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Multimodal Archipelago: Social Movement Knowledge Practices Among Transnational Rohingya

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Abstract Social movements of Myanmar and the *archipelagic affinities* which complexly connect them are like islands, both dividing and connecting communities of Myanmar via multidirectional channels of staked arguments, and knowledge-sharing practices. This article traces how (dis)connections are being (re)made in the aftermath of the attempted coup both online and on the ground. Drawing from the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Akyab, Burma (Myanmar) and with the Rohingya Community in Ireland, their diasporic networks, and the interventions they make in the ongoing genocide in Myanmar, this article highlights the diffuse, and fractured pangea of digital social movements in order to contribute towards understandings of how *archipelagic affinities* can be viewed as mobilising forces against the military's attempt at centralising power.

Keywords Transnational. Social movements. Multimodal. Network. Burma. Myanmar. Rohingya. Ethnography. Anarchism. Southeast Asia. Refugee. Diaspora.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Anti-Military Affinities. – 3 Transnational Rohingya Networks. – 4 Conclusion: Archipelagic Affinities.

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1 Introduction

Drawing on a collaborative ethnographic research project with transnational networks of Rohingya, this essay foregrounds the digital and creative labour these actors are involved in to build social movements through multimodal practices. Through the processual and inventive nature of multimodal practices among transnational Rohingya networks, actors intervene in contemporary crises of ongoing genocide, protracted forced migration, inter-ethnic conflict, the attempted military coup of February 2021[1] and its aftermath in Burma. These networks are crucial not only in getting to grips with forces they are in resistance to, but also vital in disseminating information across displacement-affected networks.

The creative practices of these networks generate films, poems, photography exhibitions, news websites, and an array of other multimodal formations which make meaning and mobilise social movements. These distinct, yet malleable, networks share lines of affinities (Cuevas-Hewitt 2011) which intersect with multiple social movements in and of Burma. The etymology of affinity, with the latin *ad-finis* meaning *to border* and *affinis* meaning related, helps to linguistically hold together the antinomy of the points of separation and connection or archipelagic affinities. My fieldwork has been multi-sited in the sense of working in Burma, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Ireland, Germany, and the United States as well as multi-*web*-sited, having traced (dis)connections and collaborations across social media apps, and Rohingya-operated news websites. This approach has led me to explore affinities and see them as differing from solidarities, but rather as nexus where collaboration, aversion, disruption, and resistance imbricate along varying scales to create polyvocal meanings among the heterogeneous actors involved in these networked social movements.

This article explores the basis of connection for these intersecting social movements of Burma by looking at how mobilisation of these social movements is vested in the digital. This article uses the lens of archipelagic affinities (Cuevas-Hewitt 2011) to transcend the Burmese state's essentialized conception of identity politics. Intersecting social movements learn from, support, or embrace one another, while retaining their distinct cultural difference, this phenomenon is analogized through a metaphor of water and channels (dis) connecting islands of an archipelago. The writing style and flow of this article is intentionally varied so as to match the archipelago

1 Multiple resistances have effectively quelled the Myanmar military from the dominating position that is typically associated with a successful coup. Therefore within Myanmar and the diaspora the *coup d'etat* is not commonly accepted as *fait accompli*, and is thereby referred to as an attempted coup.

metaphor – separate, but together, with choppy waters at moments, and glass-like stillness at others. The archipelagic frame makes visible the important paradox of distinct cultural identities sitting alongside what Tomlinson refers to as *complex connectivity*, "the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterise modern social life" (1999, 1).[2] The changing landscape of Burmese opposition politics that have come since the attempted coup opens many avenues and yet-to-be built bridges between intersecting social movements in Burma connecting their knowledge practices. This article seeks to explore the basis for those connections while paying attention to the ways in which, what Amarasuriya et al. describe in *The Intimate Life of Dissent* (2020, 121) as "conditions of possibility" for varying political acts to be made while reflecting on how those acts are shaped and perceived along channels of competition and conflict among the people who are entangled within the movements.

2 Anti-Military Affinities

The pre-colonial, and colonial histories of the Burmese state have come face-to-face with intersecting social movements, presenting complex challenges for all the actors involved. The underpinning connection among the various social movements is their opposition to the Myanmar military (Ryan, Tran 2022). With the onset of the attempted coup, the history and future of Burma are being reconsidered in complex terms. The Burmese military's infamous propaganda machine's long pushed nationalist narratives by are being questioned now more than ever. A culture of imperialism in which the Burmese military carries out the 'Bamanization' of indigenous communities whilst multiple resistances form in opposition to this subjugating force, build the foundation for affinities which go beyond the exclusionary basis for belonging penned into law and policy by Burma's colonial-cum-military dictators – to emerge and take root. In simple terms Bamanization can be understood as a colonial force formed by the ethnic majority Bamar, acting upon the indigenous minorities of the territories of Burma. Those enacting Bamanization use coercion to acculturate minorities to a majoritarian cultural identity through hierarchies similar to many colonial projects, the aim is subservience and sub-citizenry to the Bamar as well as to create a larger armed force to perpetuate the state-building project (Callahan 2004a; Boutry 2016).

