Hilary Oliva Faxon

Surviving the State

LAND AND DEMOCRACY IN MYANMAR

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the State

GLOBAL AND INSURGENT LEGALITIES

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Cover art: Walking the fields of the Kalay Valley. Photo by Hilary Oliva Faxon.

For the everyday revolutionaries

Contents

Preface

Shortly after Myanmar's military seized power, Abraham was shot by police while protesting for democracy.[1] The demonstration that he attended on the main street of Kalaymyo, a town in the rural northwest, was just one of many peaceful mobilizations that had erupted across the country. On February 1, 2021, the eve of a new parliamentary session, the military had arrested prominent politicians and declared a state of emergency, overturning the National League for Democracy's sweeping electoral victory and a decade of reforms that had liberalized the economy and empowered civilians. In response, public- and private-sector employees—from doctors to township clerks to railway and factory workers—began a general strike, refusing to work for the junta. Farmers staged tractor protests and refused to repay their government crop loans. Students and schoolteachers revived old protest chants, linked arms, and marched in the streets. The week that Abraham was shot marked the start of a brutal crackdown. Unlike hundreds of politicians, protesters, and civilians, Abraham survived. But his wound rendered palpable the death of a dream of democracy, at least as it existed during a decade of tenuous compromise between reformers within the military and the civilian leaders of the National League for Democracy. As Abraham and others were hurt, jailed, and killed, their friends took up homemade hunting rifles. Soon, the quiet agricultural valley that Abraham called home would become a center of armed resistance in the Myanmar Spring Revolution.

It was not difficult for me to imagine my friend joining the protests. When his sister, the leader of a grassroots land-rights organization, told me the news, I thought of the days we had spent traveling through the rice paddies and villages of the Kalay Valley. Like many Myanmar people of all walks of life, Abraham had come home from work abroad, most recently

in a sushi restaurant in Kuala Lumpur, when reforms started in 2011. Eager to be part of the turn to democracy, he lectured on land law and followed farmers out to their fields, squatting in the shade to listen to their stories of dispossession and dreams for the future. I scrolled through the pictures that his sister had sent: blurry figures facing police on a familiar street corner; Abraham lying bloody on the floor of the family home, which doubled as the activists' office. I remembered many long afternoons in that room, sorting through documents from land cases or eating dinner with a gaggle of nieces and nephews. I also remembered one freezing cold night that Abraham and I spent sleeping beside other land-law trainers in a house a stone's throw from the Indian border. We visited several villages on that trip, stopping for daylong trainings about new land policies, held in Buddhist monasteries, Christian churches, and farmers' homes. We were all exhausted, but Abraham had stayed up late, talking softly with the owner of the house. The man confided that some of his land had been taken; Abraham told him he would help. He told him they no longer lived under military rule. He told him not to be afraid.

Surviving the State is about everyday life on the land in the face of ruthless and recurrent violence. This violence includes brutal crackdowns on peaceful protests that followed the 2021 military coup, such as the one that injured Abraham. It manifests in the recurrent armed conflict across the country, battles that constitute the world's longest-running civil war. It permeates familiar places and banal activities, surfacing on the land, in the home, and in the law. This book narrates how people like Abraham endure these shifting forms of violence and negotiated Myanmar's decade of democracy by adapting long-standing strategies forged over successive periods of coercion and abandonment. The stories that animate these pages are the fruit of many days spent with grassroots activists, land-law trainers, village leaders, and smallholder farmers. These women and men invited me into their homes and taught me not only about the limits of law but also about how everyday life on the land continues in spite of hardship, enables endurance, and inspires joy and resistance.

This book is not for Abraham. It is not for his sister or for any of the others you will soon meet. Experts in survival do not need their situation explained to them by an outsider, though some have told me they appreciate my effort to tell their stories. This is, then, a book for the curious student and the critical theorist, the aid worker and the policy maker, the urban and exiled elite: those who have not worked or wandered Myanmar's

countryside. Heeding Eve Tuck's (2009) call to refuse research that consistently casts communities as damaged, depleted, and hopeless, I choose to emphasize rural people's strength and creativity. This focus honors their struggle while producing theory that helps to understand not just suffering and brokenness but, more importantly, brilliance, grit, and possibility.

Introduction

As a source of subsistence, a homeplace, and a bargaining chip, land enables everyday practices of survival within spaces of political violence. Amid periods of brutality and possibility, fields and forests shelter and support basic needs, community solidarity, and revolutionary dreams. During Myanmar's decade of democracy, from the inauguration of a military reformer in 2011 through the election of a civilian government in 2015 to the military coup in 2021, reforms targeted land as a source of economic growth and object of "good governance." Smallholders who had long sought to avoid notice began laying claims to land both in the new language of liberal rights and in a wide range of moral vernaculars invoking hard work, ethnic ties, and responsible citizenship. This was a short-lived but remarkable shift, one that not only helps us understand how attempts to govern resources take shape on the ground but also holds lessons for achieving land justice.

To say that land is at the heart of Myanmar's struggle for democracy is not an original insight: Shortly after the historic National League for Democracy (NLD) electoral victory in 2015, I heard the former US ambassador to Myanmar answer a question about the nation's postauthoritarian prospects with the zinger "It's all about land." In giving that answer, the ambassador was likely thinking of the ways in which land had long shored up the military's power and still supported the livelihoods of the majority of the population. Since Myanmar's days as a British colony, the extraction and export of lucrative natural resources—including timber, rice, jade, and

oil—had funded the rule and enrichment of a series of armed oppressors. After independence in 1948, a brief period of parliamentary democracy, punctuated by insurgency, ended decisively with a 1962 military coup. When President Thein Sein, a reformer within the military handpicked by the former dictator, embraced democracy in his 2011 inauguration speech, he heralded the end of half a century of authoritarian rule. At the time, most people relied, at least in part, on farming rice, beans, corn, sesame, and watermelon for their livelihoods. About 70 percent of Myanmar's population of fifty-four million lived in rural areas and two-thirds of the labor force worked in agriculture.[1] Many had lost their land, or knew someone who had, in previous waves of armed conflict and land-grabbing by the military elite. For foreign diplomats like the ambassador, as well as for Myanmar politicians and activists, land tied together the projects of rule of law and rural development, providing the possibility of redressing past injustices while lifting people out of poverty.

Because land was so central to both everyday existence and national reconciliation, it was a critical site of negotiation where aspirational rhetoric met the material realities of farmers' lives during the decade of democracy. But there was more at stake than food production and political legibility. In figure I.1, red dirt and juvenile plants stretch beyond a white fence toward hilly slopes. The photo was taken in southern Myanmar in 2017, close to a new Special Economic Zone and old ethnic territory. Land-grabbing had accelerated here during the reform period, including in joint ventures between military cronies and foreign companies. Promising lucrative plantations, they often stop at conversion timber (Woods 2013).[2] This land was taken for oil palm. This photo was taken by a woman whom I will call Daw San during a participatory photography project conducted during the five years in which a civilian government held tenuous control and promised rural development and economic growth. Daw San's photo essay documented lands that had been taken by the military, the government, and private companies. Describing her images, Daw San explained the challenges that local people faced in accessing water, providing for families, and taking care of communities after losing land. Her photographs highlighted the ongoing and existential threat of dispossession, as well as the value of land as a basis for livelihoods and a source of social identity.

The title Daw San chose for her photo essay emphasizes the devastation wrought by land loss: "Though We Are Alive, Life Seems Dead." It suggests that land can make the difference between mere existence and flourishing. In contrast to the ways land was being discussed in policy meetings

FIGURE I.1. "Many don't have land as they give up hundreds and thousands of acres." From the photo essay "Though We Are Alive, Life Seems Dead" by Daw San.

focused on formalizing rights and investment memos fixated on unlocking profits, Daw San's photos depict Myanmar's landscapes as alive. These were not abstract properties, but places with histories. Plots possessed not only productive potential but also the capacity to generate community and anchor identity. Interconnected social and subsistence qualities endowed land with a life-giving vitality.

