her nation first

traffics not only with the Burmese/Myanmar public, but also in the objectifying white Orientalist gaze that values a desirable Asian female domesticity through which an entire nation can be translated. This translation is a corporeal matter, as “authentic” knowledge of Burma/Myanmar and its political resistance is made readable, apprehendable, and ultimately synonymous with her “authentic” corporeality: her perceived beauty, fragility, poise, physical resemblance to her father and associated acts of filial piety, and, in the words of United Nations diplomat Ma Than E, her “unmistakably Burmese complexion” (quoted in Ho, 2015: 280). As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan explains, the woman as subject must not only be metonymically related to the nation, as a citizen and as its leader, but must also become “an actual metaphor for it, its equal and its visible embodiment” (110). Here, the invocation of the literary is intrinsic to the corporeal. Instances of repetition and cyclicity in the bodily cultivation of Aung San Suu Kyi’s iconicism, as it has traveled through transnational cultural and political imaginaries, constitute a corporeal form of Burmese-ness that is consistently read for in a U.S. context.

Definitively, Bow’s analysis of Aung San Suu Kyi contends that the most generally accepted notion of human rights “requires an individual for whom attention, concern, and then outrage can be channeled into activism,” and, as the face of the NLD, “Aung San Suu Kyi is the body through which political protest is made intelligible” (143). Then-president George W. Bush stated of Aung San Suu Kyi after she was awarded the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal in 2008, which she was unable to accept in person due to her house arrest: “[t]his is a fitting tribute to a courageous woman who speaks for freedom for all the people of Burma, and who speaks in such a way that she’s a powerful voice in contrast to the junta that currently rules the country.”<sup>54</sup>

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by emphasizing her nurturing devotion to her (white) husband and their family, which she tragically had to sacrifice for her country.

<sup>54</sup> See the following article on *The Guardian* website:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/20/aung-san-suu-kyi-medal>

At the beginning of a new decade, Burma/Myanmar appeared to have been starting to transition out of absolute military rule and opening up from isolation.<sup>55</sup> After her release from house arrest and elections in 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi won a seat in parliament, and she was able to finally accept her Gold Medal in Congress. Aung San Suu Kyi stated that it was worth the years of waiting, being honored “in a house undivided, a house joined together to welcome a stranger from a distant land.” After her win, the U.S. normalized diplomatic relations with Burma/Myanmar, with then-President Barack Obama expressing his “admiration for her courage [...] in championing democracy and human rights over the years,” according to a statement from the White House. Buddhist monks in saffron robes and women in “traditional Burmese dresses crammed into the venue” alongside U.S. politicians. The president “reaffirmed the determination of the United States to support their sustained efforts to promote political and economic reforms and to ensure full protection of the fundamental rights of the Burmese people.” At the medal ceremony, House and Senate leaders joined Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in paying tribute to Aung San Suu Kyi. Clinton stated, “[i]t’s almost too delicious to believe, my friend, that you are in the Rotunda of our Capitol, the centerpiece of our democracy as an elected member of parliament.” Members of Congress set aside the intense rivalries ahead of the upcoming presidential election in the U.S., and lawmakers spoke about years of working together across party lines on the behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi’s democracy movement.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Elections in 2010 had seemingly led to a peaceful transition from sixty years of absolute authoritarian rule to a quasi-civilian government headed by former general Thein Sein, under whom the country began a series of political and economic reforms. These reforms include the release of hundreds of political prisoners and child soldiers, the signing of a cease-fire agreement between the Burmese military and eight major minority ethnic armed groups, greater enjoyment of press freedoms, and parliamentary by-elections in 2012 in which pro-democracy leader and nobel peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won 43 of the 45 contested seats. As president, Thein Sein wooed the international press with promises of windfall profits and a burgeoning democratic governance in Asia’s “final frontier.”

<sup>56</sup>At the ceremony, then-Democratic senate majority Leader Harry Reid “lavished praise” on a man who is usually his adversary: Republican leader Mitch McConnell, for long being at the forefront of efforts to help Suu Kyi for two decades, and McConnell compared Suu Kyi's path of peaceful resistance to Martin Luther King Jr.

The liberalism of U.S. institutions privileges a humanistic model wherein a single individual unites people across their many differences and is in turn democratically “chosen” by them to enact top-down change and overturn a corrupt regime, and such liberalism also symbolically legitimizes this individual’s leadership through the awarding of national accolades. The aforementioned unity valued by liberalism was not only elevated by Aung San Suu Kyi herself in Burma/Myanmar but also in the U.S.—where she was able to unite Democrats and Republicans alike by being the embodiment of a “distant,” burgeoning democracy in the Third World, reflecting the values of the U.S. government as the “original” standard for democracy in the face of the Burmese/Myanmar military dictatorship. However, the ideologies of both governments here are ruled by their respective nationalisms: the former being a multicultural nationalism sustained by neoliberal multiculturalism and the other an ethno-nationalism built around Bamar Buddhist dominance. The U.S.’s neoliberal multiculturalism and multicultural nationalism is unable to comprehend the structural complexities of Burma/Myanmar’s ethnic and religious nationalisms and prioritization of an “authentic” Burmese-ness, despite reinforcing both by helping to create Aung San Suu Kyi’s icon status through an Orientalist perception of her, along with her theorization of a Burmese Buddhist humanism.

*Freedom from Fear and Other Writings* compiles previously published essays and speech transcripts, organized into three parts, with the first titled “The Inheritance” and the second titled “The Struggle.” The first section opens with a biography on Aung San, titled “My Father,” followed by the essays “My Country and People,” “Intellectual Life in Burma and India under Colonialism,” and “Literature and Nationalism in Burma.”<sup>57</sup> Through this structure, Aung San

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<sup>57</sup> The essay that follows is an informational pre-colonial and colonial cultural, political, religious, and even geological history of Burma/Myanmar titled “My Country and People.” The following essay, “Intellectual Life in Burma and India under Colonialism,” is a comparative colonial history impressing the centrality of Buddhism to Burmese culture: whose ancient influence entered Burma/Myanmar through India; Aung San Suu Kyi states that Burma had been open to cultural influences from India since ancient times— “[o]f these influences, the most important was Buddhism, which became so integral a part of the Burmese ethos that it has become common to say:

Suu Kyi “introduces” Burma/Myanmar to the world as that which she has inherited from her father, which includes pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial histories. Her private and domestic history *is* the history of Burma/Myanmar—for readers uninformed about the country’s plight, *she* is the text that educates them; the tragic tension, “The Struggle,” as it is so-named, is contained *within* her.

Regarding that struggle: an emphasis on the importance of Buddhism as the cornerstone of Burmese culture and values, as well as the vehicle around which resistance to systematic oppression was and can be organized, is maintained throughout—coming to fullest fruition perhaps in the essay “In Quest of Democracy.” Here, she responds to the military regime’s accusations of democracy being a foreign, Western concept that is inherently “un-Burmese” by indigenizing democracy, arguing that it is comparable or equivalent in practice to traditional Buddhist kingship. She invokes the figure of Indian Emperor Ashoka, “who ruled his realm in accordance with the principles of non-violence and compassion is always held up as an ideal Buddhist king.” She goes on to state:

There is nothing new in Third World governments seeking to justify and perpetuate authoritarian rule by denouncing liberal democratic principles as alien. By implication they claim for themselves the official and sole right to decide what does or does not conform to indigenous cultural norms. [...]  
The Buddhist view of world history tells that when society fell from its original state of purity into moral and social chaos a king was elected to restore peace and justice. [...]  
By invoking the Ten Duties of Kings the Burmese are not so much indulging in wishful thinking as drawing on time-honoured values to reinforce the validity of the political reforms they consider necessary. It is a strong argument for democracy that governments regulated by principles of accountability, respect for public opinion and the supremacy of just laws are more likely than an all-powerful ruler or ruling class, uninhibited by the need to honour the will of the people, to observe the traditional duties of Buddhist kingship. Traditional values serve both to justify and to decipher popular expectations of democratic government. [...]

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“To be Burmese is to be Buddhist.” In the following essay, “Literature and Nationalism in Burma,” she recounts the history of the development of Burmese nationalism in the British colonial era, and an emphasis on the importance of Buddhism and the Sangha (monastic order of monks) in the country.

It was predictable that as soon as the issue of human rights became an integral part of the movement for democracy the official media should start ridiculing and condemning the whole concept of human rights, dubbing it a western artefact alien to traditional values. It was also ironic – Buddhism, the foundation of traditional Burmese culture, places the greatest value on man, who alone of all beings can achieve the supreme state of Buddhahood. Each man has in him the potential to realize the truth through his own will and endeavour and to help others to realize it. Human life therefore is infinitely precious. (170-174)

In a glowing 1991 review of the collection, Patricia M. Herbert states that the name “Aung San” is ineradicably linked with Burma’s struggle for independence—and of his daughter, fashioned now as the mother of democracy in a country under military rule, she gushes, “[a]ll the world loves a heroine, especially a beautiful and intelligent one bearing a charismatic name” (13). But in the above series of excerpts, Aung San Suu Kyi, makes recourse to a patrilineage and fatherhood that long precedes even Aung San: a tradition of Buddhist Kingship that serves as an ancient model of democracy, despite how “Kingship” implies a monarchical system. She argues that “liberal democratic principles” and the “concept of human rights” are not only compatible with traditional Burmese values but already intrinsic to them, because Buddhism is “the foundation of traditional Burmese culture.” As such, Buddhism places the greatest value on individual human potential and the preciousness of human life, because only a human (man) can achieve Buddhahood.

Again, notice the repetition and cyclicity—first: the military regime is a repetition of yet another “Third World” government justifying their authoritarian rule by denouncing liberal democratic principles, and second: the military regime, in a Buddhist worldview, is a repetition of a prior societal descent into chaos, one which was remedied through the election of a king to restore peace and justice. Drawing on such “time-honoured values,” “the Burmese” are not adopting a new, foreign model of governance but returning to that which has already come before. But while her argument opposes the authoritarianism of the military regime, it is, through

its recourse to a patrilineage used to reinforce the essential interchangeability between Burmese and Theravada Buddhist culture, still fairly in line with a masculinist nationalism—just simply one suited to the liberal democratic principles she favors, and coincidentally, also suited to those of the U.S. Aung San Suu Kyi’s stance is once more positioned against, but on the terms of, the military regime, which has, since the 1960s, worked towards enforcing a national standard of Burmese identity built around, or always in proximity to, a purified Bamar Buddhist identity: with religious proselytization being fundamental to their Burmanization policies. However, at the same time, the enforcement of authentic Burmese-ness—either with respect to the military regime’s ethno-nationalism or the nationalism inevitably furthered under Aung San Suu Kyi’s elevation of liberal democratic principles—is not reducible to a desired “purity” of a Bamar Buddhist heritage.

In the 2010s, Aung San Suu Kyi’s icon status has become the grounds for its own kind of nationalistic, authoritarian enforcement of authentic Burmese-ness, even by those who are also fervently against the Burmese/Myanmar military. In the wake of the 2021 military coup and her jailing by the regime, she remains beloved among Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora, many of whom adamantly declared “We Stand with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi” through social media campaigns amid her complicity in the Rohingya crisis of 2017, in which she minimized and defended the genocidal actions of a military that put her under house arrest six years later. As Kenneth Wong says sardonically of her dedicated supporters: “[m]other may have some poor judgment and mistakes, but by God, you must come to your mother’s defense when someone publicly criticizes her.”<sup>58</sup> But, as Soe Lin Aung asserts, the line of critique aimed at Aung San Suu Kyi by international spectators, U.S. politicians and journalists included, “suffers from a

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<sup>58</sup> See the following online article:  
<https://theworld.org/stories/2018-10-18/how-deal-when-politics-divide-your-family>.

familiar series of flaws [...] it embraces a liberal fetish for ‘leadership’ that is over-invested in politics at the top and the figure of the lonely dissident” and it also “remains stuck in the romance of bourgeois dissent,” occluding “structural analysis and collective agency, which are necessary for any serious attempt to understand and address the situation in Rakhine.” He states concisely that the “point is not that Daw Suu does not matter or that she could not, or should not, be acting differently. But the obsession with her has become a distraction to the point of becoming unproductive” and also obscures the “military’s direct culpability.” “She herself,” Soe Lin Aung continues, “describes herself as a politician, not an icon.” However, in the ongoing turmoil following the 2021 coup, her icon is undying.

In shifting to Law-Yone’s novel, I believe *The Coffin Tree*—published years before the world knew of “Aun Mye Suu”—can help engage and disengage from such an enforcement of authentic Burmese-ness by prompting a reading of Burmese-ness as form that is similar to, but notably different from, the one outlined in this section. It is similar in that it is constituted by the previously discussed formal elements of repetition, cyclicity, and a tension from within—all inextricable from the body. However, reading for Burmese-ness as form in Aung San Suu Kyi’s transnational icon presents one with an attractive maternal “natural”: an authenticity constructed as that which is un-constructed. “Hers” is a stable and originary Burmese-ness that is positioned in opposition to authoritarianism and therefore appealing to the liberalism of the U.S., despite how it, like U.S. liberalism, is still nationalistic in nature and becomes its own standard of authenticity, enforced in an inevitably authoritarian manner. In contrast, reading for form in *The Coffin Tree* presents one with an ugly Burmese-ness that asserts its authenticity by assuming an authoritarian voice outright, but in doing so continuously calls attention to its constructed and contradictory nature—enacted most effectively through its interesting generic style; in doing so,

reading for Burmese-ness as form here challenges the always potentially authoritarian politics of ethnic/racial/national identity as defined by authenticity and absolute origins.

### III. Little Mother Killer

If Aung San Suu Kyi is the beautiful “heroine” with a “charismatic name” in the American public’s fetishistic, Orientalist humanitarian romance with Burma/Myanmar, the narrator of *The Coffin Tree* is the ugly “anti-heroine” with no name. However, there are clear parallels between the two. The narrator is also the privileged daughter of a revolutionary, but her father does not serve as a source of inspiration or aspiration; instead, his presence in the novel is domineering and oppressive. Moreover, unlike how the construction of Aung San Suu Kyi’s body is at once the construction of an attractive, legible, singularly contained and representative Burmese-ness, *The Coffin Tree* vulgarly deconstructs the body and simultaneously deconstructs Burmese-ness, along with its purported authenticity, through an obsession with the body’s most hideous incarnations as they decay, becoming fluid with the spaces they inhabit and even other bodies.

“Living things prefer to go on living” is the line that opens the novel, but what follows is actually a scene of dying and death, which, like the scene that introduces this chapter, desecrates the site of the maternal. At the novel’s outset, the narrator recounts an interaction with her grandmother’s disease-ridden corpse. She describes touching her stiff, shriveled arm and notes how light it is, though she states her grandmother’s fatal illness had brought on some “unaccountable weight.” In the “mystery” of her grandmother’s last days, the petite woman’s body became so leaden with paralysis that it took two strong adults to move her around the house, easing her episodes of discomfort or boredom (Law-Yone 4). After her grandmother’s passing, the narrator describes how those in mourning turned her body from side to side,

revealing festering bedsores, and swabbed the rubber sheet underneath her, which stank from “urine and sweat and rotting flesh” (4). Others exhibit an inability to fully perceive the physical excess of the grandmother’s deteriorating body, which is unstable even in death. Yet as she neared death, the “unaccountable weight” of her weakened state still dictated the actions of her family, prompting them to continuously adjust to it though they could not rationalize it.

Thus begins a narrative full of volatile and transformative bodily surfaces, which exploit anxieties over the body’s vulnerability to contagion, but also its failure to be a sealed vessel and static entity tamable by reason. Deceased, the grandmother’s body continues to leak its substances into open space. Her corpse now expands its bodily parameters via odious smells. When the body is turned over, the exposed rubber sheet emanates the stench of bodily fluids. The grandmother’s excessive, diseased corporealities envelop others even after she has died. Odors constituted by particles originating in the grandmother’s body—originating as *parts* of her body—ooze beyond its surfaces, consuming the shared space so that to walk through the affected area is to walk through extensions of the grandmother herself. The visual produced by the narrator is so repulsive and disrespectful that it is almost humorous, as is the memory of her interaction with her grandmother’s ghost, which happens to occur at a moment when the narrator finds herself laughing alone in her room from a nervous tic:

She just stood there, casting a still shadow over me, with a look of stern puzzlement that came through even in the dark. I knew I had to stop laughing, but couldn’t control myself at first.

“Why are you laughing?” Her interest in me was ominous.

“It’s nothing, Grandmother.” I began to tremble. “No reason. I’m just happy,” added foolishly, “that’s all.”

“Happy? She let out a long, false laugh. “Happy! You’re happy because I’m dead. You’ve been waiting for me to die. Witch!”

“Yes, Grandmother. No, grandmother.” In my fear I was willing to concede anything.

“Be happy, be happy!” she sang, and collapsed in a jerky, stylized dance, throwing up her arms, kicking up her heels, swirling round and round like a puppet in the hands of a crazed puppeteer. [...]

The dance came to an abrupt end, mid-step. She held the pose and exaggerated in falsetto: “Now. Tell: Happy you killed your mother? Happy she died giving birth to you? Happy now, little mother killer?” (6)

In this scene, the grandmother’s ghost asserts her dictatorial presence from beyond the grave, accosting and scolding the narrator, who in her fear is “willing to concede anything.” The ghost torments the narrator over the memory of her mother, who died during childbirth, calling her daughter a “mother killer.” Later, the narrator recounts looking into a mirror, “nose to nose” with herself while harboring a “familiar self-loathing” (13). “Heavily touched-up portraits” of her mother hang throughout the house, showing a “young woman of arresting delicacy: long-limbed, long-fingered, slight as a dance. Her hair, black and thick, was peaked at the brow and framed her face like a low, neat cap. Her wide [...] eyes had the look of a startled doe” (14). Dissimilarly, the narrator states of herself: “[a]ll that perfection had been squandered to produce my lusterless hair; my square-tipped fingers with the unsightly, bitten-off nails” (14). She lists in contrast her “dark skin, broad face, and the half-moon shadows under my eyes that branded me with an old woman’s look” (14). The narrator, looking at her own reflection, feels a self-hatred stemming from the fact that she is, in almost every way, the opposite of her mother in looks. Her appearance *fails* to inherit, to repeat her mother’s beauty, which is described in an almost stereotypical manner of delicate, innocent “Asian” femininity.

And yet, the manner in which we come to know the appearance of the mother is mediated through portraits, specifically *heavily-touched up* portraits—an altered visual form—that serve as grounds for cruel comparison. Though they are described in an attractive clarity, they obscure the idea of the “original.” Circling back to the narrator’s interaction with the ghost, one can observe here the notion of an “origin” also being distorted—no, *destroyed*. At least in the eyes of her grandmother’s ghost, which in itself is a strange way to relay perception and self-perception, the

narrator is a “mother killer” because her mother died giving birth to her. Thus, the narrator’s exit from the womb and ongoing existence, with her unsightly, bitten-off nails and lusterless hair—constituting “an old woman’s look” though she is a child—embody the *destruction* of perfect and pure origins. Her birth is her mother’s death, and she endures in life as a mother killer; she is the destruction from within that was and is realized on the outside.

#### **IV. Securing the Knowability of the Body**

The opening scenes of the novel set the stage for further fixations with the inner and outer limits of the body. In the previous instance with the grandmother’s corpse, the body becomes fluid with space; its excesses give rise to both the transformation of space and variant manners of charting movement through space—a motion that guides one’s attention outward from the body. However, the novel also directs one inward, portraying the body as a space and territory in itself that must be shielded from the forces of illness and beyond. While the narrator seems morbidly fascinated with bodies that seem to overflow with rot, she is paranoid of leakage when it comes to the limits of her own body, feeling conditioned by rigid walls of confinement. For the majority of the novel, the narrator associates these walls with her father, who has her grow up in Rangoon in a “walled compound fortified against vagrants and madmen” and also eventually attend a strict Catholic boarding school (18).

Founder of the “People’s Army,” which is fighting for the Hill-tribes’s autonomy from the central military government, the father is a “freedom fighter” type who initially comes across as what Christopher Lee calls the “idealized critical subject”: a desired figure which operates throughout Asian American literary culture as a means of providing coherence to oppositional knowledge projects and political practices (3-4). But though he is leading a resistance movement, he is still an authoritarian figure. The narrator recounts the period after the People’s Army won

its first war against the military regime—“[father] would come home without warning at irregular hours, and at the sound of his limousine rolling up the gravel driveway, the household snapped to attention” (19). She goes on to say how the servants “bowed and squirmed,” ducking their heads as they awaited his orders; “[t]o my knowledge, he never actually chastised any of them, but instinct told them never to put him to test. His potential for violence was [...] explicit” (19). After a military coup, the father’s domineering presence endures even in his absence.

When military tanks looking for the father surround their family’s house, the narrator and her relatives realize he has already fled without leaving any explanation. The country’s ensuing coup and descent into military rule catalyzes a period in which the narrator experiences intense bodily reactions:

I had seen that fear could stimulate courage, but it didn’t work that way for me. Instead it made me shrink. I shrank from the endless family discussions about the damages done by the coup: nationalization; demonetization; surveillance; censorship; curfews; confiscations; rations; midnight arrest. I shrank from puzzling about my father’s disappearance, and simply accepted the secret, sovereign nature of his mission. I shrank from the contemplation of any protest: That was my father’s business. I shrank from my own womanhood, binding my breasts with rolls of elastic bandage as cruelly and senselessly as the Chinese had done to their baby girls’ feet... And though no one would believe me, I even shrank in height. Between the ages of eighteen and twenty, I shrank a full inch... (31)

In the above passage, fear works to contain some bodies so that they take up less space. But the narrator’s bodily compression isn’t only a response to the country’s mounting authoritarian conditions; it is specifically a response to the discourse and deliberation of others about those conditions, and the heavy weight of unknowability. She shrinks from the “endless talk” of nationalization, demonetization, surveillance, curfews, midnight arrests, etc. taking place in the country, as well “puzzling” about her father’s disappearance. Her reaction is characterized by “senseless” acts of constraint done unto herself. The narrator contains her own psychological distress by walling in her personhood and compacting her body so it is guarded from the

increasingly dystopic nature of her world. She expresses anxiety over her body as a vessel that must be tightly closed in order to stave off the vulnerability caused by the unknown: that which causes instability in her perception of the world around her and also her self-perception.

Interestingly, the narrator's response to not being able to ascertain the specifics of her father's location or rebel affairs is to tell herself such things are "his business." Physically shrinking from the idea of "any protest," she puts herself *in-place*, so to speak, as his daughter, echoing the narrative of Aung San Suu Kyi's acts of filial piety that are inextricable from her corporeal construction. However, unlike that particular narrative, here, the daughter of a rebel father shows no "luminous courage" and is not meant to be involved with, or even know, the revolutionary affairs of men, nor does she want to know or be involved. Instead, she simply accepts the "secret, sovereign nature of his mission." In doing so, she shrinks from her own "womanhood," demonstrated through the binding of her own breasts. Because of her anxiety over not being able to make "meaning" of her present moment, she resorts to gendered acts of excessive self-affliction, wherein her body is the medium by which she can exert control and make meaning. To protect herself from the unknowable, she attempts to strictly enclose herself within absolute, knowable bodily parameters, preventing leakage. She makes *herself* known through the compactibility of her body, taking measures to confine herself to her body and rescind it as much as she can from space. She tries to keep the surfaces of her body as secure as possible so that she can continue to perceive herself as a subject. She *is* her body, and her body must be stable and unchanging, because the static and passive nature of the body constitutes its immediate access, knowability, and cohesion of self-representation.

The narrator's actions seem premised on a fear of losing some sense of internality to the realm of externality, as if the narrator does not want to inhabit space, or simply "be," in excess of

herself. Her fear is articulated via the pressures of maintaining a body's categorical bounds, invoking what Barbara Johnson calls "[a threshold] where an inside/outside opposition can be shown to be in a state of crisis" (3). Just like the house and school she grows up in are fortified constructions enforced by her father and centered in majoritarian rule, just like the entire country is becoming an isolated and insular authoritarian state, so is her body: the locality whose borders she must constantly police. But "majoritarian" and "authoritarian," as one will see later on, are labels that can be applied to the narrator as well; in what might be considered a shadowy, but at the same time illuminating, counterpart to the repetition between Aung San Suu Kyi and Aung San, repetition occurs between father and daughter in the novel—insofar as the daughter assumes an increasingly authoritarian voice throughout the novel towards her own brother.

#### **V. On *The Coffin Tree's* Wayward Corporealities**

Desire to secure the body from leaking outwards and also prevent the invasive, excessive and diseased corporealities of another body from penetrating inwards characterize the ethnic difference between the narrator and her brother. Again, the narrator attributes her brother's nature to a primitive madness inherited from his mother. In describing the women of the Hill tribes, the narrator fixates on grotesque physical attributes and bodily decay, describing the women as "already showing rotting teeth and breasts that sagged to their waists" by age twenty (Law-Yone 18). Such corporealities aggregate into an unstable surface that "leaks" madness, itself portrayed as a wayward bodily substance, into others. As a baby, Shan is described as a "sickly runt" who robbed his mother of sleep and her mind, soon growing out of infant sickliness and tended to by the other village women as a toddler. The narrator states:

Her people supposed the lunacy to be a curse - just one of a hundred that childbirth could carry. But suppose the wild weed of insanity had been creeping through the woman even as Father bedded her? Father wasn't one to be put off by the disordered psyche of some

mountain woman, if he noticed the signs at all. He preferred to separate himself from any frailties of spirit or mind. (21)

The narrator contrasts the people of the Hill tribe with their father, who is evidently able to separate himself from “frailties of spirit and mind.” She and the father are associated with control, containment, and restraint, while Shan and his mother are associated with uncontrollability, disorder, and excess. Though they share the same patrilineage, the narrator appears at this point, like their father, as a being of sound, rational (masculinized) mind while Shan, like his mother, is relegated to the (feminized) realm of the body and irrationality. If the kind of body the narrator seeks to maintain is the kind that prevents all leakage, the bodies of the mother and other Hill tribe women, overflowing with diseased rot and decay, present themselves as being the terrifying opposite of that standard. The above passage portrays “lunacy” as a condition transmittable through sexual intercourse. While the narrator describes how her father is generally unbothered by such threats, she still wonders whether or not madness had leaked into her father through his sexual union with Shan’s mother. The instability of the body’s surfaces allow the “weed” of insanity to pass from one body to the other; though typically thought to be a psychological condition, here, insanity is also a material substance that exists in excess of the mother’s body, passing through its surfaces and into the father’s body through fleshly contact.

