CHOOSING TO BE LGBT: GENDER AND SEXUALITY ACTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a unique queer identity has emerged in Myanmar. Just as locally informed as it is globally influenced, queer identity and activism in Myanmar is the result of the confluence of historically Burmese gender and sexual practices, the discourse of universal human rights, the flow and direction of international aid, money, and attention, and local activist's interpretations and reactions to the preceding three factors. This thesis examines how new identities can emerge through the practice of activism and the factors that influence this emergence. Based on original fieldwork involving participation in queer events in Yangon and conservations with activists and community members, as well as a review of the print literature and digital and social media output of LGBT organizations in Myanmar, this thesis demonstrates that queer activism can create sexual identities in the process of defending them.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A Burmese immigrant raised in California, Aye Min Thant holds B.A. degrees from the University of California, Santa Cruz in Feminist Studies and Anthropology. While attending UCSC, she served as a student director for Rainbow Theater, a multicultural student theater troupe, and was a founding member of the school's Burmese Student Association. Prior to attending Cornell, Aye worked for a year as a project manager for a tea company in Mandalay. In addition to her M.A. studies, she works as a Burmese translator in the Ithaca School District. After graduating, Aye plans to work in the NGO-industrial complex, so she can make enough money to support her cat.

I dedicate this thesis to the people whose support and encouragement emotionally blackmailed me into finishing this thesis and pushed me past my moments of doubt and despair.

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Next, I must thank my family members who, though they still do not quite understand what exactly I am studying, are supportive nonetheless. I thank my parents for giving me an upbringing that taught me the importance of critical thinking, my aunts for helping fund my education, and my siblings for keeping me grounded. I would also like to acknowledge the valuable contributions made to this thesis by my partner. He not only read and gave valuable feedback on my thesis, he also cooked for me in times of crisis and impending deadlines, provided a shoulder to cry and vent on, and made sure I periodically left the house/office.

Finally, I must express my profound gratitude to all the people whose works and words appear in the thesis, all the people who took the time to answer my questions, and all the people who let me tag along to events, even if it meant I showed up to a nightclub with a notebook in hand. Without them, truly none of this would be possible.

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NOTES ON TRANSLATIONS AND ROMANIZATION

All translations provided are mine, unless stated otherwise. As there is no agreed upon standard for transliteration of Burmese to English, I have used the same system the Southeast Asian Language Library uses. The exceptions to this are the names of places and people. I have used the most common used spellings for those words, even if they disagree with the Southeast Asian Language Library's system.

PREFACE

No matter gay, straight, or bi
Lesbian, transgendered life
I'm on the right track baby
I was born to survive
No matter black, white or beige
Chola or Orient made
I'm on the right track baby
I was born to be brave

Lady Gaga, "Born This Way"

The night was young, I was a couple of drinks in, and Lady Gaga's 2011 song, "Born This Way", was heart-beating through the large room. In two days' time, the gunshots at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando would be heard around the world, but on June 10th, 2016, I felt transcendent. After arriving in Myanmar a couple weeks prior and struggling to settle in, I was more than ready for a night of partying. I was ready to leave the tropical humidity of the city for air conditioning and strobe lights, if only for a few hours. After half a month of hypervisibility, too tall, too accented, and too timid while crossing streets to blend in, I craved the warm familiarity and anonymity of a gay nightclub.

The experience was uncanny. It almost felt like walking onto a movie set replica of my home. The correct arrangement of the rooms and furniture making minor deviations in the details all the more jarring. The DJ spun the latest hits, interspersed with Lady Gaga, Beyonce, and Britney Spears. Young people danced while wearing next to nothing. Selfies were taken, and the world narrowed down to how right it felt to be dancing with your partner. Close your eyes, and it could have been anywhere in America.

I was pulled back from the fantasy by the stinging in my eyes caused by the sheer amount of cigarette smoke accumulating in the room. Or maybe it was the K-Pop song played after nearly thirty continuous minutes of American Top 40 songs. Or perhaps it was hearing a white tourist complaining about how "ghetto" the party scene in Yangon is. Whatever it was, the spell

was broken. I was not anywhere in America. I was not transcendent. The veneer of familiarity was exactly enough to make the differences all the more difficult to perceive.

In many ways, my fieldwork in Myanmar, conducted from May to August in 2016, is indistinguishable from the summer vacations being taken by many of my fellow students. I went "back home" – a notion that becomes more nebulous with each passing year – saw friends and family, and generally hung out for a few months. Except this time, home was not suburban Los Angeles. This time, home was Yangon, the city I was born in. This time, family was aunts, uncles, and cousins. Family was also the ever-present neighbors I called aunts, uncles, and cousins, whose "blood" relation to me, or lack thereof, can only be confirmed through long conversations with my grandmother. But I did hang out a lot, and this casual but critically reflected upon participation in everyday life in Yangon is what informs most of my writing. It is an almost ethnography.

As part of the fieldwork, I went to fashion shows, nightclubs, organizing lunches, and human rights workshops: familiar ground after years of student activism in the United States. Except now, I was there to observe and, in a very limited way, participate, rather than help lead. There was not a moment that did not feel awkward. After years of exposure to texts on queer theory and third world feminism, I was very concerned with projecting Orientalist notions into what I was seeing, and unintentionally using my non-local understandings of things to unduly influence what people were doing. I wanted to be very careful about my language usage and input, when it was requested, so as not to privilege knowledge produced in a US context as more correct or useful than that produced in the Myanmar context. This was made all the more difficult by many of my interlocutors' insistence on calling me *sayama*, or teacher. Knowledge I was concerned about imposing was being actively sought from me. When I first began, I wanted

to understand the local context, as if that were something discrete, as if queer politics in Myanmar was not always already local and translocal.

In the end, I worked with a wide range of people, all of them based in either Yangon or Mandalay, the two largest cities in the country. This thesis is an exploration of the work of queer activists in Myanmar. It is by no means representative of queer life in the country, and there is a definite sample bias due to social and familial restrictions on young women's, or those who are deemed to be women's, movements. There are also class, education, and ethnic biases due in part to the ways these factors work to determine who is physically present in Myanmar's cities, who have the social and economic capital to be involved in overt political actions, and who have access to the spaces I was operating in. There are also probably other biases I am not aware of or capable of noticing due to my own subject position.

What I hope to accomplish with this paper is to show how queer activists are necessarily involved in the tension between the local and the translocal. In recent years, a unique queer identity has emerged in Myanmar. Just as locally informed as it is globally influenced, queer identity and activism in Myanmar is the result of the confluence of historically Burmese gender and sexual practices, the discourse of universal human rights, the flow and direction of international aid, money, and attention, and local activists' interpretations and reactions to the preceding three factors. Queer Burmese bodies, practices, and knowledges are sites in which the distinction between transgression and normativity play out and are remade. In examining queer activism in Myanmar, I hope to answer the question of what particular formations of personhood arise in the interaction of the global and local. This thesis explores how new identities can emerge through the practice of activism and the factors that influence this emergence. This thesis demonstrates that queer activism can create sexual identities in the process of defending them.

CHAPTER 1

FINDING (QUEER) COMMUNITY IN MYANMAR

I was living and working in Myanmar before I applied to graduate school[1]. My time as an undergraduate was spent at the University of California, Santa Cruz, a school rated as one of the most LGBT-friendly universities in the United States and located in a city a mere one hour's drive from San Francisco, home of the "largest gathering of the LGBT, or lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgender, community and allies in the nation", according to the San Francisco Pride website (http://www.sfpride.org/about/)[2]. After graduating, I moved to a country for which the United States State Department issues travel warnings. As written on the State Department website, since "[c]onsensual same-sex sexual activity is illegal […] and entails punishments up to life imprisonment", queer travelers are advised to practice caution and discretion while in Myanmar[3]. Though the travel warning goes on to state that this law is rarely enforced, travelers are warned to be careful nonetheless, due to reports of Myanmar police extorting bribes from queer travelers with the threat of persecution. Suffice it to say, as a queer woman, I had my concerns about moving to Myanmar, potentially permanently[4].

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[1] I use Myanmar to refer to the country as opposed to Burma or Burma/Myanmar for three reasons. The first being that Myanmar is what is used by most people living in the country whom I spoke to, and I want to respect their choice of words. The second is that there has been a regime change, and the argument of undermining the military dictatorship is no longer as valid. Thirdly, neither "Burma" nor "Myanmar" solve the problematic of privileging the majority Bamar ethnic group in the country's name, so "Burma" is not an attractive alternative to me.

[2] Campus Pride. "National Listing of LGBTQ-Friendly Colleges and Universities." https://www.campusprideindex.org/searchresults/display/324935 (accessed March 15, 2017).

[3] U.S. Department of State. "U.S. Passport and International Travel." https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/country/burma.html (accessed March 15, 2017).

[4] I use "queer" as an umbrella term to refer to non-normative or non-idealized gender and sexual identities and practices. My usage of "LGBT", "LGBTQ", "LGBTQIA", and other versions of this acronym are in reference to the language of the source I am citing.

This apprehension was greatly tempered by my previous experiences in the country. I was born there, spent a large portion of my childhood there, and recently spent a winter vacation there. I may not have been Burmese in the same way I might have been if I had never left, but I thought I knew enough to keep myself out of trouble. Yet, anxieties over whether my modes of dress, mannerisms, or speech would give me away and result in negative economic and social consequences continued to linger. As it turns out, the greatest challenge I faced concerning my sexual practices and sexuality identity stemmed from illegibility rather than hypervisibility.

One experience that crystalized the dilemma came from an incident with my family. During most of my time working in Mandalay, I was sporting what I thought was a very queer haircut that involved a little less than half of my head being clean shaven while the rest was left long. What was seen as unambiguously queer in my social circles in the U.S. was more often than not interpreted as a sign that I was not properly socialized in Burmese culture. While my haircut was not an object of concern after the first few weeks of shock, hand wringing, and lectures from my aunties over concerns that America was "too free", it became a problem when it came time to attend my cousin's engagement party. This is when my aunt, in her words, "called in the gays", and I was transformed from the weird foreigner into a respectable Burmese girl that my family could present to their social circle.

