THE REVOLUTIONARY'S TWO TEMPORALITIES?
Activism, Failure, and Uneventing

ELLIOTT PRASSE-FREEMAN
National University of Singapore
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3078-0530

Ayay-daw-boun Aung-ya-myee
Ayay-daw-boun Aung-ya-myee
Ayay-daw-boun Aung-ya-myee

Ayay-daw-boun Aung-ya-myee—"The revolution must be victorious"—became the rallying cry of the ongoing people's uprising against the Myanmar military's coup d'état of February 1, 2021, when Kyaw Moe Tun, Myanmar's representative to the United Nations, condemned the military regime in an impassioned speech to the General Assembly three weeks later.[1] He concluded his talk, voice quivering with emotion, by switching to Burmese to deliver the exhortation that would be repeated millions of times.

But the speech snippet quoted above comes neither from Kyaw Moe Tun nor any of the millions participating in the revolution today. Rather, it is extracted from a Facebook post from early 2016, within the heart of Myanmar's so-called democratic transition, an era that commenced circa 2011 and ended, unceremoniously, with the aforementioned coup. Aye Than, a Mandalay-based activist, included the exhortation at the end of a post announcing a "plow protest" that would begin in Mattaya (a township near Mandalay city) the following

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 40, Issue 4, pp. 697–725 ISSN 0886-7356, online ISSN 1548-1360. Cultural Anthropology *is the journal of the Society of Cultural Anthropology, a section of the American Anthropological Association.* Cultural Anthropology *journal content published since 2014 is freely available to download, save, reproduce, and transmit for noncommercial, scholarly, and educational purposes under the Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0 license. Reproduction and transmission of journal content for the above purposes should credit the author and original source. DOI: 10.14506/ca40.4.06*

day. After describing the situation—"The ancestral lands of the farmers have been forcibly exploited . . . making them farm servants, slaves, landless people"[2]—Aye Than declared that 500 farmers were coming to take the land back.

Aye Than and the activist group with which he was affiliated—Movement for Democracy Current Force (MDCF)—organized, by their account, dozens of plow protests during the "transition" era (Prasse-Freeman 2023b: chaps. 3–4) of 2011–2021, particularly in Anya (the "upriver" domain of Mandalay, Sagaing, and Magwe regions). Strikingly, every one of these struggles had, in the group's assessment, ambiguous outcomes: those which appeared to *fail* contained traces of potential—as subsequent mobilizations might overwhelm opponents. Conversely, however, those that appeared *successful* were always at risk, I was told, of ensuing catastrophe—officials could return and seize the land again. And similarly, at a larger scale, even the democracy that appeared to have been attained during the transition was always vulnerable to being undermined by a coup that, indeed, did materialize. Moreover, in reflecting on the necessity of attending to both successes and failures of the past, Ko Taw—an MDCF leader—also highlighted the need to apply the same analytic to today's ongoing *taw-hlan-yay* (revolution; literally, overturning). Indeed, while considering the possibility of the revolution's victory, Ko Taw was circumspect in a late 2023 conversation over the encrypted messaging app Signal: "The *sit-tat* [military] will fall sooner or later surely. For the people are not afraid of them and they really hate them. . . . But abolishing the *sit-tat* entirely doesn't mean we've got democracy. There may be another dictatorship of another style forming. We must continuously fight against any kind of dictatorship. That is what I have been working on since a long time ago."[3]

The perdurance of calls for revolution across these multiple moments, not to mention the perpetual activist mobilization and its indeterminate outcomes, index a particularly potent and enduring challenge faced by political activists everywhere: that they are compelled to work at multiple temporal scales. Activists must remain aware that action in one instant (leading a protest or a strike or, conversely, provisionally capitulating to an apparatus of repression) must be assessed both for what that action enacts (relatively) immediately, and also for what it might produce in the (relative) longer term. Rather than fetishizing the event—as performatively enacting "rupture" or "destabilization" of the status quo (e.g., Butler 2015, 25–26; Lara 2020, 32) or, alternatively, producing unequivocal failure and defeat—Burmese militants in particular (and perhaps activists tout court) entertain varied and often inscrutable potential trajectories. Indeed,

they interpret some of the most "present" or apparently "immediate" phenomena imaginable (the evental protest) as dependent on sources *and* responses that are both proximate *and* distal.

Reflecting on a decade of ethnographic work with Burmese activists, and drawing from a 20,000-word chat log between myself and Ko Taw amassed between 2021 and 2025, as well as from three fieldwork trips to the Thai/Burma border (February 2022; April 2023; September 2023) where I conversed with exiled activists and militants, I seek in this essay to focus on questions of time vis-à-vis indeterminate failure and success, asking: How do activists manage and manipulate temporality by, in Laura Bear's (2014) phrasing, "laboring in/of time" (see also Goodale 2022; Harms 2011)? Specifically, how do activists assess the effectiveness of their actions? For how long can they maintain certain versions of the future when the material evidence in the present suggests inefficacy? How do they assess whether it can really be said that a "rupture" has occurred—and how do they render legible the signs that were created by such a rupturing event? Do they transform these traces into more durable representations (narratives, slogans, dances, songs, and so forth) that can be drawn on in future mobilizations? And how do they align their conceptualizations of temporal scales with that of those they are trying to mobilize—those who may have different assessments of current power dynamics and future potentialities?

UNSECURED VICTORIES, RESOURCEFUL FAILURES

Anthropological literature (Robbins 2007; Kapferer 2010; Holbraad, Kapferer, and Sauma 2019; Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi 2020; Chambers and Cheesman 2024, 749–50), often building on the philosophical inspirations of Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze, has advocated for an increasing focus on rupturing events whose spontaneous emergence can fundamentally alter social reality. "The idea," as Joel Robbins (2007, 12) puts it about Christian conversion, is "that at any moment a future could arrive totally independent of the causal thrust of the present." These calls edifyingly intervene against a disciplinary structural-functionalist residue (Kapferer 2010, 7; Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi 2020, 1) that guides anthropologists to prefer continuity over change, instead attuning us to the immanent possibilities for sociopolitical transformation.

Recent anthropological writing on activism has, however, foregrounded the social labor necessary to construct events (Povinelli 2011, 12–15): such that while they may appear to explode out of nothing, they are actually the outcome of extended collective efforts, a fact that directs focus toward activist conceptions

of temporality—what David Scott (2014, 1) calls "the lived experience of time's passing." For example, Sian Lazar (2014, 93) describes a seemingly heterochronic dimension of activist practice in which political organizers imagine themselves embedded in "historical time" (in lineages of "iconic events, epochs, and people" from past mobilizations) even as they work through "attritional time" in "the mundane, repetitive, constant struggle that makes up political activism in the everyday" (Lazar 2014, 101; see also Krøijer's 2010 contrast between "active time" and "dead time"; see also Berlant 2011, 95). Chloe Ahmann (2018, 146) identifies how, for the environmental activists she studies, certain acts constitute an "explicit . . . marking of time that condenses protracted suffering and demands an ethical response." But to achieve such temporal distillation and compression, time is first stretched in the opposite direction: activists mimic the slowness of the state-corporate projects that would dispossess them, while deploying delay as a tactic (see also Fung and Lamb 2023). Such tasks take time itself "as the object, not merely the context, of human behavior—it is something people use to direct attention and make claims" (Ahmann 2018, 153).

Yet I propose that creating the event is not so much the question—or, rather, it is only the beginning of many questions. As a growing anthropological literature on "political failure" (Greenberg 2014; Jansen 2019; Allen 2020; contributions in Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2020; Musallam 2020; Morningstar 2021; Greenberg and Muir 2022; Schielke 2023; Prasse-Freeman 2023a; Mathias 2024, 159–60; Trisal 2025) observes, evental ruptures often fail to ultimately materialize. Because this literature shows how failures can follow apparent successes, we may need to question the model of the event, particularly how it presupposes a temporally unidirectional unfolding of entailed consequences (*after this, things will never be the same*) that misunderstands the fact that struggles are typically polydirectional (Nielsen 2014; Al-Khalili, Ansari, Lamrani, and Uzel 2023, 5–6)—meaning that events can be continually resignified, even annulled, as evental. Events are hence subject to their own *uneventing*, in which past events become severed from the present from which that event is perceived, "*because*," as Scott (2004, 41) puts it, "it is no longer clear what [the present's] relation to the future might be." Put otherwise, the event can be understood as a machine that continues to work after its immediate effects appear to dissipate, potentially generating the seeds of its own banalization or obsolescence, as it produces new conditions that give rise to other events, which operate recursively on the initial effects. The point here is that activists not only do things to time, but are subject to time doing things to them.