In *The Coffin Tree*, bodies are untamed, unpredictable, un-fixed, and become continuous with each other in fleeting moments; bodies are even mediated through other bodies. These transformative, distortive qualities are crucial to a consideration of Burmese-ness as form in the novel, despite how the body and its matterings have tended to be excluded from certain kinds of Asian American formalistic and aesthetic inquiry. Dorothy Wang parses the body out of a consideration of form when she states that because minority subjects and cultures “are viewed in the American imaginary as occupying the realm of the bodily” and material, they are often

overlooked when considering questions of form, which is “assumed to be the provenance of a literary acumen and culture that is unmarked but assumed to be white” (20). Moreover, the “new” formalist turn of the early 2000s and onwards<sup>59</sup> took its own shape within Asian American literary studies as it worked towards, in Rachel C. Lee’s words, “a more discursive (and arguably disembodied) metacritical reflection on ‘Asian Americanness,’” seeking to destabilize “historical or live bodies” as the field’s referent in order to emphasize textual composition of the Asiatic racial form (12).<sup>60</sup>

Also figuring strongly in this tradition of formalist inquiry, which has evolved variously in the past two decades, was a poststructuralist aversion to the notion of a preceding “experience” located within the realm of the bodily or that which the body was a direct stand-in for, as well as a move away from seeing language only in its signifying capacities and part of a corrective process of representing, and thereby accurately capturing, a prior Asian American reality or “prediscursive subject” (see Chuh 2003). Wang continues, speaking not to Asian American literary studies necessarily but to how minority writers are apprehended by a largely white culture of literary study: “[m]inority writing...is inevitably [only] read as mimetic, autobiographical, ‘representative’, and ethnographic,” with the writer, speaker or protagonist as “native informant” (22).<sup>61</sup> The project, then, of redirecting a more focused study of Burmese American literature, whose predominant genre is memoir, serves especially troubling in light of Wang’s words, since such texts are, in general, quite literally intended to be autobiographical and relay preceding life experiences. That being said, one should not forget that arguably the most

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<sup>59</sup> As Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian have thoroughly evaluated, the new formalism of the early 2000s posited itself as more of a “return” to formalism an assertion that invokes a “kind of going back to basics, as if form ever enjoyed the authority of an uncontested term” (2).

<sup>60</sup> See Colleen Lye, “Racial Form” (2005)

<sup>61</sup> Wang’s words highlight what Rey Chow calls “coercive mimeticism,” wherein ethnicity functions as a process that places expectations on those marginal to “Western culture” to “resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them” (17).

famously read, studied, and debated work of Asian American literature is Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976): a memoir integrating fantastical, supernatural, and otherwise fictional elements, which brings me to my next intellectual juncture.

Naturally, critical debates around Asian American autobiographical writing and memoir have centered on the question of authenticity—delimiting the criteria necessary for works to qualify as “authentic” or “inauthentic,” “real” or “fake,” which is measured not only in terms of factual or experiential verifiability but also “in terms of what facts or experiences count as valuable or dismissible, thereby associating value with ideology” (Cheung and Lawrence 24). The genre has been especially condemned for a perceived openness to, and affirmation of, exoticization and commodification of Asian identities and bodies by the white gaze.<sup>62</sup> But if *The Woman Warrior* is as Yoon Sun Lee says, “a memoir that presents itself as a novel,” then *The Coffin Tree* is a novel that presents itself as a memoir. *The Coffin Tree*'s generic style as a fictional memoir littered with unattractive and constantly reshaping bodies—a work which was published before any of the Burmese American memoirs listed in this chapter and my introduction—provides auspicious conditions under which we can further complicate all the aforementioned sentiments and ultimately the extraction of authentic Burmese-ness: in which Burmese American literature is read for the purposes of “knowing” Burmese American

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<sup>62</sup> Frank Chin states in his essay “This is Not an Autobiography” (1985), “[m]y life is not one of my market commodities” (123). However, critics such as Traise Yamamoto have broached that many Asian American memoirs and autobiographies published throughout history self-consciously “resist and radically stabilize the notion of a discrete self whose singular ‘life’ is commodifiable or reducible to dominant stereotypes of Asian Americans as exotic foreigners” (379). Yamamoto states that the trend of Asian American autobiography that sparked in the 2000s—during which Kenneth Wong and Thant Myint-U's memoirs were published—“may well represent an opportunity for new voices to be heard and for particularities of identity to be recognized,” but also introspectively raises the question of “whether or not the atomization of identity reduces it [...] to a commodity” (388). See Yamamoto's entry “Asian American Autobiography/Memoir” in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature* (2014).

experiences, apprehending Burmese American bodies themselves in order to fill the representational gap of knowledge in the field on Burmese American identity.

Here, I take inspiration from Lee, whose usage of the body in particular is interchanged with the *biological*, which has haunted Asian American studies at large due to its assumed equivalence to fixity and essentialism, an assumption she in turn disrupts. Though I do not make recourse to the biological as equivalent to the body per se, I still privilege a turn to the body and its material, experiential engagements. I do this not in a turn away from the discursive, aesthetic, and formalistic, but because the “tilt of the field toward a more discursive reflection on Asian Americanness very much informs the ground of my thinking” (Lee 2014: 12). Such is the idea behind my reference to Burmese-ness as form, a *corporeal* form, constituted in its own way by internal instability, repetition, and cyclicity. However, these formal elements rupture the idea of a fixed, pure originariness or “before” meant to evince authentic Burmese-ness, doing so through the manner in which the unnamed female narrator—the “writer” of the memoir who is the near-opposite of a mother-daughter-saint figure where nativity can be inscribed—presents the text as exactly that: authentic.

## **VI. Authentic/Authoritarian**

In her 1997 article on Law-Yone’s novel, Rachel Lee urges that an understudied text such as *The Coffin Tree* requires a reading anchored to its broader geopolitical contexts and questions of territorial/national identity, as well as other “geocultural factors of identity” (1997: 150). To her, one of the most obvious indications of these larger contexts and factors is Shan’s minority background, with the “Hill States” being “clearly a transposition of the Shan States: thirty-four principalities of Thai (Siamese) descendants living in the northeastern area of Burma. ‘Shan,’ ‘Siam,’ and ‘Assam’ all derive from the same root word meaning ‘free people’”: “an especially

evocative appellation given the history of Shan peoples' struggle for political and territorial autonomy from the Rangoon-based Burman government" (151). Lee argues that because of this etymological origin, "Law-Yone symbolically merges him with all Shan peoples as well as with other minority groups of Burma who have sought political autonomy from Burman hegemony," making the character represent at once the narrator's brother, "the collective Shan nation, and the freedom-seeking minority factions that constitute Burma (Myanmar) in the late-twentieth century" (151). Her clean and direct reading of Shan's character as symbolic of all indigenous minorities seeking self-determining in Burma/Myanmar cuts sharply through the kinds of readings she is positioning herself against: those authored by early white reviewers of the novel who champion Law-Yone's work for how it transcends locational specificity, which Lee asserts mimic "imperialist logics" (150).

While I understand and appreciate this approach, and certainly agree with Lee on the nature of such early reviews, I am cautious of a too-neat reading of Shan as a symbol that homogenizes all indigenous minorities in Burma/Myanmar, for which the subject of "autonomy" is not a clear-cut or unanimously agreed on concept. Rather, I see Shan's character as a figure that contributes to the novel's tensions from within or sense of internal contradiction, which I will return to at the end of this section. Though, by tracing the root of the name "Shan," Lee hones in on the concept of freedom associated with his character, something that helps preface her influential claims about the psycho-spatial contrast between the two siblings. From early on, the narrator distinguishes her words as fact and her brother's as fantasy, stating that after the coup, "Shan seems to no longer make distinctions between the actual and the imagined. He would sit at the table and feed us his flummery and yarns" (Law-Yone 37). After the military coup in their birth country, the siblings, as children of a wanted revolutionary, are forced to seek

asylum in the U.S.; throughout their travels in the U.S. as refugees, the narrator also comes to adapt more readily to the unfamiliar geographies and socioeconomic structures of U.S. hegemony, while her brother remains nostalgic for the openness of the hills and perpetually suspicious of their new surroundings. She frequently writes off his paranoia of state surveillance and encounters with xenophobia and racism, attributing them to his worsening insanity, identified by Lee as a “semiotics of space”—wherein tropes of proximity and remoteness rank the characters’ perspectives in a core-periphery model: what is near has normative value, and what is remote has an alien, degraded value (1997: 150).<sup>63</sup>

The narrator constantly highlights Shan’s “madness” in conjunction with his Hill tribe ancestry; to wander among, or be a vagrant of “free” space is to be associated with madness (156), and this serves as justification for the narrator’s ongoing dismissals of how her brother experiences their shared refugeehood; Lee calls this an “authoritative voice,” but I want to reiterate my modification of this stance—it is an *authoritarian* voice. And yet, though Shan’s peripheral position might be portrayed as unstable, the narrator’s centered position is also plagued by instability that simultaneously presents as stability. The narrator goes to great lengths to make her subjectivity legible and knowable to herself in an authoritarian manner, enforcing the limits of her own body and attempting to seal it. She tries to contain her relationship with her brother by demoting him to the status of diseased other via the same terms she tries to contain and elevate herself as a subject. The novel’s status as a fictional memoir prompts an even further scrutiny of her dismissive nature and dogmatic delineation of true and false. As gestured to prior,

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<sup>63</sup> Shan, the illegitimate son of their father and a “hilltribe girl” (Law-Yone 18), is characterized by the spacious, outlying region of his mother’s people, which is encroached upon by the military. This contrasts with the narrator, who is the offspring of their father’s “official wife” (18) and has a privileged childhood rooted in the country’s urban center, growing up in a strictly-walled compound and a repressive Catholic boarding school. The narrator is an inhabitant of ‘safe’ prisons and Shan the vagrant of ‘free’ space” (Lee, 1997: 152). This classed distinction between rural/marginal and urban/centered geographies corresponds to the siblings’ differing statuses of legitimacy: familial and otherwise.

because a memoir is generally meant to document “real-life experiences,” an authentic and lived truth, it is largely meant to be the opposite of fiction. The contradictory genre of “fictional memoir” proves effective in demonstrating how *The Coffin Tree* troubles the authoritarian gaze by entertaining its desire for authenticity. The novel invites the desire for knowledge of authentic Burmese-ness by *assuming an authoritarian voice* to constantly affirm its own authenticity as a memoir, its truthfulness and rightfulness that is fixed and has existed as such from the start, while simultaneously demonstrating through other formal elements the construction and associated instability of that positioning.

In response to Shan’s shiftiness of their surroundings, particularly the feeling of being spied on by the CIA in the New York City flophouse of one of their father’s white journalist friends, the narrator “diagnoses” Shan’s hyper-awareness as paranoia, classifying his viewpoint as symptomatic of illness. She characterizes his sense of peril in the U.S. as “imagined” and “self-made” (Law-Yone 60). As Lee argues, the narrator has apparently grown to see the spaces of America more in terms of their freedom rather than their surveillance, and she assures the reader that her half-brother’s observations on surveillance are hallucinatory fictions (152). The narrator’s words apparently reference a lived truth (authentic) while Shan’s words are aspects of made-up constructions (inauthentic). And yet, their dynamic prompts a reevaluation of subject-other relations as they apply to making intelligible what is authentic, precisely because the novel’s authoritarian narration and policing of Shan’s authenticity is challenged by certain exchanges of the siblings’ dialogue.

The narrator offers “evidence” of Shan’s worsening mental illness at a moment when the siblings are speaking to a car mechanic in a small southern town. Shan states, “We bought this car in another snake...drove it all the way from South Carolina. It’s not a bad snake to live in”

(Law-Yone 68). His sister corrects him: “‘States,’ I said to the mechanic. ‘He means states.’” The narrator presents this moment initially as one demonstrating Shan’s poor grasp of English, but when the siblings return to their car, the dialogue they have implies a different meaning; the narrator asks her brother, “[w]hat was wrong with you just now? You kept saying ‘snake’ for state.” He replies, “[i]t’s the same thing. Don’t you get it? State, snake . . . poisonous bastards.” She then asserts that he needs to have “his head examined,” and he replies, “[t]hen you do, too. How is it you knew what I meant?” (68-69). To borrow from Elda E. Tsou, I take the repetitions of “snake” in place of the assonant “state” to exist in a “vexed referential trajectory,” which proposes a “different model for referentiality.” The narrator accuses Shan of saying “snake” when he means “state,” obviously implying one of the fifty U.S. states—but Shan uses the term *snake* to imply a deceptive or two-faced force in reference to the “*state*,” or U.S. government, limning out, in Tsou’s words, “an unanticipated referentiality” (14). In doing so, Shan turns the narrator’s assertions about language back onto her, expressing that her acknowledgement of his linguistic slip-up implies that she and him are actually on a connected intellectual and/or psychological wavelength with regards to the sneaky, untrustworthy powers of the federal government, synonymized here with snakes: poisonous bastards. By replying “you do too” in response to his sister’s insistence that he needs his head examined, Shan subverts her authority and the dynamic between them, implying that she is as susceptible to being labeled “ill” as he is. He throws her position as the holder of fixed and authentic knowledge into question.

Later, Shan explains why he left his job at a hotel, describing how his coworkers were good to him at first, but then asked him to vacate their dorm room and move into another: “[w]hy didn’t they ask one of their own kind to move? They asked me because I was the foreigner. I was different [...] They punish you for being different, don’t you know that?” (Law-Yone 73). He

goes on to tell her, “They raped me, you know.” While the narrator does not doubt that he had been “genuinely upset,” she recognizes the statement that Shan was raped as “inexplicably a lie” (73). The narrator describes Shan’s “world” as shaped by a nostalgia for the Hill States and also one in which the smallest things took on secret meaning, where “the man in the street harbored harmful thoughts and designs, in which passers-by talked about him in code, in which a coup in a remote land sent out a signal only he could understand” (74). Shan’s increased paranoia is in response to a sense of political and cultural dislocation, racist harassment and sexual violence, yet the narrator frames his prior account as a “lie” and continues to pathologize his behavior. The narrator highlights how Shan ascribes meanings to sights and sounds that she implicitly “knows” to be inaccurate or incorrect. His processes of meaning-making relate back to the violence of the military regime they fled, memories of which are triggered by further violences in the democratic regime they now live under, both of which Shan recognizes as authoritarian. By stating that the coup sent out a signal that “only he could understand,” the narration again emphasizes how certain knowledge eludes the narrator, but the situation to her is not one that throws her subjectivity into doubt, but one attributed to Shan’s delusions and diseased state.

With regards to its depictions of disease, the novel collapses a binary between mind and body as Shan’s mental illness becomes increasingly fluid with a physical illness, which causes a gastrointestinal crisis that eventually takes his life. The narrator describes his last days as a “sentence” they both serve helplessly—“he because there was no alternative and I because his illness infected me with a great numbness that seemed to spread through flesh, bone, and spirit” (74). While it might seem logical that Shan’s stomach illness would be that which would “infect” the narrator, here she seems to be referring to his madness, his building insanity, which penetrates her corporeally; she states that she became the anchor to his unanchored self, but at

the same time: “he fused himself to me” (Law-Yone 74). Such descriptions of the continuity between bodies point again to the narrator’s anxieties over her body’s inner and outer limits, a mounting instability and transformative nature that paradoxically sustains itself in the form of stability (she is the “anchor to his unanchored self”).

I should say that the goal here is not to determine wholly if what Shan says is “right” or whether the narrator is “wrong,” who is “really” sick or who is not sick, or if they’re both sick, but instead to focus on what manifests and disintegrates via the fleeting encounter between bodies. As Zhou Xiaojing explains, “[f]ormal and stylistic features are sites of struggles, for they are coded with ideologies and marked by subject positions” (5). Form is a mode of subject positioning, which then makes it a mode that positions an object/other as well—in the case of *The Coffin Tree*, the narrator’s majoritarian position delineates, in her authoritarian voice, absolute truth and knowledge—representing itself as an “authentic” perspective—while the novel simultaneously crumbles and destabilizes that authenticity via her brother’s minoritarian position.

Regarding Lee’s assertion that Shan symbolizes all freedom-seeking minority factions in Burma/Myanmar, a “version” of Burmese-ness that serves as a model for readerly identification, I again prefer to avoid the trap of positing individual characters in the novel as offering oppositional knowledge projects and political practices about an entire people—in this case multiple peoples. Moreover, though he longs for the open space of the hills, I do not see Shan’s character as necessarily being a standard for “resistance”; if anything, the novel troubles that very concept. As seen in flashbacks during the novel’s second part, the siblings’ own father heavily disciplines his son for his lack of a masculinist spirit of “resistance” and other perceived behavioral failings. The narrator states that Shan was “a dreamer rather than a fighter”

(Law-Yone 107), and because of this their father physically beats him, violently springing on him out of nowhere for days—the father occupies an oppressive presence in Shan’s life, even though Shan is descended from the same ethnic minority his father is allegedly fighting for. Therefore, Shan’s character in the novel less so serves as an individually representative model of oppositional resistance knowledge and is more so situated by the novel in a way that disturbs how “resistance” against an oppressive force becomes its own standard for ethnic authenticity, enforced by those who also place themselves in opposition to that force.

What then, is to be “identified” perhaps, is how the simultaneous relation and rupture between the two siblings is the internal difference structuring the entire novel, a difference that, alongside the previously discussed instances of repetition and cyclicity, constitutes the novel’s form. Via the afflicted, constricted, and volatile bodies that fleetingly become continuous with each other, *The Coffin Tree* expresses the pressures of authentic ethnic representation under the authoritarian gaze but also does not portray two well-defined knowledges of authentic Burmese-ness to extract or neatly identify *with*, or two bodies one can apprehend and extract for ethnic “truth” in order to “know” Burmese American identity. The novel instead depicts characters who relationally constitute Burmese-ness as form—that form being the form of the novel itself. Burmese-ness as form is always pointing to its own tension, fragmentation, and instability from within. Note that such self-aware instability is not reducible to the narrator as a single character; despite how she is constantly establishing her own narrative voice as truth, her dialogue with Shan provides alternate meanings and contradictions. Burmese-ness as form *is* ethnic difference—it is not defined solely by what a majoritarian or minoritarian perspective is thought to authentically or accurately represent, but instead the fracture and inconsistency

between their representations. Burmese-ness is a form always in difference from itself while such displacement binds it together in a state of internal contradiction and difference.

Shan's positioning works in conjunction with his sister's narrative voice to highlight the *constructed* nature of her authenticity, which she unabashedly presents as that which is not constructed at all as the speaker of a "memoir": a genre meant to relay a lived truth; her narration eventually runs fluid, or "fused," with his own words, just like their bodies become fused into each other. The "minoritarian" body does not exist as lacking or incomplete without the "majoritarian" body constantly being undone as well, and therein lies the disruptive tragedy and power of Shan's character, of his so-called madness. Reading Burmese-ness as form engages the idea of ethnic authenticity through its own destabilizations, exposing the vulnerability of the categorical foundations upon which authoritarian forces make ethnic identity legible and stable.

## **VII. The Leaking Page**

Of course, the relationship between the siblings changes once Shan passes away at the end of Part One. Immediately in the next chapter, we find the narrator being wheeled into Intensive Care. Ironically, after berating her brother for his psychological afflictions, the narrator herself is diagnosed with her own mental illness, a culmination of the cracks in her own subjectivity. She is then sent to a psychiatric institution, where she feels imprisoned and constantly surveilled. During the novel's second half, the narrator struggles greatly with her illness, experiencing intense feelings of depression as she reflects on memories of her father and reevaluates her treatment of her brother in his last days. In this period of her life, she comes to more deeply meditate on truth, the meaning of life, and the act of living itself—raising interesting ideas about the concept of knowledge in relation to selfhood. During the novel's second half, *The Coffin Tree's* highlighting of its own construction becomes even more apparent.

Later in the novel, the narrator recalls a moment from her childhood, describing how one day the family's maid brought home lentil fritters she had bought at a sidewalk stall. She offers the narrator a few pieces, and when she comes to the bottom of the cone made of various discarded papers, she unwraps the item. The narrator states:

The paper this time was of a different stock—porous and coarse, like the cover of a pulp novel. The print was small and the block of text ran askew. I describe it so exactly because I have it in hand now, ten years later. It was a propaganda sheet, but as the only justification of my father's cause I had seen in print, it seemed a document worth saving. (Law-Yone 40).

She introduces it as a “propaganda sheet,” which causes one to anticipate that the document will be propaganda disseminated by the military regime, but it is actually propaganda in favor of the revolution of the Hill Tribes. What follows in the narrative is the inclusion of the sheet, which details how the “People's Army,” the legendary guerilla force founded by the narrator's father, has eliminated head-hunting in the Northern States. After reading it, the narrator becomes infuriated, thinking that it is regrettable and wrong that her father left their family to involve himself in the fate of strangers who “should have not concerned him” (42). The above quote, however, in the act of recounting the past, brings us simultaneously to the scene of writing that is narrativizing it. The narrator explicitly states that she is describing the document, doing so in such detail because she currently has it in hand ten years later. The moment is notable because the narration suddenly references itself as being a memoir, presenting a preceding experience or fact through the process in which it is constructed into a narrative.

Moreover, even though the narrator classifies the document as propaganda, she keeps it because it is the only material item that can justify her father's cause. Her words and actions are a contradiction; the document is a falsity that signifies to her a truth. This moment is vital in calling attention to the story's own construction and workings of language, and, if one reads

Burmese-ness as constituted by the story's form, it calls attention to the active construction of Burmese-ness itself, challenging the gaze that seeks to extract the truth of Burmese American identity. To read a work of Burmese American literature with the desire to transform it into an object of knowledge—to believe one holds a Burmese American experience, a Burmese American *body* in one's hands—forces one to accept the fact that the narrative, and thus Burmese-ness itself, is always pointing out its own constructed nature, its own process of being shaped and reshaped, written and rewritten.

The narrator attempts suicide towards the end of the novel. When she finally leaves the mental institution, she returns to life on her own. One day, as she is going through her late brother's old things, she finds his book on the titular "Coffin Tree": a tree sought after in Burma for wood to build into a coffin, and the mysterious thing Shan was obsessed with finding as a child. She states that when the two of them were growing up in Burma, in a time when "the country was still open to tourism," the shops along the bridges that led to their temples were "full of these bogus documents of no particular literary or historic value, but for which the tourists were ready anyway to pay through their noses" (Law-Yone 187). When she reads the book for the first time, she finds that it tells what seems to be a vaguely Theravada Buddhist-inspired story of the "Spirit" of the Coffin Tree, who comes to the reader in their time of death, dazzling them with shapes, sounds, and lights: the colors of the elements, which are "[a]s clear and as finely spun / As the rays of the sun" (188). While the moment might seem like a prime opportunity for the narrator to, in a more maudlin sense, "find out the truth her brother had been trying to show her along," the story only proceeds to puzzle her further.

The narrator states that she would never know what about the book captivated her brother so much, but now thinks of the proverb, "The secrets of another are deep enough to drown in"

(Law-Yone 192). She reflects on the many dreams Shan kept from her, perhaps due to her tendency to doubt him or accuse him of lies. The narrator goes on to say this of her brother:

I thought I had figured out all the important things: how his fabrications reflected an excess of imagination coupled with an excess of fear; how he needed to construct a world catastrophic enough to accommodate these overblown fears; how it was easier for him, for all these reasons, to live in the future.

But I had missed so much else! So many deeper and trickier contradictions! What was the real nature of his interest in the coffin tree? (190)

The narrator, once so sure of her knowledge of her brother, is left with no definitive understanding of her brother's interest in the Coffin Tree, which may in fact just be the subject of another "bogus document" fixated on by tourists. After dismissing Shan's speech as flummery, yarns, delusions, and fabrications for almost the entire novel, one does not receive any confirmation from here that his words were "actually true." But the delineation of a coherent truth is not the point. The narrator acknowledges that she had "missed so much else," and what she is really interested in is the concept of contradiction. Most profoundly, this interest, this continuous meditative process on an open-ended question, is spurred by an *inauthentic* document—it is one inauthentic document within another inauthentic document, the latter, of course, referring to the novel itself. The document detailing the Coffin Tree is described as a fabricated souvenir item that only interests tourists, as opposed to native Burmese people, whose identities should presumably be defined by the real and authentic. It has neither "literary" or "historic" value, yet, the narrator creates value from it still, but that value is an ongoing, unromanticized process of study and self-reflection.

At the very end of the novel, the narrator, after waking up in desolation from a dream, realizes that the meaning of the Coffin Tree—of Shan's many excessive obsessions and fantasies—eludes her still. Yet, she is overwhelmed by the feeling of being alive, though still

“lonely and unhappy.” Even so, she states that she is “unable to hide from herself” and the novel again returns to the scene of being perpetually written by ending with the line “*Living things prefer to go on living*”—the same statement that opens it, this time appearing in italics. The novel invokes its own cyclicity in a return to the origin, though not one that leads to a “cathartic reversal or formal closure,” but instead a “narrative suspension, a hesitation,”—to borrow from Amy Tang—rather than the linear and upward generation of “progress” desired under neoliberalism and liberal multiculturalism. However, while one could read this instance as a hellish oscillation back and forth, a going-round-in-circles to only “disclose the repetitious, dialectical structure of contemporary identity politics” (Tang 4), I believe the “return to the origin” here *is* generative through its own cyclicity and repetitious nature. While the narrator’s words are not generative in the sense that they lead us “upwards” in the name of grand progress, they are nonetheless a *rewriting* and a *rebirth* cut from the pre-determining force of an originary mother—or father; the novel cares only about referencing the novel.

