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Sonic Kinship: Listening, Protection, and Personhood in Post-Coup Myanmar

By

Anne Greenwood

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge

Professor James Davies, Co-Chair

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Spring 2024

Abstract

Sonic Kinship: Listening, Protection, and Personhood in Post-Coup Myanmar

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Doctor of Philosophy in Music

University of California, Berkeley

James Davies, Co-Chair

Marié Abe, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines select sounds made and heard in post-coup Myanmar, that is, sounds made and heard in Myanmar since February 2021. In the context of a near-total media blockade, and the internal displacement of an estimated 1.5 million people, the stakes of the dissertation are high. The dissertation shows how a vernacular politics of reproduction informs sonic activity—ranging from popular music to acts of sonic dissent. In Chapter One, "Between the Beats," I draw on an archive of sources collected through virtual ethnography, including sound art, social media posts, journalistic sources, and fundraising materials, to show how solidarity can be made through and heard in *thanbone hti*, a practice of banging on metal pots, pans, buckets, and tins with metal utensils. Chapter Two, "Blood and Bonds," focuses on the forms of relationality that 1988 *copy thachin*-as-protest-song "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu" and Rap Against Junta's 2022 track, "Blood" produce, drawing on blood as a powerful rhetorical device that forges links between generations of activists, musical cover versions, and a global audience. Chapter Three, "Recording Disappearance," marks a shift towards thinking about kinship in the wake of absence and loss. The tracks on Operation Hanoi Hannah's (an anonymous activist collective) second album *Redemption*, present a history of violence through mothers' and sons' voices that speak of the visceral experience of separation. Chapter Four, "Participatory Audio Recording's Potential," finally, recounts my own ethnographic experience in developing and implementing a research protocol wherein participants' audio collages, sound maps, and field recordings—and their explanations of that work—inform my own anthropological conceptions of disconnected kinship. The phrase "sonic kinship," as per the dissertation's title, refers to those kinds of meaningful relationships between beings and sounds that are produced through the acts of producing or perceiving sound. Sonic kinship arises in the act of apprehending sound together, the perception of shared material or substance within songs and sounds, and practices of care directed towards sonic products or performed through sonic actions, all of which build relationships between humans, sounds, music, the environment, and other beings. By thinking through the stakes of sound reproduction via these materials, this dissertation shows how, far from being ephemeral under post-coup conditions in Myanmar, sounds persist as a durable means for preserving and reproducing kin relations.

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Introduction

The Mandalay Marionette Theater was a tourist destination in 2019 and made no pretense otherwise. There was a ticket price for foreigners ($10 USD, which I took as a sure sign that it was not intended for a local audience) and the show was a condensed highlight reel with an English-language voice over of what would have been an all-night performance decades ago. The troupe had travelled internationally to perform in Europe, North America, and elsewhere in Asia and written books about their experiences.

I had seen the marionettes before, and was intrigued. In the performance, the details of each characters' gestures were virtuosic. Small and sturdy, the marionettes embodied a rich history of performance. The princess' hands trembled with feeling during her duet with the prince. The Zawgyi—the alchemist—was an acrobatic whirlwind, tumbling across the stage with his staff. Even the groups of clowns gave off a sense of jollity as they bounced above the stage floor. Historically, marionette performance existed in a parallel realm.

The puppets, equipped with the life-giving property of *leikpya* (literally "butterfly," but used in this sense to mean something like "soul") enjoyed freedoms that people did not; they could speak critically and touch one another. That is to say, the marionettes had a sort of freedom that humans did not. In a similar vein, marionette performance enabled geographic mobility and cross-cultural experiences for modern performers. After 1962 and before 2012, when travel in and out of Myanmar was restricted, marionette performers were able to leave the country on tours, and foreign puppeteers were allowed to visit.

Despite being a tourist destination, the Marionette Theater was enmeshed in local life. During the day, the theatre functioned as a language school. Teenagers and people in their early twenties filled the seats for English language lessons provided by Daw Mar Mar Aye and the teachers she employed. English language classes were a reliable revenue stream, likely steadier and more lucrative than nightly puppet shows. In conversation, Daw Mar Mar Aye alluded to being part of NGO projects, potentially another source of income. She mentioned tapes of puppet shows developed to address HIV/AIDS prevention and another about basic hygiene, like hand washing. These activities prompt questions about finances as much as questions of care and connection. I would have liked to have been able to follow up on the day-to-day budgeting, long-term forecasting, and the accumulation of contracts that underpinned artistic production. And, of course, I would have liked to survey language students, neighbors, and other community members who did not attend performances, per se, to glean an understanding of how they felt connected (or not) to the Marionette Theater.

In July 2019, the theater moved from its original home to the south of Mandalay palace to a prime spot at the bottom of Mandalay Hill. In addition to the Su Taung Pyae Pagoda at the top of the hill, a popular spot for watching the sunset, the new location was within walking distance of four other pagodas that domestic and international tourists would visit. Admission to the Shwenandaw Pagoda, which is decorated with ornate teak carvings, is included in the admission ticket for Mandalay Palace. Kyauktawgyi Pagoda, located just behind the new theater location, sounded busy whenever I was in the neighborhood. Sandamuni Pagoda and Kuthodaw Pagoda are both visually striking, the bright white and gold reflecting the sunlight. The theater's

physical proximity to these landmarks evokes marionettes' heyday during the Konbaung Dynasty.

The marionettes were carefully wrapped up and the drums and gongs removed from their stands in preparation for the move. Even the *pyinsarupa* atop the main drum frame was disassembled into three, not five, parts. [1] I tried to help, in what would become a repeated and ultimately unsuccessful gesture, but was discouraged from lifting and carrying anything into the truck that would transport it to its new home as that kind of work was for men, not women, and definitely not for foreign women like me.

Unlike the old theater, with its woven walls, the new venue was a concrete shell. Much of it was painted bright green. Over the course of a week, egg carton foam was affixed to the walls for acoustic balance and a carpet was glued down on the floor, acting as an aisle between two sets of wooden chairs with red upholstery. Here, in this miasma of paint and glue fumes, I was finally allowed to help with some tasks, my height being an advantage when it came to things like hanging curtains. There would be live music for the opening performance, not the usual tape, so the musicians came to set up their instruments and rehearse with the singers. I remember standing across the street, juggling my phone and camera to take photos of the group outside the new theater. A fancy car drove past and a man got out (if I remember correctly, he was a diplomat from India). He joined the throng, in that official dignitary sort of way, and a cluster of balloons was cut from where it was tied. Speeches preceded the performance. I sat next to two little kids, a brother and sister pair whose father was running the sound system. Other neighborhood kids from the food stalls and shops along the road clustered at the back of the seats. When I listen to the audio recording from that night, I hear the wood-on-wood hits of *belu* (ogre) fighting *belu* and remember their excited reactions, and my own, as we fell into the marionettes' performance-world.

Members of the theater group were not just co-workers, but bound together through family ties. A puppeteer's son would arrive after school and not just learn how to maneuver the characters alongside me and a few other youth—he was well past that point—but teach us. The proprietor's son and daughter-in-law were intensely involved in settling into the new theater space, driving in from where they lived and ran their own business to oversee construction work and take part in the event planning. Another family lived at the theater, to the best of my knowledge. The father acted as someone in between a general laborer and a security guard, depending on what work needed to be done and what time of day it was. The three of them, father, mother, and toddler, slept in the performance space.

With family, came a sense of familial obligation, as generations passed along knowledge, responsibilities, and obligations. Readers with background knowledge about the arts in Myanmar might already know that Daw Mar Mar Aye took on her father's project to revitalize and celebrate marionette performance (Foley 2001; Singer 1992; Thanegi 1994). But how did members of younger generations feel about what they stood to inherit. Did they want to become

[1] A *pyinsarupa* is a supernatural creature with five parts from other beings, including: a serpent's head, antlers of a deer, horse's hoofs, wings of the mythical galon bird, and a carp's tail. Carved from wood, this gilded figure is a decorative presence in *hsaing waing* ensembles. *Hsaing waing* ensembles include gongs, drums, and wind instruments.

musicians, puppeteers, or singers or did they want to satisfy their parents' desires? Was there a way in which participating in the puppet theater helped them to develop transferable skills, like speaking English, for example, that they could take into another professional setting or would they say they were going to follow in their parents' footsteps? Did their decision making follow in accordance with customary beliefs shared by other families in Myanmar? What could this performance setting tell us about families and labor?

Research Questions and Main Objectives

On the morning of February 1, 2021, I reached into my jacket pocket after my phone buzzed, and read the message notification: "Coup in Burma." The line moved forward, and I nudged my grocery basket forward along the floor. We were all keeping a healthy distance from one another, standing six feet apart and wearing masks. Covid had already forced me to reconsider what fieldwork would look like—if it would happen, even. But a coup? More politically-attuned scholars and journalists would comment on foreshadowing, but I have to admit, a coup wasn't on my radar. Very much in the thick of the "stay safe, stay home" phase of the pandemic, I was preoccupied with reading and studying for my qualifying exams.

Present-day circumstances forced me to reimagine the dissertation project, but they also animated the political dimensions and possibilities of this work in generative ways. First, I shifted from this highly specific and situated context of the marionette performance community to a larger and more loosely defined group: Burmese communities in Myanmar and around the world who use sound to maintain connections between themselves and to reach out to others. Second, instead of engaging in-person with the politics of everyday life, I resorted to a more abstract ethnography of media analysis, interviews, and participatory recording projects to address the pressing ethical considerations imposed by the political circumstances of life in Myanmar.

As my account of my time with the Mandalay Marionette Theater hints at, musical and sonic practices in Myanmar exist within webs of social relations that stretch beyond the strictly human. The February coup prompted me to direct my attention to the pressing questions surrounding ways of being with and caring for one another. My primary research questions distilled into: does participating in sonic dissent facilitate a sense of kinship? What do musical examples employ to forge a sense of kinship? How do recordings reveal the limits of care between kin?

This dissertation describes select sounds from post-coup Myanmar and situates them within a local politics of reproduction in order to show sound's durability and efficacy works to make and maintain kin relations through moments of crisis. The project aims to articulate how a local politics of reproduction informs sonic activity—ranging from popular music to acts of sonic dissent—in post-coup Myanmar. I consider how the political dimensions of gender and care ring out in the sonic dissent practice known as *thanbone hti*, examine the rhetorical power of blood as a substance in forging relationships not just between activists but between musical products, and analyze how recordings function to reaffirm bonds between separated family members. I explain how people in post-coup Myanmar make sense of their changed soundscapes, paying particular attention to the ways that their recording projects thematize

movement, domestic life, and their relationships with others. This project describes the durability and efficacy of sound in building and maintaining relationships through moments of crisis.

Sonic Kinship

Theories of kinship have remained a throughline in my work since the inception of research, whether in thinking through acts of sonic dissent as forms of care, the reproduction of media during separate political crises, sound recordings made to draw attention to the violent separation of family members, or through the care that is made audible in my interlocutors' recordings. In this dissertation, I draw on a combination of ethnographic and archival research techniques to study forms of sound reproduction in Burmese culture. My aim is to better understand processes of kinship formation that arise between people and between sonic objects that function in addition to patterns of biological reproduction and genealogical descent.

I use sonic kinship as a term to refer to the types of meaningful relationships between beings and sounds that are produced through the acts of producing or perceiving sound. I make a deliberately expansive theorization of both kinship and sound in order to address the wide range of materials and actions this includes. The forms of sonic kinship can be musical or non-musical, recorded or live; I stretch what the concept of sound can include to encompass sounds that have been rendered and reproduced silently—as in the case of drawings and photographs of *thanbone hti*; the mere trace of sound counts as much as the possibility of an absent audience who can listen, as my study of Operation Hanoi Hannah's work prompts. In developing and applying the notion of kinship in this project, my strategy has been not to rule anything out. It is clear that diverse understandings of kinship already exist, as explained below, and I have worked to expand on existing theoretical conceptions of the term. Namely, I suggest that doing things together, shared material or substance, and acts of care build relationships between humans and everything else. They are fundamental to matters of survival and continuance.

Following Marshall Sahlins' theorization, I define kinship as a "mutuality of being," in which kinship relations are established through participating in the existence of others (Sahlins 2013). Accordingly, in this project, I seek out the ways media objects and my interlocutors use sound to engineer such a mutuality—one that can exist alongside ancestral or genealogical ties—whether through acts of sonic dissent, examples of recorded sound and music, or personal narratives of listening. Two related questions motivate my research: how do individuals use an array of sonic practices to connect human and more-than-human entities as kin? Furthermore: what can the audible work of forming, maintaining, and affirming kinship through sonic practices reveal about localized expectations regarding reproductive labor and economies of care?

But how does this study define kinship? Although the anthropological study of kinship was first motivated to explain the organization of human groups as a means of species-level differentiation, it has not retained that ideological thrust over time. A fundamental belief undergirding early studies of kinship was the notion that humans placed inherent value on genealogical ties and used such ties to construct social groups. Furthermore, the use of kinship

terminology, even between people without close genealogical ties, was taken as evidence of a coherent system of social organization (Morgan 1997).

Social anthropologists in the early twentieth century, on the other hand, took a less universalizing perspective and sought to describe various examples of kinship, not as an abstract principle, but as made apparent in the concrete networks of relationships they documented in the field. Anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown took a functional approach to kinship studies while retaining focus on the use of kinship terminology; relationships formed through marriage or affinal bonds were attached to rights, duties, and modes of behavior; his work is often credited for endowing the concept of kinship with an instrumental or socially-directed purpose (1922; 1941).

By the 1950s and 60s, anthropologists, often working with and against structuralist frameworks, sought to address types of fluidity and exchange, though in conflicting ways. Famously, Claude Lévi-Strauss transposed the study of kinship so as to connect it to theories of exchange through the study of wedding customs (Claude Levi-Strauss 1971). Lévi-Strauss, as a structuralist thinker *par excellence*, traced the development of related groups through patterns of marriage. For him, the exchange of women through marriage worked to build alliances between groups. Studying kinship in this way meant shifting attention away from the nuclear family by itself to include more people. Edmund Leach, working with the Kachin people, worked to show that kinship terminology represented an ideal, rather than practiced, type of kinship (Leach 1945). In his monograph, first published in 1954, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, Leach leveraged patterns of descent as a tool for understanding the malleability of identity and power amongst the Shan and Kachin peoples.

In *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (1968), anthropologist David Schneider challenged the principle that biology was the fundamental basis of kinship, preferring instead the power of such notions as “home,” “family,” and “love” to categorize relationships. His intervention was to show that kinship was more than about roles and function, but also about a system of symbols and meanings. His 1984 critique of kinship further emphasizes the distinction between relations that are given at birth and cannot be rescinded, and those that arise through interaction with others (Schneider 1984). An echo of Schneider’s attention to the processual and constructed qualities of kinship is present in subsequent studies of kinship from the 1980s and 1990s that questioned the role of shared bodily substance and genetic material in order to build an understanding of the stakes surrounding assistive reproductive technology (Carsten 2004). By attending to the scientific processes and technologies, Carsten pulls back the curtain, so to speak, exposing to her readers the constructedness of reproduction.

More recently, studies of queer kinship and interspecies kinship (Haraway 2016; Weston 1997)underscore the necessity of understanding kinship as radically expansive: as made, not given. Kath Weston’s work shows how members of the queer community use the symbolism of love and biology to forge kinship relations with each other; they do so in ways that supplement rather than overturn the assumption that kinship relations arise in obeyance of one’s family of origin. Zoe Todd draws on her own Métis sense of kinship to think through her relation to fish and pollution within her environment; she does this by way of her relation to her grandfather

and his relationship to horses, spinning a web dense of interconnection that embraces entities both human and non (Todd 2017).

While kinship is a central matter of concern in anthropology, it has received little attention in ethnomusicology. Arguably, the question of the nature of acoustic relationality has been displaced into other concerns. Take Mantle Hood's concept of "bimusicality" (Hood 1959). Bimusicality refers to the practice of becoming capable in another (usually non-Western) musical tradition, which as a research technique has generated scholarship that discusses the topics of musical transmission and musical lineages (Brinner 1995; Weidman 2006; Wong 2001). Benjamin Brinner traces patterns and procedures of interaction to advance an ethnographically-grounded understanding of musical competence within the setting of a Javanese gamelan ensemble. Through her work on the *Wai Khruu* ritual, Deborah Wong outlines the power dynamics at play between teachers and students of classical music and dance in Thailand. Amanda Weidman, meanwhile, grounds her work addressing the politics of voice present in South Indian music through accounts of her own interactions with a violin teacher. Each of these studies expands from a grounding in an understanding of musical genealogy and lineage.

Another strand of arguably kinship-related research concerns the formation of musical communities in ways that operationalize an affect-oriented theoretical framework to explain the social ties between group members (Gray 2013; Guilbault 2017). The feeling of *saudade*, in Lila Ellen Gray's study of *fado*, recounts histories of nationalism and colonization that play out in the genre's origin story. Jocelyne Guilbault works in another direction, studying how processes of "cosmopolitan musical bonding" in Caribbean popular music practices assemble social, political, and economic relations. Here, the movement of affect between musicians and listening communities functions as a binding agent, the force of shared feelings engendering togetherness.

Two more recent works engage more directly with the anthropological concepts of exchange and kinship in a way that is productive for my work. In his 2018 monograph *The Musical Gift*, Jim Sykes frames patterns of exchange between groups of humans and divine beings in Sri Lanka with music serving as a "technology of care" that has the potential to bring about reconciliation in a post-conflict setting (Sykes 2018, 15). In *The Voice and Its Doubles*, Daniel Fisher's work on the role of radio (in connecting members of Australian indigenous communities to incarcerated friends and family) draws on tenets of kinship studies (Fisher 2016). However, the technological infrastructure of broadcast media is at the heart of Fisher's study, not the relationships that emerge as a result of using the system. Likewise, Sykes' project is more invested in explaining infrastructural systems than in concentrating on the formal structure of intersubjective relationships. My project, then, is indebted to all these strands of thought but stands apart through its concentration on asking *how* kinship relations are constructed rather than trying to show *what* exactly they are.

Rewinding from Post-Coup Myanmar

My attention throughout the project remains on sound and kinship, but I work to give music scholars enough historical information to understand the events leading up to 2021 as they

pertain to protest music and sonic dissent. I make no pretense that I can build out a picture that is as dense and complex as remarkable work done by academics working in Burma studies (Charney 2009; M. Aung-Thwin 2005; M. Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2012; Thant Myint-U 2001). Interested readers should consult these sources in order to build out their understanding. In this short section I flag key points for readers who are unfamiliar with the political history and cultural depth of Myanmar and recount how my periodization of the post-coup period has been determined by a steady rise in violence committed by the military.

My understanding of post-coup Myanmar has been shaped by journalistic reporting, social media posts from individuals and organizations in Myanmar, and work done by international organizations like Human Rights Watch, Fortify Rights, and Amnesty International. Such an understanding is, admittedly, reactive. By "reactive" I mean that I have consumed media that was created in response to newsworthy crises; in this case, escalations in violence have been the most urgent concern for those involved in Myanmar's global media representation.

Since February 1, 2021, there have been a number of major developments in Myanmar. Rather than provide a comprehensive account of everything that has happened, I present here what stood out to me the most as I followed what was happening in Myanmar. During the first month following the coup, large-scale protests took place in cities around the country. Violence against protestors sharply increased beginning in March 2021. On March 3, 2021, Kyal Sin, a woman in her early twenties wearing a T-shirt that read "Everything Will Be OK," was shot in the head by the military at a protest in Mandalay—during what the UN special envoy for Myanmar described as "the bloodiest day since the start of the coup on 1 February." On March 8, 2021, hundreds of protestors were forced to hide from soldiers and police in Sanchaung Township. People living in that neighborhood helped them hide, despite the risk that they would be arrested for harboring persons not registered to that home. On March 14, soldiers responded to protests in Hlaingthayar Township, an industrial area west of downtown Yangon, by kettling and then killing protestors. I name these events as part of a rising wave of violence enacted by the junta against protestors that has only escalated since. In response, the National Unity Government established the People's Defence Force in May 2021, and declared a defensive war against the junta on September 7, 2021.

Since then, the Myanmar military has conducted air strikes against civilians at political events (Pazigyi; April 11, 2023), schools (Let Yet Kone; September 16, 2022), camps for internally displaced people (Moebye; September 16, 2022), and at a music festival (Hpakant; October 23, 2022). The military has burned tens of thousands of homes, schools, and essential civilian infrastructure to the ground in Sagaing Region, Kachin, Shan, Kayah, and Kayin States. By the end of 2022, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, approximately 1.5 million people had been internally displaced, with the majority in the Northwest, in Rakhine State and in the Southeast, as well as in Kachin state in the Northeast.

Present-day Myanmar[2] has been shaped by its history as a British colony. The country was colonized by the British from 1824 until 1948; it was administered as a province of India until 1937. Scholars have worked to illuminate the vectors of the construction of difference during this time, foregrounding matters of race, personhood, and gender (Edwards 2002; Saha 2015; Delap 2012). Readers interested in the history of protest and rebellion in Myanmar would be well served to seek out sources that address anti-colonial resistance, particularly the Saya San rebellion (Ghosh 1999; M. V. Aung-Thwin 2001).

Cultural identity in Myanmar was more fluid in the precolonial period; loyalties did not rely on ethnicity but a combination of patron-client relations, Theravada Buddhism, and geographic proximity (Lieberman 1978). As Ardeth Thawnghmung explains, the importance of ethnic identity increased in the wake of census projects conducted by the British, the establishment of administrative divisions between geographic areas that linked "people" to a "territory," the uptake of Christianity amongst certain animist communities (namely the Karen, Chin, and Kachin), and migration to Burma from China and India (A. M. Thawnghmung 2022). Disagreements between ethnic groups intensified immediately following independence due to differing ideological and territorial foundations (Smith 1999). The Panglong Agreement of 1947 would have granted simultaneous independence for Ministerial Burma and the Frontier Areas and granted some groups (the Shan and Karenni (Kayah)) the right to secede. Beginning in 1949, the Karen National Union started an armed insurgency against the Burmese government, followed by the Shan community in 1958 (A. M. Thawnghmung 2022). Armed conflict escalated during military rule between 1962 and 1988 as the military violently tried to quell armed groups fighting for autonomy. While some ethnic armed groups signed ceasefire agreements, the conflict between the Burmese military and ethnic armed organizations has never stopped entirely. Ceasefire agreements reduced casualties and opened up economic and social possibilities for civilians, but allowed for intensive resource extraction (A. M. Thawnghmung 2022). To give a sense of the scale of this issue, In 2015 there were at least twenty non-state armed groups active in Myanmar, 223 battalions of Border Guard Forces drawn from ceasefire groups and under the command of the Tatmadaw, eight "people's militias" (*pyithu sit*) that have a similar structure to Border Guard Forces, countless smaller state-linked militias, and many criminal armed organizations (A. Thawnghmung and Furnari 2019).

Ethnicity impacts citizenship. The 1982 citizenship law only granted "full citizenship" to members of ethnic groups (*taing yin tha*) that resided in Myanmar before 1823, when the first British annexation of Burma occurred (Cheesman 2017, 11). Two other categories exist: "associate" and "naturalized" citizenship. This law nullified the 1948 citizenship law; the Rohingya went from being full citizens to being categorized as Bengali (Cheesman 2017). It was not until 2015 that the Thein Sein government allowed the Rohingya to apply for

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[2] The name of the country changes depending on where you are and who you talk to. What is key to know is that "Burma" and "Myanmar" both refer to the dominant ethnic group, the Bamar people. The two different words are a product of the different registers of language; "Burma" being in the colloquial register and "Myanmar" in the literary register. After the military changed the name of the country to Myanmar in 1989 many pro-democracy activists continued to use Burma instead (in fact, Canada referred to the country as "Burma" until 2016, shaping my pattern of speech). However, my interlocutors used both names for the country interchangeably and referred to themselves as "Burmese," not "Myanmarese" or as "Myanmar people." Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "Bamar" to refer to members of the Bamar ethnic group (that is, as an ethnonym) and "Burmese" as a demonym to refer to people who are from Myanmar.

naturalized or associate citizenship (A. M. Thawnghmung 2022). Obviously, the Rohingya's vexed citizenship status has contributed to the violence enacted against this group by the Burmese state.

Despite the challenges of doing research with ethnic minority groups in Myanmar, excellent scholarship exists for those who want to delve deeper into the history and culture of specific groups (A. M. Thawnghmung 2012; Sadan 2013; Dudley 2011; Jirattikorn 2010; Kramer 2022). The scope of this project does not allow me to adequately develop a sense of how to understand a Shan, Kachin, Lisu, Wa, or other ethnic minority "sonic vernacular." While not all of my interlocutors identified as Bamar, I do not state their ethnicity in order to protect their identity, given the small number of participants.

In her comparison of the protests in 1988 and commemorative events in 1999, Viola Krebs points out that a key difference is the access to primary sources about happenings in Myanmar made available through the internet (Krebs 2001). The online circulation of press releases and activists around the world has allowed them to spread their messages more easily, according to Krebs. In 2011, as Andrea Caldarero reports, Myanmar had the second lowest number of internet users and mobile subscribers; the internet penetration rate was 0.98% and there were only 1.3 million mobile subscribers (2.3% of the population) and the only mobile company was the state-owned Myanmar Post and Telecommunications (Calderaro 2015, 2–3). Change came quickly. As the World Bank reports, the price of a SIM card dropped from $2,500 to less than $2 in 2016 ("Myanmar: Investment Analysis and Implementation Options for Proposed Digital Government Project" 2018). It follows that by 2017, 55% of the population were connected online through their mobile devices. Facebook, in particular, has emerged as a forum for cultural expression, commerce, and an instigator of conflict (Wittekind and Faxon 2023; Prasse‑Freeman and Kabya 2021; The-Thitsar 2022; Whitten-Woodring et al. 2020). This connectivity stands in stark contrast to the country's isolationism following the 1962 coup; here, I am thinking of how the internet has enabled my research in comparison to scholars including the ethnomusicologists Judith Becker and Robert Garfias who had to end their projects following the 1962 military coup.

While my interlocutors were conversant in the cosmopolitan language of sound scholarship that steered our conversations away from traditional belief systems, the majority Theravada Buddhist context of Myanmar is an influential factor in Myanmar's sonic vernacular. Theravada Buddhist practice is a sonic vernacular unto itself (Walker 2018; Greene 2004; Douglas 2020) and offers ways of sounding in relation to loss (Walker 2011; Dyer 2020). On an everyday basis, amplified sound and chanting emanates from monasteries and pagodas into the soundscape of urban and rural sites in Myanmar.

Positionality, Pivoting, Research Methodology

My interest in families and music stems, in part, from my own positioning as part of what people would call a "musical family." Both my parents worked as music educators, and as they have told me, their parents and grandparents had enough music education for them to be enthusiastic and supportive listeners (my dad's dad) if not casually proficient performers (my mum's mum). I started taking private piano lessons when I was four, and continued to show up

for weekly lessons at my parents' behest until I graduated from high school. I benefited from French horn lessons that started when I joined the school band program in grade seven. I kept playing French horn and completed a degree in music performance before switching to pursue ethnomusicology.

To introduce myself more completely, and in a way that is in accordance with the culture of the place I currently live, I should note that people usually call me Annie. I am able-bodied cisgender woman living in Canada as a settler. I was raised on the unceded traditional territory of the Ts'msyen people. I attended post-secondary education on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səlilwətaɬ/Selilwitulh Nations. Over the duration of this project I have lived as an uninvited guest on the unceded ancestral land of the Chochenyo speaking Ohlone people; the unceded, asserted, and shared territory of Hul'qumi'num-speaking Coast Salish People; and the traditional territory of Kaska Dena people.

You might have noticed in that previous paragraph that I did not mention spending time in Myanmar while researching or writing this dissertation. I traveled to Myanmar for the first time before I started my doctoral degree. Between August 2017 and October 2017 I studied *saung* in private lessons and connected with the marionette theater in Mandalay, attended festivals at Inle Lake, and traveled around a circuit of major sights in the center of the country. I returned from June to July of 2019 for preliminary fieldwork, during which I explored the prospect of working in Kachin State and spent a weeks-long stint at the marionette theater.

Despite the fact that this dissertation is about people and culture from Myanmar, I conducted my research from a distance. Travel to Myanmar has been restricted since the February 1, 2021 coup, but, more importantly, I felt compelled to do what a fellow scholar-activist asked. In a conference held in response to the coup, this individual urged us—scholar-activists from other countries around the world—to refuse to engage with the military government. Such a refusal would include not applying for and paying fees for a visa. I would also point out that I have no desire to expose myself to violence or increase my interlocutors' risk of harm beyond what it currently is.

In line with the call to refuse fieldwork or travel, I drew on a "patchwork" ethnographic approach, informed by critiques of long-term fieldwork and necessitated by the political circumstances in Myanmar at the time of writing (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020). Since February 1, 2021, when the military staged a coup against the democratically elected government, Burmese citizens and the Burmese diaspora have sustained a courageous protest movement. In addition to global Covid-19 travel restrictions and the volatile conditions in Myanmar, the military junta has imposed laws that are designed to limit political criticism and silence online communication. As a result, I turn to "patchwork ethnography" because the possibility of my physical presence has been curtailed, and this approach requires me to reconsider the division between field and home and find new modes of "being there" and "being with"(Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020). This methodology, moreover, foregrounds the need to develop long-term, sustained research relationships and commitments; that is, responsibilities to individuals and communities that last beyond the duration of this project. I endeavored to find ways of "being there" or "with" by conducting a significant portion of the research online,

whether accessing materials held in institutional archives, joining in social media practices, or conducting calls using video conferencing software.

Conducting online research was a reaction made in response to circumstances. In this work, I employed digital communication as a tool for communicating with people. My approach differs from ethnomusicological projects that specifically study online communities that have formed around musical practices (Lysloff 2003; Wood 2008). I used tools like social media, secure messaging platforms, and video conferencing to facilitate something resembling the sort of conversations I would have had with interlocutors if we had been in the same location. This project remains focused on thinking through processes of kinship formation enabled by producing and perceiving sound; it is less invested in putting forward explanations as to how people used specific technologies. This method (involving an orientation away from a medial concern for the technologies being used) has been called "virtual fieldwork" (Cooley, Meizel, and Syed 2008, 91).

The circumstances and stakes of my research has led me to consider some of the ethical ramifications of digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016; Hilder and Tan 2017; Tausig 2013; Goralska 2020). I write carefully so as to avoid giving readers the impression that I am what Gabriele de Seta has termed a "networked field-weaver" (De Seta 2020). Rather than being open-ended, doing research in Myanmar through digital means is like looking through a door that is barely open. I have attempted to show up as myself in my online interactions by having a public social media profile on Instagram that I updated regularly during the duration of my research in order to allow people and organizations I followed a chance to know me. The accounts that I mention and the posts that I reference were all taken from "public" accounts, meaning that anyone with an account on Instagram or Facebook (depending on the source) could view that profile and what they had posted. I have tried to embody an ethic of care when working with materials that record violence and loss, following Temi Odumosu's work (Odumosu 2020).