This quality became crucial after a military coup ended a decade of democracy in 2021. As urban protests gave way to rural revolt, land's role in staging subversion was broadcast in popular Facebook videos of revolutionary fighters training in the jungle. Less obvious were the ways that connections to land continued to nurture and shelter families in times of war. A second photographer, Mi Mi, evoked this power when she explained her photographs, reproduced here as illustrations (figure I.2). On the left, her belongings are neatly packed in preparation to flee at the sound of fighting; on the right, a single figure works rows of rice. She took the pictures in eastern Myanmar a year after the military coup, where hers was one of thousands of families displaced in yet another wave of fighting. Mi Mi fled

FIGURE 1.2. Illustrations of Mi Mi's photos of packing up her belongings in a small truck to escape armed conflict (*left*) and farming her sister's land after displacement, with sounds of fighting in the hills nearby (*right*). After months of fleeing, her mother urged her to come to this place, saying, "If you have to die, die here together with the family." Photos by Mi Mi. Illustrations by JC.

after the 2021 military coup brought war again, leaving the two acres she had farmed with her husband. After giving birth to her first child, she repacked and continued moving, now with a baby on her back. After months of fleeing, her mother beckoned her back to the family plot, saying, "If you have to die, die here together with the family."

For farmers like Mi Mi, land was more important than ever. After joining her mother and sister, she farmed land rented from her sister amid the sounds of shelling from the nearby hills. She switched from transplanting to broadcasting seeds to avoid spending too much time out in the open. Water was scarce that season. By early 2022, the price of fertilizer, like many basic goods, had tripled. While she had once harvested ninety bags of rice, the year after the coup she scratched out just two bags from her sister's land, barely enough to keep her family from starving. Still, she donated to the People's Defense Force, the local resistance fighters, whenever she could. Sometimes, while her husband was out making money by digging bunkers and her mother was watching the baby, she sat alone and missed the home she had left behind, wondering if her house had been burned down or was still standing. But she felt a little relief when she cooked and ate

by candlelight with family in the evenings, or worked together with neighbors in the fields, trading stories and work.

Daw San and Mi Mi took their photos in different parts of the country during separate participatory photography projects: the first conducted in the boom years of democratic reform and economic growth; the second, in the lean and dangerous days of revolution.[3] Their images and narratives are distinct, grounded in particular places, times, and families. But, together, these women's accounts deepen dominant understandings of land politics; they clarify *why* it's all about land, *how* land matters, and *for whom*. Their stories demonstrate that land is critical not only as a source of food for smallholders or money for the military but also as a way to create and sustain family and community during recurrent waves of violence.[4]

This book is the culmination of a project that began with questions about democratic resource governance, evolved through a decade of academic and activist research on land politics, and took on new urgency after the 2021 military coup. It centers the stories of people like Daw San and Mi Mi, women who combine traditional forms of political engagement—documenting land-grabbing, donating to resistance forces—with the everyday work of growing food and earning a living, of caring for children and cultivating community. The landscapes they capture are sites of intergenerational trauma, but also sources of life and spaces of home. Across generations, gendered work and care on the land, which I call *making meaningful life*, forges social ties, cultivates environmental knowledges, differentiates ethnic identities, and sustains communities. Understanding these efforts, adapted over generations of struggle to live on the land and keep the law at bay, is the central task of this book.

Core Contributions

Black feminist bell hooks invites us to consider theory as a liberatory and subversive practice. As a way of making sense of the world, theory can provide a place of sanctuary when what is happening all around us is painful, immoral, or wrong. Skewering those who write in ways that alienate and intimidate, she urges vernaculars that bring others in. How we choose to conceptualize has consequences: "Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end" (hooks 1994, 61).

In this spirit, the substance and argument of this ethnography focus on people's agency, exercised in extremely challenging and constrained

circumstances. Starting from one of the founding commitments of critical agrarian studies, which is the contention that rural people are not behind or outside of modernity but rather constitutive of it (Edelman and Wolford 2017), this book narrates the everyday practices through which smallholders draw on land to feed families, maintain communities, and stake claims over successive periods of coercion, abandonment, and violence. In doing so, I advocate a conceptual move beyond making, escaping, or resisting the state, putting forward a feminist analytic for understanding the relationships between marginalized people and political violence.

I argue that surviving the state is simultaneously an ecological, intergenerational, and legal project. Survival is daily work, sometimes celebration and often drudgery, enacted in response to political violence waged on the land, in the home, and in the law. It demands stamina and sustains life in what I call *the interstices of authoritarianism*, the times and spaces carved out amid violence and neglect. Through periods of spectacular violence, routine exploitation, and quiet neglect, women and men draw on land to grow food and earn a living, cultivate family and community, enact strategic (il)legibility, and mount revolution.

Everyday practices on the land enable endurance. Focusing on this productive, social reproductive, and political work ethnographically illuminates the lived experiences of Myanmar's decade of democracy. It also explains a broader puzzle—the persistent importance of land within uneven development and resurgent authoritarianism—with a theory that centers rural people's genius and honors their struggle.

State Formation and Land Politics

Scholars in the overlapping fields of political ecology, political geography, and development studies have long been interested in the relationships between land, the people who live on it, and the slippery entity called the state. Theorizing the state is one of the classical problems of social theory. From Antonio Gramsci's ([1971] 2014, 257–65) ruminations on the "state as educator" and "state as nightwatchman" to Philip Abrams's (1977) insight into the importance of disaggregating the state system from the state idea, scholars have long been interested in the multiple dimensions and shifting character of the state. While classic studies show how the state is constituted historically through class struggle (Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979), recent work emphasizes the ongoing, everyday nature of state formation (Joseph and Nugent 1994). These are spatial processes, as James Ferguson

and Akhil Gupta (2002) argue in an important essay that examines the territorial character of government ethnographically, demonstrating how routine bureaucratic practices constitute the state as both "above" and "encompassing" society. At the margins of the state, Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004, 9–11) write, authorities are continually in the process of pacifying, civilizing, and disciplining, even as both officials and civilians engage in a dance of legibility and illegibility.

Such an account resonates with my ethnographic encounters in rural Myanmar with low-level civil servants, many of whom would leave the government in protest after the 2021 military coup; they explained to me that during the democratic decade that they were *nget deh*, or sandwiched, constantly shuffling between a repressive government and an impoverished population. One former village headman used the same word when describing his negotiations with both the Myanmar military and the local Ethnic Armed Organization, highlighting how Myanmar's landscape of fragmented authority challenges Max Weber's ([1919] 1978) classic definition of a state as having a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Yet, despite Myanmar's history of armed authorities and the practical and theoretical problems of locating the edge of the state, the reality is that most people in Myanmar still know the state primarily as a war machine. Authorities might shift between pacifying and promising, or change the color of their uniforms, but ultimately Myanmar is, as political scientist Mary Callahan (2003, 2) argues, "a state predicated on, constructed around, and ultimately held hostage to organized violence."[5] While this changed partially during the decade of democracy, when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi become the symbolic leader of the country, the events following the coup in 2021 proved this to be an anomaly. Like the smallholders who animate these pages, I am less interested here in what the state is, than in what the state does.[6] Seen from Myanmar's countryside, the state is most obvious as a source of political violence when soldiers torch villages or generals forcibly take land. But violence is also felt in the state's absence: for example, when aid fails to arrive after disaster strikes. Understanding the Myanmar state primarily as a source of intermittent and sometimes extreme political violence is an important starting point for engaging with scholarship on land politics and state formation.

A key aspect of this work has been to uncover and analyze how land control enables state-making. Nancy Peluso and Peter Vandergeest's pioneering work on political forests, for example, demonstrates how establishing control over natural resources, and the people who use them, was

key to the historical development of state power in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Peluso and Vandergeest 2001, 2011). Territorialization, or extending and deepening control over space, can be carried out through surveys and statutes, administrators or soldiers, development or conservation (Winichakul 1997; Yeh 2013). Property inaugurates authority and cements internal, often racialized hierarchies (Sikor and Lund 2009; Bhandar 2018). Borders and frontiers are often privileged times and places of state-making, as delineation and expansion, resource extraction, and the enactment of new rules bring institutions and communities into being (Peluso and Lund 2011; Rasmussen and Lund 2018; Cons and Eilenberg 2019). These processes can be brutal, as when Myanmar's military burns villages to drive out insurgents, or banal, as in the endless paperwork and office visits required for farmland registration.