How fitting, then, it is to make a cyclical recourse back to a text like *The Coffin Tree*—the first work of Burmese American literature, which is in the form of a memoir but is actually fiction. The narrator, this shadowy presence read in the “after” of a mother figure is also the always and before, but to make a recourse “back” to the narrator’s own words in conjunction with the novel itself is to also embrace the death of a pure origin through a fictive one. The novel’s ending words—“*Living things prefer to go on living*” are a *rewriting*, a *re-birth*. And so, Burmese American literature—and Burmese American identity as a literary object—gives birth only to itself, a repetition notably different from the last.

## CHAPTER TWO

Problem/Parallel/Pretense: Towards a Burmese American Criticism and Critique in Charmaine

Craig's *Miss Burma*

The year is 1956—the location: Aung San Stadium, Rangoon, Burma. It is the eighth annual Miss Burma beauty pageant, and among the ten finalists vying for the title is fifteen year-old Louisa Benson Craig, a girl of Karen descent on the side of her mother, Khin, and Sephardic Jewish descent on the side of her father, Saw Bension, or “Benny.” Her parents watch as their daughter, initially referred to in Charmaine Craig’s 2017 historical novel *Miss Burma* as the “mixed-breed,” stands center-stage wearing a white one-piece and gold high-heeled sandals in front of thousands. Dubbed by the press as the “image of unity and integration” for a country splintered by inter-ethnic conflict and civil war carrying over from the colonial and anti-colonial period, Louisa has a striking presence that sets her apart from her competitors.

As Benny has noted while sitting in the audience: “[m]any of these girls [...] were too heavily made up; most wore smiles that were too theatrical; some tottered and swung their hips, as though to impersonate feminine confidence and magnetism” (Craig 227). Upon his daughter’s emergence in her simple bathing suit, he wonders, awe-struck, “*was* some amplification of lighting responsible for her skin appearing so luminous? Her smile seemed to reach out past him and across the stadium, to reach out as if to fling the gates open and let everyone in.” Further detailing this pivotal moment, the novel states:

Who had taught her to move on those gold heels—not cheaply or brashly; not frantically—no, there wasn’t a tense or unnatural note in the way she fell into a smile, cast her eyes over the stands, turned, looked with another unabashed glance back at the audience. Here, rather, was a young woman radiant with self-possession. Yes, this was precisely what distinguished her from the rest. Not the mechanics of her beauty [...]—all of these girls were knockouts, mechanically speaking. Rather what distinguished her was what she *did* with her looks: disregarded them, so that the outer luminosity gave way to a

more resplendent inner one. Wasn't it a truism that a virtue was a virtue only by a dint of its keeper's unconsciousness of it? And didn't she seem to be unself-consciousness made manifest, a sort of heavenly body obediently prepared to shine on for the others spinning and circling around her composure, until the light of that composure must finally perish? I give you my light, she seemed to communicate, that you might have a measure of grace. I give you my naturalness, that you might see a simpler, more natural life, one unspotted by the shadows of divisiveness. Yes, I have the blood of various peoples coursing through my veins, but what of it? We are all various. Don't despair. Stop these arguments. Content yourself with enchantment. (227-228)

Echoing the previous chapter's analysis of Aung San Suu Kyi's bodily construction—the corporeal *form* of her Burmese-ness and its authenticity, its naturalness—one can observe in the above quote an emphasis on Louisa's own naturalness. She is unlike the other contenders, who are indeed beautiful but bear too much cosmetic embellishment and flamboyance; their appearances give off a distinctly feminized, ornamental fakeness to which Louisa's real, natural femininity provides stark contrast. The profundity of this naturalness communicates unity amid a brutal civil war between the central Bamar (Burman) army and a resistant Karen faction, along with other armed minority rebellions. However, the “virtue” of the naturalness she grants to quell division is only able to sustain itself because of her “unconsciousness of it.” It is not Louisa's physical attributes alone that are able to enchant her audience; it is her *disregard*, her unconsciousness, of her own outer, surface beauty that permits the audience access to a more “resplendent inner one.” But at the same time that the novel impresses how she is unnoticing of her own attractiveness, which gives way to this naturalness, this authenticity, the novel also impresses that she is radiant with “self-possession” and *does* something with her “her looks.”

The disregard of her looks indicates that naturalness, or authenticity, is actively constructed—only that it is constructed as that which has not been constructed at all. The construction of her external body is simultaneously a construction of a preceding internal condition, a “literal” ethnic unity that serves as a model for political unity among the currently

warring ethnic groups—she “has the blood of various peoples running” through her veins, but “we are all various. Don’t despair. Stop these arguments.” Interestingly, her crowning as “Miss Burma” cements a nationalistic standard of pure, authentic Burmese-ness that is defined by her ethnic “impurity” as a mixed-race and mixed-ethnic woman, displacing the notion of authentic Burmese-ness from a mere matter of “pure” Bamar identity. And though naturalness invokes an un-artificiality that cannot be commodified or commercialized, they are, in fact, incredibly manufactured and a desired political commodity. In a preceding chapter titled, “The Burma Problem,” Louisa is entered by her mother in a child beauty pageant; though she does not win, her mother informs her husband in the visiting area of the prison where he is being held that their daughter’s participation had been a “success.” Benny, who has been sentenced by the government for his activism towards Karen liberation from Bamar hegemony, is told by his wife that Louisa had after the pageant visited the organizer of the event: the wife of the local district commissioner who has jurisdiction over the prison. Louisa had told the district commissioner of her father’s innocence, and in return he stated he would see what could be done about his case.

Upon his release from prison and return home, Benny comes to deliberate further on the worrying socio-economic conditions of the Union of Burma under the parliamentary government headed by Prime Minister U Nu, who has begun nationalizing companies, causing financial distress for their family. Nu has also called for unity across the nation, “claiming to want to [...] convert their clanism into patriotic nationalism so that any insult or threat to the Union becomes as unbearable as an insult or threat to one’s family’ were the prime minister’s words” (185). However, the programs he “had recently put in place prompted what Benny thought of as a Burmanization of the country,” wherein a mandate dictated that governmental affairs be conducted only in the Burmese language and that history be taught from a Bamar-dominant

perspective in schools. Moreover, the government had implemented “loud efforts” to spread Buddhism, denied applications for licenses, loans, and citizenship submitted to them by minorities, and allegedly started to strip land from “foreigners”—even those whose families had lived and worked in the country for hundreds of years (186). Troubled by these worsening circumstances, Benny confines himself to his study one evening, pacing and mumbling to himself about the “problem,” with the problem being that there would “always be problems among men,” unsolvable by the “unity” for which people like Nu preached, which was inevitably a reinforcement of a nationalist cause.

“Even if *I* believe believe that we are all brothers and sisters—in spite of our differences—deserving of the same respect,” Benny says to himself, “if *you* don’t believe it—if you abuse my brothers because you feel they are not yours, that they are inferior—then I am forced to protect the brotherhood you abuse” (186). Determined to put his ideas of fighting injustice—not only for the Karen but all those suffering in the country—in print for a wider audience, Benny seeks to publish an English-language piece on Burma’s turmoil for a Western audience. In April of 1954, he meets with two Americans at the Orient Club in Rangoon, describing how the editorials he has recently submitted to American and British venues had garnered no response. He asks them for advice, and the scene plays out as follows:

“It’s got to be topical,” the younger one said. “I dabbled in journalism for a while, and I can tell that you have to find a way to *frame* your story—link it to something people are *talking* about. Nuclear power. Or something friendly. Take Miss America—they’re putting the pageant on television later this year. Now, that’s a feel-good story. Also links into people’s dreams. Maybe you frame your story with the Miss Burma pageant—is there a Miss Burma pageant?”

“Communism,” the older one put in carefully. All along, he’d been observing the conversation, and now, pushing his glasses up over the slick bridge of his nose, he continued, just as cautiously. “Vietnam. The domino Theory.”

“The *Domino Theory*?” asked Benny. He hadn’t heard of it.

“Yeah, well those are obvious,” the first spat. “I’m giving him an angle that’ll be *unique*.” (189)

The older gentleman turns out to be a CIA operative—a fictionalized version of William Young, code-named “Hatchet” in the novel, who supplies the Karen rebels with logistical support, even as the U.S. State Department, represented by Ambassador William Sebald, supplies the government with weapons to defeat the Karen and communist insurgencies. In the above passage, one is faced with Benny’s dilemma of trying to introduce the world to Burma’s strife, and one finds alongside his character that these American acquaintances can only accommodate an understanding of this exotic, forgotten land by transposing it onto, or paralleling it with, already “known” political contexts—i.e American imperialist endeavors in other parts of Southeast Asia, namely Vietnam—or the more unique, “feel-good” angle: the Miss Burma pageant.

The pageant becomes the focal point and tool of narrating history, of telling Burma’s “story” to those inside and outside the country. Louisa, having won the crown and bearing the sash of “Miss Burma” around her figure, is a body produced as a text by the transnational gazes seeking to extract knowledge of authentic Burmese-ness. As the “Miss Burma” of Craig’s novel, who is engaged with what the novel calls the “pretense of not pretending,” Louisa is the fiction within the fiction. Further analyzing the novel, this chapter advances its inauthentication of Burmese American literature by building on the previously established concept of Burmese-ness as form—in *Miss Burma*, I read three forms of Burmese-ness: problem, parallel, and pretense. Through reading for these forms, I lay the grounds for a Burmese American critique and criticism that works with and against the novel, raising concerns relevant to both Asian American studies and Burma studies.

## **I. Straying from the Path**

As I gestured to in my introduction and previous chapter, the study of Burmese American literature and identity in general occupies a blindspot in Asian American studies. While the first subfield relevant to such study that might come to mind is Southeast Asian American studies and critical refugee studies, the predominant mode of analysis in these fields is framed largely by the American war in Vietnam and dominant narratives of an overarching Cold War politics, into which Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora do not seem to fit neatly. As guest editors Mimi Thi Nguyen, Fiona I. B. Ngô, and Mariam B. Lam state in their introduction to the 2012 “Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue” of *positions: asia critique*—“[g]iven the rise of US power in Southeast Asia during but also after the Cold War,” which has escalated both intellectual and imperial goals to contain or capture these nations, “many emerging scholars are focusing on the traffic in bodies, images, and capital, coming to and from Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam (and the other nations included in Southeast Asia, if to a lesser extent)”; the intensified scholarly eye on this traffic has seen it as comprising “scenes for a multiply postcolonial imaginary and neoimperial geography” (672).

The editors emphasize that the specific presence of “wartime refugees [...] in the United States [...] as well as their changing connections to their so-called homelands, necessarily draw our inquiries into new methodological and epistemological configurations” (672). Quite clearly put here, the emergent formation of Southeast Asian American studies and its “new methodological and epistemological configurations” has understandably highlighted the nations and peoples affected by the U.S. War in Vietnam as the main geopolitical entity central to a burgeoning sub-genre of Asian American critique. Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora are challenging to assimilate into such Southeast Asian American critique, as the country does not have a similar history of U.S. intervention, invasion, war, or occupation in the Cold War era

following independence; historians such as Michael Aung-Thwin and Robert Taylor have explained that the 1962 coup under General Ne Win was seen by the U.S. as beneficial because of the regime's anti-communist agenda—thus no foreign powers opposed the coup, on the grounds that Ne Win's Revolutionary Council reassured Burma's foreign policy of neutrality in the Cold War would continue.<sup>64</sup>

However, the study described by the editors in the "Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue" is not loyal to the structure of the nation state or its borders, as it also includes stateless Southeast Asians who trace their ancestry to additional ethnic minority groups, such as the "now nomadic Mien, Hmong, and Cham, as well as varying degrees of naturalized ethnic Chinese and Indians throughout Southeast Asia, many of whom are secondarily, trebly, or multiply located in yet other regions throughout the rest of the world" (672). Based on this, one would think that immigrants and refugees from Burma/Myanmar in the U.S., who comprise a massive degree of heterogeneity between various indigenous minority groups and diasporic populations such as Burmese Chinese and Burmese Indians, would arise as a major concern for Southeast Asian American studies, Southeast Asian American critique, and critical refugee studies. Such concern should be compounded by the fact that, since the passage of the Patriot Act in 2001, Burma/Myanmar has become one of the Asian countries from which the U.S. accepts the most refugees.

In 2017, Christians from Burma/Myanmar were the largest group of current refugees in the U.S., many of them Karen, Kachin, and Chin peoples fleeing violent internal conflict and ethno-religious state persecution by the military regime: the same long-standing civil war that the novel portrays.<sup>65</sup> The geo-political context pertaining to many Karen refugees specifically, who

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<sup>64</sup> See Aung-Thwin (2012) and Taylor (2009).

<sup>65</sup> See the following online article:

<https://theworld.org/stories/2018-10-18/how-deal-when-politics-divide-your-family>

are born in camps on the Burma/Myanmar-Thai border, especially troubles the idea of a distinct “country of origin” that might correspond to a hyphenated identity in the U.S.—as does the very fact that there are two extremely contested names for the country to which refugees and immigrants in general might trace their heritage. The presence of many indigenous minorities from Burma/Myanmar who are counted as “Burmese Americans” also complicates notions of (global) indigeneity in Asian American studies and discussions of Asian settler colonialism. However, despite these many opportunities for further critical inquiry, Burma/Myanmar is named only once at the very beginning of Nguyen, Ngô, and Lam’s introduction (exactly as it is written here—with a slash between), in a list of all the other countries that constitute Southeast Asia as an “epistemic formation” (671).

With all that said, studies of refugee passages from Burma/Myanmar have been conducted by Asian American sociologists Monica M. Trieu and Chia Youyee Vang, as well as critical ethnic studies scholar Emily Hue, who has also challenged the understanding that Burma was a neutral bystander in Cold War discourses about Southeast Asia by examining how the “West was anxious about Burma” as a possible site of imminent communist contagion (1); one can observe very clearly how *Miss Burma* engages such anxieties. Moreover, the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar is certainly not the first intellectual object to complicate critical norms within the field via the issue of a hugely heterogeneous ethnic makeup or a hard-to-place connection to a national formation/nation-state. As Nolana Yip mentioned in her entry “History, People, and Culture” under the section “Burmese Americans” in *An Encyclopedia of Folklore and Folklife* (2010), groups such as Chinese Americans also exhibit quite a degree of ethnic diversity, and the same could be said of Indian Americans, Filipino Americans, Cambodian Americans, and so forth. In addition, Ma Vang has studied how Hmong American subjectivity shifts a paradigm of

knowledge and power to assert reimaginings of home not tied to the nation-state, as the Hmong do not have a “geographic homeland,” (89) and Marimas Hosan Mostiller has studied how groups such as the Cham Muslims, an unrecognized indigenous community in Vietnam and Cambodia, also experience erasure of their indigeneity when resettled as refugees in the U.S.—wherein their indigenous status is deemphasized to instead emphasize their “ethnic minority” status (112). Thus, I am aware that the aforementioned analytical framings do not make Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora a completely unique case for the field.

But regardless of any “un-unique” traits, it remains that Burma/Myanmar, its diaspora, and its diaspora’s cultural production *is* understudied in the field and *does* challenge its scholarly precedents. Burmese-ness names a distinct “problem” for the field, one which I want to further interrogate through an Asian American literary framework by circling back to how Southeast Asian American studies and Southeast Asian American critique centers primarily on the U.S.’s imperialist Cold War projects in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos: all countries who share a common history of French colonialism. Though *Miss Burma* is a Cold War-era novel, the imperialism that is portrayed heavily throughout much of the novel’s first half is, as mentioned previously, of the British empire—which ruled Burma as a part of British India from 1824-1937.<sup>66</sup>

Regarding this, one might then point to how the “Burma problem” cum “Burmese American problem” within Asian American studies might be remedied by merely shoving it into South Asian American studies. While I believe that it is important to highlight continuities between a study such as mine and studies situated within South Asian American studies and the dominant angles of Southeast Asian American studies (coincidentally resonant of how the younger American insists Benny frame his article on Burma), I am fervently against doing so in

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<sup>66</sup> However, the country remained under British colonial occupation until its independence in 1948.

this chapter because I do not want Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora's specific historical particularities to be subsumed without question by other more established sub-fields; though, I am of course not implying that these fields are monoliths without hugely varying degrees of historical particularities as well. Rather, in my pursuit of a distinctly Burmese American literary criticism and critique, I would like to deal with the histories of imperialism and ethnic relations portrayed in the novel according to their own specificities and logics while still also acknowledging how there will always be overlap.

## **II. Problem**

The novel's portrayal of British imperialism is of special interest in light of the story's centering on a Karen perspective. Broadly, "Karen" refers to an ethnolinguistic group of peoples indigenous to southern and southeastern Burma/Myanmar. Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung states "[i]t is a matter of dispute as to who constitute 'Karen' and who do not. The British colonial authorities identified 21 Karen subgroups as constituents of the major Karen language group," but of course, "ethno-national identities are multiple, fluid, and socially constructed" (xxv). Jessica Harriden similarly explains that "Karens do not, in fact, constitute a homogenous ethnic category. The name 'Karen' is a collective term for twenty-odd ethnic sub-groups that live in Burma and Thailand" (85). Many of those who speak any of the Karen languages or consider "themselves a member of one of these groups by tracing their ancestry back to Karen parents and ancestors" might recognize kinship among one another (Thawnghmung xxv). That being said, there are obviously countless linguistic, sociocultural, religious, and political differences between sub-groups, and underneath the umbrella term of "Karen" lies much diversity that often goes unaccounted for in political conversations on Karen ethnic identity.

However, in general, the Karen have long-faced oppression under Bamar majority rule, an oppression that dates back to pre-colonial times and continued throughout the early post-independence era and, of course, has continued in the (ongoing) period of the country's domination under its military dictatorship, which rose to power in the early 1960s. This history and enduring state of oppression is central to *Miss Burma*. Craig's novel, a work of historical fiction based on the life of her mother, Louisa Benson Craig, and her grandparents Saw Benson/Moses Ben-Zion Koder and Naw Chit Khin, was said by *New York Times* reviewer Emma Larkin to serve as a "much-needed recalibration of history, one that redresses the narrative imbalance by placing other ethnic, non-Burmese points of view at the center of its story."<sup>67</sup> Although, Craig is referred to as a "Burmese American" author by a 2018 review of the novel in the *Deccan Herald* (here with a hyphen between "Burmese" and "American") and an interview with the *Exberliner*, and she is included as an author under Tamara Ho's entry "Burmese American Literature" in the *Routledge Companion to Asian American Literature* (2014).<sup>68</sup> In stating that the novel focuses on a non-Burmese perspective, Larkin sustains a definition of "Burmese" that is equivalent to Bamar or Burman, and thus a title with which people of Karen descent or who are members of other persecuted ethnic minorities would have valid reason for disidentifying.

The "recalibration" from a "non-Burmese"—i.e., non-Bamar—point of view of which Larkin speaks is quite arresting; she describes Karen history as being a "tale of trust and betrayal. After centuries of Burmese hegemony, the Karen welcomed British colonial rule and ended up fighting bravely on the side of Allied forces in World War II." General Aung San, the

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<sup>67</sup> See the online review here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/books/review/miss-burma-charmaine-craig.html>

<sup>68</sup> See the following online articles:

<https://www.deccanherald.com/sunday-herald/sunday-herald-books/margins-676524.html>;

<https://www.exberliner.com/books/ilb-interview-charmaine-craig/>

revolutionary leader instrumental in Burma's liberation from the British, is "not depicted in the novel as the national hero he is hailed as in Burma." Larkin quotes Benny in a dialogue he has with an Anglo-Burmese acquaintance in the early stages of Aung San's agitation against British rule: "[t]hey claim [Aung San's] starting some sort of movement, saying the Burmans are the true lords and masters—Britons be damned, and everyone else along with them." She continues, saying "[d]uring World War II, Aung San's Burmese Independence Army wreaked havoc on the Karens for their loyalty to the British, and even after his assassination in 1947, the same soldiers marched into Rangoon reportedly chanting, 'We want to eat Karen flesh'."

Indeed, the novel initially appears to portray the Karen as *thankful* for British colonial rule; Burma's colonizers allied with them against the Bamar people, "freeing" the Karen of their oppression under the Bamar and promising them political autonomy post-independence. Perhaps the most jarring expression of this gratitude takes the form of a Karen prayer song to their god Y'wa, also known as the "Christian Creator," that Khin's mother used to sing to her. The song recounts their "people's story":

*Long ago, the story went, we came here along a river of sand. We came upon a fearsome, trackless region, where, like waves before the sea, sands rolled before the wind. We came to this green land, to the sources of the waters and the lakes above. Until we fell among the Siamese and Burmans, who made slaves of us. They took our alphabet and holy books, but our elders promised the coming of our Messiah. White foreigners would bring a holy book, they said. Give thanks exceedingly for the coming of the white men. Give thanks, songs of the forest and children of poverty, for before their coming we were poor and divided and scattered in every direction.*

*Before the white men, we lived one stream beyond another, and the Burmans made us drag boats and cut rattans. They made us collect dammer and seek beeswax and gather cardamom; weave mats, strip bark for cordage, pull logs, and clear land for their cities. They demanded presents—yams, bulbo-tubers of arum, ginger, capsicum, flesh, elephant tusks, and rhinoceros horns. If we had no money to give them, they made us borrow and thus become their slaves again. [...] They beat us with rods, struck us with fists, pounded us for days on end, till many of us dropped down dead. They made us march carrying rice for soldiers, so that our fields fell fallow and great numbers of us starved.[...]*

*And in our turmoil we prayed beneath the bushes. "Children and grandchildren," the ancient sayings of the elders went, "If Y'wa will save us, let him save speedily. Alas!*

*Where is Y'wa?" we asked. "Children and grandchildren," said the elders, "if the thing comes by land, weep; if by sea, laugh. It will not come in our days, but it will in yours. If it comes by sea, you will be able to take breath; but if by land, you will not find a spot to dwell in." (18-19)*

The song unabashedly places all hope in an approaching Messiah to deliver the Karen people from their suffering, and that Messiah takes the form of white foreigners—"[g]ive thanks exceedingly for the coming of white men," the song states. The white men are foreseen to bring the Karen a "holy book" and free them from their enslavement by the Bamar. Therefore, the event of the British's alliance with the Karen is not simply presented as a chance political opportunism of the moment but instead a long-awaited and predetermined happening in accordance to the Karen's own religious origin story, and the white men colonizing the country are liberators who are also meant to be worshiped.

According to the prayer song, for thousands of years, the Karen have been oppressed by the Bamar, who exploited them economically and also inflicted mass destruction onto their culture and people. The above passage is not only disturbing because of the immense detail given to the Karen's oppression by the Bamar but also because of the immense value it places on the idea of a literal white savior to bring an end to such oppression. In the following chapter, "Something About the Karens," Benny, in trying to learn more about the Karen and their history, comes across an essay authored by Charles Dickens Jr. in 1888, which states "one of the most pleasant features has been the remarkable loyalty to the British Crown of the little nation of Karens" (34). "It is a nation almost unknown at home here," writes Dickens, "and is frequently misunderstood and misrepresented..." The essay proceeds to praise the actions of the Western Baptist missionaries who converted much of the Karen to Christianity in the nineteenth century and the Karen's staunch loyalty to the British Crown, describing the "most remarkable tradition" held "absolutely identical by each tribe of the Karens," which enables the British to "understand

the success which the American missionaries have had among them, and their devotion to the British alliance” (35).

What follows appears to be the same, or at least a very similar, religious origin story recounted by the prayer song: after “the Fall,” the Karen say, “God gave His ‘Word’ (the Bible) to the Karens first, as the elder branch of the human race: but they neglected it, and God, in anger, took it away and gave it to their younger brother, the white man.” The “white man” was placed under a promise to restore [the Bible] to the Karens” (36). In turn, the white man would teach them “the true religion after their sins had been sufficiently expiated by long oppression of other races” (36). The glowing manner in which Western powers are portrayed does not seem limited to only the “liberating” force of British colonialism. Upon the novel’s transition from the colonial and anti-colonial period into the post-independence and Cold War era, one witnesses Louisa’s ascendancy as “Miss Burma,” along with how she eventually relinquishes that title in an official capacity, transforming from a beloved beauty queen to a “Most Wanted” leader hunted by Ne Win’s military regime for her role in the Karen National Union: a rebel armed political organization fighting for Karen self-determination. By the end of the novel, she seems to have placed faith in the U.S. and the “West” to support the Karen’s democratic cause, so long as they refuse to “tangle with the Communists” (354). It is also an American agent who arranges for Louisa’s family to leave the country as it crosses over into its first period of military rule, securing jobs for her loved ones—including one in which her sister will teach Burmese to marines.

This all serves especially troubling for a long tradition of literary criticism and critique that has valued Asian American literature and culture as a site for, in Lisa Lowe’s words, “imagining different narratives and critical historiographies” and “practices that give rise to new

forms of subjectivity and new ways of questioning the government of human life by the national state” (29). With respect to how Asian American critique engages conversations not only tethered to the bounds of the U.S. nation state, groundbreaking work in Cold War studies such as Jodi Kim’s *Ends of Empire* have contended that the “critical longings, enactments, and embodiments” displayed in Asian American literature and cultural works “allow us to imagine alternatives to empire, as in a singular ‘end’ or termination of empire” (5). Kim conceptualizes “Asian American critique as an *unsettling hermeneutic* and reads Asian American cultural politics against the grain of American exceptionalism and nationalist ontology,” a process that “unsettles and disrupts the dominant Manichaean lens through which the Cold War is made sense of and in turn generates meaning” (5).