Equipped with an LTE internet connection, I did my research from my family's cabin on Galiano Island, British Columbia, Canada. The island is positioned between the mainland and Vancouver Island, part of a group of islands known as the "Southern Gulf Islands." There are about a thousand full-time residents, though that number is steadily increasing, but the population triples in the summer. Unlike much of Canada, winter is mild and there are no predators (though many would cite anecdotal reports of cougars to contradict me). Someone who had visited the island once or twice told me that people who lived there were referred to as "rippies," a portmanteau of "redneck" and "hippie," based on their appearance and attitude.
If fieldwork has been built up to be a novel experience in a distant locale (which is a narrative that privileges whiteness and the kind of institutional power that opens doors, so to speak, while marginalizing and devaluing the experience of researchers who work with their own communities), this was the opposite. I grew up visiting my grandparents here. I fell asleep watching the bats dart back and forth from the eaves, I accidentally released tens of shore crabs I wanted to keep as pets into the cabin, and I jumped from the top of the stairs to the landing at the dock to avoid the slightest chance of stepping on a garter snake. My parents moved to another home on the island when they retired, one that unlike the cabin, is connected to roads and the electrical grid.

Over time, my connection to the island was deepened through summer jobs at restaurants and community organizations, through attending community events like the Winter Solstice dinner and Nettlefest, by going to the store with my mum when I visited, by waiting for my dad when he chatted with "the guys." Galiano became somewhere I knew people and people knew me, either by name or through my connections to other people, or at least recognized me enough to wave. My husband lived with me on Galiano during this fieldwork year, furthering his connections to people and places on the island in a way that gave others an additional point of reference for making sense of me. "Annie, Mary and Rob's daughter," could also be "Annie, Matt's wife," depending on who I was introducing myself to. When I write about my experiences in more detail in Chapter Three, I use the pronouns "I" and "we" to reflect others' co-presence in my work. That is because I do not want to build up an illusion of self-sufficiency. I might have been the one doing research, but my family and neighbors made my work possible through everyday acts of care.

I should note that generational wealth made this project possible. Owning a home, let alone homes, is a position of immense privilege from which I directly benefited, as my parents did not charge us rent to live in the cabin. Moreover, I was (and remain) an uninvited settler on Indigenous land.

Chapter Outlines

In Chapter One, "Between the Beats," I track a practice called *thanbone hti* as it moves through different forms, each of which bring out participatory and political possibilities. *Thanbone hti*, as it is known in Burmese, is the term used to refer to the practice of banging on metal pots, pans, buckets, and tins with metal utensils. I begin by providing necessary background by synthesizing scholarship on sonic dissent and presenting Myanmar's Spring Revolution (from February 2021 through the end of 2022) within a historical trajectory of pro-democracy protests in order to situate *thanbone hti* within a specific sonic vernacular. Next, I work to differentiate *thanbone hti* from other forms of protest that use pots and pans—whether *manifs casseroles* in Quebec or *cacerolazos* in Chile—based on its utility as an invocation. As an invocation, *thanbone hti* summons audience members who are supposed to intervene. I draw on an archive of sources collected through virtual ethnography, including sound art, social media posts, journalistic sources, and fundraising efforts, to show how solidarity can be made through and heard in this form of sonic dissent. More specifically, I work to connect the sonic phenomenon I call "alternation" (bursts of sound as heard within *thanbone hti*) to the experiences of solidarity cultivated between protestors as well as the strategies of protection they have turned to in response to the military junta's escalating violence. Crucially, I extend my view to think through the high stakes of participating in *thanbone hti* and the proliferation of silent strikes in response to the consequences that the military has meted out. I move from the use of kitchen implements, laden with gendered expectation, towards other examples of sonic dissent that foreground a changing politics of gender, including Moe Myat May Zarchi's video work "Moon Landing." I position actions of solidarity that occur in relation to *thanbone hti* within a definition of kinship that is rooted in care.

If Chapter One hints at materiality and substance, Chapter Two, “Blood and Bonds,” takes substance to be its main focus. I review existing literature on a genre called *copy thachin* so as to excavate a politics of reproduction and apply it to examples of protest song. *Copy thachin* tracks, as I explain, pair the melodic content from international pop songs with newly-written Burmese lyrics. I show how as a genre, *copy thachin* has worked against cultural isolationism and leverages lax copyright laws to reproduce and circulate widely, especially through online platforms. My focus on the anthropology of kinship makes room for speculation, in particular in attending to the “substance” of sound: when the shared perception of a particular sonic materiality is heard to draw individuals into a shared political relation. As I explain more fully in the chapter, substances bind people together in at least two ways: partaking of the same substance can join people together as kin and a technoscientific understanding of kinship revolves around shared bodily substance. With that in mind, I consider the relationality selected tracks produce, between each other and between performers and listeners. “Kabar Ma Kyay Bu,” is an iconic protest anthem associated with the 1988 protests that makes use of the melody from Kansas’ 1977 hit, “Dust in the Wind.” I argue that references to blood in the lyrics works to create a sense of kinship between activists, particularly General Aung San. I elaborate on Aung San Suu Kyi’s literal and figurative position as a mother in light of this. I retain this focus on bodily substance to make sense of Rap Against Junta’s 2022 track, “Blood (သွေး). As I show, the track uses references to blood as shorthand for a shared history of violence against ethnic minority groups. The track, performed by artists from different ethnic backgrounds, presents a vision of kinship that refuses ethnic division.

Chapter Three, “Recording Disappearance,” marks a shift towards thinking about kinship in the wake of absence and loss. Operation Hanoi Hannah is an anonymous activist collective, formed in the aftermath of the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar with the aim of addressing and improving social conditions through the distribution of sonic material. The tracks on their second album, *Redemption*, accompany a report (issued as online liner notes) on the Myanmar military’s use of child combatants that was circulated on social media. *Redemption* presents a history of violence through mothers’ and sons’ voices that speak of visceral experiences of loss and separation. In doing so, this album employs tactics and techniques for registering absence through sound recording that differ from examples in which sound or sound recording is used as a mode of preservation, to connect with persons who have died, or to establish personhood (Sterne 2003, Stevenson 2017, Stanyek and Piekut 2010, Steingo 2019, Moreno 2019). Rather, I claim that these recordings, which present the perspectives of missing people and their loved ones, make kinship bonds audible, and in doing so, insist on these individuals’ personhood. Disappeared persons are made present through their family members’ voices. Absence and loss apply to the album directly, as only traces of the album exist now that the collective’s website has disappeared. I seek to explain Operation Hanoi Hannah’s disappearance from the online sphere in terms of archival instability and infrastructural failure, contrasting my experience of listening from afar with information about the increasing and persistent power outages in Myanmar that occurred in 2021 and 2022.

Finally, Chapter Four, “Participatory Audio Recording’s Potential” recounts my experience developing and implementing a research protocol. The technique, based on “photovoice,” substitutes audio recording for photography (Wang and Burris 1997). Instead of relying on my own presence in Myanmar to make recordings, I worked in partnership with a

local arts organization to recruit participants who were compensated for making audio recordings using their mobile phones and speaking about them in group interviews that were conducted through online video calls. I use their audio collages, sound maps, and field recordings—as well as their own explanations of art-making, crucially—to show how their experiences of Myanmar's post-coup soundscape apply to new workings-out of kinship. I categorize our findings into three broad categories, "movement," "staying at home," and "ways of being with one another," to support my thesis that processes of kinship formation can be heard. Within these three categories, the chapter mirrors the broader structure of the dissertation, slowly shifting from the domestic space to experiences of loss. I end the chapter reflecting on the sense of mutuality that persists in sound media despite geographic and temporal dislocation.

Chapter One: Between the Strikes
Thanbone Hti as Invocation

In April 2021, after watching and saving Instagram and Facebook posts of people banging pots and pans since early February, I had the chance to ask my language teachers on Zoom about what I saw in video footage of protests in Myanmar. They disagreed that this was a supernatural act.

“I’ve never seen anyone do that,” N said.

“Maybe in more rural places, but not where I grew up,” T allowed.

In the videos I watched, protestors banged metal objects—pots, pans, ladles, tins, serving spoons—together in concentrated bursts of percussive sound. When one person stopped, the sound of another protestor’s hits filled in the gap. A YouTube video published on Channel News Asia’s official channel, showed footage of protests that was taken from above street level. Repeating metal-on-metal strikes cut through the audio, either due to closer proximity to the camera or because they were higher pitched than other goings on. When it stopped, a rapid tapping took over, beating out a faster pace but one that was lower in pitch and less strident. The metal-on-metal chimed methodically in response. There was audible chanting in the background and the rapid tapping returned when the camera panned to capture the scene taking place up and down the street. After a brief declamation from an amplified voice—perhaps someone speaking into a megaphone—the metal-on-metal strikes were back.

I had read captions that claimed that people were doing this to drive evil spirits away—here, taken to include the military leader Min Aung Hlaing—and wanted to find out more about this form of sonic dissent and what it was intended to achieve. English language media honed in on the prevalence of pots and pans protests immediately following the military’s take-over, drawing out its supernatural associations and nightly recurrence. In the Associated Press: “‘Beating a drum in Myanmar culture is like we are kicking out the devils,’ said one participant who declined to give his name for fear of reprisals.”[3] As per the *New York Times*: “Since the coup, cities across Myanmar have resounded with the din of clanging pots, pans, gongs and empty water jugs, a traditional send-off for the devil, which, in this case, wears army green.”[4] In the *Guardian*: “At 8pm, the first rattles and shakes echoed down the streets of Yangon, rumbling into a chorus of cheers and spoons clashing against pans. Cars hit their horns, cyclists rang their bells and passersby smacked their hands against signs and stone.”[5]

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[3] “People in Myanmar Honk Horns, Bang on Pots to Protest Coup.” 2021. AP News. February 3, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-lawmakers-house-arrest-coup-93148fa493acec64213753152d84318d.

[4] “Myanmar Erupts in Protests After Military Coup - The New York Times.” 2021. February 16, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/06/world/asia/myanmar-military-coup-yangon.html.

[5] Lovett, Lorcan. 2021. “The Nights of Pots and Pans Are Back, on Myanmar’s Fearful Streets.” *The Guardian*, February 2, 2021, sec. Global development. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/02/the-nights-of-pots-and-pans-are-back-on-myanmar-fearful-streets.

I posed the same question to another teacher towards the end of one of my lessons a year later: “Why are people banging pots and pans? Is it really to drive evil spirits away?”

“I mean, I don’t believe in it, but some people do,” she replied.

“Why pots and pans though?”

“It’s not always pots and pans,” she clarified, “but it has to be metal. People are using tins or containers—biscuit tins, oil tins, things like that.” What she said aligned with one of the phrases I had repeatedly seen in captions: “metal on metal to drive evil out.”

“So the pots and pans aren’t the important part?” I asked.

“No, it’s the metal.”

She continued and took the idea of pots and pans in another direction. “You know, when women are cooking, when they’re in the kitchen, they’d try not to make any noise with the pots and pans. They’d try not to bang them together at all because it’s bad luck.”

“What kind of bad luck?”

“Things to do with money, you know, with household finances.”

We wrapped up our Zoom call with the usual talk of homework and scheduling the next lesson. By the time I clicked “end meeting for all” I knew more and less than what I expected to find out about the pots and pans.

In this chapter I work through an array of sounded and silent sources (including recordings, sound art pieces, Instagram posts posted between early February 2021 through December 2021) to show how *thanbone hti* is a practice that can take many forms, including that of an appeal to a supernatural audience and to solidarity between women working in domestic households. Correspondingly, *thanbone hti*’s diverse forms open up possibilities for participation that function in addition to the noisy street protests. I make use of quantitative analysis to suggest that “alternation” (or the repeated succession of rapid-fire beats as performed by different people to create sound masses) is an important sonic feature of *thanbone hti*. I understand alternation to be sonically representative, not only of an aesthetic idea, but of the solidarity extant between protestors in Myanmar. In their soundings, individuals shoulder some degree of risk so that others around them can know (to some extent) their dissatisfaction with the current political conditions. Joining in signals some degree of commitment to a vision of a changed Myanmar without tying individuals to a specific viewpoint. In light of the risks of participation, I address “silent strikes,” where participants opt to stay home instead of doing protest actions including *thanbone hti*, as a safer alternative to *thanbone hti*. I follow the thread connecting participation and risk to “Tanbone သံပုံး (Sound Pot),” a multimedia exhibit and mobile application by Kam Seng Aung, Joshua Weitzel and Sam Tsao, which allows for audience participation while tasking audience members with the onus of bearing witnesses to people who have been killed in protests.

English language journalistic sources, like the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* have emphasized the possible supernatural elements of the practice. These sources have indicated that the metal-on-metal sound of *thanbone hti* is meant to summon supernatural figures who will drive evil spirits away. There is a risk here of exoticizing a meaningful form of political dissent and thereby categorizing participants as not being rational. I want to recognize that for some, this call to the supernatural is real and I acknowledge that their reality is valid (Viveiros de Castro 1998). In my argument, however, the use of *thanbone hti* in fundraising merchandise, suggests a more tangible-to-me way that the practice functions as an invocation. That is, *thanbone hti* works to summon an audience whose members are supposed to bring about material change for those who are banging on pots and pans. Meanwhile, visual images of *thanbone hti* circulated on Instagram have made space for discussing women's changing role in activism, a point that is also taken up in Moe Myat May Zarchi's multimedia work "Moon Landing."

In what follows, I begin by contextualizing and differentiating *thanbone hti* as a vernacular practice. After a brief overview of previous pro-democracy protest movements in Myanmar, I outline the sonic features and uses of pots and pans protests heard elsewhere in the world. In the next section, I build out my analytic frame around the ideas of sonic dissent and voice. In the third section I focus on examples of *thanbone hti* that foreground participation and risk. Next, I work through examples that relate back to invocation, before ending by addressing how *thanbone hti* intersects with women's movements and anti-coup gender protest.

Contextualizing *Thanbone Hti*

The Spring Revolution, during which *thanbone hti* has been practiced as a form of sonic dissent follows the 2007 Saffron Revolution and the 1988 Uprising, which I include condensed narratives of here for readers who might be less familiar with Burmese history. The 1988 Uprising, also referred to as 8888 Uprising, was set in motion following the demonetization of certain banknotes in favor of new, more numerologically-auspicious denominations. A brawl between students and a BSPP (Burma Socialist Programme Party) member's son over the refusal to return a cassette tape escalated. After the party member's son was quickly released, student activists protested, which garnered an outsized response: hundreds of riot police were deployed. If anything, this course of events galvanized student activists, who continued to protest against military rule and police brutality. Ne Win, the military leader, resigned in late July, but he appointed his replacement, Sein Lwin. Pro-democracy activists organized a general strike beginning on August 8, 1988 and lasting until August 12, 1988. On August 26, Aung San Suu Kyi addressed hundreds of thousands of people at Shwedagon Pagoda, advocating for peaceful struggle rather than violent conflict. September 1988 raised and swiftly dashed hopes for a transition to democracy. Members of the BSPP voted in favor of establishing a multi-party government during their congress, but the military seized power again. The constitution was repealed and the State Law and Order Council became an even harsher ruling body than Ne Win's military government. Protests were violently put down—not that they were not before.

Monks, not students, were at the center of the Saffron Revolution in 2007. The sudden removal of fuel subsidies raised the price of fuel dramatically, negatively impacting not only the

price of transportation but people who were already struggling to afford basic commodities and food. 88 Generation activists lead protests that spread nation-wide starting in August; after the first of which, well-known activists were arrested. When monks were injured by troops at a protest in Pakokku in September, the situation escalated. Thousands of monks marched against the military on the street in cities across the country alongside secular protestors. Yet again, the military forcefully ended the movement through the use of intimidation, arrests, and violence.[6]

Thanbone hti rang out from streets and balconies shortly following the February 1, 2021 coup, before the military began violently suppressing protests. The Civil Disobedience Movement was brand new, and the Spring Revolution had not started in earnest yet. However, the post-coup period can be joined to the Saffron Revolution and the 8888 Uprising by various threads. In all these movements, young people played key roles. Events are held at familiar landmarks, like Sule Pagoda. And, unfortunately, the military has reacted to pro-democracy activism with violence. In the Spring Revolution, key figures from the 88 Generation have returned as leaders. Now, though, the increase in portable technology and telecommunication links over time has afforded those of us not in Myanmar a clearer image of what is happening compared to the scant information released by the military in the past.

Pots and Pans Around the World

Banging pots and pans has a well-established history as a form of social critique. “Rough music,” so-called in the Anglophone practice, was used to enforce heterosexual norms in Britain and English colonies from at least the 1730s. Young men, with their identities obscured, would gather outside their target’s home and make noise with whatever they had at hand (E. P. Thompson 1992). In the Francophone version, “*charivari*” functioned as an alternative to violence (Sterne and Zemon Davis 2012). A group of noisemakers would gather outside the offender’s home, sound their discontent, and leave. While the sound would draw attention to someone’s offense against the community, it wouldn’t leave a lasting punitive mark. Rather, the offender would have the chance to salvage their reputation by paying a fine (Zemon Davis 1971).

The historian Matthew Kerry has done work to differentiate between forms of pots and pans protest in South America and Spain. The historical practice of “*cencerrada*” includes “short, derogatory ditties” and is more carnivalesque than a serious social rebuke (Kerry 2024, 14–17). The “*cacerolada*,” by contrast, is an imported practice from Chile and decidedly political. On December 1, 1971, women protested on the streets in Chile, banging their empty pots and pans to highlight food shortages they claimed were a result of the Allende government’s economic reforms (Kerry 2024, 20). The third form, the “*escrache*” is a “form of collective action consisting of the noisy public harassment of politicians” (Kerry 2024, 30).

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[6] During the Saffron Revolution, monks overturned their alms bowls to show that they disagreed with the military’s actions. There is a connection to be made here between this act of refusal and other forms of passive disobedience, including workers’ strikes and the silent strikes. For more information on the significance of this act see: McCarthy, Stephen. 2008. “Overturning the Alms Bowl: The Price of Survival and the Consequences for Political Legitimacy in Burma.” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 62 (3): 298–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357710802286767 and “Overturning the Alms Bowl.” 2022. Insight Myanmar. July 3, 2022. https://insightmyanmar.org/insight-myanmar-blog/2022/7/3/overturning-the-alms-bowl.

Another New World import, while it takes place outside politicians' homes, there is no substantive link between this practice and the "*cencerrada*" (Kerry 2024, 31).

Variations on these forms have taken place around the world, reaching from Iceland to Lebanon. Of course, this pattern of circulation hints at the legacy of colonial occupation. While *thanbone hti* bears a resemblance to *cacerolada*, given its use of kitchen equipment, the two practices should not be conflated. *Thanbone hti* is distinct for the way in which it makes use of both public and private spaces, and the way it resounds to take up space, as I will explain in this chapter.

Sonic Dissent

The practice of *thanbone hti* carries local meanings that diverge from imagined historical precedents, ones that can be related to a "sonic vernacular." "Sonic vernaculars," Benjamin Tausig explains, are made up of well-rooted sonic and aural practices and the meanings they circulate. He argues that unlike protest music, which as a specific genre appeals to a so-called "universal" sense of symbolism, sounds of dissent–like banging pots and pans–work within more specific logics (Tausig 2018). "Sonic vernaculars" make sense, as performances and logistically, when and where a practice is used, but their meaning and comprehensibility can change in different settings. For example, you might have heard people banging pots and pans from their windows and balconies during lockdowns brought about by Covid-19. Initially, people did so as a performance of their gratitude for essential workers. However, the same sound has been used to protest extended and strict lockdowns. The time and place, rather than the sound itself, determine meaning–so confirming a tenet central to ethnomusicology.

Tausig's work presents itself, usefully, as a rebuttal to the primacy of protest song as a universal form of social resistance; his intention is to "provincialize" protest song as a genre of music rooted in a particular time and place—for him, the United States following World War II. In doing so, he accounts for the relative lack of protest songs attached to more recent social movements in North America like the Occupy Movement and opens the door to connect his argument to an array of protest techniques used around the world as studied by fellow ethnomusicologists. Several theorizations of protest song and sonic dissent exist in ethnomusicology–ones that offer a rich complementary discourse to the discussion of *thanbone hti* offered here, and all of which inform my understanding of sonic dissent (Kheshti 2015; Manabe 2015; Novak 2015; Schwartz 2012).

The vernacular setting here extends from the streets of Yangon and Mandalay, through residents' homes, and into a porous online community. As part of this online community, I followed Instagram accounts that posted regular updates on protests happening in Yangon from February 2021, and occasionally, in other parts of the country. This has resulted in a bias towards the urban, not to mention those with some degree of English language fluency and with the means to connect to the internet, which should not be taken to be the norm for people elsewhere in the country. Rather, this partial view is a product of the challenge of access in this scenario. The porous online community engaged here is made up of members of the Burmese diaspora, concerned individuals, and researchers like myself who post, comment, like, and share on social media platforms. I describe it as porous because there are no formal requirements to

being thought of as part of it and it surely includes people who choose to "lurk," that is, to only view posts but never share their own.

I lean away from harnessing "voice" as the primary mechanism for understanding sonic dissent in Myanmar, and steer clear of leveraging so-called "voice studies" to my cause (Eidsheim and Meizel 2019; Harkness 2013). I have insufficient ethnographic evidence that participants in *thanbone hti* would frame their actions in relation to a politics of voice, or to a politics of "making voices heard." Political context is key; Myanmar is not a liberal democracy and as such the equation of voice with individuality, representation, and power might not apply here. However, the concept of *athan* (အသံ, rendered in Burmese) might be relevant. Here, I model my intervention on Laura Kunreuther's treatment of the Nepali term "āwāj." "Āwāj" brings together two registers of voice; the first of which concerns the study of vocal sound and the second of which encompasses the use of the term to refer to a discursive category dealing with matters of representation, agency, and power (Kunreuther 2018, 3). Through his work with musicians in Myanmar, Lorenzo Chiarofonte has added new dimensions to our understanding of *athan*. He notes that in specifically musical contexts, musicians use the term to indicate what mode (collection of pitches) is being used in a particular piece—which they dub "tuning" in English. Within the context of ritual performance, he found that inquiring about *athan* yielded answers about sounds that are used to index specific nats (or the spirits of long-dead ancestors) rather than information about modality (Chiarofonte 2020, 175).[7] Zooming out from musical settings, the Burmese word "အသံ"(*athan*) holds the multiple meanings of voice, sound, and noise. The SEAlang Library Dictionary lists thirty relevant subentries that relate to sound-producing technology (အသံဖမ်းစက်, "recording machine") audible qualities of voice (အသံဝါ, "resounding voice; bass"), ways of making sound (အသံကောင်းဟစ်, "make pious sounding noises), and language ("အသံနေအသံထား, "stress and intonation").[8]

Participation and Risk

Scholarly accounts of recent pots and pans protests concentrate on the form's potential for participation. In her article on forms of sonic dissent in Nepal, anthropologist Laura Kunreuther writes that "drumming out beats together on pots and pans is also just plain fun" (Kunreuther 2018, 22). Jonathan Sterne, in his writing on *manifs casseroles* (student strikes involving similar kitchenware in 2012 Quebec), blithely claims that the practice reaches across systemic barriers imposed by race, class, and gender because it does not require specialized instruments or musical training (Sterne 2012). The sounds and stakes of *thanbone hti* are different. Quantitative analysis confirms that the repeated hits happen so quickly that participants are not coalescing around a beat. Rather, they set up a pattern of alternation in which participants bang out a rapid-fire barrage of strikes, then rest while others take over. I extend this sonic metaphor to make sense of two responses to the consequences of doing *thanbone hti*: silent strikes and the

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[7] Nats are the spirits of long-dead people, accessed through ritual performance, as I explain more later in this chapter.

[8] The SEALang library is an online dictionary project focussing on languages and dialects from Southeast Asia. It is a collaborative project between the University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Southeast Asian Studies and the Center for Research in Computational Linguistics. For more information about the resource,visit: http://sealang.net/library/#:

installation titled, "Tanbone သံဗုံး (Sound Pot)." I approach these efforts as part of *thanbone hti* because they are what has taken over after banging pots and pans has become unsafe to do.

In the aforementioned study of Quebec's "casseroles," Jonathan Sterne uses Charles Keil's notion of participatory discrepancies to bolster his claim that this protest form is inclusive (Sterne 2012). Participatory discrepancies take the form of slight inconsistencies in rhythm and pitch that create a productive tension, bringing individual participants together. This, according to Keil, makes music "personally involving and socially valuable" (Keil 1987, 275). While Sterne uses observations derived from participant-observation to make this assessment, Keil was open to harnessing a range of techniques to identify and measure participatory discrepancies, including using a combination of visual and aural information, employing technology, and interviewing interlocutors (Keil 1987, 278-79). In doing so, work on participatory discrepancies anticipates more recent research on interpersonal musical entrainment.

Interpersonal musical entrainment is a term used to describe the "interaction and coordination of human beings mediated by sound and movement" (Clayton et al. 2020, 136). This attention to the human beings who make sound marks a shift from the application of the term "entrainment" to describe how two rhythmic patterns interact with each other (Clayton 2012, 49), as demonstrated in scholarship focused on analyzing music (London, Polak, and Jacoby 2017; Polak 2010; Jacoby et al. 2020; Jakubowski et al. 2022). To develop a comprehensive model of interpersonal musical entrainment, Martin Clayton and his co-authors suggest that scholars should build out their analysis by accounting for the size of the group, spatial organization, the presence of any subgroups, various roles within the group, leadership structure, participation, technology, and knowledge (Clayton et al. 2020, 152). In what follows, I draw on quantitative analysis of the sound of *thanbone hti* as recorded in video footage to show that something other than participatory discrepancies undergirds this practice.

Thanbone hti

Here, my objects of analysis consist of four videos that last less than two minutes each. Each video is made up of clips that are only a few seconds long. As the uploaded comments to the videos themselves state, these protests took place across Myanmar and hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of people participated. Moreover, the nightly sessions rang out for up to thirty minutes in some cases. That is to say, these video clips provide a very partial view of a large social movement. Because the majority of clips have "bursts" of strikes in which there is a short period of very rapid hits followed by a rest where another participant's "burst" of strikes can be heard, I wondered if there was a way to quantify what I heard as demanding physical exertion that would warrant a participant needing to rest.

In order to get the most information I could from the scant information the videos convey, I decided to ascertain the tempo at which pots were being struck in each clip. Fortunately, I had ready access to a basic form of the laboratory technology Keil thought productive. After noting the time points for the short clips with *thanbone hti* sounds in each video, I listened carefully and tapped along with the pulse I heard. Using a website that calculates beats per minute based on keystrokes or trackpad clicks, I arrived at an approximate

number of beats per minute for each clip. Next, I converted beats per minute into milliseconds by dividing 60000 by the number of beats per minute for each clip.

This set of simple calculations made it possible to translate my qualitative assessment—"this sounds like they are hitting so fast that it would be difficult to sustain over time"—to the terms used to discuss entrainment. Clayton et al. put forward three ranges of numbers that all revolve around interonset intervals (IOI), a term for the duration between successive audible events. A beat, that is a pulse abstracted from a stream of onsets which may or may not be audible, usually has an interonset interval in the range of 250-2000 milliseconds (Clayton et al. 2020, 140). Subdivisions are a "fast" pulse that subdivides the slower beat and have an interonset range of 100-250 milliseconds (Clayton et al. 2020, 140). The tactus is defined as the beat that is most comfortable to tap along to, which usually falls in the interonset interval range of 350-700 milliseconds (Clayton et al. 2020, 140).

The chart below lists the approximate beat per minute and interonset interval measurement for the relevant clips in each video.

Figure 1.1, Beats Per Minute Timing and Interonset Intervals of Thanbone Hti in News Footage

Example 1: *Yangon Residents Use Pots and Pans to Protest Myanmar Coup*. 2021. https://www.nbcnews.com/video/yangon-residents-bang-pots-and-pans-honk-car-horns-to-protest-myanmar-military-coup-100425285722.

Time Points in Video	BPM	Interonset Interval
0:09-0:12	315	190.5
0:12-0:17	260	230
0:20-0:25	300-320	200-187.5
0:28-0:34	300	200
0:36-0:44	170	352

Example 2: Guardian News, dir. 2021. *Myanmar: Clanging Pots and Pans Ring in Protest over Military Coup*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ODFFiJp0rE.

Time Points in Video	BPM	Interonset Interval
0:00-0:12	340-240	176-250
0:13-21	220	272
0:26-0:33	240	250

Example 3: Bloomberg Quicktake, dir. 2021. *Myanmar Residents Resist Military Coup Banging Pots and Pans*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68FBehWTBYs.

Time Points in Video	BPM	Interonset Interval
0:00-0:08	190-200	315-300
0:09-0:18	260	230.77

Example 4: Radio Free Asia, dir. 2021. *Myanmar Residents Bang Pots and Pans to Protest Military Coup*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmVKiSC4ktk.

Time Points in Video	BPM	Interonset Interval
0:09-0:12	185	324
0:14-0:18	310	193.5
0:26-0:37	210-220	285.7-272

These numbers prove significant, even if this is a tiny corpus of information made up of clips that are very short. The interonset interval for most of these is too short—meaning, the rate of strikes is too fast—for these strikes to be hammering out a tactus, something people could clap along with. In fact, most of the examples perch awkwardly between a beat and a subdivision, either a very fast beat or a slow subdivision. More sonic details round out this simple analysis. In addition to the difference in the rate of strikes and the short bursts of activity, *thanbone hti* does not appear to include subdivisions, which are clearly audible in casseroles. Finally, the videos indicate that someone will perform rapid strikes for a short period of time, stop, and start again. In the intervening time, another individual (as indicated by a change in timbre and volume) will do the same, setting up a pattern of alternation without adherence to a shared tempo.

Unfortunately, my lack of ethnographic access means that it is not possible to advance what Clayton et al. would consider to be a comprehensive study of interpersonal musical entrainment. The videos only supply spatial information in the sense that they depict how much space the protests take up; a shot that pans up and down a street shows light coming from the majority of windows and people are visible on their balconies holding pots and pans. We have to settle for knowing that there is other important contextual information–about the existence of subgroups, the use of technology within groups, even whether or not there are leaders–that is not accessible at this time. Despite these gaps in information, the performance context and sonic features suggest that *thanbone hti* works in markedly different ways from those of the *casseroles* protests that Sterne observed.