The person tasked with the supervision of my transformation was "one of the gays", and a prominent member of the hair and makeup artist community of Mandalay. It was an ironic moment, my symbol of my queerness was being covered up by a queer man so that I could "pass", not as straight, but as properly Burmese. Of course, what it means to be proper has connotations of gender and sexuality, but the intention of the makeover was not to make me seem straight, as my family was not able to read me as queer enough to need covering up for that

reason. In that moment, I felt such affinity with this person, and yet had no idea how to communicate that to them[5]. I have had over a decade of training in reading, signaling, and selectively signaling queerness in America, but in that moment, I was struck silent. I found myself incapable of articulating myself not only due to a lack of knowledge of terminology and the legal and social context of queerness of Myanmar, but also the knowledge built through experiencing the world through a specific subjectivity. It is an interest in how this subjectivity shapes community making and activism in Myanmar that I set out to explore in my research.

As I began my fieldwork, it became increasing clear that my understanding of gender and sexual practices and gender and sexual identities, an understanding deeply shaped by my mostly American upbringing, was incomprehensible to many of my interlocutors. There was a disconnect that went far beyond issues of mistranslation and different experiences. I realized that I was trying to find the Burmese queer community out of the assumption that one already exists. Different and locally specific in certain ways perhaps, but recognizable nonetheless. In a sense, I was trying to find not only a community, but also community with people I thought I shared some fundamental sameness with.

In this chapter, I explore the question of whether there are distinctly Burmese sexual and gender practices or identities, and how or if communities are structured around these practices and identities. Southeast Asia especially, with its multiplicity of sexual and gender expressions, has been, in recent decades, a particularly favored region in which to explore this question of how universal gender and sexual practices and identities actually are[6]. Myanmar, though less

[5] I use "them" as a gender neutral singular pronoun to refer to many of my interlocutors to reflect the gender-neutral သူ that is the most commonly used pronoun in Burmese, and the intentionally ambiguous gender presentation of many of these individuals. I use gendered pronouns for those who have clearly indicated a preference to me.
[6]Some examples include Megan J. Sinnott's 2004 book, *Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand*; Amporn Marddent's 2007 book, *Sexual Culture Among Young Migrant Muslims in Bangkok*; Sharyn Graham Davies' 2010 book, *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam, and Queer Selves;*

studied, is no exception. This chapter will build upon and respond to the work of scholars who write on issues of gender and sexuality in Myanmar, such as David Gilbert, Lynette J. Chua, Tamara Ho, and Ward Keeler[7]. I approach this subject with an interdisciplinary methodology, combining ethnography, primary source analysis, and discourse analysis.

How Do You Say "Gay" In Burmese?

I was headed to dinner one night with some cousins, sitting in the back of a converted pickup truck, the sort that is ubiquitous in the streets of Myanmar, when one suddenly stood up, pointed at some pedestrians, and yelled "အခြောက်။ အခြောက်။" (/*Achau'! Achau'*/). The whole car burst into laughter as we sped past the group. We did not know if they were men who were cross-dressing, trans women, or individuals performing other forms of gender expression. We certainly did not know what kind of sex these people have or want to have. All my cousin knew was that they were not behaving "correctly," and he felt the urge to point it out as loudly and publicly as he could. He seemed quite pleased with himself, and gave me a knowing look. I stared back blankly. Unsatisfied with my lack of response, he told me "သူတို့က *gay* လေး။" (/*Thu dou. ka. gay lei*/ They are gay), thinking my lack of amusement or excitement was due to my not understanding the Burmese term.

Achau' is an interesting word, and I heard two main etymologies for it during my research. The literal translation of *achau'* is "dry". It can be used to describe anything from

Julian C.H. Lee's 2011 book, *Policing Sexuality: Sex, Society, and the* State; Audrey Yue and Jun Zubillaga-Pow's 2012 book, *Queer Singapore: Illiberal Citizenship and Mediated Cultures;* Arnika Fuhrmann's 2016 book, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai* Cinema; and Shawna Tang's 2017 book, *Postcolonial Lesbian Identities in Singapore: Re-Thinking Global Sexualities.* Not to mention all the articles and conference papers on this topic.

[7] See David Gilbert's 2013 article, "Categorizing Gender in Queer Yangon"; David Glibert and Lynette J. Chua's 2015 article, "Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Minorities in Transition": LGBT Rights and Activism in Myanmar; Tamara Ho's 2009 article, "Transgender, Transgression, and Translation: A Cartography of 'Nat Kadaws'"; and Ward Keeler's 2016 article, "Shifting Transversals: Trans Women's Move from Spirit Mediumship to Beauty Wok in Mandalay.

drying one's hair after bathing to dried fish. Used when labelling people as an *achau'*, this dryness is said to denote either the lack of lubrication imagined to be involved in anal sex, or the dryness of the sperm (or lack thereof) emitted by those seen as inadequately masculine. These two definitions do not seem to be mutually exclusive, as informants who have told me one definition often gave the other as well. My cousin on the other hand, defined it as the Burmese equivalent of the English word "gay." In that moment, however, the English equivalents that most immediately came to mind were faggot and dyke. Cars full of strangers do not often scream the word gay at people in the United States, at least not in my experience.

Yet, *achau'* is also used in less violent contexts. The two young women who run a noodle stand a few blocks from where I was staying in Yangon call each other ဝက်မ (/*wet'ma*./) and အခေါက်မ (/*achau'ma*./), or Miss Pig and Miss *achau'* (မ/*ma*./ being a modifier used to feminize words). In this case, these seem to be terms of endearment between the two women, one fat and the other always sporting short hair and baggy jeans. In fact, after a summer of eating at their stand, I never heard them call each other by their actual names. In these interactions, faggot or dyke no longer work as translations. *Achau'* like many other Burmese terms surrounding gender, sexuality, and their intersections morph as they are used, and resist easy translation into English.

At this point, I realize I still have not given an adequate translation of *achau',* at least not one that points to a specific action or identity that may lead individuals to be labelled or label themselves as *achau'*. In the end, my cousin may have inadvertently given the best translation. It may be "gay", for all its nebulousness, that is the best English equivalent for *achau'* after all. They are both words that toggle between description, slur, and umbrella term. In the same way a man who has sexual intercourse with other men may identify as gay; a particularly boring

television is called gay; and two women can get gay married, *achau'* is difficult to define, but you know it when you see it.

Achau' is not the only term that has an uneasy relationship with English. Gay and homo also make appearances in the queer scene in Yangon, but they seem to have departed from their common English usage. Ko Hein Kyaw Tun, a self-identified "openly gay man" from Yangon, said during a conversation (in English) about terminology in Myanmar, "Only trans [people] are out in the open. So, *gay* becomes trans [people] in Myanmar, and gays start to adopt the term *homo* to describe themselves"[8]. What he meant is that either by choice or simply hypervisibility, people whom those educated in a Western context may identify as trans women are the public face of queerness in Myanmar. So, the English word "gay", as a fairly well recognized word, becomes attached to these individuals as *gay*. The response of local individuals who may fit under the category of "gay" in a different context, in Great Britain for example, thus adopt *homo* as an identity term. So, while gay and homo may have synonymous meanings in English, *gay* and *homo* become terms that indicate gender and sexuality respectively in Burmese.

This is an expression of what Tom Boellstorff calls dubbing culture, wherein "two elements are held together in productive tension without the expectation that they will resolve into one […] a relationship more intimate than dialogue, but more distinct that monologue" (Boellstorff 2005, 5). Like a movie that has been imported and dubbed over with the local language, the final product is novel for being something that could only have come out of this unique set of interactions. Here, questions of authenticity or indigeneity are not particularly productive. In the context of urban Myanmar, where people's lives are always already in conversation with dub-able material, it is more interesting to ask how and why these terms come

[8] All names and other identifying information have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.

to be used in this way, and the new meanings they take on because of this process. For queer terminology in Myanmar, this process is deeply influenced by the activist networks that are active throughout the country.

Transnational Activist Web/Sites

The following is a phone conversation I had with a receptionist at the Colors Rainbow, an LGBT rights organization in Myanmar, office. We spoke in Burmese, and I provide the translated transcript below. I have left the terms of address we used untranslated.

Receptionist: Hello?

Me: Hello, အကို (*/akou/* older brother). Is this Colors Rainbow?

Receptionist: Yes, this is အမ */a ma.* (older sister). How can ကျွန်တော် */kjundo/* (literally meaning slave, but commonly used to mean I in formal settings) help you?

Me: ညီမ */njima./* (meaning younger sister and used here to refer to myself in the third person) is a graduate student from Cornell University, and is trying to find out more information about LGBT people in Myanmar.

Receptionist: Of course, ဆရာမ */hsajama./* (teacher) let me connect you.

This was my first interaction with any official member of the queer activist networks in Yangon. In some ways, it was familiar. To speak to a Burmese person for the very first time is to engage in a game of status chicken. The words used to refer to oneself and the other person constantly shift due to continuous reading and analysis of social and verbal cues given by both parties to determine the proper way to address one another. These cues are both relational and static, where age is a key factor. This is additionally complicated by education level, occupation, and social status. However, if the point of a traditional game of chicken is to force the other party

to yield, the point of this Burmese version is to figure out whose role it is to yield. These honorifics can often determine whose voices are most sought after and taken most seriously.

