

# Visual Aesthetics and the 2021 Burma/Myanmar Spring Revolution Tracing Relational Solidarities

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**Abstract** The 2021 attempted military coup in Burma/Myanmar has uprooted a decade of – partially corrupted – democracy-making. Simultaneously, a creative pro-democratic mobilization has emerged, with calls for alliances that had long been unthinkable. Tracing connections across space and time as symbolically manifested in protest art, this article suggests that insights from the intersectional tradition – in its theoretical conceptualizations and its rootedness in activist praxis – may help to trace the complexity and multiplicity of contemporary mobilization. Moreover, it proposes that an intersectional lens may allow to pay attention to the critical crossroads of imagining a future liberated Burma/Myanmar, beyond the common enemy and towards genuine relational solidarity.

**Keywords** Intersectional Tradition. Symbolism. Protest Art. Mobilization. Htamain Revolution. Three Finger Salute.

**Summary** 1. Introduction. – 2. Conceptualizing Relational Solidarities. – 3. Relational Aesthetics and the 2021 Spring Revolution. – 3.1. Symbols of Resistance: On Clenched Fists and the *Three Finger Salute*. – 3.2. Mobilizing Local Particularities Within the *Htamain* Revolution. – 4. Relational Solidarities and the Imagining of a Future Burma/Myanmar.



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## 1 Introduction

She\* stands tall and strong. One arm raised up high to show the *Three Finger Salute* [fig. 1], which is used in *The Hunger Games* and has become a symbol of pro-democracy movements across Southeast Asia since the 2014 coup d'état in Thailand (e.g. Bolotta 2023; Hui 2020). She\* holds a speakerphone in the other hand, and *htameins* are waving above her\* safety helmet-covered head. Strength and determination are reflected in her\* gaze. A multitude of deeply entrenched struggles and topics come to mind: The three fingers as a symbol of silent protest by the oppressed, borrowed from pop-cultural adaptation. The masses on the street, loudly demanding #RespectOurVote. A gendered revolution challenging long-held “patriarchal norms, misogyny and sexism rooted in the dictatorship” (Khin Khin Mra 2021, n.p.). Strategies exchanged among movements, friends, and siblings (Bolotta 2024) in Hong Kong, Thailand and beyond. #MilkTeaAlliance.<sup>1</sup>

Following 1 February 2021, the attempted military coup has uprooted much of what Burma/Myanmar has come to be over the last decade, including processes of state-building and the stalled peace negotiation process. Simultaneously, a vivid, strong, and creative pro-democratic movement has emerged with calls for solidarities that

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I owe my deep gratitude and admiration to all those fighting for true liberation through - and beyond - the 2021 Spring Revolution. This importantly includes those artists who have created and shared their powerful works for the resistance. A special thanks goes to Aung Ye, BlackDesign, and kuecool for allowing me to use their artworks here. I am indebted to the organizers, mentors, and participants of the 2022 Summer School on Contemporary Social Movements in SEA, where this writing originated from, not only for their invaluable discussions and feedback but for reminding me about the joys and purposes of academia. I especially thank Giuseppe Bolotta and Edoardo Siani for bringing us together in Venice and in this special issue, as well as for their invaluable comments and guidance. I also wish to thank Rizky Sasono, two anonymous reviewers, and the journal editors for the constructive comments received on earlier manuscript drafts that substantially improved the argument of this article. Finally, I thank Albion M. Butters for the excellent proof-reading and editing. All shortcomings remain mine alone. This article was partially produced with the contribution of Next Generation EU - line M4.C2.1.1 - project: 'SISEA - Symbolic inequality at work: gendered exclusion and imaginaries of empowerment in Southeast Asia' - CUP: H53D23005970001.

**1** The #MilkTeaAlliance can be described as a loose, leaderless, transboundary (online) network/movement that finds its origins in a 2020 ‘meme war’ connected to the One China principle between Thai and Chinese netizens/actors. Deeply entangled in pop cultural references, within mere days this conflict erupted into wider, wittily led debates integrating topics around democratic values and anti-authoritarianism, binding together milk tea-consuming Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (in delimitation from Chinese non-milk tea). Subsequently, the #MilkTeaAlliance was expanded in solidarity with other pro-democratic mobilizations including, following the February 2021 attempted coup, in Burma/Myanmar. For more detailed analyses on the emergence and characteristics of the #MilkTeaAlliance, see, for instance, Schaffar, Praphakorn (2021) and Bolotta (2023).



**Figure 1** Aung Ye, 2021. Digital protest art. Reproduced with kind permission and courtesy of the artist

had long been unthinkable, including during the prior NLD-led government. This has led the previously less audible voices of women, the LGBTQIA+<sup>2</sup> community, ethnic nationalities, and Gen Z, amongst others, to move to the centre stage of protests, both on-site and online. Thereby, photos of protest banners shared on social media, voices heard in online debates, protest art, and videos captured by citizen journalists showed the world a united front with the joint goal of overthrowing the '(military) junta'.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, with multiple and diverse voices becoming audible, nuances in the imagining of a future democratic, federal country are being revealed. Those are reflected in multiple overlapping – and at times contrasting – aspirations based in the complex, historically grounded socio-political mosaic of Burma/Myanmar.