As a listener, I hear the stop and start of short bursts of rhythmic activity as alternating with one another. Moreover, following work that finds a relationship between what an act of sonic dissent sounds like and its political affordances, I understand alternation to be a sonic performance of the political solidarity extant between protestors in Myanmar.[9] In their soundings, individuals shoulder some degree of risk so that others around them can know (to some extent) their dissatisfaction with the military. It signals some degree of commitment to a vision of a changed Myanmar without tying individuals to a specific viewpoint. Like the banging of pots and pans and flickering of lights in Turkey that Zeynep Gürsel describes, *thanbone hti* works as "social media" because it functions as "a 'medium' for communicating solidarity." (Gürsel 2017, 70). Additionally, as I will discuss later in the chapter, there are parallels between the way pots and pans still ring out when someone takes a break and the practices of mutual aid and direct aid that have gained traction with people outside Myanmar in the wake of the 2021 coup.

As the consequences for participating in *thanbone hti* have become increasingly dire, so the nightly protests have waned. Individuals in Mandalay and Karen state were arrested for participating in pots and pans strikes in 2021. In Mandalay, a group of eleven people were arrested in December 2021 for participating in a pots and pans protest against the violence committed in Salingyi, Sagaing Region.[10] Sa Aung Moe Hein was arrested and sentenced to seven days in jail in February 2021 after protesting in Hlaing Bwe town.[11] While he was one of many who took part in the noisy protests, no one else was jailed.

The junta's reaction to protests has intensified further since then. In January 2022, the junta issued a statement claiming that the People's Defence Force and National Unity Government encouraged the destruction of state stability through actions including silent strikes, honking, clapping, and banging pots and pans. Therefore, participants in those types of protests could be charged with high treason, which carries a sentence ranging from three years of imprisonment to the death penalty.[12] In the January 26, 2022 issue of the *Global New Light of*

[9] See, for example, Marié Abe's work on resonance and adjustment in *chindon-ya* (Abe 2016) and Maria Sonevytsky's account of dissensus as experienced at the 2017 Women's March (Sonevytsky 2019).
[10] Malik, Khalid Umar. 2021. "Myanmar: Junta Arrests 11 for Banging Pots and Pans." December 13, 2021. https://www.laosnews.net/news/271928882/myanmar-junta-arrests-11-for-banging-pots-and-pans.
[11] Karen News. February 22, 20221. "Karen Youth Jailed for Banging Pots and Pans." Karen News. February 22, 20221. https://karennews.org/2021/02/karen-youth-jailed-for-banging-pots-and-pans/.
[12] *The Straits Times*. 2022. "Myanmar Junta Threatens Pot-Banging Protesters with Treason," January 25, 2022. https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/myanmar-junta-threatens-pot-banging-protesters-with-treason. See also:

Myanmar, a press statement released by the junta which I quote at length below, is sandwiched between an article on community-based tourism and another article about Covid vaccine programs in remote villages:

> CRPH and NUG, which were declared terrorist groups, their subordinates and colluded groups and persons are intentionally making incitements, propaganda and threats to destroy the stability of the State and administrative machinery with the public fear using various ways via social networks.
>
> If the people follow and make their incitements and propaganda without understanding or by fear or by sounds or by matters or by any means, destructive elements against people, sharing the propaganda and supportive measures, they will be taken action under the Counter-Terrorism Law Section 52(a), Penal Code Section 124-A and Section 505-A, Electronic Transactions Law Section 33(a) and the existing laws." (*Global New Light of Myanmar* 2022, 3)

When that statement was issued, the junta had yet to execute anyone. However, Kyaw Min Yu (popularly known as "Ko Jimmy") and Phyo Zeya Thaw were sentenced to death under the Counterterrorism Law and were executed alongside two others, Hla Myo Aung and Aung Thura Saw, in July 2022.[13] I suggest that when the decision to participate in *thanbone hti* is punishable by the same law—given that the practice might draw unwanted attention from people who would do you harm—that decision becomes a calculated risk made with one's own and others' safety in mind.

Silent Strikes

In response to acts of state suppression, silent strikes have emerged as an alternative form of anti-government sonic dissent. The first "silent" protest was held on March 24, 2021 and the second on December 10, 2021 to mark Human Rights Day.[14] Silent strikes have also been held to commemorate the first, second, and third anniversaries of the coup.[15] According to

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"Myanmar Junta Threatens Pot-Banging Protesters with Treason." 2022. France 24. January 25, 2022. https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220125-myanmar-junta-threatens-pot-banging-protesters-with-treason.

[13] "Myanmar Junta Executes Four | Human Rights Watch." 2022. July 25, 2022. https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/25/myanmar-junta-executes-four. See also: "Myanmar: UN Experts Sound Alarm over Junta's Decision to Enforce Death Sentences." n.d. OHCHR. Accessed April 23, 2024. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/myanmar-un-experts-sound-alarm-over-juntas-decision-enforce-death-sentences.

[14] Wei, Brian. 2024. "Myanmar's Junta Will Be Hit by Another Strike of Silence on Coup Anniversary." *The Irrawaddy*. January 30, 2024. https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-junta-will-be-hit-by-another-strike-of-silence-on-coup-anniversary.html.

[15] RFA Burmese. 2024. "Third Anniversary of Military Coup Marked with 'Silent Strike' across Myanmar." Radio Free Asia. February 1, 2024. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/strike-02012024161130.html.
See also: Ratcliffe, Rebecca. 2024. "Myanmar at Standstill as Silent Strike Marks Third Anniversary of Coup." *The Guardian*, February 1, 2024, sec. Global development. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/feb/01/streets-of-myanmar-silent-as-people-take-part-in-strike-against-military-junta.

instructions shared online on the day of the strike, participants were enjoined to stay home from ten in the morning until four in the evening.[16] This would not have created a complete absence of sound, of course. People still would have made noise as they breathed, their clothes rustled, and their sandals slapped against the ground. The intent was to refuse to participate, to make the point that, no, stores will not open as usual; and no, people will not go to work or school as usual. The junta reacted with force. Radio Free Asia reports that a quota of civilians—50 in smaller townships, and 100 in larger townships— were required to attend pro-junta events on February 1, 2024.[17] According to the same article, junta forces intimidated shop owners into opening their stores by taking photos of closed shops.

The wording on posters reads: "အပြင်မထွက်၊အသံတိတ်သပိတ်," which makes for an unidiomatic translation, but one that stresses how the silence of a silent strike is actively performed by participants. The first part is easy—"don't go out"—but the formulation of အသံတိတ်သပိတ် breaks apart into "အသံ (sound (noun)) + တိတ် (silence (verb)) + သပိတ် (strike (noun))," or "silence sounds strike." This underscores that this form of silence must be understood as an active effort.

Lack of sound does not correspond to a lack of scholarly apparatuses for understanding absence. The silence of certain industrialized sounds is venerated within a prestigious corpus of environmentally-oriented work (Schafer 1993) and indicative of disastrous species loss when the sounds of identified animal populations fall silent (Krause 2013). Elizabeth Margulis' work shows how silence is more than a sought-after listening condition; silence is a function that indicates boundaries, works as a productive interruption, creates opportunities for anticipation or projection, and sets up communication within Western art music compositions and performances (Margulis 2007). Scholars have addressed how silencing can be understood as an act of repression and erasure, whether exerted against information, expression, or existence (Ochoa Gautier 2015). Ethnomusicologists have examined silence's culturally-specific meanings. In his study of protests in Thailand, Benjamin Tausig provides examples in which quiet sound–or voluntary silence–takes on an aspect of power. Take, for one, his example of a protestor meditating silently to commemorate a journalist's death, thereby demonstrating *nâasongsân*, a state of being pity-worthy. Tausig notes that this activist's silence had the same effect as very loud sound: it "generated a social space of pain, sympathetic feeling, and suffering" (Tausig 2019, 90). In his study of *onkyô*, a Japanese genre characterized by silences and pauses, David Novak explains how silence in this case is a product of development and nation-building (Novak 2010). By contrast, Marié Abe historicizes moments of silence at rallies following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in relation to the practice of *jishuku*, a form of self-restraint (Abe 2016, 244–46).

In the case of silent strikes in Myanmar, I understand silence to be an effective risk management strategy. Nomi Dave's work with musicians from Guinea shows that by choosing

[16] "DVB | စစ်အာဏာသိမ်း ၃ နှစ်ပြည့်နေ့တွင် အသံတိတ်သပိတ်နှင့် အဖြူရောင်လှုပ်ရှားမှု ပြုလုပ်မည်." 2024. နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေး ၃ နှစ်ပြည့်နေ့မှာ ပြုလုပ်မယ့် အသံတိတ်သပိတ်နဲ့ အဖြူရောင် လှုပ်ရှားမှုမှာ ပြည်သူတွေအားလုံးပါဝင်ကြဖို့ သပိတ်ခေါင်းဆောင်တွေနဲ့ တော်လှန်ရေး အဖွဲ့အစည်း အသီးသီးက တိုက်တွန်းထားကြပါတယ်။လာ…. January 29, 2024. https://burmese.dvb.no/post/636228.

[17] RFA Burmese. 2024. "Third Anniversary of Military Coup Marked with 'Silent Strike' across Myanmar." Radio Free Asia. February 1, 2024. https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/strike-02012024161130.html.

not to address certain topics in their work, musicians maintain economic security within a patronage model. In addressing this type of protective omission, Dave works to dispel the myth of “musical heroism” (Dave 2014, 24), in which music is able to effect change. She makes the case for a more nuanced perspective that accounts for a full spectrum of political views, rather than cleaving to a binary division between those shared through progressive popular music and a conservative viewpoint expressed in older forms (Dave 2014, 3–4). It is not the sound of silence, nor is it the sound of pots and pans that is doing work to change people’s circumstances in post-coup Myanmar. It is the people participating in silent strikes and *thanbone hti* who are making their anti-military views known, both to those within earshot and to a global audience, who are doing the work. In light of *thanbone hti*’s criminalization, participants in silent strikes create a safer opportunities for activism.

In contrast to silent strikes, which manage risk, “Tan Bone သံပုံး (Sound Pot),” a collaborative exhibition project by Kam Seng Aung, Joshua Weitzel, and Sam Tsao, creates a space for audiences to reckon with the terrible fact that activists have been killed while engaging in *thanbone hti*. In its various configurations, “Tan Bone သံပုံး (Sound Pot)” has brought together field recordings, protestors’ pots and pans, and a smartphone app. In the first version, exhibited at Marburger Kunstverein in Germany from June 11 to July 29, 2021, a four-channel audio recording of the protests that took place in early February 2021 plays on a loop with woks as loudspeakers. Version Two was shown at the Opening Sound Art Festival Trier in Germany from July 24 to August 15, 2021. This version used the same audio material as pots were positioned on chairs spread through the gallery space. The exhibition catalog explained that the former owners of these pots were murdered by the military. The pots were displayed starkly as “silenced objects,” suppling a visual contrast to the audio recording playing in the gallery. The positioning of speakers in the room emphasized this silencing. The entrance to the space was framed by loudspeakers positioned across from each other, creating a gate for exhibition goers. Due to this spatial arrangement, as participants moved closer to the objects, the recording grew quieter. Small placards next to each object listed its deceased owner’s name and age alongside the date and location of their death.

More biographical information about the activists was accessible in a smartphone app that gallery visitors could access by scanning a QR code. Visitors left the exhibit the way they came, hearing the field recordings once more through the pair of loudspeakers, this time with crucial information about the stakes of this protest action. Version Three developed the app further. In Version Three, a transducer was attached to the back of a cooking pot, turning it into a loudspeaker that plays a shorter loop of KSA’s field recordings. The quietness of the recording worked to draw visitors closer to the pot-turned-loudspeaker, where they would be able to read that this pot belonged to Seing Naung Naung, who died from a gunshot wound inflicted by the military. In Version Four, the exhibit expanded to include the *htamein*-garnished barricades that protestors used on the street, again using the app to supply background information.

The app does more than supply information. It functions as a way of repeatedly revisiting the work and offers an access point for viewers to become participants. Scanning a QR code takes you to a screen sequence entitled “Hear The Voice of Myanmar,” where the first screen advises you to take your phone off silent mode. Pressing “next” leads to a page with a start button that instructs “get ready to make some noise.” A system screen then prompts you to

allow the site to access motion and orientation on my device. I followed the instructions, shaking my phone to play the sound recording of *thanbone hti*. Tapping that button allowed me to change which field recording my phone played. The exhibits and the app, in other words, prompt audience members to take action. Audience members come into closer and closer contact with protestors who were killed as they look at the pots, lean in and read placards, and edge nearer to speakers. These calls to action, I surmised, were intended to task audience members with another obligation: memorializing these activists as individuals.

When the metal-on-metal sound of *thanbone hti* is heard, it is not perceived as one unified, steady acoustic pulse. As I have explained, it is made up of short bursts of rhythmic activity that alternate, giving participants a chance to rest and recover. So far, I have picked up on the phenomenon of "alternation" in order to elaborate on how the consequences for practicing *thanbone hti* have given rise to new ways of participating, including silent strikes and the art piece "Tanbone သံပုံး (Sound Pot)." As I have argued, silent strikes offer potential participants a measure of safety. "Tanbone သံပုံး (Sound Pot)," meanwhile, asks the audience to participate by using an app to play recorded sound and by memorializing protestors who were killed by the military. It remains to show how non-profit humanitarian organizations might engage in an expanded notion of "sonic dissent" by both spreading abroad silent images of *thanbone hti* practice. Finally, I conclude by centering the participation of Burmese women and domestic life in widespread protest action. My contribution, in the end, is to draw out the gendered implications of *thanbone hti* in view of the "quietness" of cooking and care work, while also explicating how gender stereotypes might be appropriated to the public cause of civil outcry and unrest.

Invocation and Aid

The silence of the aforementioned forms of international remembrance and invocation extend to proliferating forms of media and art-making across the Burmese diaspora. For example, Start A RiArt, a "collective non-profit online merch shop" seeks to raise funds to support activists in Myanmar through the sale of clothing and accessories featuring art donated by Myanmar artists.[18] The description box for each item notes three important facts: that they are using the image with direct permission for fundraising, that 10% of the proceeds will go to the artists and 90% will be donated to "CRPH-OFP verified organizations or personally trusted charities," and that the donations will be disclosed on their social media platforms. The online store uses a platform called Threadless, a print-on-demand company which handles manufacturing and shipping, as befitting of a "small team of volunteers with $0 startup funds."[19] Notably, the "worldwide" shipping available through this site excludes Myanmar as a destination, suggesting that international customers are the targeted market.

[18] Myanmar, Start A. RiArt: non-profit merch shop for. n.d. "Start A RiArt: Non-Profit Merch Shop for Myanmar | Featuring Custom t-Shirts, Prints, and More." Accessed April 23, 2024. http://startariart.threadless.com/about.

[19] Myanmar, Start A. RiArt: non-profit merch shop for. n.d. "Start A RiArt: Non-Profit Merch Shop for Myanmar | Featuring Custom t-Shirts, Prints, and More." Accessed April 23, 2024. http://startariart.threadless.com/about.

Figure 1.2 “Banging Pots and Pans” by the artist known as kuecool

In addition to kuecool’s image, “Banging Pots and Pans,” *thanbone hti* is inscribed through two other artists’ work on to shirts, hoodies, and art prints. In MK Toymaker’s work, “ဒေါင်ဒေါင်,” a cartoon person wearing a red hoodie with long dark hair strikes something resembling an empty oil container. The onomatopoeic phrase, “ဒေါင်ဒေါင်,” is emblazoned in yellow, emphasizing the deeper pitch and metallic quality of the sound this item would produce when hit. “Beat MAL,” a design by JS Creation House, shows a group of people—perhaps a family, with a mom, dad, and kids ranging from infancy to teenager-hood—banging on metal plates, bowls, trays, and buckets. The title of the work, of course, is a play on words; they are beating pots and pans to “beat,” resist, the junta leader Min Aung Hlaing (MAL for short).

In this example, *thanbone hti* has been leveraged as fundraising merchandise to provide direct aid to communities in Myanmar. Direct aid in this case describes efforts to give funds directly to efforts and projects.[20] Start A RiArt shared nine updates to their Instagram feed between August 2021 and August 2023 that outline how much money they have donated in all and the recipients. In all, they donated $3405.56 to twelve different recipients and efforts to repair roofs in ten different areas. On a month-to-month basis in 2021, they raised a couple of hundred dollars but the monthly amount has declined since then. Of note is the way that the organization strives for transparency. In a comment on their August to October 2021 report, posted on November 8, 2021, they note that the amounts donated to organizations appear as round numbers (as in, they do not have cent amounts) because their finance officer insists on

[20] By contrast, mutual aid “is a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable” (Spade 2020, 136). Spade’s definition gets at the heart of what I found challenging in my own efforts to support activists in Myanmar: mutual aid is not just an exchange of money. Before my dissertation research started in earnest, I connected with a scholar-activist who was supporting people participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement by sending them money. I called and emailed people in my social network, asking them if they would donate money to this effort. I had no details to give them beyond the basics; in the interest of protecting everyone’s safety the only additional information I disclosed was the region this effort was based in. The people who gave money gave it freely, knowing that they would not get a tax receipt or even an update. Rather, this endeavor relied on the trust that I had developed with the scholar-activist to direct funds to where they were needed, that is, a new social relation.

paying the PayPal transaction fees. More emotional honesty is apparent in their post reporting on a raffle held in March 2022. The caption mentions the sense of burn-out that they (and other activists) feel. Perhaps due to this burnout, the post was shared months later, on July 2, 2022.

Compared to an organization like Mutual Aid Myanmar, which has distributed over $921,000 to more than 17,700 CDM participants, the efforts made by Start A RiArt might seem inconsequential.[21] I argue, however, that Start A RiArt harnesses a reproductive potential inherent to this form of sonic dissent to affirm a type of participatory sociality amongst its "audience"—here, customers. As this array of examples shows, *thanbone hti* can be reproduced into a number of audible and inaudible forms; a drawing of *thanbone hti* protestors on a shirt is only one. Customers, or audience members, are actively participating here because they are shopping with the intent to financially support activist work in Myanmar. That is, they are distributing funds indirectly through Start A RiArt to efforts on the ground. Additionally, customers recirculate the images of Start A Riart makes an invocation, albeit one that is not sounded, to a new audience when they wear or use the merch they bought.

Of all the examples cited in this chapter, the fundraising merchandise places the most direct obligation on the audience. It is not the imagery of pots and pans nor the merchandise objects that are supposed to make a difference. The customer responds directly to the invocation and makes a change, no matter the size, through their financial transaction as they purchase a commercial product. This marks a change from the "boomerang" style of interaction Elliot Prasse-Freeman has observed as typical of social media posts, wherein posts by individuals in Myanmar do not gain traction with an international audience to bring about a desired result, whether that takes the form of increased awareness of conditions in Myanmar or something as drastic as international intervention (Prasse-Freeman 2023). In the case of Start A RiArt, the imagery attendant to *thanbone hti* successfully reaches an audience who responds to the appeal for funds by purchasing an item.

One way to understand Start A Riart's "call to give" is as an "invocation," albeit one not sounded. Such a "spiritual" understanding might accord with the "local sonic vernacular" so beloved of aforementioned journalistic accounts of *thanbone hti*, ones that take these "invocations" to be "calls" in which Burmese sounds bring about transhuman or supernatural intervention. In a marionette performance, for example, the dramatic performance is set in motion by percussive strikes that represent the mythical horse's hoofbeats that created the world (Singer 1992; Dway Ye 1975). A more direct invocation takes place within the ritual performance setting known as *nat pwe*. Musicians perform specific melodies in order to "call" the nat (the spirit of a long-deceased person who died a notable, often violent, death) that the *nat kadaw*, a spirit medium, will embody during the ritual.[22] These examples, in which sound

[21] "Mutual Aid Myanmar." n.d. Mutual Aid Myanmar. Accessed April 23, 2024. https://www.mutualaidmyanmar.org.

[22] Lorenzo Chiarofonte's dissertation adds a level of musical detail to Bénédicte Brac de La Perrière's studies of *nat* rituals, including descriptions and analyses of these invocations. See: Chiarofonte, Lorenzo. 2020. "Powerful Sounds: Music, Dance and Ritual Efficacy in Burmese Nat Kana Pwe Spirit Possession Ceremonies." London: SOAS Unviersity of London. https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/37915. Also: Brac de la Perrière, Bénédicte. 2016. "Spirit Possession: An Autonomous Field of Practice in the Burmese Buddhist Culture." *Journal of Burma Studies* 20 (1): 1–29 and Brac de la Perrière, Bénédicte. 2009. "An Overview of the Field of Religion in Burmese Studies." *Asian Ethnology*, 185–210.

reaches an ancestral audience which then acts directly into a worldly status quo, leaves the possibility open that *thanbone hti* is intended to reach a supernatural audience. In this sense, Start A Riart might be said to make an unsounded invocation to a human audience. The funds that the organization raises enable actions to be taken–like roof repairs–that make a change in physical circumstances for people in Myanmar.

Out of the Kitchen, Into the Streets

Emerging international photographic accounts of post-coup Myanmar, whether circulated by major news outlets, in prominent art installations, or on social media may be said to engage in a similarly "invocative" sonic vernacular, particularly by the ways in which they depict *htamein* (the wrap-around skirt worn by Burmese women), or portray the sounds of household objects such as pots and pans. I end this chapter by considering various "invocations": photographic images of women appearing in international media: how the moving image and audio piece titled "Moon Landing" by Moe Myat May Zarchi and Instagram posts by @kuecool amplify women's experiences doing *thanbone hti*. Together, these examples represent how women have been participating in protest actions following the 2021, even leveraging patriarchal norms to their advantage. Together, they implicate women in the invocation of "silent" protest so characteristic of post-2021 dissent.

In a striking photograph by Nyein Chan Naing, for example, a metal tray covers the woman's body from her chest to her hips; her blurred hand evidence of her exertion as she holds a stick for striking. Her fabric mask is another protective mechanism, whether to guard against Covid infection or to obscure her identity.[23] Another photo by him is tightly cropped around hands that hold a small metal bowl in one hand and a pair of black-handled scissors in the other. The dents on the bottom of the bowl attest to the repetitive hits it has withstood.[24] Two metal cups are overturned on the stainless steel counter of a street vendor's stall. Rather than hold ingredients, the cups have been repurposed as noisemakers. The vendor's hands are visible, caught in motion striking the bottoms of the cups with a spoon and a pair of scissors.[25] Ben Small's photos from February 3, 2021, posted to instagram and on his personal website, show pro-democracy protestors on the streets of Yangon.[26] In one of them, the small group is split between banging on pots and documenting their participation, the phone screens and camera flashes a testament to their involvement. In another, a man strides down the middle of a road, his face determined and a metal tray held up in front of him. Next we see a group of kids, mostly boys but a couple girls positioned at the fringes. They are hitting empty vegetable oil

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[23] Nyein Chan Naing. "A woman hits a metallic tray as she protests against the military coup, in Yangon." In "In Pictures: Striking Pans to Protest Myanmar's Military Coup." 2021. Al Jazeera. February 3, 2021. https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/2/3/in-pictures-striking-pans-in-myanmars-capital-to-protest-coup.

[24] "A man hits a plate with a pair of scissors to make noise in protest against the coup. Myanmar's overthrown leader Aung San Suu Kyi was formally charged on Wednesday, two days after she was detained." In "In Pictures: Striking Pans to Protest Myanmar's Military Coup." 2021. Al Jazeera. February 3, 2021. https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/2/3/in-pictures-striking-pans-in-myanmars-capital-to-protest-coup.

[25] "A street vendor joins the latest protest against the coup by hitting metal cups to make noise." In "In Pictures: Striking Pans to Protest Myanmar's Military Coup." 2021. Al Jazeera. February 3, 2021. https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/2/3/in-pictures-striking-pans-in-myanmars-capital-to-protest-coup.

[26] Small, Ben. 2021. "Myanmar Coup." Ben Small - Photographer and Communications Specialist in Yangon. February 2021. https://www.bensmallphoto.com/photography/myanmar-coup.

tins and metal bowls and plates. A fourth photo captures the moment a stick hits a large metal tin, held aloft by a man in front of a small shop. In the final photo, a group sits cross-legged on the street with metal plates and bowls in front of them. Thin sticks swipe through the air.

While a sound recording would capture the din of sound made by many participants hitting many metal objects, the photographs present a different orientation entirely. The images I describe, and others like them, place an emphasis on individuals' bodies and the objects they use to sound out what I parse as their dissent. As a viewer, the tight focus on individuals, rather than a group, prompts me to consider the ways in which these people's views may differ. What does democracy mean to each of them? While a protest with chanting and signs—with words—allows for multiple viewpoints to exist side by side, *thanbone hti* might flatten out this political texture. Photographs of people underscore their individuality. Looking at a more elderly figure, I think about what other actions they might have taken to support the pro-democracy movement (broadly construed) at different moments of time? In response to younger faces, I wonder about the compromises they may have made in the months since the photograph was taken. Did they have to stop attending school or work? Are they in hiding? Did they join the People's Defence Force? How might they have found a balance between dissent and safety? As the stakes of protesting have been raised by the threat of violence, photos posted to social media tend to obscure their subjects' faces, whether by blurring their face or covering it with an emoji to offer some measure of protection.

The photos of protests show that the items used for *thanbone* are associated with the domestic space: cooking pots and woks; cups, plates, bowls, tins, and trays; spoons, ladles, and scissors. Transported from the kitchen to the street or balcony, these items are transformed from utilitarian objects to symbols of political dissent. Based on what one of my interlocutors said to me—that women should not make noise when using these objects in the kitchen—their close ties to cooking and care work are a reminder that gender informs the protest experience and that protest movements can push back against gender norms or employ them to different ends.

Despite colonial-era Western depictions that have portrayed Burmese women as being "heads of households" due to their economic activity, Burmese culture was not, and is not, a feminist utopia (Ikeya 2005). Rather, such an observation rose out of comparison that emphasized differences between Burmese women and women in Western European cultures. While Burmese women did not change their name after marriage, newly-weds tended to live near a woman's family, and women took on financial responsibility, "male chauvinism [was] the rule rather than the exception" (Than Than Nwe 2003). Gender hierarchy was enacted literally within the household space, as women's clothing—particularly *htameins*, the wrap-around skirt women wear—were never to be placed above a man's clothing. Nor should such clothing be placed on a washing line where a man might have to walk under it. Positioning a *htamein* on the moon, even if only figuratively, as will be shown to be the case for "Moon Landing" would mean that men would be under it. Therefore, men would either have to reject the prospect of damaging their *hpon*, an essential masculine quality that can be damaged through proximity to female-coded objects, or somehow withstand this threat to their *hpon*.[27]

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[27] Lau, Jessie. 2024. "Myanmar's Women Are on the Front Lines Against the Junta." *Foreign Policy* (blog). May 14, 2024. https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/12/myanmar-women-protest-junta-patriarchy-feminism/.

Items used in protests, including the *htamein*, leveraged widely-held beliefs about bodily substance, gender, and the arrangement of space. According to 2021 Reddit posts uploaded from inside Myanmar, photographs of military officials were placed inside inflated condoms, conveying the sentiment that people wish that these individuals had never been born.[28] Menstrual pads and underwear were attached to photographs and signs, preying on the belief in *hpon*.[29] Protestors hung *htameins* to create safe zones, harnessing the same patriarchal logic to impeded soldiers and police who were reluctant to walk under the garments and damage their *hpon*. On Instagram, users posted selfies where they had wrapped *htameins* around their head, positioning themselves under the garment, to indicate their disdain for damaging attitudes towards women and women's bodies.

First exhibited in 2022 at God's House Tower in Southampton, as well as for Ecological Futurisms in London (an event arranged by a collective of faculty and doctoral researchers at the University of Westminster also in the United Kingdom), Moe Myat May Zarchi's moving image and audio work "Moon Landing" brings in gender as another dimension of the Spring Revolution through its use of iconic imagery.[30] The artist statement describes the work as an "audiovisual collage" that juxtaposes footage from the American moon landing with footage focused on the use of *htameins* in recent protests in Myanmar. The work begins quietly with a red *htamein* planted on a handcrafted moon. The moon becomes a screen and fills with footage of the NASA control room with men reading out technical sounding phrases, followed by a glimpse of an astronaut preparing for launch as audio of the countdown plays, "Ten, nine, eight…". Red-orange flames from the launch overtakes the human figure and as the moon shape changes to bright white, audio of women's voices chanting in Burmese cuts through. The banging of pots and pans can be heard in the background while a flag, made from a yellow *htamein* and a pole, flutters and words written in English scroll across the screen, "Our SKIRT! Our FLAG!" The third proclamation, in bright pink, reads, "Our VICTORY!" Again and again, we hear that chant bounce back and forth between an individual amplified voice and an energetic crowd with pots and pans audible in the background: "Our SKIRT! Our FLAG! Our VICTORY! Please let me speak…". The video changes scene to show astronauts walking on the moon, where they plant the American flag as the recording of the women's voices gradually distorts so as to be unintelligible. A jazz-inflected jam between keyboard, bass, and drums picks up as viewers watch more footage of rocket launches. The music shifts to be recognizable as "The Star-Spangled Banner" while the video switches back to street protest scenes. This time a *htamein* flag waves in front of a street scene with a pink flowering vine in the background. The next phrase that follows pronounces: "There it is, the US flag planted on the surface of the moon," while a hand holds a miniature *htamein* flag above a puffy white surface. While it waves, the different audio tracks are layered together: "The Star-Spangled Banner" meets backing jazz, all while women chant their aspirations for a more equitable Myanmar. The

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[28] "Condom Strike as People Have Put Genocide Criminal Burmese Generals' Pictures inside Condoms as They Wish That These Criminals Should Never Had Been Born." 2021. Reddit Post. *R/Myanmar*. www.reddit.com/r/myanmar/comments/mvzbu6/condom_strike_as_people_have_put_genocide/.

[29] See Monique Skidmore's work for in-depth background information on blood and perceptions about female mental health and an explanation as to these objects' power: Skidmore, Monique. 2002. "Menstrual Madness: Women's Health and Well-Being in Urban Burma." *Women & Health* 35 (4): 81–99. https://doi.org/10.1300/J013v35n04_06.

[30] https://www.phantom-limb.co.uk/moonlanding

subtitles return as the video clips play and change faster and faster until a shadow falls and blacks out the moon. It returns to its blank white state and the piece is complete.

While the video footage in the work is not derived from *thanbone hti* protests, the sound of banging pots and pans can still be heard. Moe Myat May Zarchi explained that she included the sound because it is so closely associated with the Spring Revolution protests.[31] "It also shows how women are taking up space," she elaborated.[32] The 2021 coup has changed how women participate in activism in Myanmar. As Tharaphi Than explains, the number of female participants, made up of civil servants, healthcare professionals, educators, and–crucially–garment workers, strengthened the civil disobedience movement (Tharapi Than 2024). Women have also joined the armed resistance movement, overturning patriarchal gender expectations to take on combat roles (Tharapi Than 2024, 65). They have also asserted themselves in reshaping personal relationships. Tharaphi Than notes that women married to members of the military have encouraged them to defect, in some cases, and in other cases, divorced their husbands (Tharapi Than 2024, 64).