2 For further see Cuevas-Hewitt 2011.

In February 2021, the Burmese military, (known as *sit-tat* which translated literally to military), attempted a coup in Myanmar. Since the coup, signs of mutual support have emerged on the streets of Yangon, along the Mayu Peninsula, and across the internet as an archipelago of understanding that the Burmese military is the common enemy. As the technological developments shift, or at times leap forward, those resisting and opposing military oppression must similarly use technology like organising via social media, to outwit the military.[3] Given the military regime's disproportionate size to population ratio compared to other Southeast Asian nations,[4] their quasi-state control of transportation, banking, education, and other realms of civic life, the opposition(s) must be more inventive with the resources they have than the regime. In *Hybrid Media Activism*, Emiliano Treré argues for a more culturally attuned reading of digital activism, arguing that earlier social movement theorization:

> adopted a functional understanding of social movements and the media […] neglecting the consequences that the use of particular forms of communication can have on the internal structure of a movement. (2015, 3)

In Burma the oppositions' multimodal inventiveness (Dattatreyan & Marrero-Guillamón) against the Junta is key in producing effective, multi-fronted, on and offline resistances (Prasse-Freeman 2023a). An emphasis on the organisational feature of online activism often overshadows *how* these networks evade, deter, and combat the military, through what new social movement theorists like Melucci (1985) describe as the collective identity factor – the "cultural factors, emotions, and networks of meanings", that bring about mobilisation (Treré 2015, 4). A wide range of resistance forces, online and offline, work to find military blind spots and undermine the quasi-state's attempt to seek legitimacy through an attempt at monopolising violence (Springer 2016). This pattern is perceived by the many parties involved across memes, videos, and other digital outputs which percolate from the waters of resistance.[5]

3 https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/exclusive-myanmars-junta-rolls-out-chinese-camera-surveillance-systems-more-2022-07-10/.

4 Thailand estimates 350,000 armed forces for a population which is 15 million larger than Myanmar who claims to have upwards of 500,000 troops – though those figures are contested, and this is not a complete analysis of their efficacy see: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-s-military-numbers; and Kyed, Lynn 2021.

5 Including but not limited to, the National League for Democracy (NLD), National Unity Government(NUG), Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), National Unity Consultative Committee (NUCC), various civil society organisations (CSOs), and

The ways in which these various stakeholders chaordically (Werbner 2002) work off one another with both order and chaos can be viewed as means of mobilisation against the quasi-state. As it tries to centralise, the opposition strategically decentralises (Graeber 2004). This is not to say these actors agree with one another; in fact, there are many instances in which they are staunchly opposed to one another's views. Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAO's) have been left with a feeling of betrayal (Brenner 2017) and this sour political history plays to the military's favour by dampening the perception of the National League for Democracy (NLD) for many (Passeri 2019). Aung San Suu Kyi's denial of genocide and defence of the military in The Hague is complex in her reasoning being in line with the military's current arguments against multiple armed uprisings in Burma (Putra et al. 2021) while attempting to construct a positive image of the country in the international court.

Burma's modern history of social movements is often conflated with the democracy movement and Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party. On the one hand there is a push for a Federal State by various EAOs, this imagined state which is separate yet harmonious intersects and contrasts with Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD-cum-NUG, which is described by some as a refreshed (Thuzar, Tun 2022) or others as a merely rebranded version of the NLD (Campbell, Prasse-Freeman 2021). So what about Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD – the elected government, which was ousted by the coup? Prasse-Freeman and Kabya work to sum up the paradoxes of the NLD's legacy in the current movement(s).

> Simultaneous impossibility and necessity of the NUG leadership: they are both critical for the revolution even as they must change aspects of their politics. The same issue holds for the people writ large (and this is a point that transcends Myanmar and applies to people's movements around the world): a genuine social revolution will require that the polity drastically alters many of its fundamental assumptions about exclusion and privilege. (Prasse-Freeman, Kabya 2021, 2)

It is where these two ideas put forth by Treré, and Prasse-Freeman and Kabya meet that bring us to a thinking about why the decentralised nature of the resistance(s) is working to keep the Myanmar military on their toes and keeping a social revolution in Burma growing. The anarchic notion of *affinities*, which are not based on traditional notions of identity, but, instead, as Magsalin (2020), an anarchist based in the Philippines writes, "unity on the basis of the affinity of

Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), diasporic networks, NGOs, INGOs, and the multifarious, decentralised entities which preside mostly online.

Figure 1 J Francis Cerretani, A Burmese nun watches a large screen projecting the International Court of Justice's initial hearings in the case of Genocide against Rohingya. 2019. Photograph. Yangon, Myanmar. Copyright J Francis Cerretani

all who struggle for liberation" (10). At the core of many issues of disharmony in Burma are essentialised forms of ethnic or national identity crafted by the military like *taingyintha* or the use of national races as a basis for citizenship. If we instead turn the focus to affinities formed against the military dictatorship which transcend existing trappings of the military-generated identity categories, we can come to understand the importance of *how* online social movements are creating awareness of such affinities as shared grievances and are making networks of meaning through creative labour and affect.