Revolutions and protest are complex across time and space, as insights from both social movement studies and the intersectional tradition (Bohrer 2019) show. This dynamic includes the very politics about mobilization itself and its constant negotiation over which claims are legitimized (or not), heard (or not), and carried over into an envisioned future (or not) – whether that be through conscious debates or unconscious highlighting and omitting of voices and structures. The 2021 Burma/Myanmar Spring Revolution – which I understand as represented in the multiplicity of sites, voices, tactics, peoples, and identity positions that have joined forces against the 'junta' in ever-fluid (and at times contested) modes following the attempted coup – has opened up a space where previously dominating hegemonic voices, topics, and symbols have been cracked open to shed light on deep-seated, long-established structures of privilege and discrimination. These cracks leave space for

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**2** I use the abbreviation LGBTQIA+ for the entirety of this article. I do so purposefully to take a political stance on the importance of inclusive language and to voice my solidarity. Yet, I do so with acknowledgement of the diverse and unequal lived realities within and across varying identities. For instance, when I write here that less audible voices of the LGBTQIA+ community have moved to the centre stage of protests, I do not want to suggest that this visibility is equally distributed.

**3** Taking into consideration debates around the politics of language, I aim to be as critical as possible in my own choice of words given my positionality as a white woman who will never “have to embody the pain of local people” (Chu May Paing, Than Toe Aung 2021, n.p.). As such, I choose to use the term ‘attempted coup’, for instance, to reflect the fact that the ‘military junta’ – currently under the command of Min Aung Hlaing (MAH/MAL) and responsible for the ongoing violent crackdown on ‘their own’ peoples (see Desmond 2022; Aung Kaung Myat 2022 for a nuanced reflection) – has at no point been successful in fully controlling the country or its peoples. Along those lines, I have also decided to use scare quotes for the purpose of this text (for lack of a more suitable term) when referring to the '(military) junta' to show my disagreement that it represents “a *government*, especially a military one, that *has taken power* in a country by force and not by election” (Cambridge Dictionary 2023, emphasis added). That said, any misuse of terms remains my responsibility alone.

different demands to be claimed. Yet, moving from joint aims or demands to building genuine solidarities is not straightforward as Ryan, Mai Van Tran, Swan Ye Htut (2024) show in a recent analysis of interethnic digital solidarity-building in Burma/Myanmar. More so, as Thirteen (2024) pointedly demonstrates, the term ‘solidarity’ is anything but clear-cut and its meaning and qualities need to be constantly reflected on.

Being grounded in unstructured research since the attempted coup on 1 February 2021,<sup>4</sup> I suggest in this article that insights from the intersectional tradition – both in its theoretical conceptualizations and in its rootedness in activist praxis – allow better understandings of the critical crossroads of imagining a future liberated Burma/Myanmar. I show that the intersectional tradition functions as a powerful tool when uncovering the complexities of differentiated forms of oppression, and it may simultaneously contribute to formulating strategies of liberation. Mobilizing an understanding of ‘relational solidarities’ (Bohrer 2019), I trace the potentials for radical liberation through – but importantly beyond – the current political situation, which unites people against a common enemy. To approach this, I engage the unique lens of visual aesthetics to suggest that art – emerging from within revolutions – should not be understood as mere empirical data but rather as a unique but critical theory-contributing voice. To clarify, as della Porta (2016) reminds us, social movements always leave behind certain traces of their demands. I argue that (some of) these demands – and connections – have been manifested not only in texts and talks but importantly and powerfully also within visual traits, from photography to protest art. In this paper, I mobilize the latter and indicate how (protest) art moves through – but crucially beyond – documenting the resistance, as art reinterprets it. Thereby, I argue that by creatively engaging demands emerging from within resistance, protest art connects to wider movements, demands, and histories in unique ways. Without arguing that these connections automatically lead to solidarities across time and space, I believe that they can serve as memory and as a way of imagining more just futures.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I set the terms that frame my conversation as they emerge from the intersectional tradition. Concretely, I clarify my situatedness within it and outline my engagement with ‘relational solidarities’. Against this, in section 3 I move on to situate the Spring Revolution’s visual

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**4** The main focus is on insights collected until July 2022, when the first draft of this article was finalized, but it also expands to importantly integrate further nuances beyond that point. I combine insights generated through an inductive conversation with protest art and a more traditional interrogation of media content as well as other published documents (including reports, press releases, and policy-related documents, among others).

aesthetics within a wider reflection on symbols used to ally with and across movements. Within two subsections, I then bring into conversation insights from my intersectional grounding with two recurring symbols of the Spring Revolution: the *Three Finger Salute* (§ 3.1) and the *htamain* (a type of women's longyi/sarong/wrap skirt) (§ 3.2). By doing so, I trace both alliances across movements and related particularities manifested in visual cues. I close this paper by arguing that the traces of more radical demands for liberation spark hope for relational solidarities to emerge.

## 2 Conceptualizing Relational Solidarities

In order to engage with my argument, there is a range of terms that need clarification and contextualization first.<sup>5</sup> These concern the positioning of my analysis within the 'intersectional tradition' (Bohrer 2019) and how an understanding of 'relational solidarities' emerges out of a close engagement with this rich and diverse body of thinking. Thereby, I draw upon Ashley Bohrer (16), who conceptualizes the 'intersectional tradition' as both "a definite, specific concept, named and elaborated by particular people and at a particular moment" – as for instance Kimberlé Crenshaw, who is often named as the grounding figure of intersectionality – and simultaneously a much broader sphere of *related* heterogeneous textual and more-than-textual insights of a theoretical, conceptual, activist, historical, and inquiring nature. It is beyond the scope of this article to outline the complex and multifaceted body of activist and scholarly work done within the spheres of the intersectional tradition.<sup>6</sup> Thus, rather than trying to fit this rich tradition into the limiting box of a working definition, I seek to highlight and explain how I think the conceptualization of 'relational solidarities' (Bohrer 2019) may prove to be a helpful stepping stone when both reflecting upon contemporary resistance in Burma/Myanmar and imagining radical liberation across time and space.