Temporality's double edge warrants increased attention; to understand it, a detour into more formal anthropologies of time is necessary. Alfred Gell (1992, 149–65, 166–241), in *The Anthropology of Time*, builds on philosophers who distinguish between the ontic time of the universe ("B-series time") and the time subjectively experienced by individuals ("A-series time"). B-series time is fourth-dimensional and *tenseless*—events do not happen in any definitive past, present, or future relative to some agent's perspective on them; rather, they only relate to one another as *before* or *after*. The coup's five-year anniversary—February 1, 2026—is always earlier than the preceding year, February 1, 2027, no matter when you are reading this sentence. A-series time, by contrast, is agent-dependent: the same February 1, 2026, is future or past depending on when your act of reading this occurs. We lack phenomenological access to fourth-dimensional B-series time, and so, for anthropological purposes, what time *is* in any metaphysical sense is irrelevant to how humans perceive it, and how different human communities perceive it divergently. But the perceived reality of B-series time—the perpetually becoming-later of time that encroaches on human life—provides the ontological ground on which human communities manipulate their temporal experiences. Hence there aren't different times, but rather "different conceptions of the world and its workings" (Gell 1992, 36) in which some cultures "refus[e] to regard as salient certain aspects of temporal reality which [others] regard as much more important" (Gell 1992, 72). While time can only be comprehended through our socially constructed and intersubjectively ratified interpretive schema ("time-maps" for Gell; see also "temporalization" for Munn 1992) that allow us to "generate templates, in the form of anticipations of the proximate future, which are involved in the active process of perception itself" (Gell 1992, 237), the larger point is that these maps are circumscribed by the temporal parchment (B-series time) on which they are inscribed. This constitutes a critical fact for anyone (e.g., activists) desiring to alter the perceived course of time: B-series will keep churning along (to which culturally specific temporalities respond), forcing a reckoning by activists who cannot simply pause time or reverse it, but instead must make sense of its relentless pushing forward and what their actions in it produce: should a lack of change or transformation over any specific period be construed as a failure, or a mere "not yet"? To summarize: A-series is to activist temporal strategies with time as B-series is to activist reckoning with its inexorable march.

How, then, are time maps written? As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003, 29) reminds us, objective reality has material effects on the world (his "historicity-1")

that constrain the degrees of freedom we have in crafting narratives about it ("historicity-2"), a general critique also advanced by Matt Hodges (2008, 407) and Erik Harms (2011, 102). Materiality parametrizes the time-world that activists maneuver as they respond to outcomes of their and others' actions. As Pierre Bourdieu (2000, 221, quoted in Nielsen 2011, 406) puts it about how failure circumscribes ensuing perceived possibilities: "Below a certain threshold of objective chances, the strategic disposition itself, which presupposes practical reference to a forthcoming, sometimes a very remote one . . . cannot be constituted." In other words, time can be manipulated—but only within reason, one that is intersubjectively determined: if one fails four times, five times, six times, one might no longer be able to credibly claim—to others, or even to oneself—that these failures are only temporary, contingent, insignificant. Rather, the failures may become collectively interpreted as revelatory of a reality highly resistant to change—or at least to the mode of enacting change pursued by the repeated fail-er. We could then propose that respective semiotic communities have differentially flexible time-maps that afford constituent members the ability to variously represent time to themselves, as well as to interpret material reality—thereby constructing their respective perceived "threshold[s] of objective chances" (see also Gell 1992, 292–93).

What might motivate or account for various semiotic communities retaining divergent collective temporal understandings? One explanation is the framework of ontological difference, in which some researchers identify "indigenous time" (e.g., Awâsis 2020; Whorf 1956) as fundamentally (phenomenologically, grammatically) divergent from "Western time." In the Burmese case, for instance, the historian Michael Aung-Thwin (1991) argues that "circles" and "spirals" define not just Burma's history but also Burmese thought itself, while the linguist A. L. Becker (1995) asserts that circularity in Burmese orthography (vowels circumambulate consonants, forcing a typewriter to "pause" before it proceeds) reflects, and is produced by, Burmese circular thinking. Melford Spiro (1966) has stressed, citing Burmese Buddhism's emphasis on the cosmology of future lives, a Burmese aversion to considering what Jane Guyer (2007) calls the "near future."

But as Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen (2017, 46) argue, ontologies are necessarily plural, "in line with the demonstrable diversity of people's lifeways." Harms (2011, 99) observes, for instance, that peasants "can conceive of the passage of time in two ways"—understanding "industrial time discipline" and "the peasant mode of production"—"without developing a fundamental

metaphysical crisis," a phenomenon Paul Kockelman (2024) interprets as reflecting humans' capacity to have various *degrees* of ontological commitment. This point is borne out by how the activists featured below read and think beyond any circumscriptions located in an ostensibly hermetically sealed "Burmese culture." While not dismissing the partial relevance of deep cultural foundations, I would like to consider what we might call an *activist ontology* (one likewise not immured but incorporating of other ontologies).

By way of elaborating this ontology, I use the term *activist* (cf. Taylor 2016; Battistoni 2019)[4] as shorthand to identify political militants defined by revolutionary practices and orientations:[5] (1) they engage in activities—disruptive actions directed at extant apparatuses of power and organizing activities directed at communities they perceive as marginalized—often as their primary vocation or otherwise as their way of life;[6] (2) these practices reflect a commitment to fundamentally altering a world activists see as requiring radical change; (3) they are conscious of their ability, and hence their politico-ethical responsibility, to intervene in the course of history (Strange 2018).[7] Indeed, Burmese activists' continual fixation on responsibility (Prasse-Freeman 2023b, 63–64; 256–57) reveals an understanding of the future as available for, and even demanding of, alteration.

But because the world not only affords but resists change, failure becomes constitutive of activist praxis (explaining, I argue, why the many explorations of activist subjectivities cited above focus on it), forcing activists to manage time within and beyond defeat. Indeed, as Scott (2014, 2) argues, failure "provoke[s] . . . a more acute *awareness* of time," compelling activists to reckon with the paradoxical temporalities that their sense of responsibility imposes. Fuad Musallam (2025, 223), for instance, identifies how failure is imbricated in temporal management when he argues that "activist futurity is affected by a very shallow historical depth that is tied to the immediate past of failure and the circulation of narratives of that failure. This shallow historical depth, however, is productive of a very patient and long-term strategy that pushes the future out and populates it with moments of potential rupture." In other words, activists must have short memories when it comes to failure, while retaining long-term views of ultimate success.

And yet, can the future be pushed out indefinitely? How do activists in such situations resist accusations of quixotic tautology (that their method and theory of change cannot be falsified through assessment of their actions' effects), not to mention deal with the exhaustion, despair, and even madness (see Proctor 2024)

that attends the imperative to perpetually rehabilitate failures and preempt victories from eroding? Some do so, according to Alex Flynn (2021, 156), by recognizing "the very impossibility of distant objectives," consequently transforming means (practices) into ends in themselves, forfeiting transformative change as a realizable objective, thereby dissolving time, as work toward the future collapses into an everlasting present where activists "striv[e] ever harder in perpetual struggle" (see also Graeber 2009, 210; Edwards 2023). David Graeber's (2009, 527) famous emphasis on activist "prefiguration"—"acting as if one is already free" (adopted from Boggs 1977)—seems a version of this (although only to the extent that the one "acting already free" can resist a reality that acts as if one is *not!*). And Lazar (2014, 102) observes a similar phenomenon in which activists she studied "seemed on the whole comfortable with the ongoing and attritional nature of their struggle," something they achieve by "folding" their present into the "longer tradition of struggle" derived from the past.