Are the multimodal affinities among multiple social movements central factors in keeping the *coup d'état* from achieving fait accompli?

For those who are similarly resisting state power, online movements could be an affinity, a call to mobilise albeit perhaps in differing directions. However, at the height of forced displacement of Rohingya Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) was overwhelmingly supporting the military's genocidal operations against Rohingya and abetting the divisions through their own internet postings on the State Councillor's Facebook page (Fisher 2017).[6] Since the coup there have been more signs of change among those who did not support Rohingya and who now realise their common

6 Burma garners its name from the largest ethnic group, the Bamar.

enemy in the Tatmadaw. Proclamations of regret and support have come from political figures and online activists alike (FRONTIER 2021; Sharma 2021). While there are fair doubts to the genuineness and timing of these claims it is certain that the coup has awakened many to look beyond the divisive propaganda of the quasi-state and the figure of the common enemy – the Myanmar military – has emerged. This is not to say that solidarity has formed on a broad scale with Rohingya, but rather that the common anti-military stance has been like a hurricane moving waters of resistance at great speeds across varying island and channels of social media making affinity in hybrid resistances which build upon knowledge practices established by those who were most at the margins prior to the coup.

While the military is not to be underestimated, the speed at which these opposing networks adjust and mobilise is far beyond the military's expectation (Bächtold 2023). While the NLD (National League for Democracy) with National Unity Government (NUG) is staking out rhetoric of reconciliation and unity, to centralise power, I argue it is paradoxically the decentralised nature of varying oppositions which has kept the movements from being easily dismantled. Co-option of key thinkers and movements is commonplace among the actors with more consolidated power, but the NUG's – 'the government-in-hiding'[7] – inability to centralise power is not necessarily to its detriment as there is now more interest from various actors across the country in the future of the central government as many see the moment as a possible reshaping of the future away from its prior trajectory one often seen as an elitist power struggle between groups like the NLD and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) among others.

The propaganda-fuelled divide and conquer tactics of the Myanmar military trace back into pre-colonial periods in which the Burmese kingdom acted as an imperial force crossing mountains to claim new bodies of land, and more importantly human bodies in the form of slaves, into its empire prior to the British invasion (Beemer 2009; Callahan 2004b; Charney 2022). These methods then took on a colonial taxonomy of division during the British annexation of Burma, the effects of which continue to linger as colonial legacy in laws and policies which are still on paper from that era. The military are now faced with a wide array of opposing forces which, thanks to the internet, can communicate in ways they could not during previous social uprisings, like the student led movements of 1988, and the Saffron

7 The NUG is often referred to as in hiding, or in exile, as most of its leaders are not able to make themselves visible in daily life in Myanmar, and therefore live outside the country or outside major metropolitan areas such as in territories which are under the control of a resistance army.

revolution in 2007 when there were still historically pervasive levels of internet censorship in Myanmar. There is now a place, beyond the physical realm, to build as Treré (2015, 4) suggests, "a collective identity", online, based on anti-military affinities which need not align with a single political party to be highly effective. The anti-Sit-Tat (Burmese language for military) connection connection is supported by Megan Ryan and Van Tran's (2022) research analysing Facebook posts related to Burma after the coup. They found that, "dissident forces focus their online activism primarily on anti-military narratives and broadcasting protest activities in order to motivate and mobilise grassroots resistance to the coup" (1). It is this focus on anti-military narratives which dominate the top viral postings according to Ryan and Tran's data, that suggests the anti-military affinity is much stronger than any specific political formation which has risen out of the power vacuum of political instability.

While many youth movements cannot imagine a future with the Sit-Tat, other geopolitical powers like ASEAN are having difficulty coming to consensus on whether to broker a future with the Myanmar military or not (Reuters 2022). This begs the question about whether similar forms of governance – i.e., the military-NLD composite – are viable for a future Myanmar? Prasse-Freeman and Kabya (2021) point out that past divisions were harboured by the NLD's government, and that demands to move past this type of caretaking, pseudo-democracy, are tied into the current struggle for liberation. For many, including those pushing for a federal charter and more self-determination, the time has come to start to unfold and deal with the past in a way that envisions a future which sees the next generation as not living with the precarity of potential coups. This is another leap, like those in technology, to move past the 'care-taking government' that was in place from 2010-20. That so-called democracy *in transition* (see Girke, Breyer 2018) in which the military drafted constitution gave the sit-tat veto power over parliamentary decision, effectively rendering the authoritarian government into a business-centric, pseudo-democracy, had been sanctified by foreign governments as a step towards democracy, though more accurately the aim was opening of Myanmar for business from all parties. The attempted coup instead places the stakes much higher as the tolerance for this pseudo-democracy has worn out among the general population.

