

## Spring Revolution: New Opening(s) and Old Heteronormative Narratives

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### Abstract

This article, adapted from a longer master's thesis in critical gender studies, describes the discrimination that Burmese queer people face in their everyday lives in Burma, but argues against treating them merely as passive agents. In fact, Burmese queer people are building their own counterpublics to make sense of and redefine nationalism, manliness and honor, and are ungluing the link between ideals of manliness and heterosexuality in the common nationalist agenda. Based on interviews with Burmese queer people and textual analysis of protest slogans and writings used in the Spring Revolution, the article aims to show how queer people are building solidarity with women and other subordinate groups to challenge heteronormativity.

### Introduction

In this article,<sup>1</sup> I discuss how old heteronormative narratives are still present in Myanmar's social movement against military dictatorship, also known as the Spring Revolution, and how Burmese queer people are deploying new strategies to challenge these heteronormative narratives. I identify these strategies and heteronormative narratives within slogans and protest writings and through interviews with those in the Spring Revolution. To this end, I use Van de Velde's framework<sup>2</sup> as an analytical tool. I highlight the qualities of queer counterpublics<sup>3</sup> in

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<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from my master's degree thesis, *Queer Counterpublics in the Queer Time (2011-2023) of Burma*, submitted in partial fulfilment for a Master's of Critical Gender Studies at the Central European University on 15 June 2023 (Aung Zaw Myo, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Van de Velde, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Berlant & Warner, 2005.

the new strategies of Burmese queer people to build my theoretical framework. In the case of the intersection of nationalism, middle-class respectability, and sexuality, Mosse,<sup>4</sup> Peterson,<sup>5</sup> and Nagel<sup>6</sup> are useful. This article uses these theories to build an argument that Burmese queer people make sense of and redefine nationalism, manliness, and honor through their slogans and activities, and manage to build queer counterpublics on their own.

### Counterpublics and Heteronormativity

Michael Warner popularized the concept of heteronormativity.<sup>7</sup> He argued that:

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth, and trust, censorship, intimate life, and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body.<sup>8</sup>

He pointed out the hegemonic privilege of “het” (heterosexual) culture to interpret society as itself. In this way, heteronormativity has a “totalizing tendency” to marginalize non-heterosexual sexualities.<sup>9</sup> Reproduction becomes “the logic of sexuality and the means of self-transcendence”.<sup>10</sup> This normalization of

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<sup>4</sup> Mosse, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Nagel, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Warner, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Warner, 1991, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Warner, 1991, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Warner, 1991, p. 9.

heterosexuality subordinates those who do not fit into heterosexual norms and sexual relations.

While Warner developed this concept of heteronormativity in the context of the United States, my interview subjects in Myanmar understand it too. They do not dare to show public displays of affection toward their queer partners, for example. Warner came back to heteronormativity in his book, *Publics and Counterpublics*,<sup>11</sup> defining it as:

More than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture.<sup>12</sup>

To challenge this normalcy and rightness of heterosexuality, they proposed “queer counterpublics”.<sup>13</sup> The term “counterpublic” refers to a social space or community which opposes the dominant wider public sphere. Their modes of communication are often excluded from the larger public sphere.<sup>14</sup> Queer counterpublics are not limited to a physical space. They can be spread through unconventional registers. It could be a book, a novel or an after-hours club or even an academic lecture. They are also not limited to biological sex, can be more inclusive than the counterpart general public, and transcend referential points such as geographies.<sup>15</sup> Queer culture develops different forms of intimacy “that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, or property, or the nation”.<sup>16</sup> These intimacies belong to a (queer) counterpublic that is conscious of

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<sup>11</sup> Warner, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Warner, 2005, p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> Warner, 2005, p. 187.

<sup>14</sup> Warner, 2005, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Warner, 2005, p. 198.