Noteworthy here is how Musallam, Flynn, Graeber, and Lazar, respectively, identify unique ways that activists labor with time: some insert themselves into a quasi-mythical lineage of past revolutionaries (Lazar); others remain in a permanent present in which they continue their struggles without concern for futures that may never materialize (Flynn; Graeber); while still others focalize the future to deemphasize, if not obliterate, failures in more present temporalities (Musallam). But rather than identifying these as separate temporal domains (past, present, future), I seek to highlight their shared commonality: all three temporalities inure activists against the possibility of ultimate loss—they are antilinear in the way that A-series time affords, and evoke the timeless, eternal "presence of the now" endorsed by Walter Benjamin (1986, 261) in his famous "Theses on the Philosophy of History." By contrast, I suggest that revolutionaries—if Burmese ones are at all representative—*also* must engage B-series time, a temporality not only contingent but also productive of limiting path dependencies, in which victory may be possible to imagine but in which irrevocable failure also remains a perpetual option. Consequently, Benjamin (1986, 261) seems to overstate things when he insists that revolutionaries are nothing less than fully *aware* that, "at the moment of their action," "they are about to make the continuum of history explode." This is because at the very least the agents with whom activists interact—state officials, corporate shareholders, on-the-fence masses—likely understand history as *resistant* to such explosion, leaving activists less certain of their interventions' potential effects. I hence propose that we perceive this temporal division—between A series and B—as demarcating a

stance toward time that activists can, and perhaps must, oscillate between. But, as I demonstrate in the ethnography that follows, any tidy division between the two temporalities dissolves in practice, with activists living both senses of time simultaneously.[8]

LIVING PERPETUAL REVOLUTION

The older members of Movement for Democracy Current Force (MDCF)—(mostly) men born in Yangon or Mandalay in the early or mid 1970s[9] —had already lived through the failure of several earlier uprisings when they helped Burma's 2021 Spring Revolution emerge. First, and most indelibly, there was the "8888" (*shiq-lay-loun*) failure of August 8, 1988—a mass protest event that responded to nearly three decades of military oppression. Because while it forced the military-led Burmese Socialist Program Party (which took power in Burma through its own coup in 1962) to step down, the mass movement was ultimately repressed by an ensuing coup and demobilized by the promise of an election—one that occurred in 1990 but whose results the military rejected.

As participants in the protests, Aye Than, Soe Aung, and Ko Taw occasionally referred to themselves as part of the "88 Generation"—Soe Aung was only thirteen at the time but was arrested for throwing stones at a propaganda billboard. But given that so many others also identified as such, they preferred to distinguish their sacrifice and commitment by highlighting the number of years they spent in prison for their participation then and afterward, especially after the failed 2007 so-called Saffron Revolution.[10] That uprising, much smaller in scale and now discursively associated with (although not actually organized by) Buddhist monks, was precipitated by MDCF comrades who, in the nine months leading up to the protest, led monthly wildcat demonstrations against the regime's disregard of declining living standards (Schrank 2015, 59–60; Prasse-Freeman 2023b, 105–8). Most were imprisoned after the ensuing crackdown.

After promulgating a new constitution in 2008—one that guaranteed the military veto power over parliamentary processes—Myanmar's military state began to release political prisoners in the run-up to the 2010 elections, an act meant to index its putative sincerity in transitioning to democracy. Ko Taw reflected on beginning MDCF in response, as well as on the membership's thought process at the time, and why they chose to include "Current" (*sin-hset ma-pyat*) in their name:

> At that time the junta released DASSK [Aung San Suu Kyi] and some other prominent leaders such as 88 Gen Students. So, some people thought we

> are on the way to Democracy, and we need no longer fight against the dictatorship. *Sin-hset ma-pyat* warned [everyone] that it still remains to abolish the military dictatorship entirely.[11]

Translating *sin-hset ma-pyat* into English as "Current" plays on the dual English meanings: first, present-tense temporality (current as in *now*), and second, and closer to its literal meaning in Burmese, current as in a river's *flow*. However, according to Ko Taw, "It actually means 'continuous,' 'constant,' 'non-stop.' It comes from Marxism, and Mao's thought too." This name was chosen consciously—and MDCF was formed in general—to contest the country's ostensible political "transition" that lasted from 2011 to the 2021 coup. This era was defined by a liberalization of markets and an increase in political and social freedoms, changes that many believed brought the country out of "the dark ages" (Aung 2021). As Elizabeth Rhoads and Courtney Wittekind (2018, 204) argue, such discursive and governance practices effectively framed Burmese history as a teleological progression in which Myanmar became "only dynamic when . . . tightly bound to Western capital flows" (see also Campbell 2022, 18; Aung 2022a). MDCF responded by devoting itself to three interlacing objectives: contesting the transition's atemporal framing; defending laborers, peasants, and poor people victimized by the transition's processes; and reminding others that an apparent *end* was rather a *continuation* of struggle against a more insidious apparatus.

This was not always a popular position, and members relayed how journalists covering their activities regularly challenged MDCF strategy as defeatist. Further, Burma's NGO and policy elites—whom MDCF called *yay-baw-si* ("oil on top of the water"), meaning these individuals claimed to be part of the people but actually stood above them, refusing to mix—condemned MDCF's actions as inopportune. Elite rhetoric emphasized the fragility of the transition, stressed doing nothing to upend it prematurely, and implored everyone to give it a chance. Members of MDCF were not immune to these appeals, especially after Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy was elected in 2015 and came to officially—if not materially—control the country (Prasse-Freeman 2016).[12] This is perhaps because elite appeals took the same A-series temporal logic as (one of) their own: both bourgeois NGOs and MDCF radicals identified a future state that had to be enacted through efforts in the present, and if those efforts did not produce that future, the only remedy was more efforts, indefinitely. While the relationship between current means and deferred ends remains in all human

endeavors somewhat inscrutable (Candea and Heywood 2023), this is particularly the case when transformative political change is the desired objective, given the unpredictable effects of iterative efforts, unintelligible or hysteretic feedback loops, and complex intermediate variables (Petryna 2018, 571–72). Liberals argued that the liberalization of markets and political institutions would produce path dependency, "locking in" reforms; MDCF argued the inverse—only the abolition of the military would guarantee a just transition for Myanmar's poor. Only time could prove which perspective was correct—but how much time was enough?[13]

Yet unlike the transition supporters, the activists recognized that, to paraphrase Albert Einstein, doing the same thing repeatedly while expecting a different result might be *dangerously* insane. This B-series awareness derived from their semiotic attunement to the risk of failure, not to mention their sense of responsibility for that failure's consequences, in which various instances of discrete disappointment would aggregate into congealed social truths, both for those they were trying to mobilize (who would conclude that it is better to not fight than to risk painful failure) and for themselves (subject to exhaustion and defeatism—indexed by comrades leaving the struggle or going mad).[14] Simultaneously, they were unwilling to give up on the struggle, given the inability to know when pushing *just a bit harder* or for *a bit longer* would produce a substantive rupture.

This dilemma can be ethnographically illustrated by returning to the plow protests introduced above. Many of these direct actions of land re-occupation appeared to fail at their immediate outset, in the sense that security forces arrested protest leaders and destroyed the fields they attempted to sow. And yet, when I recently asked Ko Taw about these failures, he made intertemporal connections that forced reassessment of those protests' provisional meanings:

> It was difficult to fight the *sit-tat* during those days. But the farmers were ready to fight against the dogs [military] before the coup. So, when the National Crisis [the 2021 coup] came out, they can easily change themselves from oppressed farmers into LPDFs [Local People's Defense Forces]. That is why Sagaing Region became the most popular LPDF area. . . . The farmers have nothing to lose [but] their chains.[15]

Ko Taw here credited earlier land struggles as explaining the surprising fact that the revolution is being maintained by those in central Burma who had rarely before participated in Burma's political uprisings (Callahan 2022; Huard 2024). Soe Aung further elaborated how these farmers evolved during the past decade:

> At the time [of the first plow protests] when we entered their community, we learned that they were afraid to see a person wearing long pants (not even a uniform)! They thought that the person wearing long pants is a police or soldier. Former governments governed them by using fear. Now they are night heroes in the revolution. Their sacrifice is no less than that of famous people. . . . They had to divide into two groups. One group works as daily workers to get income to buy the food. The rest remain as revolutionary armed group and continuously fight against the dictatorship. Sometimes, they change the groups after some months . . . . Many died. Many were killed. Many were arrested. I don't have an exact list. But they are still in the revolution, and they never give up.[16]

Here Soe Aung notes the transformation that peasants experienced, going from fearing trouser-wearing people (Burmese villagers wear sarongs) to being "night heroes" (attacking the military). He and Ko Taw reframe farmers' struggles, shifting them from the fight to reacquire land to the fight to reinstall democracy.[17]

Conversely, however, even those struggles that appeared *successful*—such as the plow protest in Mattaya mentioned above—proved difficult to assess as such. When I visited Mattaya in 2016 and 2017 after their apparently victorious direct actions—in the sense that they re-entered the fields from which they had been evicted, planted seeds, cultivated those plants, and then later harvested them for consumption and sale—Aye Than refused to endorse my assessment of victory. "The cronies and military can come back at any time," he told me. "The farmers must remain ready." And, sure enough, Soe Aung relayed that several times from 2016 to 2021 Mattaya farmers mobilized against imminent attacks from "cronies"—a class of tycoons connected to both the military and the democratically elected government of Nobel laureate Suu Kyi—who had designs on peasant land.[18]