During my fieldwork, though I often wanted to use the honorifics for daughter, student, and younger sister to refer to myself, I was almost invariably referred to by others as *hsajama.*, meaning teacher. It is a strange position to be placed in as a researcher, especially a master's student. Whereas I saw myself as someone trying to gain knowledge, my interlocutors regarded me as someone there to impart it. It was quite jarring, and I quickly realized that, at least while I was acting in my role as a researcher, I was in a position of power. In the weeks that followed, a consistent script developed for almost every phone call and introduction, the basic formula of which almost exactly mirrors my first conversation with the receptionist at Colors Rainbow. Being positioned as a *hsajama.* gave me access to events, resources, and people my youth and lack of social capital might normally have disqualified me from. My Ivy League status, presumed knowledge of all things queer, and general Americanness were assets to trade with. A path was cleared for me, but that also meant that I was expected to lead the way.

This duality was difficult to miss. An especially memorable moment was a lunch conversation I had with an acquaintance, *hsajama.* Phyu Phyu Min, a professor at a university in Yangon. She is a friend of a friend, and this lunch was originally meant to be a break from fieldwork. Of course, being a "foreigner" in Myanmar, it is almost impossible to avoid the question of why you are there. After explaining my research to her, h*sajama.* Phyu informed me of a gender and sexuality workshop taking place at her university later in the summer. I told her I would not be able to go, as the workshop would take place after I would have already returned to the U.S. Her response was that if I could not attend the workshop, I should give a lecture in her

class on my research topic at her college instead. I went to Myanmar to learn, and was asked to teach.

Where does this expectation come from? I argue that this (mis)understanding of my activities in Myanmar is a combination of the role the United States government has fashioned for itself as a global defender of LGBT rights, the relations that have been fostered between the queer organizations, foreign embassies, and international non-governmental organizations over the past few years, and the educational and outreach activities of the queer organizations in Myanmar. In this thesis, I focus entirely on organizations and events that primarily use English and Burmese. This is partially a matter of convenience for me. However, it is also a testament to the dominance of these two languages in queer activist spaces in Myanmar. With so many different international actors, Myanmar's British colonial past, and the influence of the United States today, English became the lingua franca of these organizations and activists. More than that, English began to be seen as the language in which queer knowledge was contained, knowledge that now needed to be translated and transmitted. By virtue of my subject position, I was now a conduit for this knowledge. However, I quickly learned that, as with *gay* and *homo*, just because we were saying the same words, did not always mean we were speaking the same language.

In recent years, the United States has carefully and intentionally crafted an image of itself as a global defender of LGBT rights. For example, on December 6, 2011 then Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered a speech to the United Nations in honor of International Human Rights Day. She spoke movingly of "the work we have left to do to protect one group of people whose human rights are still denied in too many parts of the world today […] LGBT citizens" (Clinton 2011). This speech is one that universalizes human rights, collapses the distinction

between person and citizen, and frames a state's (eventual) protection of human rights as an inevitable part of development. This is made clear in the language that is used. She speaks of the importance of being "on the right side of history", the need for all nations to participate in "the march toward progress", and her own "evolution" of thought (Clinton 2011). She clearly defines the protection of LGBT rights as a necessary part of progress, evolution, and civilization.

Though Clinton acknowledges the history of violence against LGBT people in the United States, and the need to do more work, what she highlights is the United States' triumph over bigotry, not the bigotry itself. She does this by choosing relatively less violent examples when talking about the U.S. The legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015 is celebrated as the exemplar of the evolution of laws and attitudes in the United States. However, it was not until 2014 that California became "the first state in the U.S. to officially ban the use of 'trans panic' and 'gay panic' defenses in court" to justify the murder and assault of gay and trans people and lessen the charges or sentences of the attackers, and as of this writing, many states still allow gay or trans panic to be used as a defense in murder trials (Molloy 2014). This violence is tied to U.S. religious and cultural beliefs. Yet, Clinton states that when other nations, emphasis on the other, "cite religious or cultural values as reasons to violate or not to protect the human rights of LGBT citizens […] this is not unlike the justifications offered for violent practices towards women like honor killing, widow burning, or female genital mutilation" (Clinton 2011). Even when violence in the U.S. is recognized, it is still framed as more civilized and less brutal than the violence of the Other. In this configuration, the U.S. is always perceived as being a step ahead of non-Western countries.

Violence against LGBT people is characterized as "one of the remaining human rights challenges of our times" (Clinton 2011). Clinton says that "[i]t is because the human experience

is universal that human rights are universal, and cut across all religions and cultures." The implicit message here: human rights are universal, oppression is not. Oppression and violence are location based. They are rooted in the religion and culture of "hostile places" (Clinton 2011). The racist language of the enlightened West and the barbaric East has been replaced by the language of progressive pro-homo countries and cultural anti-homo countries, with the United States at the top of the ladder. As such, it is common for my Burmese interlocutors to share the view that the "Obama administration defends the human rights of LGBT people as part of our comprehensive human rights policy, and as a priority of our foreign policy" (Clinton 2011)[9]. They are constantly exposed to the narrative of this United States as the world leader when it comes to human rights, especially LGBT rights.

This hyperawareness of the United States stems in part from the role the country has taken in leading the sanctions movement against the former military regime in Myanmar. It is also related to the deeply personal investments U.S. political leaders have in promoting democracy in Myanmar. Sanctions were placed on Myanmar in 1997 under President Clinton, continued and expanded under President Bush, and were finally lifted by President Obama, all with the approval of Congress. Despite great political changes and legislative power changing hands multiple time, support for democratic change in Myanmar seems to be one of the few things most U.S. government officials can agree on. During a conversation I had with Derek Mitchell, the former U.S. ambassador to Myanmar, when he came to speak at Cornell, he said that Burma was "one of the few truly bipartisan issues that ever comes across the floor of

[9] It is difficult to say how the Trump administration and its foreign policy decisions will impact this dynamic. Much of my research was conducted before Presidents Trump was elected or took office. As Trump represents a much more isolationist worldview than Obama or Clinton, and the U.S. plays such an outsized role in Myanmar, it is likely that queer organizations and activists in Myanmar will need to make dramatic changes in the coming years.

Congress"[10]. Indeed, The New York Times recently ran an article detailing the long friendship between Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Chancellor of Myanmar. Senator McConnell "introduced the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act in 2003" and worked with Secretary Clinton in 2009 to plan her trip to Myanmar (Steinhauer 2016). The 2012 – 2013 academic year was the inaugural year of the J. William Fulbright – Hillary Rodham Clinton Fellowship, named to "honor former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton for her dedication to public service and role in the program's creation" (us.fullbrightonline.org). In 2014, President Obama became the first United States president to visit Myanmar. Thus, the U.S. and its political actors are often held in high esteem in the eyes of the Burmese public.

These connections to the U.S., to the "outside" world, were deeply valued by those in Myanmar. They served as reminders that they were not forgotten even as the political situation showed no signs of changing in the 1990s and early 2000s. For those Burmese people working to bring about political and social change in Myanmar, the U.S. and those acting on behalf of the U.S. government are the epitome of people who use their liberty to promote the liberties of others. The United States and specific political actors like Clinton and Obama come to be seen as the defenders of human rights, and the saviors of Myanmar (queers).

However, U.S. policies and sanctions are not the only place that queer organizations turn to for hope or material support. Colors Rainbow works with the U.S. embassy in Yangon to host youth forums to discuss issues of gender and sexuality. &Proud, a Yangon based group that organizes an annual queer film festival, partners with the French Institute to organize, advertise, and host that event. YG Events, an organization that focuses on socialization and parties, works

[10] David Mitchell consistently refers to the country as Burma.

with international DJ to host queer club nights and drag balls at a local club. There is a whole host of different queer organizations and allied groups active in Myanmar focusing, or perhaps specializing is a better word, on different aspects of queer activism, and none of the ones I encountered work without some kind of international partnership.

This is due in part to the history of these organizations and their intellectual lineages. This history largely begins in Thailand. During the more repressive years of the military regime, many of the human rights organizations and organizers worked out of Thailand and were deeply influenced by their time there. Thailand was an attractive base of operation. In addition to being physically accessible via a long land border, Thailand is also a Theravada Buddhist country. One activist told me that "Thailand is a good model. We want Thai-style acceptance, not American chaos". Thailand is a vitally important and influential source of knowledge and resources, not least of which comes in the form of Thai movies and shows that feature queer characters. In addition to this, the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma, now known as Equality Myanmar, was originally based in Thailand[11]. This organization gave rise to Colors Rainbow, which is the ancestor organization to &Proud, Rays of Rainbow, and YG Events, all prominent queer NGOs operating in Yangon today. In contemporary Myanmar, it would be difficult to find a queer activist or organization lacking some original connection to Colors Rainbow. Colors Rainbow has been active for ten years now, active inside of Myanmar for four, and has trained "over 400 participants from LGBT communities in Burma and Burmese border areas" including "[r]representatives from 20 Burmese LGBT CBOs [community based organizations]"[12].

[11] According to their Facebook page, the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma is an non-governmental organization that "facilitates a broad range of human rights training and advocacy programs for grassroots organizations and community leaders" for issues related to Myanmar founded in 2000 ((Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (H.E.R.I.B) n.d.).

[12]Colors Rainbow. "Background." colorsrainbow.com. http://www.colorsrainbow.com/background/ (accessed January 22, 2017)

Contemporary gender and sexuality activism is deeply influenced by these networks of knowledge and people as well as more uniquely Burmese understandings and practices of gender and sexuality.

A History of (Burmese) Sexuality

For those interested in Burmese queer terminology, I would refer you to David Gilbert's "Categorizing Gender in Queer Yangon", as it provides an overview of colloquial terms used by queer-identified individuals in contemporary Yangon. For the purposes of this project, I do not think it is particularly useful to rehash this terminology here. I would not be able to add much to Gilbert's scholarship. Though if I could, it would be to address the relative dearth of terminology for women loving women and trans men. Men, and those who are treated as men, have much greater freedom of movement, especially at night. I often had to meet the non-trans women, and the people who are treated as women, during the day, often at their workplaces. As such, it was much easier for me to meet with those coded as men by the larger society. In turn, many of the people my initial informants introduced me were often also men and trans women. In turn, the lack of opportunity to socialize as a group seems to lead to a lack of terminology as well. Many of these women and trans men live in relative isolation from one another, especially in comparison to *gays* and *homos*. Their networks are not nearly as wide. Additionally, as Gilbert argues, you cannot translate or contextualize terminology that seems to shift every time it is used. In Yangon, "[n]etworks of individuals can move in and out, and alter their *image* without articulating their subject position", and use terms as objects of convenience rather than as static bundles of meaning (Gilbert 2013, 266).