Before moving into this, however, there are a few caveats to consider. First and foremost, intersectionality as a term is often used in rather convoluted ways; it can be misused, appropriated, depoliticized, and too often employed with limited (or absent) engagement

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<sup>5</sup> I thank two anonymous reviewers for their encouragement to clarify my use of language and terminology, including my own grounding within intersectional thought. Considering the recurrent flattening of the rich intersectional tradition, I feel this to be especially fruitful and important for any future work.

<sup>6</sup> For comprehensive insights into the intersectional tradition, see, for instance, Bohrer (2019) and the recently published *The Routledge Companion to Intersectionalities* (Nash, Pinto 2023).



with the complex and heterogenous body of academic/activist work it originates from. Importantly, Mary E. John highlights the tendency of mistaking an understanding of multiple oppressions as an additive exercise rather than acknowledging that these experiences “prove to be *more than*, or *other than*, the sum of the various ‘parts’ that are thought to constitute it” (John 2015, 73; emphasis added); as such, subject positions are incommensurable (see Bohrer 2019). A helpful example is Carolin Hirsch’s (2023, 154) analysis of Hnin being a “female person of mixed ethnicity and Muslim background” within a Yangon punk community. The discrimination experienced here is not one of being a woman *and* not-only Bamar *and* with a Muslim background; rather it is the incommensurable experience of this particular subject position that Hnin needs to navigate within a patriarchal, Bamar- and Buddhist-dominated society and also within her own punk community, which has been moulded by that society as well.

Second, it is crucial not to forget or silence intersectional thought’s grounding in a long history of struggles that date far beyond the articulation of the actual term and move through – and importantly beyond – class, race, and gender (Bohrer 2019; John 2015). Highlighting its origins within Black feminist resistance and its fluid and rich evolution across time and space (see, e.g., Davis 2016) reminds us of intersectionality’s unapologetic and political stance. This becomes a key reminder that an intersectional analysis must always be historically sensitized, including when we carefully move across space into Burma/Myanmar (see § 3.2). In like manner, the origin of the term ‘intersectionality’ within Black feminist thought and its rootedness in the U.S. American context carry the danger of remaining untranslated or being mistranslated into other contexts,<sup>7</sup> including Burma/Myanmar. Furthermore, when intersectional thought and resistance are mobilized across borders, as John (2015) reminds us, we have to avoid unidirectional travel where intersectional thought flows into non-U.S. vernacular analysis but not vice versa. This becomes especially crucial when thinking about solidarities to be forged. John (2023, 196) advocates that “we need to think with *and* without intersectionality” and acknowledge the theorizing outside the realms of intersectionality that “nonetheless [have] been of value to our theorizing”.

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<sup>7</sup> As a case in point, Françoise Vergès articulates the limitations of an intersectional approach that “only studies class, gender, and race” especially when looking at vernacular, non-Western/U.S. contexts or in countering ‘civilizational feminism’ and its colonial legacies (Vergès 2017; Bechiche 2021). It is through, rather than despite, this advocating for a “multidimensional analysis of oppression” which takes into consideration the “totality of social relationships” (including privileged positions), avoiding a “hierarchy of struggles” (Vergès 2017, 20-1) that I see crucial, if non-reducible, conversations with the ‘intersectional tradition’ (Bohrer 2019) emerging.

It is through this expanded understanding of the intersectional tradition that this paper shall address and illuminate the relational solidarities mobilized by the 2021 Spring Revolution's visual aesthetics. As mentioned, solidarity as a term is anything but straightforward. One expresses their solidarity in daily organizing or when claiming to #StandWithMyanmar and voicing their #SolidarityForMyanmar. Yet, there remains the real danger that solidarity becomes an empty signifier exempt from any political meaning. Simultaneously, the question arises, where is solidarity situated? Where does solidarity start and/or end? It is against this inquiring of the quality of solidarities that I see the specific strength in thinking with, through, and beyond the expanded intersectional tradition. Concretely, it necessitates to weave together the particularities of incommensurable identity positions (across multiple axes) as they emerge uniquely across space and time, *without* neglecting the larger systematic structures and oppressions that bind everyone together within the 'house of difference' (see Lorde 1993; Bohrer 2019). To clarify, as Ashley Bohrer (2019) notes, human beings are *always already* connected within the 'matrix of domination' (Collins 2000) although (importantly!) "in distinctly and incommensurably different ways" (Bohrer 2019, 252). Acknowledging such a relational analysis is not only helpful when trying to understand the complexities of "inhabiting a world shaped by oppression and exploitation" (257) but also when thinking about projects of liberation.

Based on these conceptual considerations, in this paper I approach the aesthetics of protest art through a relational reading of differentiated subject positions within society. I explore solidarities as situated beyond the smallest common denominator (i.e. the fight against the 'junta'), based on the key intersectional tenet that "unity,<sup>8</sup> not uniformity" (Bohrer 2019, 254) defines the core of solidarity in activist praxis. To do so, it is crucial to situate my analysis, and present how such relationalities have manifested within the complex historically grown, sociocultural and political multiplicity Burma/Myanmar is made up of.

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**8** At this point, it is necessary to briefly mention the long-standing and fluid claims for 'unity' within Burma/Myanmar. While noting that analysis would go beyond the scope of this article, I want to point out that this is another term - similar to solidarity - that needs careful reflection across time and space, including, for instance, how unity when interpreted as 'oneness' has inhabited interrelated processes of homogenization and heterogenization in the form of Burmanization, standing in rather stark contrast to an intersectional framing introduced here. Further analysis, including in relation to contemporary claims for 'unity in diversity', might prove interesting (for an engagement with 'unity', see, for instance, Callahan 2007; Walton 2015).