If land has long been critical to making the state, it has been equally crucial to escaping the state. Mountains, swamps, and jungles are hard to reach and traverse, and the people who inhabit these landscapes cannot always be brought to heel. Historically, the hills surrounding Myanmar's central plain provided shelter to those fleeing the coercive power of lowland kingdoms; James Scott (2009) popularized this notion with his account of upland "zomia," as a zone of escape from the state.[7] Ethnographic and historical scholarship has interrogated the societies that inhabit Southeast Asia's uplands: if not lawless, often outlaw; if not anarchist, fiercely autonomous (Fiskesjö 2010; Sadan 2014; Rippa 2019). Such communities both use and weaponize land to furnish food to eat, goods to trade, and to perform as a topographical defense system.[8] The final chapter of this book follows farmers and fighters across mountainous international boundaries, reprising historic strategies of upland autonomy.

Yet arrival in India did not mean escaping the state. Rather, it brought revolutionaries and refugees into contact with a new set of political authorities. This demanded forging new relationships and updating tactics of land politics. In an age of unprecedented infrastructure and technology, most people are stuck, unable or unwilling to dodge state power. Those not wholly successful in avoidance might turn to outright or subtle acts of resistance, protesting in the streets or simply dragging their feet. A rich tradition of scholarship with its roots in Southeast Asia's paddy fields has interrogated subaltern politics, calling attention to the individual and collective strategies through which marginalized rural people push back through land-based practices, whether by sabotaging threshing machines or ordaining trees (Scott 1985; Hart 1991; Turner and Caouette

2009; Kenney-Lazar et al. 2018; Fung and Lamb 2023). Work on everyday resistance highlights a range of oppositional practices, not formally organized but rather integrated into routines, that contest uneven power relations from below (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016). Yet even without delving into these vast and heterogenous debates, a day in the Myanmar countryside is enough to reveal that not all activity is divisible into spatial strategies of domination and resistance. Indeed, a common critique of scholarship on everyday resistance is that the term has come to mean everything: It can be impossible, empirically, to discern whether a grumpy peasant's act is dissent, or rather refusal, reworking, or making do.[9] Those looking for resistance would miss the profound ambivalence that characterizes even strong social movements occupying land in Brazil (Wolford 2010) or the stories about and love of landscape that make it possible to live with oil and coal in India (Kikon 2019). Amid chronic insecurity and organized crime, people negotiate risk and pursue opportunities in ways that consciously stage a better life.[10] Even in the extreme circumstances of war, people continue to plant crops, play games, bear children, and fall in love.[11] Native American studies suggests thinking beyond "resistance" to concepts like "survivance," an active process of cultural and physical preservation and self-reliance, one that repairs relations between people and land that have been ruptured by settler colonialism and genocide (Vizenor 1999). In the gaps between repression and revolution, life on the land continues.

Seen from the margins, land is key not just to making, escaping, or resisting the state, but also to enduring it. This book highlights the everyday, land-based work of surviving the state, focusing our attention on smallholders' hard work to make life on the land in the narrow spaces afforded by regimes that oscillate, with little warning, between violence and neglect.

In framing these actions as a response, I am aware that I run the risk of reifying the state. Building on the work of Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci and reflecting on his own ethnographic research in rural India, Akhil Gupta underscores the need for new analytics that contend with the blurred boundaries of the postcolonial state, emphasizing the need to reconceptualize the terrain of political struggle. "What is at stake is nothing less than a transformation in the manner in which the state comes to be constructed. It is a struggle that problematizes the historical divide between those who choose to do political work 'within' the state and those who work 'outside' it, because the cultural construction of the state in public culture can result from, and affect, both in equal measure" (Gupta 1995, 394). In other words, theories of the state must take seriously the material and discursive ways

in which the state continuously comes into being, in shifting relation with rural society. Rather than studying "the state" directly, I direct attention to how postcolonial and postsocialist laws and policies, everyday interactions with local politicians and bureaucrats, and acts of arson, torture, and murder shape the possibilities for surviving. This approach moves us beyond dichotomies of state/society and co-optation/resistance while politicizing the precarious conditions of everyday life.

A Theory of Surviving the State

Surviving the state names the active, ongoing work of securing subsistence, maintaining community, and negotiating law in a context in which the state is both blurry at the edges and brutally obvious. Recalling hooks's notion of theory-making as a liberatory and subversive practice, I offer *surviving the state* as a conceptual apparatus for understanding how people endure, and even thrive, in shifting conditions of political violence. Inspired by feminist accounts of survival, which emphasize gendered knowledge and future-making in the face of change and crisis, and by previous work in Burma Studies focused on collective and individual coping strategies, I direct my theorizing toward smallholder ingenuity and vitality.[12] Surviving the state is an ecological, intergenerational, and legal project. Each of these dimensions emerges in response to particular forms of political violence, waged on the land, in the home, and in the law.

First, surviving the state is a material process that demands adaptive practices on dynamic landscapes. Myanmar's landscapes are highly militarized. Taking land, seizing roads and mines, burning homes, and setting landmines have long been control tactics. These landscapes are also increasingly affected by global climate change, with increased flooding, extreme heat, and landslides. Smallholders must navigate and adapt to war and environmental change, even as they transform the landscape to feed their families. As chapter 1 demonstrates, this has been a long-standing process, with farmers and forest dwellers adapting to the resource priorities of colonial, socialist, and authoritarian regimes. While these processes look different across different agro-ecologies—from hilly swidden plots to lowland rice—surviving depends on both an intimate knowledge of the land and the ability to adapt to the particularities of plants and pests and changes in water and weather.

Land has traditionally been valued for its ability to produce—whether food, fuel, raw materials, or financial returns.[13] While scholars have noted

that land resists reduction to the status of either private property or fungible commodity, less has been said about the ways in which land provides a refuge and resource for building collective life in the context of political instability and racialized violence.[14] Yet land has never been only or even primarily a source of economic value.[15] Native American and Indigenous scholars highlight the importance of land to collective identity, even in the face of dispossession and genocide, and the recursive relationship between theory-building, storytelling, and active practices of survivance.[16] In her account of collective mobilization in the face of plantation expansion and authoritarian resurgence in rural Cambodia, Alice Beban (2021, 207) advances a feminist ontology of land, one that centers land's agency, its unbounded and unruly qualities, and its role in sustaining social reproduction in the face of state violence.[17]

Understanding surviving the state as an intergenerational project builds on these insights to bring into focus the gendered and racialized relations of kin and community that make it possible to endure over time. These intergenerational relations reshape landscapes ecologically, such as when parents reinvest remittance capital to dig fishponds, and emotionally, transforming dusty plots into villages and homes. Chapter 2 explores survival as a set of social relations, everyday practices of celebration and drudgery that go beyond securing subsistence to make life worth living. What I call *making meaningful life* is social reproductive labor, often performed by women, that is embedded in the seasonal and daily demands of agrarian settings. The collective work of harvesting together, preparing a marriage feast, and rebuilding village infrastructure relies on and reinforces relations of gender, generation, and class. This work becomes both more difficult and more urgent as state violence intensifies because political violence explicitly targets families, including through the infamous "four cuts" strategy, in which the Myanmar military terrorizes communities by cutting off food, funds, information, and recruitment for insurgents. To include meaningful life in a notion of survival is to underscore the importance of this social reproductive labor and to emphasize that what is at stake is not merely physical but also social and spiritual vitality. This is the intangible but vital sense that Daw San referred to when she titled her essay about land loss "Though We Are Alive, Life Seems Dead."