Instead, I will focus on the practices of queerness and LGBT identity as an emergent phenomenon. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, Michel Foucault writes, "sodomy was a

category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage […] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault 1978, 43). Foucault charts a transition from identifying people who commit certain sexual acts to identifying people with certain sexual acts. I would argue that in some places in the world there has been a further transition of people identifying as people who are identified with certain sexual acts. So, the person who commits sodomy becomes a gay man (who is gay because he commits sodomy) becomes a gay man (who is a gay man because he experiences the world as someone who is labeled as a gay man because he commits sodomy). It is true for me at least, that when I say that I identify as bisexual, I am not only making a statement about my sexual desires and practices, but also identifying myself with others who, because of their desires and practices, I assume I share some social solidarity with. I argue that in Myanmar this second transition, the transition from species to community member, is in process.

This is not to say that the transition from aberration to species to community member is inevitable or universal. Already, the Burmese case challenges Foucault's scholarship. He writes from a European-oriented context, which is also necessarily a Christian-oriented context, filled with notions of sin and a creator-god. In Myanmar, with its Buddhism-dominated understandings of karma and multiple lives, the sodomite is only a temporary aberration in that one life eventually ends and another begins. Rather to be born as someone who has the desire to commit sodomy is in some ways as much an aberration as the actual act itself. To be born with these queer desires is taken as evidence that one is living the consequence of bad karma from previous lives. A common explanation by Burmese people for why some people are queer is that they are individuals who committed adultery in a previous life. Whereas in the context in which Foucault

writes, sodomy can and should be punished, in Myanmar the desire to commit sodomy is already a punishment in itself. At this point, it should be noted that I am mainly addressing the belief system of urban Burmese lay Buddhists. The hegemonic nature of their beliefs may inform the beliefs of those who do not fit into this category, but it would be irresponsible to assume those of different social, geographic, and especially religious backgrounds share these exact beliefs.

For many in Myanmar, those who deviate from sexual or gender norms are more akin to those born with serious birth defects than those who steal or commit acts of violence. While there is a colonial era law that is still in effect today, Penal Code 377, that criminalizes "unnatural sex", most Buddhists in Myanmar do not have a framework to conceptualize consensual sex acts between adults as against nature, only against accepted societal norms. Instead, I would argue that a Burmese Buddhist framework understands queerness as a break in what Judith Butler calls "the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire", the idea that one's sex determines one's gender and one's gender in turn determines one's sexual desires (Butler 1990, 6). The dominant ideology surrounding gender, sexuality, and their intersections in Myanmar is that the correct order of things is, for example, of females being feminine and being attracted to males, where if one condition is true the other two must follow. Any divergence from that is against the norm perhaps, but not unnatural. While Butler was mostly writing about an American context, her framework is also useful for characterizing dominant norms surrounding gender and sexuality in Myanmar. Being someone who does not possess "correct" sex/gender/desire is completely natural in the Buddhist Burmese worldview; it is just not an ideal way to be born.

This is reflected in both the language and the ways in which queer people are treated in Myanmar. ယောကျ်ားလျာ /*yu'kasha*/ and မိန်းမလျာ /*mein:masha*/ are two terms often used to refer to those outside of idealized sex/gender/desire. *yu'kasha* refers to those deemed to be women, but

not behaving as and having the sexual desire of women; *mein:masha* to those deemed to be men, and not behaving as and having the sexual desire of men. It is polite, if a bit clunky, and almost never used as a term of self-identification. During a discussion with Ma Chit Su Win, an informant I met at one of the queer club nights, on the histories of these terms, she told me that they derive from *jau'kjaaloun* and *mein:maaloun*, meaning one who is a candidate to be a man and woman respectively. This grammatical construction of adding *aloun* to the ends of nouns in Burmese is also used to refer to the Buddha in his lives before he achieved Buddhahood, as wells as those running for elected office while they are still candidates. To call someone *yu'kasha* or *mein:masha* is to call them someone in the process of becoming a man or a woman. Where Buddhahood is something to be achieved through extraordinary merit, "proper" sex/gender/desire is easily accomplished by most people. Additionally, candidates hope to quickly shed their *aloun* status, but *yu'kasha* and *mein:masha* are stuck in transition. They are not exactly unnatural, but definitely out of karmic balance[13]. This fits into a world view in which the way we are born, including everything from our appearance to personality traits, is dictated by accumulated karma from previous lives.

Drawing a connection between Buddhism, karma, and sex/gender/desire is something done by both the laity and monks alike. There was a story circulating during my time in Myanmar of a group of *gays* who had a now infamous (at least within queer circles) incident with a monk they made a donation to. Rumor has it that this is the first *gay* Kahtein donation. While making donations is an everyday ritual for many Burmese people, so much so that Myanmar was ranked one of the most generous countries in the world in 2016 by the Charities Aid Foundation World Giving Index, there is a distinct donation season, a month long period

[13] See also Peter A. Jackson's 1989 book, *Male Homosexuality in Thailand: An Interpretation of Contemporary Thai Sources*, and the 1998 edited volume *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists*, by Winston Leyland.

taking place around October when groups of friends, families, co-workers, and classmates pool their resources to give large donations to monasteries and monks[14]. This season, Kahtein, is an important time for individuals to provide material support to monks and monasteries, and it also functions as a sort of bonding or reaffirming ritual for the groups performing the donations. In addition to the actual donation ritual itself, the group providing the donation also spend days, if not weeks, raising money, shopping for the donation items, and preparing the food to be donated. This process creates merit both for the individuals, and the group as a whole, and it is often said that people who generate merit together in one life will meet again in another. This ritual binds together the people involved in the donation event in this life as a cohesive social group, and also in future lives as a karmically intertwined group.

So, a group of *gays* walk into a monastery… and they are welcomed. They come bearing donations of money, monk robes, and food, and are graciously received by the head monk and his accolades. Everyone in the donating party is dressed to impress. They are wearing their best outfits, with sarongs sewn from silk and velvet, intricately embroidered tops, Burmese gemstones glittering from throats and fingers, perfectly coiffed hair, and expertly applied makeup. The event would have been uneventful, and the group mostly unremarkable, had the monk not delivered a sermon based around a story of a man transforming into a woman as a punishment for his actions, and eventually being transformed back into a man after he generated enough merit to offset his previous bad behaviour. The punishment being becoming a woman, seen as a spiritual demotion, and becoming a man trapped in a woman's body. The monk's message is one of both condemnation and hope. The moral of the story he told seems to be that the past wrongs can result in people becoming *gays*, but through generating good merit could

[14]Charities Aid Foundation. "CAF World Giving Index 2016."cafonline.org. https://www.cafonline.org/about-us/publications/2016-publications/caf-world-giving-index-2016 (accessed December 20, 2016)

change themselves “back”, either in this lifetime or the next. The donors saw the donation ritual through to the end, but word spread quickly. This story now serves as a warning in queer circles against donating as a queer group, and to donate as part of other groups instead to avoid similar problems in the future.

Two things can be seen here. The first is evidence of the second transition I mentioned earlier, a transition from a queer personage to a queer community member. Queerness in Myanmar is the practice of community. The act of individual *gays* coming together as *gays* is relatively new. Performing a donation as an act of community making, actively making an argument that there is something that connects them into a cohesive and identifiable social group is also relatively new. They are making the argument that sex/gender/desire alignment is on a par with familial, work, or school relations as a socially binding force. In doing so, certain sexual practices can open the option of being able to make choices about how one identifies oneself.

The second is a different sort of relationship of queerness with the dominant religious order. The monk’s sermon did not position these donors as outside of the Buddhist spiritual world. They are firmly located in it, albeit as men who are being punished by being turned into the wrong sex. The story that the monk cites points to the androcentrism and sexism that exists in Burmese Buddhism, but used in this context, in reaction to the group of *trans* presenting themselves as a community, it also points to a boundary that has now been crossed. For the people who were circulating this anecdote, the moral of the story was not that monks discriminate against *gays*, but rather that people who are *gays* could go donate so long as they do not go as *gays*.

This tension between these practices of finding community with other individuals possessing non-ideal sex/gender/desire and dominant local understandings of these individuals is

a major force shaping how those who transgress gender and sexual ideals in Myanmar negotiate their understandings of personhood and belonging. One strategy that arises to combat the placement of their subject position as less than ideal in the Burmese-Buddhist moral order is to place themselves in a different narrative of difference.

LGBT and *LGBT*

Martin F. Manalansan IV conceptualizes queerness as being "about messing things up, creating disorder and disruptive commotion within the normative arrangement of bodies, things, spaces, and institutions" (Manalasan 2015, 567). Queerness destabilizes the tidiness of the normal. While Manalansan advocates anti-normativity as a way to achieve possibilities outside the dominant systems of logic, I argue that by layering multiple normative orders and temporalities while strategically shifting between them, queer Burmese activists are creating productively destabilized mess from which to create new frameworks.