Henceforth, Asian American critique “generates new interpretive practice of analytic for reading Asian American cultural productions, and the very formation of contemporary ‘Asian America(n),’ in new ways,” defamiliarizing the “‘United States of America’ and the contemporary formation of ‘Asian America(n)’ by interrogating their violent and contradictory conditions of possibility in the post-World War II conjuncture (5). Though, it appears from the above excerpt and many of the events that follow in the novel, that the “different narratives and critical historiographies” (Lowe) and “alternatives to empire” and “nationalist ontology” (Kim) that are imagined by *Miss Burma* are alternatives to the *Bamar* ethno-nationalist narrative furthered by the Burmese/Myanmar military regime and such ideology’s origins in the WWII-era anti-colonial resistance. As far as the Karen diaspora that makes up the formation of “Asian America(n),” media coverage of the large refugee communities in the U.S. have expressed that, largely, “the United States is a ‘dreamland’” for those arriving from the “land-mine-strewn

jungles of eastern Myanmar.”<sup>69</sup> American journalist Patrick Winn, who “specializes” on Southeast Asia, has reported on how Christian refugees from Burma/Myanmar make up the largest refugee population in the U.S. Such refugees are then counted under the category of “Burmese” in the U.S. In an article on the staggering number of refugees resettled in the U.S., Winn states that Karen refugees “often feel a near-spiritual bond with America,” but those who make it to the U.S. find that “Americans generally have no idea they exist.”

He goes on to say that because of how American humanitarian aid has helped provide healthcare and basic schooling facilities for these refugee camps, many Christian Karen are “often primed to adore America from an early age.” He quotes Pastor Winner, a preacher in Mae La, one of Asia’s largest refugee camps, who states: “[f]or years, America has supported us. Not just physically but spiritually, too [...] America and the Karen, we are brothers.” The Pastor continues, saying that this brotherhood “goes back to the 1830s when American missionaries came and converted us. Even before that, in Karen history, we believed white brothers would bring this ‘good news’ to the Karen people,” more or less echoing a narrative identical to what is presented by the novel. Obviously, this coverage cannot be taken as representative of all Karen refugees and other refugees belonging to minority indigenous groups from Burma/Myanmar in the U.S., but it is nonetheless troubling as a narrative reinforced by (white) American journalism. Evidently, one finds that the critique reading the “Asian American cultural politics” in question is a *resettling* hermeneutic. A work like *Miss Burma*, in providing a historical narrative alternative to that which has been systematically pushed under Bamar/Burmese nationalism and hegemony, does not seem to identify or interrogate any contradictory conditions of possibility; instead, it *reaffirms* the troubling narratives of empire—first with the gratitude it shows the

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<sup>69</sup> See the following online article:  
<https://theworld.org/stories/2017-05-04/biggest-group-refugees-us-christians-myanmar>

Karen expressing towards British colonialism and then with the faith that it shows Louisa putting in U.S. support, *re-familiarizing* the “United States of America” and its “nationalist ontology.” Or does it?

Certainly, a review like Larkin’s, which praises the depiction of how the Karen fight “bravely on the side of Allied forces in World War II,” might value the novel in this way to incorporate its “recovery” of Karen history into a narrative of U.S. multicultural nationalism, just as the review values how the novel evidently perceives Karen identity in a clean separation from Burmese identity. However, despite Larkin’s assertion that the novel is a recalibration of the “missing” or “forgotten” history of the Karen people in Burma, one should note that the novel is, well, a *novel*; it is a work of fiction, albeit historical fiction. By saying this, I am not implying that the goal here is to scrutinize an Asian American text such as *Miss Burma* for an “accurate” depiction of major events in Burma/Myanmar’s history through its centering of Karen perspectives. I am asserting that through the novel structure and its positioning of complex characters, as well as their political dialogues with one another, the text more so provides a foundation for challenging and troubling common paradigms of knowledge with respect to Burmese-ness—and the Karen-ness that also constitutes Burmese-ness—amid an Asian American or broader American/“Western” tableau, rather than simply affirming them one way or another.

From an Asian Americanist perspective, what can one possibly make of the novel’s portrayal of the Karen and their “people’s story,” which shows how the Karen are expected to be “thankful” for white European colonialism instead of resisting it? The Karen’s gravitation towards the British is clearly out of need to overthrow Bamar control, and as one learns in the novel, the Karen play a crucial role in the British colonial administration as police officers. What

is one to make of how the Bamar, even as they have subjugated the Karens, are being subjugated by the British, who are allying with the Karens only to further oppress the Bamar? Do the Bamar, in being an ethnic majority, “deserve” their subjugation under Burma’s white colonizers? Despite what one is led to think by the prayer song, the novel does not come across as a ringing endorsement of imperialism and colonialism, but it does prompt a more nuanced understanding of their portrayals—an understanding that does not smooth over the many cracks and crevices in a simplistic “oppressor” and “oppressed” dichotomy.

Taking inspiration from the chapter “The Burma Problem,” and the problem that Benny himself names and tries to introduce/solve via publishing his political ideas for an American readership, I pose that “problem” is a particular *form* of Burmese-ness—wherein Burmese-ness is defined by its own difficulty of study and understanding, by the mystification around the “angle” from which one approaches it in a U.S. context, Asian American and otherwise. Deploying Asian American critique to read for Burmese-ness as problem can aid the development of a specifically Burmese American literary criticism and critique, which routes Asian Americanists through some of the most uncomfortable and counterintuitive modes of thinking, pushing us to further engage with how ethno-nationalist rule in nations such as Burma/Myanmar troubles the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist “resistant” ethos of the field, an ethos that often pledges absolute loyalty to the field’s “radical roots narrative.” Often, those who cling to such absolutely known roots reinforce the institutional logic appropriating them, while also believing that they are working in clear opposition to the neoliberalism and multiculturalism of the university by setting a rigid precedent for literary “analysis.”

Such a precedent still dictates that Asian American literature must be read for authenticity value, which is not exemplified by knowledge of an exotic home culture, but instead

by how a certain text provides oppositional knowledges for enacting political change—wherein authenticity is policed by how “radical” or “resistant” an Asian American literary subject, mapped onto Asian Americans themselves, can be. Certain Asian American literary representations are seen as inauthentic because they are not found to be radical enough in content or to neatly reflect a preceding “truth” of a certain Asian American experience and identity, which should also be authenticated on the grounds of whether it properly adheres to an idealized narrative of political resistance. To that end, Asian Americanists’ reinforcement—whether knowing or unknowing—of liberal multiculturalism and multicultural nationalism via the enshrinement of authenticity seems to articulate itself through familiar authoritarian terms. Those who abide by such a mentality likely also value such anti-intellectual misnomers as “praxis” over “theory” and “real world” community involvement over the isolated discursive abstractions of the “ivory tower”: ultimately disregarding how such binary thinking, which fashions itself as being radical, is still, in actuality, a liberal position furthering the institutional ends it professes to be against. As Christopher Lee explains, “this irony stems in part from Asian American Studies’ status as an academic formation whose legitimacy depends heavily on its activist roots” (23), quoting Viet Thanh Nguyen’s widely-cited model minorities vs. bad subjects paradigm—“the field is characterized by a pervasive idealism that privileges radical resistance as its normative standard” and sees its enemy in narratives that appear to endorse assimilation over resistance (Nguyen 9). What results is a “rigid dichotomy between authentic resistance on the one hand and accommodation and complicity on the other” (Lee 23).

Note how the ethno-nationalist dictatorship that emerged under Ne Win was also driven by a desire to erase the legacy of imperialism, correcting the structural wrongs set as precedent by the nation’s British colonizers: a corrective effort that has its roots—as Benny conveys—in

the anti-colonial movement, which was headed by heralded anti-colonial figures like Aung San. I should say that my goal here is not to place definitive, singular judgment on Aung San as a person, revolutionary, or politician, nor am I attempting to deny his crucial role in Burma's liberation from British colonialism. One should remember how the military regime that rose to power in the 1960s and tried to undermine Aung San Suu Kyi as its pro-democratic opposition in the 1980s and 1990s did so also through trying to erase her father's history as an architect of modern Burma/Myanmar, meaning that the ethno-nationalism of the military also involves attacking other Bamar individuals who they see as adversarial or not authentically Burmese. That being said, what I am specifically interested in are cultural and literary *depictions* of Aung San (and by "continued legacy" his daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi), insofar as they have informed a certain standard of resistance that is seen as ideal not only among anti-military sentiments within Burmese/Myanmar culture, but also potentially preferenced by Asian Americanists' for the utility of decolonial knowledge and associated analytical framings. The authoritarian manner of enforcing authentic Burmese-ness is multiplicitous and not only one wielded by authoritarian governments; it can easily be replicated by Asian Americanists' efforts to correctively represent Burmese American identity and cultural production through valuing an oversimplified understanding of anti-colonial and anti-military resistance.

But, to further discuss the ongoing ethno-nationalist rule of the military in Burma/Myanmar, one might orient themselves vis-à-vis what Jini Kim Watson describes in *Cold War Reckonings* (2021). In a way that is particularly relevant to ongoing ethno-nationalist military rule in Burma/Myanmar, which still deeply affects much of the country's diaspora in the U.S., Watson explains that the decolonization struggles of the Global South had a constitutive role in producing the "authoritarian moment" of our present (8). Regarding the study of Burmese

American literature and identity specifically, Burmese-ness as problem forces one to confront, again, the ways in which “Burmese” remains tethered to “Bamar” in an ethno-nationalist continuity. But, at the same time, Burmese-ness as problem can also allow one to observe all the ways it severs itself from that tethering. In describing a rapidly-changing political and the early stages of anti-colonial revolt in Burma, as perceived by Benny, the novel states:

...he had been repeatedly confronted by the news that the former law student Aung San—the one who’d risen to the top ranks of those protesting with the rallying cry ‘Burma for the Burmans’—had co-founded a new political party, which opposed backing Britain’s war with Germany, called for Burma’s immediate independence from the yoke of imperialism, and, for all Benny could see, emphasized the supremacy of the ethnic Burmans, thereby aligning itself with the master-race ideals of the Nazis (who, Benny learned from a recent radio program, had monstrosly decreed that Jews over the age of twelve must wear an armband with a Star of David). Benny was only beginning to understand that to be *Burmese*—meaning, to be one of Burma’s natives—but not to be *Burman* was, in Burman terms, to be distinctly undesirable.” (33)

While the Karen’s persecution by the Bamar is clearly a conflict that structures much of the story, here the novel makes sure to differentiate “Burmese” from Bamar or “Burman.”

In the above quote, the term “Burmese” is acknowledged as meaning a native of the country of Burma, not, as Larkin would contend, someone of ethnic Bamar descent. However, the ethnonationalist divide fostered under Bamar hegemony is highlighted as a major dilemma in which Burmese-ness arises as problem, characterized by internal fracturing between a majoritarian and minoritarian identity—a desired versus undesired Burmese-ness via Bamar-centric definitions of ethnic and national identity.

Benny’s position as a Jewish member of the Karen community is crucial to engaging the fraught discourse, stricken by a mess of colonial and postcolonial politics, around Burmese-ness, because it illuminates and confronts how such discourse manifests by paralleling other situations of ethno-nationalistic oppression and racial supremacy. As exhibited by the quote, the novel appears to draw its own strong comparisons between Bamar chauvinism—influenced by the

figure of Aung San and his leadership—towards ethnic minorities in Burma to the Nazi’s persecution of Jewish people in Europe, which is occurring contemporaneously with the anti-colonial struggle in Burma. Benny believes the nationalistic ideals embraced by the slogan “Burma for the Burmans” is aligned with the “master-race” ideals of the Nazis, bolstering the comparison with a mention of how the Nazis have ordered that armbands with the Star of David must be dispatched to identify who is Jewish. The observations outlined above, wherein the ethnic and racial conflict in Burma is transposed onto and paralleled with other national and transnational contexts, morph into numerous comparisons throughout the novel—such as the genocide of indigenous people and the enslavement of black people in America, which is also a persistent trend in Burma studies. One can thus read for another form of Burmese-ness in Craig’s novel: the parallel, by which I do not mean parallelism, but the pointing out of similarity via analogism and metaphor. Reading for Burmese-ness as parallel contributes to a potential Burmese American criticism and critique that addresses not only present conversations in Asian American studies, but Burma studies as well.

### **III. Parallel**

In his 2013 article, “The ‘Wages of Burman-ness,’” which is a variant title of critical race theorist David Roediger’s 1991 book, *The Wages of Whiteness*, Burma studies scholar Matthew J. Walton states that “[p]ositing Burman-ness as Whiteness initially appears to be problematic, since scholars have described Whiteness as a particular relationship to both power and to others who are considered non-white” (5). Walton goes on to explain that in Burma/Myanmar, the vast majority of people, both Bamar and non-Bamar, have lived under a military government widely recognized by most of the populace as oppressive. He reasons that while it is true that almost all of the leaders of this government have been of Bamar descent and “they usually reserved the

most destructive treatment for non-Burman ethnic groups,” it is also “undeniable that most of the Burman people in Myanmar have been oppressed to some degree by the government as well.” Is it, then, possible, he asks, “given these conditions, to view Burmans as privileged, even dominant within Burmese society?” (5).

Walton’s article pulls from U.S. critical race theory, comparing “race” as constructed in a U.S. context to “ethnicity,” as constructed in Burma/Myanmar. He discusses how critical race theorists have made the case that “members of a dominant group can be exploited or oppressed by elites within that dominant group, even as they continue to enjoy privileges denied to those outside the group.” Drawing from W.E.B. Dubois, Roediger specifically evaluates the ways in which white working class Americans gradually came to see themselves as “White” by aligning themselves with the white capitalist power structure and against political non-white allies, receiving privileges (“wages”) simply because of their skin color. Following Charles Mills in considering Whiteness to be a “racialised order of white supremacy, historically privileging those who are considered to be ‘White’ but replicable locally within other contexts,” Walton argues that in contemporary Burmese/Myanmar society, “Burman-ness functions as a localised version of Whiteness,” because Bamar people are generally privileged politically, economically, and socially. The government and society in general presents Bamar culture, language, and values as the norm.

In discussing the government’s Burmanization policies, which spread Bamar Theravada Buddhism and also force ethnic minorities to assimilate into Bamar culture, Walton states, “[t]here are similarities in the ways in which whites in America and Europe perceived Native Americans and Blacks” (12). Addressing the challenge of comparing race in a U.S. context to ethnicity in a Burmese/Myanmar context, Walton asserts that in Burma/Myanmar, “race and

ethnicity are functionally similar with regard to access to power and privilege. The dominance that is constructed along racial lines in the case of Whiteness can be replicated” according to ethnic boundaries, because people in Burma/Myanmar “often perceive ethnicity as something inborn, unchangeable, and, in some cases, determinant of an individual’s very nature” (4).

Interestingly, while Walton asks whether it is problematic to compare Bamar ethnicity and ethnic identity to whiteness because Bamar people have also widely suffered under the military regime, he does not ask whether it is problematic to compare the two constructions because it erases the structural presence of whiteness in Burma/Myanmar during the country’s rule under British colonialism. He does not ask whether it is problematic to compare the two constructions because it erases the history of Anglo-Burmese, or people of mixed white British and Bamar, Burmese Indian, Burmese Chinese, indigenous ethnic minority descent, etcetera. He does not ask whether it is problematic to compare the two constructions because of how it erases the history of white American presence in Burma/Myanmar through the CIA and currently through U.S. military bases. He does not ask whether it is problematic to compare the two constructions because of how the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar in the U.S., the dominant non-English language spoken among them being Burmese, is oppressed under the paradigm of white supremacy. And, of course, he does not ask whether it is problematic to compare the two constructions because it appropriates the manner in which whiteness *and* blackness—and also indigeneity, which is collapsed into a homogenized “minority” status with blackness—has been formed and theorized in a U.S. context. This also erases the historical presence of Black soldiers from the U.S. in Burma during World War II, which has been studied by historians such as

Michael Charney and documented in American memoirs and biographies of soldiers such as Evelio Grillo and Herman Perry.<sup>70</sup>

Granted, some might view Walton's analysis as well-intended, as it seeks to allow pathways for Bamar people in Burma/Myanmar to "recognise the ways in which they are privileged in relation to non-Burmans and acknowledge the differential suffering and oppression of non-Burman communities." It also posits "Burman-ness as a set of power relations" that highlight "the necessary role of Burmans in dismantling structures of Burman privilege and in creating a space for ethnic unity and equality in Myanmar." However, in appropriating from U.S. critical race theory and the work of W.E.B. Dubois, as well as mentioning indigeneity in conjunction with such theorizations, Walton's analysis demonstrates a tendency in Burma studies to discuss the history of ethnic relations in Burma/Myanmar through a metaphorization of U.S. indigeneity and blackness, the latter of which has been theorized in a U.S. literary and cultural context by scholars such as Chad Benito Infante—whose work builds on the incredibly influential scholarship of Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers.<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, such

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<sup>70</sup> See Michael Charney, "Black American and West African soldiers in Burma in World War Two." (2020). See also Evelio Grillo, *Black Cuban, Black American: A Memoir* (2000) and Brendan I. Koerner, *Now the Hell Will Start: One Soldier's Flight from the Greatest Manhunt of World War II* (2008).

<sup>71</sup> The dynamic observed here has somewhat of a resonance with the way Jodi Byrd describes how the figure and symbol of the "Indian" has been made to travel across empire, how ideas of Indian-ness have created conditions of possibility for U.S. empire to structurally manifest. The colonialist field of Burma studies and area studies in general, in grafting minority status in Burma/Myanmar onto Indian-ness, alongside blackness, could be read as an instance of Byrd's "imperial transit." See *The Transit of Empire* (2011). The dynamic also has another small resonance with the manner in which Chad Benito Infante analyzes—via Rayna Green, Saidiya Hartman, and Hortense Spillers—the manner in which the metaphorical figure of the "African slave" and "Indian savage" was "an essential grammar, if not the essential grammar, of colonial literature" and Western metaphysics. However, Infante is addressing not how the figure of the enslaved black person and conquered native in the U.S. were metaphors for non-U.S. black and non-U.S. indigenous "others," but instead metaphorized as commodities, which in turn justified their acquisition by the institutions of slavery and settler colonialism. Infante states that "metaphor is foundational to the concept of metaphysics because it encapsulates the process of abstraction central to language that metaphysics attempts to capture" (63). He defines metaphor as "the transference of seemingly related nouns, where one thing, word, or sign is given the name of another" and metaphysics as a "European mythology and philosophy concerned with 'being as such,' 'first causes of things,' and 'things that do not change'" (64). On the same page, Infante goes on to quote Jacques Derrida, who says that "for the West, analogy is the most powerful metaphor because it is the most logical form of metaphor: 'Analogy is metaphor par excellence.'" As metaphorical characters in a metaphysical narrative, the figures of the "African Slave" and "Indian Savage" are "broad and capacious enough to represent paradigmatic, planetary alterity itself" (Infante 66). The "oft-cited pairings of Black and Native America

methodologies in Burma studies reinforce the idea that one cannot attend to the seriousness of how Bamar identity is structurally privileged in Burma/Myanmar without paralleling and analogizing it with whiteness and therefore paralleling and analogizing all non-Bamar peoples, or ethnic minorities in Burma/Myanmar, with blackness and indigeneity, enacting a violence unto both by (1) dissolving them into each other without a nuanced understanding of differences between or continuities across and (2) utilizing them only as a metaphor to symbolize the oppression of a different “other.”

Such engagements circulate blackness and indigeneity as metaphors of suffering and oppression to speak about everything *other* than blackness and indigeneity while at the same time justifying the continued, simultaneous abstraction and commoditization of blackness and indigeneity. Quite amusingly, Walton’s argument has been critiqued by scholars such as Stephen Campbell and Elliot Prasse-Freeman, but not because of the aforementioned violences it engenders, but because—at least in the manner I see it—it does not appropriate the systematic

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by nineteenth-century white writers and artists” were used “to identify how Blackness and Indianness are transformed into linked metaphors,” misnamed as “problems”: abstract *and* material objects to be acquired, conquered, and dominated (63-64). In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman states that the “value of blackness resided in its metaphorical aptitude,” meaning that the fungibility of blackness is itself a metaphorical process, wherein the African is changed into an object (7). Through metaphorization, blackness and the bodies of black people became duplicatable, transposable, transformable, and plasticized so they may be understood as “the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves.” Rayna Green’s use of the term “controlling metaphor” and Patricia Hill Collins’s phrase “controlling image” “corroborate Hartman’s notion that metaphor operates not just as a literary tool, but as a base process of language that enables images of the mind as well as the connection between different and unconnected objects and mental pictures” (Infante 68). Furthermore, Hortense Spillers specifically describes how the “African in the Middle Passage is transformed into a ‘resource for metaphor,’ a ‘metaphor for value’ that ‘remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation’” (73); she demonstrates how “‘the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation’ enable connections between unrelated objects,” drawing from, as Infante states, the “ephemeral but important connections between Black and Native America through settlement and slavery.” Such institutions represent for “African and indigenous peoples a scene of violence and banishment.” Infante takes Spillers’s “‘and’ between ‘African’ and ‘indigenous’ to signal both indigenous Africans and Native Americans and their simultaneous transformation into metaphor” (65). Though the discussions outlined by Infante are of course not situated with respect to my particular concerns, I find it necessary to cite this argument in my consideration of how the white colonialist engagements of the university—especially as they constantly mine and commodify blackness and indigeneity via metaphorization—are incorporated in ongoing projects of settler-colonialism and anti-blackness amid the afterlife of slavery and genocide of indigenous peoples, on which the academic institution and its dominant liberal ideology in North America was built and sustains itself. See also Kandice Chuh’s study of these foundations of liberalism and the North American university in *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* (2019)

paradigm of whiteness that produces blackness and indigeneity in a U.S. context *well enough*. Campbell and Prasse-Freeman open their 2022 article, “Revisiting the Wages of Burman-Ness: Contradictions of Privilege in Myanmar,” with a discussion of the Black Lives Matter protests that “rattled the USA’s system of entrenched racism in the northern summer of 2020” after the police murder of George Floyd (177). Observers in Burma/Myanmar reconsidered the concept of Bamar privilege at this time by drawing analogies “from that conflagration to the racial oppression in their own society” (177). Debates flared around the societal use of the idiom “kala,” which is often equated as the “n-word” of the Burmese language. However, “kala” does not refer to black people; it is instead used to describe people of “South Asian physiognomy in Burmese/Myanmar culture” (177).

The ensuing “Don’t Call Me Kala” campaign started by Burmese of South Asian heritage on social media took inspiration from the Black Lives Matter protests in the U.S. Bamar opponents of the campaign responded with the declaration “Don’t Call me Burman.” The campaign similarly drew parallels between Bamar privilege and white privilege in the U.S., as well as parallels between non-Bamar marginalization with the marginalization of black people in the U.S. Campbell and Prasse-Freeman criticize Walton for utilizing Roediger’s “liberal white privilege theory” instead of the more “radical white privilege theory” of W.E.B. Dubois. The authors explain that recent years have seen a move within Asian studies to adopt “dominant white privilege theory, as developed in the USA” in order to better analyze systemic racial and ethnic inequalities in Asia. Their explanation gives no pause at all to how a long-standing, heterogenous tradition and critical framework of analyzing racial formation and hierarchies within the U.S.—one country—is extrapolated onto not only Burma/Myanmar, but the entire Asian continent.

The authors state that this variant of white privilege theory emerged in the 1980s as a liberal displacement of “earlier, radical theorising of white privilege” (178). “The earlier analysis of white privilege,” Campbell and Prasse-Freeman state, “had drawn its politics from the black liberation struggles of the 1960s and its conceptual lens from the historical sociology of Du Bois” (178). They then seek to delineate the difference in utility between liberal white privilege theory and radical white privilege theory, and they accordingly apply their understanding of Du Bois’s 1935 *Black Reconstruction in America* to discussions of how Bamar privilege is a “bourgeois poison” that also sustains itself through the oppression of the Bamar proletariat in Burma/Myanmar. Ironically, in impressing that Walton’s analysis of Bamar privilege as equivalent to White privilege reinforces the liberalism of the U.S. academy, Campbell and Prasse-Freeman also reinforce the violence of the liberal academic institution by further commodifying blackness and black thought through metaphorization, in order to imagine the future liberation of non-Bamar people from Bamar oppression in Burma/Myanmar.

I must ask at this juncture—is it at all possible to deconstruct how Bamar/Burmese nationalism has caused and presently causes violent fracturing and ethnic minority oppression across Burma/Myanmar in a way that does not center whiteness and the exploitation of black and indigenous suffering in order to be “taken seriously”? Is it at all possible to carry out this deconstructive task while also acknowledging that Bamar ethnic identity is not equivalent to whiteness, which erases a long history of British colonialism and the hovering presences of American imperialism, along with the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar in the U.S., who are also oppressed under structures of white supremacy? Must Bamar ethnic identity be made equivalent to whiteness for people to understand the devastation caused by its systematic elevation in Burma/Myanmar? Must Karen identity, Burmese Indian identity, and all minority ethnic

identities in Burma/Myanmar—which absolutely do not experience minority status in the same way—be collapsed into one and synonymized with U.S. blackness and indigeneity—also homogenized into a single minority status—to make their oppression visible?

To return, finally, to Craig's novel, one observes that Burmese-ness, and all the ethnic fragmentations that constitute it, arises as another form—the parallel: Burmese-ness, as in the various political turmoils and histories of Burma/Myanmar, is made legible only when grafted onto “already known” racial and ethnic entities (which are of course never “known” in absolution). Burmese-ness as parallel displaces Burmese-ness from its own historical particularities, specificities, and logics. In one instance, wherein Benny is separated from his family during WWII, the novel shows how Japanese soldiers, who have begun their occupation of Burma, mistake him for a black man—“it was now assumed by the Japanese secret police that Benny was part N\*gro—part black, part *kuro*, the fellow chided him, pointing to his twists of hair” (81). However, before the novel makes any mentions of blackness and indigeneity in a U.S. context, Burmese-ness as parallel is read between the actions of the Bamar/Burmese nationalists and Nazi Germany. As Frank B. Wilderson III contends, the post-WWII era was “fixated on the Jewish Holocaust as the affective destination that made legible the ensemble of questions animating the political common sense of oppression” (35). He goes on to explain that the Holocaust as “natural” metaphor continues to anchor many of today's “metacommentaries.” In *Miss Burma*, the Holocaust as metaphor and narrative tool facilitates the inaugurating gesture used to collapse Jewishness, U.S. blackness, and U.S. indigeneity, into one—generating a revolving door of “other” that holds Burmese-ness as parallel until, well, it absolutely doesn't.