If "Moon Landing" and the *htamein* protests speak more broadly to the changing position of women in Burmese society, @kuecool's drawings of women doing *thanbone hti* position the practice within the domestic space, as one of the many activities women engage in to support the pro-democracy movement. The many-armed female figure in @kuecool's May 30, 2021 post gestures toward how protesting fits in amongst other tasks women perform.[33] In her three left hands she holds a feather duster, an iron, what I see as a cell phone. One of her right arms is raised up in a three-finger salute, another holds a stack of kyats, and one holds a cooking spatula. She clutches a baby close to her body. Her eyelids droop a little, weary from her various labors and she is wearing a blue-green medical mask.

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[31] Interview, May 14 2022.
[32] Interview, May 14, 2022.
[33] https://www.instagram.com/p/CPhvrXCsiOxEJpm3i8t0znv7JuLrqu3QzJXUAA0/^

Figure 1.3, @kuecool's Instagram post captioned "Fixed covid drawing to three fingers salute #rejectmilitary coup". May 31, 2021.

Each of these objects corresponds to an action. The duster and iron symbolize work done to maintain the household and household through cleaning. The cellphone stands in for online activism work. The three-finger salute shows her alignment with the democracy movement, as it is a gesture associated with pro-democracy movements throughout Southeast Asia. The money she is holding could be meant to represent donations or money being withheld by participating in boycotts against military governments. The baby speaks to women's labor as caregivers and mothers. The spatula is a cooking implement and an essential tool for doing *thanbone hti*.

Given *thanbone hti*'s proximity to the domestic space, both through its use of kitchen implements and its performance staged from inside houses and on balconies, I include these examples to show how the politics of *thanbone hti* include a changing politics of gender in which women become present in the political sphere through their activist work.

Conclusion

In this chapter I make an argument for understanding *thanbone hti* on its own terms, that is, in relation to other recent moments of protest in Myanmar and in relation to other forms of protest. I assert that *thanbone hti* is different from, but related to, other forms of pots and pans protests heard worldwide. These acts of sonic dissent use the same instruments, but different logics. Approaching the practice of *thanbone hti* as an "invocation" allows for connections to be made between the use of *thanbone hti* to appeal to a supernatural audience and *thanbone hti* as it has been inscribed on items sold to raise funds. *Thanbone hti* takes many forms–Instagram posts, nightly protest actions, sound art–each of which create different conditions for participation and emphasize different political priorities. I address the consequences of doing *thanbone hti* in order to better understand some of the factors shaping the sonic vernacular of post-coup Myanmar and to bring out the connection to "silent strikes." While *thanbone hti*'s aim is often to reach an audience who will act and help make a change for the better, it also functions as a site for negotiating gender expectations. Concentrating on the domestic provenance of the items

used to make sound allows me to shift and consider how *thanbone hti* is related to the *htamein* protests in order to bring out the political dimension of gender.

Chapter Two: Blood and Bonds
Reproductive Politics, Popular Music, and Political Solidarity

Introduction

In this chapter, I seek to show how a "reproductive politics"—the customs, norms, and legal frameworks used to control or prevent reproduction—shapes the connections between and circulation of popular music in Myanmar. I am interested in questions of "substance" in *copy thachin*, a music genre, emerging in the 1980s, wherein international pop songs are re-recorded by Burmese artists with Burmese-language lyrics, resulting in cover versions with constantly updated textual and social meanings. (*Copy thachin* translates, literally, as "copy song.") The chapter seeks to draw connecting lines to musics beyond *copy thachin* (including protest songs) in order to explicate the larger processes of reproduction governing sound in a Burmese context.

I start by reviewing the scholarly literature on *copy thachin*, to work against assumed accusations of "mimesis" or "mimicry" as applied to the genre. Having established the need for a more substantive account of *copy thachin* (one moving beyond a limited West/non-West binary optic), I proceed to an examination of the well-known protest song "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu" because it opens up two lines of inquiry that pertain to issues of substance. First, I contextualize this track as an example of *copy thachin*, defining "substance," in technical ways, as musical material: chord progressions, riffs, lyrics, and the like. Second, and more metaphorically, I consider how reference to bodily substances, specifically blood, in this track and another more recent composition intersect with anthropological theorizations of kinship. Towards the end of the chapter, I introduce into the discussion another protest song, "Blood," released in 2022 by art collective Rap Against Junta, in order to suggest how the invocation of that life-substance works to resist ethnicized assumptions about kinship in Myanmar. By way of conclusion, the chapter shows how the "reproductive politics" attendant to *copy thachin* make use of what poet Ross Gay calls a "nonpossessive undeclared citationality," where discussions over property rights and the inauthenticity of cover versions turn out to be moot.

My contribution, in line with the structure of the chapter, is twofold. First, my claim is that the study of *copy thachin* is valuable for the ways it affords a uniquely vivid account of a Burmese "politics of reproduction," a wider theoretical concern applicable to diverse forms of Burmese music and sound, specifically examples taken from protest settings. Second, I contend that attending to the materiality or substance of sound, as perceived in terms of a local politics of reproduction, allows for a heightened critical appreciation of the political efficacy of *copy thachin* tracks heard in the wake of the 2021 coup. If the first section of the chapter is about inter-musical connections, and the second underscores how ideas transmitted in music support interpersonal relations, the third deals with the type of engagement *copy thachin* engenders. Whereas non-Burmese examples of "world music" commonly revolve around collaboration with Western artists and patterns of circulation associated with analog recording, the online distribution of *copy thachin* through Youtube channels and Facebook pages traces out a new pathway for scholarly engagement, one where *copy thachin* cannot be so easily be passed off as belated or derivative of "prior" Western models.

Historicizing *Copy Thachin* in Scholarship

One way to politicize *copy thachin* is to claim that such "copy music" pushes back against the ideals of independence and the practice of cultural isolationism espoused by the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) from the Ne Win era through the State Law and Restoration Council (commonly abbreviated as SLORC) years. The popularity of *copy thachin*, that is, might be said to agitate against isolationist claims to autochthony, and the long history of anti-Western state agitation against "globalist" values of mobility and exchange.

A gap in the ethnomusicological literature bears witness to the hard truth of isolationism and a closed-off country. In the early 1960s, Robert Garfias, Judith Becker, and Muriel Williamson conducted fieldwork in Burma, but were forced out of the country and, subsequently, were unable to continue their research. The example furnished by the work of these three scholars is illustrative of the far-reaching restrictions placed on academics, aid organizations, and businesses from outside Burma. In these years, foreign visitors were limited to 24-hour visas and aid was only allowed on a government-to-government basis. Burmese citizens' travel to Western countries was curtailed; instead, the junta sponsored travel for students and professionals to Soviet bloc countries. English-language instruction had been part of the primary school curriculum, even after independence, but it was pushed back into the secondary school years, ensuring that even if foreign contact was made, communication would pose a challenge.

Economically, the nationalization of all major industries, including rice, teak, and petroleum, in 1963 was devastating. The isolationism and economic ruin of the 1960s through the 1980s created circumstances in which access to recorded music was limited. The ban on foreign imports covered musical instruments, recording equipment, and even relevant magazines (MacLachlan 2011). Not only were the offerings slim, but few people could afford to buy them. Teashops, oft-cited as social hubs, subverted these conditions by serving as sites for group listening. As an interlocutor explained to me, for the low cost of a cup of tea you could linger and listen for hours. Just like these distributive nodes made listening equipment more available, *copy thachin* took a restricted item—a foreign pop song—and made it accessible to a wider audience.

Censorship of some musical genres and official interest and investment in others led to uneven development in the music industry and a distinction between genres. "Mono" genres included those broadcasted on state monophonic radio, including the *mahagita* repertoire and *kalabaw* songs, hence the name (Valdovinos Kaye and Myint 2021, 51). Western popular music—dubbed "stereo"—was set apart from hybrid and local forms and restricted. Under BSPP rule, Western music and songs that followed Western conventions were banned from the radio (Zaw 2005). *Mahagita* repertoire was further bolstered with the creation of a national music competition (Douglas 2001). To be clear, the military consistently reinforces the supremacy of Bamar performing arts over and above those of ethnic minorities; performers from non-Bamar backgrounds learn and play this repertoire at the annual state-sponsored *Sokayeti* competition, as Douglas notes (2001). Put bluntly, supporting Bamar arts and culture aligns with the military's vision of Myanmar as an ethnically unified, conservative, and Buddhist nation.

Copy thachin have also circumvented restrictions and thrived without official support because of their amateur origins. The fact that this music was always performed in laidback settings and recorded in home studios enables artists to find audiences for their work. Of course, *copy thachin* were subject to approval from the censors when distributed through official channels, which posed more of an obstacle than copyright law did. After the passage of the Printers and Publishers Registration Act (PPRA) of 1962, all albums (of any genre) were necessarily submitted to a censorship board for approval. If official authorization was granted, producers would be given stickers to put on the albums, making the approval visible (Ferguson 2013, 228). Copyright law, on the other hand, was and is relatively lax in comparison to the censors' standards and Western notions of intellectual property law. Under the Copyright Act of 1914, foreign works were not granted protective license. The 2019 Copyright Law affords works by non-Burmese citizens and residents copyright if the works in question are either first published in Myanmar or published in Myanmar within thirty days of being published elsewhere.

In Heather MacLachlan's 2009 ethnography of popular music production in Yangon, she relays the ways in which *copy thachin* have been a cultural resource for musicians who are in a bind. These musicians' problem? They want to learn and perform music that would fit into the category of international pop music, but they have no way of doing so. MacLachlan relates the extent to which music education of any kind is scant in primary and secondary schools, post-secondary options being limited to the transmission of traditional forms. As a result, aspiring pop musicians learn by ear from recorded albums they access on the digital market and elsewhere. Copying tracks, they claim, lets them learn the rules they will need in order to compose their own tunes later (MacLachlan 2009, 91). As MacLachlan explains, the practice of "copying to learn" accords with local educational norms in which copying music that is already known to be successful is perceived as "an intelligent, sensible move" (MacLachlan 2009, 91).

David Valdovinos Kaye and Zin Mar Myint offer a contrasting perspective on such acts of "copying to learn" rooted in intellectual property law and oriented towards policy-driven outcomes. Citing their interviews with stakeholders in the music industry in Myanmar, they point to the dissolution of censorship mechanisms (specifically the need for songs to be approved by the central registration of the Press Scrutiny Board, which ended in 2015) and the rapid increase of information and telecommunications technology in Myanmar post-2012 as catalysts for change in the music industry.[5] The increased availability of digital technologies has lowered the barriers to entry for many musicians and opened up possibilities for unregulated music distribution (Valdovinos Kaye and Myint 2021, 57–58). Additionally, Valdovinos Kaye and Myint suggest that alternatives to the Myanmar Musicians' Association are important to musicians for financial and political reasons. While the Myanmar Musicians' Association has normalized a "five-layer" split between songwriters, singers, music producers, recording studio, and instrumentalists, artists can opt to work with such management and promotion agencies as 360 Beatz, who do not conform to this unwritten rule, and collect a larger share of the profits (Valdovinos Kaye and Myint 2021, 58). And, unlike the Myanmar Music Association, which was established by the SLORC, these new organizations feel more trustworthy to the musicians Valdovinos Kaye and Myint interviewed (Valdovinos Kaye and Myint 2021, 58).

Directing our attention to language use in *copy thachin*, Jane Ferguson identifies two important features of the genre for Burmese audiences and relays them clearly to her readers of her 2013 article "Burmese Super Trouper: How Burmese Poets and Musicians Turn Global Popular Music into *Copy Thachin*." First, she points out the extent to which songwriters consider themselves to be poets (Ferguson 2013, 230). Reading between the lines, we should note that, in doing so, the songwriters situate themselves within a certain artistic milieu that comes with a higher level of respectability and prestige than that which is afforded to musicians. Whereas music is looked down upon, if not actively discouraged (based on the seventh of the eight Buddhist Theravada precepts that laypersons abstain from worldly entertainments), poetry carries none of that baggage. Second, she notes that songwriters usually consider that they can make their version sound the same even when they might not be concerned about preserving the semantic meanings of the lyric. Ferguson cites the prominent songwriter U Thukhamein Hlaing, who explains that he started with the phrase "su mya, su the la" due to its sonic resemblance to the phrase "super trouper" (as disseminated by Swedish pop group ABBA in the 1980s) when writing "Hninsi Koko" (Ferguson 2013, 231).

Theoretically, Ferguson glosses *copy thachin* as a "mimetic transcription device" that allows Burmese musicians and poets to interact with an international other (Ferguson 2013, 226). In her conception, the genre functions as a site for Burmese cultural producers to "rehearse and mimic" international rock music in ways that have been "poetically transformed by Burmese songwriters and the star scene" and will eventually find their way to Burmese audiences through "local channels of distribution" (Ferguson 2013, 226). For Ferguson, the genre's international nature does work to "step out" from expectations. She claims that creators and performers gain prestige by copying a "more powerful Other" (Ferguson 2013, 226). More specifically, by engaging with international material, Burmese creators and listeners access a type of modern cosmopolitanism that works to alleviate the anxiety around "falling behind" or "falling below" in economic and cultural terms (Ferguson 2013, 226–27).

Ferguson develops her conception of this enthrallment to "mimesis" and "mimicry" further in her 2016 article, "Yesterday Once More: Tracking (un)Popular Music in Myanmar." Here, she emphasizes the ways in which *copy thachin* might be read as a "representation" of international songs, in view of its imaginative deployments of real and illusionistic elements. Her focus, in other words, is on *copy thachin* performance by "real" singers and instrumentalists in ways that "selectively reveals the authorship and performance" of its "original" version (Ferguson 2016, 242). However, she contends that the newness of *copy thachin* challenges the existing models of mimesis because the songwriters come up with entirely new lyrics that will be understood in a way that is specific to their Burmese audience and must be "benign enough" to get past the censorship board. In assessing Ferguson's contribution, it is crucial to remember that Burmese listeners are hardly unaware that the *copy thachin* being listened to has its origins elsewhere. This sometimes plays out as disdain, as she shows in Youtube comments, but Ferguson identifies another angle. "Educated elites" look down on *copy thachin* according to the (false) impression that, while they are aware of a song's true origins, more purportedly naive listeners are "being duped" (Ferguson 2016, 239).

Ward Keeler's query (and corresponding article) "What's Burmese about Burmese Rap?" introduces an even more complex formulation of the relationship between international popular

music, local political conditions, and audience response—one that troubles the blitheness of existing assessments of *copy thachin*. He argues that rap appeals to male adolescents whether they are American or Burmese because rap affords participants the opportunity to display power (Keeler 2009, 7). Such a statement pushes back against the ethnomusicological zeal to find progressive politics or connections to older local forms in the sounds of the most authentic popular musics. A line cannot be drawn to connect *thanjat* (a Burmese form of call-and-response chant that often acts as a vehicle for political satire or critique), to Burmese rap, according to Keeler. Due to a combination of censorship and Buddhist morality, Burmese rap lyrics tend to limit themselves to the topic of love.

That said, Burmese rap presents striking similarities to *copy thachin* by its imitation of "the sound" of its international corollary. Like American rap, Burmese rap is accompanied by a prominent bass line that drives the verbal flow. But the resemblance is obscured in view of linguistic modification. While it is easier to preserve the tonal contours of the Burmese language in rap than it is in song, the varying syllable lengths of spoken Burmese are at odds with the rhythmic complexity of American rap (Keeler 2009, 5). When rappers change syllable length to maintain rhythmic integrity, they compromise on intelligibility (Keeler 2009, 5). Burmese rappers change the pronunciation of some words to make them sound more like American rap; Keeler singles out that rappers change the "t" sound to an "r" in the plural marker "twei." The alteration in pronunciation of a commonly-occurring word makes an "unusual, and highly marked, aural texture" (Keeler 2009, 7). The semantic content of the Burmese genre, that is, is hardly comparable to the model that supposedly preceded it.

Until the End of the World: "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu" as *Copy Thachin*

"Kabar Ma Kyay Bu," also translated as "We Won't Be Satisfied Until the End of the World", is the Burmese-language anthem of Myanmar's 1988 pro-democracy movement. In light of the song's close association with the 8888 Uprising and today, my concern, in what follows, is to highlight the manner in which textual references in the song's lyrics underscore Aung San Suu Kyi's familial connection to Burmese electoral politics. I turn to a set of musical examples (framed as *copy thachin* covers of "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu") to develop my claim that songs are used to generate a sense of fictive kinship with Aung San Suu Kyi, and by extension, within the activist community. Sonic qualities and performance practices observed in Youtube videos of အရှုံးမပေးနဲ့မိငယ်ရေ" bear a family resemblance to those of "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu." In view of this resemblance, I suggest that inter-musical relations exist between performances of *copy thachin*, in addition to the relation between a *copy thachin* and the original international pop track it is based on. The form and content of these "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu" versions, that is, point towards larger processes and politics of reproduction, ones that resonate with the replicant forms of cultural reproduction discussed above.

The *copy thachin* track "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu," then, composed by Naing Myanmar in 1988, is a genealogical descendent of "Dust in the Wind," as recorded and released by the American rock group Kansas in 1978. Transformed into an intergenerational anthem of condemnation, the track starts with an arpeggiated guitar introduction, less ornate than the finger-picking introduction of "Dust in the Wind." But it is only when the vocals start that international listeners might recognize the tune. At this point, a group of male and female

vocalists sings in unison, backed by instrumentals that build momentum. The instrumentation changes during the break but the overall structure of the track remains.

Increasingly in recent years, artists living outside Myanmar have recorded and disseminated their own performances of this iconic track online. A blog post from "Insight Myanmar," an established podcast that transitioned to cover current affairs following the coup, includes a Youtube video of a woman accompanying herself on piano while she sings "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu." The blog post identifies her as Karin Johansen, a Swedish meditator who has traveled to Myanmar on several occasions for her meditation practice, and who has been ordained as a "Buddhist nun." In a performance arranged by Myanmar GenZ in Norway, the Burmese lyrics are translated into Norwegian with subtitles added in English. The track is bisected by a rap interlude, also performed in English. The individual singers each sing one verse as a solo before performing the last verse in harmony with each another.

Together, these tracks evince the ways in which *copy thachin* has circled back towards "the international" since 2021, reversing assumed relations between original and copy. In the video shared by "Insight Myanmar," the accompanying text describes Johansen as a "fluent Burmese speaker." By contrast, the Myanmar Gen Z in Norway group's description does not attest to anyone's language ability. Johansen notes that she posted the video following a conversation with a friend in Myanmar who solicited words of encouragement. By the ways in which she herself emphasizes linguistic competence and family relationships, this "Buddhist nun" attests to her strong attachment to a vision of Myanmar that allows for cultural exchange. Meanwhile, the description box for the Myanmar Gen Z in Norway asks viewers to donate to online fundraisers and speaks to general conditions in Myanmar rather than the experience of any one individual. The website advertises that funds will be used to help provide food and basic supplies to families, pay for medical treatment, and to replace lost wages for people who are on strike or who have quit their jobs.

The song tips back towards the international sphere in other ways too. Its title, for example, closely resembles that of the national anthem, but with a meaningful change in spelling. U Sarana, also from "Insight Myanmar," clarifies that the spelling of "ကျေ" in the *copy thachin* can be translated as "to repay." The title affords the sense, then, that even after the end of the world, the military's debt to the people cannot be repaid. In the national anthem, "ကျေ" makes the title mean "Until the End of the World."

What might be called "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu"'s *reproductive potential*, to draw this chapter discussion back to questions of kinship, has played a part in its enduring appeal as a protest song. The legal parameters that facilitate the "mimicry" specific to *copy thachin* notwithstanding, the song's reproductive potential can be heard in the altered instrumentation, lower vocal range, and omission of vocal harmony. This audible sense–that *copy thachin* are proliferative and readily reproducible across many media formats–comes across powerfully in surveys of reactions from listeners. Talk of piracy and plagiarism escalate into charges of promiscuity, as Jane Ferguson observes in her 2016 article "Yesterday Once More: Tracking (un)Popular Music in Myanmar." In an examination of Youtube comments, she came across one example that she translates as: "These proud sluts that sing copy when I slap their cheeks it will be painful [sic]" (245). By her assessment, criticism of *copy thachin* is related to colonial

anxiety over being “left behind” by the imperial forces of “development.” But by my measure, this whorephobic statement reveals entanglements between sound reproduction and social norms. When you reproduce too easily, as *copy thachin* do, you risk being frowned upon, and marginalized.

Reproducing Aung San Suu Kyi

Nestled inside the lyrics of “Kabar Ma” are references to common ancestors and bodily substance that can be understood as establishing or maintaining fictive kinship bonds. “Fictive kinship” is a technical term for a relationship that is not formed through genealogical relation or marriage. In the song, the political leader and “father of the nation” General Aung San is invoked as a shared ancestor. Such a claim gains more traction if we account for generational linkages in Burmese politics.

Figure 2.1, Lyrics of “Kabar Ma Kyay Bu” as translated by English Major students from Yangon University of Foreign Languages

ကမ္ဘာမကြေဘူး "**There is no pardon for you till the end of the world**"
ငါတို့သွေးနဲ့ရေးခဲ့ကြတဲ့ မော်ကွန်းတွေ "**Cause that's the bloody record written by the people's lives**"
တော်လှန်ရေး "**The Strong Revolution**"
ဒီမိုကရေစီ တိုက်ပွဲအတွင်းမှာကျဆုံးသော သူရဲကောင်းတို့ရေ "**Oh the brave Heroes died for Democracy**,"
အာဇာနည်တွေနေတဲ့တိုင်းပြည် "**Our country**, **Myanmar**, **is a place built with Martyrs**"
ရဲရဲတောက်တို့ပြည်သူတွေ **And with strong affirmation and lack of fears to fight against the Monsters**, **Our People**.
ကိုယ်တော်မှိုင်း၊ ရာဇဝင်တွေလည်း ရိုင်းခဲ့ရပြီ အဖိုးရေ "**Dear Grandpa KoDawHmaing** , **who fought against Colonies with pen**, **our history was shamefully destroyed by our Myanmar Military themselves**"
သခင်အောင်ဆန်း ၊ နိုင်ငံတော်လည်း သွေးစွန်းခဲ့ပြီ အဖရေ "**Oh our leaderThaKhin Aung San**, **who tried to get the independence**, **please look us back from the heaven - our country is bloody now**"
ဪ ... လုပ်ရက်ကြပေ "**What the hell**! **No mercy**, **just bullies**"
ပေတစ်ရာပေါ်မှာပြည်သူ့အလောင်းတွေ "**Dead bodies are here and there**,"
အတုံးအရုံး လဲပြိုကာနေ "**Helplessly lying on the road**"
ညီအစ္ကိုတို့ "**Hey**! **My brothers**, **sisters and friends**"
ပေတစ်ရာပေါ်မှာစီးတဲ့သွေးတွေမခြောက်သေးဘူး "**Those blood bath can be still felt**"
မတွေဝေနဲ့ "**And so**, **don't confuse it**"
ဒီမိုကရေစီ တိုက်ပွဲအတွင်းမှာ ကျရှုံးသော ဪ သူရဲကောင်းတို့လို "**As the fallen heroes** ,"
ခိုင်မာပီပြင် တော်လှန်ပစ်မလေ "**Let's bravely fight against for Our Democracy**"
မျိုးချစ်တဲ့ တို့ဇာနည်တွေ **Cause we are the ones who unconditionally love our country**
ကမ္ဘာမကြေဘူး "**We swear**, **We'll never forgive what you've done**"

Not only is Aung San Suu Kyi the de facto elected leader of Myanmar, but her position within her family and the attendant caregiving obligations that go along with it have shaped her political career. In 1988 Aung San Suu Kyi returned to Burma to take care of her mother, during which time she rose to prominence within the National League for Democracy. However, one of the measures taken to stop her ascent takes advantage of her family structure. The 2008 Constitution includes provisions that bar anyone from the presidency who is or was married to a foreign citizen or has children who are foreign citizens. Since she was married to a British citizen and has children with British citizenship, Aung San Suu Kyi cannot be the president until the constitution is changed. This has not prevented her from taking a central role in political life and the popular imagination. Her maternal role has expanded to the scale of the nation, as protestors chant that they "stand with Amay Suu."

A track released by May Toe Khine on Youtube for Mother's Day (in the very month of the 2021 coup, titled, "အရှုံးမပေးနဲ့မိငယ်ရေ | For Our Mother") urges "Mother Suu" to stay strong in the face of her arrest and detention by the military. This track is not an original composition. Its composition can be credited to Khin Maung Toe, a Burmese pop artist best known as the lead singer of the band "မဇ္ဈိမလှိုင်း" (Medium Wave). The video credits him as the composer in the description box. The verses' lyrics speak to troubled times through metaphor, mentioning a bumpy path, a rising tide, and dangerous blades, while the chorus exhorts the woman to whom the song is directed to "not give up."

Its aforementioned author, May Toe Khine is a Burmese actress-turned-activist who was imprisoned between April and June 2021 for protesting against the junta. The music video stitches together video footage of Aung San Suu Kyi and images of protestors in 2021 with clips of the performers singing. Three details from the images of protestors indicate that the compilation of the video took place in the direct aftermath of the 2021 coup. First, *thanbone hti* is not associated with the 1988 protests or the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Second, protestors in the included photographs are holding up three fingers, a gesture derived from the *Hunger Games* books (referencing the trilogy of novels published by American writer Suzanne Collins between 2008 and 2010), which has become associated with pro-democracy movements in Southeast Asia. Third, many of the protestors are wearing masks to prevent the spread of Covid-19. In contrast, the footage of Aung San Suu Kyi shows her at different life stages. Interspersed in the video (alongside images of her as a polished politician) are photos of her with her husband and newborn son, and photos of her with both her sons. Another photo shows her crouching next to a pet dog in ways that reinforce the family-oriented narrative; news reports tell that her son gifted her Taichito (the name of the pet) during his visit in 2010.[34]

While this track is not a *copy thachin*, the performers in the video make reference to "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu" through the visual aspects of their performance. First, the red shirts that they wear indicate their support for the National League for Democracy Party. The video depicts a group scene with male and female performers, recalling the makeup of the band that first

[34] See https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/daw-aung-san-suu-kyis-fetching-friend.html

recorded “Kabar Ma Kyay Bu.” There are sonic and visual markers associated with amateurism, a distinctive feature of “Kabar Ma Kyay Bu” that the composer thought would make it more appealing (according to a MM times interview). In this performance of “အရှုံးမပေးနဲ့မိငယ်ရေ” the voices have not been homogenized; frequent shifts in vocal texture occur when singers get louder or change registers. The singers appear to be reading music or lyrics from their mobile phones. This could be a reference to the quick turnaround necessary to make this music video, which was the case for “Kabar Ma Kyay Bu.” The lyrics referencing shared blood and General Aung San, moreover, strengthen an existing fictive kin relationship that endures over generations and extends into performances of Burmese songs in general, as heard in the case of “အရှုံးမပေးနဲ့မိငယ်ရေ.”

Substance: Blood and Kinship Bonds

Talk of “shared blood,” accordingly, raises the issue of shared substance. “Substance,” as I am using it in the context of *copy thachin*, refers to codified musical materials on the one hand (as indicated previously), and audible references to bodily substances, on the other. *Copy thachin*, to reiterate, are made up from the melodic content of internationally-known pop songs paired with new, locally-generated and culturally-relevant lyrics. Moreover, material from one pop song can be made into more than one *copy thachin*, based on the creation of new lyrics for each new *copy thachin* track. In what follows, I claim that the presence of shared substance—between original pop songs and *copy thachin* tracks, as well as between generations and iterations of *copy thachin* over time—sets up that form of kin relationship identified in Marshall Sahlins’ conceptualization of kinship as “mutuality of being.” As Sahlins uses the phrase, “mutuality of being” refers to the ways in which people are necessarily a part of one another—that their individuality exists as part of a collective “substance.” Operating at a theoretical rather than descriptive level, Sahlins presents a series of ethnographic examples in his brief but convincing 2013 text “What Kinship Is” to support, rather than verify, his claim. In doing so, he works to show how kinship structures, far from being preordained, can be artfully reproduced through performed and procreative actions that reorganize the “intersubjective relations of being.”

For Sahlins, the question that precedes “what is kinship?” is: “what materials are needed for beings to produce offspring?” The exchange of substance is a part of how reproduction is achieved, scientifically, and how many humans make sense of their kinship groups, colloquially. A technoscientific explanation of human reproduction focuses on the sperm and egg as necessary substances, while we might proffer explanations of degrees of relatedness that are predicated on “blood ties.” Substances, in these two cases, fall into the narrower category of “bodily substance,” but also imply specific lineal ways of relating to one another. In anthropology, bodily substance has been used as an analytic to understand the connections between concepts of bodies and persons and kinship, which allows researchers to think at the levels of both the individual and the group (Carsten 2011).

“Bodily substance” is a term used to refer to the constituent materiality of bodies. That includes clearly delineated elements like bones, flesh, hair, skin, and nails and softer, more liquid parts: organs, blood, breast milk, semen, and female sexual fluids (Carsten 2011, 21). The varying hardness or softness of these substances is relevant to our topic due to a variance in

terminology. Carsten notes that the first group—things that are bony, hard, or clearly delineated—are referred to as "bodily material," while the second group of squishier things gets called "substances" (21). However, I use the term "bodily substance" in the first sense, as an umbrella term, not because of any properties of hardness or softness in the elements at hand.

Commensality, the sharing of food, is one way that shared substance produces kin relationships. A variation—eating food that was grown from shared land—binds people together as kin, as Janet Carsten's research in Malaysia shows (Carsten 1995). By my reckoning, the shared substance present in *copy thachin* more closely resembles a bodily substance. The kin relationships I am concentrating on here do not refer to commonality experienced between people engaged in a shared experience of listening to the same music, but to commonality perceived between pop songs. As a substance, the musical material that moves from international pop song to *copy thachin* bears a closer resemblance to a bodily substance than food, because the substance in question is being passed along or exchanged, not consumed.

Substance, usefully, was at the center of the work of U.S. anthropologist David Schneider, whose work on kinship in the late 1970s destabilized the very idea of kinship. Schneider directed the Kinship Project, a study supported by the National Science Foundation at the University of Chicago, that interrogated how middle-class families in the United States and Great Britain responded to their kinship relations. His theorizations rested on the materialist premise that blood is a "biogenetic substance" and that "kinship is whatever the biogenetic substance is" (Schneider 1984, 3)). According to him, blood relations cannot be severed, since such relations are enduring. It should come as no surprise then that, by his standards, he eventually found kinship to be a faltering concept, irrelevant not only to his interlocutors but to anthropology as a discipline.