### 3 Relational Aesthetics and the 2021 Spring Revolution

The history of protest and resistance is ultimately bound to visual cues and symbolic representations, which are used to show allegiance within and across movements. Thereby, symbols - like the raising of a clenched fist (arguably one of the most widespread symbols of resistance and one we shall return to in § 3.1) or the rainbow flag - can be used overtly to easily show common cause. In history, however, cues have also been used in subtle ways that are only comprehensible to insiders, including, for instance, within queer contexts. As such, visual cues serve a double function of solidarity and protection. In their urgency within specific resistance, they are unique, as no words are needed to show protest through visual aesthetics. However, this can quickly change; when symbols are mobilized, travel, and become translated, they need to be reflected against local particularities. Just as the use of English-language, Western-born notions like feminism, patriarchy, and LGBTQIA+, amongst others, need to be carefully reflected upon in order to avoid the dangers of a mainstreamed, whitewashed feminism, it is crucial to closely analyse how symbols are integrated, translated, appropriated, and re-signified within the context(s) of Burma/Myanmar.

In a related manner, Pryzbylo et al. (2018, 1) remind us how (feminist) symbols can also be a sign of division by representing certain realities more than others and by resonating “with those they represent while acting as reminders of the exclusion and expulsion of those they fail to speak for and to and with”. As such, one can trace the very quality of the solidarities they inhabit, as well as those they obscure: one case in point concerns the variations of rainbow flags and their queer use (for instance, visibly including transfeminist demands or not).

As mentioned before, art has the power to reinterpret issues in unique ways. While documentary photography is far from neutral, considering, for instance, the framings used (see Butler 2009), the expression of visual art can add a different layer of reflexivity. This is what I am interested in here. Colours and symbols are neither given nor arbitrary; instead, they carry meaning and intent. While there has emerged a wide range of different artworks within the context of the 2021 Spring Revolution, for the purpose of this article my analysis will focus on what I call ‘protest art’, namely, (digital) visual representations that were - and are - emerging from and shared within online and offline activist spaces and created by individuals (not all self-describing as artists), particularly in the early days of resistance. While visual representations have been widespread and varied, reflecting the overall character of the revolution, it is beyond the scope and purpose of this article to analyse them in their totality. Accordingly, in the following, I outline a non-exhaustive list of themes and related symbolisms recurrently appearing within the protest art of Burma/Myanmar.

Especially during the early days when people were still gathering on the streets to protest the ‘junta’, protest art included depictions of the ‘common enemy’ and its evil. These depictions served in at least two ways: on the one hand, they captured the cruelty of the ‘junta’ and connected entities (depicting, for instance, bullet holes and weapons, blood, and arrests); on the other hand, they – especially pictures of ‘junta’ leader Min Aung Hlaing (MAL) – were used to ridicule and degrade the enemy both online (e.g. through depictions of MAL as Pinocchio or “rest(ing) in pieces”) and offline (i.e. by stepping on them as an act of disrespect).

At the opposite end of the spectrum and in much greater quantity, we have a multitude of examples of protest art depicting ‘the people’ in a range of different ways, including the people vs the ‘junta’, and the variety of tactics (from frontline street protests to keyboard warriors), peoples (with an increasing depiction of symbols and colours associated with different ethnic nationalities/minorities), and forms of protest (e.g. pots and pans protest, flower strike, boycotts, the Civil Disobedience Movement [CDM], or peopleless protests). We can also observe a type of protest art that could be described as ‘archive-in-the-making’, where specific places, people (including ‘fallen heroes’), and moments of the Spring Revolution are captured and at times combined with its recurring symbols, like the *Three Finger Salute*.

While these themes capture(d) the revolution as it was unfolding, there is a set of symbolisms and protest artworks that connect the Spring Revolution across time (to previous anti-authoritarian mobilizations and generations) and space (i.e. to the #MilkTeaAlliance and when calling upon the ‘international community’ for help). At this point, it is worth noting that historical references remain mostly within the hegemonic narration of history, especially in referring back to dominant figures (such as Aung San) and symbols (e.g. the peacock) without the much-needed recovering of other histories. However, when reflected against the aforementioned archives-in-the-making, these are accompanied by increasing attention towards the multiplicities within the country.

It is crucial to emphasize that symbols are not in and of themselves signs for and of solidarity; indeed, they can be shallow or misused. Nevertheless, they can trace (potential) connections between peoples and movements and serve as reminders of the legacies of previous liberation movements. They can also allow for aspirations and imaginaries for the future to manifest. Against this, rather than seeing symbols, protest art, and other visual representations as empirical materials to be analysed, I turn to a thinking-with them. Bringing them into conversation with an intersectional analysis, I understand art as a guide through the 2021 Spring Revolution, which allows us to trace solidarities without claiming any determinisms.

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To do this, in the following I mobilize two exemplary recurring symbols of the Spring Revolution, namely, the *Three Finger Salute* (§ 3.1) and the *htamain* (§ 3.2). I choose these two due to their centrality within visual representations of the early days of resistance and because they trace solidarities in different yet intertwined ways. As we will see, while the *Three Finger Salute* emphasizes a mobilization across space and movements, the *htamain* strikingly shows the particularities of Burma/Myanmar and the Spring Revolution. Thinking these together allows us to understand the potential for relational solidarities without neglecting the historical complexities and cultural specificity of Burma/Myanmar's multiple subject positions.