This semiotic sensitivity to temporal inscrutability applied, I would argue, even to how they considered political tools. During the transition era, millions of dollars in the form of legal aid reform and rights-based trainings flooded Myanmar (Prasse-Freeman 2015). Members of MDCF expressed skepticism of these models' presuppositions. Soe Aung observed in 2014 that "some NGOs come to communities to explain formally about the UN, etc. Most people don't understand." Instead, he counseled: "Don't talk about human rights; talk [instead] about *sa-wut nay-yay* [livelihoods]." When Aye Than was asked if he considered

himself a "human rights defender," he scoffed: "I myself have no security. For myself, human rights are broken [*lu akwint-ayay cho-pauk*]. So, I cannot defend them."[19] I have elsewhere observed that Burmese activists see rights as alienable rather than inalienable possessions (Prasse-Freeman 2023b), and Aye Than's response further clarifies that the problem with possession (how could he defend something he did not have?) was impacted by security *and its temporality*. What separates a "right" from a gift, for instance, is that rights are temporally durable (and inalienable rights temporally eternal). To wit, the fact that one could understand oneself as having rights even when one materially lacks them highlights two dimensions of durability: one possesses rights both across *contexts* (rights vis-à-vis both the weak and the powerful) and throughout *time*. Consequently, a "right" that exists for only one moment should be called something else: a privilege, a concession, an exception. Conversely, activists have focused on "opportunities," ones that, as they put it repeatedly, "depend on the situation" (*achay-anay-aya mu-teeday*), and which emerge only through the perpetual production and reproduction of that very situation.

The contingency of time here is also reflected not just in their partial dwelling in a perpetual present (as Seinenu Thein-Lemelson [2021, 262] argues, many Burmese activists seek to neither "'heal' from a 'psychic wound' nor to 'recover' from 'violence,'" as activists want to keep those wounds fresh). It also emerges in the spatial circularity of activist practice, in which they go from one struggle to the next, constantly looping back so as to help, to the extent possible, solidify gains made in each area of intervention (worker organizing; plow protests; daily survival in peri-urban Yangon), rehabilitating and trying to transform losses (strikes broken; land stolen; increasing precarity), while also preventing victories from atrophying or becoming vulnerable to the forces of reaction. Activists move elliptically not only to continue to push struggles forward but also to prevent "uneventing"—to, in other words, intervene against the erosion of proximate gains.[20] For instance, on one particular trip, we went from Mandalay to visit farmers; on to Shan State, where the activists held a community-organizing workshop in Moe Meiq for four days; back to a Mandalay flophouse en route to Letpadan in Bago region, the site of an early 2015 stand-off between students protesting for curriculum reform. Sensing the ensuing state crackdown, MDCF decided to leave Letpadan as "this is not our time to get arrested" (as Teza, another comrade, put it). They had to get back, anyway, to a Yangon industrial zone where every Sunday they provided English and computer-skills trainings for workers—these laborers themselves building displaced futures deferred far into the time to come.

I was able to ride this movable feast for a week at a time, perhaps two, but I always needed to exit the flow—to return to home base in Yangon to rest and consolidate thoughts about what had transpired. By contrast, in experiences at levels both micro and meso, there was a sense that activist life had no "home base" to speak of—there was no exiting the flow. At the micro level, consider the perpetually befuddling fact (at least to me) that no one ever turned off the lights when they slept. I take this, in perhaps an extreme interpretation, as indexing that there was no delineated "sleep time" that could be separated from the time of action. At the meso level, activists were continually on the move. In 2016, Soe Aung recounted how he had not seen his mother for years after his release from prison:

> In 2013 April I started serving my sentence in Shwe Bo prison. When I was released [in November], I was not able to return to my mother's house; I was moving around from friend's place to friend's place. I got out and went to Mattaya and organized [the farmers]. I protested at the Chinese embassy. As the police came to arrest me, I ran away. As the battles were continuous, I had to run away. I did not see my mother for two years. Finally, I returned to her. She told me "I am happy to meet with you again before I die." She cooked and served the curries that I like. I stayed with my mother only one or two days and then the next day returned.

When I asked why Soe Aung only spent two days with his mother, he replied that he did not want to get her in trouble with the police, and that he had to respond to queries regarding his work in central Burma. He continued: "In my mother's area, communicating is difficult. And so, because I had to communicate, I was not able to stay there for very long." He re-entered the flow soon thereafter.

USING FAILURE

The activists with whom I worked have remained active during the current revolution. While many of their comrades have joined armed militias in the Liberated Areas of Kayah State, most of my interlocutors have remained in lowland cities. Their activities have evolved as the revolutionary terrain has changed, progressing through four overlapping phases: organizing for protest; guerrilla warfare; hiding (and surviving COVID-19); and organizing communities under the protective aegis of social welfare service delivery work—in these activities, they returned to the clandestine, plausibly deniable social support labor that they had pursued before the transition (Prasse-Freeman 2023b).

When it first became apparent that the coup indeed had occurred, MDCF members joined an emergency meeting organized by the famous dissident Min Ko Naing to coordinate responses. As the dictators had declared martial law and forbade gatherings greater than four people, this put them on the run from the start. At that point, the country had responded with a spontaneous ceremony of banging pots and pans each night at 8:00 P.M., repurposing the traditional ritual of driving away ghosts to address a new evil. Ko Taw, Soe Aung, Teza, and others began planning street marches to escalate those pot bangings into mass uprisings. On February 4, the eve of their first day of protests, Ko Taw posted the following, imploring the country's youth to join them:

> Your generation is superior, ours is inferior. In the time we are thinking to avoid, you are trying to come face to face. Our leaders are over there. Coming behind these leaders in these fucked up times you guys are starting to lead campaigns to oppose the military dictatorship. . . . I am ashamed that up until this point we have lived as the military's slaves. . . . I'm proud of all of you! . . . If I get a chance, I'm willing to sacrifice my life in this battle we're facing.[21]

When I asked him about the addressee of this message, Ko Taw acknowledged that it was directed both at the youth *and* at his own generation. Striking here is how, at a time when one might expect narratives of unity that insisted on an unbroken connection across generations, Ko Taw highlighted the failures of the past, his generation's avoidance of and capitulation to the military (its willingness to live as its slaves), and the consequent shame produced. Ko Taw is not the only activist to use this device. Several activist reflections published since the coup explicitly reflect on earlier failure (e.g., Kyaw Zwa Moe 2024). For instance, Lay Lay Mon (2023, 111), writing about her and Ko Taw's shared activist cohort, asserts that "my generation lives as deviants instead of living like young leaders. There are many opportunists." Phyo Phyo Aung (2023, 131), taking a more positive tack, "welcome[s] the new steps of our younger generations, who are honest and brave and in whom we put our trust." Min Han Htet extends this failure analytic to the entire postcolonial history:

> The military dictatorship still existed before the coup, which as an event was just the reawakening and resurgence of the still-powerful military . . . we Burmese have had generations and generations of activism

> and several revolutions aimed at eradicating the military dictatorship. But these revolutions never reached their goals. They always fell short, and the military dictatorship has endured. The recent 2021 military coup is just the next chapter in the story of dictatorship written by the military. (Kaung Sithu 2023, 485)

By calling attention to failure, these texts acknowledge B-series time encroaching on reality, making this acknowledgment the ground on which the current political demand is made: opposition to the regime must continue, but with a difference, so as to avoid the same outcome. As such, the distinction between the two "temporalities" mentioned above here again breaks down, as the repetition of actions, the commitment to perpetual struggle (A-series), only occurs because failure is recognized (B-series). Failure can only be used if it is accepted as a potential outcome, not if it is raised to be dismissed and displaced as "mere" setback.

EMPTINESS AS OPENNESS

As alluded to above in the critique of rights paradigms, grassroots Myanmar activists engage in a double refusal: they not only reject authoritarian abuse and neglect but also simultaneously rebuff what they see as liberalism's false promises (Prasse-Freeman 2023b). A question emerges: What exists in the gap between these refusals—we can observe what activists are against, but what are they *for*? What constitutes them as political subjects?[22] Clearly these activists are influenced by Marxism, as the discussion of *sin-hset ma-pyat* above demonstrated. Ko Taw and MDCF tapped into, and have helped advance, Myanmar's vibrant radical Marxist tradition (Aung and Campbell 2024). But this is not all—they are also influenced by other strains of thought, particularly by the inchoate political anarchism endorsed by the farmers whom they defend (Huard 2024). Their politics thus seems close to Maoism (see Shah 2021), in the sense of: (1) a commitment to perpetual revolution, (2) an ecumenicism about tactics, and (3) a tethering of themselves to "the people," even when the people's politics do not align perfectly with their own. In these senses, their politics seems to have definitive contours: forms of solidarity, values of sacrifice for clearly delineated senses of justice, and so on. We might call this the "horizontal" dimension of subjective formation—in the sense that it happens through interactions with communities, other activists, and more. Ethnographers of activism have highlighted how the affect generated both in protest actions and through reflections on those actions

creates both subjective transformation and solidarity with their comrades (Juris 2008; Krøijer 2010; Knight and Stewart 2016; Laszczkowski 2019; Schielke 2023; Musallam 2025). It is tempting, then, to answer the question above by concluding that their politics are a mélange of influences from different sources, drawn from their own experiences.