<sup>16</sup> Warner, 2005, p. 199.

its subordination position. This reflects not only the creativity of queer world-making but also its fragility.<sup>17</sup>

## Social Movements and Slogans

Slogans in social movements can “encapsulate an intolerable situation in a few striking, memorable words, and therefore can have a considerable impact on movement mobilization”,<sup>18</sup> even though they are usually short.

Cécile Van de Velde notes that every slogan and form of protest writing is also public expression and voice carrying a political message through a visual medium. Protest writings point out that social movements are not only spaces for speeches and gestures but can also act as stages for the written word.<sup>19</sup> She reminds us that since protest writings do not always reflect a collective voice, we cannot reduce them to a homogenous block. She identifies banners (collective signs, posters, flyers, stickers, visuals) carried by activist groups, unions, and parties as collective writings. On the other hand, signs (individual prints, visuals, graffiti, and words on bodies and clothes) worn by participants and activists are individual writings.<sup>20</sup>

Van de Velde argues that distinguishing between protest writings as either collective or individual is not enough. Consequently, she made four categories based on writings’ functions. The first carries a demand function. Such protest writing refers to political claims or expressions of refusal directed toward authorities. The second has a proclamation function. It usually comes in the form of contested messages, directed toward a wider public. The third aims to mobilize and give internal cohesion to the protest, such as encouraging messages or rallying slogans.<sup>21</sup> The last acts as bearing witness to the protest.

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<sup>17</sup> Warner, 2005, p. 199.

<sup>18</sup> Stewart et al., 2001, p. 176.

<sup>19</sup> Van de Velde, 2022, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Van de Velde, 2022, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Van de Velde, 2022, p. 6.

Empathic messages for the cause, words of support, and personal testimonies belong in this fourth category.<sup>22</sup>

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

## **Nationalism and Sexuality**

A large scholarly literature deals with nationalism, gender, and sexuality.

George Mosse has traced the relationship between nationalism and respectability. Respectability “indicat(es) decent and correct manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude toward sexuality”.<sup>23</sup> He took a special interest in historical sexuality in the framework of nationalism and respectability because “it was basic to human behavior and preoccupied the moral concern of respectability”.<sup>24</sup> Focusing on Germany and Great Britain, he showed how nationalism and respectability allied at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The middle class kept a distance from the aristocracy and the lower working classes through moral superiority, which respectability provided.<sup>25</sup> Sexual intoxication of any kind such as same-sex relationships, pre-marital sex and extra-marital affairs were regarded as “immoral” or “indecent”.<sup>26</sup>

Homosexuals provide a particularly useful example of how the line between normal and abnormal was to be ever more closely drawn through the rise of respectability and its emphasis upon manliness. They were thought to symbolize not only the confusion of sexes but also sexual excess – the violation of a delicate balance of passion.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Van de Velde, 2022, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Mosse, 1985, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Mosse, 1985, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Mosse, 1985, p. 4-5.

<sup>26</sup> Mosse, 1985, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Mosse, 1985, p. 25.

Peterson exposed the heterosexist presumptions of state-centric nationalism. She defines heterosexism as “the institutionalization and normalization of heterosexuality and the corollary exclusion of non-heterosexual identities and practices”.<sup>28</sup>

In *Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations*, Joane Nagel traced the relationship between microcultures of masculinity and nationalism. She argues that masculinity is constructed within nationalist discourses, attaching it to ideals such as honor, bravery, patriotism, and duty.<sup>29</sup>

## Methodology

In this section, I share how I collected queer experiences, motivations, and stories from the Spring Revolution.

First, I asked gay friends and recent colleagues if they knew of any queer/LGBT/gay people at the forefront of the revolution. At that time, I wanted to focus on queer members of the armed People’s Defense Forces (PDFs). After several weeks, I realized this was not feasible, because I could not identify enough interview subjects who were in relatively safe locations.

Then, I extended my scope to any queer person in any part of the revolution. In the end, I identified ten interview subjects, with four being members of PDFs, and the rest involved in fundraising, in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), or sending supplies like food and female hygiene products to political prisoners. I knew three of the research participants personally. The other seven I met for the first time, finding them and learning their stories through the snowball method, and during the interview process.