### 3.1 Symbols of Resistance: On Clenched Fists and the *Three Finger Salute*

The raised arm (often with a clenched fist) is likely one of the globally most widespread symbols of resistance. Sara Ahmed (2017, 85) traces the arm as the limbs of the labour(er) and as a "revolutionary limb", connecting the central themes relevant for our understanding of relational solidarities. Through the arm one can trace both the complexities of structures of oppression and the potential for liberation. In an intersectional tradition, staying with the symbolisms of the arm emphasizes that we are always already entangled: when an arm - abused as a tool for labour within the factory or the household of the (white/hegemonic) masters - becomes freed, one must always ask if this freeing of one's arm comes at the expense of other arms being forced into labour (see Ahmed 2017). When symbolic gestures of revolutionary - arms, fists, three fingers - are raised to demand liberation, an intersectional approach hints towards potential relationalities of struggles across time and space. Without suggesting any pre-given or straightforward alliances between black liberation, the global labour movement or feminist struggles, and contemporary Burma/Myanmar, they do have in common the raised arm as symbol against differentiated forms of oppression. In the 2021 Spring Revolution it often appears as the *Three Finger Salute*, thereby connecting to other contemporary instances of anti-authoritarian mobilization within Southeast Asia (as also seen in Figure 1).

Let us for a moment return to *The Hunger Games*, where the pop-cultural adaptation of the *Three Finger Salute* originated from, in the context of contemporary mobilization in Southeast Asia. In their analysis, Burke and Kelly (2015) usefully point out how in the spaces of Panem - the polity within which the books/movies are set - certain inequalities (i.e. around race, gender, and sexuality) are not talked about as if they were non-existent within this dystopian future; at the same time, within the organization of everyday life, the

Hollywood-produced film repeatedly shows that they indeed are very much present (e.g. black = poor; women = household and care work, the private; men = labour in mines, the public). Keeping in mind these “patterns of visibility and invisibility around various systems of inequality” (61), let us move back to contemporary Burma/Myanmar, where we might ask: Who is represented in the masses raising their arms to showcase their oppression/resistance through the *Three Finger Salute*? What are they demanding and what futures are they imagining (and for whom)? Thus, we can try to unpack the quality of solidarities that are being forged.

Thinzar Shunlei Yi and Mimi Aye mention the leadership role that young women and women workers have played from the start of the pro-democracy protests by being the “first ones to get out on [the] streets in Yangon. [...] Especially the workers, the labour unions members and the workers women” (Thinzar Shunlei Yi in an embedded video in Mimi Aye 2021). As a crucial part of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), women workers from the garment sector have stood side to side with doctors and teachers, amongst others. As such, questions around gender have, from the very start of the protests, been ultimately intertwined with labour issues, both on the streets and online, where hashtags like #fightlikeagarmentworker<sup>9</sup> have carried meaning to allow for “shared interests rather than shared identities” (Cole quoted in Bohrer 2019, 94) to distil. Again, rather than seeing women or workers at the forefront, an intersectional approach necessitates an understanding of the particularities of mobilizing as women workers/working women. Acknowledging this highlights that struggles are always already interrelated.

As such, the early days of the revolution saw a combination of clenched fists and three fingers being raised by the masses that joined the protests across the country. Figure 2 was created in relation to the nation-wide 22222 general strike (five twos, held on February 2, 2021: 22/2/2021), which were the largest demonstrations at the time. While highlighting especially the role of women generally, the concrete date-related reference (organized as strike and thus carrying a crucial labour notion)<sup>10</sup> allows for multiple intersecting

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**9** The # (hashtag) can arguably itself be understood as a symbolic space spanning a limbo between ‘slacktivism’ (Tufekci 2014) and meaningful hashtag activism/feminism (Jackson, Bailey, Welles 2020). Similar to other mobilizations of the last decade, social media has proven to be a crucial ‘expanded space’ (Grammatikopoulou 2020) for organizing and spreading information of #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar. While different in their mechanisms, the relevance of the quality of solidarities does not depend on their locality but their political and liberational stance (see also Tufekci 2014).

**10** Including in news reporting such as the Irrawaddy’s stating that “Myanmar woke up [...] to a nation in which many businesses [...] were shut down [...] as people went out to join the strike”. (Kyaw Phyto Tha 2021).

struggles to be read from this depiction (whether intended when creating or not). I argue that a thinking-with such artworks helps when thinking through historically embedded, structurally moulded relationalities among people(s) that have become unveiled within the 2021 Spring Revolution.



Figure 2 BlackDesign. 2021. Digital protest art. Reproduced with kind permission and courtesy of the artist

The colourful images arriving on my screen – through social media analysis and via private messages from friends and colleagues – from the early stages of mass mobilization also importantly included

people from the LGBTQIA+ community, who played an active role. For instance, the *LGBT Union Mandalay* and the *LGBT Alliance Myanmar*, while not huge in their followers count, cultivated rather active social media presences. It is also key to remember the vital role that non-Bamar ethnic nationalities/minority<sup>11</sup> women have played (and continue to play), representing a clearly observable widening of the pro-democratic mobilization compared to previous instances. This is not to say that these are homogenous groups or that such multiplicity has not been present all along; rather, I would argue that the active and visual participation of previously less considered voices allows for a crucial opening in revealing within the wider societal understanding existing structures of oppression.

Visual images - both in photos/videos and in digital art - emphasize this when showing diverse women or members of the LGBTQIA+ community as an integral part of the revolution. Geoffrey Aung emphasizes the diversity within the political struggle:

[It] would be a mistake to locate this resistance in a singular political subject, grounded in the working class or otherwise. Rather, we might see efforts to compose political struggle across difference - a strength coming not from a formal whole but the concatenation of many fragments. Here, people who do not necessarily share very much - drag queens and garment workers, or Zoomer meme makers and highland farmers - find themselves suddenly thrown together, trying to coordinate practically to bring down this regime. (Geoffrey Aung in Levenson 2021, n.p.)