A decade later, Marilyn Strathern's work in Melanesia argued in an almost opposite direction, finding that relations of substance were fundamental to how her interlocutors thought of personhood. Substances, for Strathern, have "analogizing" properties (meaning one can stand in for another), "generative capacities," and diversity of form. She identifies a key difference between form and substance or content that I think applies to *copy thachin*; it is a property of substitutability, she declares, "that enables a transformation of form into content or inner substance" (Strathern 1988, 251). A substantive connection relies on the exchange or transformation of substance, not just the replication of a form. That is to say, *copy thachin* have a substantive connection to international pop songs because they transform the musical material through the addition of new lyrics. In the terms developed in this chapter, the *copy thachin*, like the Melanesian body Strathern describes, manifests a "microcosm of relations" (Strathern 1988, 131).

Despite the prospective pitfalls of a substance-oriented approach to theorizing kinship—its proximity to hegemonic epistemologies of the body and reproduction, namely— Strathern's mode of analysis proves extraordinarily productive for my project. More than a metaphor, the exchange and flow of musical substance functions in relation to a politics of reproduction, which, when foregrounded, underscores the significance of references to bodily substance in the lyrics of several post-coup Burmese songs.

On Kinship: Versions, Iterations, Generation

As descriptors, “mutuality” and “intersubjectivity” get to the heart of what I think about when I think about kinship. I should clarify—when I think about kinship, my first order of business is to make it a more approachable term by introducing a degree of specificity. What I am really talking about are “kin relationships,” which I gloss as the enduring connections between beings forged through specific processes. Kin relations rely on a combination of similarity and distinctness because the intent is to describe something that exists between, not within, individuals. In my formulation, a kin relationship is an external relationship; therefore, it is necessary for there to be more than one whole, fully-fledged being (however that is defined). These whole beings, in turn, are bounded entities; edges, borders, or boundaries are necessary for the production of the in-between space of relating. At the same time, the beings in this relationship are similar enough to play a meaningful role in each other’s existence, whether those roles include making, sharing, or caring with or for one another.

Forms of kinship can be categorized by considering what is produced through this type of connection. Does the act in question make a new being or a new bond? If a new being comes of it, the action can be classified as procreative. Performed actions, by contrast, create or strengthen ties between extant beings. Procreative actions include biological reproduction, but we have to be careful to show that this doesn’t necessarily mean that the parties involved think of producing offspring as the result of procreative sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. Rather, offspring may come about as the result of adoption, as Sahlins references. He offers naming practices as one such example of a performed action that both fortify and create kin relationships between already-existing beings.

Terms like “offspring” and “generations” evoke the vertical lines of descent achieved through procreative action over time. But as diverse entities and different reproductive mechanisms are introduced, as in the case of *copy thachin*, a need for more nuanced terminology arises. Perhaps *copy thachin* that use the same melodic material but different lyrics to produce two or more distinct tracks could be referred to as “versions.” “Iterations,” on the other hand, could refer to *copy thachin* tracks as they circulate as live performances or as recordings in which their repetition is salient to the audience. Finally, the term “generation” in its noun form could be used to refer to iterations of *copy thachin* first composed in response to conditions or circumstances that have since recurred.

A Final Example: Rap Against Junta’s “Blood”

An effective sonic example of “generation,” one explicit about the substance of non-biological kinship bonds (here overriding claims to ethnicized or racial difference), is the track, “သွေး” (“Blood”) by Myanmar hip-hop and creative collective Rap Against Junta. In this 2022 track, biological substance (“သွေး”), is referenced so as to index non-genealogical ties between members of different ethnicities present within Myanmar. Verses declaimed in Kachin, Mon, Chin, Arakan, Kayah, Karen, Tai, and Burmese speak to the military’s violence and the need for solidarity between these different groups. The repeated phrase “this is our blood” heard in the

chorus invokes a sense of mutuality formed through shared experiences of violence. While much of the violence has been inflicted by members of the Bamar-speaking majority, the Burmese-language verse in this track works to renounce a sense of ethnic superiority or exceptionality. In doing so, this track aligns itself with the one of the tenets of the federal democracy movement that the National Unity Government claims to represent: a unified nation-state with equal citizens who have the right to cultural freedom, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

The music video for the track, available on YouTube since 2022, works within a minimalist visual vocabulary. Its color scheme is mostly limited to red, black, and white, with flashes of military green and bright yellow when photographs of Min Aung Hlaing are presented on screen. The performers' obscure their faces, either through digital effects, or through the clothing they wear. Some of them wear sunglasses, hats, and hoods; others appear with bandanas tied around the lower half of their faces or wear a medical mask. In the case of the performer rapping in the Arakan language, who appears with a bandana tied around his forehead, his likeness has been rendered as an animated line drawing. Flames are superimposed over the Shan/Tai language rapper's face. Flags associated with these ethnic groups, specifically a Mon flag, a Rakhine flag, and a Karenni/Kayah flag, are positioned with the rapper performing in that group's language. The whole track has subtitles for the language being rapped in English translation. Only one rapper looks to be female, the Karenni/Kayah performer, who wears a traditionally woven v-neck blouse.

The performers belong to a group known as "Rap Against Junta," which, as indicated above, bills itself as a creative resistance collective. As they proclaim in their Soundcloud bio: "We know we could be shot dead but, fuck it, we'd rather die than to live in fear." This "alliance" of hip-hop artists, including DJs, MCs, producers, promoters, graffiti artists, and sound engineers, lists their three main objectives as: "to express our rage against Junta in Myanmar," "to bring down the dictatorship and battle for democracy," and "to use Hip-Hop as a creative means to bring unity, justice and peace." Their anonymity in performances reads as an attempt at self-protection rather than an artistic choice; their aims are pointedly anti-junta.

In the lyrics of the track, references to blood speak to notions of descent, solidarity, violence, and diversity. The verses in Chin, Arakan, Karreni/Kayah, and Karen contain lines making reference to descent, generation, or family members but with poetic valences. The Karen verse contains the line, "New generations get wider knowledge,/ain't gotta be like the elders from black age" but this is set against others such as, "It had been a very very long time since we descended/instead of developing," in the Arakan verse. In each case, kin are said to be connected over a span of time, though I understand the Karen verse to be advocating for a break with the past. Direct mention of members of the same generation, siblings, occurs in the Karenni/Kayah verse in the words, "You are killing my sister. You are killing/my brother."

Lines in the verses rapped in Mon, Karen, and Shan/Tai speak to the violence enacted against non-Bamar ethnic groups. In the Mon verse, listeners hear "Just watch soldiers shooting and killing civilians./And see the streets full of bloody corpses." The Shan/Tai verse includes the words, "Our people got shot/and died beside the road with a lot of blood." The line, "We

won't forget our martyrs and heroes who gave their/blood and lives," in the Karen verse underscores the point that people remember the violence committed against them.

The track is explicit about the collective's desire for bloodshed, whether as retribution or in service of new ideals. In the Karenni/Kayah verse, there is a tone of sacrifice in the line, "We pour out our hearts/to fight til the end" while the Chin verse employs more direct language: "Let us bleed them all by the people they had/killed. Once innocent hands who help them,/turning to bloods." The Burmese verse urges violence in the line, "No need to be merciful to hit the military/junta back with our unity of being rebellious" and goes on to clarify that this would be in service of the political aim of unity: "Also, just strike brainless ones who don't accept to that saying 'Burmese are one of the ethnics.'" In other words, the injunction here is to lambast people who don't realize that Burmese (Bamar) is an ethnic identity too, albeit one that has not been subject to the same forms of oppression.

Four of the verses, strikingly, present four contrasting conceptions of diversity. The Kachin verse notes, "We only have our people so no way to get diverse," perhaps speaking to the limits of existing within the confines of an ethnic identity. The Mon (second) and Chin (fourth) verses present diversity as occurring within unity; the line in the Mon verse goes, "People of many races come together to become one" and the Chin language line is, "All the brothers from far and near/connected." I hear the line, "We will never be/diverse again as our blood has the same aim to achieve," in the Karen verse as renouncing their position as an ethnic minority that contributes to a sense of diversity within the nation in favor of a vision of Myanmar in which people would no longer have to adhere closely to their inherited ethnic divisions. The third verse, in Chin, includes the line, "Children cried and longed for mother to care/But the mother country isn't there for us to dare," which I mention here to turn this chapter towards the topic of ethnicity (and the audibility of ethnicity) in Myanmar. In what follows, therefore, I recount two personal experiences that made ethnicity salient to me in order to give readers a sense of how the topic intersects with research and shapes everyday life. I do so briefly, before concluding the chapter, in order to suggest how ethnicity, in this context, might have more to do with processes of "citation" than with claims to essence.

Sounding Against Ethnicity

> what's your key
> majority in minor-c or minority in major-d
> ceasefire in flat-b or cease-identity in sharp-g
> give me a falsetto
> let's improvise
> no need for harmony
> –ko ko thett, "the burden of being *bama*" (ko ko thett 2012)

Two years before the coup, in summer language classes held in Yangon, attended by researchers and expats alike, race and ethnicity were brought up in two different phrases. The first phrase we dealt with was, "*Ba lu myo le?*" or "What race are you?" As a class full of white people it was assumed that we would need to be able to respond to such an inquiry. The correct answer, rather than "white," would be to provide my nationality. I would reply with, "*Canada lu myo*

ba" or, "I am Canadian." In another session, precipitated by the number of students who were political science researchers, we went through vocabulary associated with conflict, where we learned the term "တိုင်းရင်းသား လက်နက်ကိုင် အဖွဲ့အစည်း--meaning "ethnic armed organization." The change in terms should have tipped me off to the fact that the ideas of race (*lu myo*) and ethnicity (*taing yin thar* or တိုင်းရင်းသား) are applied differently in Myanmar.

While I was living in Kachin State in 2019, conversations with people normalized the presence of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). They spoke of paying taxes and of land being appropriated for roads used by this "ethnic armed organization." I do not mean to give the impression that they necessarily supported the KIA, but that their presence did not come as a surprise. Meanwhile, the military checkpoint on the highway to Hpakant was staffed by members of the Tatmadaw. The word around town—which I did not verify—was that the soldiers belonged to the notorious 33 Light Infantry Division. Here, unlike in the major cities of Yangon and Mandalay, reminders of armed conflict were daily.

For political scientist Matthew Walton the notions of whiteness and white privilege are useful for thinking about Bamar or Burmese privilege. He claims that, even though ethnicity is used to mark difference and the distribution of power, economic benefits and social opportunities still accrue from an ethnically-divisive political reality, where Bamar-ness is taken to be the default. Like whiteness, Bamar identity goes unmarked. Furthermore, as Walton outlines, while Bamar people might see themselves as experiencing the same repression that other ethnic groups do, this characterization is false. In addition to the ongoing conflicts between Ethnic Armed Organizations and the Tatmadaw, two processes work to create and support Bamar privilege at the expense of other groups. First, cultural assimilation works to chip away at non-Bamar identities. Gavin Douglas presents a musical case study of this phenomenon, in which non-Bamar musicians learn traditional Bamar music and perform in state sponsored competitions. Restrictions on the teaching of non-Bamar languages, he argues, destabilize those cultures while propping up Bamar privilege. Bamar people have the privilege of being "conversant in the language of political power" while those from other ethnic groups must learn Burmese as an additional language (Douglas 2001, 15).

All of this is to emphasize that the linguistic diversity on display in the verses of "သွေး" coupled with the ethos of the track amounts to a meaningful sonic representation of political solidarity. Together, these individuals work across ethnic divisions sowed by colonialism and upheld by military leaders to voice their commitment to building a new vision of inter-ethnic solidarity and experience in a battle-torn country.

Conclusion: "Nonpossessive Undeclared Citationality"

In his book *Inciting Joy* (2022), the poet Ross Gay includes a chapter on impersonation and copying titled, "How Big the Boat: The Cover: The Tenth Incitement." His range is expansive. As expected, he begins by writing about cover songs. But he soon takes his subject beyond the realms of music, connecting it to basketball, to cooking, to teaching. In basketball, he explains, spectators will respond to players who imitate other (more famous) athletes by calling out the famous athlete's name. We cook recipes that other people cooked first and shared with us. When we build, we always build on someone else's foundation. His point, with which I agree,

sidesteps vexed questions of authenticity and reproduction in favor of celebrating the social connections that cover songs generate. Key to his thinking is what he calls "nonpossessive undeclared citationality." The idea of nonpossession is important for him as a Black thinker; he suggests that the notion of property or the need to insist on property rights is less at issue for people who were only recently treated as property. I understand the "undeclared" part of this citationality to be a product of the ongoing lack of allegiance of the practice. When we are always referring back to something, and that something refers back to something, nodding to one point of connection is not enough. Like Gay writes, "we are perpetually covering, we are ever citational, it is called thinking, it is called learning, it is called making, it is called being a creature with, it is our only choice" (Gay 2022, 216).

When *copy thachin* can circulate without the impediment of copyright law, when the barriers to circulating are lowered so that you need a device with enough storage and an internet connection, "nonpossessive undeclared citationality" comes into its own. Listeners know what they are listening to (a *copy thachin*) and that each reproduction refers back to an international pop song. Unlike an artefact like a cassette or record which finds a place to perch in homes and businesses, the digital recording floats in the cloud, so to speak. Gay's conception of "undeclared citationality" works for considering how *copy thachin* circulates and makes references to other tracks; but understanding the importance of "substance" to forming identities and linkages between members of different groups might require a different theorization, one that is more grounded in local practices. Further work could be done to find out more about what blood means within different cultures found within Myanmar's borders, for example, or to delve into a comprehensive study of the details of inter-ethnic collaboration in a political setting compared to an artistic setting. For now I will settle for a speculative analysis, one that pairs close attention to musical material with anthropological theorizations so as to find more points of connection than points of difference. My agenda, merely, has been to describe local kinship relations, often illegitimate or unsanctioned by the state, structured in, by, and through an inimitably local and initimably nonpossessive form of sonic production.

Chapter Three: Recording Disappearance
Sonic Vernaculars of Separation and the Absence of Operation Hanoi Hannah

Operation Hanoi Hannah

It comes down to this: one day the website was there, the next time I went to check something on it, it wasn't.

A military coup in February 2021 had already foreclosed the possibility of conducting in-person fieldwork in Myanmar, but I decided to pivot as necessary, drawing on a combination of digital ethnographic techniques. This is how I came across Operation Hanoi Hannah, an activist collective from Myanmar who resists the junta through their recorded work, through other activists posting on Instagram, and followed the link to their website.[35] I followed them on social media, downloaded their albums when they were released, and sent direct messages and emails to introduce myself and ask if I could interview them. My efforts didn't exactly yield results. They didn't message me back, and by June 2022, their website was offline. Parts of Operation Hanoi Hannah's website are archived on the Wayback Machine, but not the entire site. The recordings were not archived. References to Operation Hanoi Hannah exist on other activists' social media pages and in news articles, so there are traces of it out there.

The disappearances of people and information that Operation Hanoi Hannah recorded is a byproduct of the Tatmadaw's systemic violence, part of a larger project to control the circulation of narratives that contradict the junta's nation-building project. The concerns of the collective and of online users work together to thematize child abduction and familial separation in order to encourage soldiers to defect from the military. But what is most striking about the digital-ethnographic scene is the ways in which their use of sound recording leverages, not just ideas about, but the visceral human experience of loss and separation.

The Collective

As previously stated, Operation Hanoi Hannah was/is an activist collective that formed in the wake of Myanmar's 2021 military coup.[36] That year, the group released two albums through their website. *Bark Frequencies* is a collection of eight tracks that are intended to encourage members of the military and police (collectively known as the Tatmadaw) to defect. *Redemption*, their second album, was recorded to accompany the report of Mahar Insights (a youth collective of Myanmar digital activists) on the Tatmadaw's use of child combatants as part of an awareness-raising campaign. I remember their website being well-designed, yellow used as a bold accent color and *sans serif* text to create a broadly appealing online presence. A link bar across the top directed users to links titled "More Tracks," "Contact Us," and "Support Myanmar," with a button to toggle between English and Myanmar language versions of the site on the far right of the page. The contact us page linked to social media profiles for two other organizations: *Sekku Magazine* and Mahar Insights; a submission box at the bottom was there

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[35] Of course, the collective's name references the Vietnam War era broadcaster known as "Hanoi Hannah" who was the voice of a disinformation campaign against US troops.

[36] I am using both the past and the present tense here to highlight the organization's unknown status. While they are not active on social media—where I would encounter their work—they could still currently be active in Myanmar.

for people to send messages. Clicking "Support Myanmar" brought up a range of options: Go Fund Me fundraisers, a digital art project called "Love Letters From Spring," and links to other awareness-raising efforts. Under "More Tracks" one would find a track submitted by a user named Cherubim titled "Operation Mourning Souls" as well as the two albums created by Operation Hanoi Hannah.

On the home page, Operation Hanoi Hannah laid out their agenda. With a nod to their namesake, the Vietnam War-era radio personality known as Hanoi Hannah, the group outlines how people can assist in their propaganda project. They invited people to join their effort by playing audio files, writing scripts, voice acting, sharing about the project on social media, or donating funds. In short, Operation Hanoi Hannah asked people to participate in their targeted effort to "convince at least some of the soldiers to participate in CDM (Civil Disobedience Movement) and join with the Myanmar citizens' fight for the cause." Rather than catch soldiers off guard, they wanted to expose soldiers to dissident messages using sonic content. Doing so is risky, and the group acknowledged that. While they wanted people to "blast off the audio files 24/7" they urged participants to remember that "safety comes first." To stay safe, they instructed participants to open and play the audio from a safe location where soldiers would not find them.

The work of Operation Hanoi Hannah aligns with a broader landscape of activism occurring in post-coup Myanmar. As such, the work of the collective aligns with the grassroots activism of street protests and strikes spearheaded by the Civil Disobedience Movement, the National Unity Government's politicking with the international community and confronting the junta through combat, multiple civil rights organizations, as well as citizen media streams, which have worked to connect Myanmar to the world. Operation Hanoi Hannah works alongside other social media accounts that are not affiliated with a larger organization or media entity, but that present detailed information about what is happening in Myanmar in English language posts.

As per their website, Mahar Insights is/was a "youth collective of Myanmar digital activists striving towards freedom of Myanmar, human rights of the citizens, and freedom of information through elaborate research." In addition to "Sleepless in the Barracks," they published "Jade: Inside the Military's Blood Money" on April 1, 2021. They also published a series of infographics describing the connection between oil and gas companies and the junta to their Facebook page on May 3, 2021.[37] The most recent post on their Facebook profile features a collection of images that make up a report: "Transforming the Tatmadaw." The caption notes that this is the first in a six-part series, but nothing has followed it; nor have they shared a Burmese language edition.

Separated from Their Output

While my "first contact" with Operation Hanoi Hannah—finding it mid-scroll—bears a resemblance to a fortuitous chance encounter, my attempts at a more engaged relationship were unsuccessful. I sent an email to their website that went unanswered; direct messages to Mahar

[37] "Sleepless in the Barracks," "Jade: Inside the Military's Blood Money," and "Transforming the Tatmadaw" are all English-language texts, while the infographics about the oil and gas companies' connections to the junta are in Burmese.

Insights didn't get a response. This was to be expected. I did not, and do not, have an extensive network of interlocutors in Myanmar. Answering my messages could have been more of a liability than a priority; they would have been taking a gamble on my identity while increasing the likelihood of accidentally revealing their own identities.

When their website went offline, I was tempted to shelve the material presented below. If their non-response felt like a shortcoming on my part, some type of ethnographic failure to build digital rapport, losing access to the material in question was a cosmic sign: don't talk about it. Yet Operation Hanoi Hannah worked so hard to create these materials in an effort to sound out the possibility that soldiers would defect, that civilians would understand, and—the ultimate hope—Myanmar would become democratically governed. Buoyed by their courage to act, I have centered the question of "separation" in this chapter so that there I still have something to write about. In the analysis that follows, I follow matters of *separation* into three domains: the listening experience, infrastructure, and interpersonal loss.

Introduction: Sonic Vernaculars of Separation

In this chapter, I develop the term "sonic vernaculars of separation" to discuss processes of recording, broadcasting, and listening to Operation Hanoi Hannah's 2021 album, *Redemption* despite obstacles to ethnographic work. This album was released alongside a report on child combatants within the Myanmar military as part of an awareness-raising campaign. As tracks on the album recount, children have been forcibly separated from their families and inducted into the Tatmadaw through coercion and abduction. Operation Hanoi Hannah has also been cut off from prospective listeners; their website disappeared only a few months after the album was released. The concept of separation covers a lot of ground in this chapter, referring to both literal and figurative states of experience. I list the main ways that I employ the term here for readers to bear in mind. Literally, I remain separated from Operation Hanoi Hannah's recordings, now that they are offline. There has always been a gap in communication between me and members of Operation Hanoi Hannah as I was not able to talk to members of the collective. Power outages and restrictions to internet access continue to separate people in Myanmar not only from me, but from each other and from the global community. Figuratively, in addition, my analysis of their sound recordings must consider separation as the ex post facto effect of the distance between the live voicing of scripts and the recorded product. Equally to be taken into account is the fact that, prior to shutting down, Operation Hanoi Hannah advertised that they were in search of voice actors and script writers; I surmise that if they are using voice actors, those individuals are not necessarily those who have experienced familial separation directly. Finally, within the text itself, I use boxed-off sections of prose to separate out sections of reflexive prose from the chapter itself. The first reflexive section addresses my personal sonic vernacular of separation as it pertains to my musical background. In the second, I show how matters of separation play out within the context of the location wherein I conducted fieldwork.

This chapter builds on Benjamin Tausig's formulation of a "sonic vernacular" to pivot from scholarship oriented around the compositional and ethical risks of using sounds that have been separated from their sources (Schafer 1969; Feld 1996; 2000) to a body of work that seeks to explain how sound reaches into the liminal states of before-and-after-life (Stevenson 2017; Moreno 2019). Tausig uses the term to show that there are many forms of sonic protest. In my

formulation, “dissent” has been replaced by “separation” in order to make room for the various ways that sound, under modernity, enacts and reflects separation. Scholarship in music and Sound Studies discusses sound’s role in creating and maintaining spatial divisions (E. A. Thompson 2002; Helmreich 2015); articulating the contours of the body (Sterne 2003; Rice 2011); and building and bolstering social boundaries at small and large scales (Guilbault 2017).

If the question of separation is both prevalent and pressing, it may be worthwhile to develop a more nuanced and productive way of thinking about it. This is where a building-out of Tausig’s aforementioned formulation “sonic vernaculars of dissent” will prove strategic. A “sonic vernacular,” as per Tausig, works within a defined context, where it is made up of the sonic and aural practices and the symbolic meanings they transmit and add to (Tausig 2018). These systems for anthropological exchange are not necessarily localized; nor are they endemic. Rather than being constrained to any one location at any given moment in time, sonic vernaculars reach across geopolitical borders or hover in online communities. Sonic vernaculars might resist the dominant sonic order, creating friction with what Martin Daughtry has termed “auditory regimes” (Daughtry 2015). Even when they are not contesting a “hegemonic sonic order” (Tausig 2018, 26), a sonic vernacular is likely to be embedded in actions or lived experiences rather than in official narratives. Crucially, this term centers the everyday, ordinary, even prosaic ways of sounding and apprehending sound, ones that are best apprehended through bottom-up rather than top-down analyses of social organization.

As I will show, Steven Feld works to add a layer of ethical concern to R. Murray Schafer’s notion of “schizophonia” by moving to consider the stakes of research and intellectual property within the uneven grounds of academic work and pop stardom. Jairo Moreno’s and Lisa Stevenson’s work examines the modalities of listening and “sounding out,” respectively, as connective strategies following children’s death or disappearance. I address the technological dimensions of Operation Hanoi Hannah’s online presence and the state of infrastructural collapse in post-coup Myanmar to throw further light on their critical aesthetics and politics of failure.

As necessary as a theorization of “separation” might be to theorizations of both sound recording and kinship, this chapter coins the term “sonic vernaculars of separation” in order to consider factors beyond the technological that shape the sense of separation: in this case, state-sponsored violence, resistant strategies, infrastructural circumstance, and geographic distance. An overview of this Sound Studies literature reveals that audio recording is still too often assumed to stave off the threat of disappearance. The assumption grounding such ideas as “schizophonia” is that, through processes of audio recording, an ephemeral experience is transformed into a more stable (though purportedly unnatural) form that can be accessed again and again. I suggest the blitheness of such a statement fails to account for the interpersonal dynamics of such an exchange, let alone the larger structures that enable what is, at its worst, an extractive endeavor. The ends to which people use recordings are just as complicated. I use reflexive writing to build out this theorization. Through close listening and social media analysis I suggest that Operation Hanoi Hannah harnesses separation to create forms of resistant media that work to build digital kinship and solidarity through the thematization of absence.

As a case study, this chapter models a way of working through scant material and obstructions for researchers working in similarly adverse conditions. While the object of my analysis is not widely accessible and ethnographic access to people involved in the project is sharply curtailed, explicating these materials works to further Operation Hanoi Hannah's goal: to expose systemic violence in the hope of dismantling the military junta. In addition to the audio tracks and reports Operation Hanoi Hannah released, I draw on newspaper articles, social media commentary, and infrastructural information to show how "separation" or the sense of "separation" in digital aesthetics is leveraged in the name of political solidarity and resistance to total media crackdown. The recordings might have disappeared, but their effects can still be felt.

A Reflexive Response:

Question:

Where do sounds act like walls, dividing up space and offering privacy? What sounds are more like windows in the way they offer a chance for interaction, or connection, even?

In my own sonic vernacular, separation is part of processes and a motivating factor for performing certain actions. My examples fall under the broad categories of making music, listening to music and environmental sound, and engaging musical memories to sustain relationships with kin. I work to draw out the systemic factors that shape my engagement with sound because as a white cis settler woman, I stand to benefit from the existing systems that oppress others. Specifically, my sonic vernacular has been molded by my continual access to formal musical education within the Western Art music tradition. There are many ways of separating and being separated and the stakes of separation encompass the breadth of human experience so I draw on my own experiences for illustrative, not prescriptive purposes.

Within my music-making experience, separation occurs spatially, interpersonally, and through engagement with musical compositions. Growing up, the piano I played was in our living room. Anyone in the house could hear what I was playing, whether or not they wanted to. I made use of the basic strategies like playing hands separately and using a metronome to work through technically challenging passages, but I did not diligently run through scales and arpeggios. My parents, though they were both trained to be public school music teachers, did not comment on how my piano playing was progressing, or if it was progressing, even though they heard what I was doing every time I sat down on the bench. I note the sense of separation that they must have cultivated to listen without comment, and juxtapose it with the relative lack of spatial separation between the so-called "musical space" of the piano and the shelf of sheet music behind it from the adjoining "domestic space" of the kitchen and dining room.

The layout of practice rooms—and the very idea that one would practice in small, adjoining rooms—marked a shift in my practice habits and a change in musical priorities. I would arrive at the music building, take my horn from its locker, and go to the first practice room on the right. Arriving early meant that I had enough time to "warm up" for the day with a sixty-minute set of technical exercises before anyone else could claim their scheduled time in that room and before anyone was around to overhear me. The practice rooms gave the impression of being separated from everyone else, but the lack of soundproofing meant that

sounds spilled into nearby rooms. There is a similarity between this spatial pseudo-separation and the separation used to practice. If playing piano at home was about making "pleasant enough" music for family members to overhear and enjoy, the practice room was a place to subdivide pieces of music into smaller chunks to polish through repetition. Standard repertoire turned into orchestral excerpts turned into intervals turned into mouthpiece buzzing. The common phrase, "wood-shedding" gets to the heart of the repetitive nature of breaking musical pieces into smaller and smaller parts.

Once it was time to move from the practice room to the stage, for large ensemble rehearsals or performers, the task was to fit the component parts back together into music. Separation at this point was interpersonal, working at the scale of the group and the individual. I am not the first to comment on the sharp division between performers and audience in the Western Art Music tradition. But to add a layer of specificity, I would suggest that the audition process by which students are assigned to ensembles reflects a separation predicated on skill that has social consequences. If an orchestra is more prestigious than wind ensemble, which is, in turn, more exclusive than the concert winds group, students become aware of how their ensemble placement positions them in relation to their peers. Separation based on skill even happens within an instrument group. For horn players, if you have a strong high range you play first or third; second and fourth horn require a player with a developed low range.

Joining world music ensembles showed me a more connected alternative. I played with the Balinese gamelan ensemble and the West African music and dance ensemble, both of which were led by musicians who followed an educational trajectory from their respective tradition of origin into conservatory-style Western music education. Neither group required auditions, both were open to all members of the university community. I remember asking how we could get time in the room to practice outside of class time on the first day of gamelan. There was no need, the instructor clarified. We would all be learning together. I struggled, both to acquire the basic skill of striking and dampening, and with the prospect of being wrong in front of people. I found it challenging to be patient and wait while other people learned their parts, until I realized that I needed to know what was going on around me to memorize the piece. Without the separating factors of the practice room and auditions, rehearsals had to move at a slower pace. It produced the sense that it was more of a community group and less of a rehearsal. When I think about presence of the instructor's and students' children at African music and dance ensemble rehearsals and performers I'm reminded of how musical practices and performances were integrated into my everyday routines. Sleeping through at-home rehearsals and falling asleep at concerts that ran past my bedtime was the norm for a kid with musical parents.

These points—the entanglement of musical life and domestic life and a sense of awareness of how musical practice can be stratified—are more emotionally salient than other factors that have shaped my own sonic vernacular of separation.

Against Schizophonia

R. Murray Schafer's idea of the "soundscape" and his term "schizophonia" still exerts a powerful gravitational pull in the Sound Studies literature. The hand of the pioneering electroacoustic composer might have been shaking as he wrote the word,

"schizophonia"—when he paired the Greek prefix "schizo-" with the "phono" to refer to sounds separated from their source to give a name to his concern. Few scholars understand the limited way in which Schafer used the word as he developed new terminology for describing the ways in which "modernity" enforced the "separation" of sound via sound recording technology. "Schizophonia," its inventor wrote at the end of the eponymous chapter, "is intended to be a nervous word" (Schafer 1969, 47). Schafer's discomfort is palpable throughout the chapter, which loosely takes the form of the back-and-forth conversation between him and a classroom of composition students. Readers will notice that his word choice betrays his belief in a certain violence inherent to the recording process, stating that "any natural sound, no matter how tiny, can be blown up and shot around the world" (Schafer 1969, 43). His claim that "[s]ounds have been torn from their natural sockets" reinforces his position that recorded sound is unnatural, as if eyes have been pulled from heads. He goes so far as to invent a Dracula story in which "naïve" villagers mistake a sculpture fitted out with a sound recording device for a live human presence, thus insidiously reifying technology and liveness at the same time (Schafer 1969, 44). The moral of the story, apparently, is that the villagers should not have been so easily taken in by a recording, and Dracula should properly listen to his paramour in the flesh, not to a recorded voice.