Being an *achau'* does not provide leverage in a Buddhist informed framework, but being LGBT can. "LGBT" comes with universal human rights, lovely speeches by progressive politicians and celebrities, and a general global trend towards decriminalization and increased tolerance. Whereas to be an *achau'* is bad because they are born that way, those who are LGBT deserve tolerance because they are born that way. Every page of the Colors Rainbow website proudly proclaims that "LGBT is An Identity", but when these websites and the activists associated with them say LGBT, often they mean *LGBT*[15]. The English acronym, standing for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans, continues to function as an umbrella term in Burmese usage, but undergoes significant changes as it does so. Whereas in the English usage, one belongs under the LGBT umbrella as a group member, in the Burmese usage, one can be an *LGBT*, with no

[15] Colors Rainbow. "Home." colorsrainbow.com. http://www.colorsrainbow.com/ (accessed January 22, 2017)

expectation that one specifies what letter they identify with. For many it becomes a noun, rather than a series of adjectives, that come to mean something along the line of non-normative. This becomes an especially pronounced distinction when listening to those of different formal education levels speak. In casual conversations, those with less formal education, especially less English language education, will often make LGBT plural by saying LGBTတွေ, meaning LGBTs. On the other hand, those with more formal education, are more likely to say LGBTလူတွေ, meaning LGBT people. Yet, there are also instances where LGBT toggles between noun and adjective in the same setting.

Figure 1: &Proud About Page

One clear example of this is in the promotional material for &Proud. In figure 1, we can see that LGBT switches back and forth from being used as an adjective and a noun in the English: LGBT community to LGBTs, back to LGBT identities and LGBT rights. The Burmese text usages of LGBT also echo this. It is hard to write it off as a grammatical mistake, or unfamiliarity with the English usage of the term. &Proud works with the French embassy in Yangon, and have been working with them for years[16]. It seems unlikely that no one would have

[16] Institut Francais Birmanie. "&Proud Yangon LGBT Film Festival." institutfrancais-birmanie.com. http://institutfrancais-birmanie.com/proud-yangon-lgbt-film-festival/ (January 22, 2017)

caught this by now, if it were an error. Further, both the English and Burmese text switches between using LGBT as a noun and an adjective. There seems to be an intentional switching back and forth, between LGBT as this universal category that comes with human rights and international recognition, and "LGBTs" as a distinctly Burmese term. The Burmese intentional misappropriation of English words shows that "LGBT" is not necessarily universal, but can be tweaked and localized to make it make sense in Myanmar. This requires a Burmesization of the term. It cannot simply function as a loanword inserted to capture an idea that cannot be expressed in Burmese, rather it is integrated into the language, thus taking on new meanings that overlap and intersect with the older ones. LGBT becomes dubbed as *LGBT*.

In doing so Burmese queers resist being fully incorporated into the global discourse surrounding LGBT issues and displace Buddhist-informed frameworks that marginalize them. Shifting from *achau'* to *LGBT* allows Burmese queers to bypass rather than directly address a dominant system of logic that renders them less than ideal human beings. The question of karma and past and current lives is no longer pertinent if the conversation has shifted to questions of evolution of thought and being on the right side of history. The temporality that matters now is the long linear arch of history rather than the cyclical time of multiple lives and reincarnation. They trade in this narrative of non-idealness for a narrative of non-normativity. Being non-normative, and oppressed, they now deserve access to international aid, money, and attention. It also allows them access to using the normative discourse surrounding democracy and progress. Yet, the process of changing LGBT to *LGBT* before it can be used effectively in Myanmar also challenges the universal applicability of LGBT, and further resist the translation and classification of Burmese terms in an English framework. It is a mess, and it is a productive one.

LGBT functions as a goal, an end point. In the process of reaching this goal, *LGBT*s emerge. Where the *achau'* is an individual, LGBT/*LGBT* is a part of the local and global community. I think we can say that the notion of and desire for an inclusive LGBT community is a modern and intrinsically transnational idea, while simultaneously maintaining that *LGBT* is a continuation of historically local ideas and practices. This flexibility, the ability to switch between LGBT and *LGBT*, allows for activism that needs to appeal to local sensibilities yet still be legible enough to receive international attention and funds. It is an activism that is as normative and non-normative as the situation requires.

Local Nat Kadaw and Foreign Gays

Another example of how Burmese queers negotiate between local inclusion and foreign legibility can be seen through an examination of the figure of the *nat kadaw*. The Burmese *nat kadaw* "functions as a professional ritualist, shaman, and entertainer, translating the realms of the supernatural and human, usually for a fee. The term *nat kadaw*, literally "'lord-consort,' […] refers to people who are possessed or 'loved by' one or more supernatural beings called nat, a flexible term with connotations of sexuality" (Ho 2009, 274). These connotations are the subject of debate between scholars.

On one hand, in Western representations from the past few decades, the figure of the *nat kadaw* has been celebrated for providing Burmese "transvestites […] a position of power and prestige in a society that would otherwise scorn them" (Salak n.d.) Through such celebrations *nat kadaw* are "often miscategorized and unevenly transposed into Western frames of language and epistemology" (Ho 2009, 273). There is a tendency to try to "place" the *nat kadaw* in relation to the homosexual, the trans woman, the crossdresser. Additionally, these individuals are also often compared to the U.S. drag queen, Thai *kathoey*, and Indian *hijra* in documentaries, news articles,

and academic work, further separating the *nat kadaw* from their Burmese and Buddhist roots. On the other hand, some have argued that the *nat kadaw* represents an unaltered and wholly Burmese tradition, because "Burma has been isolated from foreign visitors and scientists since shortly after World War II [….] This political, social, and cultural isolation has preserved cultural traditions of long standing" (Eli Coleman 1992, 314). The *nat kadaw* comes to occupy two extremes, as either the Burmese version of a transnational gender category, or a purely Burmese Buddhist phenomenon without connections to the outside world. The one constant seems to be the agreement that *nat kadaw* are those who transgress masculinity and maleness. Yet, a closer look at the evidence shows that even that is contestable.

The assumption is that the role of *nat kadaw* is occupied by people who deviate from acceptable sex/gender/desire, and that this is a historical constant that provides evidence of Myanmar's tacit acceptance of gender and sexual deviance. In their paper, Coleman et al. claim once a man or boy becomes a *nat kadaw*, "he will never be like other men. Instead, he takes on the characteristics of the female spirit and will always be an acault [an older romanization of *achau'*] in his behavior and feelings. […] The Burmese seem to accept that, once invaded by the nat's spirit, the boy or man has little choice but to accept his status as an acault" ((Eli Coleman 1992, 315). The authors assume all *nat* kadaw occupy some form of transgressive masculinity, *acault* being a sort of catch all term for transgressive males. Over two decades later, Ward Keeler makes a similar assumption, arguing that though they were "[l]ong active as spirit mediums, trans women have become increasingly important players in the beauty business in Mandalay" (Keeler 2016, 792).

Yet according to Tamara Ho, historically "Burmese women have been the predominant practitioners in a wide range of rituals related to propitiating nats. […] In the mid-twentieth

century, few nat kadaws were male: 3-4 percent according to one local estimate in the early 1960s" (Ho 2009, 274). Ho further supports her claims through an analysis of the film, *The Legend of Lady Hill,* a 2008 supernatural melodrama produced by a Burmese film company featuring a female *nat kadaw*, to show that female *nat kadaw* are still common. More evidence for the female *nat kadaw* is provided in *Burmese Drama,* a book by U Maung Htin Aung published in 1937. In it he provides a history of the origins of Burmese dramas and the players who bring them to life. He writes that the predecessors of actors in 13th century Myanmar were *nat kadaw*. Performers were scouted from unsatisfied or unsuccessful *nat kadaw*.

> To break away from the tradition and the conservatism, persons outside the pale of 'good' society were needed. Spirit dancers were such persons. They worshipped the *nats* and most people looked upon them with fear as being in touch with sinister and unnatural forces. They were outside the religion, and their drunken dances – drunken from wine and ecstasy – were outside the popular conception of moral behavior. Therefore, the new professional actors were drawn from the ranks of the spirit mediums. (Aung 1937, 9).

Spirit mediums were the obvious choice, because, according to Maung Htin Aung, "[t]he economic attractions of spirit dancing tempted people who had no faith in the spirits to become mediums" (Aung 1937, 10). These people were already acting, already marginal, and were mostly (non-trans) women.

> The real religion of the Burmese before the reintroduction of Buddhism in 1056 was animistic, and they worshipped various spirits, known as nats. There were mediums, mostly women, who danced to please the spirits, and as the spirits were supposed to enter into the bodies of the mediums, sometimes it was believed that the spirits, and not the mediums were actually dancing. Sometimes the medium herself believed that a spirit had taken control of her body, but usually she only pretended that a spirit had entered her, and gave an exhibition of acting. (Aung 1937, 5).

Based on this evidence, there has been a demographic shift of the sorts of people who become *nat kadaw*, as well as a shift from perceiving those who are *nat kadaw* as generally socially transgressive people at the margins of society to seeing them almost exclusively as trans

women and cross-dressers. In a way, it is through Western scholarship and interpretation that the *nat kadaw* became an "authentic" and "indigenous" expression of queerness. Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation provides a useful framework to understand the transition of people who are *nat kadaws* from being transgressive to being *trans* (Althusser 2014). It is not that there were not, or are not people who may identify as trans women or fit that categorization, but that the entire practice became a queer practice because it was hailed as a queer practice. Like the use of *LGBT*s as an identity, regarding *nat kadaws* as an indigenous queer practice is the uniquely Burmese result of modern flows of information and power. Through this revisionist history of the *nat kadaw*, *LGBT*s now have a history and a narrative that falls within the realm of the recognizably foreign.

For queer people in Myanmar, their notions of personhood and belonging are deeply influenced by local as well as translocal understandings of gender, sexuality, and desire. These influences, themselves interrelated and interwoven, govern the framework through which queerness is recognized and understood. Further complicating the matter in the contemporary context, queer Myanmar people, especially queer activists, find themselves suspended in webs of unexpectedly transnational connections. Queerness becomes just as much about the physical and bodily practices as it is about community making, both in Myanmar and on the international stage. The Myanmar case demonstrates that there is no authentic indigenous queerness, or queer identities that are not always already being shaped by supposedly "outside" forces; queerness is shaped by continuities rather than ruptures. In recent times, to be queer in Myanmar is an experience of being, while simultaneously becoming something else. It is characterized by its flexibility. Given increasing globalization and the nationalist backlash against it across the globe, this framework of understanding queerness can help foster more inclusive notions of what it

means to queer on the global and local stages by allowing for an understanding of queerness that does not need to appeal to authenticity or universality to be taken seriously.