While Geoffrey Aung's analysis, similarly to a relational solidarities lens, continues in a call against homogenization, the quality is ever so slightly different: taking into account a relational solidarity allows us to go one step further, to acknowledge "identities as coalitions" (Bohrer 2019, 252; emphasis added), meaning that neither highland farmers nor drag queens are homogenous groups in themselves (even if they are made so through structures of oppression with real material consequences). This highlights that 'bringing down the regime' is not something to be achieved despite difference but through it, as

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**11** For the purpose of this article, I use (non-Bamar) 'ethnic nationalities/minorities' to acknowledge the favouring of the former term by some groups, against the argument that they are majorities in some of the areas where they live (see International Crisis Group 2020). Beyond that, Sai Wansai (2016) stresses the real marginalizing effects of being treated as a minority - rather than being an equal partner - including in the building of a union. On the other hand, the latter term acknowledges the immense ethnic diversity within Burma/Myanmar and reminds us of those numerically smaller ethnic nationalities, some of whom themselves (strategically) use phrases such as 'minorities within minorities' to call attention to their unique situatedness.



well as through being bound together in it. It is worth quoting Audre Lorde here at length:

You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future with the particular strengths of our individual identities. And in order to do this, we must allow each other our differences at the same time as we recognize our sameness. (1993, 142)

There remains the obvious risk of painting an overly romantic picture against the socio-political and historical complexities of Burma/Myanmar, especially from my white, Western situatedness. There are very nuanced debates taking place within civil society that need close attention, especially for those of us who are outsiders. Importantly, Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung (2021, n.p.) pointedly emphasize the need to “Decolonize Burma Studies!” away from a White gaze but also from Bamar-centred and male-dominated scholarship. They further criticize the “transportations of white Western feminism in the Global South like Burma”, which “ignore the countries’ colonial histories and their current internal neocolonial practices”. Along similar lines, Tharaphi Than (2021) challenges the Western donor-driven, mostly urban-based feminist interventions during the ‘pseudo-democratic’ (Aye Lei Tun 2023) pre-2021 era, with its stipulation to make a previously less easily visible (especially from a Western gaze) Burma/Myanmar feminism not only more observable but also part of a universal feminism based in individualism rather than collective liberation. This both undermined the unique specificities of a historically embedded, culturally shaped ‘feminism’ and simultaneously reinforced the detachment from ethnic women movements and other important intersectional issues arising from struggles of farmers (e.g. land rights) or garment workers (e.g. fair wages) (see Tharaphi Than 2021). If we can take away anything from a careful intersectional analysis of and activism for Burma/Myanmar, I would argue that it is exactly this countering of universalization while striving for collective (yet differentiated) liberation.

With that, I want to return to the symbolism of the *Three Finger Salute* that this analysis emerged from. Within the online sphere, we can trace a flood of depictions of it, for it is still used as a clear signifier for protest across the region. What is the significance of this for refining our understanding of relational solidarities? In its symbolism we are reminded of transboundary alliances across the region, including neighbouring Thailand. Simultaneously, it relates itself and comes paired with the clenched fist, representing connectivity across movements. Yet, one should abstain from making



oversimplified, romanticized claims of solidarity, especially against Burma/Myanmar’s complex and multi-layered history, as well as the multifaceted transboundary relations that both need attention while moving towards a different, more just future.

With this in mind, I want to draw our attention to Figure 3, which connects the *Three Finger Salute*, with another recurrent symbol of the Spring Revolution, the *htamain*, which emerged from the very particularities of vernacular experiences.



Figure 3 BlackDesign. 2021. Digital protest art. Reproduced with kind permission and courtesy of the artist

### 3.2 Mobilizing Local Particularities within the *Htamain* Revolution

Other than the *Three Finger Salute*, the *htamain* (i.e. a sarong/women's garment) is far less universally comprehensible as a symbol for resistance. This brings us even closer to how oppression and resistance function within the particularities of Burma/Myanmar. Let us start by taking a look at the following quote by Bamar writer Pyae Moe Thet War, who engages with the standing of women within 'Myanmar culture':

I don't want to make the blanket statement that Myanmar culture hates women, but it doesn't love us, not unconditionally, and sometimes it seems like it will respect other men before it respects its own women. (Pyae Moe Thet War 2022, 38)

There are several things that need to be unpacked here. To start with, while this quote may seem universally adoptable, it is important to stress its situatedness within the cultural, socio-political context of Burma/Myanmar, including against certain interpretations of the concept of ဟ်ပုး (hpone) against specific Theravada Buddhism-based traditions within Burma/Myanmar to which this quote refers and which I will engage with below. This concept has been powerfully appropriated to resist the 'junta' within the ထာမ် (htamain/sarong) revolution by hanging women's *htamains* on ropes over the streets as temporary roadblocks and as a means of epitomizing strength and victory, as indicated in the digital artwork by the artist kuecool [fig. 4].

Considering that the *htamain* has become a strong symbolic representation of localized contemporary resistance, it is worth unpacking not only what *hpone* is (in order to understand how it has been reappropriated), but importantly what it does within and across different sets of subject positions. The concept of ဟ်ပုး (hpone) - in its contemporary dominant iteration - can be understood as the socio-culturally embedded belief in a supposedly innate superiority of cis-gender men over women. It is a quality, which men are contemporarily said to be born with and which is described by Than Than Nwe as

a highly abstract quality that has no practical relevance. It gives men the advantage of a special status, higher than that of women. Having hpon is having hpon, not much else. But losing hpon is wrought with unknown dangers. Thus, at the spiritual level, the position of Burmese women fares badly [based against the] belief in the attainment of Buddhahood as possible only for a male and the pollutive effects of women on men's hpon. (2003, 7)



Figure 4 kueecool “Our Longyi ⚡ Our Flag ⚡ Our Victory 🇲🇲”. 2021. Digital protest art. Source: [https://www.instagram.com/p/CMHharAFT-2bFYvX5lFgi\\_KNFKehDVS9XNkumw0/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CMHharAFT-2bFYvX5lFgi_KNFKehDVS9XNkumw0/). Reproduced with kind permission and courtesy of the artist