I used semi-structured questionnaires, with interviews undertaken online for security reasons. Research participants chose the digital platform and scheduling that they were most comfortable with. The interviews ended up taking place through Telegram, Signal, and Facebook Messenger, three commonly

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<sup>28</sup> Peterson, 1999, p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> Nagel, 1998, pp. 251-252.

used social media platforms in Burma. One of the research participants is deaf, requiring us to use typed written communication over a period of two days. All research participants gave either written or verbal consent to participate in the study.

In my research there was power asymmetry and a benefit imbalance between the investigator and investigated. While my research could give me opportunities for work or academic recognition, the best they could expect was the pleasure of talking about their lives and culture to me.<sup>30</sup> Taylor et al. warn that because of such power asymmetries, we should “take good care” of informants, with care here going beyond the “do no harm” principle, ensuring that research participants receive some reward for their participation.<sup>31</sup> The least I could do was to promise myself to later sum up my analyses into the Burmese language and have dialogue with my research participants, so that my findings would not only be circulated in Global North universities. I was told by some interview subjects that they were glad to be interviewed because they wanted to let the general public know that LGBT/queer people were taking part in the revolution. In further regard to “taking good care” of research participants, I made their safety a top priority. I used pseudonyms even when some assented to using their real names.

In this article, I used two methodologies. The first is ethnography, to the extent that I conducted interviews with ten people aged 21 to 36 years old, from across Myanmar. The interviews each lasted from one hour to one and a half hours’ duration. There were laughs, silences, disruptions to the internet connection, frustrations, and hopes in our conversations. I collected rich and dense raw data from them. But their quotes often did not speak for themselves. Discourse analysis filled the gap and is my second methodology, following Fairclough, who categorizes three types of identifiable assumptions in discourse: existential assumptions (assumptions about what exists), propositional assumptions (assumptions about what is or can be or will

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<sup>30</sup> Taylor et al., 2013, p. 129.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor et al., 2013, p. 130.

be the case), and value assumptions (assumptions about what is good or desirable).<sup>32</sup>

As mentioned earlier, I analyzed not only what my interview subjects said, but also protest slogans from the revolution.

### **Spring Revolution: New Openings**

The Myanmar military staged a coup on 1 February 2021. It is worth investigating narratives around sexuality in this social movement. In response to the military coup, multiple competing publics arose, including the General Strike Committee, General Strike Committee of Nationalities (comprising of many [minor] ethnic groups, later the General Strike Coordination Body), and the CDM. On the fifth anniversary of the genocide against the Rohingya people (August 2022), strike groups across the country chanted the slogan, “*bathalumyo mahkwecha myanmar-naingngantha*” which can be roughly translated as “No discrimination against race/ethnicity or religion, we are all Myanmar citizens”. Sexism and homophobia were left out in this newly imagined nation.

Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir Puar raise important questions against the backdrop of the tensions and frictions between Western “queer theory” and “Middle Eastern studies”:

In a context [where permanent and semi-permanent war exist] what kinds of queer organizing, archives, theory, practices, visibilities, institutions, knowledge production projects emerge? The precarity of queer life is not exceptional in these sociopolitical spaces: it is additional precisely because war, genocide, occupation, oppression, dictatorship, terrorism, and killings are part of the everyday fabric of life for many people who live in the region ... What animates the impulse to search for something to call or to theorize as queer? What

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<sup>32</sup> Fairclough, 2003, p. 55.



must the queer body do, or be, to be recognized as such, and by whom? Do we want this recognition, and if so, how and for what purposes? How can we generate theory out of these locations, and if doing so, are these bodies of theory routed through area studies rather than recognized queer theory?<sup>33</sup>

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

### “Fearless Revolutionary Faggots”

The primary function of slogans is to persuade and incite.<sup>34</sup> In the Spring Revolution, slogans have included “Down with Dictatorship”, “Respect our Votes”, “Support the Civil Disobedience Movement”, “Release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and our President” and many more. However, I focus only on slogans and protest writings which address queerness.

