

THESIS

THA BAW POUT DEH: AN AUTOHISTORIA FROM THE BURMESE DIASPORA

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

THA BAW POUT DEH: AN AUTOHISTORIA FROM THE BURMESE DIASPORA

This study seeks to make sense of my first-hand experience witnessing and experiencing the Burmese diaspora both from within and as an outsider. The title *Tha Baw Pout Deh* is a Burmese phrase that describes the process of reaching an understanding of a complex subject. It is a compound phrase made up of *Tha Baw* (mind set) and *Pout Deh* (explode), much like the English phrase ‘to blow your mind’. My *Tha Baw Pout Deh* began with my experience living and working with Burmese refugees on the border between Burma and Thailand. Theories I was exposed to subsequently as a formal student of Ethnic Studies, both at the University of Colorado at Boulder and at Colorado State University, helped me comprehend fully my experience in the borderlands and my prior experience as a child of mixed race in a predominantly white and extremely affluent Boulder. It is from the collision of my border experience, my own upbringing, and Ethnic Studies theories and accounts through which chapters of this thesis were produced. I use these chapters to illustrate the central message of my thesis, which is that a contribution of three factors was needed to reach my *Tha Baw Pout Deh*. These are an autobiographical experience, first-hand observation of the experience of others, and a theoretical framework learned from the Ethnic Studies literature.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank the people of Burma, without whom, this thesis would not have been possible. So many people took me into their homes, fed me, and cared for me with everything that they had. I learned so much from them and I can only hope that my efforts have been and will be enough to repay them. I also want to thank my family and friends who are always behind me and to whom I am so grateful. And last, I would like to thank my teachers here at Colorado State University and at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Thank you for sharing your time and knowledge with me.

DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this work to my Pwa Pwa, my Po Po and my U Myat Thwin. Pwa Pwa, thank you for being one of the first people in this world to feed me, your warmth and love radiates throughout my life even to this day. Po Po, you always emphasized the importance of a good education. You loved me from the start and I thank you. You will always be in my dreams, laughing. U Myat Thwin, I'm sorry you had to go, we haven't forgotten you and we will come visit you soon.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This thesis provides an insight into the Burmese diaspora but from a personal point of view. In this chapter, readers will be provided with my personal interest in Burma and how this thesis came about, as well as a brief section on history, politics, and ethnic conflict in Burma. I will end the chapter with a glossary of terms and my Research Questions.

I am half Burmese and therefore have a personal connection to the community. I have spent several years living and working in and around Burma. In the beginning of 2012, I visited Thailand and Burma for the first time since I was a child. Later that year I moved to the border to teach English as a volunteer with a Christian international Non-Governmental Organization. I lived and taught at a medical clinic in an Internally Displaced Persons' (IDP) camp. I stayed for about five months in the camp. In 2013, after working and saving money back home in Colorado over the summer, I moved back to Thailand to a different spot on the Thai/Burma border. I was volunteering with the same NGO, teaching English again, but this time I was working at a migrant school in the town of Mae Sot, Thailand. I taught English, Social Studies, and Art to 11th and 12th graders. I taught people who had fled war in Burma, and I taught both the kids and their parents. I have a very deep personal connection to this country, yet, when I speak with people about it, often they have never even heard about the country, let alone the people of Burma and what they have endured. I now work in the Burmese community in Aurora, Colorado. I like to let people know that there is a large Burmese immigrant community in Aurora/Denver. There are around four thousand people from Burma living in this community. This is the

community in which I live and I find it to be quite robust, brimming with a rich assortment of cultures from Burma and full of people who are a vital part of Colorado.

Visits to the border were life-changing; they made me examine who I am and the worlds that I live in. The results of these often-self-internal examinations, along with experience living on the border and many visits to Burma, are organized into essays that form the bulk of this thesis. I will begin with a section on the historical background on Burma, also known as Myanmar. I will then provide positionality by describing my relationship with Burma, how I came upon this topic and what my potential or actual biases could be. The subsequent chapter, Autohistoria, uses five essays to illustrate the central message of my thesis, which is that a combination of three factors is needed to reach the deepest understanding of one's own world and experience. These are an autobiographical experience, first-hand observation of the experience of others, and, in my view, a theoretical framework drawn from the Ethnic Studies literature. I will end this thesis with a look to the future.

History, Politics, and Ethnic conflict in Burma

Burma, also known as Myanmar, is a country in Southeast Asia with a landmass almost exactly the size of the state of Texas. Within its borders, which were created by the British, live over 135 different ethnic groups, each with its own language, customs and religion. (Overview of Ethnic Groups, 2014). The British colonized the area now known as Burma in three stages, each incorporating more and more land area from the South to the North. Colonization began with the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) and was completed in 1886 following the third Anglo-Burmese War, with Burma becoming part of British East India. The various ethnic groups, most

of which were self-governing but in military conflict with each other and with neighboring China and Siam (now Thailand) before colonization, artificially became part of a single country under the British. The borders between regions in which different ethnic groups reside are porous and, in many parts, people cross back and forth. A very large amount of Burma's political unrest today comes from the tensions brought about by the inter-mixings between these ethnic groups that was forced by the British colonizers.

The dominant ethnic group in Burma is the Bamar or Burman, comprising more than half of the population, and this is where we get the word “Burmese” from. The term “Burmese” is typically used to refer to members of all ethnic groups including Burmans, but some ethnic groups shun the use of “Burmese” to describe themselves. In this thesis, I will use “Burmese” to refer to members of all ethnic groups that reside within Burma/Myanmar. The significance of the change of the name from Burma to Myanmar, which occurred in 1989, will be explained below (Should it be Burma or Myanmar?, 2007)

At the outbreak of World War II, Burmese nationalists sought the help of the Japanese to overthrow British rule by military action. The leader of the group was Major General Aung San, who formed the Burma Defense Army, later renamed the Burma National Army. The Japanese declared Burma ‘independent’ in 1943, but this turned out to be a sham, with the Japanese maintaining control of the country. The Burma National Army then aligned with the Allies to drive the Japanese out of Burma. Burma received independence from the British in 1948 (they left India in 1947), who left the newly formed country in the hands of mostly Burmans despite the fact that the newly drawn borders encompassed multiple ethnic groups. Thus, Burma was

born artificially from colonial action, through military action, to become a neo-colony ruled by the Burmans. Major General Aung San is the father of current Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi and is viewed by the Burmese as the liberator of Burma.

Before receiving Independence from the British, Major General Aung San and leaders of the future Burma attempted to address the ethnic issues. There are eight major ethnic groups in Burma that occupy their respective states/regions in which the smaller ethnic sub-groups live: Karen, Karenni (also known as Kayah), Kachin, Chin, Burman, Shan, Arakanese (also known as Rakhine) and Mon. In 1947, representatives of the major ethnic groups met at the Panglong Conference (named after the town in which it was held), to draft an agreement. The Panglong Agreement, as it became known, determined that the different ethnic groups would live in harmony with one another for a ten-year waiting period during which the Burmans would be in control. After this time, it was agreed, the ethnic groups would regain total autonomy over the region that they had governed before British colonization, while also working together with the Burmans. With the Panglong Agreement, leaders of the major ethnic groups agreed to join together to form the Union of Burma, a single country. The Panglong Agreement was signed in February 1947 but was never implemented because in July of the same year Major General Aung San and his associates, who were believed to be the future of democratic Burma, were assassinated by a conservative paramilitary force, for motives that are still debated. The future of Burma is said to have died that day. Ethnic tensions in Burma have thus been volatile since before the country was even born and continue to be so to this day.