For Rohingya who face genocide at the hands of the military the idea of a future with the Sit-Tat having any power undermines the necessary conditions for their return to a safe and secure home. The multiple international court cases against the Junta incubating at the Hague, in both the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court, may provide partial justice over a protracted period of time, and have implications for Burma as a nation and its people. Meanwhile Rohingya have taken efforts into their own

hands. Through multimodal creative labour youth are (re)imagining their futures in Burma alongside diasporic networks and those seeking refuge, as well as in collaboration with activists and scholars. Whether through what Karen Strassler (2020) calls 'demanding images' that germinate online and make demands about rights, recognition, and grievances, or through an array of modalities such as news websites, poetry, short films, collaborative online activism and ethnofiction, the networks being built are generating new affinities which transcend essentialised notions of identity and give strength to the solidarity among those who oppose the Myanmar military. Many Burmese youth are demanding that now is the time to remove the sit-taw from their futures (Kyed 2022). It is to these texts and movements that the article now turns.

3 Transnational Rohingya Networks

The connections and bridges among transnational Rohingya communities are collaboratively created into the above collage. This collage is ever-growing, and, as more connections emerge through this project, the collage will grow in reflection of the multifarious nodes of Rohingya networks. Where the photos and *photo-messages* imbricate are representative of some of the various ways through which these diasporic Rohingya networks demonstrate mutual care and work together to mitigate the effects of the ongoing genocide in their homeland of Burma (Myanmar). Some of the connections are familial, like Dalil[8] and his brother in Polaroids (upper left) taken in Bangladesh and Malaysia or the Rafiques (centre bottom) picking up grocery items from Burma at their local shop in Ireland and Rafique's father who is holding in his hands in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh, that same photo from the grocery store. Other overlappings like the several *photo-messages* – image-text amalgamations which make connection through their co-creation across borders, or in the case of the *photo-message* (centre lower middle) above a photo of Rafique riding the local bus (lower middle right), it's both his written words, "*Ken Aso*[9] Never lose hope, good things coming soon, keep going", and his place of origin – Sittwe, Burma, which connect him with those he has written the message to. In the image the men are carrying fish back from the Bay of Bengal to their cordoned-off

8 Certain names are anonymized for the protection of interlocutors, others who are public figures and explicitly request to have their real names used are exercising ownership of their stories.

9 Rohingya language phrase, *Ken Aso*, translates to "How are you?"

Figure 2 Rohingya Community Ireland (text) & J Francis Cerretani (images), *Collage showing the Bridging connections of Transnational Rohingya networks*. 2019. Photographic collage. Myanmar, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Ireland. Copyright J Francis Cerretani 2019

village on the perimeter of Sittwe, Rakhine State or as Rafique refers to by the pre-colonial names Akyab, Arakan.[10]

My multi-sited fieldwork from 2014-20 among transnational Rohingya communities provides insight into the knowledge practices of transnational Rohingya youth. A focus on the modes and meaning makings of networks may offer potential links and affinities towards the basis for the connections to be made within the current social movements in Burma. My descriptions and experiences of working with Rohingya communities are based on specific contexts and are by no means applicable or representative of all people identifying as Rohingya.

The Rohingya Community in Ireland is approximately one hundred persons who were displaced from Myanmar in 1991-92 during what the Burmese military referred to as, Operation Clean Nation. These families subsequently spent seventeen years from 1991-2009, living

10 Like Rafique, many Rohingya regularly use 'Arakan' rather than the Burmese military-led government's official name, 'Rakhine State', when referring to their home and place of origin. This is in part because the name, 'Rakhine State', like many state names in Burma, essentialises a territory to a single people when there is in fact much more diversity. As is commonplace in Burma, the British' taxonomy and essentialization of peoples and places has been carried forth by subsequent Burmese dictatorships and military Juntas creating many fissures. In the case of Arakan, it is to name the state, 'Rakhine', after the majority, Rakhine people.

in various camps on the Bangladesh side of the Naf River which borders Burma, before resettling in Ireland. At the time of independence, Rohingya were active participants in the civil and political world of Burma. However, the successive military coups brought with them dictatorship-directed ethno-nationalist policies that would falsely cast Rohingya as outsiders slowly stripping them of their citizenship and freedom of movement, resulting in over four million Rohingya being stateless and leaving many to seek refuge across the Naf River and around the world.

Throughout my time in Ireland, I began to gain more insight into the politics of representation among Rohingya. Photos and video depictions of Rohingya, particularly of violence against Rohingya bodies, were prevalent in the quotidian experiences of my host family and were pullulating online where they would change forms and find new nodes of resonance over time. The living room was a 24/7 newsroom, where Rafique, my key collaborator and host, received hundreds of messages daily, many videos and photos sent directly from Rakhine State where ongoing violence against Rohingya was occurring. The experience of seeing these images, and having their context explained to me by Rafique prior to my seeing the same images making rounds on social media, and then onto international media drew me to deeply question the way Rohingya were being represented, and the news cycles through which race is mediatized. Representations of Rohingya amid exile from Myanmar to Bangladesh which were channelled through mass media outlets, stood in contrast to the moments of family-life that occupied the same living room in which some of those images first surfaced from Rakhine State. I was familiar with Rafique's news website and some others, like R-Vision, and the Arakan Times, and have since met with the news staff and organisers of these and other Rohingya news outlets. These interactions have opened up an understanding for me around the labour and care that goes into transnational media for those seeking refuge, and living in diaspora.