And, of course, this holds true. But it is striking how often both MDCF members and other Burmese activists (Kaung Sithu 2023, 490; VFURP 2023, 540) explicitly disavow universalizing political ideologies, as when Ko Taw condemned elites in the revolution as "wrongly think[ing] that their way of thinking is the only universal truth."[23] More importantly, revolutionaries disavow their own political influences as well, while endorsing ones that do not appear consistent with their praxis. "I don't like communism. But I like some of its ideologies, such as Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism, and I like the Class perspective. And if you are really on the sides of farmers and workers, you can never stay together with capitalism for a long time under the same shelter peacefully. But I cannot accept dictatorship of the proletariat. I don't like any kind of dictatorship," Ko Taw conveyed recently. In a different conversation: "I am not an anarchist." Instead: "I am a Social Democrat." When I pointed out that few of his actions seemed particularly aligned with social democracy, with its formal institutions and desire to contain, not eliminate, capitalism, he told an illustrative story:

> I think I have told you about sexual harassment at a Garment factory named Kind Dream in Shwepaukkan? The Supervisor, line leader, Team leaders—we beat those four men harshly and warned them not to do such a kind of sexual harassment anymore. It worked. We sometimes emphasize more on what we believe than how we should do effectively.[24]

He clarified that he and his comrades make proclamations (adherence to social democracy) that do not necessarily align with what is necessary "according to the situation": "For example, as an authentic Social Democrat, we must avoid bloodshed in revolution. But for the current situation, we can't avoid it . . . . If our chosen political way doesn't work to protect and promote the community, we must choose another right and suitable way." The declaration of being a social democrat becomes an empty signifier, its substantive meanings deferred or refused, substituted for an immanent politics that is aligned "with the people" and "the situation." This emptiness warrants comment because it appears

counterintuitive—we may presume that activists are staunchly committed to ideologies, even dogmatically so, as that clarity guides and sustains their struggles.

Badiou (2008, 152) explains this subjective absence through his theory of the event: as "an event brings" a "void" that reflects "the latent inconsistency of the given world" and ruptures intelligibility, struggles are hence contentless, their meanings deferred, until they recreate the world through their generated effects (see Jansen 2019, 244–45; Petryna 2018). But given the critique of the event advanced throughout this article, such a theory seems inadequate. I propose that subjective ambivalence also derives from the near-universal activist experience of failure and the consequent temporal destabilization that failure entails. If revolutionary activism is defined, as Igor Cherstich, Martin Holbraad, and Nico Tassi (2020, 33) propose, as agents enduring personal costs when attempting to realize their utopian vision for the world, what happens to that vision when it is thwarted? Revolutionary activism can be profitably assimilated into an Adornian Marxist dialectical model where subjects respond to the wrongness of the world itself—"the ontology of the wrong state of things" perceived "after the attempt to change the world miscarried" (Adorno 1973,11, 3)—to generate a non-identity with themselves. As Jessica Greenberg and Sarah Muir (2022, 312; emphasis added) have it, the disappointment that results from failure "involves, by definition, the *splintering of perspectives*, as one simultaneously sees and feels the appeal of a particular promise and the pain of its unfulfilled condition" (see also Geuss 2020). Hence, the emptiness is produced—subjectivity is partially evacuated—as an outcome of the failure dialectic: on one hand, the stabilization lent by a governing set of values that guides their praxis is met by, on the other, an imperative to maintain a distance from those values given the potential of failure to dampen their potency, and because becoming overly aligned with them could separate the revolutionaries from an ever-evolving situation that might demand tactics so different as to potentially generate different values.

Taking the event and failure together, subjective emptiness hence derives from a similar orientation toward temporality: rather than only being embedded in A-series (of a perpetual present, past, or future)—in which values are static—activists are also receptive to the open-ended element of time (B-series), in which rupturing events *and* failures necessarily alter their perspectives on the world and themselves.

ACTIVISM FOR ALL?

This activist openness, reflecting a humility conditioned by failure, aids in a critical task: dissolution of the barrier between themselves and those they would mobilize. This impels a reconsideration of the apparent schism between activists and non-activists, where the former are particularly attuned to the way that conditions assent to, or resist, change, while the latter might be more given over to dailyness—carried by time rather than proactively attempting to alter (perceptions of) it. Indeed, some Burmese activists have been lamenting the withdrawal of the masses from revolution, observing that "after the miliary coup, the decrease in people's support is a bitter reality. Consequently, there is a limit to persuading more members to join and start new battles" (VFURP 2023, 536). But Ko Taw emphasizes that "if they people don't take part in revolution actively, it is only [because of] the weakness of *taw-hlan-yay-thama* [revolutionaries]. . . . We must organize them to fight against the dictator by themselves." Critically, and consistent with the openness elaborated above, Ko Taw continues by presenting the masses not as inert material to be assembled, but as teachers in their own right—imminent revolutionary activists: "We must listen to their daily lives, obstacles, and how they think. After that, we can consider how to educate, organize, and agitate them based on those data."[25] But how to bridge the gap between activists and non-activists regarding both the possibility and responsibility for altering the future?

It is useful to revisit the call *Ayay-daw-boun Aung-ya-myee*—"the revolution must be victorious"—invoked both before and after the coup, and introduced at this article's outset. It has, critically, been used by both radical activists and those less directly involved in the current uprising. The slogan appears at first glance focused on the future, and what must now be done to enact it. But the call for victory evokes an entire history of struggle, extending to the Buddha himself, who declared *Aung-bi* ("victory has been achieved") when reaching enlightenment (see Prasse-Freeman 2023b, 24–25). Several activists told me that *Ayay-daw-boun Aung-ya-myee* was an *ateiq-nimeiq*: a prediction or omen that partakes in cosmologies beyond the secular and temporalities beyond this lifetime. The Burmese historian Phyo Win Latt describes it as *Aung-taw-mu Ga-hta*—an "*eventual* victory manifestation mantra." He elaborates: "I use the phrase 'eventual victory' rather than just victory. People who joined these movements sincerely don't know when the eventual victory will come. But they are anticipating the eventual victory and disregard other incidents along the ways as temporary."[26] This point is well taken, consistent as it is with an A-series approach, but such speech acts must be invoked in the first place because the manifestation of actual

victory is contingent in a B-series sense (otherwise why shout out, and continually reiterate, *Ayay-daw-boun Aung-ya-myee*, if the eventual victory is always already secured?).

Such speech acts do not claim to *immediately* alter history (as in the model of the evental performative critiqued above); they rather act to haunt the present (Langford 2016; Good, Chiovenda, and Rahimi 2022). In this sense haunting does not entail a ghost coming from the dead to trouble the living, because here injustice and violence have not killed the political dream. Haunting therefore disrupts temporality not in the sense of past in the present, but by producing different spectral routes running in parallel: that which exists now is haunted by the alternative reality that continues being imagined playing out astride the current one (Strange 2018; Benjamin 1986). This fork in temporality produces alternative trajectories to be made legible by further political work, all while the B-series marches on. In this sense, haunting disjunctively synthesizes A-series and B-series time.

Ayay-daw-boun Aung-ya-myee and related texts entextualize (Silverstein and Urban 1996) this haunting,[27] making it available for reiteration and circulation. Each time the slogan is chanted, a particular element of the dance reproduced, the chorus of the song reprised, the revolution and its potential are cited, recalled, and re-assessed. While this is inherently risky—what if the call is interpreted as a reminder of failure?—such devices convey activist temporality to those who may not share the same understanding of history and the way in which it is available for manipulation. A key activist tactic for mobilizing others to shared objectives hence becomes aligning non-activist conceptions of temporality with their own, in which both A-series and B-series are entertained simultaneously. This requires enacting a double move: activists intervene in the regnant understandings of time held by farmers and workers (in which time is resistant to change), but not such that farmers and workers simply come to believe that revolution is imminent (and that time is subject to easy manipulation). The plow protests again prove instructive here: peasants had to be convinced *both* that another future is possible *and* that it is unlikely to materialize any time soon. Often they were unwilling to risk the attempt; in other cases, they did take the risk—only to feel betrayed when they did not get their land back (Prasse-Freeman 2023b, 140–42). Yet as described above, these events sometimes merely make for short-term failures; across longer trajectories, they become instructions on how to live revolutionary time.