Take for example a dialogue between Benny and Saw Lay, a Karen acquaintance of him and his wife who, alongside Benny, is organizing towards Karen liberation and goes on to help

form the Karen National Union. Though the novel portrays Aung San as calling for an inclusive, nationalist unity not based on the superiority of any one ethnic group—an idea that Benny seems at least partially open to—a skeptical Saw Lay comments that “unity is just the word tyrants use before heads begin to roll” (96). The dialogue includes the following:

“I want to ask you something,” Saw Lay said, sinking back into his seat as he took a long swallow of beer. “Do you suppose that the British—that any of the Allies—would think it would be reasonable for the Jews to trust the Germans again? I mean to live peaceably under the Germans, under their government?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Benny said. If he’d been short, it was because Saw Lay’s question had struck his ears—and his heart—as a latent insult, because it presupposed that Benny was so much an outsider that a comparison with the Jewish condition had to be drawn in order for him to understand that of the Karen people.”

As stated previously, Benny is of Sephardic Jewish descent, born as part of a sizable Sephardic community living in colonial era Rangoon. Orphaned at the age of 7, Benny is sent off to live with aunts in Calcutta and no longer speaks Burmese when he returns to Rangoon in 1938. Upon his return, he sees 18 year-old Khin, standing toward the end of the jetty at the seaport of Akyab, located in Western Burma in what is now regarded as Rakhine or Arakan state. He falls in love with Khin and becomes deeply committed to Karen liberation. As Benny becomes invested in the Karen’s larger resistance movement against Bamar oppression, so does the novel, which navigates events from his standpoint. His outsider perspective—as someone who is not technically Karen “by birth” but nevertheless wishes to be counted as Karen—is critical in one’s own introduction to, and envelopment in, the minority history that the novel privileges.

The above dialogue is important because it momentarily dissolves the parallel between the Karen and Jewish people in Europe. Saw Lay is appealing to Benny’s Jewishness in order to discuss the Karen’s oppression at the hands of the Burmans, as if that is the only way it will register, as if Benny has not already devoted his entire life to Karen liberation by integrating into

Karen identity himself. Benny is made to feel like an outsider by Saw Lay, who reinforces that what is happening to the Karens is parallel to what has happened to the Jews. In doing so, Saw Lay implicitly maintains that he represents the Karen standpoint and Benny the Jewish one, when in actuality Benny is also among the Karens. Karen identity, not reducible to any single religious identity, encompasses Jewishness. Benny's Jewishness is part of his Karen-ness, and vice versa. The Karens are a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community, with the title only existing as a broad umbrella. This is acknowledged later in the two's conversation, which also happens to incorporate questions of U.S. indigeneity and also implicitly blackness, with Benny asking Saw Lay if Aung San's call for unity might be on to something, that the people of Burma should strive to "form a perfect union, as the Americans put it" (96). He entertains the idea of unity among ethnic groups vis-a-vis a comparison to the U.S. nation state, countering the Karen "tribalism" for which he suspects Saw Lay is advocating. Saw Lay responds by sarcastically mentioning how the "American Indians" have been "incorporated into that perfect union with such stunning success" (96). The conversations continues:

"Suppose—" [Saw Lay] persisted, but with the trace of his old politeness, "suppose that your Americans suddenly found themselves being overrun by Japs. Say Hiroshima never happened and so on. Say that we had lost the war, and suddenly America is overrun. Americans are no longer permitted to speak English in any governmental setting; their children must learn their lessons in Japanese, learn a 'history' that mocks their 'minority' perspective. Say that in theory their children can rise to the top rungs of the social and political ladder—but only be adopting Japanese values, a belief in the superiority of Japanese blood, and even a disdain for American primitivism. American religion—be it Christianity or anything else—is, if not formally stamped out, labeled crude, 'aboriginal.' Or say something more radical happened..."

[...]

"Say that these Japanese rulers institutionalized handicapping Americans by cutting off their hands if they were found with reading materials or writing implements, so that before long—without a written language, without a written history, without access to education—Americans were as ignorant as the Japs said they were. If, instead, these Americans refused to relinquish their writing and language and values and culture and history so easily, would that be 'tribalism' as you call it?"

"But—" Saw Lay went on with a fanatical gleam in his eyes, "in the better of these two

scenarios, these Americans would have the right to speak their own language and practice their own religions in private, you argue! Why should they insist on educating their children in English, and on practicing a form of government that coheres with their American cultural tenets?”

“That wasn’t going to be my argument! You’ve conveniently chosen an example of a group not bound together by racial sameness! Not to mention the fact that the Burmans made slaves of the Karens hundreds of—if not a thousand—years ago.”

“And so what? Is it time for the Karen to accept their lot—like the American Indians?”  
(97-98)

The above dialogue is a mess of competing ideals. The union considered by Benny is unsatisfactory to Saw Lay, who seems to be more in favor of Karen rebellion against the Bamar/Burmese nationalists, who he does not trust to stay true to their ideals of unity after the British have been overthrown.

In response to Benny accusing him of tribalism—of advocating more or less for Karen nationalism—Saw Lay brings up the hypothetical case of America being “overrun by Japs,” and asks if Americans were to rebel against their oppressors, would that then be “tribalism”? The hypothetical situation presented by Saw Lay clearly grafts the Bamar onto the Japanese and the Karen onto the Americans. Interestingly, Saw Lay’s imaginings of a dystopic America wherein Japanese overlords force Americans to assimilate into Japanese language, culture, and values, as well as a belief in Japanese superiority and American inferiority, erases the WWII-era xenophobia and anti-Japanese sentiment that actually took place in the U.S. after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor—which saw the internment of thousands of Japanese Americans in camps across the West Coast. Saw Lay appears to see America in two contradictory dimensions; he acknowledges the indigenous genocide by white settlers upon which America’s “perfect union” was built—which relays a “negative” image of the U.S.—but he also seems to, like Benny, utilize America favorably in a metaphorical manner to bolster his own defense of Karen nationalism.

But, Saw Lay's metaphorical use of a victimized America as the victimized Karen nation in fact reinforces the actual fears of white American nationalism and "tribalism," which is what caused a reversal of the future Saw Lay is describing. While there is no reality in which the U.S. was "overrun" by the Japanese, there was a reality in which the U.S. feared this outcome, and in turn profiled Japanese Americans, interning them en masse. By appealing to this idea of America via metaphor to defend Karen nationalism, Saw Lay is thus defending white American nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. However, Benny seems to pick up on the illegitimacy of Saw Lay's hypothetical situation, stating "[y]ou've conveniently chosen an example of a group not bound together by racial sameness!" He reminds Saw Lay of the U.S.'s massive degree of racial and ethnic heterogeneity, which, of course, is a result of its establishment through settler colonialism and enslaved black labor. Though, Benny also seems to contrast the "Burma" problem with the "America" problem by asserting that the Karens have been enslaved by the Bamar for hundreds of years, again equating Bamar-ness to white-ness, but additionally implying that the genocide and enslavement of indigenous and black peoples respectively in the U.S. are not institutions that are also hundreds of years old. While neither Saw Lay nor Benny mention blackness, anti-blackness, or the transatlantic slave trade that has occurred alongside—*constitutively* with—European colonialism, their absence becomes loud through Saw Lay and Benny's disagreements and distorting usage of parallels.

Saw Lay then counters Benny's point by again comparing the Karen not to Americans writ large, but the indigenous peoples of North America—"[i]s it time for the Karen to accept their lot—like the American Indians?" In doing this, he makes a bizarre recourse back to colonialism, specifically British colonialism, in a positive light—"[i]t's the history of the world, one group invading another's territory, swallowing them up. But we're still here! And you're

conveniently forgetting that our problems were largely resolved for a century under the British.” He continues, saying that “[t]his is a critical juncture! When, for all intents and purposes, we won the war for the British in Burma, and thereby aided the Allies’ overall effort in the Pacific—and therefore have a right to expect something in turn” (98). He then corrects Benny’s implication that the Karen are racially homogeneous, stating that there are “Black Karens, White Karens, Red Karens,” and “Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, animist” Karens, all of whom share a vision of self-determination. “You,” he states in reference to Benny, “are Karen and racially different from me” (98). Here, Saw Lay acknowledges that Benny’s Sephardic Jewish identity is part of an overarching Karen identity. But, as the preceding quotations show, after comparing the Karen to indigenous peoples in a U.S. context, Saw Lay favors the Karen alliance with the white British colonizers that helped the Allies “win” the war.

Saw Lay’s stance thus overlooks how white European colonialism—specifically settler colonialism (which is admittedly different from the colonization of Burma, India, and other countries once part of the British empire)—is *also* the cause of indigenous genocide in the U.S. Moreover, despite Saw Lay’s diagnosis that one group invading the other’s territory is simply the “history of the world,” not all histories are the same; Burma/Myanmar, unlike the U.S., is notably *not* a settler state, and the Bamar, though clearly oppressive and subjugating of the Karen and other peoples indigenous to the region, are technically also “indigenous” to the region. The concept of “indigeneity” in Southeast Asia specifically is a very contested concept that cannot be collapsed into the multitudes of ways in which indigeneity is studied in a U.S., or even a broader North American context; as Burma studies scholars have noted, the prizing of indigeneity—specifically the rightfully indigenous, native status many Bamar/Burmese

nationalists claimed to expel British influence—have especially had a key role in laying down the foundations for ethno-nationalist military rule in Burma/Myanmar.<sup>72</sup>

The confusions *Miss Burma* presents via the adamant usage of parallel and metaphor boil over in the novel, finally, when Benny and Saw Lay send a delegation of Karens on a “goodwill mission” to London in order to “plead the Karen case” (112). In London, Saw Lay does “what he could to play into British sympathies,” thanking Prime Minister Atlee’s ministers for delivering the Karen from the Japanese occupation of Burma, reminding them of how the Karen, who have long been loyal to the British crown, need “an autonomous state that he hoped might exist within the British Commonwealth even if Burma itself gained independence from it” (112). In response, one of Atlee’s ministers responds, grateful that the Karen’s alliance with the British had also aided Aung San’s eventual re-alliance with the British against Japanese forces. He states: “[w]e’re terribly grateful for what you have done [...] But I can’t imagine how our officers thought they had the right to promise you statehood in exchange for your service. They overstepped. Yes, they overstepped. Very unfortunate” (112). Regarded as a “betrayal” by the novel, the British government’s response to Saw Lay deflates the idea of them as liberators. It becomes painfully clear in the novel that the British only allied with the Karen to strengthen their front against the Bamar/Burmese nationalists’ anti-colonial resistance and to also eventually defeat the Japanese; they had never intended to give the Karens any real autonomous position of power in the state building process post-independence.

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<sup>72</sup> See Ian G. Baird, “Indigeneity in Asia: an emerging but contested concept” (2016); “Introduction: Indigeneity in ‘Southeast Asia’: Challenging identities and geographies” (2019). See also Michael R. Dunford, “Indigeneity, ethnopolitics, and taingyintha: Myanmar and the global Indigenous Peoples’ movement” (2019); Jonathan Liljeblad, “Indigenous Identity, Human Rights and the Environment in Myanmar: Local Engagement with Global Rights Discourses” and Micah F. Morton, “The Rising Politics of Indigeneity in Southeast Asia” (2017). However, one should note that the presence of refugees from Burma/Myanmar who are members of the country’s indigenous groups pose huge complications for studies of Asianness and indigeneity in an Asian American context. In what is perhaps an astonishing nexus of all these complications, Charmaine Craig herself played a Native woman in the Disney film *White Fang*, and she was also, alongside Naomi Campbell and others, a model for Disney’s *Pocahontas*.

The event of the British's betrayal of the Karen's seems to echo the words of Khin's mother at the end of the Karen prayer song discussed earlier. Khin asks her mother of the foreign white saviors that would come to the Karen's rescue—"[a]nd how did the foreigners come, Mama?" The novel states: "[b]y sea! [...] yet Mama sang it like a lament" (19). *Miss Burma's* initial introduction of Burma's white colonizers as the Karen's "Messiah" and instances of confusing parallels drawn between the ethnic conflicts within Burma/Myanmar and the homogenized struggles and oppressions of Jewish peoples, Black peoples in the U.S., indigenous peoples of the U.S., and, most strangely, hypothetical "Americans" being invaded by the Japanese, is overturned by its own piercing depiction of a reality. Far from being "saved" by a white messiah, the Karen are manipulated by Burma's white colonial power, who, just as the essay from Dickens Jr. stated, ultimately see them only as the "little Karen" who remain unknown and irrelevant in the colonizing nation, but whose loyalty was of great convenience to their imperialist project. By reading Burmese-ness as parallel in *Miss Burma*, one is also able to *critique* the insufficiency of Burmese-ness as parallel. Such a critique drawn from a reading for forms of Burmese-ness in the novel is useful in its orientation with *and* against Craig's text.

Burmese-ness as problem and Burmese-ness as parallel lay a grounds for a Burmese American criticism and critique pertinent not only to Asian American studies, but Burma studies as well—particularly with respect to the latter's increasing commodifications of blackness and indigeneity in U.S. contexts. However, these forms do not work without their relationality to the final form of Burmese-ness discussed in this chapter. Reading Burmese-ness as problem and Burmese-ness as parallel primes one for a reading of Burmese-ness as pretense, which emerges in the novel primarily through Louisa's characterization as "Miss Burma."

#### **IV. Pretense**

Circling back to the scenes that opened this chapter, one finds that the “Burma problem” named in the titular chapter that Benny seeks to address becomes gendered; it becomes, in the also titular chapter, the “Miss Burma Problem.” While the events in the aforementioned section take place during the anticolonial and early postcolonial period, Louisa’s emergence as a beauty queen occurs in the 1950s, well into Cold War-era Burma. Some time after Louisa’s “success” in the child pageant, Khin registers Louisa for the 1956 Miss Karen State pageant. The novel describes how Benny is troubled by this, but knows that he cannot say anything to his wife; to broach the subject of his apprehensions with her would be to claim “responsibility for what he privately came to refer to as the Miss Burma *problem*” (214). He imagines his wife saying in response: “But I thought this is what you *wanted* [...] A subject for your writing—what did you call it? An angle? A platform” (214).

Despite how the scene analyzed at the beginning of this chapter describes Louisa’s “naturalness,” implying a certain effortlessness that underscores her body itself as a form of authentic Burmese-ness, one finds that her naturalness is painstakingly crafted and cultivated. Khin grows increasingly invested in Louisa’s winning of the ultimate title—Miss Burma—in addition to the “potential financial and political rewards, her own self-worth might be salvaged by means of it” (214). She takes to furiously haranguing her daughter about her appearance (“pull your stomach in whenever you think of it”; “you could do some toning exercises”; “you see the women in the magazines, how each of them stands without slouching, as though she’s wearing a beautiful necklace she wants everyone to see...”; “your calves are too big—that’s unavoidable—but if you stand just so it will be less evident”; “pinch the tip of your nose for ten minutes a day—your father’s is so big”) (214-215). On the day of the Miss Karen State pageant, Louisa is up early, and has had her hair and makeup done:

There was nothing garish about that makeup, [Benny] saw as soon as he sat across from his daughter. On the contrary, the artistry typical of so much of Khin's sewing and gardening—the delicacy, the naturalness—had been brought to bear on the girl's lovely face, so that his next impression, when Louisa smiled sympathetically at him over the light morning meal of coffee and fruit she'd been permitted, was that somehow Khin had managed to clarify rather than muddy what was already there: the imprint of authenticity, of decency, and also of...what? As Louisa continued to take him in, he became aware of being read by her intelligence, of being *assessed*...And there was something smoldering beneath the surface of her astute gaze, something that told him that she, too, was acquainted with her inner demons. What she had survived (whatever she had survived, for Benny still didn't really know what had happened to his children during their years apart)—what she had suffered and overcome—had made its mark and dignified her beauty, made it extraordinary. (218-219)

In the above passage, we are thrust into the construction of the natural, of authenticity. As Benny notes, his wife's artistry with fashion and cosmetics constructs Louisa's authenticity—"Khin had managed to clarify rather than muddy what was already there." In a contradictory manner typical of many Burmese American literary works, the novel expresses how authenticity is constructed as that which has always been there, that which has always been *unconstructed*. As a beauty queen, Louisa exhibits a purity that seems unmanufactured and non-commodifiable, even though it is exactly all of those things. Such manufacture has been painful: a series of afflictions and constrictions committed by her mother that have produced her body as a text to be read for authenticity value and the yielding of "potential financial and political rewards." And yet, Benny notes that what—*who*—has been produced also possesses the ability to read the gaze desiring authenticity *back*. The novel states that it is her *intelligence* that is reading her father; the future Miss Burma, who *is* the knowledge of authenticity, of authentic Karen-ness and an overarching authentic Burmese-ness, is *reading* him: "[a]s Louisa continued to take him in, he became aware of being read by her intelligence, of being *assessed*..."

In being authenticity made manifest, such authenticity also points to its own painful construction—"there was something smoldering beneath the surface of her astute gaze,

something that told him that she, too, was acquainted with her inner demons” (219). Louisa, alongside her mother and siblings, survived WWII without their father (due to his time away and imprisonment), running from both the Japanese and Bamar. “What she had survived,” the novel states, “what she had suffered and overcome—had made its mark and dignified her beauty, made it extraordinary” (219). Though this recognition sounds inspiring, it is, upon closer examination, quite harrowing. In being produced as a text, the body brings into relief the pressures of its own authentic ethnic representation. And yet, as the body brings these pressures into painful relief, it is able to read back the gaze that produces it—a dynamic realized in further effect at the scene of the Miss Burma pageant, along with the political discussions that have preceded it.

When Louisa stands center stage in front of thousands at Aung San stadium, giving the crowd her “naturalness,” so they “might see a simpler, more natural life, one unspotted by the shadows of divisiveness,” the novel depicts Benny avoiding looking at his daughter, and in his avoidant glances he spots someone “one row up and across the narrow aisle” (228). “There was the same nest of hair,” the novel states, “the same perspiring pink skin, the same glasses, hiding the same intent, guardedly embarrassed gaze—a gaze now directed, it seemed in profile, past the poor girl in question, toward the shadows in which Louisa stood futilely trying to hide her light” (228). The disgusting, perspiring, pink-fleshed man looking at, and beyond, Louisa, is Hatchet. In the chapter, “The Burma Problem,” which precedes the previously discussed moment, Benny meets with Hatchet and his younger American friend at the Orient Club thinking they can give him advice on how to publish his piece on Burma’s strife; when Benny asks them what brings them to Burma, the younger American replies that they are “Bangkok based” and work for a company called “Sea Supply.” Later in the chapter, Benny learns the meaning of the “falling domino” gestured to by the younger American. The term had been used in a speech by the U.S.

President Eisenhower last month—“[y]ou have a row of dominoes set up [...] you know over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go on over very quickly” (190). Of course, he is speaking about the spread of communism; if one country in Southeast Asia aligned itself with the Communist Bloc, all of Southeast Asia would soon do the same (190). In a later meeting with the American Ambassador Sebald at a casual reception, Benny emphasizes the need for good medicine in the country. Sebald can not “be bothered to dignify Benny’s attempts at conversation with even the briefest look of interest” and instead informs him that what he is interested in is the resources in Burma—“[c]an you *imagine* the benefits through trade? It all depends on reinforcing internal security” (191). Afterwards, Benny meets with Hatchet again, who tells him about the U.S.’s anxieties over a group of Chinese who have based themselves inside Burma’s borders, and how the U.S. has been trying in recent years to stage attacks on these Chinese Communists from Burma—an effort Hatchet had tried to assist.

Hatchet’s job had been to coordinate the transfer of American arms from Okinawa to the Americans’ airstrip in Shan State, under the radar of Prime Minister Nu’s government. Benny learns from Hatchet that Nu does not want to give China the impression that he is in any way supportive—“he has to toe the neutralist line between the West and the Communist Block...And also under the radar of most of our own people. Ambassador Sebald. The State Department” (193). “Sea Supply” turns out to be a front for the CIA, and Hatchet is, as stated in the beginning of this chapter, a CIA operative. He and Benny have the following conversation concerning Benny’s desire to garner support for the Karen cause, and the cause of all those suffering in Burma:

“You need to watch what you say around Sebald,” he told Benny. “Ambassador Sebald has a certain perspective. It makes him suspicious of people like you.”

“Like *me*?”

“What you described to me that night we met—your editorials, your vision of a Burma

with different ethnic states, one of them being Burman, a federal system—that's the last thing someone like Sebald wants to see happening to this country."

"You do realize that my interest has always been in what *Burma's* peoples want to see happening to this country—"

"Don't be naive."

"Excuse me?" Benny was surprised by the emotion in his own voice—by the high, hollow inflection of hurt.

"Sebald's perspective," the American went on, "the State Department's perspective, is that the Burmese government is inherently anticommunist. That it enjoys broad popular support among its citizens and therefore deserves our support and understanding."

"I see." What had Benny expected of the United States? What, really, had he expected? After all the hopeful, stupid editorials he'd dispatched to their papers with no response....His opinion didn't matter, because Burma's peoples didn't matter. Burma mattered only so far as it posed a problem for the countries that *did* matter: America, China, Russia.

But Young wasn't finished. "And because Sebald equates the local opposition groups with a threat of communism—"

"That's insanity—" (194)

In this devastating conversation, Benny learns that a Burma governed under a federal system is the "last thing" Ambassador Sebald, and by representation the U.S. government, would want to see. He finds that his "opinion" is immaterial to the Americans, who are only interested in containing the spread of communism and are thus eyeing the armed rebel Karen faction, along with other minority opposition groups, as also carrying communist threat. Burma only matters to the U.S., whose state endeavors are never "altruistic" in their imperialism, insofar as it poses a problem for "the countries that *did* matter." Interestingly, Larkin's review describes this plotline as "discomfited C.I.A. agents struggling to pull the right strings in their mandate to prevent Southeast Asia from falling to Communist forces," glossing over Benny's realization that Burma's peoples—all of Burma's peoples—are of suspect to the U.S. imperialist gaze, who is trying still to suss out leftist groups (of which the Karen are being counted a part) that would give them cause for concern. Among her praise for the novel "recalibrating" the forgotten history of the Karen, Larkin seems to leave out that the hovering presence of U.S. imperialism, and the threat of violence it carries, is a part of that history. As the novel states at the beginning of the

chapter, “The Miss Burma Problem”: Hatchet “could have been placed in the field precisely to assess the Karen’s threat to America’s and Burma’s interests and relations” (213). Miss Burma’s body is thus read by two gazes desiring knowledge of authentic Burmese-ness: it is read as the “image of unity and integration”—a “weapon,” as Benny describes, used under the government’s Burmanization processes to show the world that discrimination, racism, and ethnic conflict did not exist in the country (224)—and it is also read by the literal U.S. imperialist gaze—Hatchet’s—trying to situate itself further in Burma’s political discourses and turmoil according to the U.S. government’s own ends.

The authentic Burmese-ness that is extracted via Miss Burma’s body is not an authenticity valued by the Burmanizing government because it is synonymous with a “purity” of Bamar identity; it is an authenticity valued because of the “purity” of Louisa’s mixed-race and mixed-ethnic heritage, which demonstrates that the government can peacefully, seamlessly incorporate all of Burma’s various peoples into a utopic postcolonial future. While this obviously still works towards Bamar nationalist ends, it also goes *beyond* the supremacy of Bamar identity—it works towards the birth of the nation state. In addition, the authentic Burmese-ness that is extracted from Miss Burma’s body by the imperialist U.S. gaze is not one that seeks a mere expression of exotic Burmese “culture,” but, in the words of Sunny Xiang, is instead agitated by the Cold War Oriental as “prospective ally yet probable enemy,” an inscrutable figure whose racial inscrutability “requires us to understand cold war Asian self-representation as a problem of *intelligence*” (12)—as in the U.S. state’s gathering of information. And, as hinted by Benny’s earlier recognition of how Louisa’s intelligence has the power to *read back*, Hatchet is immensely unsettled by her corporeality: all that is in, of, and beyond it.

But, as I said in the very beginning, Miss Burma is the fiction within the fiction. One reads Louisa, as Miss Burma; as authentic, natural Burmese-ness; as her own form of Burmese-ness—Burmese-ness as pretense. As pretense, Burmese-ness is constituted by the struggle of always trying to perform an authentic version of itself. It assumes authenticity as a natural state of being while also emphasizing authenticity's painfully, visceral cultivation and construction—as Louisa's pageant preparations overseen by her mother show. In the chapter, "The Great Pretender," after she has been crowned Miss Burma, the novel states that with the crown on her head and the sash around her shoulder, it had begun: "her long engagement with pretense" (229). She wonders, aside from all the "image of unity" talk that had buzzed around her in the press, "who or what" was really to blame for her success in the pageant. She pretends that the following questions are not swarming in her mind—"[h]ow, really, could a *Jewish* Karen win, whose 'foreign' father was an enemy of the state and under house arrest?"; "[h]ow during this time of continued civil war, in a country bent on weakening 'the influence of outsiders' and denying anyone's difference?"; "[h]ow, unless Daddy *had* managed to fix the results, or unless her success had actually been part of some official plan to prove that if the minorities played by the rules, they, too, could be championed?" (229). Eventually, she begins a career as a film actress, and finds that acting—"the pretense of it"—relieves her "of the pretense of not pretending" (235). Louisa's naturalness, her authenticity, is a careful, methodical construction and one that has manifold commodities. As pretense, Burmese-ness is that which needs not pretend to be anything; it is not constructed, not "faked"—it is that which is natural, authentic. And the manufacture of that which has never been manufactured afflicts, constricts, and cuts one into pieces.