Rohingya and Rakhine have been increasingly subjugated since the Burman invasion of Arakan, the native land of Rohingya, and subsequent conquest, in 1784.[11] Prior to Burmese invasion Arakan was an independent state centred around the Kingdom of Mrauk-U – an important trading city with a key geographical position in the Bay of Bengal. Contemporary Arakan is divided from what was once a more fluid transcivilisation space. Prasse-Freeman and Mausert (2020)

11 Aung San Suu Kyi's position within the government which she made for herself to be above the president, as a law written by the prior Military government barred her from being president on the basis of having family members (her late husband and children) who were nationals of another country (United Kingdom).

dive into the historiography of the region to show how around 1666 the Mughal invasion and Dutch displacement of Arakanese naval monopoly are key historical moments for creating divisions in the region. When the British arrived, boundaries were remapped with Burma's Rakhine State, taking the majority, and Bangladesh absorbing a smaller part of the former state.

There exist many interpretations of the history of Arakan. Multiple ethnonationalist, ethnoreligious, narratives are promoted by the Burmese state, making for an ill-informed public (Schissler et al. 2017; Wade 2019) and ripening conditions for ethnic cleansing and genocide. The Burmese military makes the claim that Rohingya are outsiders, despite the many historical accounts and contemporary scholars that show otherwise (Uddin 2020). Rohingyas' claim to citizenship has been at the crux of their struggle for recognition and belonging in Burma. A host of scholars of Arakan, and contemporary Burma (Gerharz et al. 2017; Lee 2021; Uddin 2020) validate Rohingyas' claim of indigeneity to be in-line with the 1982 Citizenship Law, and importantly many scholars argue that the policy of 135 ethnic groups or *taingyintha*, and the overall citizenship frameworks are not only designed to unjustly exclude Rohingya, but are an ill-contrived, corrosive force on the people of Burma, creating ethnic hierarchies, and tiers of citizenship which playout in their everyday citizenship practices (Walton 2017). Rohingya struggle to fit into the citizenship framework, not because they would not qualify as Cheesman (2017) argues, but because the intention of the laws is to exclude them (Rhoads 2023). Given the wide effect of this on people of Burma there is a basis for an affinity which would work against these policies and colonial concepts of dividing ethnic groups and offering limited-rights based on static conceptions of identity.

Transnational Rohingya who face genocide and protracted forced displacement have heterogeneous lived experiences (Nursyazwani, Prasse-Freeman 2020; Prasse-Freeman 2023b). Where it is their varying lines of flight from refugee camps to relocation, or awaiting repatriation the varying spatio-temporalities that Rohingya experience are some of the many ways in which their quotidian experiences are highly differentiated. This multiplicity extends to all people of Burma and is a starting point to unravelling the affinities across various intersecting social movements. Because essentializing, homogenising, or generalising in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, age, or religion is at the helm of the Burmese military's propaganda and division tactics, we must keep our attention to not reify the same ethnic divisions while pointing towards the basis for (re)imagined futures. Whilst the Burmese propaganda machine seemingly never sleeps, Leehey (2010) argues that many people of Burma snooze on the Propaganda altogether ignoring it, and the crux of Ryan and Tran's (2022) work on Facebook in Myanmar that Burmese people continue to use

FB as a way to organise despite the massive risk and policing of Facebook that the sit-tat pursue. At the same time, we must not erase the differences in equality faced across the intersections of ethnic, racial, class, gender, and (dis)ability. This is a challenge in any context, and as someone positioned as coming from outside of Burma, raised in the United States, and as an academic researcher in anthropology – one fraught history of serving colonial projects and the taxonomy of peoples, it calls for an especially vigilant approach to ethics in methodology to mitigate the worst effects of the kinds of anthropology which bring about the question of whether the discipline should be left to burn? (Jobson 2020) As transnational communities find themselves geographically separated from their kin there is an increasing need to understand how these communities stay connected. Social and mass media have the widest reaching influence in shaping an image of groups of people (Forkert et al. 2020). Participatory media-making storytelling and self-representation practices are effective ways to disrupt homogenous narratives and make visible the agency of transnational networks.

The interweaving experiences of transnationalism that pass through multimodal messages exchanged between Rohingya families and networks were central to the daily experiences of my Rohingya collaborators. Later, I will expand on the use of *photo-messages* – collaboratively-made analogue, photo-textual objects that represent bridges that connect transnational communities seeking refuge – to open an understanding to the importance of multimodal, digital exchanges between Rohingya networks towards their existential challenges, but let me begin with a basis of theory and methods on which the *photo-message* methodology is built.