CONCLUSION: Writing the Unknown Future

This article has illuminated how revolutionary activists deal with the failure that saturates their praxis. It has demonstrated how political activists often delineate temporality allochronically, differentiating the time of the *event* (the weeks when decades happen) from *banal* time (those decades when nothing happens) to then highlight how this view of cleanly bifurcated temporality underestimates the potential for the event to later dissolve (Juris 2008; Jansen 2019), receding again into a normal time now laced with the residue of failure. Given such mutability, activists consequently are compelled to perceive different understandings of how their work in the world envelops them in different temporalities. They then oscillate between strategies calibrated to each. To wit, at some points, activists inoculate themselves against the possibility of ultimate failure by embedding themselves in perpetual struggles that efface ends through an embrace of means; conversely, at other moments, lest they be dismissed by those they are trying to mobilize, activists embrace a contingent and open-ended temporality in which victory is only one of several potential outcomes, and absolute failure remains a perpetual potential conclusion. This experience of failure produces a striking subjective emptiness—or, better, openness—to various visions of the future. By braiding together different temporal strategies—resisting failures as mere setbacks while also adjusting their tactics to respond to unassailable material realities—they create an ontology of historical change that they attempt to imbue in others.

Reflecting on this indeterminacy, anthropologists might ask ourselves about ethnographic renderings of political struggles: How do we write about subjects and engagements that remain undecidable because both remain literally unfinished? If ethnography—writing about people—is a literary genre with narrative constructions containing beginnings and ends, does this get put into crisis when any semblance of an ending gets undermined? It seems that ethnography might mirror the dual temporalities described here: conveying not just what occurred but also the haunting alternatives of what might have and what might still.

ABSTRACT

Radical activists assess actions both for their relatively immediate effects and for their potential longer-term consequences. Provisional failures can become resources for future victories, while erstwhile successes can dissolve after apparent achievement. Drawing from ethnography with Burmese revolutionaries, this article shows how activists appear to engage two divergent temporal strategies divided by respective

orientations toward failure: in one, activists inoculate themselves against failure by inhabiting constant struggles that efface ends by committing to means; in the other, activists embrace a contingent temporality vis-à-vis ultimate outcomes, thereby remaining responsive to evolving conditions. Yet as activists oscillate between them, the distinction dissolves, revealing that it is not time that is manipulated but various intersubjective renderings of actions' efficacy. Ultimately, engagement with failure splinters activist subjectivity, generating an openness to both senses of temporality that aids activists in altering the understandings of temporality held by the non-activists they seek to transform. [activism; temporality; revolution; subjectivity; political ethnography; the event; Burma/Myanmar]

အနှစ်ချုပ်

တိုးတက်သော တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများသည် ၎င်းတို့၏ လုပ်ဆောင်ချက်များကို ချက်ချင်းဖြစ်ပေါ်လာနိုင်သည့် ရလဒ်များနှင့် ရေရှည်အကျိုးဆက်များ နှစ်ခုစလုံးအတွက် အကဲဖြတ်လေ့ရှိကြသည်။ တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားမှုဖြစ်စဉ်များ ယာယီကျရှုံးမှု များသည် အနာဂတ်အောင်ပွဲများအတွက် အရင်းအမြစ်များ ဖြစ်လာနိုင်သကဲ့သို့ တစ်ချိန်က အောင်မြင်ခဲ့သော အရာများသည် ထင်ရှားသော အောင်မြင်မှု ရပြီးနောက်တွင်လည်း ပျက်ပြယ်သွားနိုင်သည်။ မြန်မာတော်လှန်ရေးသမားများနှင့် ပတ်သက်သည့် လူမျိုးနှင့် ယဉ်ကျေးမှု သရုပ်ခွဲခြင်း ပညာရပ် (ethnography) နည်းလမ်းဖြင့် သုတေသနပြုထားသော ဤဆောင်းပါးက တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများသည် ကျရှုံးမှုအပေါ် ၎င်းတို့၏ ကိုယ်ပိုင်သဘောထားများအရ ကွဲပြားသော အချိန်ကာလဆိုင်ရာ ဗျူဟာနှစ်မျိုးကို မည်သို့အသုံးပြုပုံကို ပြသထားသည်။ ပထမဗျူဟာတွင် တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများသည် နည်းလမ်းများကို ဆက်လက်လုပ်ဆောင်ခြင်းဖြင့် ရည်မှန်းချက်များကို ပျက်ပြယ်စေသည့် အဆက်မပြတ် ရုန်းကန်လှုပ်ရှားမှု များတွင် ပါဝင်ခြင်းဖြင့် ကျရှုံးမှု ကို ကာကွယ်ကြသည်။ ဒုတိယဗျူဟာတွင်မူ တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများသည် နောက်ဆုံးရလဒ်များနှင့် ပတ်သက်၍ ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာနိုင်သော အချိန်ကာလကို လက်ခံကျင့်သုံးခြင်းဖြင့် ပြောင်းလဲနေသော အခြေအနေများကို တုံ့ပြန်မှု ရှိနေစေသည်။ သို့သော် တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများသည် ၎င်းဗျူဟာနှစ်ခုကြားတွင် အတက်အကျ ပြောင်းလဲနေသောကြောင့် ခြားနားမှု မှာ ပျောက်ကွယ်သွားပြီး အချိန်ကို ကိုင်လှုပ်ခြင်းမဟုတ်ဘဲ လုပ်ဆောင်ချက်များ၏ ထိရောက်မှု ဆိုင်ရာ အချင်းချင်းဆက်စပ်သိမြင်မှု ဆိုင်ရာ အဓိပ္ပာယ်ဖွင့်ဆိုချက်အမျိုးမျိုးသာ ဖြစ်ကြောင်း ဖော်ပြနေသည်။ အချုပ်အားဖြင့်၊ အချိန်သည် ပြောင်းလဲ၍မရသော်လည်း ကျရှုံးမှု နှင့် ထိတွေ့ ဆက်ဆံခြင်းက အဘယ်ကြောင့် တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူ၏ ပုဂ္ဂလပညတ် (subjectivity) သည် ပြောင်းလဲနိုင်သည်ကို ရှင်းပြထားသည်။ ဤပြောင်းလဲနေသော သဘောသဘာဝသည် တက်

ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများအား ၎င်းတို့ပြောင်းလဲလိုသော တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူမဟုတ်သူများ၏ ကာလဒိဋ္ဌိ (temporality) ဆိုင်ရာ နားလည်မှုများကို ပြောင်းလဲရာတွင် အထောက်အကူပြုသည်။ အဓိကအညွှန်းစကားလုံးများ: တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားမှု၊ ကာလဒိဋ္ဌိ၊ တော်လှန်ရေး၊ ဘာသာသာဝယတာ၊ နိုင်ငံရေးနှီးနွယ် လူမျိုးနှင့် ယဉ်ကျေးမှု သရုပ်ခွဲခြင်း ပညာရပ်၊ ဖြစ်ရပ်၊ ဗမာ/မြန်မာ

NOTES

Acknowledgments This article emerged out of audience feedback provided during two talks, one at the CUNY Graduate Center and the other at the University of Washington, both in November 2023 (see note 22 below). The article was then refined at talks given at UCLA and UC Berkley in March 2024, and then at Australia National University, the University of Melbourne, Deakin University, and Stockholm University in October 2024. These talks were supported by NUS grant A-8000900-03-00. For close readings of drafts, thanks go to Sayres Rudy, Phyo Win Latt, Joshua Mitchell, Stuart Strange, Lisa Mitchell, Canay Özden-Schilling, Sayd Randle, Ting Hui, Timothy Gitzen, and two anonymous reviewers for *Cultural Anthropology*. Special thanks goes to Ko Taw and members of MDCF for sharing their insights.