Within this superiority of men over women, this particular (if hegemonic) interpretation of *ဘုန်း* (*hpone*) includes the assumption that a man’s *hpone* may be diminished by women in multiple ways, with real material consequences for everyday life. As such, it defines women’s place in society as based in a spatial hierarchy where a woman is not to inhabit (physically and thus metaphorically) higher places than men when sleeping or sitting, and regulates participation in specific religious practices, like the in/ability to touch Buddha statues or enter certain areas in pagodas.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the gendered storing and washing of clothes has been engrained in the (crumbling?) majority of society.<sup>13</sup>

While a detailed historical analysis of this concept is beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>14</sup> the ways in which *hpone* has evolved across time and space illuminate how it has become instrumentalized. As


<sup>12</sup> Important crossovers of religious-based constructions include, for instance, gendered restrictions based on women’s supposed impurity or regarding merit-making; these are found in other spaces across Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia in similar yet distinct ways (see, e.g., Falk 2007).

<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of *hpone* and the *htamain* revolution, see also Marlar, Chomers, Elena (2023).

<sup>14</sup> See Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2012) for a detailed analysis of how *hpone* has historically evolved and Tharaphi Than (2021; 2014) on the deep historical entanglement of women’s mobilization with the independence movement and the nationalist cause.

Tharaphi Than (2021) suggests, the women's movement in Burma/Myanmar cannot be understood disconnected from the independence movement; rather, any causes of the Bamar women's movement have stood in the shadow of the nationalist cause. Within this independence climate, Khin Mar Mar Kyi (2012, 119) traces the emergence of an othering where *hpone* "became a political tool to express Burman inherent [racial] superiority over the colonial rulers" creating a "new ideology of nationalism [...] using the idea of *hpone* as extended to the whole nation". Following independence, during different phases of military rule, *hpone* was mis/used by those in power and morphed to "become increasingly nationalised, Burmanised, and sexualised (masculinised)" (107).

Against this brief historical reading, we can see how *hpone* has been instrumentalized, not only to manifest a 'simple' superiority of men over women but to (re)create a 'matrix of domination', in Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) sense. In order to make this more approachable, let us return to the question what *hpone* does<sup>15</sup> against an intersectional reading. Two processes are of importance here. The first is how *hpone* has been used to homogenize certain groups of people in delimitation vis-à-vis others (e.g. (cis)men vs women\*; Buddhists vs non-Buddhists; Bamars vs Others; nationals vs non-nationals) in order to create hierarchies based on these categorizations.<sup>16</sup> While these dualist categories are easy to dismantle (and indeed this is at the core of much intersectional resistance), they have real material consequences, as we have seen. Furthermore, beyond the immediate structures of discrimination emerging from these, they have - and this brings me to my second point - shaped social relations in their totality (Vergès 2017). As such, they have moulded not only those in positions of discrimination but also those who inhabit a hetero cis-gender male (Bamar) Buddhist position within society - albeit in incomparably different ways. This becomes relevant when we now turn to evaluating the *htamain* revolution's potential to forge relational solidarities.

Taking a closer look at the  (*htamain*) revolution emphasizes some important nuances within this action: namely, the *htamain* used as a specific protest strategy and the dismantling of the structures that make this usage possible in the first place. In an article

<sup>15</sup> I borrow this from Sara Ahmed's (2014) analysis of what emotions *do* (rather than what they *are*). While *hpone* is not an emotion, I believe it to be a helpful inquiring including as certain emotions seem to stick to *hpone* in interesting ways that would benefit from further probing.

<sup>16</sup> At this point we may also have to critically question Pyae Moe Thet War's introductory statement, which needs a more explicit articulation regarding which situations (that is, involving which group of other men) women are less respected in. One could equally ask, what does the categorization of 'its own women' (Pyae Moe Thet War 2022) imply?



entitled *Women fight the dual evils of dictatorship and patriarchal norms in Myanmar*, Khin Khin Mra comments on the hanging of *htamains* as barricades:

Images of security forces trying to remove these *htamain* shared on social media show that this strategy challenges deep-seated misogynistic/patriarchal beliefs held by the military, and demonstrate that the *htamain* has been turned into an empowering symbol of resistance. (2021, n.p.)

We can follow Audre Lorde's (1993, 112) famous elaboration of how "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" when looking at the ထာမ်အိတ် ( *htamain* barricades). By serving as a protest tool that can (following Bohrer 2022, 79) be positioned within harm-reduction politics and as such does show "strength [in] its actionable immediacy" - namely, in slowing down the security forces - it still plays under the rules invented by the master (i.e. the risk of losing *hpone* by walking under women's clothes). If we follow Audre Lorde's prefigurative politics (see Bohrer 2022), we have to acknowledge that the connections between the *htamain* as a protest tool and the dismantling of patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs are more complex - and indeed more fragile - for the master's tools "may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 1993, 112). This is far from implying that these tactics were not powerful, both in their immediacy and in allowing for radically different futures to be envisioned. To be clear, the symbolic acts of the *htamain* revolution carry the potential - and have already contributed - to open up radical changes and demands; however, as with any symbolic act, there is no guarantee.

The lens of relational solidarities asks us to also pay attention to those who are made by *hpone* while inhabiting a position of 'privilege'. As Bohrer (2019, 258) makes clear, not being oppressed by a specific form of oppression

does not mean we have not been made by it. What is often called 'privileged' is in reality this molding, a conditioning that shapes certain groups to be comfortable with exploitation and oppression, to be unable to see it, to be unable to see how it has been present at every step, in every moment of our lives as well.