The bonds of these transnational families and the Rohingya community at large are laboured around the clock, with constant calls, messages, audio clips, and audio-visual materials bouncing back and forth from Burma, and Bangladesh – where Rohingya were fleeing to escape the pogroms. Care, concern, and connection were constantly performed through stories, photos and memories. Arnold (2021, 139) describes this labour among transnational Salvadoran families, "Through cross-border communication, transnational families carry out the everyday labour of care that keeps them together despite political-economic and discursive forces that would tear them apart".

The Rohingya community in Ireland's penchant for mutual care is perennially cultivated. A common theme of the calls I was in Rafique's living room for, and continue to have with Rafique to this day myself, are around gardening and meal-prep. Community gardening is two pronged in the RCI. There is a shared plot designated for the Rohingya community at Carlow's community gardens. There are also backyard, home-grown gardens. Each member of the community who has a green space utilises it for gardening, recreation for the youth, and

intergenerational gatherings. What one household grows is shared with the others and vice versa. These care communities extend wide beyond the boundaries of Carlow, connecting across digital currents of social media and messaging applications to one's kin and care networks regardless of the spatio-temporal differences that come with transnational relations.

The regularly performed care (Arnold 2021; McKearney, Amrith 2021) and creative labour of Rohingya networks works to build bridges and make meaning through the digital diaspora. A large portion of my fieldwork in Ireland during the summer of 2017 was spent in the living room of my host family where Rafique and I sat with our laptops open and our phones at our fingertips. We were constantly receiving and interpreting photos, videos, accompanying text, and audio recordings from villages in Rakhine state, ground zero for Myanmar military's genocidal actions. My housemates were taking calls from their network of news informants in Myanmar who use smartphones to combat the suppression of information coming out of Rakhine state. Rafique was constantly making ethical decisions about the safety of his informants based on the information in the images, as to whether or not he could publish them through his Rohingya-focused news site, share them via twitter, or assist international media organisations such as the BBC, who called him to verify the authenticity of videos they wanted to air on network television as the violence of the military escalated after 25 August 2017.

Rafique's intimate relationships with his interlocutors and the images they made are complex and he has a working ethics about how and what to share to what outlets. As he received images it was undoubtedly important for them to make it out of Burma, as per what Arielle Azoulay (2012) describes as a way of undermining state sovereignty.

I began to think about how relationships among people were being shaped through a visual economy (Campt 2020). I wondered how the interpretation of a visual representation, like a Facebook post about the Rohingya Genocide, were being reshaped as the intimacy of these images is broken along the bridge of hermeneutics from interpersonal (among kin) to international media. When an image is deterritorialized from the place it was made, ie. the Naf river banks, into the living room in Ireland with Rafique, who is looking at it with care for those he shares some kinship with, and then that image makes its way to the BBC in a narrative context of news cycles from late summer 2017, the reterritorialization has become so far removed that to intimate with this images is perhaps no longer their utility. Looking at the phenomena in which people actively increase or cease their engagement with such images in which people show their interest in a subject and apply value based on how long one chooses to engage with the image, how it is shared, and where it is traded (Sontag 2004). What is the latent power of knowing rather than seeing

Figure 3 J Francis Cerretani, Rabeya picking Mula Faátha, in Ireland transplanted from Kutupalong refugee camp, Bangladesh. 2017. Photograph. Ireland. Copyright J Francis Cerretani 2017

that such images, like brutal police killings, exist? How do news cycles influence the ways Rohingya must be inventive to keep the general public knowing about the genocide in Rakhine state? Thinking through the phenomenology of image-events (Strassler 2020) which cause people to *pay* attention or to look away from things more broadly, brought me to deeply consider what modes of representation would contribute to a more heterogeneous set of representations of Rohingya (Nursyazwani, Prasse-Freeman 2020).

Back in the living room, I was asked by Rafique to help with technical editing of English language translations of the audio descriptions which accompanied images coming in from Arakan. This entailed reviewing the image repeatedly to make sure that the English text was as accurate as possible in describing what was happening in the photos and videos while asking Rafique and others in the house questions to decode the embedded aesthetics and meanings of certain landscapes, places, language, timing, and other contexts. They would relay any questions they could not answer to the news informants on the ground in Arakan through voice memos sent over WhatsApp and other messaging applications. I was not tasked with creating any original captions or words, but rather making sure the best language, grammar, and punctuation were being used, which came

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with multiple considerations and constant refining beyond what I had expected in mere technical editing. Some days there were dozens of stories, and the constant inward and outward flow of these images caused me to reflect on the representations of Rohingya, where they originated from and how once they were out of the hands of those who directly interpreted them, they were reframed into various media contexts, and turned into cultural capital by a variety of actors, namely large media outlets, human rights organisations, the Burmese state, and many online seeking to use the images with their narrative (on cultural accumulation see also Collins, Durington, Gill 2017). My own position in this newsroom was of constant reflection, as this method of participant observation caused me to reflect on the constant ethical decisions that are made when editing news stories (see Gursel 2016).