1. From Aye Than's Facebook post, January 19, 2016. All names are *naingan-yay nahmay*, noms de guerre.
2. Translations from Burmese by the author.
3. Chat with the author, December 2, 2023.
4. Astra Taylor (2016) and Alyssa Battistoni (2019) prefer "organizing" over "activism," the latter of which they eschew as denoting episodic and ultimately unserious work. Given that the revolutionaries tracked here spend more time organizing than participating in activist actions, I mean *activist* to include *organizer* as well.
5. Those Burmese I call activists typically introduce themselves not as such (as *hlouq-sha-thu*) but as "former political prisoners" (*naing-kyin-haung*) or, increasingly, "revolutionaries" (*taw-hlan-yay-thama*). That said, MDCF's name includes the term for activism (*hlouq-sha-hmu*), which it translates as "movement," a term functionally equivalent to "activist." Especially given that MDCF is not oriented toward English-speaking addressees, this suggests that *hlouq-sha* is relatively emic.
6. For a discussion of activists generating their own communities and cultures—and the ways this demonstrates both connection with and separation from the communities from which they come—see David Graeber (2009, 228–37). On the class dimensions of activism, comparative research suggests that activist groups constitute a mix between (relatively) privileged (in the sense of education or wealth) and a society's most marginalized (Graeber 2009, 245–56), a structure born out in the Burmese activist groups I worked with.
7. Not everyone feels such interpellation; as Stuart Strange's (2018) research on conceptualizations of accountability in Suriname demonstrates, various communities have divergent semiotic ideologies regarding the relative affordances of material reality to willful human intervention—*was that sickness caused by bacteria . . . or by witchcraft?*—and therefore feel greater or lesser responsibility for worldly outcomes.
8. See also Mittermaier 2014; Aung 2024; Özden-Schilling 2024; and Mitchell 2025 for aspects that inform my argument.
9. Two women were affiliated with MDCF. On affiliation, see the following note.
10. In Myanmar, "affiliation" rather than "membership" is a more apt description of an individual activist's relationship with a social movement organization, as most activists

participate in many organizations simultaneously, depending on the specific objective and area of the country in which the organization works. Activists subordinated the specific organizations to their own histories, identities, projects, and solidarities.

11. Chat with the author, December 13, 2023.
12. It remained in a tense and awkward power-sharing arrangement with the military; see Aung and Campbell 2016.
13. David Graeber (2009, x) makes a related observation about temporal logics across the left/right divide.
14. See Elliott Prasse-Freeman (2023b, 104)
15. Chat with the author, December 1, 2023.
16. Interview with the author, January 15, 2024.
17. For similar analyses of transition-era worker and student movements, see VFURP 2023.
18. Land's value was rising because of liberalizing land markets; see Faxon 2023.
19. In-person interview, November 14, 2014, led by Ginny, an American working for a self-described Human Rights Defenders non-governmental organization.
20. Geoffrey Aung (2022b, Conclusion) identifies similar strategies employed by land activists from Dawei, who periodically circulate and recirculate amongst local villages to provide ongoing support and mobilization in the wake of their victory, to prevent it from eroding. Seinenu Thein-Lemelson (2025, 131–32) tracks ritual commemorations enacted by Burmese activists who seek to achieve what she calls "mnemonic security"—preservation of their existence and role in Myanmar's history—amid attempts by the regime to eliminate material evidence (e.g., destruction of their photos, letters, and keepsakes) of their existence (Thein-Lemelson 2025, 129). I, however, did not observe such activist memory work during my fieldwork.
21. Ko Taw's Facebook post in Burmese, February 4, 2021.
22. I thank Jeff Maskovsky and Sayres Rudy, in respective personal communications, for highlighting this general question about the absence at the heart of (my account of) Burmese activist political subjectivity.
23. Ko Taw's Facebook post in Burmese, June 2021
24. Interview with the author, December 18, 2023.
25. Interview with the author, November 22, 2024.
26. Interview with the author, December 15, 2023.
27. For Burmese revolutionary songs and their singing, see Min Zin 2016; Brenner 2018; MacLachlan 2023. For revolutionary dance, see Sebro 2016.

REFERENCES

Adorno, Theodor
1973 *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. London: A&C Black.

Ahmann, Chloe
2018 "'It's Exhausting to Create an Event Out of Nothing': Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1:142–71. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.06

Al-Khalili, Charlotte, Narges Ansari, Myriam Lamrani, and Kaya Uzel
2023 *Revolution Beyond the Event: The Afterlives of Radical Politics*. London: UCL Press.

Allen, Lori
2020 *A History of False Hope: Investigative Commissions in Palestine*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Aung, Geoffrey Rathgeb
2021 "Dead Generations." *N+1*, April 8
2022a "The Frontier in Heterogeneous Time: Finance, Temporality, and an Economic Zone on Hold." *Journal of Cultural Economy* 16, no. 3: 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2022.2098517

2022b "Infrapolitics: The Political Life of Infrastructure in a Myanmar Economic Zone." PhD dissertation, Columbia University.
2024 "A Revolutionary Present." In "Back to the Present," edited by Timothy P. A. Cooper, Michael Edwards, and Nikita Simpson. American Ethnologist website, January 26.

Aung, Geoffrey Rathgeb, and Stephen Campbell
2024 "The Myanmar Radical Tradition: Revolution, Reaction, and the Changing Imperial World Order." *Dialectical Anthropology* 48: 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-024-09716-0

Aung, Soe Lin, and Stephen Campbell
2016 "The Lady and the Generals." *Jacobin*, January 13.

Aung-Thwin, Michael
1991 "Spirals in Early Southeast Asian and Burmese History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 21, no. 4: 575–602. https://doi.org/10.2307/204451

Awâsis, Sâkihitowin
2020 "'Anishinaabe Time': Temporalities and Impact Assessment in Pipeline Reviews." *Journal of Political Ecology* 27, no. 1: 830–52. https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23236

Badiou, Alain
2008 *Conditions*. Translated by Steve Corcoran. London: Continuum.

Battistoni, Alyssa
2019 "Spadework: On Political Organizing." *N+1*, no. 34.

Bear, Laura
2014 "Doubt, Conflict, Mediation: The Anthropology of Modern Time." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20, S1: 3–30. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12091

Becker, Alton
1995 *Beyond Translation: Essays toward a Modern Philology*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Benjamin, Walter
1986 "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*. New York: Random House.

Berlant, Lauren
2011 *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Boggs, Carl
1977 "Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control." *Radical America* 11, no. 6: 99–122.

Bourdieu, Pierre
2000 *Pascalian Meditations.* London: Polity Press

Brenner, David
2018 "Performing Rebellion: Karaoke as a Lens into Political Violence." *International Political Sociology* 12, no. 4: 401–17. https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/oly013

Butler, Judith
2015 *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Callahan, Mary
2022 "Myanmar's Dry Zone: The History of a Tinderbox." *Fulcrum*, February 9.

Campbell, Stephen
2022 *Along the Integral Margin: Uneven Development in a Myanmar Squatter Settlement*. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press.

Candea, Matei, and Paolo Heywood
2023 "Introduction: Ethnographies of Explanation and the Explanation of Ethnography." In *Beyond Description: Anthropologies of Explanation*, edited by Paolo Heywood and Matei Candea. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Chambers, Justine, and Nick Cheesman
2024 "Introduction: Revolution and Solidarity in Myanmar." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 54, no. 5: 741–58. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2024.2371976