*Miss Burma*, in making visible these complexities, does not alone offer any easy “utility” for either Asian American studies or Burma studies. While it offers grounds for a critique of U.S. racism imperialism, it also seems to fold these opportunities back in on themselves. The novel thinks of Louisa’s engagement with pretense, again, by paralleling it with blackness; in the chapter, “The Great Pretender,” she expresses her love for the song of the same name sung by the Penguins and Johnny Mathis, thinking that “perhaps those American singers were famous not *in spite* of their minority status in their country, but because there was something acceptable and even reassuring about a minority playing the part of a happy clown” (234). Towards the end of the novel, Benny finds out more about Hatchet’s background—that his mother told him growing up that his father’s family had been “nice to their slaves” and that his father, during his childhood, abused a black boy who had been working under him. Hatchet also jadedly informs Benny that the U.S. will be supplying Ne Win’s military government with aircrafts, boats, and weaponry to fight its minority factions, so he can sustain his dictatorship and keep Burma isolated from communist influence.

Benny laments then how his political writing on the “Burma problem” will likely never see the light of day, and Hatchet offers him encouragement, to which Benny responds “[y]ou’re a decent fellow” (311). When Khin’s mother learns of their family’s arrangement to flee Ne Win’s Burma and resettle in the U.S., she thinks of how “to be Karen in Burma was bad enough, she said; she’d heard what Americans did to those who weren’t white” (332), which, again, collapses the practice of parallel the novel has been employing by considering a future in which Louisa’s family are citizens of the U.S. marginalized because of their non-whiteness. However, Khin’s worry of the threat of racism they might face, which always implies the larger structure of anti-black racism in the U.S., does not mention blackness—even though the novel has

metaphorized blackness to talk about Louisa's minority status in Burma/Myanmar and portrayed Hatchet, the American CIA descendant of slave owners, in a redemptive light.

For these reasons, I posit that reading for the three forms of Burmese-ness outlined in this chapter—problem, parallel, and pretense—contribute to a Burmese American criticism and critique that can work with *and* against the novel. Such critique and criticism does not seek to see the novel inherently as a site of resistance knowledge, but works from the level of its shocking discomforts, which do, in their many contradictions, resist both the authoritarian standard of authentic Burmese-ness enforced by an ethno-nationalist Burmese/Myanmar gaze and a U.S. multicultural nationalist gaze. As such, formulating the genre of Burmese American critique and criticism can intervene in related discussions in both Asian American studies and Burma studies.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The (Nat)ure of the Body in Burmese American Poetics

With regards to her 2020 poetry collection, *Storage Unit for the Spirit House*, Maw Shein Win expresses that she wanted her writing “to be about containment, but also release” (Costello 2020)<sup>73</sup>. In an interview with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the Californian poet, musician, and teacher describes how her writing process began with meditations on the storage business, a booming industry in the U.S. that she attributes to the “combination of people losing their homes and others unwilling to let go of their personal belongings.”<sup>74</sup> Beyond this line of thinking, Win also mused on the container and its act of “holding” as a type of cultural form, constituting everything from different types of architecture—such as convention centers, prison cells, and towers—to smaller objects—such as vases, jars, and bottles—all of which appear in the collection, making it a curio box of sorts.

Perhaps the most arresting form of container the poems experiment with is the body, which Win describes as “a container of pain” but also the “release of pain” (Costello 2020). Within, alongside, and synonymous with the collection’s many containers are body parts. Win highlights the soft brain matter stored inside the jar. The *bone* of “bone china.” The rib cage filled with an unnamed liquid. However, instead of wholly perceiving the body-as-container as an oppressive figuration—which decades of feminist critique has sought to overturn—*Storage Unit* re-theorizes containment and self-storage while not shying away from the violently gendered and racialized histories of these ideas.

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<sup>73</sup> The interview in which this quote appears was conducted by Elizabeth Costello in 2020. See this link for full interview: <https://elizabethscostello.com/the-otherworlds-of-maw-shein-win/>

<sup>74</sup> See this link for full interview: <https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/books/the-spiritual-tradition-of-storage-vessels-with-poet-maw-shein-win>

The retheorization that emerges from Win's poetry is invaluable to my dissertation, which has thus far leaned more towards the former approach when speaking to the notion of the body, made equivalent especially to text, and vice versa. Overall, the project of locating Burmese American literature within a larger Asian American canon requires problematizing the body-as-container. With respect to how I have examined it up until this point, the form of container in question here is, really, the category—particularly the category of ethnic identity. A category of ethnic identity, created and made legible through an ethnic title—"Bamar," "Karen," "Kachin," "Chinese," "Indian," "Burmese," "Burmese American," "Karen American," "Burmese Chinese American," "Burmese Indian American," etcetera—must function to accurately signify its contents, i.e. the ethnic group named by and held within that title. Under a nationalistic gaze that employs authoritarian methods of reading for ethnic authenticity value, ethnicity and ethnic identity only exists in the form of a rigid category, and therefore the body *is* a container, *is* a category, *is* ethnic identity. As I have demonstrated throughout, Burmese American literature can bring into relief the pressures of authentic ethnic representation under the authoritarian gazes of dual nationalistic structures: the ethnonationalism of the Burmese/Myanmar military regime and U.S. multicultural nationalism.

From the period of the first major coup in Burma/Myanmar's history and onwards, the Burmese military regime has sought to maintain ethnic Bamar dominance through officiating language that discursively produces the body as a vessel of ethnic truth or experience. Per the concept of *lu-myo*—the logic that animates the country's national censuses, registration cards, and other forms of state documentation recording ethnic groups and identities—bodies are biological territories containing a truth of ethnic identity. The truth of ethnic identity is read on and through the body in a process of authentication; the authoritarian gaze of the

Burmese/Myanmar state reads the body's surfaces as un-mediatedly signifying evidence of a preceding internal condition, which verifies (or fails to verify) a purported ethnic identity. To properly authenticate ethnicity, the body itself must be authenticated as one would authenticate a document, or rather, the body *is* a document under the gaze of the state—which results in the authentic/authoritarian slippage that Burmese American literature elucidates and critiques.

The body *is* a container, *is* a category, *is* ethnic identity, *is* a document. Understanding this schema is key to the task of situating “underrepresented” Burmese American literature within larger frameworks of Asian American canonicity and literary study, a field that, as I have emphasized throughout, has long been incorporated into the multicultural nationalism of the American university. To uncritically fill the gap in a shallow representation model that sees the study of Asian American literature merely as a corrective process of slotting in “missing” ethnic experiences—to disregard the nuances of how ethnicity functions in a Burmese/Myanmar and Burmese/Myanmar diasporic context—risks replicating the same essentialist, authoritarian logics used by the military regime. For as one has seen, correctivity and accuracy are concepts that have literally been utilized by the regime to enforce the maintenance of ethnic authenticity and as justifications for ethnic cleansing, genocide, and other atrocities committed against minorities and Burmese/Myanmar society in general. The academic institution's production of body-texts, as in, figurations in which works of Asian American literature become interchangeable with Asian American bodies as containers of ethnic experience, are an intersecting point of turmoil for the two previously-discussed kinds of nationalism. And yet, the poetics of Burmese American/diasporic Burmese writers such as Win tap alternative forms of containment in a manner that can be read as working from within and beyond this combined critical storm.

Organized into six sections total, *Storage Unit* includes many poems with the same title; for instance, in the first section, there are three poems titled “Storage Unit 202.” Many poems are also numbered, such as “Water Space (one),” “Water Space (two),” and “Water Space (three).” Other poems, such as those titled “Sky Space” and “Vase” also exhibit this type of organization, as do the titular “Spirit House” poems, which are dispersed across all six sections. These poems in particular reference a tradition used in reverence of the *nat*, an umbrella term for a broad range of deities in indigenous Burmese spiritualities or “folk” religion. Tamara Ho states that the term “nat” signifies “regional and local animistic beliefs predating Buddhist Burma,” and cites American anthropologist Melford E. Spiro when describing how these deities are “more powerful than man. [They] can affect him either for good or for evil” (Ho 277; Spiro 92).

Generally, nats can be distinguished as belonging to three different classes: 1) nature or ancestor spirits—these nats are commonly revered as the sovereign spirits of trees, rivers, and various parts of the natural world; however, these types of nats can also hold command of other types of structures, such as a family home 2) devas – these nats are celestial beings in Buddhism characterized by god-like abilities and extremely long life-spans in relation to humans 3) “nat sein” – the term for this kind of nat can literally be translated to “green nat,” but more accurately refers to nats who died a “violent or unexpected death” as humans and became nats as a result (Bamford 5). A “spirit house,” also known by the Burmese term *hpayar hsin*, is a miniature structure erected to house a particular nat and also a site where worshippers can place offerings. Win’s collection opens with a quote from Qiao Dai, a PhD student in the Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, explaining the tradition in more detail:

Because *nats* hold sovereign power in particular geographical locations, small shrines called spirit houses are often placed in a village or even inside or near a worshipper’s

house where offerings can be made to the local *nat*. As the doorkeepers, guardians and protectors of a home or locale, *nats* are powerful entities. Failure to honor them properly—through offerings and appropriate behavior—can bring illness, injury or disaster on family or community members. (16)

Folklorist Maung Htin Aung likens the power of nats to feudal “overlordship” since each nat has dominion over a specific group of people, certain objects, or a bounded locality. He states “This overlordship can be ‘both territorial and personal’” (34). The practices of nat worship also include the tradition of nat mediumship: the act of channeling nats to temporarily take up residence in, or possess, one’s own body. The role of those who perform nat mediumship in Burma/Myanmar, known as *nat kadaw* or spirit mediums, has historically been held by gay men, women, both cis and trans, and genderfluid individuals—giving the practice a distinctly queer association.

Drawing from various traditions of nat “containment,” this chapter explores how Burmese American poetics offer an alternative theory of the body-as-text-as-container. Reading select poems by Win and Myint’s post-apocalyptic lyrical novel, *The End of Peril, the End of Enmity, the End of Strife, a Haven* (2018), I end my inauthentication process by taking a direction slightly divergent from the one in which I have been traveling. Here, I analyze how Burmese American poetics utilize the nat as a queer figure to rethink the many gendered binaries (mind/body, form/content, outside/inside, etc.) characterizing the authoritarian maintenance of the body as a receptacle containing ethnic truth, authentic scripts of identity. While the texts emphasize the violences undergirding these binaries, valuing the body specifically as a container is crucial to this rethinking and the nat’s relevance to larger studies of Asian American poetics and objecthood. By pursuing this line of thought, I dwell more creatively on authenticity in relation to the literariness of Burmese-ness, Burmese American literature, and the literary object that is Burmese American identity as something that does not entirely warrant discarding.

## The Dilemma of the Body-as-Container

my next door prison  
neighbor, we can't see  
ourselves, garland of posies

slung through iron bars, nat  
swinging from old rope

can sense us holding our cups  
cocks, crosses  
teardrop tattoo on cheek

eyelash on pillow, we touch  
ourselves, our cells

Win, "Spirit House (two)" (37)

The speaker of this poem presents fragmented glimpses and pauses in a state of imprisonment. There is a prisoner in the cell next to them, and regarding the situation, the speaker states "we can't see ourselves." This can be taken in two ways: one, each prisoner cannot see themselves, as in the narrator cannot see themselves and the prisoner cannot see themselves and two, the prisoners cannot see each other. There is a garland of posies slung through the bars of the cells, and a *nat* who springs from old rope senses the two prisoners "holding our cups / cocks, crosses." The last two lines of the poem invoke a masturbatory act, or, at the very least an act of self-touching that emphasizes the previous stanza's use of the term "cocks," a slang in English that has been culturally made synonymous with male genitalia. The prisoners hold their "cocks" while also holding their crosses—perhaps a reference to a rosary or perhaps not. The *nat* in the poem is the sensory conduit through which touch is recognized. "Touching ourselves" seems to refer to an act of self-touching, but it can also refer to touching each other. And as the two prisoners touch themselves and each other, they also touch their "cells," another instance of double meaning. For they can be touching the inner walls of their cells, the (external) structures that contain them, but they can also be touching their cells—in a biological sense, with cells of

course referring to the (internal) basic membrane-bound units that constitute life. The nat is a figure by which signifiers of inside and outside become confused, here underscored by an act of potentially queer intimacy.

To revisit Win's own musings about containment: the body is a container of pain. Such a notion might bring to mind a wholly negative view of the body for which Theravada Buddhism is often stereotyped—the idea that the body is a “problem” that must be transcended (Harris 1). But the body is also the release of pain, which might initially reflect another view of the body present in Theravada Buddhist: the liberated body that can be “purified” through meditation and mindful practice (1). The image of the body in Theravada Buddhism, of which there are plural, is certainly important to my analysis of these texts, since they are rather explicit in their religious influence. I will return to Buddhist themes at the end of this chapter, but for now, I wish to dwell on Win's specific meditations on the body-as-container in the context of her poetry. The body is a container of pain but also the release of pain, therein the body itself becomes synonymous with the amorphous idea of release. The body doesn't release, the body *is* release. Containment, typically thought to be the opposite of release, is here synonymous with it.

Though the nat figure senses acts carried out within a prison cell, the poem disarticulates the body-as-container from the body-as-prison—the structure that entraps the mind, which must transcend its entrapment to realize full subjecthood. If the body *is* what it contains, and it *is* release, then it must also *contain* that release. But containment neither inhibits nor occurs prior to release; rather, release and containment simultaneously formulate each other. By this logic, release is also a type of containment. Win's poetics therefore make the container a critical structure that must be reevaluated with respect to studies of the body.

Troubling the body as a rigid and unchanging vessel determined by, but also detaining, a preceding essence has been fundamental to intersecting queer and feminist-inflected inquiries into science and the question of the biological, from which groundbreaking contestations to the gendered body's naturalness emerged in the 1990s. Constituting an intellectual approach that Rachel C. Lee terms the "femiqueer," such theories challenged the idea of the body as a passive, inert, nonhistorical, and naturalistic thing of "brute givenness" that interferes with the operations of the mind (which, as gestured to earlier, is also a perception present in many interpretations of Theravada Buddhism). In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz famously probed Cartesian mind/body dualisms coding the body as feminine, thus associating it with unreason; she explains how philosophy established itself as a form of knowing through a disavowal of the feminized body and the corresponding elevation of the masculinized mind as a disembodied term (7). Citing Plato, she describes how the mind has been theorized since the time of antiquity as a non-corporeal being trapped within the body as dungeon<sup>75</sup> and that reason must overcome this entrapment, thereby ruling over the body. Through this comes the (feminine) body's association with nature, which also figures as an entity of brute givenness or "fact" governed and evidenced by physical laws and ontological exigencies. Just as the mind and consciousness must be evacuated from the body, so must it be from nature.

Grosz outlines how Descartes linked mind/body opposition to the foundations of knowledge itself, which placed the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority over and above nature, including the nature and materiality of the body. As much of contemporary feminist and queer discourses have traversed, such ideas have been historically used in biologically essentialist definitions of gender, based largely around reproductivity. Grosz's work—along with

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<sup>75</sup> Grosz states that Plato claims that the word "body" was introduced by Orphic priests who believed that man was a noncorporeal, spiritual being trapped within the body as a dungeon. Regard also Chora in Plato's *Timaeus*, who demonstrates that maternity is regarded as mere housing, receptacle rather than co-producer.

that of Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, the later writings of Eve K. Sedgwick, and others—is widely considered to mark the beginnings of the materialist turn in gender and sexuality studies. In the following decades, the direction of this line of inquiry has been expanded by theorists like Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, Eva Hayward, Stacy Alaimo and their more ecologically-minded studies, which have sought to displace the idea of nature, the material, biological, and corporeal from essentialism and fixity<sup>76</sup>. I am aware that much of this turn has criticized the linguistic turn and deconstruction itself, a tradition to which I am obviously partial. However, I still believe it is necessary to acknowledge this work to understand the manner in which the “new” materialist turn has taken shape in Asian American studies and tangential fields.

Concurrently, theorists in Asian/American studies, many of them literary or linguistic scholars, such as Lee, Mel Y. Chen, Monica Chiu, and Anne Anlin Cheng, have developed these conversations on the body and its matterings with respect to both the study of Asian American literature and racial being, in this case displacing the body from biological essentialisms of not only gender but also race and ethnicity. Recounting this critical history of oppressive dualism inflected by the mind/body split spurs one to zero in on the tension that defines it: a persisting inside/outside opposition. What is perceived as internal essence is valued above what is perceived as an external surface or covering; this is the dilemma of containment, that of the container and contained. To return to the idea of bodies being produced as texts containing authentic ethnic knowledge—i.e. a discursive product of the multicultural liberalism in which Asian American literary studies has long been enveloped—“people of color” (not to be confused with minoritarian or ethnic literature, but, quite literally *people* of color) has in itself become a

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<sup>76</sup>Of course, while I recognize Grosz’s massive contributions to feminist studies of the body and the materialist turn, which has also influenced groundbreaking scholarship of queer and trans theorists, one must acknowledge the continued transphobia of Grosz’s work, despite the sentiment going directly against her own theoretical framings.

literary category and genre<sup>77</sup>. Asian American literary works, synonymized with Asian American bodies, are fundamentally containers: holding a script of ethnic experience that must be read and apprehended to further the project of multicultural nationalism. As scholars like Mel Y. Chen convey, the textual or linguistic is, in actuality, quite material, which is why my project incorporates into its deconstructive approach many theories considered to belong to the materialist or “new” materialist turn, despite how some of its most prolific theorists have been interpreted as going “against,”<sup>78</sup> ideas of the linguistic or textual. As we have seen, different structures of power make reading a material, bodily matter.

Within the schematic of the body-(as-text)-as-container, wherein the body is read as a document or text would be, I view the inside/outside opposition as aligning with content/form. New formalist theorists of the 2000s such as Ellen Rooney, Marjorie Levinson, and Susan J. Wolfson have meditated on the form/content opposition amidst the rise of New Historicism, with which allegedly came the institutional phenomena of literary works being relegated to statuses as archival records of historical, ethnographic, and anthropological study. Asian American literary studies, and other fields of ethnic literature, became folded into institutional pushes to

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<sup>77</sup>Here I am indebted to the black feminist work of Sylvia Wynter, which teaches us that “race” is really code-word for “genre” (22). Wynter goes on to explain that when she speaks at a feminist academic gathering and says that “gender” is a function of “genre,” “they don’t want to hear that.” She then points to the “tremendous perks” that feminism has given to some women of color, and beyond this, how scholars of color who do “radical” work on race actually have categorically assimilated into the institution. Much of this is contingent on the fact that a tokenized and flattened conception of “people of color” within paradigms of white supremacy is, in many cases, a genre of upward mobility. However, such upward mobility is facilitated by the expectation that those who do this always “current,” homogeneously “radical” work on race are required to overturn a one-dimensional past of straight, dead, and white achievement, filling in gaps of underrepresentation. Race work is only ever “radical” (in the flattest sense) if it is to be of worth to appropriative systems of liberal capitalism and multicultural nationalism seeking to assign minoritarian cultural production with “resistance” knowledges. This is premised on the ahistorical idea that scholars of color who have made groundbreaking contributions to studies of race across disciplines and fields do not actually belong to a field or genre of study. Or rather, the field (genre) is “people of color” and not, say, Asian American literature or Asian American literary studies, black literature or black literary studies, etc. This understanding obscures the fact that such fields have long histories of debate, disagreement, and critical trends that have evolved concurrently with overarching currents in the humanities as a whole.

<sup>78</sup> As Chen states in *Animacies* (2012), “Words more than signify; they affect and effect. Whether read or heard, they complexly pulse through bodies...” (54). To the point of “going against” the linguistic turn, I am here referring primarily to Karen Barad’s critique of the linguistic turn in “Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter” (2003).

“diversify” the canon and combat the purported ahistorical nature of previous traditions of literary analysis via these approaches. Certain efforts to recover or renew formalist reading practices declared the concern that, in the wake of New Historicism-as-code-for-cultural studies (particularly of “underrepresented” minoritarian experiences),<sup>79</sup> dominant reading practices had prioritized the extraction of content from literature at the expense of form or aesthetics. Granted, I would complicate this further per Dorothy Wang’s polemic, which argues that the “form” in form/content discussions with respect to Asian American literature had not historically registered as such in a broader culture of literary criticism. As Wang argues, “form” belongs to sophisticated aesthetic inquiry in a provenance unmarked but known to be white, whereas Asian American literature serves to provide authentic knowledge of “missing” ethnic experience (23). As I analyzed prior, many formalist critics in Asian American literary studies have reckoned with this issue for decades, and their reckonings serve as one of the bases for my theory of inauthentication in regards to reading Burmese American literature.

Vis-a-vis Wang, the form of form/content in studies of Asian American literature has often not been known as form. It is instead the transparent case holding and displaying its content—and in this internal space goes many simplified “ethnic” things: “experience,” “history,” “authenticity,” etc. All are considered the “real” things that *matter* in the study of Asian American literature, which must be known as epistemic objects and Asian American bodies themselves. The dynamic at play reflects the feminization of the body undergirding the body-as-container. Here, form is not form in an intellectual mode but instead another container aligned with the devalued body.

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<sup>79</sup>A harsh iteration of this diagnosis is poetry scholar Majorie Perloff’s opinion that “the governing paradigm for so-called literary study is now taken from anthropology and history” (654); with respect to the study of Asian American poetics, Dorothy Wang profoundly speaks back to Perloff’s take in *Thinking Its Presence* (2013).

My previous goal in theorizing inauthentication and Burmese-ness as form was to in part re-value the body's intrinsic connection to form, to impress the constructed nature of the body and thus ethnicity: a concept that, along with race, has been biologically and culturally essentialized via the body by various authoritarian structures—be it an ethno-nationalist military regime or a multiculturally nationalist academic institution. Doing so required the overturning of the body-as-container, but I have embarked in this chapter on the journey of re-considering this very concept through the nat figure that permeates Burmese American poetics.

### **Nat Containment in Resistance to Hegemonic Identity Formations**

In this section, I historicize the customs of nat worship in a reconsideration of the body-as-container that does not unanimously align it with violent histories of patriarchal and racist Eurocentric philosophies, returning to Win's poetry towards the end. This task is clearly a lofty one, but still, I must persist and ask: what if the body-as-container is actually *needed* in the anti-essentialist project of inauthenticating “underrepresented” Burmese American and diasporic Burmese literature? How does the body-as-container, as theorized via the nat figure, actually resist nationalistic, authoritarian dominations?

In Win's poem, the release is not one of pain but instead pleasure, specifically queer pleasure. Through its play with inside/outside distinctions, “Spirit House (two)” positions the figure of the nat with queer intimacy and spurs us to think of containers within containers within containers. The prison cell contains the speaker, and the speaker contains their cells: themselves microscopic containers. But then, that alone does not appear to be quite the dynamic that is occurring in the poem. For as the speaker and their neighbor touch themselves they touch their (biological) cells, a motion that directs inwards; but as they touch themselves they also touch their (prison) cells, a motion that directs outwards. And, simultaneously, as they touch

themselves they are also touching each other. In its experimentation with the body as container *and* contained, the poem showcases movements inside, outside, and across all at once. The touch occurring in this poem seems to register as sheer contradiction, troublingly so. But then again, to borrow from Karen Barad, “touching oneself, or being touched by oneself—the ambiguity/undecidability/indeterminacy may itself be the key to the trouble” (212). What appears as chaos is actually a structure, a grid of euphoria that the nat figure presides over.

Keeping in mind the broader scope of this chapter, the poem begs a deeper look into how traditions of revering nats also directly play with inside/outside distinctions in relation to the body and ethnic identity. The various acts of *containing* nats, whether in human-made structures or human bodies, reflect how nat worship and cosmology imbricate us in both organic and inorganic object-worlds. However, to better understand how this is linked to ethnicity in a diasporic context, one must engage how nat worship is syncretized with Theravada Buddhist practice. Both Win and Myint were raised as Buddhists in the Theravada tradition, and the influence of the religion and all its syncretisms is evident in the texts analyzed in this chapter. However, I attend so closely to the figure of the nat and the traditions of spiritual relation based around it in reading these texts not because I am disregarding the Buddhist influences present in them, but in fact because I value them enough not to orientalize them.

Though not all diasporic Burmese and Burmese American authors studied in this dissertation are Buddhist, I acknowledge Buddhism, whether through thematic usage or simple mentions in the storyline, is still a topic of interest in their writing. But to merely utilize an orientalist understanding of Buddhist “philosophy”—abstracted from how religion is intimately bound up in negotiations of ethnic and cultural identity—as a lens with which to read diasporic Burmese literature risks violent ahistoricism. And, at the same time, to subordinate the Buddhist

thematics at hand as solely illustrative of ethnic or cultural experiences runs one into exactly the type of essentialism this dissertation challenges. However, the manner in which Win and Myint utilize the figure of the nat is at once reflective of ethnic and cultural heterogeneity *and* also helps traverse deeply philosophical and abstract matters. Both sides of the “and” inform each other.

Tracing and valuing a genealogy of nat worship is important to analyzing its figurations in Burmese American literature, especially when put in conversation with larger Asian American discourses on Buddhism. American Buddhist writer and chaplain Chenxing Hang cites the late Aaron J. Lee of the online platform “Angry Asian American Buddhist” when articulating the “two Buddhisms” narrative that dominate the story of Buddhists in America: the Buddhism of white converts and the Buddhism of Asian immigrants. “We are told, for starters,” states Hang, “that ‘Western’/‘white’ Buddhists focus on meditation practice in keeping with their ‘rational’ and ‘modernist’ bent, whereas ‘Asian’/‘Asian American’ Buddhists prefer the ‘traditional’ and ‘devotional’ rituals of chanting and bowing” (10). Asian American Buddhists carry a “more supernatural bent” than white Buddhists, focusing their “energies into [...] spiritual beliefs instead of meditative practices,” though some Asian Buddhists are “Oriental monks” who have brought their so-called exotic teachings to the West (Lee, “Stereotypology of Asian American Buddhists”). The temples attended by Asian American Buddhists are seen less in terms of spreading the dhamma and more-so resemble “ethnic social clubs.” From this, it is not difficult to guess which sides of the white Buddhist/Asian American Buddhist dualism align with mind/body dualism, and thus one should avoid reproducing these destructive dualisms by not applying an abstracted “Buddhist” reading to these texts. Doing so would disregard how

Buddhism is, for better or worse, intrinsically tied to constructions of ethnicity and ethnic identity in many contexts.