Burma was ruled by an elected parliamentary-style government after Independence in 1948. But the situation remained volatile. Even at the time of signing in 1947, members of non-Burman groups who disagreed with the Panglong Agreement took to arms and went underground. Insurgencies led by Shan, Arakanese, and Karen armed forces continued. In 1962, a military coup, led by many former members of the Burma National Army, overthrew the democratically elected government, with the goal of using military action to unite Burma and squash ethnic insurgencies where political negotiations had failed. The military junta that came into power after the coup was made up of ethnic Burmans and used violence and military action as the solution for ethnic conflict from 1962 to this day. Interspersed throughout that time period, there were uprisings which attempted to topple the rulers, but mostly the country was very violently and tightly controlled during that time period by the military junta. This is a part of an explanation as to why there is a historic tension between the various minority ethnic groups in Burma and the majority Burmese ethnic group.

Under the military junta, the country was tightly closed off to foreign investment and any type of foreign interaction. Burmese were likewise prohibited from officially leaving the country even for visits; they were simply not issued passports or any other travel documents. This makes the departure of my mother's family from Burma in 1976 an exceptional event that I will discuss below in the Positionality section. The junta had absolute control until 2010. What Lorde (2007) writes about in "*The Master's Tools*" piece is reminiscent of a phenomenon in Burma called "Burmanization." This is the colonizing of all people native to Burma, forcing the colonized ethnic groups to assimilate into Burmese culture with an intent to erase ethnic culture. This takes place in the education system, in which ethnic languages are not allowed to be taught in the

curriculum, and it reflects extreme nationalist Burmese rhetoric. The way the mostly Burman military chose to deal with ethnic conflict was to erase ethnic identity or eliminate insurgencies with force. The collateral damage of the actions of the military junta has been the displacement of members of the ethnic groups across the border into neighboring Bangladesh, India, Thailand and China (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The displacement of members of the ethnic groups across the border into neighboring Bangladesh, India, Thailand and China. Source: Poverty driving Burmese workers east, 2007.

In 1988, a pro-democracy movement was squashed with ruthless force by the military government. Thousands, mostly students, were killed. This was followed in 1989 by a change in the name of the country from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar'. The official reason given was that 'Myanmar' is more inclusive and acknowledges not only the Burmans but also other ethnic groups. While most countries recognize the name change, the US and UK continue to use 'Burma' as a way to protest the junta's having acted without popular consensus. I will use 'Burma' throughout my thesis, for the same reason (What is in a name: Burma or Myanmar?, 2018).

In 2010, military rule began to thaw. This was based in part on the rulers' recognition that the economy was in dire shape. They began by easing economic and cultural control, allowing foreign investments and visitors. A general election was held in 2015. The constitution automatically gives the military 25% of the parliamentary seats, which means any governing party must obtain the cooperation of the military. Today, Burma is geopolitically an enormously important part of Southeast Asia. Its location is right in the middle of a direct trade route from China to the Indian Ocean. Not surprisingly, China is a key economic partner of Burma's. Currently there are multinational infrastructure projects being carried out in Burma to complete China's new "belt and road" initiative, an infrastructure development and investment initiative that would stretch from East Asia to Europe (China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative, 2019). This could not have happened under the old regime. Currently there is a lot of investment entering Burma.

The recent social and economic openness of Burma has had an impact on Burmese refugees and migrant workers. Mae Sot is a Thai town on the Burma border and is home to Burmese migrant workers and the largest refugee camp, with approximately 50,000 refugees (Mae La refugee camp, 2019). Thailand's military government has designated Mae Sot to be a Special Economic Zone (SEZ, 2018) to improve trade with Burma. Substantial oppression and abuses of refugees and migrant workers by dominating groups such as the Thai police, local businesses, and mafia have been reported in Mae Sot. Taking advantage of "illegals" is likely to be exacerbated by the establishment of the SEZ. This is similar to how migrants from Central and South America are policed and bullied here in the US (From the Tiger to the Crocodile, 2010).

Definitions of Terms within the Thesis (listed in order of appearance)

Tha Baw Pout Deh To reach an unexpected understanding of a complex subject. It is a compound word made up of Tha Baw (mind set) and Pout Deh (explode), not unlike the English 'blow your mind'.

Autohistoria Gloria E. Anzaldúa defines 'Autohistoria' as the genre of writing about one's personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir (Pitts, 2016).

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

IDP Internally Displaced Person

Bamar/Burman The largest ethnic group in Burma. This is also the ruling ethnic group.

Burmanization Forcing ethnic groups to assimilate into a national Burmese culture with an intent to erase local ethnic culture.

Burmese Used to refer to the nationality of people residing or coming from Burma regardless of ethnic affiliation.

Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Regions designated by the Thai Government with plans to support infrastructure development, investment incentives, and administrative services to attract foreign workers and businesses.

White privilege “An invisible package of unearned assets” that makes it so that whiteness is often not questioned or even self-recognized (McIntosh, 1989).

Nepantla Anna Louise Keating (2006) writes of the Anzalduan term, Nepantla: “As I understand the term, then, Nepantla includes both radical dis-identification and transformation. We dis-identify with existing beliefs, social structures, and models of identity; by doing so, we are able to transform these existing conditions.”

Dokah This is an ancient Pali word which means “suffering”. It is part of the current Burmese language.

LTL What most aid workers call Loi Tai Leng, a village that straddles the Thai/Burma border in which an IDP camp and a school for migrants are located.

Pwa Pwa Grandma, like *na na*.

Pwa Pwa Gyi Great-grandmother. It is a compound word made up of Pwa Pwa (Grandma, like *na na*) and Gyi (big or great).

U lay or Oo Lay Burmese for ‘uncle’ if he is the younger brother of a parent. U = uncle, lay = little or younger

Bahmar Pyee Burma, as called by Burmans. *Pyee* = country

Sadu Buddhist blessing, similar to ‘*Amen*’

A word about Burmese names. *U* (male) and *Daw* (female) are honorifics. Burmese traditionally do not have family names, and there is no concept of taking a spouse's name upon marriage. Therefore, it is possible for someone to have a single name. This happened to my great grandmother. Her name was 'Tin'. When she was young, she was called *Ma Tin* (*Ma* is the honorific for young females). When she got older, she became *Daw Tin*.

Research Questions

In my thesis I will address these three research questions.

RQ1. How does my own personal experience contribute to the concept of *Tha Baw Pout Deh*?

RQ2. How does the first-hand observation of the experience of others contribute to the concept of *Tha Baw Pout Deh*?

RQ3. How does the theoretical framework from the Ethnic Studies literature contribute to the concept or experience of *Tha Baw Pout Deh*?

In the Autohistoria chapter, I will examine how each section answers each of these questions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides the background for the essays that form the bulk of the thesis. These stories and writings describe events on the border between Burma and Thailand. They put into context my upbringing as a biracial child in a mostly white and affluent college town in the US. They provide real-life examples of Ethnic Studies theories I would later learn in college and graduate school.

Autohistoria or Testimonio

In “*Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro*” Gloria Anzaldua (2015) writes that “autohistoria is a term I use to describe the genre of writing about one’s personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir, and autohistoria-teoria is a personal essay that theorizes.” It means it is not necessarily a strict factual account of one’s life. Instead, one can play with the reality. It is like *magical realism*. Andrea J. Pitts (2016) writes about Anzaldua in “Gloria E. Anzaldua’s Autohistoria- teoria as an epistemology of Self Knowledge / Ignorance”. She talks about how writing autohistoria can result in the capacity to act and to create. So, the act of writing autohistoria should ideally result in some positive change in the world. The purpose is to build solidarity with others. I link this to how I learned ethnic studies and women’s studies theories and how they inform my work as a preschool teacher. This is how I hope my thesis will have an impact.

Ethnic Groups and Migration Patterns

Because of the long and complicated history that has taken place across the Burmese borderlands, there is a lot of inter-ethnic tension between different ethnic groups in and from Burma. The causes behind these tensions are not always the same because each ethnic group has its own unique history and culture. For example, Karen and Shans occupy areas of Burma that border Thailand, but the history of the Karen under British colonialism is less contentious than that of the Shans. This is because the Karens fought on the side of the British against the Japanese during World War II. The Shans never did so and have always remained a more militant ethnic group when compared to some of the other ethnic groups. Refugees displaced by the fighting between Karen or Shan armies and the Burmese military seek shelter across the border in Thailand. Sections of this thesis are based on my interactions with Karen and Shan refugees in IDP camps across the Burma-Thai Border.