Cherstich, Igor, Martin Holbraad, and Nico Tassi
2020 *Anthropologies of Revolution: Forging Time, People, and Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Edwards, Michael
2023 "Reading Graeber, Leach, and a Revolution in Myanmar." In *As If Already Free: Anthropology and Activism after David Graeber*, edited by Holly High. London: Pluto Press.
Faxon, Hilary Oliva
2023 "After the Rice Frontier: Producing State and Ethnic Territory in Northwest Myanmar." *Geopolitics* 28, no. 1: 47–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1845658
Flynn, Alex
2021 "Once Upon a Time in Utopia: Bergson, Temporality, and the Remaking of Social Movement Futures." *Social Anthropology* 29, no. 1: 156–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12991
Fung, Zali, and Vanessa Lamb
2023 "Dams, Diversions, and Development: Slow Resistance and Authoritarian Rule in the Salween River Basin." *Antipode* 55, no. 6: 1662–85. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12939
Gell, Alfred
1992 *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*. Oxford: Berg.
Geuss, Raymond
2020 *Who Needs a World View?* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Good, Byron, Andrea Chiovenda, and Sadeq Rahimi
2022 "The Anthropology of Being Haunted: On the Emergence of an Anthropological Hauntology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 51: 437–53. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-101819-110224
Goodale, Mark
2022 "Timerendering: Reflections on Chronopolitical Praxis in Bolivia." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28, no. 3: 788–806. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13777
Graeber, David
2009 *Direct Action: An Ethnography*. Oakland, Calif.: AK Press.
Greenberg, Jessica
2014 *After the Revolution: Youth, Democracy, and the Politics of Disappointment in Serbia*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press,.
Greenberg, Jessica, and Sarah Muir
2022 "Disappointment." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 51: 307–23. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-041520-105355
Guyer, Jane
2007 "Prophecy and the Near Future: Thoughts on Macroeconomic, Evangelical, and Punctuated Time." *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 3: 409–21. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2007.34.3.409
Harms, Erik
2011 *Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Hodges, Matt
2008 "Rethinking Time's Arrow: Bergson, Deleuze, and the Anthropology of Time." *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 4: 399–429. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499608096646
Holbraad, Martin, Bruce Kapferer, and Julia Sauma
2019 "Introduction: Critical Ruptures." In *Ruptures: Anthropologies of Discontinuity in Times of Turmoil*, edited by Martin Holbraad, Bruce Kapferer, and Julia Sauma. London: UCL Press.
Holbraad, Martin, and Morten Pedersen
2017 *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Huard, Stéphen
2024 *Calibrated Engagement: Chronicles of Local Politics in the Heartland of Myanmar.* New York: Berghan Books.
Jansen, Stef
2019 "Anthropological (In)fidelities to Alain Badiou." *Anthropological Theory* 19, no. 2: 238–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499618809578
Juris, Jeffrey
2008 "Performing Politics: Image, Embodiment, and Affective Solidarity during Anti-Corporate Globalization Protests." *Ethnography* 9, no. 1: 61–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138108088949
Kapferer, Bruce
2010 "Introduction: In the Event—Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments." *Social Analysis* 54, no. 3: 1–27. https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2010.540301
Kaung Sithu
2023 "Interview with Spring Revolution Student Leader Min Han Htet." *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 3: 477–520.
Knight, Daniel, and Charles Stewart
2016 "Ethnographies of Austerity: Temporality, Crisis, and Affect in Southern Europe." *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 1: 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2015.1114480
Kockelman, Paul
2024 "Ontologies and Worlds: The Price of Being Free." *Current Anthropology* 65, no. 5. https://doi.org/10.1086/732402
Krøijer, Stine
2010 "Figurations of the Future: On the Form and Temporality of Protests among Left Radical Activists in Europe." *Social Analysis* 54, no. 3: 139–52. https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2010.540309
Kyaw Zwa Moe
2024 "Evolution of the Myanmar Revolution." (Parts I–III) *The Irrawaddy*, August 26–September 3.
Langford, Jean
2016 "Ghostly Poetics." Paper presented at the Penn Ghost Project, University of Pennsylvania. February 26.
Lara, Ana-Maurine
2020 *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press.
Laszczkowski, Mateusz
2019 "Rethinking Resistance Through and As Affect." *Anthropological Theory* 19, no. 4: 489–509. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499618793078
Lay Lay Mon
2023 "My Participation in the 1996 Student Movement." *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 3: 105–22.
Lazar, Sian
2014 "Historical Narrative, Mundane Political Time, and Revolutionary Moments: Coexisting Temporalities in the Lived Experience of Social Movements." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20, S1: 91–108. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12095
MacLachlan, Heather
2023 "Revolutionary Songs from Myanmar: Reconsidering Scholarly Perspectives on Protest Music." *Music and Politics* 17, no. 1: 3. https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.3853
Mathias, John
2024 *Uncommon Cause: Living for Environmental Justice in Kerala*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Min Zin
2016 "'Kabar Ma Kyei': Imagining the Nation through Songs." *Myanmar Affairs* 1.

Mitchell, Joshua
2025 "The Forever Soldier: Addiction, Rehabilitation, and War in Myanmar." PhD dissertation, Cornell University.
Mittermaier, Amira
2014 "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Egyptian Uprising and a Sufi Khidma." *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 1: 54–79. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.1.05
Morningstar, Natalie
2021 "Bad Parrhesia: The Limits of Cynicism in the Public Sphere." *Social Anthropology* 29, no. 2: 437–52. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.13036
Munn, Nancy
1992 "The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21: 93–123. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.21.100192.000521
Musallam, Fuad
2020 "'Failure in the Air': Activist Narratives, In-Group Story-Telling, and Keeping Political Possibility Alive in Lebanon." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 26, no. 1: 30–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13176
2025 *A Break in the Future: Feeling Like an Activist after the Arab Uprisings.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Nielsen, Morten
2011 "Futures Within: Reversible Time and House-Building in Maputo, Mozambique." *Anthropological Theory* 11, no. 4: 397–423. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499611423871
2014 "A Wedge of Time: Futures in the Present and Presents without Futures in Maputo, Mozambique." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20, no. S1: 166–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12099
Oustinova-Stjepanovic, Galina, ed.
2020 "Futile Political Gestures." *Anthro Theory Commons*, August 23.
Özden-Schilling, Canay
2024 "Real Time in Rear View: Techno-economic Acts in Markets of Electricity." *Current Anthropology* 65, no. 5: 787–809. https://doi.org/10.1086/732255
Petryna, Adriana
2018 "Wildfires at the Edges of Science: Horizoning Work amid Runaway Change." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 4: 570–95. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.4.06
Phyoe Phyoe Aung
2023 "Opportunities and Challenges for Student Unions." *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 3: 123–144.
Povinelli, Elizabeth
2011 *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Prasse-Freeman, Elliott
2015 "Conceptions of Justice and the Rule of Law." In *Myanmar: The Dynamics of an Evolving Polity*, edited by David Steinberg, 89–114. Boulder, Colo.: Lynnne Rienner Publishers.
2016 "The New Burma Is Starting to Look Too Much Like the Old Burma." *Foreign Policy*, June 28.
2023a "Bullets and Boomerangs: Proleptic Uses of Failure in Myanmar's Anti-Coup Uprising." *Public Culture* 35, no. 1: 73–112. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-10202416
2023b *Rights Refused: Grassroots Activism and State Violence in Myanmar.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
Proctor, Hannah
2024 *Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat*. New York: Verso.
Rhoads, Elizabeth, and Courtney Wittekind
2018 "Rethinking Land and Property in a 'Transitioning' Myanmar: Representations of Isolation, Neglect, and Natural Decline." *Journal of Burma Studies* 22, no. 2: 171–213. https://doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2018.0011

Robbins, Joel
2007 "Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity." *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 1: 5–38. https://doi.org/10.1086/508690
Schielke, Samuli
2023 "'Revolution? There Was a Revolution?': Defeat, Mythology, and Continuity in Egypt after 2011." In *The Affective Dynamics of Mass Protests: Midän Moments and Political Transformation in Egypt and Turkey*, edited by Bilgin Ayata and Cilja Harders, 165–81. London: Routledge.
Schrank, Delphine
2015 *The Rebel of Rangoon: A Tale of Defiance and Deliverance in Burma*. New York: Bold Type Books.
Scott, David
2004 *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
2014 *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Sebro, Tani
2016 "Dancing the Nation: The Politics of Exile, Mobility, and Displacement along the Thai-Burma Border." PhD dissertation, University of Hawai'i.
Shah, Alpa
2021 "For an Anthropological Theory of Praxis: Dystopic Utopia in Indian Maoism and the Rise of the Hindu Right." *Social Anthropology* 29, no. 1: 68–86. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12978
Silverstein, Michael, and Greg Urban
1996 "The Natural History of Discourse." In *Natural Histories of Discourse*, edited by Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, 1–17. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Spiro, Melford
1966 "Buddhism and Economic Action in Burma." *American Anthropologist* 68, no. 5: 1163–73. https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1966.68.5.02a00040
Strange, Stuart
2018 "'It's Your Family That Kills You': Responsibility, Evidence, and Misfortune in the Making of Ndyuka History." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60, no. 3: 629–58. https://doi.org/10.1017/S001041751800021X
Taylor, Astra
2016 "Against Activism." *The Baffler*, no. 30: 123–31.
Thein-Lemelson, Seinenu
2021 "Healing Our Sacrifice: Trauma and Translation in the Burmese Democracy Movement." In *Traumatic Pasts in Asia: History, Psychiatry, and Traums from the 1930s to the Present*, edited by Mark S. Micale and Hans Pols. New York: Berghan.
2025 "When Memory Is Not Defended: Precarity and Political Imprisonment in Myanmar." In *Defending Memory in Global Politics: Mnemonical in/Security and Crisis*, edited by Erica Resende, Dovilė Budrytė, and Douglas Becker, 121–38. London: Routledge.
Trisal, Nishita
2025 "How to Sustain a Strike: Rules, Routines, and the Essential in Kashmir." *Cultural Anthropology* 40, no. 1: 162–90. https://doi.org/10.14506/ca40.1.07
Trouillot, Michel-Rolph
2003 *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*. New York: Palgrave.
Virtual Federal University Research Program (VFURP)
2023 "Young Revolutionaries from Past and Present." *Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship* 3: 521–44.
Whorf, Benjamin
1956 "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language." In *Language, Thought, and Reality*, edited by John B. Carroll, 134–59. New York: Wiley.