The atrocities being committed against Rohingya in Myanmar needed to be seen and understood, and the endless stream of images of violence against Rohingya that continue to come out of Rakhine State even with the state sanctioned attempts at blocking the flow of information out of Rakhine via internet shutdowns and laws which ban smartphones for Rohingya, confirms the importance of such images in bypassing the boundaries of the Burmese regime (see Azoulay 2012). Images take on complex lives of their own (Strassler 2020). In some cases, entire scenes and photographs were constructed and shared by heads of the Myanmar military, like when head general, Min Aung Hlaing, shared images meant to convince the public that Rohingya were setting their own homes on fire. These images were then debunked by Rohingya themselves using their own form of Forensic Architecture (see Forensic Architecture 2022; and The Observers 2017) and used instead as proof of the military's propaganda efforts.

In the evening of 24 August 2017, as many in Burma would just be starting their day, Rafique and his family's phones started to ring incessantly. There was suddenly a shift in temporality in the living room, as the calls coming in from his contacts were now mixed with those of family who were uprooted or sharing news of the death of loved ones, there was no time or space to decompress or process what was going on. The military had launched a "planned purge" (McPherson, Lone 2022), under the guise of a counter reaction to what they called "insurgent violence".

From that point on the living room lights never turned off. The strength in the multi-layered web of community members living in diaspora threaded through to their families in Myanmar or exodusing to Bangladesh was evident in the never-ending stream of connection, creativity, and care. This latent image of Rohingya networks developed in the darkness of the living room calls became to me, the clearest image, depicting the multiplicity of Rohingya and their networks. The diffuse nature of the Rohingya communities pointed not only towards the obvious struggle of displacement, but also towards

the nascent strength in a spectrum of representations of Rohingya that was widespread, fractured and diffuse, as opposed to the homogeneous reduction of millions of individuals into subjects of a crisis framing which were produced and reproduced by mass media and humanitarian actors (Forkert et al. 2020). This was seen in the WhatsApp groups, where attempts to organise in the immediate aftermath of Burmese pogroms of 25 August 2017 flourished. This is where difference in ideas, strategies, and practice in the face of genocide were formed and reformed, showing strength in fracture. From this point of fissure many varying ideas about what it was and was not to be Rohingya were contoured by a multiplicity of actors multimodally.

Members of my host family were active in Rohingya media worlds (Ginsburg 2002). They worked with Rohingya journalists who used their mobile phones to capture the realities on the ground in Rakhine State. Using their unique expertise of media, my interlocutors relayed harrowing stories of state violence to mass media outlets like the BBC and published their stories on their own cultural and news websites and circulated them across social media platforms. My Rohingya interlocutors used images made *by* them to combat images made *of* them. Examples of such *image-wars* (Pinney 2011) and *demanding images* (Strassler 2020) continue to emerge in the aftermath of the attempted coup atmosphere of online activism in and of Burma.

There were many messages relaying back and forth from the Rohingya networks and families of the community in Ireland. The most prominent themes which align with affinities found across intersecting social movements in Burma; are *hope, futures, and education* as ways of advancing the collective aim to undermine the regime.

While living with the Rohingya community in Ireland I became attuned to the ways we regularly used our phones and computers to share combinations of text, audio, and images – sending such image-texts through applications like WhatsApp, Messenger, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, and TikTok has become such a regular practice that the ontology of sharing and conversing around images are obscured. The rate at which new images appear on Instagram and are crowded with comments, then followed by a subsequent *post* or *story* exemplifies the commonality of this phenomena. Theorists often take for granted these platforms as mere instruments of connectivity (Treré 2015) while others see how cultural meaning and collective identity is imbued through the processual usage of digital communication (Melucci 1995).

I listened and learned from the community about how they were already connected and collaborating with their family and friends around the globe. If I was to contribute something purposeful it would be to highlight and document these already existing networks. To do so meant a careful, ethical approach to understanding the relationships and history among these transnational families, fitting within the geo-political context of migration and moorings.

4 Conclusion: Archipelagic Affinities

The affinities of hope, education, and aspirations for secure futures which are prevalent among dispersed Rohingya communities and evident in the photo-messages overlap with many of the shared desires and goals of other contemporary social movements in Burma and throughout the Burmese diaspora. The Photo-Messages method bridges between networks that persistently proliferate despite the geographic separation which Rohingya and other people from Burma face as part of the far-flung nature of seeking refuge. The participants writing to Rohingya with whom they feel a connection for either being from the same townships or being similar in age, show some of these affinities on a micro scale, while mirroring the themes of hope which are sent to their family members via digital communication. The connections Rafique makes with hundreds of Rohingya who share with him stories from the ground are also responded with care, hope, and consideration as Rafique receives these messages through the same social media channels, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, as the concerns from his family who remain in Kutupalong refugee camp, and are also sharing messages of hope, and indeed finding hope in seeing their families strength in exile like their ability to receive education, and to mount online resistances. The personal is constantly overlapping with the political while spatio-temporal differences are being transcended through digital transmissions, like islands in an archipelago that are kept separate yet connected by water.