It is worth pausing here to note the importance of ethnicity. Theories of ethnicity in Southeast Asia emphasize fluidity and plurality, as well as the colonial origins of contemporary identity categories.[18] Because the Tatmadaw, or Myanmar military, has long targeted ethnic and religious

minorities, the need to work for survival has been urgent and acute for many of these groups. Armed conflict between Ethnic Armed Organizations and the Myanmar military has also been a source of political violence. At the same time, ethnic ties have enabled endurance, for example, through diasporic funding networks that support a natal tribe. Here, I understand ethnicity as "racialized structures of possibility" that determine structures of belonging and exclusion, as well as networks and resources available for survival. In chapters 1 and 2, I show how different ethnic histories of migration shaped the physical and human geography of the Kalay Valley and how ethnic difference is reinforced through emic understandings of everyday agrarian work. After the coup, ethnic kinship, both literal blood ties and larger notions of belonging and responsibility, provided the possibility of shelter in Mizoram for ethnic Chin refugees, a topic I explore in chapter 5. While this book does not aim primarily to contribute to debates on ethnicity in Southeast Asia, the idea that cultural and racialized identities structure both the need and possibilities for surviving is crucial to my argument. This conceptualization troubles both notions of ethnicity as fluid and a neat division of upland and lowland people, showing instead how both dominant and minority ethnic groups rely on land and kinship networks in their struggles for physical, political, and social survival.

To focus on intergenerational strategies of survival is to insist on the inseparability of productive, social reproductive, and political work. This is a classic feminist intervention, illustrated by accounts from rural women like Mi Mi, who farms, flees, cooks for parents, cares for a baby, and supports revolutionary forces that consist largely of kids from her village. Rather than relegate Mi Mi to the status of a victim of war and poverty, feminist political geography directs us toward seeing her as a political subject, whose embodied experience is intrinsically linked to the interlinked and contested processes of state and subject formation (Hyndman 2004; Massaro and Williams 2013). Feminist agrarian political economy highlights that, on the farm, subsistence and social reproduction are particularly hard to disentangle (Razavi 2009). This interlinkage shapes the fundamentally gendered nature of land politics; critiquing James Scott's notion of resistance, Gillian Hart (1991) argues that it is not possible to accurately understand agrarian change without grounding analysis on the gendered terrain of social relations. Here I pay particular attention to women's often invisibilized work, taking care of children, but also leading land-rights organizations or traveling from village to village, teaching the law. Such an approach helps to challenge what Wendy Brown argues is the problematically gendered

character of the state: "The distinction between daily existence preserved by women and the male pursuit of power or prestige through organized violence is both what gives such a predatory, rapacious, conquering ethos to prerogative power and what disenfranchises women from this kind of power" (1992, 25).

Ongoing projects of surviving the state, including creative maneuvering to understand and take advantage of legal reforms, build on longer histories and material relations of class, kin, and ethnicity. These are relations of and to the land, not only as a site of production and a place to call home but also as property. Surviving the state is, finally, efforts to negotiate the threats and opportunities of overlapping laws. Contrary to popular beliefs, Myanmar does not suffer from a lack of law. Rather, throughout this book I show how power and violence create a murky space, where the law is both omnipresent and absent, threatening and vacuous. Writing of Sudan, another country recently plunged back into active conflict, Mark Massoud (2013) demonstrates how colonial, authoritarian, and humanitarian regimes alike drew on the legal arsenal. Similarly, in chapter 3 I show how democratic land reforms were shaped by what I call *legal debris*, conflicting ideas of governance, value, and ownership inherited from past regimes that linger on in contemporary law and practice. In this context, and on many postcolonial and postsocialist landscapes, the meaning of new, sometimes conflicting, policies was not self-evident but rather negotiated on the ground.[19] Unlike Myanmar court officials imposing order or activists embracing and brokering human rights, the farmers I met had low expectations of the law.[20] Yet they were also creative in their efforts to turn an instrument of oppression into a tool for staking claims. As I describe in chapter 4, contemporary efforts at claiming land inverted older practices of cultivating ambiguity in a dance of strategic (il)legibility. Like the landowners, militias, bureaucrats and smallholders that Meghan Morris follows as they negotiate land restitution amid war and peace in Colombia, my interlocutors occupied the shadows of both past repression and promised futures, spaces of ambiguity and anticipation that disrupt linear transition narratives and give rise to speculative politics.[21] In places where democracy, authoritarianism, and war are overlapping and unfinished businesses, the law is both a starting point and a supposition. Yet engagement is crucial to unlearning what Tyrell Haberkorn dubs "the first lesson of dispossession," which "teaches the people that they have no standing in the law" (2024, 2).

This framing emphasizes that surviving is not merely a matter of making ends meet. My analysis diverges here from Ardeth Thawnghmung's

(2019) account of everyday economic survival in Myanmar to emphasize the political roots of people's hardships and to assign a locus of responsibility. At the same time, survival is not merely, or primarily, ideological: In contrast to work that highlights cultural and intellectual traditions of resistance, my analysis is rooted in material conditions and specific relations to soil and kin. Crucially, surviving the state is a feminist theory, one that foregrounds relational agency, encompasses the affective and social reproductive, and crosses scale to think from embodied practices to elite reforms. Surviving is an active, ongoing verb, reflecting the continuing work of securing subsistence, maintaining community, and negotiating (il)legibility on the land. But the ecological, intergenerational, and legal dimensions of surviving the state may come together and pull apart in different moments. This perspective problematizes notions of "democratic transition" because surviving the state is a historical process, one that transcends particular regimes even as it involves negotiating legal debris. The rhythms of surviving the state are attuned to the temporalities of political violence.

In the Interstices of Authoritarianism

> The road ahead will be marked by huge challenges, and there will be those who resist the forces of change. But I stand here with confidence that something is happening in this country that cannot be reversed, and the will of the people can lift up this nation and set a great example for the world.
>
> —President Barack Obama at the University of Yangon, 2012

> In other countries they live in the past and work for the future, but here we live in the future and work for the past; we just work to pay old debts.
>
> —Chin smallholder in a village in the Kalay Valley, 2019

Village life under several generations of military and hybrid regimes has been exceptionally violent, but it is also often rather mundane. The days fill with long hours of harvesting rice, wrangling children, and filling out forms. This work can be repetitive and exhausting, but also joyful and invigorating, as fun and comradery combat tedium and fear. Even war, I learned, is mostly waiting: I was struck, on a visit in 2023 to the headquarters of an Ethnic Armed Organization threatened by undefendable air strikes, by a puppy that the cadets showed me they had taught to sit, stay, and lie down. This tension—between the banality of eking out a living, celebrating a wedding, and arguing over a boundary line and the omnipresent threat

of arbitrary and extreme brutality—characterizes life in the interstices of authoritarianism.

These times and spaces carved out from violence and neglect are resolutely not "transition." Conventional wisdom idealizes both political and rural change as linear passages, the first from autocracy to democracy, and the second from subsistence agriculture to urban industry. Classic scholarship across the ideological spectrum shares this rather unimaginative view of history. Theories of development, whether Karl Marx and Frederich Engels's (1848) transition from feudalism to capitalism to communism or W. W. Rowstow's (1960) linear stages of economic growth, often rely on two-dimensional notions of progress. These ideas inform practical interventions aimed at improvement that, as anthropologist Tania Li (2007) shows, remain tied to colonial logics. The 2010s were a moment of euphoria for believers in free-market democracy. Yet the Arab Spring and the Hong Kong protests are over, and the 2020s have seen an autocratic resurgence, as personified by Vladimir Putin in Russia, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Donald Trump in the United States.[22] At the same time, in defiance of modernization predictions, smallholder farmers persist. Eighty-four percent of the world's 570 million farms are less than two hectares, or five acres, in size (Lowder et al. 2016). All this means that, rather than being propelled by dual political and agrarian transitions, more and more people find themselves waiting in the interstices of authoritarianism, often with at least one foot back on the farm. When faced with armed conflict, or pandemic closures, or factory layoffs, many fall back on land as a crucial source of food and site of home.

During my fieldwork, I heard often about the need for Myanmar to "catch up," whether by embracing human rights or building new factories. Such phrasing, along with President Obama's assurances that reversal was impossible, betrayed a shared belief in a single path toward global modernity. This was supposed to be a one-way street, a belief confirmed by the cries of "backsliding" that followed the 2021 military coup. But the golden land was never a blank slate. The coup was just the latest in a string of political upheavals. Since shortly after independence from Britain, the country formerly known as Burma has been ruled by a grim parade of nominally socialist or capitalist military juntas, kept busy with ongoing fighting with dozens of insurgencies in the world's longest-running civil war. As Elizabeth Rhoads and Courtney Wittekind (2018) have shown, developments around land and property during the democratic decade recycled earlier rhetorics of progress and decline and drew on preexisting

techniques of rule. Rather than dismissing Myanmar as a failed state with a backward economy, I seek to understand how longer histories, as well as the lived experiences of rural people negotiating a partial and temporary turn toward democracy, might shape the ways sustainable development and social justice could be imagined and achieved.