Without meaning to conflate experiences, the making of men under *hpone* comes with its own harms of living in a system of toxic masculinity, with certain expectations attached to one's identity position. As a case in point, let us remember Than Than Nwe's (2003, 7) quote on how "losing *hpon* is wrought with unknown dangers". What does this imply, then, when men are wearing *htamain* wrapped around their

heads? I agree with Jane Ferguson (2023, 10), who states that “to stake a claim not to believe in *hpone* is a different act than calling out others’ sexist behavior” and that it may carry stigmatism towards others who do believe in *hpone*. The underlying meanings and motivation of this action would need further empirical exploration and are dependent upon the particularities of specific subject positions. In addition to asking what *hpone* is (or is not) for any individual, an analysis of underlying structures of oppression may be addressed by questioning what *hpone* does to re/create forms of privilege and discrimination across time and space. Tracing the ‘matrix of domination’ that *hpone* inhabits, can give insights into the ways life becomes moulded under (a contemporary iteration of) *hpone* including for those in privileged positions. Thereby, it can showcase that “toxic masculinity is so named because it is toxic not only to those who are not men, but precisely also *for men*” (Bohrer 2019, 259). This also highlights the deeply interwoven relationality of a patriarchal dictatorship – that is, without abolishing the one, one cannot be freed of the other – as the 2021 attempted coup so painfully exemplified. As such, within the context of Burma/Myanmar, gender (and related categorizations) cannot be understood detached from an understanding of *hpone* – both what it *is* and what it *does* across time and space – which in turn cannot be understood detached from its historical evolution, including its connection to the independence movement and the nationalist cause.

Within this section, I have employed visual representations (i.e. protest art) emerging from the revolution to bring them into conversation with insights from the intersectional tradition to show how symbols qua cues – manifested in the Burma/Myanmar context for instance within the *Three Finger Salute* and the *htamain* – can help us trace systems of oppressions *and* potential alliances across space and time. In the next concluding section, I draw upon these insights to examine how relational solidarities may be a fruitful way to think about a future liberated Burma/Myanmar.

#### **4 Relational solidarities and the imagining of a future Burma/Myanmar**

As social movement studies have often suggested, the effects of contentious waves [of protests] are complex, never fully meeting the aspirations of those who protest, but rarely leaving things unchanged. (della Porta 2016, 3)

Looking at the evolution of the 2021 Spring Revolution since 1 February 2021, it appears obvious that ‘things’ will never be the same in Burma/Myanmar. Those who have and continue to follow and/or

live through it are aware of the violence inherent in this revelation across all fabrics of society. Indeed, as I hope to have shown through my analysis, the patriarchal, racist, heterosexist\* system as represented within the 'junta' - in its historical continuation of previous dictatorships - has and continues to affect all peoples of Burma/Myanmar, albeit in highly differentiated ways (see also Thirteen 2024). Through an intersectional conversation with a range of symbolic cues as represented within protest art, I have attempted to sketch parts of this 'matrix of domination' that structures so much of contemporary life. At the same time, I have suggested how through the 2021 Spring Revolution we can start to trace relational solidarities working towards radical liberation. This is not to say that these are inevitable or that everyone is working towards a future that allows for multiplicity to exist in 'unity'. However, I do believe that the insights from the intersectional tradition that I have explored above may serve as a constructive thread when thinking about contemporary resistance in Burma/Myanmar, its historical legacies, and a future that moves beyond the common enemy and aims to dismantle all the intersecting oppressions that uphold domination.

To be clear, I argue here that Burma/Myanmar is at a critical crossroads of forming new - and at times previously unthinkable - alliances based around the experiences of contemporary violence induced by the 'junta' following the 2021 attempted coup. The very quality of these alliances and the imaginaries for a future liberated Burma/Myanmar emerging from them is ultimately bound by understanding how the oppressions under the 'junta' are not only a renewed iteration of historically grown violences that have been present all along (including in the form of Burmanization, coloniality, decades of civil war, the Rohingya genocide, and patriarchal violence, amongst others) at the 'fringes' of society. Indeed, they have shaped and made all of society (in critically and incommensurably different ways, depending on one's relative situatedness of privileges and/or discriminations). In this article, I have thus suggested that insights from the intersectional tradition allow for a better understanding of these structures and processes while providing a unique comprehension of relational solidarities based in "unity, not uniformity" (Bohrer 2019, 254). I argue that such an understanding can not only be brought into fruitful conversation with the particularities of the multiplicities Burma/Myanmar is made of but also when working towards a future liberated society.

Understanding this paper as an interim insight - a snapshot - future research may or may not find it useful to build upon some of these thoughts, for instance, through in-depth interviews with activists or in the form of a detailed embedding in or re-reading of histories. There is no way of knowing what future institutional arrangements will look like; however, as Donatella della Porta (2016, 349)



argues, what actually changes through revolutions “is much more than preferences – rather, those very identities that precede preferences are built”. In this sense, looking at imaginaries that have been unveiled – importantly including those that ask questions ultimately targeting underlying structures of domination/oppression within society – there is real potential for a future grounded in more radical liberation. There is hope – at the very least – as shown in an important and inspiring insight from the *School of Arts’ Manifesto*, which epitomizes the ability to critically observe and creatively imagine a future based in multiplicity:

This is a call to establish approaches to art, history and theory true to the realities of our condition. [...] The shapes of our societies are not made of polar opposite ends but of triangles, circles, squares and hearts. Abolish the dichotomies. [...] A country without proper support and understanding for arts, culture, and research will always be vulnerable and insecure. We demand a respectable place for artists, thinkers and scholars in the new [Myanmar] [Burma] [?]. (School of Arts – Spring University Myanmar 2022, 21)

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