White Privilege

Peggy McIntosh (1989) defines “white privilege” as, “an invisible package of unearned assets” that makes it so that whiteness is often not questioned or recognized. She writes about how whiteness is seen as a default racial category that white people don’t have to interrogate. Because whiteness isn’t questioned by white people, they can get away with a lot of things, such as thinking they are white saviors. Colorblind ideologies lend aid in this process of white denial because under colorblind ideologies race is never discussed.

What is white privilege? It is not having to question your own positionality in regards to race. It is being able to be in a predominately white space and not feel like you are standing out because of your race. It is being racially profiled while you are simply trying to shop. It is having safety, not fearing for your life when you “do something wrong” in public. White privilege is not having to be mindful of your potential neighbors when looking for new housing and not being fearful of your neighbors because they don’t like your skin tone. And then, not taking good housing because there are racist neighbors nearby. It is internalizing the belief that whiteness is the default and that everyone else is other than and outside of the norm that is whiteness. White privilege is being able to hold an entire conversation with someone, not mentioning race because it is implied that the subjects are white people and then, in one sentence, othering an entire group of people by stating their ethnic background. To be white is to be oblivious. I have heard many white people say that they have never had to think about whiteness or race at all. That is white privilege. All this coupled with media images and propaganda put out by aid groups contribute to the white savior complex.

Whiteness is an ideology. Anyone can espouse and support white ideologies, just like anyone can support patriarchy. Bell hooks (2010) says that “patriarchy has no gender.” Anyone can believe the images put out there by aid organizations of malnourished children and then think that by going to an underdeveloped country they will “save” those people. White people need to start talking about race.

In relation to white privilege, I recently read a book that talks about white privilege as well as an array of other pertinent topics. It is called “*Brown White Black: An American Family at the*

Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality and Religion” by Nishta J. Mehra (2019). It is very applicable to this thesis and to questions and issues that come up in my life. In it, Mehra writes of growing up in the South and of the racism there that, “it was an entire posture of separateness, a code that could be violated in only one direction.” She later writes that, “becoming the parent of a black son has given me the perspective to see that there is a real reluctance to engage in a conversation about the Asian American community’s participation in anti-black racism”.... “I am no longer willing to inconvenience myself or make parts of myself invisible so that I don’t upset others-whether they are white people or brown people.” She writes this while explaining that she has grown up submerged in whiteness and with a class privilege that often let her ignore the realities of being black in the south. She’d had to grapple with how all her life she had gotten away with “thinking of (herself) as white.” She talks about how fully living within her own brown skin and accepting it is a continual process. And she feels an imperative to not be quiet and to instead be proactive in order to protect and arm her son for the world that we live in.

Whiteness is an ideology that anyone can assume. Bell Hooks (2010) writes that “patriarchy has no gender” and the same type of thing can be applied to race. One does not have to be white in order to be a white supremacist. Many people who are not white either consciously or unconsciously hold up white culture, aesthetic or ideology above that of “minority races.”

This is important because I went into my work in Asia having experienced very little personal self-reflection and, because of this privilege that I possessed, my relationships were affected and I did embody white savior-ness in certain ways. Only later, during my time as a student of Ethnic Studies, did I begin to think about my own position in the social hierarchy and all of the

intricacies at play. When it comes to “saving” people, not only race but also class and gender play into the dynamics.

Settler Colonialism

In “Tropical Fish” (Baingana, 2006), central to the story is the relationship between Christine and Peter, and, so, that is where I will begin. Their relationship is already on unequal ground when it begins. When they meet, he speaks in a demeaning manner to her. The way that he speaks to her shows us that he doesn’t take her seriously. She says she feels like he is speaking like a “kind uncle to a five year old.” He patronizes and demeans her from the very second they meet.

Later, without her consent, he takes her to his bed. He acts as if he has a right to her body and is deserving of it, which she internalizes, and throughout the story she is submissive to him, both physically and mentally. She goes often to his house, his mansion, and she uses the location as an escape from the world she lives in. She can almost fully trick herself into believing that there is nothing wrong with the situation except for one constant reminder, which is the indigenous male servant who works in the white man’s house. Whenever she sees him she remembers her true life outside of this relationship and how this part of her life is a farce.

Throughout the six months that Christine is with Peter, she compromises her needs and desires to please him. She always goes along with what he says and what he wants, and eventually she gets pregnant. She has an abortion on her own and is degraded and judged by the medical staff as they are discharging her. She later tells Peter, he tries to buy her off, and their relationship ends.

This piece covers a range of topics. Most notably, it can serve as an example of how not to have a decolonized romantic relationship. It shows how women can live solely to acquiesce to the needs of men. Peter was white (or as Christine puts it, “pink, actually”), and Christine was Ugandan. He was living in Uganda to exploit one of the natural resources of her country, like a true colonizer. The piece shows how women will sacrifice their bodies because they think that this is the way to please and keep men.

We can use the model of “settler colonialism” and apply it to heterosexual romantic relationships such as the one that Christine was a part of. The settler sees a land that they feel has never been conquered before; they see land as a thing to conquer and the people on it as “savages” who need also need to be conquered, either through assimilation, genocide, or removal. The settler feels a God-given right to take what is not his. All of these things can be applied to dominating, abusive, colonizing relationships like Christine’s. In a colonized hetero relationship, there is an imbalance of power. The man feels like he has a right to the woman’s body, and the woman internalizes that type of psychology and ends up feeling like she owes the man something.

The fascination with virgins can be linked to the idea that the settler colonialist has regarding conquering lands, that is, that they believe them to be uninhabited and in need of the white man’s civilization. In the sex industry there is a fascination with virgins. Men who wish to have sex with a virgin must pay more money than for sex with women or girls who are not. When white settlers were invading the US before it was the US they had the idea that indigenous people were undeserving of the land and therefore it was morally just to take it away from them by force. They also had the idea that the native people did not know how to use the land properly and that it was

going to waste and in need of the white man's civilizing. God was another part of the "manifest destiny" that impelled the white settlers to colonize the land of the original Native Americans.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

When Burmese words swim thru my head and into my dreams in the middle of the night

That's when I feel I am most at ease

Most in my peace

And most in my light

Thazin Su Telling

Introduction

In this chapter, I describe how I came to write my autohistoria. Gloria E. Anzaldua defines 'Autohistoria' as the genre of writing about one's personal and collective history using fictive elements, a sort of fictionalized autobiography or memoir (Pitts, 2016).

After I completed my Associate degree at Front Range Community College, I transferred to CU Boulder. I was obligated to declare my major. Not knowing what I wanted to focus on, I declared a Psychology major because I had enjoyed Psychology classes before. After a semester of classes, I became convinced that Psychology was not for me. I was not even sure that an undergraduate degree was for me. So, I took time off to travel. A chance encounter with a family friend brought me to a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border. It was in a town called Loi Tai Leng. After a week there, I was determined to come back for longer. I managed to find a sponsor who could provide me with documents needed for a visa. I then spent a year there and after a brief visit to the US, returned to the same region but at a different border town called Mae Sot. I

also stayed periodically in the nearest city in Thailand, Chiang Mai, to attend Burmese language classes and to teach English to refugees who made it that far into Thailand.



Figure 2. Map of Burma and neighboring countries. Places I have visited or lived in and are mentioned in this thesis are shown in circles. Source: Scouting Myanmar

The approximately two years that I spent living and teaching refugees on the Thai-Burma border were a shock to my system. I took books and books of field-notes of my experience and my thoughts, which serve as the foundation of this thesis. To say that the experience was mind-blowing is the literal truth. The Burmese phrase ‘*Tha Baw Pout Deh*’ means to come to an unexpected understanding. It’s the phrase comprised of the verbs ‘to understand’ and ‘to

explode’! I think this is so interesting because when I have an intellectual epiphany I feel like it’s an explosion of consciousness! And this phrase is so beneficial to me so that I use it often and it informs my thinking and explains so much to me in my life.