These demands start from the ground, rather than from a political science textbook. During the 2010s, farmers in Kalay referred to the contemporary period as the *democracy kit*, or democratic era. But they were under no illusions that old patterns of discipline and extortion had disappeared. They made sense of new policies not in relation to some ideal type or expected future, but through their embodied memories of hard work through cycles of state aggression and abandonment. This produces a distinct temporality, as captured in the seeming paradox of the second epigraph: "Here we live in the future and work for the past." That quote came from a conversation I had in 2019 with a group of older Chin farmers about life during the *zaba dine kit*, the era of the rice tax, when the isolationist socialist regime set aggressive yield targets in the name of domestic food security. During that period, one noted, the regime cared about rice, so it also cared about farmers, though this concern often manifested in coercion, notably in the case of forced labor. In contrast, now farmers felt only neglect, a sense of abandonment heightened by the NLD's unfulfilled promises of rural development. Another farmer explained to me that they were not asking for any handouts. They just wanted to be able to get a loan with a fair rate of interest and, after several devastating currency devaluations and a looming period of hyperinflation, rely on a stable currency. Economic volatility was compounded by the unpredictability of agriculture, especially in a changing climate. Confronted by recent flooding due to unusually heavy monsoon rains on deforested slopes and crop failure due to the effects of unregulated pesticides, the last few harvests had been particularly brutal for these men and their families. Political, environmental, and economic precarity produced an existential insecurity. They worked not for a better future but to repay past debts.

This conversation made clear that life in the democratic decade was, like the periods that came before and after, characterized not by progress or even predation as much as by profound uncertainty. Such an analysis resonates with contemporary theories of the uneven ways that authoritarianism unfolds across time and space.[23] But the farmers I interviewed knew intuitively that democracy was not neatly separable from authoritarianism. While the 2021 military coup defied global logics—foreign pundits penned

dozens of commentaries angrily proclaiming that the coup didn't make any sense—it did not astonish rural people. Farmers told me that as soon as they lost a phone signal, they knew exactly what had happened. After all, it had happened before. When they fled across the international border to India, Chin farmers continued to draw from land to secure subsistence and cultivate family and community. Displacement was not the end of land politics, but a new articulation of them. Like the political reforms of the 2010s, the Myanmar Spring Revolution that followed the 2021 coup was not a rupture in the established order, but rather another chapter in ongoing efforts to survive the state.

Territory, Ethnicity, and Law in Myanmar

Understanding the practices and politics of survival in Myanmar requires a brief introduction to the country's postcolonial history. Since the colonial period, resource extraction has been a state priority, one closely tied to ethnicity. Land control has been crucial since the British invaded in successive Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824–26, 1852–53, and 1885), governing the area they called Burma as part of India until 1937 and then as a separate colony until 1948.[24] Before the British arrived, dynastic rulers held variable, overlapping control over labor, strategic ports, and irrigated agricultural areas in the lowlands, often trading with relatively autonomous, mobile, and ethnically fluid communities in the uplands.[25] Colonialism fundamentally reconfigured these relationships. The British introduced an abiding principle of formal separation of the directly ruled agrarian lowlands and the indirectly controlled, teak-rich uplands, enacted in parallel with a project of distinguishing and classifying ethnic groups.[26]

From 1948 to 1962, the newly independent Union of Burma attempted to nationalize land and maintain parliamentary democracy, but it struggled with armed conflict and a rising tide of Buddhist nationalism. Ending foreign landownership had played a key role in mobilizing the independence movement, and the 1947 Constitution declared all land and resources above and below ground the property of the state. The claim was put into force in the 1948 Land Nationalization Act, which, while barely implemented, replaced colonial private property with a system of state ownership and farmers' nontransferable use rights that continued until 2012.[27] The 1947 Panglong Agreement, which was signed by ethnic Burman, Shan, Kachin, and Chin representatives on the eve of independence, had bound the Frontier Areas with Burma proper, but shortly after the agreement was signed,

its architect was assassinated, an event that, in popular accounts, doomed prospects for ethnic equality. During the first decade of independence, Ethnic Armed Organizations and troops from the Communist Party of Burma fought each other and the Tatmadaw. Ongoing conflict provided an excuse for the military to take control in the name of national security.[28]

General Ne Win's 1962 coup ushered in decades of military rule. His Revolutionary Council arrested lawmakers and judges, shuttered universities, and abolished prominent institutions of private property and Western-style democracy. Under Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), Melissa Crouch writes, "Law was seen as a means to reinforce control and prop up a thin socialist ideology" (2014, 13). The BSPP asserted control over agriculture while employing pro-peasant rhetoric and promising land-to-the-tiller as part of what the party called "the Burmese way to socialism." The 1963 Tenancy and Farmers' Rights Protection Laws granted land to cultivators and prevented land confiscation by private debt collectors, while 1964 Executive Order I/64 gave a cultivator use rights after five years of productive use. These opportunities came with new obligations, often in the form of compulsory rice procurement, practiced for forty years.[29] The BSPP annihilated the possibility of ethnic minority self-governance.[30] Nick Cheesman (2017) has argued that exclusionary notions of ethnic-based citizenship came into being during this period as part of a socialist state-making effort tied to the nationalization of assets, placing the birth of the modern notion of *taingyintha*, or national races, in a 1964 Ne Win speech.

Ne Win's eventual resignation was due, in part, to the growing strength of the country's legendary 1988 pro-democracy movement. But a new military junta, the State Law and Order Restoration Council, soon rejected the results of the 1990 elections, jailed activists, suspended the Constitution, and swept aside the last vestiges of socialism to seek new levels of personal enrichment. State-backed crony capitalism emerged as a dominant system of resource extraction, one intertwined with ongoing violence in the borderlands (Callahan 2009; Woods 2011; Buchanan et al. 2013; L. Jones 2014). New armed resistance movements and reenergized Ethnic Armed Organizations made their headquarters in upland areas or across the border in India, China, or Thailand (Lintner 1999; L. Smith 1999; Lintner 2011). Emblematic of land law in this period were the 1991 Wasteland Instructions, which codified a much longer practice of legalizing land confiscation that enriched dominant groups while dispossessing people who were not generating revenue for, or were considered enemies of, the state (J. M. Ferguson 2014).

The military repression of the 1990s appeared to slow at the turn of the millennium as the renamed State Peace and Development Council launched a "Roadmap to Democracy," rushed the 2008 Constitution through a widely criticized referendum, and reluctantly allowed international humanitarian aid in response to the devastating Cyclone Nargis.[31] The civilian opposition party, the NLD, was allowed to run in the 2012 by-elections and won forty-three of forty-five available parliamentary seats, then a landslide victory in the 2015 general elections. But when the NLD took the helm, key ministries and a quarter of parliamentary seats were still reserved for the military, giving them effective veto power.[32] New policies, economic growth, infrastructural development, and educational opportunities during this period did not mean the country was at peace. While a national ceasefire was signed in 2015, military violence continued and intensified in Rakhine, Kachin, and Northern Shan States in the late 2010s, notably with more than 800,000 Rohingya Muslims expelled in ethnic clearance operations. Shortly after the NLD victory in the 2020 elections, when the military arrested elected lawmakers and murdered peaceful protestors, a new generation took up arms in the Myanmar Spring Revolution.

The memories of smallholder farmers in the pages that follow tell the story of colonialism, socialism, authoritarianism, and revolution in Myanmar, but not with the familiar list of dictators, drug lords, and elites. The accounts here remind us that, for the vast majority of Myanmar's population, political ideologies are distant abstractions. Land, on the other hand, is a critical material resource, enabling people to meet immediate needs and make meaningful life. Changes in national policy did impact farmers, who had to negotiate the accumulation of different, often conflicting, laws that reflected the distinct logics and priorities of successive regimes. But this book starts from the ground, seeking to understand what freedom, democracy, and violence mean through the perspectives of people who work and live on the land.