The first slogan is from the LGBT Alliance – Myanmar, a collective strike committee formed by LGBT groups from Mandalay, Yangon, Monywa, Kalay, Kyaukse, Dawei, and Yinmabin townships. They posted a photograph of a protest slogan on their Facebook page on 10 May 2022. The slogan said, “*thayhmamachautloq paydayashauqdeq dawhlan-nethaw a-chaut*” and can be roughly translated as, “Faggots who march on the streets, dare to die/They are not scared of death, and they

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<sup>33</sup> Mikdashi & Puar, 2016, p. 219.

<sup>34</sup> Stewart et al., 2001.

revolutionize”. In the Burmese language, the words *chaut* (scared, dry) and *shauq* (march/walk) rhyme. Going by Van de Velde’s categories,<sup>35</sup> this slogan has a proclamation function. It contains a contested message, directed toward a wider public sphere. To apply Fairclough’s discourse analysis, the propositional assumption of the slogan is that these faggots/queer people are not scared of the military’s violent crackdown; they march on the streets and this fearless march alone is a revolutionary act. The value assumption is that fearless queer people, marching and protesting on the streets, doing revolutionary acts, is good and desirable for the social movement. The existential assumption here is a proclamation to let queer people into the space of revolution/the dominant public sphere. The slogan states that queer people have qualities such as fearlessness/bravery and consciousness to perform duties/revolutionary acts. Terms like bravery and duty are attached to general ideals of manliness<sup>36</sup> and the slogan challenges this attachment. I expand on this later in this chapter.

In the framework of the queer counterpublic, this slogan redefined notions of sexuality and identity through bringing a positive connotation to the previously stigmatized term, *a-chaut*, and consequently fostering social change for a future in which queer people can participate in the public sphere. Queer counterpublics are not only limited to physical space. This visual and verbal slogan is a queer counterpublic.

### “District 16 Without Faggots”

Burmese queer people dub foreign (not just Western) terms such as *homo*, *LGBT*, *seme*, *uke*, etc. to distance themselves from the Burmese term *a-chaut*,<sup>37</sup> which carries negative connotations. Despite their desperate efforts, they were still addressed as *a-chaut* in the Spring Revolution. This time the term came not from the police, nor bullies at school, but from their

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<sup>35</sup> Van de Velde, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Nagel, 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Boellstorff, 2006.

revolutionary comrades. One research participant Moe mentioned a slogan, “*a-chaut mashidet-setchaut*”. He recalled encountering it on a banner within the first three or four months of 2021 and it was carried by a strike group from Yangon or Mawlamyine. I can vouch for the integrity my interview subject and I too remember seeing the slogan on Facebook, which can be translated as: “District 16, a No-Faggot Zone”. In the Burmese language, *chaut* (the number six) also rhymes with *a-chaut*. To put this slogan into Fairclough’s framework,<sup>38</sup> the propositional assumption is that there are no faggots in this particular area. The value assumption will be that this revolutionary space or geographic area is free of “faggots” who are sexual “deviants”. The existential assumption is that faggots are not/should not be a part of the revolution/new nation.

For my analysis of this slogan, I investigate the relationship between middle-class respectability, nationalism, and sexuality. I move to the framework of nationalism because while the Spring Revolution is not an anti-colonial nationalist movement, it includes some elements of nationalism. For example, in March 2022, Aung Way, a Burmese poet in exile in the United States, referred to the Spring Revolution as a collective struggle to build a “Fifth Myanmar Nation/Empire”. One of the most popular slogans in the Spring Revolution is “Toward a Federal Democratic Myanmar Nation”. Burmese people who actively take part in the Spring Revolution usually call those who side with the military “Northern Burmese people”. This is a reference to North Korea being under a dictatorship, while South Korea is a democracy.