My *Tha Baw Pout Deh* did not come at once and did not happen at the same time as my experiences. I returned to Boulder after my last year in Mae Sot and resumed my studies at CU, now as an Ethnic Studies major. It was from what I learned in Ethnic Studies classes that I became able to make sense of all of my field notes from the border, experiences before my stays in Asia, and travels since then. And this remains a continuing process. In each section of this, my autohistoria, I will first introduce my notes, providing my notes as they were, and then relate these to the larger knowledge in Ethnic Studies that I have acquired while earning my undergraduate degree at the University of Colorado at Boulder and during my Masters studies at Colorado State University. The theoretical framework I absorbed from formal classes allows me to draw parallels with my own experience and to interpret what I wrote.

Positionality

Sandra Harding (2006) lays a foundation for “standpoint epistemology” in her book, *Science and Social Inequality*. She writes that, among other things, standpoint includes an examination of doing research from an understanding of “situated knowledge.” For example, modern-day hard sciences are not value free and merely objective as they purport to be. The scientists who lead research projects have knowledge that is situated in their own socio-economic and personal and

political experiences. “Standpoint” also values collective knowledge and gives value to non-normative knowledge accounts. This is important, because I am non-normative.

I was born into an international household in Pittsburgh, PA. My parents were both immigrants, and my family members were and are spread all over the globe. My mother was born in Burma and lived there until high school. She is of a Burman and Mon ethnic background. My father was born and raised in Wales, UK. They met in graduate school in Pittsburgh, where I was born.

When I was a baby, I learned to speak English in tandem with Burmese. My two Burmese uncles lived with us, and they looked after me in the afternoons after school. I grew up hearing them speak Burmese to each other, to my mother, and to me. As is common with first-generation people, I slowly assimilated into Western culture and by the time I was a young teen, I never gave any thought to the countries my parents are from. Only as an adult have I reconnected with Burma and to some extent, Wales.

Theoretical Framework

It is my position as a half-Burmese who grew up in white bourgeoisie Boulder that led to my explosion of consciousness, my *Tha Baw Pout Deh*. In “*La Jornada*” Cherrie Moraga writes about her “growing consciousness as a woman of color” (Esparza A., 2014). I can relate to this kind of thing, and I link it to *Tha Baw Pout Deh*. She also writes about “coming home” when she met five other Chicanas. This same thing happened to me while studying Burmese. I found my people, my third-space people. Third-space people are people who do not fall inside the dominant culture’s confines and who also do not fit into the culture they came from or feel like they should identify with. I also formulated the term *Tha Baw Pout Deh* while I studied

Burmese, and it all comes full-circle in this way. I mentioned in the first paragraph of this section that I am non-normative. Gloria Anzaldua's work on Nepantla and "in between-ness" (1987) is an example of non-normative work. What she writes in *Borderlands* about being "from neither here nor there" is a good means for understanding biracial consciousnesses. DuBois' "double consciousness" also plays into this conversation (Du Bois, 1897). When I first learned about "double consciousness" I had an intellectual epiphany (kind of like the one that Audre Lorde writes about, an intellectual orgasm). It was such an eye-opening moment of revelation when I learned about it. I remember where I was: I was in the first Ethnic Studies class I have ever taken, Introduction to Africana Studies and my teacher was amazing. That class was a wonderful entry into Ethnic Studies. This moment when I learned about "double consciousness" was the start of my being able to articulate my own personal process of being racialized growing up in Boulder, CO, having previously moved from San Francisco at age 12, which was a very influential time in a young person's life. Du Bois' "double consciousness" really spoke to me when I first learned about it in the summer of 2014.

I owe my *Tha Baw Pout Deh* to the theories and works of many writers, some of which are listed here. Bell hooks (2010) writes about the Imperialist White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy that we all live in and how all of these systems intersect and affect our lives. Her theories are very central to my work. The work that Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has done on bringing different African American women's lived experiences to light in *Black Feminist Thought* and the work that Melissa Harris Perry (2011) did on "crooked room theory" are also relevant to my own theoretical frameworks. Octavia Butler (1993) has also greatly influenced the way I think about the systems in which we live daily and against which we resist. I find it enjoyable to learn about

societal issues through her fiction. Lastly, I am incorporating the works of Cindi Cruz (2001) into my own work. Her views on teaching align with mine, and the way that she teaches students to look at their experiences as embodied is very important.

I have found that the larger theme of identity development can be broken down into mestiza or multiracial consciousness. This mestiza or multiracial consciousness breaks down to mean that I can racially and ethnically occupy many spaces at one time. I have indigenous roots in Burma and Wales and I am also an American citizen by nationality. Specifically, my ties to Burma are Chinese, Mon, Shan and Burmese. I am also ethnically Welsh, not British, and that history of colonization is something I don't know much about. I feel like the many cultures that have touched my life are also a part of me. For example, we have a large Indian influence in my family because a branch of my family lived there for a long time and still has ties to that place. The same goes for Nepal, where my grandparents lived and where a maternal aunt lives now. There's also the smaller theme that comes along with a multiracial or mestiza consciousness, and that is one of never fitting in anywhere and always being questioned because of your racial or ethnic identity. We can see that one, too, in *This Bridge Called my Back* (Moraga, 2015). I will explain further the connection between Cherrie Moraga's work and my thesis in the Autohistoria chapter but will end here with a quote from her:

“A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings — all fuse to create a politic born of necessity.”

This is what my work has been about and that it is what it will continue to be. When I teach preschoolers now, I am infusing what I have learned via Ethnic Studies into their lives. This quote also speaks to the intersections of our lived experiences to manifest into what we live out daily.

Thesis Writing

Here, I reflect on the very process of putting this document together. I've always thought the final process, the thesis, should be like this, a piece of work of my own making. Writing the way I think writing should be done. Writing as I see fit, as I've always done it, the only way I know how to write. Dr. Perez, my teacher and undergraduate mentor, called it “autohistoria,” like along the vein of Anzaldua. She told us in our writing workshops that there should be no restrictions on our writing: whichever way we see fit, that’s how it should work out. So I’m writing now to insert this after the eighteen-page bit that I’ve already written. This kind of personal writing is something I can be proud of. I was having a rough time writing my thesis until now because I was trying, and failing, to fit into the neat little box that academia had set out for me. I ultimately see my writing as a beautiful artform that I perform only for myself.

CHAPTER FOUR: AUTOHISTORIA

Introduction

In this chapter, I will use five essays to illustrate the central message of my thesis, which is that the contribution of three factors is needed to reach the deepest understanding of one's own world and experience. These are an autobiographical experience, first-hand observation of the experience of others, and the theoretical framework I gained from the Ethnic Studies literature in my courses. Each of these components will be described in each essay. Before starting the essays, I will provide some context in the following paragraphs.

During 2012 to 2014 I lived in Thailand. I worked with displaced people from ethnic minority groups from Burma. The first year, I taught English to Shan medics. I also taught English to the children of migrant workers in a border town called Mae Sot. When I was there I felt disillusionment, confusion, despair, and some happiness, but really just a lot of suffering. In Burmese we call suffering "dokah." This is an ancient Pali word which means "suffering." The concept of suffering in Theravada Buddhism is pretty much just a facet of life which cannot be refuted; it is something that must be accepted, as it's just a reality.

My personal involvement with Burma as an adult revolves around the physical spaces that are the borderlands between Thailand and Burma. This is where I spent two years of my life in 2012-2014, living and working as an English teacher, first in a camp for Shan refugees in a small border town called LTL, and later in Mae Sot where the migrants were predominantly Karen. And through that experience I was able to see firsthand the different ways that the ethnic

conflicts have affected people on the ground. I have seen the intergenerational ramifications of this political melee.