CHAPTER 2

TO BE OR TO CHOOSE TO BE LGBT

Myanmar *LGBT* activists work in a necessarily transnational context due to the way queer knowledge and discourses proliferate globally and are incorporated locally. This process is at once an inevitable result of uneven power dynamics between modern nations and globalization, and intentionally cultivated by *LGBT* activists in Myanmar. It seems fair to say that in the last few decades, the general global trend has been towards the decriminalization of sodomy and a celebration of tolerance, however begrudging. Additionally, this gradual shift is largely accepted as progress and a success of democracy. As Myanmar's government initiates and continues economic and social reforms, and the country and its denizens become more interconnected with the rest of the world, Myanmar's lack of "progress" on this front becomes a useful tool for *LGBT* activists to use as moral leverage to enact change. Here, the strategy to combat institutional violence is one of subverting the old moral order and supplanting a new one. This is accomplished in part by fostering temporal and spatial mobility for queer Burmese subjects. By positioning discrimination and intolerance as unmodern, undemocratic, and provincial, *LGBT* activists can frame themselves as harbingers of democracy and modernity. The goal of *LGBT* activism in Myanmar is not to gain acceptance from the margins, but to relocate the center in both time and space.

Strategic Truths

In June of 2016, the U.S. Embassy organized a range of events and a social media campaign in honor of Pride Month, an event normally celebrated in the U.S. to commemorate the Stonewall riots of 1969 first celebrated in 2000 under President Clinton, and celebrated annually

starting during President Obama's tenure[17]. One of these events was a forum organized by the American Center in Yangon in partnership with Colors Rainbow, on the theme of "Youth and Tolerance". The forum, consisted of a quick speech by an embassy official who stated that President Obama believes that "LGBT rights are human rights" and that it was the official foreign policy of the U.S. to "prioritize LGBT rights globally". This represents another instance in which LGBT is situated as a universally applicable category and is associated with a globalized notion of human rights, and the United States' position as a leader in the fight for LGBT rights is reaffirmed. This was followed by a panel discussion by the two invited speakers from Colors Rainbow, who spoke, in English, on the criminalization of *LGBT*s in Myanmar and the importance of understanding and tolerance towards *LGBT*s.

This specific event was a part of a larger series of forums intended to be a space for young people in Yangon interested in practicing listening to and speaking, as well as participate in discussion about global topics. As such, the majority of the approximately fifty attendees were those who have access to high quality English instruction and anticipate using it outside of the country at some point, meaning that the majority of the attendees are relatively well off, even by Yangon standards. Many of them have access to foreign English language media, and are relatively well informed of events happening outside of Myanmar. Where the event became interesting was when the floor was opened to questions from the audience.

The first question that caught my attention was an audience member asking for the Burmese translation for "LGBT". The speakers responded by saying that they do not want to translate the words into Burmese because the Burmese terms "are all offensive with hurtful

[17] Pride Month has only been celebrated nine time in the U.S. Once under President Clinton, and the rest under Obama. It remains to be seen whether President Trump will continue the tradition, or follow the lead of his Republican predecessor, President George W. Bush.

meanings", and they do not want to repeat them here. The speakers stated that they prefer to use the English terms, even when speaking in Burmese, and encouraged the audience to refrain from using these Burmese terms, should they already know them.

For the speakers to commit to only using English terminology is not without risk. It is a common enough phenomenon for anti-queer rhetoric in formerly colonized countries to adopt the stance that queerness is a foreign import that did not exist in the country before colonization or increased globalization. Committing to only English terminology risks strengthening that argument, and being less accessible to lower income and rural queer people in Myanmar who may not have the privilege to have access to enough English language instruction to access these terms. Yet, it can also align *LGBT*s with the rest of the world and with the (inevitable) future. In this configuration, *LGBT*s are cosmopolitan citizens of the world. They are part of something beyond Myanmar. This international alignment comes through in the media produced by *LGBT* activists.

Rainbow Magazine, a quarterly Burmese language magazine produced by Colors Rainbow, is one example of this. While in Myanmar, I obtained eight issues of the magazine. Although this is only approximately quarter of the existing publications, some trends can still be discerned from a reading of these eight issues. The magazine, though written for a Burmese audience, focuses on a wide range of issues from a wide range of countries and regions. These eights issues alone included texts on Argentina, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Cuba, England, France, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Israel, Ivory Coast, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Nepal, Nigeria, Peru, Rome, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, Senegal, Singapore, Slovakia, South Africa, Taiwan, Thailand, Uruguay, Uganda, the United States, Vienna, and Wales. The United States was the best represented,

making up over one third of the pieces focused on countries other than Myanmar, at thirty-four articles. Russia and Thailand come in second and third at eleven and eight articles covering them respectively. What this shows is *LGBT*s actively framing themselves as part of an international community, with similar struggles and interests, be it updates on laws, celebrities gossip, or short fiction stories. *Rainbow Magazine* is not just informational. The magazine issues are educative. They teach and shape what LGBT comes to mean in Myanmar. Readers of the magazine come to learn not only about LGBT issues across the globe, but that they themselves are global *LGBT*s.

Table 1: *Rainbow Magazine* Articles

Volume Number	Issue Year	Local Focus[18]	International Focus
6	2010	9	19
14	2012	6	17
15	2013	10	13
18	2013	14	11
19	2013	13	11
20	2013	8	19
21	2014	10	18
24	2014	16	19
Total	-	86	127

This is not an unproblematic configuration. Chie Ikeya has written on the reactionary response to, especially young, women during and closely following the period of British colonization. These women were categorized into two main categories; "[t]he educated, patriotic,

[18] I defined as local any articles on Burmese people in Myanmar. All other pieces were classified as having international focus, including one article about Burmese immigrants in Thailand.

and politicized women were joined by another incarnation of the modern woman […] the consumerist woman", also referred to as the "*khit hmi thu*", meaning modern person or person keeping up with the times (Ikeya 2011, 97). In Myanmar, there is a general sense of awareness of the existence of different temporalities, and it is reflected in part in the language people use. Another example would be calendars produced in Myanmar, as many of them note the Gregorian calendar, the Burmese civil calendar, and the Buddhist calendar. Not to mention the difference in understandings of time that would accompany a belief in cyclical, and not linear time, that accompanies a belief in multiple lives and the dhammacakka, or the wheel of dharma. *LGBT*s, in situating themselves as global citizens, run the risk of displacing themselves from their place in the history of the nation-state and its future. Like the young women exploring the new possibilities engendered by colonization, the cosmopolitism of *LGBT*s may also be disparaged as having arrived at modernity incorrectly, of having gone too far.

The second interesting question was on whether it is "sinful in the Christian religion to be gay, because that is what my pastor says". This question sparked a telling exchange between the Buddhist and Christian attendees. The moderator from the embassy who had not spoken much up to this point, decided to step in. He answered that he is also a Christian, and he is gay. He said that in his church, it is taught that being gay is not a sin because people are "born that way". At this point another audience member chimed in saying that, though she does not "personally have a problem with them, they are not accepted, because most Myanmar people are Buddhist and they are born like that". A monk, who was also in attendance, intervened at this point and ended the discussion by saying that Buddhism, like Christianity, teaches loving-kindness and compassion, and that this is what we should focus on.

This was a moment of slight backfiring of transplanting a, what I call, "born this way" discourse into a Buddhist-centric context. In 2017, to say that being queer is a choice in large parts of the U.S. would likely get one labeled as a backwards conservative who is clinging to religion. Yet, for many in Myanmar, a Buddhist majority country, to say that queer people are "born that way" is to condemn them to their current suffering as karmically deserved. Due to the Buddhist underpinnings of a large majority of the country, this is a strategy that cannot work in the same way as in Christian-centric contexts. To argue that people are born that way, created that way by God, has largely proven to be effective in promoting tolerance of queer individuals in countries such as the US. Furthermore, Christian notions of forgiveness, God being the ultimate judge, and the call to "love the sinner, hate the sin", provide additional avenues for the "born this way" discourse to incorporate queer people into the realm of the acceptable. It is a discourse that makes the previously unacceptable acceptable. In Myanmar, it is a discourse that can reaffirm the view of queer people as suboptimal human beings.

Despite that, the born this way discourse continues to be used in Myanmar. In a way, it needs to be for *LGBT*s in Myanmar to maintain their position as part of an international community. They cannot reject something that is widely held as truth, that being queer is not a choice. Despite the risk of alienating themselves from Buddhism-informed temporalities and moral orders, there are clear benefits to be gained from committing to more globalized narratives. At the same time, this is not to say that queer people in Myanmar are not appealing to Buddhist-inflected morality. The *gay* Kathein donation and the monk that was invited to attend this youth forum point to evidence of queer individuals as well as queer activists engaging in activities that maintain their commitment to Burmese norms and morality, even as they are testing the boundaries these norms set. This tension between global and local discourses works to

create new narratives that are simultaneously both and neither. When one line of moral reasoning closes in regard to a specific goal, *LGBT* activists engage in a different one.

Civilization and the Democratic Imperative

India, Malaysia, and Jamaica share with Myanmar not only a common history of British colonization, but also a section of its penal code, Section 377. The Myanmar Penal Code of 1861, Section 377, states, "Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with transportation for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine" (The Penal Code, 1861). This Section is the most direct legal basis for criminalizing sexual acts between people deemed to be of the same sex, and remains in effect as of this writing.