Regarding Burmese/Myanmar culture in particular, one easy example of the syncretization between Buddhism and nat worship is that spirit houses or *hpayar hsin* are also the same type of structure used to house statues of the Buddha, and they are also sites of Buddhist offerings and reverence. That being said, a more thorough engagement with indigenous Burmese spiritual practice and Theravada Buddhism first requires an understanding of the role the religion has in defining Burmese/Myanmar identity and nationhood. To reiterate a point from my introduction: “ethnicity,” “race,” and “nationality” are concepts that have been uniquely collapsed together in the history of identity formation in Burma/Myanmar; to this series of identitarian referents, I would also add “religion.” As an institution, Theravada Buddhism is a force that permeates Burmese culture at every level of society, central to the formation of modern Bamar (Burman) ethnic identity and Bamar/Burmese nationalism, which, as I have thoroughly explored in previous chapters, has its modern origins in the anti-colonial resistance against the British in Burma.

Amid the rise of the first period of military rule in 1962, General Ne Win worked towards re-centralizing Theravada Buddhist, Bamar identity in the definition of larger Burmese nationhood to erase the legacy of British colonialism in the country, and the regimes that followed his have maintained these efforts of Burmanization<sup>80</sup>: forcing the assimilation of minorities into the majority ethnic culture. A pillar of these efforts is cultural assimilation through religious missions seeking to spread Buddhism to other ethnic groups (Walton 12; Brown 49). In this way, the military regime not only reinforces the dominant Bamar identity, but

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<sup>80</sup> Walton states that the “government is usually not explicit about its Burmanisation policies, describing them instead as “development efforts for border region national races” (11; Houtman 69).

it reinforces the specifically Buddhist cultural traditions of the Bamar. Walton states, “policies like this contrast the foreignness of non-Buddhists with the ‘pure’ Buddhist heritage” of Bamar individuals.

How exactly, then, do traditions of nat worship, syncretized with Buddhism in the country, figure in its complex religious and societal framework? In Burma/Myanmar, it is not uncommon to find nat imagery placed within the grounds of pagodas. As I mentioned early on, nats are conceptually a part of Burmese/Myanmar Buddhism. Furthermore, in Burmese/Myanmar Buddhism, “nats and humans are both a class of being engaged in the cycle of multiple rebirth” (Bamford 4). Additionally, while the country is overwhelmingly Buddhist, many people in Burma/Myanmar, across various religions and ethnicities, retain an ancient belief in the nats. Nats themselves can be of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. That being said, the seemingly universal relation nats have to the diverse communities of Burmese/Myanmar society does not mean that the traditions of nat worship are always institutionally privileged.

According to Ho, nat worship occupies a marginalized position as an “impure” indigenous or so-called folk belief that should not be elevated above Buddhism proper. Popular cultural depictions of nat worship present it as a lingering remnant of the nation’s past, symbolically associated with the local, rural, superstitious, traditional, corporeal, and feminine. All the while, Buddhism is linked with Burmese modernity and embodied as urban, educated, privileged, intellectual, and male (281), part of a dualism that can be seen as another mind/body variant. Not only this, but nat-centered festivities are stereotyped as encouraging public carnivalesque over-indulgence, depravity, and orgiastic pleasures of the flesh. Documentaries and other portrayals of nat festivals often show eager crowds attending the performances of nat kadaws, with supplicants offering goods that the particular nat they are channeling may enjoy:

flowers, food, alcohol, cigarettes, or hard cash; certain nats themselves have reputations for being shameless drunkards and gamblers.

The global headline-making actions of ultra right-wing, xenophobic and nationalist sects of Burmese Buddhist sangha in the past ten years have largely profiled their Islamophobic tirades against the Rohingya and Muslims in Burma/Myanmar in general, premised on a fear that Buddhism will be extinguished by Islamic extremism and Muslim “overpopulation.” Lesser-known are their efforts to purify Buddhism from participating in the “debaucheries” of lower nat-based reverence<sup>81</sup>. One might make the easy claims: nat worship perverts Burmese Buddhist practice because it is too dionysian, too excessive, too old-world, too witchy, too queer. However, I do not place the nat figure’s resistance to hegemonic forms of Burmese identity made synonymous with Bamar Buddhist identity in a recourse back to “traditional” pre-Buddhist indigenous beliefs over “modern” Buddhist knowledge. Such a route only reifies a senseless categorical divide and reinforces the siloing of nat worship into an imagined dying past. I place the nat figure’s resistance to hegemonic forms of Burmese identity construction by acknowledging how traditions of nat worship actively, presently structure institutions of Burmese Buddhism and vice versa. Moreover, traditions of nat containment—meaning how humans contain and are contained by nats—overturn certain exclusionary Buddhist nationalist norms through theorizing the body-as-container as an entity reflecting the heterogeneity, fluidity, and fragmentation of ethnicity in a Burmese/Myanmar context.

The ethnic diversity of nats is arguably best exemplified through the nat sein, the class of nat who were previously human and met violent, unnatural, or premature ends. It is widely said

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<sup>81</sup> The Taungbyone festival, held about nine miles north of Mandalay, has historically been the most popular of annual celebrations that commemorate nats in Myanmar. In 2019, it was the site of conflict between Buddhist nuns and devotees seeking the guidance of nat kadaws. The nuns bickered with the devotees, insisting that nat worship was a “base superstition” that stained “true” Buddhism. For more information, see this archived article from *The Economist*: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/11/14/monks-in-myanmar-have-a-new-target>

that there are 37 nats<sup>82</sup> that fall under this category. To some, they comprise a pantheon of sorts, and are believed to live on Mount Popa: a dormant volcano located in central Myanmar in the region of Mandalay, about 50 km (31 mi) southeast of Bagan (Pagan) in the Pegu Range. Each member of the 37 nats is a figure of legend who became a nat due to the unjust terms of their death. Many were killed either by royalty or other individuals in positions of authority. Of the 37, most belong to the royal houses of Burmese history, but the group also includes nats of ethnic Thai and Shan descent, in addition to other backgrounds. For instance, two of the most famous nats are Shwe Hpyin Naungdaw and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw: sons of Byatta, an Indian-Muslim senior commander in the Royal Army of King Anawrahta, who founded the Pagan Empire with his ascension to the throne<sup>83</sup> in 1044. Byatta is said to have fathered them with the flower-eating ogress Me Wunna, also known as Popa Medaw<sup>84</sup>. According to the commonly held narrative of their deaths, Shwe Hpyin Naungdaw and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw defied King Anawrahta by neglecting their duty to each contribute a brick to the construction of Taungbyone Pagoda, and were subsequently killed by the King. As nats, their worshippers avoid the consumption of pork in respect to their father's religion, transgressing Bamar Buddhist hegemony to elevate reverence of these particular nats. However, arguably the most transgressive quality of nat worship manifests in the task of channeling the nat sein, which is undertaken by nat kadaws.

Nat kadaws in Burma/Myanmar perform the roles of professional ritualists, shamans, and entertainers, translating between the realms of supernatural and human—typically for a fee. Ho

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<sup>82</sup> Sir Richard Carnac Temple famously published a book entitled "The Thirty-Seven Nats: A Phase of Spirit Worship Prevailing in Burma" in 1906, itself a translation of an earlier Burmese manuscript. Temple's book and its role in the historiography of the 37 nats has been disputed by Sally Bamford in "Counting to 37: Sir Richard Carnac Temple and the Thirty-Eighth Nat" (2019).

<sup>83</sup> Here I refer to the throne of the Pagan Kingdom, which lasted roughly from 849-1297.

<sup>84</sup> Popa Medaw (Burmese: ပုပ္ဖာမယ်တော်; lit. 'Queen-Mother of Popa *or* Lady of Popa', also known as Me Wunna) is a nat of Myanmar. She is a flower-eating ogress and the mother of the Shwe Hpyin ('Inferior Gold') brothers Shwe Hpyin Naungdaw and Shwe Hpyin Nyidaw. Although not an official member of the 37 nat pantheon which is based on her domain and namesake of Mount Popa, she is seen as an important nat in the Burmese spirit world. Popa Medaw is also called Mei Wunna ("Miss Gold").

explains that the term literally means “lord-consort,” often translated as “spirit spouse” or “spirit wife.” It refers to people who are possessed or “loved by” nats. Since the 1980s, the popular image of nat kadaw has been of gay men or transgender women in Burma/Myanmar, but cisgender women in the country have also been predominant practitioners of a wide range of rituals related to propitiating nats.<sup>85</sup> The cultures of spiritual relation engendered by nats are indicative of what Stacy Alaimo would term “trans-corporeality”: an understanding of human corporeality that is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world (2). This trans-corporeal understanding is catalyzed primarily through the body-as-container in the act of nat possession, as illustrated by Ho’s description:

Possession allows a nat kadaw to function as a medium, telepathically translating the insight of supernatural beings to foretell the future. By channeling the nats, a nat kadaw provides clairvoyant guidance or ritual advice for paying clients. The vocation of a nat spouse centers on appeasing supernatural beings and functioning as a performative intermediary. Their dance entertains the nat by commemorating his or her life story and tragic death to musical accompaniment while simultaneously incarnating the nat who controls the physical body of the human nat kadaw. In other words, ‘mediums dance for the nat, but at the same time the nat dance through the mediums... The dance, with the mastery of the body that is implied, is the mark of the possessed in Burma.’<sup>86</sup> (278)

Nat mediumship demonstrates how we contain nats in order to (re)animate them, while they also contain and animate us. Channeling a specific nat is a performative act that is mutually constitutive for both the nat and the medium. When a nat kadaw channels the nat, they perform (dance) for them, providing amusement for the nat by memorializing and narrativizing their life and death. This initially seems to imply that the nat is “watching” the medium from an external vantage point, from a place “outside” of the medium. However, at the same time, the act of channeling the nat reincarnates the nat “inside” the body of the medium, willing them to dance

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<sup>85</sup> Historically, the role was a vocation passed from mothers to daughters, and the majority of nat kadaws were cisgender women married to men who are “stereotyped in late-twentieth-century academic scholarship and Burmese popular discourse as ‘socially weak and sexually inadequate’” (Ho 274; Spiro 223).

<sup>86</sup> Brac de la Perrière, “Taungbyon Festival,” 79-80; and Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*, 206-7

for the ritual desires and entertainment of patrons. The nat “possesses” the medium in that they control their body, but the medium “possesses” the nat in that they *contain* the nat within their body. These notions of a bodily “outside” and “inside” are defined through a collapsing of the outside/inside defined through mind/body dualisms. And even through this collapse, there is still a “mastery of the body” that is present, complicating Alaimo’s idea that trans-corporeal subjects must “relinquish mastery as they find themselves inextricably part of the flux and flow of the world that other would presume to master” (17).

What mastery Ho in particular is referring to is difficult to track. In one sense, the mastery can refer to the nat’s mastery over the human nat kadaw’s body, wherein the nat kadaw becomes the nat. In another sense, it can refer to the nat kadaw’s mastery of their own body that attracts the nat to love, occupy, and become them—thus mastering, briefly, the nat itself. The body-as-container is required for both masteries, and what is crucial to a non-dualist understanding of the body-as-container with respect to nat containment is a reevaluation of *what*, exactly, is being contained. Ho asserts that nats symbolize the country’s heterogeneous past, “the dynamic mythology and multiple identities articulated through nat kadaws and nat legends” (277). A nat belonging to the diverse pantheon of nat sein channeled by a nat kadaw can be, and frequently is, of a different gender and ethnicity. Thus, channeling the nat sein quite literally animates the concomitant fluidity of gender and ethnicity.

As such, the body-as-container is actually desired and necessary to honor the nats, but what is being contained in this honoring performance is not a single ethnic identity discrete from other identities. A nat kadaw, in temporarily containing and becoming the nat sein, opens themselves up to a shift in ethnic, cultural, and gender identities to revere a nat of a certain background. However, this shift is not characterized by a singular experience or truth of ethnic

identity, because what is being contained is not one concentrated ethnic truth but multiple identities constituting an ongoing *narrative*. To become or contain the nat, the nat kadaw performs the story of their life and death, embodying fluid identities in one process of narration. It is this narration, this process, this *release*, that constitutes the contained and the container. The queer practices of nat kadaws thus resist an essentialized concept of ethnic identity—static and entrapped within discrete categories inscribed unto bodies—which is propagated by the ethno-religious nationalism of the Burmese/Myanmar military regime. Nats and the traditions of their reverence place an emphasis on the narrativization and construction of ethnicity: specifically reflecting its fluidity and genderqueer nature through the concept of the body-as-container.

Moreover, revaluing the body-as-container and containment in general, as precipitated by the figure of the nat, opens up materialist inquiries into how the nat figure relates to embodied ethnic authenticity concerning the Burmese-ness “within” Asian American-ness. Regard the titular poem, “Storage Unit for the Spirit House,” below:

the father at dining room table shades drawn, wobbly throne  
the daughters with their brown shaky hands

a forest *nat* haunts the master closet among  
the clothes moths, felt wolverines

daughter #1 hiding behind a juniper bush, bright *longyis* ^  
wooden handgun in metal case

daughter #2 sleeps with a long broom next to her bed  
mint chocolates under pillow  
5am the father drops a cool wet towel on her face

storage unit filled with boxes of LPs, Joni, Dylan, Carly  
back cover of *Jimi Hendrix Experience*: on two hits of acid  
this will blow your brains out

dusty military jackets, punishment belt, piles of lockboxes

missing keys, jars of Nescafé, VHS tapes of Burmese pop singers

daughter #3 listens to father's records in the den  
altered music room

Sits on the piano bench near the door, the father in armchair  
Joni singing *A Case of You*

forest nat flutters above in air smoky from Kent 100s (45)

Again, a spirit house is a miniature structure built as a dwelling space for a nat in their domain.

“Because belief in the nats is common to all sections of Burmese/Myanmar society, their shrines may be seen in homes and businesses, attached to prominent trees, guarding roads and on the outskirts of villages” (Bamford 4). The rule a nat holds over a particular structure or natural feature of the landscape commands respect from humans<sup>87</sup>. In addition, the threat of incurring the wrath of a nat or nats has, in the past, prevented even government officials and corporations in Burma/Myanmar from felling trees. To reiterate another earlier point: the tradition of erecting spirit houses is an act that doubly-contains: humans contain a nat in a spirit house and the nat contains humans and nonhumans within their bounded locality honored by the spirit house. One observes a similar twofold/inverted dynamic of containment in the above poem, once again experimenting with inside/outside boundaries and ideas of scale.

A father and his daughters, numbered from 1-3, read like inventory stored within the house, which is the macro-container holding micro-containers: at least two different rooms (den/altered music room and dining room)—or perhaps three rooms, if one counts a closet as a

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<sup>87</sup> Due to how traditions of nat worship greatly inform people's interactions with nature, it is understandable that they have become key to certain ecological conservation efforts in Myanmar. For example, in December 2019, U Win Naing Tun, the director of the environmental action group Resource and Environment Myanmar proposed using the U Shin Gyi spirit - the guardian nat of the salt water - as the symbol of conservation. His idea was met with applause by conservationists working in the Mekong region, who were eager to learn more about the culture of spirit worship in Myanmar. For more information, see the following article on the *Myanmar Times* website: <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/nats-helping-protect-environment-myanmar.html>

room—and also, located somewhere in the house, “a storage unit.” From the exterior of the large house, one goes deeper into the smaller housing entities within it—containers within containers within containers. But where, or what, is the “spirit house” to which the title of the poem refers?

The title has potential double meanings: the storage unit “for” the spirit house might refer to a storage unit in which the spirit house is stored or, it might refer to a storage unit offered to the spirit house. The listing of objects is a defining aspect of the poem. Nats, while seemingly spectral entities, maintain with humans spiritual economies wherein they accept material offerings—nats adore their “things,” and the custom of maintaining a spirit house is dependent on nats regularly receiving preferred items, which can be everything from flowers to fruits to cigarettes to any of the items listed in the poem. These seemingly inanimate items are in themselves an active and integral part of nat worship and relationality, animating and sustaining a combined network of “natural” and/or “artificial” objects into an object-world that imbricates human and nat. Such a dynamic makes the nat figure of Burmese American poetics relevant to new materialist Asian American inquiries into objecthood and racial being.<sup>88</sup>

To entertain the idea that the storage unit is being offered to the spirit house, one gathers that the items inside the storage unit—the belt, jackets, and boxes (more containers) of LP’s—are actually alms to the forest nat. Yet the family’s entire home—in all its compartments, small and large—might also comprise the spirit house containing the forest nat, as it “haunts the master closet” and “flutters above in smoky air.” If that is so, the nat’s lordship contains the home and family as well, an interpretation that arranges the scene to showcase the family members as things among things, objects among objects. The daughters, perhaps possessing a more gendered objecthood as evinced by their state of being numbered, are objects alongside

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<sup>88</sup> For Asian Americanist explorations into object-oriented ontologies, see Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (2018) and Chad Shomura’s various essays.

“bright *longyi*’s,” LP’s of Joni and Dylan, jars of Nescafe, and old VHS tapes of Burmese pop singers. In considering the object-world the figure of the nat incorporates the family into, one might interpret a tension between authenticity and artificiality in self-perceptions of Burmese-ness and Burmese American identity, and Asian American identity in general. Burmese-ness is formulated by an arrangement of various things, an arrangement of which Burmese American identity and Burmese Americans are a *part*, and to which they become equivalent. This is troubling, because as Joseph Jonghyun Jeon states, “the *thing* in American literature and culture has stood for nothing short of dehumanization. In nineteenth-century racial discourse, a thing is an epithet for the racialized body” (xviii).

But to keep with the thing, with *things*, one might then ask: how is the authenticity of Burmese-ness altered if it is in proximity to a longyi versus the back cover of *Jimi Hendrix Experience*? A punishment belt versus mint chocolates? Which cluster of items should the Burmese-ness of “Burmese American” embody and be embodied by? Is a consciousness of Burmese American identity unable to be distinguished in authenticity from a pile of lockboxes? How is the distinction made between the authentic and artificial here if authenticity is defined as an arrangement of many artificial items? Could there be, perhaps, a pleasure in this objecthood among many objects, this porosity or mystification of authentic and artificial, wherein “things access alternative histories and contexts of intelligibility” (Jeon xxiv)? Reading Myint’s poetry can, in Jeon’s terms, help one consider the link between “reification and racialization—between race and things—in avant-garde attempts to seek out material forms for uncanny phenomena, through which one can engage unconscious matter in more self-conscious terms.” (xxiv).

Between the poem’s nat figure and its spirit house, objects are not merely placed inside of each other like Russian nesting dolls, but side-by-side and overlapped with each other, engaged

in manners of arrangement that makes Burmese-ness and Burmese American identity aware of their own plurally configured objecthood and crisis of authenticity. In utilizing the nat figure and its love of things, an interpretation of the above poem can provide a rich engagement with the discursive and material dilemmas posed by the study of “underrepresented” Burmese American literature and identity.

Perhaps the poem that exhibits the most effective use of the nat figure in a formulation of the aforementioned crisis is one literally titled “Containers,” which does not mention nats at all. For this reason, it serves as an ideal transition into a discussion of Myint’s novel, which also does not mention nats but draws heavily from their lore. Regard the following lines in the poem:

why do I repeat myself  
does self-storage matter  
are your teeth still here  
who do you hold  
is this a panic attack  
[...]

I witness each body through the missing bricks (84)

The speaker of the poem literally poses an inquiry into the relevance of “self storage.” And, in the course of posing other inquiries, they wonder if they are experiencing a panic attack. Just as *The Coffin Tree* invoked the pressures of authentic ethnic representation with “affliction” as a bodily mediation, so does Win’s poetry with “containment.” The speaker questions the importance of self storage—or, more accurately, they question if self storage *matters*. As a literary scholar of Asian American poetry, when Wang polemicizes how critics read Asian American poetry as “a transparent window into the ethnographic ‘truth’ of a hyphenated identity

and an exotic ‘home’ culture” (22), she brings to mind a built structure. Such a structure functions only to beckon a gaze that extracts the self-as-object.

But the poem pushes us to inquire: can self storage or the body-as-container *matter* in the study of Burmese American literature, in a way that does not reproduce itself as an extractable epistemic object of a *material reality*? The speaker here seems to reckon with the haunting presence of the body-(as-text-)-as-container, the dominant means of containment within a literary study produced by neoliberal multiculturalism, which seems to make the pondering of any other idea of bodily containment a wildly anxious one. To ask if self storage matters here is to ask if a body’s containment of Burmese American experience that exists outside of the body-(as-text-)-as-container is important. It is also to ask whether it is *possible*. Both questions appear to be one in the same with regard to the question of studying “underrepresented” Burmese American literature, so constrained by nationalist, authoritarian histories that have produced the body only as a single kind of container—the one that holds a fixed essence of ethnic identity and experience.

One wishes to avoid the trap of reductive essentialism. One also wishes to avoid the trap of endless abstraction. These binaries keep us sprinting in panic. Yet, the line catches us, holds us in the place of a missing question mark, in pause among an endless series of associated dualisms: mind/body, inside/outside, form/content, reason/emotion, soul/corporeality, ideas/matter, etc. Powerfully, then, the speaker asks “who do you hold,” which is reminiscent of the type of containment the nat figure and its traditions of reverence allow us to conceptualize. The fleeting practice of temporarily holding a nat—reflective of the ethnically fluid, heterogeneous, and internally fragmented nature of Burmese-ness—within one’s self leaves the question perpetually as *that* question: who? And does it *matter*—can it, does it dare, possess a materiality that is not

merely demoted to a devalued understanding of the body, wherein the body and material are governed by fact and fixity?

The line, “I witness each body through the missing bricks,” is a profound end, as it yet again brings to mind a built structure, be it a house or another type of building. Missing bricks reveal just a glimpse of an interior, a scope through which one can look through the form to view the content. Is this all the body is, a thing to be looked through and apprehended via a peephole? The almost pornographic sounding act carries the violences undergirding the gendered and racial production of epistemic objects. But one should read the line more carefully. To witness a body through the missing bricks generates the space between the bricks as its own container and form. The space exists as such because of its formation within certain bounds (the edges of the present bricks) and possibly holds an image within these bounds; it is thus a container. But the space is also what is contained *within* those bounds—though we are not used to thinking of “space” as a satisfactory essence. It is quite the opposite.

Space is emptiness and a lack of meaning to those desiring to extract ethnic truth, but to the Burmese American texts reading back the authoritarian gaze that reads them for authenticity value, for authentic ethnic embodiment, space is resistance and a universe of possibility. The bounded space that outlines the body *is* the body, which is why the speaker says they witness each body through the missing bricks. Thus, bounded space becomes one of the most subversive forms of the body-as-container in Win’s collection, and such a subversion helps transition my discussion of the body-as-container to its more speculative and genderqueer formations present in Myint’s lyrical novel.

**“In my body, I am one person.”**

Thirii Myo Kyaw Myint’s *The End of Peril, the End of Enmity, the End of Strife, a Haven* is a post-apocalyptic novel that tells the story of an unnamed narrator who returns to the environmentally-depleted land of her birth. Called the “harbor city,” the narrator’s ancestral home was founded during an ancient conflict between a kingdom and “raiders from the north” (Myint 8). The conflict is referred to as the “king’s war” by the narrator, but, despite its singular terms, the king’s war actually describes successive wars waged under successive kings. When the king’s men were no longer able to hold the enemy raiders back, they were driven to the region that eventually became the harbor city: a lush locale flourishing with trees. The harbor city was called “The End of Peril” because it was meant to be a haven—a symbol for the end of enmity and the end of strife. It was the site of the war’s last days, marked by the king’s ultimate defeat. After the city fell at the end of the war, the survivors escaped across the ocean and went on to build the “domed city,” a climate-controlled location covered by a man-made dome.

The narrator and her family were among the survivors, and the narrator’s paternal grandfather is said to have been the architect responsible for building the dome. He stole away with the daughter of an enemy clan leader, and their union birthed the narrator’s father. Her father recounts to his daughter how his father built the dome, since his father dies from genetic disease before she is born. “Before he died,” states the narrator. “My father’s father uprooted all the trees from the end of peril and transplanted them in the dome” (Myint 11). However, she clarifies that this is only how her father tells the story, implying his words mythologize and make a tall tale out of reality. She is aware no vessel can achieve the feats of which her father speaks, stating “I know no ship or plane could carry a forest of trees across the ocean.” The narrator then explains that her paternal grandfather instead studied botany and biochemistry, learning how to

grow trees from seeds presumably taken from the fallen harbor city, growing them in years rather than over decades or centuries. Here the narrator undercuts what her father tells her by disclaiming them as a “story,” likened to a legend or myth as opposed to fact. According to the narrator, her father’s recounting of how the domed city came to be is not what factually or logically happened, and she evidences what is factual and logical with an explanation of scientific study: i.e., asserting that her grandfather used his knowledges of botany and biochemistry to grow the trees.

The notion of “science” and associated concepts like “knowing”/“knowledge” pepper the narrative, maintaining it alongside the notion of “myth”/ “legend,” eventually “religion,” and associated concepts like “belief.” However, dualistic refutations are not found as easily throughout the narrative as they are in the previous quotes. In actuality, the notions of science/knowledge and religion/belief become distinct only through how thoroughly they are muddled. For instance, the narrator states:

When I was a young girl, my mother taught me the ways of science. It was meant to complement my study of religion. Both science and the religion of the king’s people, my mother’s people, rested on the universal law of cause and effect. My mother said that because of this law, the universe tended toward disorder. It sprawled and scattered. (Myint 41)

The narrator is taught science and religion in ways that balance each other, with both the logic of science and logic of religion upholding a fundamental degree of karmic retribution. The “universal law” that animates science and religion in the above quote dictates that causation governs all. A preceding event or occurrence directly produces or results in a future event or occurrence. Yet, while the universal law is an organizing principle shared across two subjects often thought to be diametrically opposed, the universe is still in “disorder.” In fact, it is a direct result of the law that the universe is lawless—sprawled and scattered, as the narrator states.