Note too the suspicious resemblance between "schizophonia" and "schizophrenia." This is intentional, and Schafer admits that he makes such a connection in order to draw on the "sense of aberration and drama" it elicits (Schafer 1969, 43). His use of ableist language is appalling, and reason enough to avoid promulgating the term. If acousmatic sound is simply sound presented without its source, he invents the notion of schizophonic sound as its pathologized double. His choice to leverage our discomfort with conditions and mental illnesses, specifically schizophrenia, is not just deliberate, but deliberately negative. To use these cognate terms to suggest that a listener might confuse hearing recorded sound with an auditory hallucination belies the same sort of prejudice and ignorance present in his Dracula story.

Some rehabilitation of the term is possible if one concentrates on the ways in which Schafer presents recorded (schizophonic) sound as a compositional obstacle. It is to his dismay that his fellow composers might miss out on the affective power of music because their physical gestures and bodily expenditures do not correspond to the pitch, volume, or timbre of the sounds they produce through electronic means. I would argue, then, for the limited rescue of his term, in the sense that only refers to this problem, and narrows schizophonia's universalizing scope. With that in mind, the term might be usefully employed to interrogate Operation Hanoi Hannah's recordings as compositions. However, I concentrate on the political aims of their work and what separation during the recording and composition allows for, rather than elucidating any single actor's compositional experience.

In the 1990s, Steven Feld picked up the term "schizophonia" and used it as a springboard for discussing the perils and pitfalls of separation within the context of world music. In 1996, for example, Feld traces the Ba-Benzélé vocal sounding known as "Hindewhu," itself an "onomatopoeic imitation" of an instrument (Feld 1996, 5), through Herbie Hancock's 1973 reissue of "Watermelon Man," and "Sanctuary" (1994) by Madonna to discuss the stakes of global musical exchange. Feld's subject concerns the densely layered, wordless multipart

singing of Babenzélé people and other groups from Central Africa. A track entitled "Hindewhu," recorded in the field by Simha Arom and Geneviève Taurelle in 1965, illustrates the cyclic pattern of intervals and alternation between whistled and sung pitches that are common in this type of Central African polyphony. The opening of "Watermelon Man" bears more than a passing resemblance; as Feld notes, it has simply been tweaked to better fit metric and timbral expectations (1996, 5). When it is sampled in Madonna's "Sanctuary," the intervals and the rhythm of the passage are clearly audible as part of the background. Feld's concern is not with the use of sampling as a compositional tactic, but with the ramifications of conducting musical exchange across power imbalances. "Schizophonic mimesis," as Feld dubs it, describes how the splits that occur in the long process of production, circulation, and consumption create conditions for renegotiating identity (1996, 13). His use of the term, that is, takes it beyond the scope of composition and applies it to a compositional process that is ongoing within the world music industry, which allows music to be recorded and recirculated in contexts where its value changes. This indicates the limits of the term; Feld's emphasis is decidedly directed towards articulating the ethical ramifications of separation.

The act of recording implicates researchers in this process of separation, which is not to say that recording or research are bad. It is just that they are not neutral. Recordings of all types enable the production of discourse. Recording "Hindewhu," and other so-called "Pygmy" music, enabled Simha Arom, Colin Turnbull, and Alan P. Merriam to build their careers, not just from the recordings, but from what they wrote about said recordings. Both the recordings and their discursive products can move without a researcher who could clarify or add nuance in conversation; their work can be used to ends they would disagree with or even find distasteful. In addition to this type of separation-in-the-future, disjuncture is endemic to any musical analysis of "Pygmy" song that makes no mention of the systemic oppression people of the Central African rainforests have experienced (1996, 12). This, for Feld, indexes "disempower[ment] … because they have never gained control over how they are discursively represented" (1996, 12). Rather, their identity has been shaped from the outside through "schizophonic mimesis;" for example, the people known as Ba-Benzélé have been made to share their name with a title of a track they have never owned (1996, 18).

In "From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis: On the Discourses and Commodification Practices of 'World Music' and 'World Beat,'" (1992) Feld deftly applies the anthropologist Gregory Bateson's idea of "schismogenesis" to describe the ways that "world music" and "world beat" work "mutualistically," as per Feld (2005, 258), to differentiate themselves. While "world music" can be pithily defined as "music *of* the world to be sold *around* the world" (Feld 2005, 266), "world beat" draws tighter boundaries around itself as a genre. While attending to a historical trajectory connecting beat to rhythm to racialized bodies, Feld identifies "world beat" as a "more marked term" that has been "critically disparaged by some as other (or just oppressed) people's party music commercially appropriated for white folks to dance to" (Feld 2005, 266-67). Bateson's model of schismogenesis works as a framework for understanding how these two genres play off each other. Feld spells out four processes that work to differentiate (read: separate) "world beat" from "world music." The relative dominance of major record labels and Western pop stars relies on the submission of independent labels and non-Western musicians (Feld 2005, 269). "World beat" and "world music" each provide substance for the other to use Feld 2005, 270). The gap between "world music"/"world beat"

performers and their "first-world fans" (Feld 2005, 270) widens as people become increasingly entrenched in their position as either performer or fan, marginalized person or privileged listener (Feld 2005, 270). Finally, within the purview of musical style, tracks within each genre become more like one another—they homogenize—and in doing so, the genres become more stylistically opposed (Feld 2005, 270).

Two critical moves that Feld repeats in both these texts are worth identifying. First, he draws readers' attention to asymmetric power relations by bringing up the topic of money. As a consequence of intellectual property law, Herbie Hancock and Madonna garner profits in ways unimaginable to any Ba-Benzélé performer, even when initiatives to compensate communities of origin for their artistic work exist. Without issuing a holier-than-thou command for researchers to compensate people for their intellectual labor, readers might walk away from the article with questions about what material difference their work does to the people they work with. Second, Feld recounts his own involvement in a recording project that transported his academic work to a wider audience. Granted, there will always be detractors who read self-reflexivity as navel-gazing. Nevertheless, the closeness of this firsthand narrative makes the point that recording and research work take place within a state of "turbulent morality" necessarily attendant to the theory and practice of ethnomusicology (Feld 1996, 1).

The tactic of all the scholars so far cited, then, is to problematize separation, albeit in contrasting ways. For Schafer, the problem of separation represents a challenge to technological and aesthetic norms. He does not hint that we can adapt, either; his position is that any form of separation makes music and listening an "unnatural" phenomenon, when, evidently, sounding and listening have always been enculturated practices. Feld takes up "schizophonia" and examines the points at which a "modernist" separation occurs in order to draw attention to the power structures at play in the music industry, whether those structures rely on money, racial hierarchies, or institutional prestige.

Listening across Death-Life

To develop an understanding of "separation" as it pertains to Operation Hanoi Hannah—both in terms of the prospect of violent separation of family members and individuals' disappearance—I turn to a body of work concerned with the boundaries between life and the states of being that precede and follow it. Sound recording's association with preservation has prompted scholars to bring the topic of death into conversations about schizophonia. In contemplating death, disappearance or absence might seem less finite, less certain. Missing people, to name one non-visible population, might not be physically present, but there is the possibility that they might hear something. While this may seem to be an unnecessary diversion, the parent-child relationships *Redemption* makes audible lead me to consider other examples of parent-child relations established and maintained sonically, even when family members are far away or deceased.

The idea of "multiple liminologies" is indicative of the many points at which lines of separation are drawn (Steingo and Sykes 2019, 19). For there to be multiple liminologies, there need to be limits, thresholds, and boundaries. For Steingo and Sykes, this phrase is useful for the ways it contributes to a discussion of sound's ontological status; they raise the question:

does sound need to be audible to be sound (Steingo and Sykes 2019, 17)? Rather than offer a concrete answer, the representative essays in the collection *Remapping Sound Studies* gesture towards the principles of sonic vernaculars: different people from different cultures have different ways of understanding and using sound. I seek to replicate that sense of plurality and equivocation here, rather than put forward an assured answer.

Gavin Steingo's work on fetal listening, and, by extension, other antenatal practices amongst people living in KwaZulu-Natal or Gauteng in South Africa, presents his findings about how sound moves across physical and metaphysical barriers. He offers up said findings in contradistinction to Stefan Helmreich's theory of transduction. In offering up the issue of "analogism," Steingo changes the (metaphorical) distance sound must travel across a separation. The fetus is considered to be alive when someone else feels or experiences it, whether it is the mother who feels it moving, or a midwife who listens for its heartbeat (Steingo 2019, 163). Birth workers place a listening device known as a "Pinard horn," an inexpensive conical tube made from wood, plastic, or metal on the pregnant person's belly in order to amplify the fetal heartbeat. For Steingo, the way the mechanics of this ethic of listening have been conceptualized—as transduction—is at odds with what he characterizes as the analogism that an array of antenatal practices rely on.

Analogism sets up a principle of causation that works without setting anything in motion. Nothing vibrates or resonates; something—whether material or ineffable—jumps across physical space in an "occult manner" (Steingo 2019, 167). The midwife's listening with a horn works by way of analogism because the relational practice of listening is what is at stake, not the presence of a particular sound as mediated through the horn. Transduction, by contrast, happens when we "turn sound into something else and that something else back into sound" (Sterne 2003, 22). Stefan Helmreich specifies that, in his definitional view of the latter, a transformation in "energy" takes place; the mechanical energy of a sound wave is turned into electrical energy as it moves through a telephone line, and back into mechanical energy again (Helmreich 2015). Through this use, transduction refers to an ever-narrowing set of technoscientific circumstances. For Helmreich, transduction can only be said to occur if sound's metaphorical path—because the sound itself isn't really moving, after all—can be traced through devices, cables, and currents from endpoint to endpoint.

During pregnancy, Steingo notes, a woman will braid her hair to prevent knots from forming in an effort to prevent the umbilical cord from becoming entangled; people in the community avoid peeking through the doors and windows of a pregnant person's home so as to prevent the fetus from protruding and receding during delivery. Moreover, horns—bearing a resemblance to the Pinard horn—are used in these contexts to draw ineffable forces from out from the body. In modern-day Zambia, for the Ndembu-speaking people's *ihamba* ritual, as Victor Turner describes, a horn is placed on the afflicted person's body to draw out the offending spirit that has taken up residence in one of their teeth. The treatment for menstrual cramps takes place on the banks of a stream or creek, where the practitioner will remove any obstacles that impede the water's flow and then place horns on the front and back of the patient's body.

My point here is not to convince my reader that fetal listening has to be either a process of transduction or work by way of analogism. Rather, it is to suggest that these examples support the premise of sonic vernaculars of separation. My point is that fetal listening happens across particular bodily states of separation, and that there are many ways of negotiating the division through sounding and listening practices. In the example Steingo presents, South African midwives straddle biomedical and traditional sonic vernaculars by the ways in which they conceive of the separation that exists between mother, child, and the community at large. Crucially, the interaction between a fetus and the perceiving mother or midwife work (in concert with other small, repeated actions performed by other members of the community) to affirm personhood according to the Xhosa Nguni principle of *ubuntu* rather than simply confirm "liveness."

Musicologist Jairo Moreno builds on Steingo's work on fetal listening in his chapter, entitled "Antenatal Aurality in Pacific Afro-Colombian Midwifery." Moreno casts a wide net, encompassing the listening practices of fetuses, deceased children, in addition to midwives from the community he defines. In this context, both fetuses and deceased children take on a heightened status due to their proximity to the divine. Here, conception is not simply a biological fact, but involves divine presence in addition to human biological materials. Fetuses are also held to have the ability to listen in to what is happening outside their womb; as such they are strongly connected to the human realm (Moreno 2019, 120–21). Ties to the divine endure; a child who dies before the age of seven is said to have a spirit but not a soul. Therefore, they are "guaranteed to rejoin the divinities in heaven" (Moreno 2019, 117). As posthumous listeners, these "little angels" are able to listen to their alive parents and godparents and intercede on their behalf (Moreno 2019, 117). These, at least, are Moreno's claims.

Lisa Stevenson, working with Inuit communities in the Canadian Arctic, works on a similarly expansive scale, synthesizing historical recordings from the 1950s with expedition accounts from the 1920s, and her own ethnographic work. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Inuit people were removed from their home communities and relocated to sanatoriums in the south for tuberculosis treatment. Their sense of separation was usually sudden and prolonged. A medical team would show up, people would come have x-rays to be taken, and if there were indications of tuberculosis, they would immediately be evacuated without receiving much explanation (Stevenson 2017, 60). The audio recordings from the McMaster University Archives capture family members at home attempting to contact their relatives in sanatoriums. As Stevenson relays, the messages are very brief and even so simple as to sound terse to an uninformed listener. She draws connecting lines from the archival recordings to writings on Inuit songs found in expedition accounts and to her ethnographic work with Inuit youth who live in close proximity to death in Arctic Bay.

Moreno is invested in the ontological stakes of listening practices within this community. Through his attention to "the aural perspective"—particularly the ability to listen—he aims to show fetal life, recently deceased beings, and humans as "a set of ontological variations on the 'human'" (Moreno 2019, 111). Midwives occupy a unique position because they draw on biomedical training and local cosmologies to provide care, much like their South African counterparts. To set up an ontological continuum that does not rely on a linear progression through states of pre-life, life, and post-life, Moreno draws on Jean-Luc Nancy's

philosophy of “the aural” to shift from analyzing listening as an object to listening as an event. Nancy’s “sonorous time” ebbs and flows, rather than setting out points on a line, which allows for a less bound and more relational take on listening (Nancy 1993, 13 on Moreno 2019, 116). Elizabeth Povinelli’s concept of “quasi-event,” where transformations and happenings do not break through the boundaries of the present sharpens critical focus towards the importance of what happens close to dividing lines, rather than on the lines themselves (Povinelli 2016, 21; Moreno 2019, 117).

Also embedding the experience of separation in the experience of death, Stevenson’s theoretical frame uses the universalizing psychological precepts of Freud and Winnicott to argue that absence and death are interconnected concepts. In Freud’s “fort-da” scene a child throws and retrieves a spool, creating conditions of absence and reappearance. Stevenson raises the stakes of childish entertainment by introducing the psychoanalyst Winnicott’s claim that children understand the absence of their mother as their mother’s death. Certainly, her ethnographic work advances the prospect of an Inuit understanding of death. Such an understanding of death is different from my own perspective in that it is not separate from everyday experience. As Stevenson recounts, her interlocutors place death in the landscape around them when they indicate where people died and where they want to be buried. Furthermore, Inuit people prepare for death through storytelling, for example by instigating conversations that raise the possibility of known people who are out on the land dying. Stevenson approaches the tapes and accounts of songs as possible points of connection, or more generally, ways of generating possibility for connecting with absent or dead individuals.

Listening is central to Moreno’s theorization. Midwives rely on principles of medical auscultation to confirm fetal presence; sounds index information about physiology which helps to monitor or make diagnostic recommendations (Moreno 2019, 114). The midwife listens for repetition, continuity, and regularity in order to find form because, for his purposes, the heartbeat is not a sonic object, but an event. Meanwhile, the muffled sound of the heartbeat indexes not just the source (the fetal being), but the conditions that make it muffled (being inside another body). Thus, a midwife practices a certain type of listening that corroborates “quasi-life.” Additionally, Moreno is employing the ability to listen as a means of differentiation. Following the perspectivist standpoint of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, his idea is that the ability to listen shows a shared interiority common to physically different beings (Moreno 2019, 122).

By contrast, Stevenson’s Freudian discussion focuses on vocalizations, sound emanating from a body towards another, which perhaps belies a weak commitment to a modality or sounding across separation. She brings together these different utterances, writing, “when we say something in the face of loss, the noise and gestures we make, I want to call [it] song” (Stevenson 2017, 68). For her interlocutors, song is more of a means of connection or a way of calling other beings closer than an outward-facing performance. Citing Rasmussen, she reminds us of how songs sprout from conditions where ordinary speech is insufficient (Stevenson 2017, 67).

The listening practices of the Pacific Afro-Colombia community create a state of being that Moreno terms “quasi-life” (Moreno 2021, 111). “Quasi-life,” describes, “a life that is fully

in its own and at a given moment but that coexists both with its negation—that is, death—and with the possibility of transcending both life and death" (Moreno 2019, 111). A linear progression through life towards death, like that which occurs in Derrida's formulation of "life spent waiting for death," is only capable of arching in one teleological direction. That is to say, only the living can think about being dead; the dead cannot think of being alive. In "quasi-life" there are no such perspectival constraints.

While some of the individuals on the tapes from the McMaster archives were simply absent, Stevenson attends to the relationship between producing sound and death as a state of being. Three points differentiate this conceptualization of death from that which I am more familiar with. Remember, from the start, that Inuit youth have a higher exposure to harm and death in part due to the systemic harm and neglect exerted by the Canadian government. First, death is made present in everyday lived experience for Inuit youth when they are taught to expect it. Stevenson recounts an interlocutor who told her she had been taught to imagine loved ones dying, to imagine what their experience of falling out of their kayak and drowning in the frigid ocean would be like (Stevenson 2017, 71). Second, Stevenson posits that death is a valid way of being—just as you can *be* alive, you can *be* dead (Stevenson 2017, 66). Third, the space of possibility that is created through song or sounding out is a space in which dead and alive people can coexist; this sound world surpasses the divisions that keep missing, absent, and dead people away from whoever is present (Stevenson 2018, 70).

In both of these examples (Moreno's and Stevenson's) sound creates a space of possibility rather than uncertainty, an idea that I take up in my analysis of Operation Hanoi Hannah's work. Like Stevenson, I find the "courageous attempt to speak into the absence-that-is-death" compelling (Stevenson 2017, 69). Likewise, the state of "quasi-life," as per Moreno's intervention, alongside his attention to listening is a productive way of recognizing the agency of absent listeners as active participants in a social world. For me, it is time to raise the stakes of how we think about separation and recording, to shift away from technological explanation in order to discuss the role of sounding and listening in Myanmar under the conditions of a total media blackout. Within my analysis, I attend to the technological and infrastructural details in service of this larger aim.

The Listening Experience

Being as though I could not interview the creators or people who listened to Operation Hanoi Hannah's recorded output, I turned to social media, where interactions on Facebook reveal community support for the project and express constructive criticism. The Mahar Insights Facebook page shared a series of posts introducing and advertising Operation Hanoi Hannah and its mission in late March 2021.

With a reach of less than three thousand followers, the first post about Operation Hanoi Hannah garnered 805 likes, 7 comments, and 435 shares. A second post shared the same material, but emphasized that this effort did not rely on the element of surprise. It sparked less engagement. The third post, sharing that new tracks had been posted, got 284 likes, 4 comments, and 247 shares. The fourth post, a re-share of the third post attracted very little engagement.

The comments solicited by these posts address two main themes: that there are technical obstacles preventing soldiers from accessing the tracks and that a fear-based approach might be more effective. Commenters point out that soldiers do not have access to the internet and do not use phones, a point that another commenter contradicts, saying that they have seen soldiers using phones at a particular intersection in Yangon. Another commenter chimed in, suggesting sharing the audio files more directly—perhaps as Facebook videos—because users might not know how to open the files.

Another commenter posted: “I think Operation Wandering Soul used by US Government against Vietnamese could work way better against Burmese soldiers since we also believes in "အစမ်းသေ သရဲ" like Vietnamese and its genuinely creepy unlike Hannah's ones that requires some critical thinking against the war which is prolly gonna be non existent with Burmese soldiers.” An အစမ်းသေ သရဲ, a “green spirit” refers to the spirit of someone who died before their time, similar to the “wandering souls” or “hungry ghosts” present in other Southeast Asian cultures. An administrator for Mahar Insights responded directly to this comment: “Operation Wandering Soul was originally considered as well. But we discarded it as it could be a double-edged sword against the civilians as well, it is important to note that a lot of civilians are also scared of ghosts and superstitions. It could do more harm to us than good.” Nevertheless, a commenter on the second post encouraged the group to capitalize on soldiers’ fear, writing: “Their [The soldiers’] weakness is fear. I think they’d rather be torn apart than think and fear.”

While the collective may have rejected a fear-based approach, sonically, Operation Hanoi Hannah’s work shares attributes with these aforementioned psyop efforts. On their recordings, voices more than music are made important to the project. While a few tracks have simple instrumental accompaniment, that accompaniment never overwhelms or obscures the message. Operation Hanoi Hannah invests, this is, in a local person’s point of view. The tracks on the album *Bark Frequencies* leverage personal connections to get their message across; the recordings depict parents of soldiers asking them to defect as well as conversations between friends and siblings about military brutality and corruption. Many of the tracks include chilling sounds in the background. The sounds of people screaming, sirens, and gunfire mean to evoke the experience of civilians behind the media blockade.

I have listened to Operation Hanoi Hannah’s material through digital means. I entered a set of feeds shared through news platforms, Facebook, and Instagram. My engagement with these materials—commenting, liking, saving, or sharing—trained the algorithm to show me awareness-raising efforts, citizen journalism, and projects like Operation Hanoi Hannah. I did so from an off-grid family-owned property on Galiano Island.

A Reflexive Note

Starting with the ferry ride to Galiano Island, the gaps between public infrastructure, community resources, and private companies become more apparent. Until 2003, BC Ferries was a Crown Corporation, meaning that it was accountable to a ministry within the government; currently it functions as an independently managed, publicly-owned corporation. I mention this because this information is not readily apparent; signs leading up to the terminals on Vancouver

Island and in mainland British Columbia count down the kilometers left to island destinations as if they are linked by the provincial highway system. Driving off the ferry the drop into the Whaler Bay's blue-green water is emphasized by the narrow road shoulder. There are no sidewalks or bike lanes. Instead, a trail maintained by a community group snakes through a glade of ferns, through the forest, and skirts people's yards, linking the commercial center of Sturdies Bay with the businesses, school, and community hall located at mid-island. Here, Georgeson Bay Road keeps moving east-west and Porlier Pass shoots up to the north end of the island. The garbage drop-off point is next to the store on the south side of the road. Instead of having municipal garbage collection, people on Galiano make use of a comprehensive local recycling facility and pay five to ten dollars a bag (more if it's heavier) to a private business (people with a big container and a truck) to have their household waste transported to a garbage dump on Vancouver Island.

Philimore Point exists on the fringes of this quilted community infrastructure. As a "boat-access" only destination, the property owners manage funds to maintain a community dock and a water system. The community dock allows for year-round moorage for those who want it—though since most people live elsewhere, they do not burden themselves with the risks associated with an unsupervised boat—and, obviously, this is where most people arrive and depart from. Although the road to and from the community dock is private, it adjoins a small public road system, complete with street signs. Each house has a civic address, to be used to report an emergency, for example, but more often than not, people use lot numbers to identify their property. The roads branch out from the dock in a trident; the two outer prongs come to natural ends, but the central one, Rutherford Road, would continue on if not for a gate across it. If you have permission from the property owners (or a willingness to take your chances trespassing, as many opt to do), Philimore Point is not boat-access *only*, after all. Pedestrians can walk on an old logging road (now privately owned), join the trail system that Mt. Sutil Farms allows the public to use, and connect to the trail running through Collinson Point Provincial Park.

Whereas Galiano Island residents happily participate in community-run activities and events for entertainment and social wellbeing, people at Phillimore Point keep their distance from one another. Nevertheless, they are linked together by the shared water system. Rather than rely on individual wells, with every household individually taking on the tasks of water testing, treatment, and management, the lots are part of a "water improvement district." This enables the community a measure of protection in the form of fire hydrants, an increasingly comforting amenity as summer droughts and propane-fueled appliances increase the chance of a forest fire.

Given that Galiano and the Gulf Islands enjoy a Mediterranean climate, where freezing temperatures are rare, the water system was not able to handle the sudden drop of temperature in December 2021. We had experienced small changes in water pressure when there were leaks in other households "upstream," but an unexpected cold snap broke connection points at the pump house. We—my dad and I—walked down to the pump house, where it looked like water was spilling out of the floor. In fact, water was gushing out from a pipe, rather than being directed into the system. That problem was easily remedied. A solution for the frozen water tank, on the other hand, was environmentally determined. We would simply have to wait for temperatures to

rise and the ice to melt before we would enjoy running water. In the meantime, we collected water from the spring tank, filling containers under the runoff, putting them in the back of the truck, driving home, and carrying them down the trail to the house.

The lots on Philimore are joined by public roads and the water system, but are not wired into an electrical system. Each household is set up differently for electricity; people who spend more time there tend to have more extensive solar set-ups, while those who enjoy only a few weekends contend with smaller battery banks, fewer solar panels, and more time "disconnected." My grandfather installed a solar power system in the early 1990s, as he recorded in his logbook. When I visited as a kid he would say, half joking, "It's enough for the stereo or the vacuum, but not both." Before we moved in, we hauled in new batteries for the new solar array. Although the panels were not installed in time—a result of workers' busy seasonal schedules and indecision about placement—the battery bank stored enough power that we only had to run the generator every other day to keep the new (electric) fridge running, the LED lights on, and charge our small electronics. With the connectivity offered by a rural mobility hub, we might have had the fastest and most consistent wifi on the island. My online Burmese language lessons went off without a hitch. That is, until scheduled power outages got in the way of my lesson time.

Carrying water, checking the inverter, and planning trips to take place during daylight hours brought infrastructure closer to the front of my mind. Having to carry your recycling to the truck, then move it onto the boat for a twenty minute ride, into another vehicle, to take it to the recycling center that is open for four hours two days a week, prompted changes to my consumption patterns, certainly. But what does infrastructure have to do with music research, beyond shaping conditions of my everyday experience during fieldwork?

A recent volume edited by Kyle Devine and Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier advances the cause of an infrastructural perspective for music studies. The essays in the collection fall into three categories: resources and production, circulation and transmission, and failure and waste. Of these, I find the prospect of attending to failure and waste to be generative. First, by staying the course and continuing to work with Operation Hanoi Hannah's material, it is not languishing on my hard drive. Second, failure occurs at many levels in this case study. There is the infrastructural failure and my failure to find interlocutors. The specter of failure is also the flip side of sounding out into absence. It is just as possible that no one is listening as it is that the message is being heard by those it is intended to reach.

Infrastructure and Separation in Myanmar

It goes without saying that a range of infrastructural obstacles impeded Operation Hanoi Hannah's work, introducing separation at a level greater than the individual listener. Internet access has been unreliable since the military implemented numerous restrictions, ranging from so-called "kill-switch" outages and targeted blocks of certain websites (including Facebook) to legislation introducing surveillance of citizens' activity through the Cyber Security Act.[38]

[38] Human Rights Watch provides an unofficial English translation of the law as of January 27, 2022 here: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/02/220127%20Cyber-Security-Bill-EN.pdf

Mobile internet, which the majority of people use, has been more impacted than wired connections. People take measures to protect their safety, wiping their phones and other devices before traveling through checkpoints. The more frequent and longer-lasting power outages that intensified from December 2021 on obviously curtailed device usage.

In the spring of 2022, extended power outages were scheduled for areas that had, until then, enjoyed more reliable access to electricity. In Yangon, there were up to two outages per day, each lasting for over six hours. I rescheduled my language lessons and interviews as best I could, but often the outages would last longer than scheduled. In addition to limiting residents' access to personal electronics, the outages impacted access to basic needs, including safe refrigeration and running water. It isn't too much of a leap to surmise that people would be less able to record new tracks, listen or broadcast Operation Hanoi Hannah's material, engage in chats on Telegram or Signal about the content, or try to find out more about the issues at hand during this time. The need to use a VPN to get around restrictions on certain websites drove up the cost of participating for the people I was in contact with. They were used to paying for mobile data; but paying for an additional service was an obstacle to our continuing communication. Furthermore, the kyat's declining value has made anything priced in another currency more expensive. Once again, my assumption is that if circumstances posed obstacles to people I was in contact with, Operation Hanoi Hannah faced the same obstacles.

The widening gap between the demand for electricity and the ability to generate and distribute electricity led to extended periods of "load shedding," a term applied to "temporary interruption of electricity services to parts of the grid."[39] Load shedding protects the integrity of the system, albeit while creating problems at the level of the community and household. As my language teacher told me, the power cuts were supposed to be scheduled so that households would get four or eight hours of power, then go for four or eight hours without. Sometimes a schedule would be posted on Facebook by one of the utility companies, but it might not be accurate.[40]

According to the June 2023 World Bank report, "In the Dark: Power Sector Challenges in Myanmar," fifty percent of the power grid's total installed generating capacity relies on natural gas, while hydropower makes up forty five percent.[41] Financial problems and seasonal fluctuations in water availability and temperature affected both of these components in the power system. In July 2021, two LNG (liquid natural gas)-fueled power plants in Yangon stopped working.[42] While payments for electricity are made in kyat, liquid natural gas is priced in US dollars. As the kyat's value declined and the price of LNG increased, it was no longer possible to pay for the fuel required to power these plants.[43] Although Myanmar has rich oil fields, as much as 80% of domestic oil and gas is earmarked to fill long term export contracts.[44] As such, there is insufficient domestically-produced fuel to power the electrical grid. With two LNG-powered plants not in use, the hydropower plants had to produce more electricity, as the

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[39] "In the Dark: Power Sector Challenges in Myanmar." 2023. The World Bank.
[40] Interview with interlocutor, November 2021.
[41] "In the Dark: Power Sector Challenges in Myanmar." 2023. The World Bank, 5.
[42] Ibid., 7.
[43] Ibid., 7.
[44] Ibid., 9.

demand did not decrease. As hydropower plants had to produce more electricity, they depleted water in the reservoirs faster. The process of generating electricity becomes less efficient as water levels drop. The dry season, from January to May, exacerbated the situation. Not only did the increase in demand from air conditioning tax the flagging power grid, but the lack of precipitation meant that water levels in the reservoirs remained low.

Conflict has affected the power grid, too. The junta reports that there were 229 attacks on the electrical grid between February 2021 and April 2023.[45] Moreover, the system remains vulnerable, as armed conflict edges closer to power plants. War-related fatalities were reported within ten kilometers of the majority of power plants.[46] In addition to outright attacks on infrastructure, many citizens have participated in resistance against the junta by not paying their electricity bills. By November 2021, up to 45% of revenue was unpaid.