Grounding Land Politics

One day when we were walking in her village, my friend Khin Khin Win shared this saying about Kalay's contrarian nature:

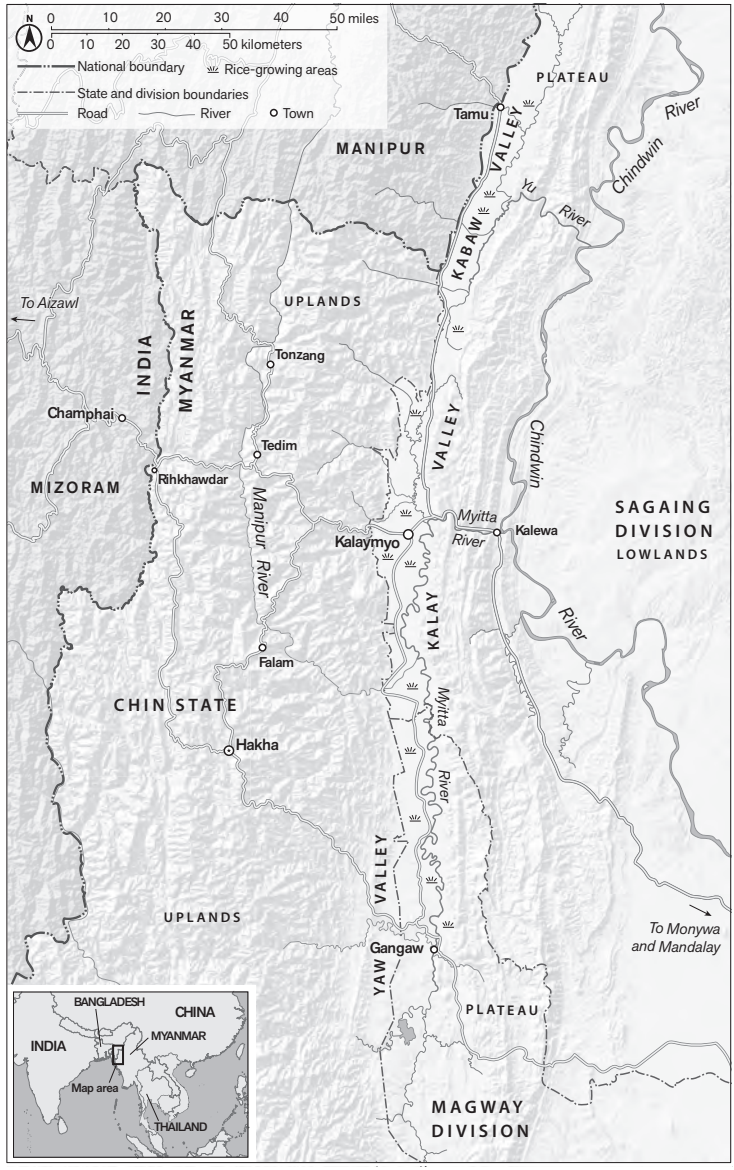
taung ga hpi la
myit ga pyaun pyan
lu ga kan lan

the mountain sticks out
the river flows in reverse
the people are argumentative

It is true that Taung Pilar, topped, like most peaks in Myanmar, by a golden pagoda, juts out from the valley floor like a sore thumb; we could see it from Khin Khin Win's fields and from most of the surrounding villages. The Myitta River flows along the valley's eastern side, irrigating the fields with seasonal floods. In October, the last monsoon clouds swath the slopes that surround a lush patchwork of valley rice paddies. The green will change to yellow when winter sunflowers bloom in February and then go tawny in the dry heat of April as farmers celebrate Burmese New Year and wait for June rains to plant again. The Myitta undulates northward like a lazy silver string until it meets the larger Chindwin, which, like all of Myanmar's major waterways, flows south to the Andaman Sea.

Despite the poem's suggestion that Kalay is unusual, I selected the field site, in part, because of the valley's typical traits: Kalay's landscapes were agrarian, multiethnic, and alive with overlapping land claims. Stretching for almost two hundred miles north from the town of Gangaw to the Indian border crossing at Tamu, Kalay comprises three subvalleys—the southern Yaw, the central Kale or Kalay, and the northern Kabaw—that straddle the seam of the hills and the plains (see map I.1). Together, they occupy a long, narrow plateau that rises to the northwest of Myanmar's predominantly Burman-Buddhist lowlands at the foot of the Chin Hills, which crest westward into the Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur. The valley's largest city, Kalaymyo, is located in the middle of the valley, a two-hour flight or twenty-four-hour bus ride from Yangon, and surrounded by Chin and Burman residents farming in what is sometimes called northwest Myanmar's rice bowl. Due in part to its proximity to the international border, Kalay hosts a number of military institutions; on the Indian Army–built Kalaymyo-Tamu highway, one can find a jail famous for holding political prisoners, a prison work-farm, two military training camps, and several government teak plantations. The valley is dotted with forests and fields that were grabbed from smallholders and then given to generals who enjoyed their stay.[33]

Despite the poem's suggestion, I did not find Kalay's people obstinate. When I arrived to Burman households, clustered on the southern and eastern sides of the valley, I was often the only white person my hosts had seen. I was treated to snacks, shown the Buddhist pagoda, and peppered with



MAP 1.1. Myanmar's Kalay Valley lies between the lowland Sagaing and Magway Divisions and the upland Chin State, near the border with India. It consists of three subvalleys, the Yaw, Kalay, and Kabaw Valleys, which run, like the Myitta River, south to north on a plateau. Map by Ben Pease.

questions in Burmese. In ethnic-minority Chin villages in the north and at the foot of the western hills, some people spoke English or had relatives who had been resettled as refugees in the United States or Australia. Seeing my blond hair, they assumed I was also Christian and often invited me back for church on Sunday. These differences reflect distinct histories of migration, both to and from the valley, which are discussed in chapter 1. The hospitality I felt among both Chin and Burmans should not mask the tenacity, even ferocity, of Kalay's people. Their bravery would become nationally renowned when they barricaded roads and streets and picked up homemade rifles during the 2021 Myanmar Spring Revolution.

Grounding this book in Kalay roots struggles for land and democracy in people's everyday practices in a specific agrarian landscape. These struggles play out in different ways across the country. I came to Kalay, and to the questions that drive this project, through work with land and women's rights activists across Myanmar, which I began in 2014. The core data for this book come from more than 150 interviews and twenty-six months of participant observation conducted between January 2017 and December 2019. I spent six of these months in the Kalay Valley, sleeping in Chin and Burman villages, attending land-law trainings, dancing at weddings, and asking nosy questions about land conflict. During the rest of this time, I was based in Yangon with frequent trips to Naypyitaw and other areas of Myanmar. I participated in land-law drafting sessions, collaborated on participatory action research projects, and supported activists. This book draws on two separate photovoice projects, collaborations that involved twenty-three rural women and adapted a participatory photography method that emerged from feminist public health.[34] I also draw on two rounds of ethnographic fieldwork conducted after the 2021 military coup, research that followed Kalay's people and problems across the border to India in 2023 and 2024. Readers interested in a full discussion of methods should refer to the appendix.

The particularities of Kalay offer the opportunity to tell a broader story while still honoring the people who see themselves and each other, as Khin Khin Win's poem reminded me, as unique and contradictory. The chapters that follow explore how farmers, activists, and officials claim land and make a life on it in the interstices of authoritarianism. I start by examining farmers' everyday strategies to secure subsistence and make meaningful life, demonstrating how relations to and through land enable productive and social reproductive strategies for enduring successive regimes. I then turn to the ways smallholders negotiated new rights and promises of

redistribution during the decade of democracy. The final chapter crosses Myanmar's border after the coup, demonstrating how displacement demanded adapting practices of surviving the state to the realities of refugee camps and revolutionary life.