Cuevas-Hewitt (2011) draws on "what John Tomlinson (1999) calls, *complex connectivity*, rather than homogenous 'unity' allowing for commonalities to be constructed *across* differences, rather than at the expense of them"(2011). Similarly, to the existential threats placed upon those within Burma being felt within the Rohingya community in Ireland – the wider Burmese diaspora and those seeking refuge are all part of the archipelago and are affected by the friction across common fault lines, but work collaboratively across channels to outwit the oppressors.

In Rafique's transnational networks of displacement affected news-media website workers there were those who could collect the video evidence on the ground in Myanmar, to those who could receive and decipher what content was safe to share and disseminate outside Myanmar. The ways in which Rafique and his Rohingya networks balance their need to expose the military's crimes and retain privacy of those who share the videos and photos shows a great ethics of care involved in their practices.

If we take Cuevas-Hewitt's consideration of the diaspora as a part of an archipelago, we can see a cluster of connectivity that spreads out across intersecting media worlds. This decentralised,

Figure 4. Ei Thin Zar (text) & J. Francis Cerretani (image), Text by community-school teacher Ei Thin Zar. A top of a photo I took while the International Court of Justice (ICJ) proceedings were taking place in Yangon in 2019, she comments, "resist injustice with the truth". Ei Thin Zar explicitly identifies primarily as a teacher as opposed to ethnic and religious identities. She works on the border of Thailand in Mae Sot with those seeking refuge from Burma. 2022. Photograph with written inscription. New York. Copyright J Francis Cerretani 2019

network-oriented, transnational reimagining of sociality pushes against Newtonian-Kantian Enlightenment-era figurations of centralised social order towards more indigenous, horizontal conceptions of community and belonging which are anti-binary, anti-exclusionary, and arguably anarchic (Graeber, Wengrow 2021).

The common repression from the military serves as the main producer of grievances which connects many networks against the regime. The military's approaches to digital repression are constantly shifting to continue its campaign of online suppression, whether the existential threat of being identified through social media and being arrested or targeted in public or the targeting of someone living in diaspora's family members who live in Burma. The internet shutdowns, taking down of websites, rescinding media permits, and IP tracing are some of the many forms of repression which the opposition(s) must constantly outmanoeuvre.

Ryan and Tran (2022) point to interesting conclusions around the evolving nature of digital protest, in that they observed a decrease in anti-coup engagement and an increase in pro-military posts. They have offered several potential reasons for this: that public interest for activists has decreased or activist content has moved to private

groups and encrypted platforms to avoid infiltration. Pro-military supporters may find a greater sense of protection using public and main-stream platforms given the military is seen as the main threat on these platforms. The spontaneous connection on more protected platforms shows a shared use of knowledge practices to evade the gaze of the military and demonstrates how quickly online protestors work collectively to evolve and exchange information and most importantly how affinity and connection are being built through these exchanges not always in an immediate rupture but rather a more resonating, shelf-shifting movement.

When thinking broader than a movement defined solely by either a contentious politics or grievance, the lens of networked social movement theory opens to a more diffuse reading of the various uprisings, resistances, those which were pre-existing, newly formed, or rebolstered in response to the February 2021 coup, and how they have unique and overlapping knowledge practices which when placed in an anarchic frame of affinities, creates the basis for connecting and sharing those practices. From this archipelagic framework there may emerge certain potentialities to transcend typical identity politics in order to surmount shared goals whilst remaining on separate islands. Instead of essentializing racial, ethnic, gender, religious, or age groups, the string of affinities which may tie together as a *net* for these *net-works* are the common aims, goals, and struggles upon which they face – most namely, working against the Sit-Tat (Myanmar military). Conceiving of affinities as not being solely built around identity allows for the finding of strength in difference through the plural roles we can play towards shared needs, and common desires. One of the central affinities that connects the metaphorical 'archipelago' (Cuevas-Hewitt 2011) in ways that doesn't aim to homogenise, but rather plays to the strength of the different roles and strengths of fragmented, decentralised, networks – is the opposition to the quasi-state as the oppressive force which is deterring the plural goals of networks in Burma and in diaspora. Transnational networks of Rohingya have developed many knowledge practices in opposition to the Myanmar military and other forces of oppression. The pre-existing work that Rohingya were doing to archive the atrocities committed against them laid the groundwork for communities to learn from each other different methods for resisting the military. This knowledge sharing is creating more fronts against the military than ever before. As of this writing, many argue the Sit-Tat is losing the civil war as they are trying to fight against not one, but many separate yet (dis)connected islands of an anarchic archipelago in Myanmar and among people of Myanmar living transnationally.

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