With these three examples as justifications, I put the aforementioned protest slogan into Mosse’s framework.<sup>39</sup> “District 16, a No-Faggot Zone”, takes faggots/homosexuality as unacceptable peoples/manners. The aim of the Spring Revolution, according to this slogan, is to end the military dictatorship and form a newly imagined nation (a Federal Democracy country). This new nation, it seems, still wants to impose moral superiority over subordinates and the aristocracy. To this end,

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<sup>38</sup> Fairclough, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> Mosse, 1985.

respectability and its emphasis on manliness needs to be maintained. In this slogan, the line between normal and abnormal is drawn at homosexuals, who symbolize confusion between sexes.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the slogan excludes queer people from District 16/a revolution space/a new nation.

### **“Min Aung Hlaing Would Be Finished Off by the *Hpon* of LGBTs”**

The third protest slogan was posted on the LGBT Alliance – Myanmar Facebook page on 11 November 2021. The post reads, “LGBT-dot-hponnet *ma-a-la-ko keitsadounmeh*” which can be translated as “with the *hpon* (the spiritual status) of LGBTs, Min Aung Hlaing would be finished”. Based on Van de Velde’s ideas,<sup>41</sup> this slogan calls for ‘mobilizing’ and for the internal cohesion of the Spring Revolution social movement. It is implying that they/we will end the military dictatorship by collaborating with LGBT people and other subordinates such as women.

Before I dive into the analysis, I need to lay out some background information for this slogan. A belief exists within traditional Burmese society that a man’s spiritual status and holiness, known as *hpon* in the Burmese language, can be lowered by women’s dress. One Burmese scholar, Mi Mi Khaing, wrote: “We call it *hpon*, the glory, the holiness of a man, and we respect this not with subservience but with the same feelings as we respect monks and parents”.<sup>42</sup> It can be read as a localized form of patriarchy. Women do not have *hpon* and therefore they are not allowed to enter certain parts of pagodas. Because of this belief in *hpon* and a taboo against menstrual blood, women’s clothing are washed and kept separately from men’s. In May 2019, a group of women activists initiated a campaign to counter belief in this idea of *hpon* on Facebook. They asked Facebook users to use a profile picture frame saying, “Women have *hpon* too”. While this campaign reinforced *hpon* ideology, we can say it tackled a

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<sup>40</sup> Mosse, 1985, p. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Van de Velde, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Mi Mi Khaing, 1956, p. 71.

localized pattern of patriarchy. On International Women’s Day of 2021, after the coup, the general strike committees challenged belief in *hpon* and called for a campaign named *htamein-thabaik* (Women’s Undergarment Strike), which involved putting up women’s undergarments as flags in public. Some men joined the campaign by putting women’s undergarments on their heads (which according to belief in *hpon* lowers their spiritual status and holiness) to show solidarity.

The inclusion of Min Aung Hlaing in the slogan, the commander-in-chief of the military that staged the coup, also requires comment. By using his name, the slogan authors do not refer to him alone in personal terms, but rather to the military institution as a whole.

This protest slogan can be read as an attempt at solidarity with fellow female revolutionaries’ struggles. This belief of holiness, *hpon*, is solely based on the division between biological men and women. It does not necessarily extend to LGBT people. This is a new strategy applied by Burmese queer people with a hint to a queer counterpublic. I have not seen collaborative campaigns between women/feminists and LGBT activists before.

In 2013, the Gender Equality Network,<sup>43</sup> together with the Myanmar government and the United Nations, developed a bill called the “Protection and Prevention of Violence Against Women Law” which reached parliament in 2020 but was never enacted, and is now stalled by the coup. This bill addressed gender-based violence experienced by women but failed to include lesbians and transgender women in its framework. Mainstream women’s rights activists focused on biological women as well. On the other hand, LGBT activism (before the coup) such as Colors Rainbow was busy with identity politics based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. In this way, women/feminists and LGBT/queer people were divided along the line of identity politics. The LGBT Alliance – Myanmar slogan breaks this division.