Feminist Ethnography

At its heart, ethnography is about the particular. As a method of writing, researching, and perceiving, it is a strange exercise in intimacy, striving to illuminate larger social patterns through everyday experience. What, then, do I gain by calling this a *feminist* ethnography? Feminist theory certainly informs and inspires my analysis, most directly in chapter 2, with the account of women's work of making meaningful life. I also employ feminist methodologies such as photovoice. But feminism is not mere theory or method; it is also a commitment to a set of responsibilities. Many of these are shared with other critical, decolonial, and Indigenous epistemologies focused on telling the stories of those whose voices are not often heard, challenging dominant ideologies, and building a better world.[35]

Put simply, declaring this a feminist ethnography is to insist that writing a book cannot be divorced from living a feminist life. Sara Ahmed (2017) explains that we become feminists in dialogue with others, by being moved by and with others. The insights on these pages have emerged through collaboration, not only with interlocutors and research partners but also with artists, who, in visualizing their own experiences and key ideas in the text, have clarified and enriched my own thoughts.[36] If ethnography is "deep hanging out," a phrase coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1998) to describe the informal, immersive experience of participant observation, it is worth acknowledging that I did a lot of this hanging out with, or because of, women. I arrived in Yangon for the first time in 2013 and returned the next year on a fancy fellowship to advise a national network of women's rights activists. I soon learned that the feminists had much more to teach me. With my first colleagues and along the many stops that followed, I was shepherded by a chain of savvy and kind women like Khin Khin Win, who welcomed me to live with her family; Ekari, a grassroots land activist whom I met at the National Land Use Policy consultations in 2015 who invited me to Kalay; Pyo, who helped me through my first rural focus groups and lent me my first copy of hooks's *Teaching to Transgress*; and Sharon, who picked me up from the airport in Mizoram, India, two years after the coup and brought me to the border. These women and many others gave me their

time, their wisdom, their food, and their rolodexes (some men helped too). This book is a product of their labor and generosity.

Living a feminist life means maintaining relations of reciprocity. My research has birthed relations of a very Burmese sense: affectionate bonds of unrepayable debt. With the activists I've worked alongside, the farmers I've interviewed, and the landscapes I've traveled, I have a *than yo sin*, an abiding attachment, and a specific form of gratitude, *che zu*, linked to notions of ongoing, often reciprocal, obligation. And yet, when violence erupted across the Kalay Valley, I was thousands of miles away. It is profoundly unfair that, since we shared laughter, karaoke, and tea leaf salad together, I have become a professor while my companions' lives have descended into chaos. My privileged position within the coloniality of knowledge enables me to share their stories and to benefit from this book's publication.[37] I dwell in this discomfort. Yet I also take it as a call to action, including scholar-activism. I have and will continue to make different kinds of contributions to Myanmar's emancipatory movements and to my friends' well-being, even as I appreciate their insights and good company. Laughing and crying together on a terrain of inequality, practices of active and conscious positioning enhance both my vision and ability to contribute to the collective.[38]

I write from guilt and grief. I write from anger and unfulfillable responsibility. But I also write to build. In solidarity and gratitude, I offer beautiful stories to argue and evoke, to honor and illuminate.[39] I write against erasure, to render dignity to the people and places that experience and cope with generations of political violence. Hope is a discipline.[40] This is my medium. With gratitude to the many people who shared their stories with me, I dedicate these pages to the women and men who remain inside Myanmar, making life on the land in extremely difficult circumstances.

Notes

Preface

1. All names in this book, except those of public figures, are pseudonyms.

Introduction

Epigraph to "In the Interstices of Authoritarianism" section: "Remarks by President Obama at the University of Yangon," November 19, 2012, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/19/remarks-president-obama-university-yangon.

1. While data on rural demographics and economies in Myanmar are notoriously sparse and inaccurate, reform initiatives included new efforts to survey, map, and measure populations. Here, I rely on statistics from the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, the first relatively complete census to be carried out in decades, as well as the Myanmar Living Conditions Survey, administered by various government ministries with the support of the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank in 2017. See Department of Population 2015; Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation 2018; and Central Statistical Organization 2020.

2. For more on the contested land politics of southeastern Myanmar, see Barbesgaard 2019; Woods and Naimark 2020; and Woods 2019, 2021.

3. The first of these projects was conducted alongside collaborators including Catriona Knapman, Naw Mu Paw Htoo, and Pyo Let Han from 2014 to 2018, and involved participatory photography projects facilitated by grassroots activists in three parts of the country. See Faxon and Knapman 2019; Faxon 2020, 2022a. The second was conducted alongside collaborators including Jenny Hedström and Zin Mar Phyo. See Hedström et al. 2025; Faxon et al. 2025, 2026. For more details, see the appendix.

4. We made this point regarding what we call remaking and living with resource frontiers in Myanmar in Sarma et al. 2023. See also Dolly Kikon's (2019) account of living with oil and coal in northeast India, which our theorization builds on.

5. Mary Callahan has argued that warfare made the state in Burma. National heroes and former fighters started with "the rickety yet repressive architecture of colonial states, which was often at odds with their anti-colonial ideological programs" (2003, 10) and built a durable, coercive, and extensive military that would wield power for decades.

6. Following Abrams's (1977) distinction between the powerful state idea and the practices of the state system, scholars have convincingly demonstrated the fragmented, enacted, and localized nature of the state (Steedly 1999; Ong 2000; Das and Poole 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Stepputat 2012) and have highlighted that state-making is a contested process, carried out by the everyday actions of multiple, competing actors (Joseph and Nugent 1994; Wolford et al. 2013). I acknowledge the importance of thinking about authorities beyond the state in Myanmar, where, in many parts of the country, Ethnic Armed Organizations (now rebranded Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations) fulfill statelike functions. Land is equally important to these groups in the contested, messy processes of producing wealth, control, and authority. Yet these theoretical and empirical arguments against a focus on the state must also reckon with Mary Callahan's (2003, 9) blunt reminder that "most of the population met the modern state in the form of an unintelligible, gun-wielding soldier." In other words, the specific history of colonial and postcolonial warfare has made the Myanmar military synonymous with the modern state.

7. See also work by Willem van Schendel (2002), who originally coined this term.

8. For the concept of terrain as insurgent weapon, see Gordillo 2018.

9. I am inspired here by Reece Jones's (2012) analysis of spaces of refusal at the border. Works on making do in Imphal (McDuie-Ra 2016) and Naples (Pine 2012) as well as in global innovation (Ames et al. 2018) emphasize the creative acts of living and making within chronic indeterminacy. Cindi Katz's (2001) typology of reworking, resilience, and resistance has also been helpful for separating analytically actions that accommodate, adapt, or actively push back on powerful external forces (in her case, globalization; in mine, authoritarianism).

10. Writing about making do in Naples, Jason Pine (2012, 9–10) writes, "Making do means more to them than simply 'getting by.' Many people in the scene want more than to merely live with chronic indeterminacy. They seek self-determination and a life that escapes precarity altogether. . . . The art of making do is a speculative performance, the staging of a better life. Enacting it requires creative tactics for seizing opportunities and negotiating risk. Excessive speculation, however, can lead to violent determinations: the ad hoc art of making do has the potential to transmogrify into organized crime."

11. For work in feminist war studies exploring the dimensions of love in conflict, see Baines 2014; Porter 2020; Gray 2022; and Krystalli and Schultz 2022.

12. Regarding feminist accounts of survival, I am thinking here of Dianne Rocheleau (1991), who tells stories of rural women's "science of survival," as well as Audre Lorde's poem "A Litany for Survival." My notion of survival also builds on recent analysis from Myanmar. I am indebted, in particular, to Ardeth Thawnghmung's (2019) analysis of everyday economic survival, Christina Fink's (2009) evocative account of living silence, and Gerard McCarthy's (2023) and Mike Griffiths's (2018) works on systems of community welfare.

13. For an account of land's shifting value in an era of financialization, see Fairbairn 2020.

14. For discussions on the challenges of turning land into a commodity, see Polanyi 1944; Riles 2000; and Li 2014.

15. For example, Jonathan Rigg and colleagues (2016, 2018) argue that land provides a critical safety net in the context of high labor migration but minimal state support in Southeast Asia. Such an analysis helps us move beyond predictions of land consolidation, predicated on economies of scale, to understand the multiple functions that land fulfills for precarious households over generations.

16. See, for example, Gerald Vizenor (2008), who writes of the possibilities of theory-building as a world-making practice, one recursive with the practices of survivance that assert active presence through Indigenous storytelling and relations to land.