To explain my personal connections, I like to start with my name. From it, you can learn a lot. The Burmese name their children according to the day of the week upon which they were born. I was born on a Friday in the early morning, and thus my name begins with a “Th”. It is very culturally significant and the first place we start when we want to introduce ourselves. So, to a person who knows about Burmese culture, upon the moment of meeting me, they learn a good deal just from my name. First, “Th” denotes Friday-born. Su is a familial name. It has been passed down from Ma Su, the nickname of my grandmother. The Burmese do not use surnames. In the US, we must use them in order to conform and to fit within socio-political boundaries that are set forth within this polity, and so my surname in this country is “Telling”, which is my father’s Welsh surname, and, so, I am ‘Thazin Su’, half-Burmese, and ‘Telling’, half-Welsh. And the fact that it is fitting into this very American requirement that we have a last name constitutes the American part in my Burmese-Welsh-American identity label that I have given myself.

Yet, through it all, the Burmese part of me thrived inside. I will mention my Burmese grandmother here but will write about her again later. My earliest memories involve being a baby, well, a toddler, toddling around. I was short, and I would toddle up to my grandmother, and she would feed me curry mixed with rice, balled up into a nice little nugget of Love. The way that she fed me was so special; I’d toddle up and all of the food was mushed into a ball by hand. I think that there is a special thing about how the Burmese eat with their hands. They say that food tastes better when you eat with your hands. This memory I have of her is so simple yet

so profound and beautiful to me. The consistency of her food was perfect. That's how she could get it into a nice little compact glutinous ball; it would never fall apart, and within that little sphere, was contained all the Love and nutrients that I would ever need. She died in 2015, and I miss her so much. Yet she is with me. She inhabits my space everywhere I go. In "*Toward an Epistemology of a Brown Body*" Cindi Cruz (2001) writes about paying tribute to ancestors. She writes, "I am suggesting that our production of knowledge begins in the bodies of our mothers and grandmothers" (Cruz, 2001, pg. 658).

Here, I would like to pay tribute to my ancestors. I think I have learned a lot about how to be spiritual, and I learned it from family members who had previously been unknown to me. While my grandmother was alive, and now, even after her death, I connect with her relatives, Daw Than Shwe (her cousin) and the rest of her family. Through them, I have learned how to be a Theravada Buddhist. Via this spirituality I have been able to calm my mind and know my mind better. By knowing this part of my family, I feel like I have almost come full-circle. Because my family was a transnational family before I was ever born, my life has been fragmented. Growing up in the US but being the child of immigrants and having such complexities be a part of my life, I have never felt whole. Nepantla (Anzaldúa, 1987). But by connecting with Daw Than Shwe and that whole part of my family, I feel more complete.

Lifting the veil

My worlds had to collide in my consciousness in order for me to see things more clearly. I had been living under a veil until I went to live and work in Thailand in 2012. The veil was the white bourgeois privilege of a Boulderite, it was the colorblind ideology that we all love to espouse in

Boulder, that love of equality that we talk about without diving deep into the messy and unpleasant histories of systemic societal problems. It was growing up learning about the sanitized version of Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. but never hearing his condemnation of the war in Vietnam until my Ethnic Studies undergraduate seminar in my last year, right before I graduated! And learning about Rosa Parks as a token figure and not the careful planning that went into making her a monumental icon. And never learning about Claudette Colvin, the young single mom who, because of identity politics, was passed over before Rosa Parks was chosen. All sanitized versions of what really happened (Karenga, 2010).

The writing included in this thesis began mostly in my second year in Thailand. I wrote as much as I physically could during this time. I took up writing by hand as an exercise that I practiced daily and over time, and I became so strong at it. I was practically writing in my sleep. I was trying to make sense of my surroundings so I was constantly fleshing it all out on paper. I wrote the excerpt below when I was living in Mae Sot, Thailand and teaching at the HTL Migrant school. It reflects my deep shock at accounts of suffering in the part of the world that I was calling my new home.

Sleepless

.....Last night I had a dream and when I woke up I had seen all of the horrible things that humans could ever do to one another.....

3am: *I can't sleep. This world is too cruel and unpleasing for me right now.
a woman was alone near the refugee camp (Mae La).*

men raped and killed her.

the old man is lonely, he doesn't want to live anymore (we think he OD'd)

we don't go in that room now

Burma is fucked and the poetry is lost

~

Living on the border and seeing all of the suffering was like a kick in the face. And I still grapple with my own class privilege. I embodied the “white savior model” when I was there and I have yet to shed it completely. It was like I had been living under a veil until I went to live and work in Thailand. Having this colorblind, class-blind privilege was a detriment to me. I sometimes found myself playing into misconceptions. I found myself expressing pity toward my students because they didn't fit into what our model of success looked like, but, in actuality, they pitied me because I was bereft of culture as a capitalistic American.

At the time that I wrote *Sleepless*, I was teaching English to 11th and 12th graders. The administration at the school thought that since I was a native English speaker and from the West, that I knew it all, so they did not instruct me in any way in how to teach English. They, too, played into the white savior model. I felt very alone and unsupported in my job. I was also in shock at the level of poverty surrounding me daily. The children who attended my school lived very different lives than the children I was used to teaching back in the States and I was just overwhelmed by sadness for them.

We were living in an area that includes some of the largest refugee camps in Thailand, and we were subsumed by government corruption: you could see it occurring on the street, but there was nothing you could do about it. We were also living in a very superstitious society, and when the old man killed himself it was an unspoken taboo, and you could feel the unease in the air.

I don't know why I wrote that the poetry was lost. I must have thought that poetry was an incredibly beautiful and joyous concept but that the world was in total despair and that no amount of words, be they poems or any other types of words, could bring us back from the ultimate destruction that I had thought we had reached. This poem was only a foretelling of what was to come because eventually, two girls would die, and my despair would just continue to make me spiral downward. This next portion of my thesis ties into the three factors of my own autobiographical experience, the life experiences of others, and the theories of ethnic studies.

Lives are devalued on the other side of the border

During the 2013-2014 school year I lived in Mae Sot, Thailand. It lies about five miles from the river Moei, which constitutes this particular stretch of the Thai/Burma border. I taught English at a school called HTL. There were about 800 students from kindergarten to twelfth grade, crowded into two buildings and a multipurpose hall. HTL is called a migrant school because the children who attend are mostly all children of migrant workers doing farming to retail to manual labor.

They were migrants from Burma who thought it would be better on the Thai side.

Demographically, the majority of the school was ethnically Karen, from Burma. Karen state is directly on the other side of the border from Mae Sot, so it makes sense that the majority of the student body was Karen. Their ancestral homeland, only five miles away and across the border,

is called Kawthoolei “the land of Peace.” The Karen have lived on the land since centuries before the British made the borders. Students from the other ethnic groups of Burma were also a part of the student body, including Mon, Naga, Shan, Bamah and so on.

HTL was extremely understaffed and underfunded in large part because most of the operating budget of the school was coming from international organizations. The Thai government allowed them to function as a school on Thai soil, but the curriculum they taught was from the Burmese system (a problem in itself), and the school did not receive funding from the Thai government. The social separation stems from this stigma that is created from being “illegal” (as Burmese migrants now living in Thailand), and also from the safety bit that I mentioned above in the background section on white privilege. This safety is not having to question your own positionality in regards to race. It is being able to be in a predominately white space and not feel like you are standing out because of your race. It is having safety, not fearing for your life when you “do something wrong” in public. Karen migrants do not feel this ‘safety’ in Thailand. Since they are undocumented, they are removed from the Thai politics and have no say in how they are treated.

When I first arrived, I told the administration that I have experience and have been trained as a pre-kindergarten teacher. They had me briefly teaching third grade. Later, because of a staff shortage, I was asked to teach 11th and 12th graders. When teaching my high school students, I learned a lot from them and they from me. I learned from them about living in Karen culture. Namely, I learned, through two examples, how Karen life is awarded less value than Thai lives in the borderlands of Mae Sot.