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<sup>43</sup> An umbrella organization with more than 130 civil society organization members, formed with the aim of furthering gender equality and the fulfilment of women’s rights in Myanmar.

The slogan “With the *hpon* of LGBTs, Min Aung Hlaing would be finished” positions itself in solidarity with subordinate women. In this way, patriarchy and heteronormativity are framed as the common enemies. As feminists and women’s rights activists challenged the patriarchal *hpon* belief, LGBT activism joined in the same struggle, challenging social norms against homosexuality altogether. By this strategy, the slogan’s authors became a site of resistance against both patriarchy and heteronormativity.

This is a queer world-making project, beautifully defined by Warner as:

Where the world, like public, differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as birthright. The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.<sup>44</sup>

LGBT activism in the Spring Revolution is not just identity politics (even though the name itself says so) but is creative enough to incorporate other subordinate fellows into it. We have seen this change because this activism/queer counterpublic comes from the people and is not restricted by NGO politics.

### **“On the Day When Guardian Spirits Had Homosexual Sex”**

The fourth protest writing I analyze is a video poem, posted on Facebook on 1 January 2023 by the account “Art Rebel - အနုပညာသူပုန်”. According to Facebook, the page has 81,000

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<sup>44</sup> Warner, 2005, p. 198.

followers, and is based in Bangkok, Thailand (after the 2021 coup, many political activists and others went to exile, some to third countries such as the United States, but most to neighboring Thailand and India). The Facebook page usually posts poems and fundraises for PDFs. The video poem I discuss has 2,600 likes, 116 comments, 614 shares, and 22,000 views, with a duration of two minutes and fifty-five seconds. Its title is “On the Day When Guardian Spirits Had Homosexual Sex” and is written by someone with the pseudonym သွေးစင်္ကြံနီ (in English: red blood drop). The video poem is narrated by a male. It can be translated as:

On the day when guardian spirits had homosexual sex, martyrs were executed by hanging. In a nation crowded with funerals, those who fuck anuses and those whose anuses are fucked, those uncivilized tarzans, all felt heated and enjoyed getting fucked by Min Aung Hlaing. Without any respect for the executed martyr who said, “Justice will prevail”, those uneducated people howled ... When the guardian spirits enjoyed getting fucked by Min Aung Hlaing, the gun won over justice. Jungle rules, motherfuckers with hungry/horny butts, licking bones given out by their masters ... Hey, motherfucker dogs, Min Aung Hlaing is a motherfucker. Hey, sons of prostitutes, Min Aung Hlaing is a motherfucker. Don't regret only when your mothers are fucked by dogs/soldiers of Min Aung Hlaing. How many poets would have to die so that you can get 5,000 Myanmar Kyat (roughly US \$2.50)? Guardian spirits do not watch over this nation.

To give some context, this video supposedly calls for all Burmese people, in exile or within the country, to join the revolution, and to condemn those who side with the military, (allegedly) taking money from them and participating in military-organized events. The martyrs mentioned in this poetry reading are believed to be Phyo Zeyar Thaw, hip-hop singer, Kyaw Min Yu, aka

Ko Jimmy, a 1988 Uprising student leader, and Hla Myo Aung and Aung Thura Zaw, two civilian political prisoners who were executed by the military regime.

Phyo Zeyar Thaw was arrested on terrorism charges on 17 November 2021. Kyaw Min Yu was arrested at his home on October 24, 2021, on the charges of inciting unrest with his social media posts. Hla Myo Aung and Aung Thura Zaw were arrested in March 2021 for allegedly killing a military informant. State media reported the news of their deaths on 25 July 2022. The last time Myanmar's military rulers carried out capital punishment was in 1988. (At that time, the military put more than 100 people on death row with charges such as inciting unrest or killing informants. Beginning executions anew in 2022 is thought to be aimed at instilling fear in the public so they do not rebel.) These deaths were shocking, and the poet's anger is understandable, but I must point out how their rage was misplaced.