An important distinction to make is that per this legal codification, it is actions, and not identities, that are being criminalized. Paradoxically, even though Section 377 is the law that most explicitly criminalizes homosexual sex acts, in practice it is very rarely used. According to a study conducted by the Human Rights Institute of Burma in 2012, "Section 377 is rarely enforced by police or used in criminal cases against LGBT individuals", and instead police "target gay and transgender individuals by using vaguely defined and broadly formulated laws, such as the 1899 Rangoon Police Act, the 1945 Police Act, and the Criminal Procedure Code" (Facing 377, 14). In fact, the report also states that Section 377 is more often used to prosecute child sexual abuse and same-sex rape than consensual sex between adults. It is generally laws aimed at preventing civil unrest and organized resistance to the government coded as laws that promote public safety and prevent public nuisance that are most often levied against queer people in Myanmar. So, though the direct criminalization of sodomy in Myanmar is arguably a

colonial import, the current manifestation of legal means to criminalize and harass queer Myanmar people is a result of the burmesization of this colonial import, where it has been adapted and supplemented to do the work the contemporary Burmese state requires of it. That work is not necessarily the imprisonment of queer people.

Two cases highlight the relationship between the laws and their enforcement. The first case is the way in which Dr. Myint Kyu, the Border and Security Affairs Minister for the Mandalay region in 2015, characterized ongoing police harassment of trans women and men in drag in Mandalay, many of whom are sex workers. He stated during a parliamentary session that the "existence of gay men who assume they are women is unacceptable and therefore we are constantly taking action to have the gays detained at police stations, educate them, and then hand them back to their parents", adding that "[a]uthorities have been to check on some gay people after being informed they were acting inappropriately with young men and detained nine of them" (hrw.org). Here he is referring to a case in July of 2013, when nine trans women and men in drag were arrested, beaten, and humiliated by police in Mandalay. Most of the group was arrested, educated, and released. One detainee stated that this "education" involved being forced to "do frog jumps, without clothes, and shout that we are not women but men" (outrightinternational.org). Those who were charged were charged with wearing disguises after sunset, which is prohibited by the 1945 Police Act, section 35(c).

In his statement, Dr. Myint Kyu makes a distinction between gay men, and gay men who are behaving inappropriately. In effect, he argues that they are not being persecuted for being gay, for their sexual identity, but for acting gay. The inappropriate behaviour here is basically transgressing sexual and gender norms publicly and visibly. The minister could easily have said that the laws of Myanmar prohibit homosexuality. Instead, his justification for police

intervention and violence is that these individuals present a threat to public safety and order. It would seem that what is offensive to the Myanmar state is not sexual acts committed in private, however "unnatural" they are deemed to be, but undeniably public, yet non-sexual, acts that undermine established gender and sexual norms.

The second case is of what has been repeatedly touted as the first gay marriage in Myanmar. A couple, Ko Tin Ko Ko and Ko Myo Min Htet, have been living together since 2004. They are not legally married, as it is not legal for people of the same sex to marry in Myanmar. In fact, it is illegal according to Myanmar Penal Code 496 to go through the ceremony of being married without being legally married. However, they found themselves at the center of national and international attention after pictures from an event they hosted to celebrate their relationship went viral. In addition to most national media outlets in Myanmar reporting on the event, the Huffington Post, Wall Street Journal, and even Buzzfeed News reported news of the "wedding". According to Ko Tin Ko Ko, "Before the ceremony, we lived our lives in peace and didn't have any problems" because they "dress conservatively and behave conservatively" (McLaughlin, buzzfeed.com). The couple had lived openly as a couple for a decade, in that their neighbors, friends, and co-workers knew, without attracting police attention. Even after this, now very public, ceremony, the couple were not detained or even questioned by the police, though they could be for violation of Myanmar Penal Code 377 and 496. It is quite possible, as Ko Tin Ko Kos suggests, that their good behavior allowed them to stay in the category of "gays," rather than "gays who behave inappropriately."

This is not dissimilar to Peter Jackson's characterization of Thai opposition to homosexuality. According to Jackson there are no "attempts to enforce compliance to heterosexual norms" by either the state or Buddhism, and "[s]o long as a Thai homosexual man

or woman maintains a public face of conforming to normative patterns of masculinity or femininity, respectively, he or she will largely escape sanctions" (Jackson 2008,11). The difference between the state reaction to the group of sex workers versus the couple could point to a disinterest of the state in policing private sexual acts or trying to force enforce heterosexuality. In Myanmar as well, it seems that publicly conforming to heteronormative norms is more valued by the state than privately conforming to heterosexuality.

Those who are put into the latter group are potentially subject to prosecution under the two sections mentioned earlier as well as Section 35 of the 1945 Police Act, but more likely to be prosecuted under Sections 290, 292 and 294, and 269 and 270 of the Penal Code. These sections criminalize being a public nuisance; proliferating obscene materials and acting obscenely in public; and negligently spreading diseases respectively. Additionally, LGBT people in Myanmar are vulnerable to Section 30(d) of the 1899 Rangoon Police Act, which allows police to take into custody without a warrant anyone found near any building or vessel without being able to satisfactorily explain their presence. These laws are vague and grant broad powers to the police, reflecting the history of a colonial government and, later, a military dictatorship that was invested in endowing the government with extensive powers to arrest, detain, and jail unruly subjects[19]. The continued existence and enforcement of these laws under the new democratic regime speaks to the difficulty of reform in Myanmar as well as a lack of political will to do so. The new constitution ratified in 2008 codifies equal rights and protections under the law as well as equal opportunities to pursue education and employment; however, the LGBT people of Myanmar are routinely discriminated against despite these guarantees.

[19] Other forms of state sexual control/intervention include the protection of race and religion laws which control interracial/religious marriage and number of children. Abortion is also criminalized.

Though Section 377 may be a colonial import, the Burmese state has made it its own, and added its own additional laws to supplement it. Given both the religious and cultural reasons for which queer people are held in low regard in Myanmar, it would be difficult to say that homophobia is solely a colonial import. Contemporary discrimination against queer people is more likely a combination of laws and customs building upon one another. It is important to recognize this mixing and building lest efforts to repeal Section 377 or make other political and legal improvements start to make the dangerous claims that either persecution or liberation can only be found in the foreign.

There are dangers in this that can have negative political consequences on the ground in Myanmar. Democracy has come to replace "civilization" as a metric to rank nations in a hierarchy, and legal protections based on issues of gender and sexuality are used as the yardstick for measuring democracy. In addition to Gayatri Spivak's characterization of colonial relations as "white men saving brown women from brown men", modern imperialism also includes white queers saving brown queers from brown culture (Spivak 2003). The white gay's burden, so to speak.

A common critique made by queer scholars and feminist scholars is that mainstream LGBT activism in countries like the United States and Britain prioritizes gay assimilation into existing power structures over radically deconstructing them. This occurs in a highly racialized way where "[w]hite gays and lesbians receive moral and legal citizenship, and in return the ideological legitimation for imperialism" (Haritaworn et al. 26). It is a continuation and revitalization of Orientalist fantasies of an oppressive East that is in need of intervention from liberated Western subjects. Gay assimilation necessarily comes at the price of gay imperialism

(Haritaworn et al. 26). So, in countries that are being "liberated," activists and politicians must always remain aware of the ever-shifting standards to which they are being held.

I argue that this can be extended to characterize the relationship between queer people in Myanmar and the rest of the English-speaking world, especially the United States. One manifestation of this is Equaldex, an online, crowdsourced "LGBT knowledge base" that documents the status of LGBT rights by country, and quite literally ranks nations on an Equality Index (equaldex.com). As a website that relies on crowdsourced data, Equaldex relies on LGBT participants and others who are interested in or knowledgeable about global LGBT issues. However, the kind of data requested and accepted by Equaldex also shapes the ways in which global LGBT issues are understood. A country's ranking is determined by the legality of homosexuality; recognition of same-sex marriages; ability of LGBT people to changing their gender on identifying documents; ability of LGBT people to adopt; general discrimination, employment discrimination, and housing discrimination against LGBT people; ability of LGBT people to serve in the military, standard age of consent across sexualities; ability of LGBT people to donate blood; and legality of conversion therapy.

It is quite telling that these are the metrics by which equality is measured. Though these metrics are presented as fairly universal, in that they remain consistent across countries, they are not all necessarily desirable goals everywhere. In Myanmar, a country in which the Burmese army is routinely accused of using child soldiers, using rape as a weapon of war, and committing ethnic cleansing, the ability to be a part of the military is not considered a cherished right. Additionally, conversion therapy is a non-issue in Myanmar. *Facing 377* does document physical and emotional abuse against queer people by parents hoping to change their children, however neither this report nor anyone I interacted with were concerned about organized efforts to attempt

to change a person's gender or sexuality. Even in the case of the police "correction" of the misbehaving *gays*, the violence was directed more towards changing public rather than private behavior. This may be why *LGBT* activists in Myanmar are pushing for the decriminalization of public queerness, but are doing very little to incorporate themselves into the state.

From my experiences in the organized queer events and conversation with their organizers and participants, it seemed quite clear that there is a general distrust of the government, even with the recent reforms. For decades, the government engaged in a strategy of what Monique Skidmore describes as intentional terror making, wherein people learned to survive in part by avoiding the state and its agents as much as possible (Skidmore 2012). It is likely that the trauma of these policies continues to shape people's trust in the government. It also does not help that Myanmar is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, with Transparency International ranking them at 136 out of 176 countries in 2016[20]. Paying bribes is a normal part of life in Myanmar, and I had to pay bribes in order to renew my visa during my fieldwork despite it being a perfectly legal request. So it is a bit of a hard sell to convince people in Myanmar to entrust the quality of their lives, and possibly their lives, to a state apparatus that seems neither that interested in or capable of protecting them. Instead, they focus on removing interactions with the state from their lives, in part by appealing to the authority of international laws and by incorporating themselves (back) into Burmese society from a more advantageous subject position. When an organization like Colors Rainbow is meeting with Myanmar legislators well to repeal Section 377 and hosting forums on tolerance and inclusions, but not advocating as hard for government recognition of marriage, adoption, or sex change, it should signal that there is a different strategy at work here. Having a standard list of LGBT of concerns

[20] Transparency International. "Myanmar." transparency.org. https://www.transparency.org/country/MMR# (accessed April 30, 2017).

and political and legal goals as the ultimate goals queer activism can end up punishing countries for not meeting standards that may not be relevant to them. Or worse pushing those countries towards policies in which "human rights" can only be accessed through the state and through citizenship, a dangerous path for Myanmar to take as a state that has a history (and present) of denying its citizens rights and denying it residents citizenship.