The novel's portrayal of religion is not limited to the religion of the king's people. There are two main religions described in the novel. One is described in the above passage: the religion of the king's people, who the narrator is descended from through her mother. The other religion is that of the enemy raiders from the north, who the narrator is descended from through her father. The religion of the king's people initially seems to be aligned with Buddhism, while the religion of the enemy raiders heavily resembles traditions of nat worship. The two religions described in the novel both work in contrast and conjunction with each other to produce the novel's cosmological landscape. In describing the enemy raiders and their religion, the narrator paints a monstrous picture:

They were brutes, the king's enemy, beastly. Their only religion was the worship of those among them who had died green deaths, untimely deaths, at the hands of tyrannical kings. A mountain was sacred to them, an ancient volcano, for the blood of the ones who were killed there mixed with ash and blood turned almost green. The enemy painted their faces with this blood-green ash and to the king's people they looked like ogres, the man-eating kind, with long, straight fangs.

The king was afraid. He lost the war. People were killed on both sides, animals drowned, fishing villages were sacked, the fields left to rot, and the river set on fire. The city fell and the two peoples are one people now.

In my body, I am one person. (41)

Indeed, the religion described above resembles Burmese traditions of nat worship, referencing the worship of individuals very similar to the nat sein. We can see this clearly through the narrator's use of the phrasing "green deaths, untimely deaths." In addition, the narrator mentions how an ancient volcano was sacred to the king's enemy, which indicates a reverence for nature that is at once a reverence for those who have died at the hands of "tyrannical kings." The blood of the ones killed by the kings mix with the ash of the volcano, and the mixture is in turn used to paint the faces of the raiders who are still alive, giving them ogrish appearances.

The rituals of the enemy are depicted as savage, cannibalistic, and carried out without reason. They are not ascribed to "law" like science and the religion of the king's people are.

Echoing Ho, the religion that resembles nat worship is relegated to a backwards and irrational state of being, while the religion that resembles Buddhism is aligned with science and organized learning. But even so, the law of causality that governs science and the religion of the king's people is the reason for the universe tending towards chaos, towards irrationality. The law shared by the two is not used to make sense of or eliminate chaos; it more so seems like the law constantly causes chaos. Chaos is mutually produced and reproduced in the war between the raiders and the king's men, which wreaks environmental havoc on the land. The wild scene of death and devastation that includes the killing of humans, sacking of villages, drowning of animals, and burning of the river funnels into the statement "The city fell and the two people are one people now." All of this is then sharply undercut by the solemn line on which the passage ends: "In my body, I am one person."

The line is jarring and bizarre. Why does the narrator refer to the internal contents of her body at this moment? Why does she distinguish that in her body she is "one" person, as opposed to being more than one person (or otherwise) in her body? What precedes the line is a description of how the two warring peoples became one amidst a process of environmental destruction. The "one" in "one people" thus corresponds to the "one" in "one person," as if all the violent events and mergings have funneled into the narrator's body, which contains elements of the two peoples. Yet, rather than read the narrator's body-as-container and her mixed heritage as metaphor (i.e. she is a "symbol" of unity between different ethnic groups) one might perhaps read it on a literal level. The above lines are a literal encapsulation of her mixed ancestry, which highlights the novel's attention to bodily construction and experimentations with the tumultuous, but conjoined acts of nat worship and Theravada Buddhism defining each other in its cosmology to generate a type of Burmese/American worlding.

Just as the figure of the nat, along with traditions of nat mediumship and reverence, confuse signs of ethnicity, gender, and religion, so does Myint's narrative. On one parent's side, the narrator is descended from the enemy raiders, who practice a religion that resembles nat worship; it is aggressive and barbaric, masculine in nature while also being feminized through an adherence to the "traditional" and "superstitious." On the other side, she is descended from the king's men, who practice a religion that resembles Buddhism; it is passed on and taught to her by her mother, making it feminine in a sense, while also being masculinized as a formal education that compliments "scientific" reason—though its governing through law perpetually generates disorder. Such wholesale confusion, as well as the ecological disaster that underwrites the uniting of the two peoples into one, is combined in the body of the narrator—who is "one person" inside her body while simultaneously being multitudes of people and non-people.

Earlier, the narrator undercut her father's "story" about the paternal grandfather with her "knowledge." The myth or legend he shares about the origin of the domed city and its many trees is refuted by the narrator's explanation that her paternal grandfather actually had expertise in botany and biochemistry. Throughout the novel, the narrative continuously juxtaposes and scrambles myth-making with scientific processes of study, almost to a distracting degree. It does this particularly with respect to the concept of bodily construction, or how bodies come to be "built," which is principally used to articulate formations of ethnicity and gender. In the novel these two concepts are constructed as one, a process that relies on the novel's own version of human "biology," which plays with and recasts essentialisms that have violently underwritten how the two terms have been defined historically and the idea of the body-as-container.

### **Mixed Lineage, Mixed Bodies, or "Transing" Ethnicity**

Unfortunately, an overgrowth in the domed city eventually occurs, causing the dome to burst in an event called “the breach,” with trees from the domed city flooding the rest of the earth. The breach spurs the narrator’s departure from the domed city and return to the harbor city, which she arrives at with a baby in tow. Myint’s novel places great emphasis on lineage, particularly through its uses of the phrases “father’s mother” and “father’s father.” The titles “grandmother” and “grandfather” are never used for the narrator’s paternal side. The notion of ethnic difference, and mixed ethnic identity, is also established in these terms. We see this mainly via the narrator’s description of her mother’s resentment towards her. The text states:

My mother does not let me forget I am descended also from the enemy. The raiders from the north who drove the king’s men to the end of peril.  
You are a nomad, my mother always said. Restless, a hungry ghost.  
My father’s mother was the daughter of a clan leader, an heiress to conquered land, a descendent of the northern invaders. She carried the enemy bloodline into my body. From her, I inherited a body built for violence. Built to endure violence, but also to commit it.  
You are always in search of that fertile valley, my mother said.  
This harbor city is not it. I am an invader here. (Myint 8)

Lines are drawn frequently in the novel. The phrase used in the quote above, “father’s mother,” and related words such as “descendent” and “bloodline,” denote a determinate value derived from verticality, particularly of ancestry, invoking the lines of a family tree. That being said, one should not only take into account lines that connect, but also lines that demarcate or separate. Consider the line implicitly drawn between the king’s men and the raiders from the north, for instance. We come to understand that the raiders are a people distinct from the king’s men, and also singularly as the enemy to which the king’s men are opposed. The raiders from the north are characterized as invaders, a savage group of people who have the capacity to both wither and do extreme violence. The narrator is constantly reminded by her mother that she is “also” descended from this group of invaders, and that the narrator’s paternal grandmother carried the enemy

bloodline “into” the narrator’s body. Therefore, we can imagine two inherited lines of ethnic descent entering and being contained within the narrator’s body, which in one sense functions as a type of receptacle whose external nature is determined by a given internal nature—a set of contents that finds its home inside her corporeal form.

And yet, in another sense, the narrator’s entire body is described as a complete construction that precedes her, inherited from her paternal grandmother; the violent capacities that her body was “built” for are also inherited. That the above quote illustrates a process wherein the enemy bloodline is *carried* into the narrator’s body implies that there was/is a point in time during which her body is untouched and unspoiled by the enemy bloodline. However, the narrator’s “new” body, which had her paternal grandmother’s enemy bloodline carried into it at birth, is also implied to already be her paternal grandmother’s “old” body. More simply put, her body both *becomes* and *has been* her paternal grandmother’s body. The process is articulated, to borrow from Samuel Weber, in the *futur antérieur*: “the always already will have been true.” We perceive the construction of the narrator’s body as a process that moves toward a future action that will always have happened already.

The transmittance of the enemy bloodline is a complex process in which the narrator’s heritage is perverted by the ambiguous gendered influence of her paternal grandmother. Or, rather, the influence is seen as perverse because it is so ambiguously gendered. Initially, we might view the grandmother as assuming a masculine position, masculinized not only by her relation to the brutish enemy raiders from the north, but also by how she is described as the force that carries the enemy bloodline into the narrator—invading her body. This is further augmented by how the line of enemy descent is repeatedly attributed more totalizingly to the narrator’s father via the term “father’s mother.” Her paternal grandmother is therefore masculinized not

only by being a descendent of the enemy, but also by how the text constantly claims her under the sign of the father. At the same time, the grandmother is a passive feminine vessel for the enemy bloodline. The narrator is likewise an ambiguously gendered figure; she assumes a feminine position by being the container for the intrusive force of her grandmother and her lineage while also embodying the masculine traits of the raiders from the north. She is at once invaded and an invader, representing a penetrative sexual threat in the eyes of her own mother, who states that her daughter is always looking for “that fertile valley.”

The text conceptualizes lineage and “mixed” ethnic ancestry directly via bodily construction, because bodies are indeed *constructed* in the narrative; as the narrator states, the body she inherits from her paternal grandmother is “built.” The manner in which certain bodies are built is shaped by seemingly binaristic ideas of gender reliant on biological determinacy, but not without prompting a major evaluation of how “biology” functions in the novel. In Myint’s novel, having “mixed” ethnic bloodlines means having a body that is literally mixed in terms of its “natural” biology, though the reliance on the biological here is not exemplified through utilizing the frequent root of gender essentialisms: reproductive organs. Instead, the novel conceptualizes biological difference, and thus gendered difference, via a certain ethnic bloodline. Ethnic ancestry is *the* biological determinant of gendered difference. The narrator does not possess a masculine or “male” biology and physicality—i.e. the capacity to endure and commit great violence, and ultimately penetrate others—because of the presence of a specific reproductive organ; she possesses a masculine biology and physicality because of the presence of the enemy bloodline. The enemy bloodline is the constant “phallus,” and the phallus is an inheritable structure constituted by her entire body. The narrator does not have a phallus. Rather, she *is* a phallus, just like her paternal grandmother. By inheriting her paternal grandmother’s

body, the narrator inherits her phallic state. But also present in this inherited bodily construction is the necessity of a feminine or “female” biology, the necessity that her body possess the capacity to be penetrated by and contain the enemy bloodline - which is/was also contained within the grandmother.

Myint’s narrative produces visions of penetration, of holes being pierced, but it is also producing visions of holes somehow piercing other holes. The novel thus spurs one to think of related re-orderings of meaning and posit them in different ways regarding containment: how is a knife a receptacle for another knife? How does a bowl penetrate another bowl? In the novel, gendered difference and ethnic difference are constructed as one, coming into being simultaneously with each other through these reorderings of signifier and signified. In its conceptualization of mixed lineages literally equating to mixed, transformative biologies, the narrative recasts the idea of the body-as-container in what appears to be an articulation of transness—or perhaps a *transing* of ethnicity resembling acts of nat containment, spun here in a speculatively biological fashion.

The trans dimensions of the narrative are expounded further by the figure of the baby. Said by the narrator to have been carried out of the domed city and to the harbor city, the baby exists without a chosen name and also a chosen gender. The narrator states, “I have not yet chosen a name for the baby. I have not yet chosen a gender. There is so much to choose, to give, and by giving, to take away. I do not want to take away from the baby” (4). The quote implies that name and gender are traditionally assigned to a child by their parent, referencing another vertical line of determinacy. However, the narrator has abstained from doing so, recognizing that choosing for her baby is simultaneously an act of providing and an act of removal. The narrator leaves the choice of gender specifically up to her baby but also tries to familiarize the baby with

gendered conditions in their society. While introducing the baby to the harbor city, the narrator states:

I stand by the chain link fence at the back of my grandfather's house and tell this story to the baby. I want it to better understand what it is like to be a woman, for the baby may one day become a woman.

...

I hold the baby close to me again, and I say very softly that the women were blamed for the sky flying away, because women are usually blamed, and I can't explain this to the baby, but I look at its soft, round face for a while and I try to make it understand. The choice of gender the baby will one day make is heavy. Choice or discovery, I say to the baby, though discoveries are made also. Everything to make, to create, to do. (8)

Again, the novel's conception of gender highlights the act of construction. It is worth noting how "choice" and "discovery" are juxtaposed in the above passage. The baby's gender is its own choice, but it is also, or also can be, a discovery. What is being described above is emphasized as a process, reinforced by the narrator's own words: "Everything to make, to create, to do." By defining gender as a result of choice, the narrator indicates that the baby can decide to take on a certain gender after being informed of how that gender is a state of being constituted by societal norms, or constructed socially by "culture," as it were. As such, the narrator attempts to help the baby understand "what it is like to be a woman," explaining that women are usually blamed for society's ills. To choose womanhood, in this sense, means that one who exists first as "not-a-woman" would then choose to adopt womanhood—depicted here as an external, culturally-constructed mold—onto their being, therefore becoming a woman. In sync with this definition, however, is another definition that proposes gender as a result of discovery.

If we understand discovery as an uncovering of, or breakthrough to, something preexisting, we might also understand the above passage's definition of gender in the same fashion. The baby might grow to "discover" that it is a woman, that it has always been a woman, as opposed to beginning its life as "not-a-woman" and settling on the choice of womanhood in

the future. Yet, the narrator makes sure to clarify that such a discovery is also made. Everything is to make and *do*, meaning that even the supposed phrase “always been a woman” is sustained by actively pursuing an ongoing process of constructing and reconstructing womanhood from a point of not-quite-understanding what a woman is. To reiterate, there is a sense of the *futur antérieur*, as well as simultaneity, in the way the novel conceptualizes gender and gender identity particularly with regards to a kind of transness. As one changes into or creates one’s self as something new, one also realizes what they have been from the start. One is somehow able to *construct* the inner state that preceded them. In relation to the body-as-container, the above passage allows us to imagine the ways the contained and container can remain as a paradigm—but here, the external casing is a dynamic, creative surface that constructs the internal condition, which will always already have been constructed. *Discoveries are also made.*

Myint’s novel, drawing inspiration from nat lore, utilizes the body-as-container in important genderqueer expressions of ethnic identity that highlight the mutual construction of gender and ethnicity via the way in which the body is itself constructed. The inside/outside oppositions and transformations that characterize the narrator’s “mixed” ethnic ancestry and gender resignify the body-as-container into a new concept. This resignified body-as-container allows us to use a confusion of signs to rethink frameworks of the self and self storage in Burmese American literary study.

### **Conclusion: Bodily (Nat)ures and In/authentication**

*Storage Unit for the Spirit House* and *The End of Peril, the End of Enmity, the End of Strife, a Haven* demonstrate vast aesthetic usages of the nat figure, inviting readings of Burmese American literature that uniquely revalue the body-as-a container while also troubling the gendered body-as-(text-as)-container schema. Preserving the capacity the body has for

containment—to take heed from the nat figure and traditions of nat reverence—allows moments for pause in these texts and slow inquiries into more plural notions of “self storage.” Win’s poems prompt us to wonder: can the objecthood of self storage allow for a more honest meditation on desires for embodying authenticity and “containing” experience? Is it always so destructive to align experience with the internal? Experience, like the body it is aligned with, is also not a brute given. It has a material life concurrent with its abstraction; could authenticity and the internal be refigured or signified in the same way in the context of Burmese American literary study? Myint’s universe, even in a post-apocalyptic age, shows us that the notion of the internal preserves itself as such only through an acknowledgement that is also made and created. It is made new while always having been. The idea of internality being *made* displaces it from the given nature of dominant notions of authenticity. Is such an internal state of the self as easily apprehendable as an “authentic” epistemic object under an authoritarian gaze?

The lyric voices of *Storage Unit* and *The End of Peril* utilize the figure of the nat to ponder and articulate new formulations of the body-as-container in a manner integral to the project of inauthenticating Burmese American literature, turning the act into a double-move. At the same time inauthenticating deconstructs the category of Burmese American, it constructs it as well. This double-move underscores a crucial aspect of inauthentication: its desire for an authenticity of Burmese-ness that exists beyond its equivalences to nationalistic definitions or ethnicity as a regime. And it is by this move that the inauthenticating of Burmese American literature becomes *in/authentication*.

## CODA

In February of 2019, the Free Rohingya Coalition, a global advocacy group led by prominent Rohingya activists and allies, hosted the International Conference on Protection and Accountability in Burma at Barnard College in New York City. The event was endorsed globally by a diverse network of institutions, including the Montreal Holocaust Museum, the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, the Refugee and Migratory Movement Research Unit at the University of Dhaka, and the Genocide Documentation Center of Cambodia and Genocide Watch. From Gayatri Spivak to Angela Davis, scholars, lawyers, activists, and United Nations officials gathered at the convening to identify strategies to curb serious human rights violations in Burma; such violations included discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, jailing and intimidation of journalists, and countless other abuses.

The primary focus of the conference, however, was the genocidal persecution of the Rohingya, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority living in Myanmar's Rakhine State, so-named for the predominantly Theravada Buddhist ethnic people considered indigenous to the region by the government. The Rohingya are unrecognized by the country's military regime, who repeatedly deny their indigeneity to the region and instead refer to them as "illegal Bengali immigrants" in official statements and state propaganda. The United Nations calls the Rohingya the "most persecuted minority in the world."<sup>89</sup> Of all the political turmoil and humanitarian crises in Burma/Myanmar that have been the subject of international concern and outrage in the past ten years, the persecution of the Rohingya is likely the most well-known. In broaching the general subject of Burma/Myanmar or its peoples to anyone, I have found that even if the person

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<sup>89</sup> See the following information from the website of the United Nations Refugee Agency: <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/rohingya-refugee-crisis/#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20has%20described,persecuted%20minority%20in%20the%20world.%E2%80%9D>

with whom I am speaking knows nothing else about the country, they will likely bring up the Rohingya genocide—or, perhaps, to borrow from the common wording I have heard: “Buddhists killing Muslims in Burma.” Either one of two questions might accompany their words—“are you Rohingya?” or “are you the one killing the Rohingya?”

Though the military’s efforts to expel the Rohingya from the country date back as early as the 1970s, with the much longer history of the group’s marginalization having colonial-era roots, the world became confounded by violence against the minority and general Islamophobic violence against Muslims in Burma/Myanmar during the 2010s. This violence, stoked by ultranationalist, right-wing rhetoric Buddhist monks in the country, shocked the world, who wondered how those who follow Buddhism could ever preach in favor of violence. A 2013 *TIME* cover featuring the most prominent of these monks, U Wirathu, titled him the “Burmese Bin Laden” the “Face of Buddhist Terror.” Naturally, my Burmese Buddhist identity became the grounds of accusation and assumption for many, who demanded I explain how my “people” had strayed so far from the fundamental Buddhist values of peace and compassion, or at least make evident how I was one of the “good ones” who didn’t agree with the violent actions of these backwards brown masses.

In August of 2017, almost two years prior to the conference at Barnard, security forces under command of the Myanmar military enacted “clearance operations” as part of a scorched earth policy on Rohingya villages in Rakhine State. Their actions were a response to attacks on police posts carried out by an armed Rohingya group called the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). Over 600,000 refugees fled across the border and into Bangladesh. The conference of Barnard was held in the wake of these atrocities committed by the military, which included mass rape, arson, infanticide, and extrajudicial killings.

A group of Burmese Americans and diasporic Burmese were present at the Barnard conference. They mingled among the conference-goers and occasionally imparted to them steadfast views on the illegitimacy of the event, that it was indicative of how the U.S. was intervening in the political affairs of Burma/Myanmar to push a false narrative. The Rohingya weren't the victims. They were the terrorists. They were overpopulating and pushing the Rakhine people out of their ancestral home. Nevermind that the military regime has also persecuted the Rakhine for decades; now, everyone was in favor of their actions in "protection" of them. Prior to the event, word of it had spread on social media, causing a stir among the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar—even among those who were members of ethnic minorities from the country, such as the Karen, Kachin, and Chin. On Facebook, a Burmese language post warned that "all Myanmar and Rakhine people should be wary of this Muslim funded event which advocates for the takeover of the land and religion of Myanmar" and called for "protection and vigilance... from both inside and outside the country."

Of course, there were other dissatisfactions with the way the issue had been portrayed. Some people were frustrated that the world, after not giving a damn about Burma/Myanmar or its many peoples for so long, were only starting to care now, disregarding the suffering of other oppressed ethnic minorities. Some were against the military's actions but defended Aung San Suu Kyi's complicity in them, saying that criticisms of her were unfair because she was trying her best to hold onto power during the nation's democratic transition away from military rule, and that her NLD government and the military itself are separate entities—which was certainly valid. However, it became more and more difficult to distinguish these more reasonable points from the amount of outright Islamophobic, anti-Rohingya vitriol that dominated my socials and

was spoken to me in person. Hateful words calling the Rohingya rats and other types of pests that needed to be removed weighed heaviest on my mind.

In reflecting on Lisa Lowe's powerful statement that Asian American culture can be a site that resists the national terrain of the U.S., I wondered—weren't these Burmese Americans resisting the national terrain? Only, their resistance of U.S. "intervention" took the form of supporting a genocide in my parents' birth country. They viewed the Barnard conference as a form of U.S. imperialism that we were meant to resist as Burmese or people with ancestral ties to Burma/Myanmar. Is this, I continued to wonder, what defines us now, as "Burmese Americans"—the nationalistic hate speech of the loudest voices? Considering the massive gap in our representation among the field of Asian American studies, and the contemporary push to center Southeast Asian Americans, I borrow from Viet Thanh Nguyen: "are those who speak of and for the voiceless always ready to hear what the voiceless have to say?"

I tried my hardest in my early years at Brown to put a dissenting voice out there. During the Rohingya crisis of 2017, I made a video with other Burmese Americans addressed to our "elders." We tried to show them, as respectfully as we could, that while we would always be grateful for their sacrifices as first-generation Burmese Americans, who gave up everything for their children to have a better life in a land that was "free," we had to criticize their anti-Rohingya stance, which seemed to replicate white nationalist and xenophobic sentiment in America—something that they had also been targets of at one point or another. Couldn't they see the hypocrisy?

The video was anonymous. I was terrified of attaching my name and face to it—afraid that my own "community" would attack me, as some relatives already had, calling me a traitor, asking me if I was a terrorist myself, if I was part of ISIS and other nonsense. It seems silly in

retrospect; I wasn't suffering. Unlike most of the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar in the U.S., many of whom live under the poverty line, I was—am—a privileged, upper-middle class daughter of immigrants. But I can't deny that at the time, all those words destroyed me, sliced me to ribbons. These were people who I had looked up to, who had always been against military rule in Burma/Myanmar. Now they were supporting it in full force.

In 2018, I led an effort to pen an open letter alongside other diasporic Burmese Buddhists decrying the violence against the Rohingya. I put my name first. I was proud. But, in reflecting back on all of this, I fear that I might have deployed the same usage of identity politics and rhetoric of multiculturalism that I heavily criticize in this dissertation. Like Aung San Suu Kyi, I utilized my Burmese Buddhist identity and an appeal to a sense of filial piety to boost the effectiveness of my message. Two years later, I watched on as Aung San Suu Kyi—the one “good,” or really the only, representation of Burmese people visible for decades in U.S. media—defended the genocidal Burmese/Myanmar military at the Hague.

In February of 2021, the military seized power from the NLD. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and her party colleagues and lawmakers were ousted from the government and jailed. She is currently still imprisoned. After the coup, there was a staggering outpour of unity in Burma/Myanmar across all classes, genders, and ethnicities—including the Rohingya. Burmese American communities in New York City, Washington D.C., and various cities across the Midwest and West coast staged anti-coup demonstrations, bringing further national attention to the situation in Burma/Myanmar. Many in Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora looked back on their words and actions just a few years earlier, regretting the fact that they had cheered on the same military who had enacted the current coup. I had to admit that I rejoiced on the inside. But I was also torn. It is not enough to extend a hand of “unity” to address the larger structural issues and

deep-seated prejudices that exist in the long shadows of military rule and colonialism, which also directly affect the realities of the diaspora.

In terms of academia's responses to the coup, those within Burma studies were some of the most prominent academics to arrange panels and other events discussing the political situation in the country. Such efforts were not without scrutiny, as the field has faced criticism from diasporic Burmese scholars for being dominated by white researchers who tend towards orientalist and colonialist engagements with the country and its peoples. In 2020, Burmese historian Tharaphi Than raised this issue in her paper "Impossible Feat? Decolonizing a Burmese Academy" and, subsequently, in 2021, graduate students Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung articulated similar criticisms with their paper, "Talking Back to white researchers in Burma Studies," presented at the 20th International Graduate Student Conference at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Michael Charney states that these scholars examine how white academics approach the study of Burma/Myanmar, "the authority they are given (or take) in the field, and the ontological and epistemological colonization that continues as a result" (FORSEA 2021). Also cognizant of these issues, events such as the 2021 panel "The Political Crisis in Myanmar: Panel Discussion with Emerging Myanmar Scholars"—of which I was a part—sought to elevate the perspectives of "emerging scholars with indigenous and heritage ties to Myanmar."<sup>90</sup>

Naturally, panels like this have caused rancorous debates among people within Burma/Myanmar and its diaspora about who and who isn't an authentic representation of the "struggle" in the country. Typically, it ends with the very familiar reasoning that Burmese Americans or those who are part of the diaspora of Burma/Myanmar are not authentically Burmese because they have grown up outside of the country. They might also carry elitist,

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<sup>90</sup> See the full description of the event at this link:  
<https://www.colorado.edu/cas/2021/05/03/political-crisis-myanmar-panel-discussion-emerging-myanmar-scholars>

Western imperialistic ideals because they have been educated abroad. Somehow, it seems that the authoritarian enforcement of “authentic Burmese-ness” rings true, always, even if it is a moving target with different definitions and utilities in different contexts. The necessary effort to highlight those with “heritage ties” obviously elicits the notion that a certain embodiment of ethnic identity legitimizes intellectual authority—something that Asian American studies is primed to unpack, but not without simultaneously unpacking the same notion within itself.

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