My two examples both involve teenaged, female students at HTL. The first was an eighth grader whose name I don't know. She had fallen ill during the first school semester and ended up in the hospital. She had a serious illness that had been untreated and progressed, and she ended up needing a blood transfusion. Her case came to my attention when she was in the hospital. The nurses whom I worked with at the NGO had become aware of the situation and were racing to get her the right type of blood, but she very quickly died. My nurse friend and colleagues later explained to me how, basically, if she had not been Karen, she wouldn't have died. The poor economic situation in which she lived and her "illegal" status set her up to fail. These two things were tied to one another and exacerbated one another. Her medical condition was not treated in time, and, when it was treated, she faced discrimination in the hospital and, as a result, she did not receive the blood that could have saved her life.

The second girl died on the road. The Asian Highway Network that connects Tokyo, Japan, to Istanbul, Turkey, runs through Mae Sot. Since Mae Sot is a major border town, the highway helps to funnel goods and people throughout this region of Asia. The roads in Thailand are generally very dangerous, and the majority of the traffic fatalities involve motorbikes. I do not know this second girl's name, either, but I do know in detail how she died. She was riding side-saddle on the back of a motorbike on the highway. Since a lot of goods are moving through this area, there are a lot of large trucks on the road that move these goods. One of the semi-trucks hit the girl's motorbike, and she ended up on the ground, but she was not yet dead. (My students told me the story in great detail.) The driver pulled back around and finished her off, so to speak.

And when my students retold this story to me it was very matter-of-fact to them, as if there was no surprise that any of this could happen. They told me, very matter-of-factly, that the driver most likely did this because, as they said, Thai people know that Karen life has less value than Thai life. They said that if the girl was still alive then she would accrue hospital bills and someone would have to pay for them. If the girl had lived she would have lived to talk, and, basically, it would be better for the driver if she were dead. They told me all of this as if they had known for a while that they are second class (non)citizens. Anyway, all of this was meant to show how Karen life is not valued in Thailand. And here, we can connect to the Black Lives Matter movement. The ethnic groups from Burma are akin to Black people in the U. S., and the dominating Bamar would be the institution of the “Justice” Department and the police in the US. The previous portion of my thesis ties into the three factors of my own autobiographical experience, the life experiences of others and the theories of ethnic studies.

K-1 visa

I wrote the piece below as a way to grieve and heal over the ending of an old relationship. It was with my ex-boyfriend, Kpaw Htoo. It was also me trying to make sense of my time living and working in Mae Sot, Thailand. We had met at a migrant school for children from Burma now living on the Thai side of the Thai Burma border. Kpaw Htoo was a teacher at the HTL school where I was teaching English. He was a revered teacher and an accomplished and successful leader in the community. Yet, as we considered our future, things looked bleak. K-1 is the name of the visa given to the fiancé of a US citizen in order to enter the USA. The poem I wrote below reflects the misgivings we had. In the poem, I address issues such as citizenship status and

immigration law, division of labor, the next generation, an incompatible love (which is not written about explicitly in the poem), and transnational relationships.

K-1 Visa

In this world you are a doctor, a teacher, a leader

Your people respect you and cherish you

If I bring you back to my world you will be nothing

The only saving grace I can bestow upon you is my citizenship

And even that they may take away from you

You will be a peon-another dark brown body to shit on and break

You will pack our meat, make our phone cases and our door frames

Oh, of course, our sushi too

You will forget your people all in the name of amerika, the great

No more doctors saving lives

No more teaching of the next generation

You will be in america's charge now

And america beats her children

~

While I was living in Mae Sot, Saw Kpaw Htoo planted two papaya trees in my garden. He had dug them up from across the street where they were growing wild. He said they represented him and me. He would plant them close to each other and watch them grow. They would grow tall and mature and would make smaller little trees in their shade. I wrote the poem below for the occasion, and with the recognition that there was not a future for us.

Kpaw Htoo

One tree for me, one tree for you. He dug up two papaya trees.

“Your voice is sweet, cho-deh.”*

Is it fair that you cook and I drive?

Yes.

Is it fair that I have a passport but you can't leave your house?.....

Is it fair that I leave you behind, I never take you with me?....

“I can't even open my eyes but I'll listen to your voice. Close my eyes and listen to your voice. I can see you near me, beside me. You are in my blood, in my head.”

~

(* 'so sweet' in Burmese)

Most poignant to me and to other readers of this poem is the part about him not having access to a basic human right to freedom of movement. Because of the long history of ethnic tensions and

the legacies of colonialism, he was deemed “illegal” in Thailand, with no passport. The teachers at HTL School did have documents stating that they were affiliated with the school, and, in theory, these documents were supposed to keep the teachers and students safe from harassment by the Thai police who were enforcing immigration law. In actuality, the Thai police are notoriously corrupt, and it is common knowledge that if one is stopped by immigration police and has enough money to pay their bribes then they can avoid detention. But in actuality, most of the teachers at HTL were not being paid more than it took to feed themselves and their families, and they could not afford bribes. All of this is to say that although HTL’s teacher ID cards should theoretically have protected the migrant teachers, most of them avoided being in public unless absolutely necessary.

This is where the line of “*I always leaving you behind and never take you with me*” comes in. The effect of branding entire groups of people “illegal” their entire lives is to leave deep psychological impacts on these people. The result is that, the enclave that was HTL was very much removed from the larger part of society in that particular part of Thailand, Mae Sot. They were removed economically, socially, politically, racial/ethnically and religiously. This was not Burma and was not Thailand; it was a third culture on the border.

Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands* (1987) perfectly captures how a third culture is created when an international border is formed, in this case the Mexican/US borderlands. Her conceptualization of the Mexican borderlands was and has been helpful for me in my conceptualization surrounding living on the Thai-Burmese borderlands.

The next portion of my thesis ties into the three factors of my own autobiographical experience, the life experiences of others, and the theories of Ethnic Studies.

Violence against Women

(An untitled poem by Thazin Su Telling)

He plucked my wings slowly, methodically

He pulled them from my body

Then he scattered them on the cold blue tile.

They fluttered as the life left them

And then they stopped.

In this section I want to talk about gender-based violence and rape. One hot sticky tropical “winter” night in Mae Sot, I was attempting to sleep, as my roommate was, too, in her own room. I don’t remember how it started, but I know my windows were open, and when my windows were open I could hear everything that my neighbors were doing and every word they spoke in Thai. There were two young men, an older, wretched man, and a girlfriend of one of the young ones. They told me they were farmers, and they often drank on their porch and beat their dog. Those men were all wretched, disgusting, and despicable. That night I was trying to get to sleep but the fighting between the girlfriend and boyfriend was just getting started. She had a very high-pitched shrill voice, and he was merciless. They were spitting words in Thai, so I could not understand a word they were spouting, but it was very heated. He was after her for something, as if she had done something terribly wrong. He yelled at her for what felt like hours but was probably less. Then he started throwing things. The houses were so close that you could

tell where they were and what he was throwing. They were in the kitchen. Metals hits the ground loudly. The rice cooker, utensils, pots.....and then he started hitting her. She would yell back and he would strike her flesh. I heard the slap of skin. Their breathing became deeper. She hit the teak floor. And, so, Jay (my roommate) and I ended up sleeping huddled in the living room, as far away from their house as possible. I wrote,

The dust was merciless

It penetrated every orifice

And choked you from the inside

My neighbor beat his girlfriend

I could hear the panting

Feel the hits

Practically could feel the hits cuz it felt so close- windows open in the cool warm

Thai nighttime

It was like I could feel him beating her because the reverberations of the hit

against her skin were seemingly so close to my ear, her pleas, her voice so close

to where I slept

I could feel him hitting her

We couldn't really do anything. Hopeless and powerless.

When I saw them practice tying each other up, I could see the rope-around the wrists, wrapped many times-looping-down to the ankles. A complete chokehold.

Sexual violence was rampant on the border. Seeing incidents out in the open made me think of my own experience with sexual violence and how it was not-talked about but swept under the rug.