Images of the night sky recorded by the Nasa Worldview platform accompany an article in Bloomberg News, show Myanmar to literally be growing darker, a sobering visual reminder of not just the political conditions, but the stagnation of development projects like household electrification.[47] Of course, the World Bank has considered the economic impact of prolonged outages; according to their 2023 report, more households are living in poverty relative to pre-Covid pandemic levels.[48] From 2017 to 2020 the rate of electrification increased by about 6% each year; it has since slowed to below a 4% annual increase.[49] As of December 2021, only 61.6% of households are supplied with electricity, leaving more than four million households in the dark.[50] There is a disparity between urban and rural areas that goes beyond simple electrification. People residing in villages and rural areas were generally unaware of load-shedding schedules, and, for them, outages lasted longer.[51]

It is important not to take electricity for granted, in this case. I have outlined my experience with infrastructure and summarized the infrastructural challenges in Myanmar's power grid to contextualize the difficulty of listening, whether from Galiano Island or in Yangon. Of course, exploring this question through digital ethnography has its limits. For example, digital ethnography failed to yield insight into the use of loudspeakers to broadcast Operation Hanoi Hannah's recordings, something that news reports said happened. Being able to pursue that line of research would bring out connections to other scholarship on loudspeaker culture, including work on volume and violence (Birenbaum Quintero 2019), the amplified soundscape in other areas of Southeast Asia (Sutton 1996), and loudspeakers' utility in governing (Li 2020). Moreover, when your research subjects do not have sufficient electricity, let alone sufficient funds or a reliable internet connection, you cannot contact them. I wanted to know more about generator use; the World Bank report has data on businesses, but not

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[45] Ibid., 10.
[46] Ibid., 10.
[47] "Worsening Blackouts in Junta-Led Myanmar Put Economy at Risk," *Bloomberg.Com*, May 7, 2023, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-07/worsening-blackouts-in-junta-led-myanmar-put-economy-at-risk. Interested readers can access the Nasa Worldview platform (https://worldview.earthdata.nasa.gov/) and enter dates and locations to generate night sky images.
[48] "In the Dark: Power Sector Challenges in Myanmar." 2023. The World Bank, 1.
[49] Ibid., 5.
[50] Ibid., 5.
[51] Ibid., 3.

households. A key point here might be due to a change in technology; rather than using desktop computers, I expect more people in Myanmar to be reliant on mobile phones, which use less electricity. Operation Hanoi Hannah turned to radio broadcasting to make their message heard despite internet shutdowns. Pirate radio stations, including Radio NUG and Federal FM Radio, broadcast resistant programming, including music and words of encouragement for Civil Disobedience Movement participants.[52]

Listening to Interpersonal Loss

At the crux of my argument, as the chapter moves towards concluding, is that the recordings posted by Hannah Hanoi, and the tracks on *Redemption* in particular, make separation audible. The messages are wistful; on the second track a mother laments that she wouldn't know what to cook for her son if she saw him again, thereby speaking to the ways that this forced separation goes against ways of caring for family members. The sonic documents attest to an experience of loss.[53]

Redemption is comprised of five tracks that, together, form a narrative arc. The first track, "Taken" leads into the next, "He Would Be 22 By Now." After "Mother's Mourn" the final two tracks "Reunion With Her Beloved Son" and "Let's Go Back Home" wrap up the imagined story with a happy ending. As the titles of the track hint at, the first three tracks are voiced by a solo female narrator and the last two are structured so as to alternate between a female speaker and a male speaker. The first line of "Taken" set up the conditions the mother is addressing, "He did not die…" ("လူတော် မပြိုတ်သေတယ်..."). The voice of the mother in the second track says that due to the passing of time she no longer knows what he would look like ("သားရဲ့ အသွင်အပြင် မသိဘူး"). Emotion obscures the words in "Mother's Mourn" as the vocalist sounds like she speaking while she cries; the phrase "it's been ten years" ("10 နှစ်ရှိပြီ") is discernible. The first exchange between mother and son in "Reunion With Her Beloved Son" is rocky. In response to her questioning, "Son? Son!" ("သားငယ်လေး၊သားငယ်လေး!") the male voice responds with, "How do you not know, mother?" ("သား ဘယ်လိုမသိတော့အမေ?"). However, at the end of the track she says, "I'll cook for my son.“ ("သားကိုဟင်းချက်မယ်။"). A line the male speaker utters in "Let's Go Back Home" echoes the sentiment of the title: "I want to return to my family" ("အခု ငါ့မိသားစုကို ပြန်ချင်တယ်။"

The accompaniment to each of these tracks highlights the affective stakes of what is being said and works to build out an image of the setting for listeners. The first two tracks, in which the mother is the only speaker, include simple instrumental accompaniment. In "Taken" this includes synthesized strings and a guitar. In "He Would Be 22 By Now" the only instrumental backing is a guitar. "Mother's Mourn" and "Let's Go Back Home" sound as if they could have been recorded in situ. Crackling, the buzz of insects, and dogs barking fill the gaps between words and sobs in "Mother's Mourn." The mechanical chug of a moving train in the

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[52] *Myanmar Mix*. 2021. "Radio Broadcast Gives Voice to Myanmar Revolution," August 20, 2021. https://myanmarmix.com/en/articles/radio-broadcast-gives-voice-to-myanmar-revolution.

[53] People interested in this line of thought–that is, developing a sense of what interpersonal loss in a Burmese sonic vernacular– should engage with the popular Burmese singer Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein's work, much of which could be categorized as mournful or funereal.

background, not to mention the intermittent train whistle that punctuates the track lend veracity to "Let's Go Back Home." Bells ring out during "Reunion With Her Beloved Son."

Violence and grief are indexed through the sound of gunfire and sobbing, respectively. In "He Would Be 22 By Now" rapid-fire shots can be heard in the background when there are no vocals. The mother character cries in all the tracks. Her sobbing comes off as surprised but positive after she recognizes her son in the fourth track, but it takes on a valence of sadness or mourning in the first three tracks.

Conclusion

Operation Hanoi Hannah's work is full of gaps to be bridged, whether through Steingo's notion of analogism, Helmreich's take on transduction, or some other means. There are the absent family members. There's the missing website. A variation on analogism could be at work here, audible in the way that the tracks on *Redemption* alternate between female and male speakers, creating a sense of dialogue between mother and child and in the use of kinship terms to address the listener as either " သား"/"tha" (son) or "အမေ"/"amay" (mother) to cement the parent-child relationship. Overall, the album garners rhetorical and affective power through this relationality that persists despite absence.

The voices on Operation Hanoi Hannah speak out into a gap of unknowability, much like the people speaking on the tapes at the McMaster archive. Will her son hear it? Might a listener recognize a story from before they were taken, if not the voice they used to know? If someone has died or disappeared, does sending voice in their direction create some kind of presence? Following Lisa Stevenson's work, the voice might not be used so much in these instances to communicate specific meaning, but as a gesture that enables relatives to *be with* each other, despite distance and the possibility of death.

The disappearance of Operation Hanoi Hannah's website, for me, invokes Min San Wai's poignant 2021 poem entitled "Hole" about a child's death and her family members' ensuing grief. (Pan Ei Phyu was killed at her home in Mandalay on March 27, 2021 by a stray Tatmadaw bullet.)

> There's a hole the size of a pencil tip
> in the bamboo wall of our house.
> Not so long ago Little Daughter
> piled thanaka on her cheeks and
> disappeared into that hole.[54]

In Min San Wai's poem, the hole in the house's wall left by the bullet is a portal through which grieving family members pass. For her mother, the hole is the muzzle of a gun and when she looks down it she sees, "a gala dinner,/where Myanmar in blood and gore/is chopped up and served." The hole gives shape to collective grief, for as Min San Wai writes, "Today each and every person in this country/has a tiny hole as big as a pencil tip/in their chest." At the same

[54] Min San Wai. 2021. "Hole." Translated by ko ko thett. *Adi Magazine*, Spring 2021.

time, the website's content constructs a type of betweenness, a surface in which the missing pieces and absences are more readily perceivable, whether the gaps are infrastructural or interpersonal.

In addition to demonstrating different facets of separation in recorded and broadcasted sound, Operation Hanoi Hannah's recorded output unmutes a history of violence. Without assigning any truth value to their work, these recordings function as sources to be used in constructing narratives and experience. With so many obstacles to in-person research and safe communication with potential interlocutors impossible, I see a need for ethnomusicologists and other researchers to find ways to engage with works like these. In this case, I have opted to ground Operation Hanoi Hannah's project in "infrastructural turmoil" so as to explain in more detail the separation between the researching subject (me) and her object of study.

Chapter Four: Participatory Audio Recording's Potential
Recording Through Disconnection

> I always want to record the sound of Yangon. It's really important for me. Right after you wake up, what defines Yangon for me is this crazy mess of car horns and trishaws, like, "kling-kling-kling-kling." I love what V mentioned street vendors. The most significant one is when you pass by the bus station, they're always reading station-by-station 'Amyaynigone-Sanchaung-…'" They are constantly making sounds. At the same time a shop will be calling you. Those are very defining sounds, sounds of Yangon. You can't find those sounds in Mandalay. I have this perspective in my ears, the sound of Yangon. But it was totally different when I went back.
>
> Now the bus station, it's not…they don't really shout any more. I mean, you know where you're going because we've got the app in our phone, YBS blah-blah. I would have liked to record from 19th Street to 41 Street, where I grew up… The question is, do we say that these disappeared sounds are signals still? Can they still be a landmark?
>
> For example, the crows. The crows in Yangon are crazy, they're never going to disappear. And, I mean, of course the cars will stay too. I don't know when there will be a metro or a train to reduce traffic. For me, these are prominent sounds that will keep happening in Yangon, and I associate them with Yangon. (LL)

As someone who had returned briefly to Myanmar in January 2021, witnessed the coup, and departed the country to pursue educational opportunities abroad, LL delivered this comment with some wistfulness. He knew that Yangon's soundscape was unique and that it had already changed. Some of the humanly-made sounds that defined his experience of the city, like announcements made on buses by the driver's helper, had fallen silent. I understand his words to be a statement on how he made sense of where he lived through the sounds associated with the transportation infrastructure of the city. Yangon might have been loud: with honks, beeps, shouts, and chimes rising from the streets, but hearing those sounds contributed to LL's memory of the city. I heard his question about whether sounds that were no longer present could still be signals as something more poignant, especially in light of his departure from Myanmar: if the sounds he associated with his home were no longer audible, could he still access that version of his home?

LL's comment speaks to the research question that motivates this chapter: how might participatory audio recording reveal changes in post-coup Myanmar's sonic vernacular? In earlier chapters I have concentrated on outlining some of the specifics of a sonic vernacular of dissent–namely, the many forms of *thanbone hti* in Chapter One and the reproducibility of protest music in Chapter Two. Here, I attend to sound recordings made by interlocutors who participated in a workshop series I co-hosted with an arts organization in Yangon. The changes to the sonic vernacular of post-coup Myanmar they observed and we discussed correspond to three areas of daily life: moving through space, staying at home, and being with others. Before presenting my findings, the next section of this chapter is devoted to explaining what participatory audio recording is. I situate the research protocol I developed in relation to a

technique known as “photovoice” (Wang and Burris, 1997) so as to contribute to possible methodologies for studying sound and listening.

Participatory Audio Recording

An inability to access information in Myanmar was limiting my project. In this case, the impediment to access was not due to potential interlocutors’ objections, but due to travel restrictions and political unrest following the military coup (cf. Simpson 2016; Robinson 2020). That is to say, there were people in Myanmar who were eager to speak to foreign researchers, but reaching them was an onerous task. With long-term in-person fieldwork, a tenet of ethnomusicology, swept off the table, I had to find another way of collecting data. Of course, other ethnomusicologists have put forward methodological suggestions regarding hybrid ethnography (Przybylski 2021) and ways of overcoming isolation (Sagesser 2022), but I was motivated to work *with* people to answer my research question.

Hilary Faxon’s work with women in Myanmar on land rights offered what I saw as a starting point (Faxon 2020). Faxon employed a participatory photography project and a household survey to collect accounts of women’s daily lives and evidence that they were being excluded from land reforms. Her method was adapted from “photovoice,” as developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, which destabilizes the usual working relationship between researcher and interlocutors (Wang and Burris 1997). Rather than being photographed as passive research *subjects*, participants learn photography skills so that they can use photography to respond to researchers’ prompts and questions, engage in critical dialogue and knowledge about central community issues, and reach policymakers. Faxon designed a simple but generative protocol that she repeated with three groups of women in three different locations. After two days of training during which participants learned the basics of photography and discussed land and gender, the women took photographs (Faxon 2020, 78). They selected their ten favorites and described them to the group, prompting discussion between the participants (Faxon 2020, 78). When paired with the household surveys, this information powerfully attested to women’s involvement with the land they tended to.

In addition to the protocol’s action-oriented roots, I was drawn to the prospect of reconfiguring my relationship to my interlocutors. A valid criticism of Sound Studies is that it often relies on an “expert” ear–usually one that is white, male, and able-bodied–to present and explain sonic information within a universalist notion of sound and hearing rooted in Euro-American culture. Moreover, Sound Studies was developed in white, Western European and North American academic settings. While scholars have widened their scope to consider sound outside Western Europe and North America, and seek to position their findings in relation to local epistemologies, many continue to rely on standard participant-observation as a methodology, as befitting their ethnomusicological or anthropological training. I would suggest that to continue to work in this way still risks relying on assumptions about expertise, ability, and access that are rooted in colonial and white supremacist modes of knowledge production. Asking people directly about sounds’ meanings and uses would allow me to prioritize my interlocutors’ knowledge.

It became clear that I would have to work in partnership with an organization in Myanmar, not just for practical reasons, but in an effort to follow the tenets of community-based participatory research (Catalani and Minkler 2010). Having only spent short periods of time in the country working with very specific groups of people meant that I did not have a wide enough web of social connections to reach out to potential participants. I asked other researchers working on projects in Myanmar for advice, and they suggested that I meet with a few organizations. Unfortunately, those leads did not yield results. Instead, I had a chance conversation with an acquaintance involved in the music scene. She connected me to former students who she knew were keen to learn more about Sound Studies and who had started an arts organization. Once she connected us, it was clear that what I was suggesting would be possible.

In our initial meetings, I worked with the organization's co-founders to establish what we wanted to do and how we wanted to do it. Three important points surfaced. First, it would be necessary to locate facilitators situated in Myanmar who would be able to translate, pay stipends to participants, and weigh in on the topic of safety. Unlike me, these individuals had first-hand experience living and working in Myanmar, and as such, had a better sense of what would be safe to record. Second, it was necessary to pay a graphic designer to create promotional materials that would attract potential participants' attention. Cultivating a polished professional image would reassure potential participants that this was not a scam and hint at the nature of the project. Finally, we agreed on an appropriate stipend amount for participants, which determined how many participants we sought to recruit. I wanted to provide participants with funds to make up for the rising utility costs and the necessity of using a mobile device to record and join video calls. I also thought about how I would have used research funds during fieldwork, and decided that the sum they received should be enough that they could pay for transportation and food while out recording. Each of the participants received $100 USD, split into two equal payments The first payment was made before the first meeting, the second at the halfway point. The two facilitators were paid $300 USD each, as they did more work before, between, and after the meetings.

Once the graphic designer had made the promotional material, the arts organization posted about the series on social media. Prospective participants were directed to sign up through a google form. The numbers worked perfectly. We ended up with twelve people interested in participating, which was the maximum number the budget allowed for. The participants were all between 18 and 25 years of age. They lived in different cities in Myanmar, in Europe, and in Australia. Of the twelve, seven identified as female, four as male, and one as non-binary. All of the participants had some amount of post-secondary education, and all of them had formal training in music.

In my adaptation of Faxon's "photovoice," which I term participatory audio recording, I taught participants basic audio recording skills and listening techniques while encouraging discussions around themes of the research project–their daily lives. Instead of foregrounding a technologically-driven way of recording sound, or teaching participants to record "good" sounds, I supported participants to value their own knowledge and experience as well as feel confident using their device through positive reinforcement, expressing praise and curiosity when someone shared one of their recordings. While the participants in this project had

experience making sound recordings, we still worked through games and activities that were intended to build participants' confidence while being fun and interactive. In addition to recording games, activities included describing and interpreting sounds, discussions and ordering games using recordings, and selecting sounds to use as a basis for talking about feelings or personal experiences. Figure 4.1, below, contains examples of the recording games and aural literacy activities I designed.

Figure 4.1 - Aural Literacy Activities and Recording Games

I. **Aural Literacy Activities**

Sequencing Sounds

- Provide a collection of sounds that illustrate an activity. For example, if the activity is cooking, the series of recordings might include sounds of chopping, sizzling, and serving. The facilitator should play the sounds for the participants out of order and participants are asked to list the sounds in a logical sequence. Participants should discuss their decision-making.

Mapping

- In this activity, participants listen to a soundscape recording multiple times and create a visual representation of what they heard. Over the course of these listenings, participants consider the relative positioning of each sound within the soundscape and sketch/notate representations of each sound on a piece of paper. During a wrap-up discussion, participants talk to each other about the sounds they identified, notation choices, and how that relates to their personal experience in a similar setting.

Recording Games

Treasure Hunt

- Make a recording of these five things: (1) Your favorite sound, (2) A sound that repeats, (3) A sound from nature, (4) A sound that reminds you of someone, (5) A sound other people don't notice.

Telephone/Duets

- The facilitator starts by sharing a recording with one participant. The first participant attempts to replicate the initial recording, using the materials they have available, then sends their replica to the next participant. Each subsequent participant follows the sequence, replicating the replica they receive. Once everyone has made their replica version and sent it on, compare the final replica to the original recording.

We planned to have a total of six calls over six weeks, during which the focus would alternate between skill-building and sharing creative projects. The calls were conducted on Zoom, which allowed us to see one another on video, and our conversations took place in English. This sharp distinction did not stick; more time was needed to share and discuss the creative projects. The creative projects took three different forms: field recordings, audio collages, and sound maps. The audio collages were sonic documents that layered together individual tracks, though in our sessions, each track was first presented individually before we heard the collage. What we casually called "sound maps" actually fall into the category of "maps-of-sound" (Thulin 2018). The documents that participants created reflect the relative position of certain sounds they heard; they are not online documents where recordings are geo-tagged to where they were heard. The project was interrupted when I broke my leg, and the calls ended up stretching out over a twelve-week period while I took necessary time off.

In sharing the narrative of developing and implementing this research protocol as well as demonstrating examples generated through participatory audio recording, my aim is to convince readers that this technique has potential for future applications. First, the emphasis on partnership counters the all-too familiar caricature of an intrepid lone researcher, recording device in hand. Being connected to an organization made me a more credible and trustworthy person. This emphasis on connection spilled over into the group calls, where interlocutors spoke in dialogue with each other, not just in a one-on-one conversation with me, and where they were able to develop peer-to-peer relationships. Additionally, I see participatory audio recording as a potential way of staying connected to field sites when in-person research is not tenable. Conflict is not the only obstacle to conducting participant-observation based fieldwork, as my sudden and severe injury reminded me. So often, our literal mobility is taken for granted when it is, in fact, contingent. Gender, sexuality, religion, and caregiving responsibilities influence how–and if–researchers access the field. Spelling out a research protocol that is an alternative to "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998) or "bi-musicality" (Hood 1959)) offers researchers who need it another option. Finally, participatory audio recording generates a multifaceted pool of data as participants share and discuss their situated knowledge of a topic (Haraway 1988). Naming and including these necessarily partial views works to redress the imbalance of power found in knowledge production.

Looking back, I would use the term "dislocated ethnography" to describe my methodology. I started with the term "patchwork ethnography," relying heavily on connecting scraps together. I find dislocated to be a more evocative and accurate way of getting at the gaps between me, my materials, and my interlocutors. Dislocation applies at least doubly to my materials. I felt like I was working backwards whenever I came across a piece of media online. First I had to figure out how it fit into the media landscape—to position it within a "feed" of other sources. Next, I worked to find out how people in Myanmar were making sense of it by interviewing people. This is where things often fell apart for logistical reasons. Either I couldn't find anyone, it took too long, they didn't have much to say, or they simply didn't respond at all. The other more technical note to raise about collecting materials online is the condition of geographical and temporal remove. Due to the thirteen and a half hour time difference between Pacific time and Myanmar time, I would wake up to yesterday's news events, instead of interacting with posts on social media in real time.

My position of safety added to my sense of dislocation. Unlike so many people in Myanmar, I never worried about meeting my basic needs. I heard sea planes, not fighter jets. I lived in a familiar and safe dwelling; I wasn't displaced by conflict. My daily life was tranquil and filled with small, reciprocal acts of care. When we fell ill Covid, people hiked in to drop off groceries. When a neighbor was leaving for the season, he told me to borrow his boat, so that I would have the mobility I craved. When I walked into town, I heard the same raven croaking at the top of the switchbacks, offering a point of mutual recognition. All of this happened while I was trying to figure out how to reconcile the ways in which people I knew were affected by precarity and violence following the coup. For me, this recognition of irreconcilable difference became my way of making kin.

Findings

Interlocutors' creative output–field recordings, audio collages, and sound maps–indicated that changes to the sonic vernacular of post-coup Myanmar were audible in at least three distinct parts of daily life: movement, staying at home, and being with others. Accordingly, I organize my analyses by theme, not by type of output. The participants' recordings and descriptions that have to do with movement, or, more specifically, the idea of moving through space reveal participants' everyday decision-making. The examples grouped together within the theme of motion deal with small-scale, repeated navigation of a familiar space and occasional inter-city travel in addition to imagined travels to far-flung destinations that are now impossible. Examples within the category of staying at home show how interlocutors grapple with feeling confined or bored given the constraints posed by the threat of violence, loss of income, and limited educational opportunities. The third group of recordings reveal how interlocutors negotiate their relationships with others.

Moving Through

YS created a collage using sounds from an evening walk through his neighborhood. The collage is grounded by his recording of ambient nighttime sounds in the city he lived in; birds' chirps and a light wind hinted at the less urban landscape. Still, he layered in the rapid chirp of a car alarm. The sense of movement derives from a track he recorded while in motion. In that segment of the collage, it is possible to hear cars drive past and conversations that fade in and out as his proximity changes. After a pause at the train tracks, as heard in the hum of wheels on a rail and squealing brakes, the collage ends with a table tennis game. The ball bounces off rackets and the table, setting up an unsteady alternation between higher and lower pitched strikes.

Not only do all of the sound clips depict some sort of motion, but the collage creates the impression of someone moving from place to place. The wind becomes audible because it moves leaves; we hear the rustling. The car alarm, driving sounds, and sounds from the train suggest forms of transportation. While his footsteps are not audible, the background sounds–the conversations, especially–change slowly, at the pace someone would walk past. He commented that walking had become part of his daily routine, part of an effort to maintain his physical and emotional wellbeing. When I listen back, this alternation reminds me of *thanbone hti*, of course.

There is a parallel here, between the manner in which protestors exert themselves, pause to recover, and start again and the way that these walks function as self-care. The gentle hum of activity in YS's collage sounds reassuringly normal, with no one sound sticking out of the overall texture. I remember nighttime in Yangon to be lively. Just because the sun had set did not mean that the day was over. Plenty of people would be out—buying food, going for a walk, still at a restaurant, or just socializing—in a way that was totally unlike what I had experienced in Canada.

For MM, movement took place on a larger scale. She, like many others, was trying to avoid spending time in Yangon, and had traveled to a city in another region of Myanmar. Visitors to Yangon are struck by how noisy and chaotic it is—a trope often applied to cities in the global south. Having visited the city she went to, back in 2017, I can say that it was markedly different. The lack of traffic would be a major surprise, as would the size of the city, and the climate. Yangon sprawls for kilometers and traffic jams can easily ruin your schedule by adding an hour to what should have been a short trip. The city MM traveled to is a popular destination for tourists, who relish its cool climate and ample greenery; but it is not an administrative center. Many ethnic minority groups live in the area.

Her field recordings emphasized this change in location by concentrating on what she heard as defining sounds in her new home. The five tracks she shared were titled simply, "Market," "Construction," "Construction Truck," "Stream," and "Hike." In "Market," amplified and unamplified voices create the impression of a bustling center, a point that is underscored by engines rumbling as they pull up to or away from the market. Repeated strikes and thuds, the sound of hammer on nail or mallets on wood make up "Construction." The eponymous construction truck's engine is louder than the others heard in "Market;" shoveling and scraping noises correspond to rocks being moved out from the bed of the truck to the construction site. "Stream" and "Hike," by contrast, highlight sounds from a nearby trail; water running, birds, rustling leaves. In the distance, the noise of construction is audible.

The selected field recordings contrast the movement of mechanized vehicles, bodies doing labor, and the transportation of goods with motion through a landscape with less industrial presence. They record her movement from Yangon to another city. Perhaps, even, there is a way to hear this type of development from sleepy mountain town to artsy destination as a sort of movement. Before the coup, the city was a popular stop on the foreign backpacker circuit, but from the way MM talked about it, I gathered that more people from Yangon were holidaying there than before. In part, this would have been due to the kyat's falling value, which would make international travel unappealing, even for people who previously had the funds. The changing market—from adventure-seeking backpackers to financially-comfortable urbanites looking for a change in scenery—would have prompted hotels, restaurants, and other tourist-oriented businesses to change their priorities in order to better serve this new market.

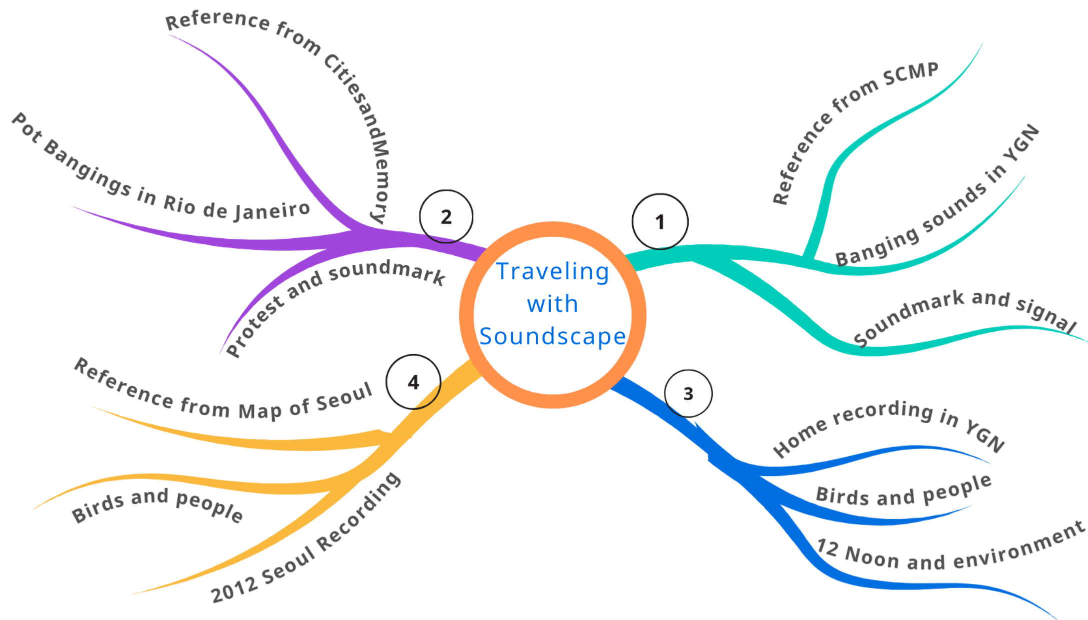
After sharing her field recordings, MM shared her vision for a more involved creative project, one that would use sound technology to draw attention to the environmental changes happening throughout the city:

> I kind of live in [City] right now and I see a lot of pine trees being cut down. The town is being popularized by city dwellers now so there's lots of urban development. I kind of want to make a change, to raise awareness that this is happening but not just by saying it's happening, through listening. First of all, we could listen for information by going to different places where pine trees are being cut down. After recording those sounds of constant cutting down, you could play it in an urban area, where no one expects to hear it and [the prospective audience] would hear this constant noise without knowing what it is. Noises like machinery and saws, buzzing noises. Maybe if there was a statement it would explain what the sound was and that the length of time corresponded to how many trees were cut down—something like that. Or, another idea could be that we could build a statue in a downtown area in the town, and when a tree is cut down, a person could take down part of the statue. So after many trees are cut down the statue would be gone." (MM)

I find it interesting that MM's proposed project would revolve around loss. Not only would the sound recordings inscribe the actions that lead to environmental loss, but her project would call attention to what she saw as an under-recognized problem. Or, perhaps more accurately, it would call attention to a problem for people in one (historically marginalized) area that people living in the urban center (the locus point of Bamar political power) didn't know about or care to know about. As such, I hear her proposed project as moving the problem of deforestation or rapid development from the rural periphery to the urban center, where she hopes it will be addressed once more people know about it.

While MM was able to move around within Myanmar, not all participants had that option. KZT used a mind map-style structure to illustrate the connections that she drew between found sounds and her own field recording.

Figure 4.2 - KZT's Mapping Structure



Her visualization joins Yangon, Rio de Janeiro, and Seoul through the shared sounds of birdsong and the banging of pots and pans during protests. She intimated that she wanted to travel to Seoul and to Rio de Janeiro, and used the Cities and Memory platform, a website that shares field recordings and their creative reimaginings, to virtually travel to these destinations. I am struck by the way her virtual "listening-in" mirrors my own research process in the way she collects sounds and uses them to find similarities. From either side of travel restrictions—to Myanmar, in my case, and from Myanmar in hers—we used sound recording as a way of relating one place and its corresponding sonic vernacular to another.

Two participants shared an example of a light-hearted restriction on movement that was enforced through sonic means. MTK started the conversation, adding to the same conversation about sound and place that LL's quote that opens the chapter came from:

> For me, one of the soundscapes that I remember had clapping sounds. There was this tradition at my university where there's a "clapping road" that only graduated students can walk on that road. So if there was a freshman who didn't know the tradition who walked on the road, the other people would tease them by clapping. So when I was at school I would hear a random clapping sound and there would be an unknowing freshman wondering where the sound was coming from. Also, at my convocation, when I finally walked on the road it was emotional to hear a different sort of clapping sounds. I didn't really like university, I thought I would be happy to leave. But when I heard the clapping sounds I was sad to be leaving it behind.

N continued:

> I went to the same school and it happened to me once! It wasn't the first day, but I think it was the first week. I didn't know the street was like that. Me and my friend went to cross the road and this random senior started clapping and we were so startled. The next day some seniors explained it to us. Oh my god, I was so startled. We didn't know what to do. We just crossed the street as fast as possible. A few months later I saw the graduation ceremony for the seniors and the clapping sound was really different. It was really powerful. We could hear it from inside our classroom. It was really loud, and I don't know, something about that was really powerful. The first kind of clapping is humiliating and awkward but the second is powerful and glorious.