To go back to the analysis, the poet refers to Min Aung Hlaing and soldiers as dogs and motherfuckers. Those (guardian spirits and people) who sided with the military are referred to as enjoying anal sex, as uncivilized “tarzans”, as uneducated, prostitutes' sons, as dogs obeying their masters, and those whose arseholes are begging to be fucked. Out of these many accusations, I focus on the homosexual acts and the “tarzan” label.

For the poet, homosexual acts are not “correct” nor “decent” manners, and are morals put at the same level as murdering people or committing war crimes. The same goes for prostitution. Selling your body/sex is an “indecent” manner from the poet's point of view. Guardian spirits (and people) failing their duties to watch over the nation, bring justice, and disassociate from the evil (military) is equated with people who have same-sex acts and do sex work. In this way, people who have male same-sex relations and sex workers are excluded.

The social hierarchy here can be read as heterosexism, which Peterson theorizes as:

A binary coding of polarized and hierarchical  
male/masculine and female/feminine identities



(ostensibly based on a dichotomy of bio-physical features) (that) denies all but heterosexual coupling as the basis of sexual intimacy, family life, and group reproduction.<sup>45</sup>

This denial of non-heterosexual coupling and intimacies can be put into the framework of heteronormativity which Warner argues is:

More than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture.<sup>46</sup>

After discussing the narrator's disgust toward homosexual sex acts and prostitution, I move on to the uncivilized "tarzans". What I translate as "tarzan" is, in the Burmese language, *taw-thar*, a slang term for those who come from rural areas. The slang takes its fictional origin in the jungle. *Thar* is a suffix for male and *taw* means jungle or rural area. In Burmese urban dictionaries people claim that *taw-thar* does not necessarily refer to those of rural descent, but to those who act in an uneducated or uncivilized way, wherever they are originally from. But the wording itself indicates that being uneducated or uncivilized is equated with coming from rural (poor or working class) origins.

While I cannot trace the origin of the adoption of this urban slang, *tarzan*, (whether it was taken from novel series by Edgar Rice Burroughs, an American writer, or the movie adaptations), it showed a hint of colonial fantasy. But Jules Zanger argued that there were no signs of white man's burden in Tarzan, who carried "no torch of civilization or Christianity to the savages",<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Peterson, 1999, p. 39.

<sup>46</sup> Warner, 2005, p. 194.

<sup>47</sup> Zanger, 1989, p. 96.

whereas Biljana Oklopčić pointed out that “tarzan” represented a white, male equivalent to the black rapist stereotype.<sup>48</sup> *Tarzan*, the slang, in the Burmese context, not only carries colonial baggage but also accounts for class formation. Just as Beijing gay men had anxieties that ‘money boys’ from rural areas would come and pollute their city life,<sup>49</sup> in this slogan middle-class people in Burma show anxieties that working-class people, receiving funds from the military to oppose the revolution, would cause it to fail. As Mosse argued in a different context, “the middle class sought to maintain their status and self-respect against both the lower classes and the aristocracy, through respectability”,<sup>50</sup> Burma’s middle-class people are positioned in this slogan as being “civilized” members of the new nation, while working-class people (who took money from the military) are positioned as dogs “who lick bones, given out by their masters”.

### **Honor, Good Citizens, and Queers**

Like in the above poem, many Burmese people try to persuade people to join the revolution. The usual tactic is drawing a line between just and unjust, right and wrong/evil, bravery and cowardice, and good and bad citizenry. Here, I will unpack the ties between nations and manliness<sup>51</sup> through two testimonials from my interviews.

One research participant Bobo told me that he asked his deaf friend Thura if he would like to be part of my research, and Thura agreed. He worked at a military owned factory before the coup and then joined the CDM. Now he is part of a PDF.