In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherrie Moraga (2015) writes about building trust with a particular gay friend of hers. What presents itself as an obstacle to alliance-building for them in particular was established around the fact that gender-based violence occurs in disproportionately high numbers to women. Her friend described his great fear of being raped by men. She writes that, “(H)e *had* felt raped by men; he wanted to forget what that meant. What grew from that discussion was the realization that in order for him to create an authentic alliance with me, he must deal with the primary source of his own oppression. He must, first, emotionally come to terms with what it feels like to be a victim. If he - or anyone - were to truly do this, it would be impossible to discount the oppression of others, except by again forgetting how we have been hurt.” When I read this, it resonated with me. A large number of females in my life have faced violence from men, myself included. An alarming number of young women I know who are in college have been raped, myself included. I wrote the next paragraphs while I was on a flight. An in-flight movie triggered an understanding of an episode in my life. I wrote,

I am on the plane, Shanghai to Seattle, I am watching "Gaslight." I just had a The Baw Pout Deh moment....At that time I'd locked myself in my room. I was not ever coming out then. I remember doing a lot of harm to myself at that time. I don't remember but I must've eaten then. So at that time I was watching a lot of "classic" movies and obsessing over them like I do. People always ask what was the impetus for moving outta that house and now I think Gaslight was part of it. I subconsciously knew I had to get out or I woulda kept being driven madder and madder..... I'm glad that I was finally able to leave and now finally, I am able to process it all, mostly. Sigh.

In *Gaslight*, Ingrid Bergman's husband is extremely abusive and he makes her go insane. That was what happened to me at that time. Gloria Steinem always talks about how in the '70s the first wave feminists talked about how rape can occur between intimate partners, and, yes, I now know this to be true. It's not cool if you wake up and someone else's body is inside yours, not cool if at any moment a person can take liberties with my body and do as they please. This person used to play mind games and make me question myself. I still do. He had complete control over my mind and body.

How does this experience fit into my autohistoria on the Burmese diaspora? It fits in two ways. First, violence against women in the borderland that I wrote about in the beginning of this section made me think of the oppression I experienced and how I had internalized it. Cherrie Moraga (2015) poses two important questions in '*This Bridge Called My Back*'. "How do I internalize my own oppression?" and "How do I oppress?" These two questions spoke to me so

much because I have been thinking about these two things for years. I think it is crucial for us all to ponder these questions. When thinking about the first question of how I have internalized my own oppression, I think of an article I wrote on “Tropical Fish” (Baingana, 2006). I have discussed “Tropical Fish” in detail in CHAPTER 2. Central to the story is the relationship between Christine and Peter. Learning about my own internalized oppression through this story was revelatory, enjoyable and painful. We can use the model of “settler colonialism” and apply it to heterosexual romantic relationships such as the one that Christine was a part of (Takaki, 2008). The settler sees a land that they feel has never been conquered before. He sees land as a thing to conquer and the people on it, “savages” who need also need to be conquered, through either assimilation, genocide, or removal. The settler feels a God-given right to take what is not his. All of these things can be applied to dominating, abusive, colonizing relationships like Christine’s. In a colonized heteronormative relationship, there is an imbalance of power. The man feels like he has a right to the woman’s body, and the woman internalizes that type of psychology and ends up feeling like she owes the man something.

This idea that the colonizer or the man in a colonized relationship feels entitled to the colonized is something I saw on the borderland and in my own earlier oppressive relationship. This is how they are connected. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde (2007) creates a space of resistance through her writings. In the essay “The Transformation of Silence into Action” she writes about how racism, historically, has made African American women simultaneously visible and invisible. She writes, “for to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson-that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today. Black or not.” She also writes about how important self-

determination is. She writes that, “there are so many silences to be broken” (Lorde, 2007). This is a call to action to not be silent and to encourage others to do the same. This is important to me and my work because I believe that it is my time to speak up and not be silent any longer. Here, I take courage from the writings of others who have come before me, which I describe in the paragraphs below.

In “Uses of the Erotic” (Lorde, 2007), Audre Lorde talks about how eroticism has become conflated with pornography. She writes that “pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feelings. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.” Here she helps women to redefine how we have been socialized to think of the erotic and she helps us bring our power back.

Cherrie Moraga’s second question in “*This Bridge Called My Back*” is, “How have I oppressed?” This is almost a more difficult thing to answer. I ask myself if I really understand what it means to be “shitted on for being brown,” which is another thing that Moraga writes. I think that briefly in adolescence I knew what that meant but that I quickly and unconsciously came to know that being white-and-middle-class-adjacent had its privileges. So I became a chameleon.

This section on *Violence against Women* addresses all three of my Research Questions. It is an excellent example of how three factors, including an autobiographical experience, first-hand observation of the experience of others, and the theoretical gained framework from the Ethnic Studies literature, led to my *Tha Baw Pout Deh*. I was a victim of sexual violence. It was my autobiographical experience that I still had to process. Then I saw sexual violence on the border. That was my first-hand observation of the experience of others. Later, I read about sexual violence and oppression in the works of Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Steinem, Doreen Baingana, and Audre Lorde. These provided the theoretical framework I needed to process my own experience and the experiences of others. All of these led to my *Tha Baw Pout Deh* on the flight to Shanghai.

Discrimination after Death

Ninety percent of Burma's population is Buddhist. Of the rest, most are Christian, Hindu, or Muslim. In Burma, not only ethnic minorities but also religious minorities are treated horribly. There are laws to prevent "intermarriage" between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist. A 1984 citizenship law prevents groups like the Rohingya, who are Muslim, from being granted citizenship. In Denver where I live there is a large refugee population, with many from Burma. Burmese refugees come from all over Burma; they are part of the many different ethnic groups living within the Burmese borders and of different religions. I personally have a connection with religious minorities from Burma. Many of my family members identify as Christian or Muslim, and many of my close friends and colleagues do, as well. This section of autohistoria has to do with the Christian members of my family and how they are treated after death.

I yearn for that connection to the people who have died and whom I did not have the privilege of knowing as well as I knew my grandmother, especially my grandfather, whom I called Po Po, and my Uncle Myat. I try to keep them alive by talking about them and remembering them. It is hard though when it has been so long since they were with us physically. They live on in my Mom, my aunts and uncles, and all of the family members who really cannot be named. I wrote the notes below when I was in Burma in October 2016. I was investigating Uncle Myat's death. He died suddenly at age 33, in 1997. His friends think he was poisoned. My notes quote my aunty, cousins and uncle. Uncle Myat had been buried in a Christian cemetery, but the local government moved his grave for purely capitalistic purposes, completely disregarding any rights that my family had over what should have been a sacred family site, his burial plot. Pwa Pwa's dad was also desecrated in death. His body is lost somewhere under the many skyscrapers that all the foreign investors are now building in downtown Rangoon. The government simply leveled his cemetery and built on top of it so we don't know where to visit him now.

(2016)

This weekend we will visit the resting place of two of my ancestors. I should not call it a "resting place" because it is far from peaceful as the word "resting" connotes. See my family was Christian, I am not and I'd like to make that very clear. Christianity and its people have hurt me a lot, but that is a whole other conversation right there. Because they were religious minorities in a Buddhist country they were treated like crap in life and in death. My other uncle faces religious discrimination even today. My uncle who's dead and my Pwa Pwa Gyi were buried in a Christian cemetery. The government didn't mess with Pwa Pwa*

Gyi but they upended U Myat Thwin^o and probably didn't even get his entire body, "My deepest regrets U lay[#]". It's funny because we were driving past the largest WW2 cemetery in Burma the other day and my mom remarked on how f--kd up it was that the government won't touch the resting places of foreigners but if it comes to the Burmese they will not think twice about moving bodies to make more malls and bs like that. You shoulda seen it, the grounds are pristine, not one leaf can fall to the ground without some doting Burmese servant rushing to go clean it up. Always serving their masters like good colonial subjects, still, to this day! Meanwhile, as I try to uncover the details of my poor uncle's death, I am asking questions of my aunty like "what kind of shop did they build on top of our ancestors' bodies?"-a bike shop. "Is U Myat Thwin's entire body contained in the grave that they dumped him in out in industrial zone 5?" No, we can't even be sure that all of his remains are in there. The grave is more symbolic.