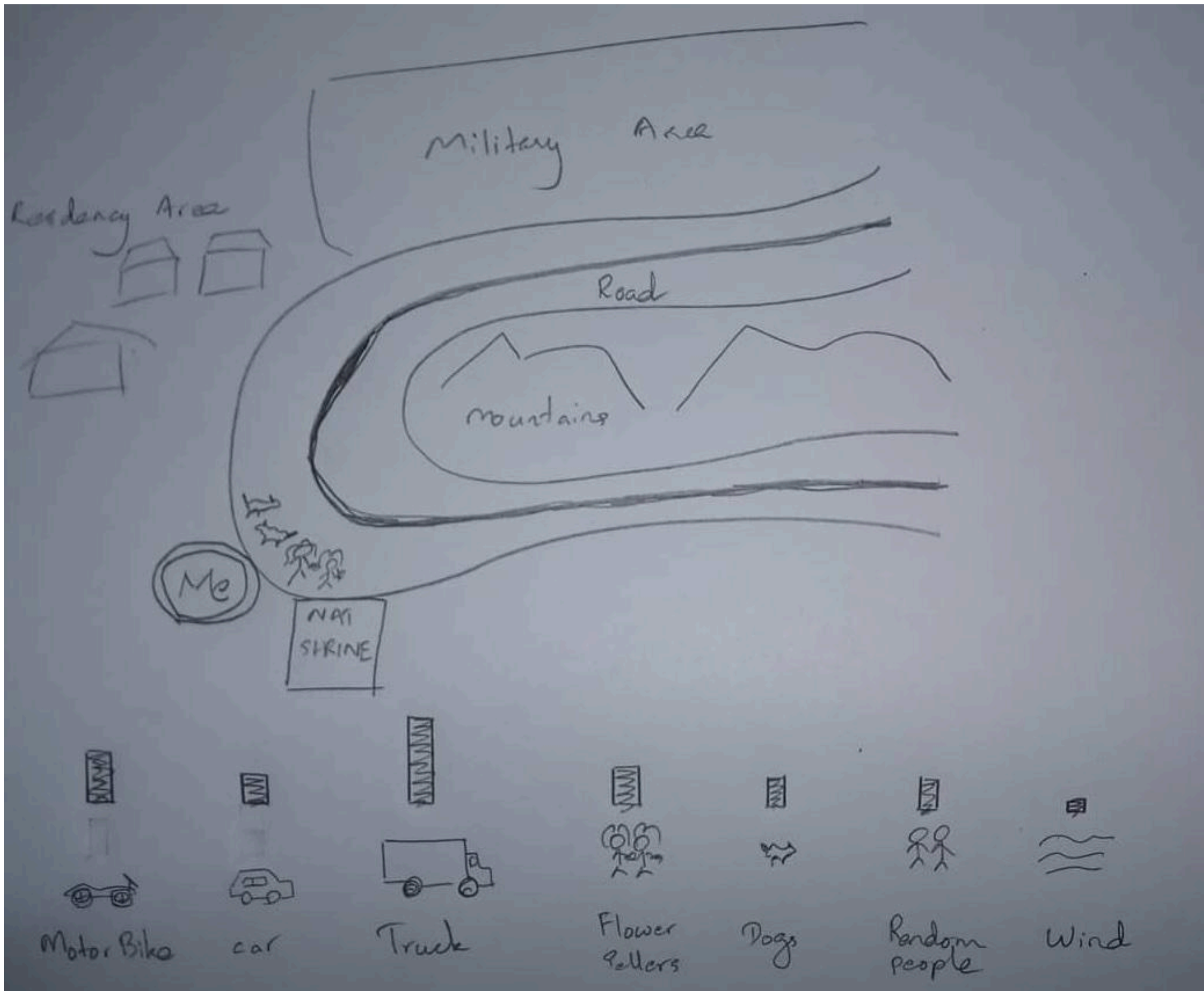
Their descriptions encompass more than the matter of sounds associated with a certain place. First, their descriptions reinforce the tenet that sounds make sense within a particular sonic vernacular. In this case, the sonic vernacular is so specific as to apply to a particular university. Within the sonic vernacular of the university in question, clapping can have two different meanings. In the first case, when someone who hasn't graduated yet walks on the road, it is a rebuke. The same sound turns congratulatory when the conditions are right, that is, when it is graduation day. That is to say, the example demonstrates that sound is used to reinforce expectations and norms about behavior.

L spoke about a location near her hometown she was interested in recording.

> When you told me about ferries it reminded me of a sound that happens near where I live. When you leave the town, near the gate, there's a *nat* shrine—a spirit shrine—so people honk three times to give their respect to the spirits. It gives me a feeling of safety because locals believe that if you honk three times the spirits will take care of you while you're on a journey or trip. So even though I don't believe in spirits I do that. It's a soundmark in many towns." (L)

She made a field recording at the shrine when she visited and a sound map of the site, shown below. What stands out to me, in my listening, is her presence in the field recording. L explained that when she had positioned herself to make the recording, she found herself amidst a group of women selling flowers, close to the turn off into a rest area. One of the women approached her and began telling her about the shrine. L embraced this interaction as part of the soundscape, and asked follow-up questions, so that the recording includes this contextual information in tandem with all the other sounds. Along the bottom of the map, L included a bar graph of what sounds she heard (and recorded). The height of the vertical line above each type of sound (indicated with a drawing and its name) corresponds to how often the sound occurred and its perceived loudness in relation to other sounds. Trucks were the loudest and most frequent, followed by motorbikes, and then people.

Figure 4.3 L’s Sound Map of a *Nat* Shrine



L’s example brings up protection as much as it does movement. In addition to the usual hazards of road travel, the military area that looms in the distance from the shrine, as shown on her map, is a potential hazard. L had traveled to her hometown and needed to return to Yangon, where she was living. Once she had made the trip safely, she shared how she had reset her phone entirely before the bus ride between cities because she knew that soldiers would search the bus at checkpoints along the way. She explained that part of the search would include checking through contact information, apps, and photographs on passengers’ phones but didn’t outline what the consequences might include. From a technological standpoint, she got around the need to wipe her phone clean by uploading her sound recordings, alongside other files she wanted to keep access to, to cloud-based storage. She explained that she would buy and use a new SIM card for the trip, and a second new SIM card once she arrived at her destination safely. Storing files on her phone raised the concern that soldiers or police could just detain you, beat you—that they could choose from a range of violent actions rather than follow the due process of the law—for having any media that might be construed as anti-junta on your device. In the

event that you were detained, your contacts might be put at risk of increased contact with officials, if not outright surveillance or detention.

At Home

While the majority of my interlocutors were living at home, most had spent time living in dormitories or shared accommodation during their tenure at university and felt constrained by their current conditions. Of course, their experience had been shaped first by restrictions put in place to limit the spread of Covid-19, and compounded in the wake of the military coup. Meanwhile, I was experiencing the inverse of that scenario; I had chosen to live "at home": as close to my parents as I could, where I could enjoy interdependence–not only with my parents, but with neighbors–that living "close by" afforded.

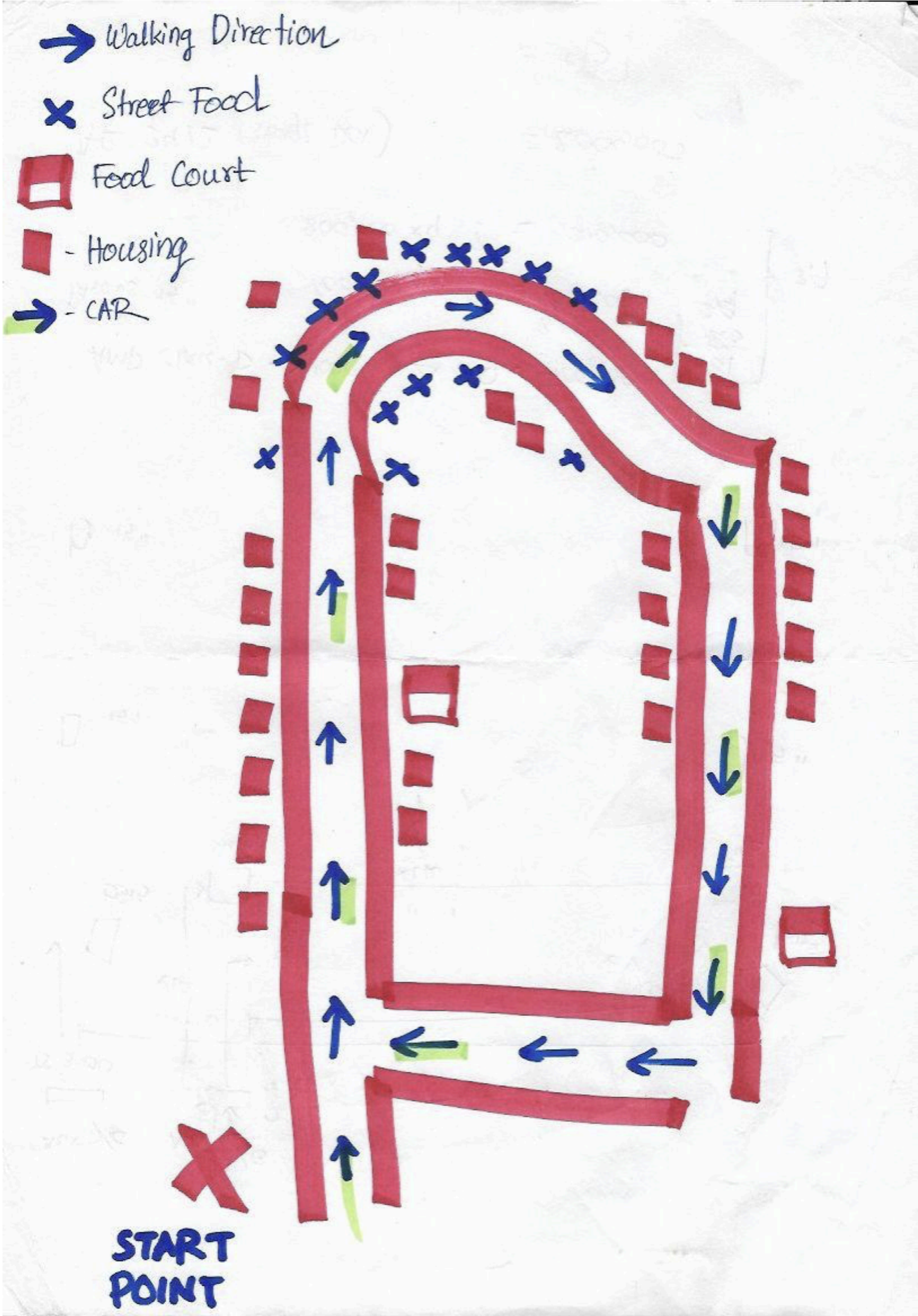
ED made field recordings that she grouped together under the title, "My Mundane Life At Home." In her recordings of everyday activities–listening to music, washing, studying, gardening, and cooking–she shared a snapshot of her more limited life. As she said, "I used to do more, but now I have to stay home and help." ED had been attending university and was currently enrolled in online classes. However, her family's economic situation had changed, and she felt compelled to take on household chores to make her parents' lives a little easier. It was hard to find out more about her life. She did not turn her camera on during our calls and was careful to keep herself muted unless she was talking; in other words, we could not peek into her life through our video calls. Unlike others who were outwardly grappling with their negative feelings about being stuck at home, ED appeared to be more resigned. I got the impression that she was okay with life being boring right now, because boring was better than outright bad.

L made a set of field recordings while at home, too. Unlike ED's tracks, which were full of street sounds and overheard conversations, L's tracks featured less background noise. As she explained in the call, this was because she was staying at her family's home in a different city, not at the location she called "home" that was located in Yangon. The tracks are titled, "A Moment With My Dog," "Min Street," "Swimming Pool," and "Walking With Shoes." When compared to the projects of her peers, the missing sounds of the hustle and bustle of the city stand out to me more than what is audible on each recording.

KZT's collage juxtaposed sounds heard during the day with their nocturnal counterparts. For the track she created, she noted that she had included a recording of wind made during the day, when people chatting, a traffic control whistle, and engine sounds could be heard, as well as a recording made at night, when the wind was louder. She recorded the sound of water pouring into an indoor basin as well as the outdoor pump that brought water into the house. Her other recordings were made in her home's bathroom. On the first, taken through the window, listeners can hear birds chirp, people talking, and cars honking; the recording makes the point that this place is not entirely set apart from everywhere else. The final piece of the collage is a recording of the bathroom fan, which connects the natural sounds with those from her domestic sphere. Having to rely on a generator and be mindful of fuel costs, she remarked, had prompted her to think more deeply about power and water consumption in her home.

An avid recordist already, KZH would have rather set up microphones around his neighborhood than had to carry around his phone in a pocket. But, safety concerns weighed on him. He settled for this less obtrusive method, but he did not want to share the resultant sound recording because it wasn't up to his usual high standards. Instead, he sketched a sound map, seen below.

Figure 4.4 - KZH's Sound Map



The bold red lines of his map and the one-way flow of traffic, marked with blue arrows, trace a tight spiral. This was KZH's daily loop, a route he would walk to break up his day spent at home and get a snack. KZH explained the changes he heard:

> There aren't so many people walking. There just aren't so many people out and about. That means that the street food sellers aren't doing as much business. Quite a few of them have closed. Still, I can go for a walk and get a snack. It's just not the same.

The food vendors KZH was talking about set up their businesses right next to the street, where they would sell mostly snacks, including skewers of meat, sliced fruit, and fried treats. Other vendors would walk through a neighborhood, pushing a cart, and calling out to customers. For V, another interlocutor, hearing their calls was a way of marking time. "The boiled chickpea vendor, he comes at the same time every morning and shouts, 'Pe byote! Pe byote!"

YS chimed in:

> I used to go to my friend's house once a week. My friend used to live in Tamwe. The sound that I think of is the sound coming from the Tamwe Mosque. There was a prayer time and the Islamic call to prayer and whenever I visited his place, whenever I heard that sound, I knew it was 6:30—and we knew we could go buy food near the mosque a few minutes after that.

To me, these interlocutors were contending with repetition and regularity through the sonic examples they shared and through their explanations. Staying at home sounded like the same vendor every day, the same mundane activities, and the same traffic patterns. Even when conditions changed, like in KZH's example, each recordist created stability for themselves by doing the same things as they did before. I got the sense that while my interlocutors often felt bored or limited, they recognized that staying at home was a way of staying safe. When they were out and about, there was a chance of getting stopped by police and searched; it was possible that an act of violence might break out. Therefore, they chose to limit their exposure to risk.

Being With

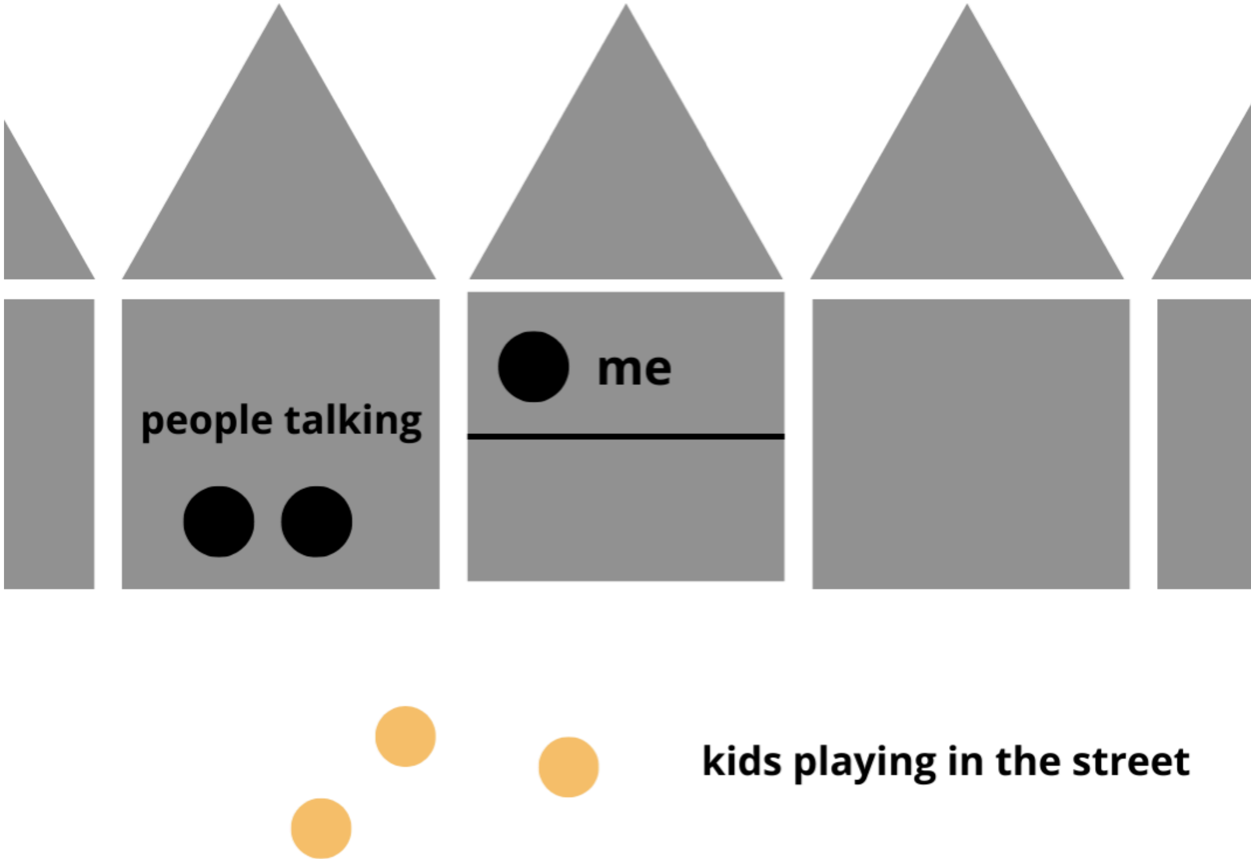
I have thematized the final group of examples I discuss as demonstrating ways of "being with" others. By that, I mean to say that people or the sound record of close human relationships are present in the recordings. In conversations, interlocutors explained how they negotiated their relationships to those audible in the recordings that they had made. Rather than this being about connection or solidarity, their remarks spoke to coping mechanisms they were using to face challenging circumstances: forced proximity, displacement, and death.

N's field recording from inside a teashop captured the convivial atmosphere of the establishment; the clanging of spoons and porcelain cups and the cloud of chatter prompted everyone's sense memory of laidback afternoons. Whether sitting with friends or alone, my interlocutors thought of the close proximity to others found in teashops positively, as expressed

by the comments they typed into the chat while they listened. “It has a good atmosphere,” N commented. YS said, “I like the vibe.” L agreed and added: “During Covid I missed teashop hangs most.”

In contrast, E shared a sound map titled, “Life in a Crowded Town.” Included below, the map shows houses with very little space between them and people conversing indoors nearby, as well as playing outside. Of note is the horizontal line dividing the house showing their position. E never disclosed their location, stating it was not safe to do so. Carrying that information as I listened to their sound recording and looked at the map, I wondered–but did not ask–if E was hiding or if they had joined one of the resistance forces. That is to say, were they simply renting an upstairs room or were they deliberately concealing themselves?

Figure 4.5 “Life in a Crowded Town”



N and MTK spoke at length about their motivation for a future creative project. N began:

> We chose the title of “At Home.” The reason why we chose it is because when you’re far from home — actually, I don’t like home—but when you’re far away from home for a long time you miss home. I’m trying to understand what home means to me, so that’s why

> I'd like to listen to the sounds of home. So we have the intention to make our own perspective of home known through listening. When you choose to listen, the sounds you hear every day take on new meaning and give you a new perspective, a new understanding of home. So we will make daily recordings. We will pick out some highlight sounds in our daily life and record them in voice memos.
>
> MTK continued:
>
> N and I will talk about how there are only a few people who came through life emotionally unscratched. But it's the same for every family—there's some kind of pain that comes from being at home, repeating the same activities, and being with the same people all your life. And then there's pain when you're far from home, so we'll talk a bit about that. And we'll talk about how listening to the sounds of home is like visiting a memory center. These sounds are ingrained into your brain in childhood and, like, when you want to go back to your childhood memories you can do that through the sounds. For me, personally, I don't have the best relationships with the people in my home so I thought, "Oh maybe if I intentionally listen to their sound—normally it's like the background noise I keep out of my head—but if I listen deliberately, say to someone in the morning going to buy breakfast, I'll hear them opening the door, doing something in the kitchen. If I intentionally listen to that maybe I can understand them better."

N made and shared preliminary field recordings with the group. In the track "Balloon Seller" a small engine purrs in the distance, drawing closer, and when it pauses, there is a repeated squeaking sound that contrasts with the bird calls and traffic honks in the background. A woman talks and a baby babbles during "Mother and Child." The woman is eliciting a response; her tone changes in response to the baby babbles and when I listen, I can imagine how she might have tickled or poked the baby. In "Documentary," multiple male voices repeat the phrase "brother to brother" over and over on top of an EDM-style background track. The repetition is entrancing; as a listener I let go of my grip on following which voice was which in favor of going with the flow. "Child's Play" includes high-pitched shrieking, babbling, and the rattling of plastic toys, suggesting ease and stability, if not domestic bliss. Again, the same sweetness of family and domestic life from "Mother and Child" plays out, on "Bein mont" ("ဘိန်းမုန့်") where listeners hear a street vendor calling out through a megaphone to advertise his wares: pancakes with coconut, peanut, and poppy seeds. N said that she wouldn't buy this sweet treat for herself: "Me? It's not my favorite but the little kids like it. It's too sweet." Of all the examples, this one most reveals the effort it takes to create and maintain a connection with someone else, especially when that relationship requires work.

Their appended remarks to each final product changed how I listened. In particular, the child's sounds opened up a duality; they can be heard either as someone to build a better relationship with, or as standing in for someone's memory of childhood. My sense of this duality was animated by N's comment about how it is possible to miss one's home even if someone doesn't particularly like their home. There is also a point to be made that what sounds like normality, sounds associated with domesticity and family here, might not be the sense of normal that N wished to return to. Before the coup destabilized her sense of normal, she was excited about starting her career, and happy to be living alone in the city. Finally, N's creative

work and explanation of her motivation brings up a key point about kinship that is often forgotten or overshadowed: kinship offers many benefits and conjures a generally positive affective response within a secular modern setting, but kin and kinship structures can be disadvantage or deleterious too (Strathern 2020).

On the other hand, cultivating an intentional listening practice in the hopes of appreciating and understanding someone better, as MTK said she was trying to do, cuts through the ambiguity in favor of problem-solving. Instead of trying to "tune out" unwanted sound, she is suggesting that engaging with those sounds might yield more positive outcomes. Her framing reminded me of a comment about noise KZH made in another session:

> So about feedback, it's like, all of us experience feedback before but I was introduced to feedback as a musician. There, feedback is something annoying that happens when someone doesn't do their job; the engineer didn't do it right, the musician didn't set up right. From that I've leveled up. When I was introduced to noise music people do feedback on purpose. In my listening journey I was forced to listen to that type of music and so I wanted to learn how to listen to that type of music—by listening to the different frequencies and trying to adapt my brain. It's really changed how I listen to feedback—from that experience I'm not scared to listen to feedback anymore. It's a sonic cue, not an annoying sound. But the point is if I hear some sudden feedback from someone else, not feedback I created I focus on it. It helps me feel better to focus on it. If I'm not focused on it, it's painful and annoying. In a way, I cancel the bad part out in my brain. (KZH)

YS's example demonstrates a case in which an individual used listening as a strategy for "being with others" in a tragic moment. He texted me shortly before our group call was scheduled to start, saying that he was going to be late, but he had already uploaded a recording to share. When I went to the Google Drive, a file was already uploaded there, titled "Morgue." He said he wanted to share what he had recorded, and played the file from his device for all of us on the call. To clarify, YS explained for my benefit that it was normal and expected to visit with the deceased at the morgue; it was his friend's sudden and violent death that was unusual. While we listened, the text chat filled with heart emojis. We didn't know the details, but wanted to show that we cared–not just about him, but about whomever had died, too. At the end, he spoke:

> My friend died. My friend was killed. I didn't know what to do, but I had to go to the morgue and see him. Once I got there, I knew that this is what I wanted to record. I put my phone in my pocket and just let the recording run.

When he was done talking, no one else spoke. We sat together in silence. Not because we couldn't say anything, and not because there wasn't anything to say. It seemed like for a few moments, connected through our assorted mobile technologies, we responded to this disclosure of loss by simply being with one another. I was sitting at my desk in the loft of the cabin, looking past my laptop and out at the ocean in front of the house. Other participants on the call were in their homes too, at kitchen tables, in bedrooms, and a few with their backgrounds blurred. This memory has stuck with me. It has become a point of return and point of

convergence for thinking through themes that are larger than the scope of this chapter, threading together ideas that are present in each of the chapters: specificity, loss, and care.

I had associated sonic violence with loudness, predominantly informed by scholarship discussing aspects of the US-Iraq war (Daughtry 2015; Cusick 2008; Friedson 2019; Goodman 2010). YS's explanation framed the recording—of the voices that were too quiet to understand, of the changes in volume created by people walking by—as an individual act of violence now representative of the widespread violence of the post-coup period. For me, this reinforces the need to attempt to understand sounds within their specific context, following Tausig's formulation of a sonic vernacular. The specific context of this project has been post-coup Myanmar, as accessed from outside the country, and the chapters have narrowed their scope to concentrate on specific sonic forms in turn.

The quietness of the recording shows a response to loss by recording the visit to the morgue and it registers loss by inscribing the silence of someone who was killed rather than the many sounds they could have made if they were alive. Like Operation Hanoi Hannah's work to make absence and separation audible on the album *Redemption*, YS's work reveals a need for developing ways of listening *for* loss. Earlier in the chapter, I endeavored to show how participants' attention to sounds at home gestured towards a loss of mobility. My own experience of injury informed my understanding of the challenging circumstances of loss of mobility combined with forced proximity to family and increased dependence on others. In addition to the loss of life, people in post-coup Myanmar have to contend with accelerated cultural loss as education is deprioritized by civilians and the military alike. They must cope with the loss of easy access to kin who have left the country, the loss of a sense of safety as fighting stretches on, the loss of opportunity and choice in the wake of financial hardship, and the loss of choice as military conscription has been activated as of April 2024. Conditions in Myanmar create a sense of urgency when it comes to finding a way to discuss loss in terms that are also amenable to understanding the language and logic of technological limitation.

I understand YS's recording as an act of care. Following the anthropologist Juno Salazar Parreñas' work on interspecies kinship, the actions we take to care for others work to build kinship bonds when we put ourselves at risk (Parreñas 2018). In the case of sound recording, the risk might not be so physical or severe as in other cases, but choosing to listen closely makes us vulnerable. As I said, I return again and again to my memory of this recording and the capacious silence that followed it. In doing so, I am repeatedly making myself vulnerable to being reminded of the effects of violence other people are feeling. As an act of care, then, listening with vulnerability becomes a way of making kin.

Epilogue

The changes to everyday life following the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021 necessitated that I change the topic of my dissertation and the research techniques I would employ and raised the stakes of this project. The marionette theater would have been a rich site for thinking through a local politics of reproduction and the idea of protection as it pertains to an art form in flux, but without access to long-term participant-observation ethnographic research, such a project was no longer an option. Moreover, I felt compelled to address the dire political circumstances following the coup in more direct terms. The legal consequences of *thanbone hti*, protest songs that record a history of violence, Operation Hanoi Hannah's attempts to make loss and separation audible indicate that sound is entwined with matters of life and death in present-day Myanmar. In lieu of a conclusion, I use this epilogue as a space to return to the idea of care and kinship formation, discuss methodological contributions, and identify areas for future research.

I frame my scholarly attention to what is happening in Myanmar as a form of care, playing on the way that "to care" can mean to devote one's attention to a situation. Alongside continuing to listen to music and sound recordings from Myanmar that proliferate in online spaces—Facebook pages, Soundcloud, and on Youtube—I have continued to engage with citizen journalism through social media in addition to international news coverage. As the number of people displaced, imprisoned, and killed by the military climbs, I have tried to hold my attention on the terrible things that are happening while my own lived experience is entirely different. During "fieldwork"—from June 2021 through September 2022—there were times when I muted certain accounts on Instagram that posted photographs of violence that had been enacted against civilians: villages that had been burnt to the ground, people who had been injured, and people who were killed. In order to approach this content properly, I had to prepare myself mentally. I needed to set up some separation between witnessing acts of violence and scrolling through photographs from friends and lifestyle content creators. I would ensure that I was seated at my desk, then check what specific profiles had posted. If they had mentioned other users or reposted content, I would follow the links. When I was done, I would leave my house and go for a walk around the block. After speaking with a counselor about how to better manage this inevitable second-hand exposure to harm I added the step of taking a shower at the end of my work session when I couldn't stop thinking about what I'd seen, underscoring my separation through somatic means. By the time the participatory audio recording workshops started, in June 2022, I found that I was able to handle staying in contact with my interlocutors as we exchanged messages through an encrypted messaging app outside of the workshops. I worried about participants, especially when they were out making recordings or traveling, but I let myself be available to chat.

Paying attention—caring—about other people sets up the sense of mutuality that produces kin, following Sahlins' formulation (Sahlins 2013). When I listen to these recordings, and other recordings from Myanmar, I do so with some sense of mutuality. Not only am I invested in the same political outcomes as the artists, but I am aware of the vulnerable position they find themselves in. I listen and try to simultaneously hold the possibility that people will continue to experience harm. Rather than tune out others' experiences of harm, I allow them to

inflect my listening experience. As such, listening, for me (and likely others), works to establish durable connections over time and despite separation, leading to a sense of kinship.

This dissertation project makes a methodological contribution to ethnomusicology by successfully employing virtual fieldwork techniques in order to work through restrictions imposed by conflict. It would not have been possible to do this project had I undertaken in-person fieldwork in Myanmar. I do not see how my visa would have been approved, my ethics review would have passed muster, or, even, how people I had not met before would have felt comfortable talking to me as a foreign researcher. Participatory audio recording allowed me to interact with people in order to gain insight into how they were listening to the world around them. Moreover, techniques like participatory audio recording enlarge the scope of what digital ethnography is. There is room to shift attention away from the study of technologies and systems and discerning how people use them and think about how we, as ethnographers, can expand our toolkit by using digital technologies as tools for connecting with interlocutors. This project revealed a flip side of access to me: that there are people who very much want to share their ways of knowing, being, and doing with a wider population, but who have been disconnected or unplugged from the global community.

No one project can hope to address all aspects of a topic, including this one. In putting forward descriptions of a "sonic vernacular" heard in Myanmar, future research could be done that has a firmer relationship to Buddhist ways of understanding sound. With that attention to religion would come the opportunity to branch out and address other religions practiced in Myanmar, including Islam and Christianity. Likewise, there is work to be done to work with a more diverse group of people doing participatory sound recording. If a researcher had more points of connection to a community it would be possible to recruit participants with differing levels of education, from different ethnic groups, and who lived in different areas. This dissertation lays the groundwork for future projects that would foreground connections between a given sonic vernacular and other practices in which sound is a link between the living and the dead. This could mean examining spirit possession rituals as well as practices associated with birth, death, and other moments of transition in the human life cycle. Additionally, there is an opportunity to develop projects that would delve more deeply into specific anthropological theorizations of kinship, perhaps concentrating entirely on the matter of substance or of kinship terminology.

As this project demonstrates, kinship formation and maintenance can be located in the acts of producing and perceiving sound, but questions remain. What relationships exist between different forms of sonic output? How can we make sense of emergent forms of kinship between sound and beings? How do people use sound to forge relationships with other beings?

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