Another manifestation of the uneven relations between Myanmar and its would be saviors is the uptick of foreign interest in the lives and legality of LGBT people in Myanmar, and the pervasive narrative of the Myanmar LGBT population as a subjugated population living in the shadows. If Googling trends can be trusted as an indication of people's interest in a topic over time, then interest in Myanmar's LGBT population has risen dramatically in the past few years. Or more specifically, interest in gay Myanmar and gay marriage in Myanmar. According to Google Analytics, searching for Myanmar + Gay has steadily increased from its low in 2007 to a high in 2015. This maps quite neatly onto the timeline of Myanmar's political reforms from a pariah state to a country that has democratic, if imperfect elections. As the country moved towards democracy, more people wondered about the state of gay life in Myanmar.

This is imperfect data, and we should be careful not to draw sweeping conclusions or determine causation from this alone. However, correlation between democracy and the status of LGBT people does seem to fit into a larger pattern. There is also probably something to be said about the fact that gay is eight and a half times more popular as a search term than LGBT. And that gay and LGBT rights were not searched at all, while gay marriage was. We cannot know from this data who was doing the searching. There are internet cafes in Myanmar, though while I was there the price was 1,000 kyats per hour, or roughly a third of daily wages for someone earning minimum wage. Internet penetration was estimated at only 19.3% of the population in

2016, a 19.1% percent increase from 2010[21]. From my experience, the majority of internet users accessed it through smart phones. Most of those users mainly used only the preinstalled social media applications since many of the more affordable phones' default language is Chinese, and most users did not know how to change it to use their phones in more versatile ways. Considering these factors, and that computers are a rare sight in Myanmar and the majority of people are not conversant in English, it seems safe to say that these searches are not being made by the average Burmese person. This data provides a gesture towards larger patterns at work.

Table 2: Googling Trends

	Myanmar + Gay	Myanmar + LGBT	Myanmar + Gay Rights	Myanmar + LGBT rights	Myanmar + Gay Marriage
2004	400	0	0	0	23
2005	300	0	0	0	0
2006	205	0	0	0	0
2007	196	0	0	0	13
2008	204	0	0	0	0
2009	239	22	0	0	6
2010	318	98	0	0	34
2011	368	153	0	0	14
2012	498	165	0	0	17
2013	868	110	0	0	16
2014	996	103	0	0	30
2015	1034	70	0	0	21
2016	970	45	0	0	13

The view of the United States as a queer utopia, and conversely Myanmar as a dystopia, is a pervasive one in contemporary Myanmar. Because the U.S. is seen as more democratic, and therefore more civilized, knowledges and practices produced in the U.S. occupy a privileged position in the fantasies of *LGBT*s. When speaking to global audiences, Western politicians like Clinton are careful to state that "gay people are born into every society in the world […] Being

[21] Internet World Stats. "Myanmar." Internetwoeldstats.com. http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/mm.htm (accessed May 1, 2017).

gay is not a Western invention. It is a human reality," with good intentions (Clinton). It is often an attempt to combat governments and groups who use nationalism and protection of national culture to discredit the activities of the LGBT people in their countries. This is certainly true in Myanmar. Queer people are seen as those unduly influenced by foreign night club culture, modernity, secularism, and perhaps most of all "Thai lady-boys." It is not difficult to see why. YG Events, the group that organizes queer nights, a cocktail party-like event, and monthly LGBT club nights communicates almost exclusively in English while promoting events serving avocado butter steaks and Heineken beers (facebook.com). Their Facebook page also shares LGBT themed news from across the world. It is a hub to find out about what is happening in "the queer world" in both Myanmar and abroad, and in a country, that interacts with the internet almost exclusively through the Facebook app on their phones, it is an effective one.

Yet despite the dangers of subscribing to a world view in which countries can be ranked in a hierarchy, or perhaps because of it, *LGBT*s aligning with the narrative of civilization and democracy is a powerful way to enact change in the country. Judith Butler argues that on the question of who has arrived at modernity, sexual politics is in the very middle of it (Butler 2007, 2). It might not be the sort of radical change that I might personally hope for and fantasize about, but striving towards the goal of LGBT rights as human rights would undoubtedly improve the lives of many in the country. For *LGBT* activists and activist organizations, these are the choices they are faced with, consciously or not. These new narratives are born out of strategic choices and genuine belief in them. In Myanmar, LGBT/*LGBT* is both an identity – with all the notions of naturalness and innateness that are associated with that – and a choice, and it is no less sincere for being both.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

It is important to be cognizant of how the mood of contemporary academia may funnel us towards certain subjects and subject matters and the lens through which we analyze them. In 2017, work on gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia is not exactly rare. It seems fair to say that fields like anthropology and gender studies promote and reward scholarship that focuses on those who are seen transgressive and powerless, scholarship that focuses on the subaltern and telling history from below. In many ways, my scholarship is a product and continuation of this general trend.

However, while I may be working with a population typically associated with scholarship on sexuality — mostly young, mostly urban, mostly male — I am approaching my analysis from a slightly different vantage point. I propose that it can be useful to think of these populations not only as transgressive and oppressed, but also as selectively normative at times. This is not to discount the violence and discrimination faced by *LGBT*s in Myanmar. The little data that is available at this time clearly demonstrates that it is a pressing issue. The physical abuse, job discrimination, sexual assault, and other types of violence faced by *LGBT*s are a serious threat to their lives and the liveability of their lives. I want to be clear that these forms of violence are pervasive, life threatening, and urgent. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that *LGBT*s often have access to global capital and attention in ways most other denizens of Myanmar do not. In some ways, the *achau'* is all the less foreign for being a "transvestite", and far less exotic than "normal" Burmese people. *Achau'* just seems so much more translatable, categorizable, and comparable, and perhaps it is easier to understand Burmese men who wear miniskirts like

women, than Burmese men who wear sarong like men. *LGBT*s get international attention, international support, and international money. Perhaps most importantly, they get the future.

It is often said by Burmese people that မြန်မာပြည်ကခေတ်မမှီဘူး /*mjanmapiikakhi' mahmibu;/*, Myanmar is not with the current era. This concern with keeping up with the world, the times, and human progression has been a preoccupation since at least the colonial era. Tharaphi Than investigates this concern by examining how the notion that Burmese women occupy a powerful and gender non-differentiated role in Burmese society was promoted by anti-colonialists as a way to justify their bid for independence. Than shows how during the transition from colonization to post-colonization, modernity and modernization were both highly sought after and seen as a threat to the Burmese way of life, with women bearing the brunt of the burden and the blame for the perceived ills of modernity. Change in the political order inspired ethnoreligious, nationalistic, and conservative backlash. The democratic transition taking place in Myanmar today seems to echo this. There is a great fear and distrust in the country of the same international organizations and political leaders whose aid and attention were so sought after just a few years ago.

This can most clearly be seen in the ongoing persecution of the Rohingya ethnic minority, and the Myanmar State's distrust and non-cooperation with United Nations intervention and international human rights watch groups. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's famous plea that the world should "use your liberty to promote ours" seems to have transformed into "leave us alone to use our new liberty even if it is illiberal. As many in Myanmar try to shift away from international engagement, *LGBT*s work towards ever greater international integration while maintaining local engagement. In an age of globalization, they are with the times; ခေတ်မှီတယ် /*khi'hmide*/. They engage in these differing discourses by maintaining mobility and dexterity

within space and time. As the general global trend shifts towards the decriminalization of sodomy and celebration of tolerance, this becomes useful moral leverage for *LGBT*s in Myanmar. Appeals to alternate interpretations of Buddhist scriptures just cannot be as effective as similar strategies with Islam and Christianity. To be successful in their political goals, *LGBT*s cannot just resist state and social violence and the religious narrative used to justify it, they must engage in an ethical practice to invent a new moral order. *LGBT* activism in Myanmar is not merely resistance in the face of destruction, but active creation of something new in the face of these pressures. This is necessary because acceptance is not a viable goal if they were never excluded in the first place, if their oppression is based not on their non-normativeness but their non-idealness.

If normalized morality in Myanmar is the regulation, or better yet eradication, of desire, a morality in keeping with the Buddhist value of the cessation of desire, then Burmese *LGBT*s fail as moral subjects. They fail not only in acting on their non-normalized desires, but also for having those desires in the first place. However, the activist response I observed has not been to problematize this moral order or propose interpretations of the moral order that would leave room for them. The main thrust of the activism seems to be to supplant a morality defined by the regulation of desire with a morality defined by "civilization" and "democracy." *LGBT* activism in Myanmar is therefore not a matter of gaining acceptance as moral subjects improperly read as immoral, but rather as moral subjects of a moral order that eclipses the existing and normative Burmese one.

LGBT activists engage in the strategic misappropriation of global discourses of human rights and LGBT issues. It is an activism of reinvention rather than resistance, where sexuality provides a platform through which new cultural norms are imagined, deployed, and inhabited.

Oddly enough, this necessitates the transition from *achau'* to LGBT – from non-idealized to non-normative – a transition that creates *LGBT*. In Myanmar, it seems that being LGBT, being queer, is not just an identity or expression of some fundamental part of one's inner self, but also something that is actively chosen and learned. LGBT can function as a norm as well as a transgression.

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