That was in 2016. In January of 2019, I visited Burma again. Here is what I wrote.

23 Jan 2019

Yangon, Burma

An update on Daw Tin's grave. We visited to her after I wrote from Bagan. We arrived just in time. The gravediggers tell us that her grave will be dug up, no specifically her bones and all, and she will be moved into a smaller plot. Now, her remains are in a body sized coffin above ground because of the monsoons. The*

reasoning, we were told is because it has been over ten years and that is the rule. Ten years and your bones downsize to smaller dwelling quarters. She is a lucky one because when no one visits your grave, I don't think that you get the smaller apartment option.

° My uncle's full name

**Paw Pwa Gyi refers to my Great Grandmother; her full name is Daw Tin*

Another update: My uncle sent me pictures of the process of the grave diggers moving the cloth and bones, all that is left of her body, to a smaller more compact spot in a mausoleum. This is all because land is so valuable in Rangoon. He pointed out the nice new lettering on her new grave.

This is happening because Christians are a religious minority in Bahmar Pyee (Burma, as called by Burmans) and also because land is so valuable there that it is very difficult to find space to bury the dead. They need her plot, and so my great grandmother will get a nice little box for her like my uncle did when they moved his bones. Buddhists mostly cremate. I think I may do this when I die because I don't want to burden the living too much.

This section addresses my Research Questions 1 and 2. It is through what I have seen happen to my family members after their death that helps me understand the religious persecution of minorities. Therefore, autobiographical experience helps me understand the experience of the others. And it is through first-hand observation of the experiences of others, including religious minority refugees in the Denver area, that helps me better understand my autobiographical

experience. I am not sure that I have gained new insights, or a new *Tha Baw Pout Deh* on this subject, but my thoughts about what to do with my body after death came out of these experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: EPILOGUE

“Our feelings of craziness and powerlessness that Combahee speaks of are induced by the shit society dumps on us rather than stemming from being born ugly or evil as the patriarchal shrinks would have us believe. We must not believe the story they tell about us. We must recognize the effects that our external circumstances of sex, class, race and sexuality have on our perception of ourselves – even in our most private unspoken moments.”

Gloria Anzaldua, in El Mundo Zurdo (2010).

Being sexualized throughout your teen years places this internalized oppression upon you, but later you can get back to the childhood you. This is what Gloria Steinem (1993) talks about in *Revolution from Within*. You have to recognize and also treat well your childhood self, meaning that you play, you treat yourself well, and also recognize that you are not a sexualized being (or you are but only for you and any other when you choose to be!). This is how one dissipates the learned internalized oppression: you get back to the sense that, “I am not a sexualized being,” and you try to decolonize the mind so that, unlearning all this internalized oppression, sex oppression, and all of the nonsense that you have learned over the years, you return to that pure child of you, that Essence. It is not so much innocence but is basically you before the world f---d you over. It is not innocence but rather like a blank slate, and it is the opposite of trauma. It is the lack of trauma. And that trauma comes from the world, and it has been placed on you from these external forces, and, because you have internalized it, then it requires a long, long process of recovery that constitutes your “future.” So there can be these two, the two major bits with which to start over: getting back to the childhood self and getting away from that internalized oppression and that sexualized being who lives in a sexualized body.

A promise to myself...I will get back to my childhood self. I will unlearn the oppression that this world has placed on me. I will get back to the things that bring me pleasure, like making jewelry. Creating, that's fun. Also, climbing trees and being fearless again, like I was when I was a kid in San Francisco, on the beach. I will try to detach the idea that my body is sexualized so that in fact that I will have autonomy over my own body. I will be strong, I will speak up when it is needed, I will do the best I can, and I will continue to teach young children. Here is what I wrote about that:

Back to my childhood. How we used to play jump rope and draw squiggly hearts everywhere, when we first fell in love and the world had not shit on us yet, when it had not yet marred us. We were pristine gold but now, marred like the bangle that I wear on my wrist. We used to jump rope and pretend like the concrete was abundant with gems. Excavating jewels with my kabya Chinese partner. The disco ball in her basement and the dance parties where we learned to slow dance with one another. Kissing Isaiah and the braces, sea monkeys, art studio loft and playing doctor with Angie. Kathy, she and Lydia all have babies now but I do have my own. I had Juni and Logan and Sydney and Maxine and B and Stella who's now Milo. I have Lily whom I love, Ruban and all the other kids who are too obsessed with their iPads. Eve, she is my baby and all of the other wonderful people, we can change the world together. "Slowly, slowly" as the Burmese would say, but it'll happen, it must.*

**Burmese word for 'half-caste'*

You asked me what I want for my future. This is hard for me to say. For some reason I have never been too good at planning or dreaming the future. I know that learning and mastering Burmese is still a goal of mine. I need to know that language well and use it in my work. There is that. Here are some thoughts about the future:

Our future together.....You are working with the whales. You just came up from diving. I am too scared to go down there with you. Although, we are still waiting for that submarine to float our way!

I just came back from the spot in the backyard where we hang our clothes-it is starting to get warm here again but the wind never lets up so I need to constantly check that the many clothespins I have used to secure our tiny garments are still hooked onto our clothes. We don't want them to blow away. It took me a long time to make them.

We are happy, oh, here he comes, dripping wet... Brown and glistening in the sun.

In closing,

The physical distance between here and Burma pulls me toward Asia but when I am there I long for Colorado. I never truly am home and I continue to grapple with this. I will continue to write and when I do the words will continue to revolve around Burma. The physical space and the more abstract/esoteric-the Burma of my dreams, of my past, present and future-Sankofa. The Burma of my ancestors.

Good Night from Bagan.

Sadu sadu sadu.*

** Buddhist blessing, similar to 'Amen'*

Conclusion

This thesis displays some of the lived experiences I have had thus far and how I have melded them with my Ethnic Studies education. It uses the Burmese concept of *Tha Baw Pout Deh* (intellectual epiphany) to explore themes such as ethnic conflict in Burma, gender-based violence, religious persecution and immigration/citizenship through a women of color feminist lens. It is a unique piece because there are not many autohistorias written from the point of view of a first generation, female scholar or student in higher education. This thesis acts as a frontrunner for other Burmese scholars. It will hopefully inspire other Burmese women to join higher education. If it has not inspired, then at least it has helped make space for others to come through, has been a trailblazer, has tested the waters or carved a path. Hopefully too, it helps me get a better job, because having not stayed in the same job over the past ten years, and due to the life-style I have led, I am now making less than I did when I first started teaching preschool ten years ago.

This thesis has offered one unique view into the larger picture of the Burmese diaspora. The view is that of a *kabya*, *luk-kung*, *farang*, Nepantla westerner who spent time in the literal and figurative borderlands of Burma. I identify as *kabya* which means that I am half Burmese. The term literally means “half caste” in Burmese but it is used in every day speech and is not seen as

derogatory as it would here in the States. People often use it to refer to me and I will even use it myself when explaining my existence to people who speak Burmese. I identify as *luk-kung* which is the Thai version of *kabya*. It literally means “half-person” and people throughout Thailand will use it to describe me when they learn that I have parents of differing nationalities. Another identity that describes me is the word *farang* which, in Thai, means, “foreigner” as that is what I am in Thailand. Lastly, I identify as a Nepantla westerner because I am always living in between cultures. I am not Burmese enough to be fully Burmese. I am not western enough to fully be a westerner so I occupy a Nepantla status of always falling in between cultures. All of these terms help to explain how I fall into the metaphorical borderlands of otherness, help inform the body of this thesis and, again, have helped to offer one unique view into the larger Burmese diaspora.

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