Thura explained how he became involved in his PDF. He felt guilty for enjoying his life while others had given their lives for the country already. “They [referring to PDF soldiers] are risking their lives for the country. They do not care about their own interests, they are saints. Unlike those military dogs who are

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<sup>48</sup> Oklopčić, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Rofel, 2007, p. 104.

<sup>50</sup> Mosse, 1985, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> Nagel, 1998.

animals.” He drew a line between who was doing right and wrong. Thura’s categorization of good and bad are based on ideals such as honor, bravery, and duty. He added:

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

Thura was not the only one to challenge the ideal of manliness as attached to heterosexual men. Nyo, another interview subject, shared with me his experience of arguing with someone in the revolution. He was told to “act like a man” because he was a ‘man’. He responded:

*How do you mean by ‘like a man’? Min Aung Hlaing is a man married to a woman. But can’t you see how much trouble he is giving to the country? Would you call a man like him ‘a good man’? How about women and LGBT people fighting at the front line? How about those (men) who live off LGBT people’s money? Whom would you call ‘a man’? Isn’t it more important to be a good person (citizen), whether they are a man or a woman?*

Nyo was not naïve. He recalled that a gay friend of his was threatened by two drunk PDF for “pocket money” on a full-moon day. He underscored this event by saying his friends and

PDF members had generally good relations, not wanting to paint PDFs or the revolution as bad.

I will put these two testimonials into Nagel's framework of the linkage between nationalism and masculinity. She argues:

The culture of nationalism is constructed to emphasize and resonate with masculine cultural themes. Terms like honor, patriotism, cowardice, bravery, and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist since they seem so thoroughly tied both to the nation and manliness.<sup>52</sup>

She reminds us that the 'microculture' of masculinity was more visible on the militaristic side of nationalism.<sup>53</sup>

Both Thura and Nyo praised patriotic acts such as "risking own lives for the country", "fighting at the front line", and the "inability to stand injustice". They saw these acts as "good citizen's spirits". They were very much aware that society attached these qualities with manliness which was automatically translated into "being a heterosexual man". Thura was trying to bring positive connotations toward queer people who are usually thought to be unmanly based on the lens of masculine notions of honor, cowardice, bravery, and duty. He saw straight "real men" being scared and kneeling under military power as a feminine shame. Both these interview subjects tried to include women and LGBT people (who are risking their lives for the nation) in the wider public sphere. They challenged heteronormativity by removing the crown of hegemonic privilege of heterosexual culture over non-heterosexual sexualities. Warner argued that queer counterpublics are not limited to a physical space and can be circulated through unconventional registers.<sup>54</sup>

These testimonials of my interview subjects are queer counterpublics, indeed.

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<sup>52</sup> Nagel, 1998, pp. 251-252.

<sup>53</sup> Nagel, 1998, p. 252.

<sup>54</sup> Warner, 2005, p. 198.

## Conclusion

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

We are haunted by the stigmatized term, *a-chaut*. But one interviewee, Aye, told me about an encounter in which a queer PDF member (‘a good citizen’) introduced himself as *a-chaut* (using dry humor) at a meeting with local people and was surprised to receive a remark from one of the local people saying, “You are not *a-chaut*. You are an LGBT person”.

I would like to conclude with a testimonial from one of my interview subjects. I was on the verge of tears when he confessed to me that he told his close friend:

*If I ever died in the revolution, please tell your children that your friend, a-chaut-ma (a derogatory term here reclaimed) did this or that in this movement. Our (queers’) contributions need to be documented. Otherwise, our experiences will disappear into thin air. I have been doing this because I want the next generations of LGBT kids to sow what we reap. With this documented history, we could hope for a future in which we, LGBT/queer people, could love ourselves, get married to whom we love, and embrace ourselves, with equality.*

I genuinely hope that this article does justice to the lived experiences, resistance, and resilience (or decisions to give up) of my interviewees, and all Burmese queer people.

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