17. See also a long tradition in feminist political ecology of seeing the environment not only as embedded in gendered social relations, but also as productive of them (Elmhirst 2011; Nightingale 2011; Chung 2017). For a recent call to attend to land's social reproductive role in agrarian studies, see Shattuck et al. 2023.

18. Scholars of upland Burma emphasize both a continuum of political models and fluidity in ethnic identifications (Leach 2004; Robinne and Sadan 2007; Fiskesjö 2010). Without directly engaging these debates, my analysis acknowledges the rich and shifting tapestry of ethnicity in and beyond Myanmar, and its relationships to both agricultural systems and political power.

19. See Verdery 1994 for an account of the elasticity of land in postsocialist contexts, and Lund 2008 for an analysis of postcolonial land claims.

20. Recent books that attend to the question of rule of law in Myanmar include Nick Cheesman's *Opposing the Rule of Law* (2015), Lynette Chua's *The Politics of Love in Myanmar* (2018), and Kristina Simion's *Rule of Law Intermediaries* (2021). But while these provide nuanced accounts of courts, activists, and lawyers and development brokers, the smallholders I spent time with rarely invested in legal reforms and human rights in and of themselves; rather, they encountered new laws and policies on the ground and made sense of them within longer, lived histories. My work also benefits from and is in dialogue with recent work on land politics in Myanmar, including by Elliott Prasse-Freeman (2023), SiuSue Mark (2023), Stéphen Huard (2020), and Kevin Woods (2011).

21. Meghan Morris (2019) uses the concept of "the shadow of post-conflict" to describe the property speculation that takes place in Colombia during a suspension between war and peace. *Shadow* evokes the temporal ambiguity of postconflict as both a time to come and condition of the present, similar to the way in which postauthoritarianism, or the promise of democracy, colored the 2010s in Myanmar with both actual shifts and anticipation.

22. This shift was amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions on public assemblies surged in countries around the world during the pandemic, even as global internet freedom continued to decline.

23. In the introduction to a recent edited collection, Natalie Koch (2022) suggests that, rather than categorizing regime types, geographers should study authoritarianism as a set of spatial practices oriented toward control. This critical spatial perspective contrasts with work in political science aimed at typologizing regimes and brings our attention to the uneven, shifting, and everyday nature of contemporary authoritarianism. Similarly, Marlies Glasius (2018) investigates authoritarianism as a series of practices that disable voice and sabotage accountability.

24. The exception to British control of the colony was two years of Japanese occupation during World War II.

25. Southeast Asian kingdoms are often described through the metaphor of a mandala, an image that contrasts with Western theories of territory and emphasizes the fluctuating and radial extension of power from a dynastic king (Tambiah 2013). Agricultural potential and port accessibility played a key role in structuring political forms in the area now known as Myanmar (Aung-Thwin 1984). During the Toungoo (1587–1752) and Konbaung (1752–1885) dynasties, lowland kingdoms had three administrative zones: the directly ruled nuclear zone, the zone of dependent provinces overseen by centrally appointed staff, and tributary areas ruled by hereditary chiefs (R. Taylor 2009, 23). Residents of the nuclear zone enjoyed state services such as irrigation in return for frequent corvée labor, while those in the secondary areas had fewer benefits and obligations to the state, and were ruled by *myo-sa* (literally "town eaters") who were appointed by the king but did not have permanent or hereditary property rights. Tributary areas varied widely in their relation to the central state but often were fairly autonomous (R. Taylor 2009). Upland communities developed different patterns of sovereignty, culture, and hierarchy based in part on their interactions in the borderlands, with distant states, and in global networks (van Schendel 2002; Scott 2009; Sadan 2014).

26. In lowland Burma proper, rice cultivation spread and hereditary village leaders became official extensions of the centralized bureaucracy in the 1880s, responsible for surveying, managing, and taxing specified agricultural plots and village units (R. Taylor 2009, 80–86, 193). Colonial institutions proved durable: During the democratic decade, century-old farmland "kwin" maps from the Land Records and Agriculture Department served as the basis for land titling, and the 1894 Land Acquisition Act provided a basis for farmers to request compensation for lost land (Mark 2016). The colonial government's strategy was markedly different in the upland Frontier Areas, which were allowed to retain some control over local resources and social organization even as the British army extracted tremendous amounts of teak. The Chin Hills, for example, were governed indirectly under the Chin Hills Regulation of 1886; clan and village headmen governed according to custom, but in ultimate deference to the British and with special rules to regulate firearms, forests, and opium. Alongside efforts to map and manage the landscape, British colonial officers codified the ethnic differences of hill peoples, creating extensive lists and classifications that set the foundation for contemporary identity claims (J. M. Ferguson 2015). Through these spatial and social classifications, the British made Burma's territory and population amenable to military control and resource extraction.

27. The act aimed to redistribute land to the land-poor and banned land sale and landlordism. However, only 17 percent of cultivated land, 25 percent of total rice paddy land, was ever nationalized (Boutry et al. 2017, 66).

28. In response to widespread violence, the leader U Nu ceded control to a military caretaker government in 1958–59 before winning the 1961 election on a promise to make Buddhism a state religion. This policy further alienated religious minorities but was not enough to prevent U Nu's ousting in 1962 by a military coup.

29. Both overall rice production and colonial forms of management of rural land and populations declined substantially during this period. No full national census was taken after 1973, and cadastral maps were rarely updated.

30. The BSPP abolished the independent ministries of Arakan and Mon and eliminated special border zones. The 1974 Constitution affirmed that sovereignty resided in the center, recognizing seven ethnic states that served as mere symbols of cultural pluralism, without substantive autonomy (R. Taylor 2009, 302–6).

31. Burmese scholar Thant Myint-U (2020) details how individuals in the military played a key role in negotiating reforms and foreign influence during this period. He paints a sympathetic portrait of the retired general Thein Sein, whom General Than Shwe handpicked to serve as president from 2011 to 2016, and the ex-military reformers in his government who faced the twin challenges of ethnic strife and economic inequality.

32. A clause in the 2008 Constitution targeted the NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, whose late husband and two sons are British citizens, by prohibiting family of foreign nationals to serve as president. When legislative efforts at changing this clause failed, Daw Suu simply invented a new position, that of state councilor, which she publicly announced was above the president. These problems—not only with legal text, but also with how it was ratified and undermined—demonstrated the unstable footing of law in Myanmar. For more on the limits of the law in Myanmar's democracy, see Crouch 2014; Prasse-Freeman 2014; and Cheesman 2015.

33. Kalay has long been a site of military and police presence. Chapter 1 discusses the histories of ethnic migration and military land-grabbing that shaped Kalay's landscape.

34. See Wang and Burris 1997 for an early description of this methodology and Hergenrather et al. 2009 for a recent review.

35. I think, especially, of Gill Hart's (2006) articulation of the commitments of critical ethnography in the face of resurgent imperialism; bell hooks's influential *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984); Kyle Powys Whyte's (2018) notion of "collective continuance"; and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) admonishments to situate research within colonial power relations and learn to tell stories that celebrate survival.

36. I am particularly grateful to the Chin artist Salai Suanpi, whose comic illustrations grace this text, and to my Aye Thada Hla, who helped me conceive of and execute the comic book project. My thanks also to JC and Tams, who illustrated women's stories for the Land, Love, Labor and Revolution project.

37. I am indebted to my friend and scholar Tharaphi Than for teaching me about, and helping me to navigate, this terrain. For an account of the enduring coloniality in Myanmar's academy, see Tharaphi Than 2021.

38. In her account of situated knowledges, Donna Haraway (1988, 584) writes of activist and conscious positioning as key to generating "partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology." This book is a small contribution to those ongoing projects.

39. Reflecting on Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and on her own experiences amid the destruction of oil palm on West Papua, Sophie Chao (2022, 24–25) calls for ethnographers to commit to writing beautifully from grief and loss, defiance and

responsibility, not suppressing tragedy but telling "better bitter stories" about the places that we live in and study.

40. A prison abolitionist and activist for survivors of abuse, Mariame Kaba, who popularized this phrase, credits it to a nun who used it to explain the lifelong work of social justice as a series of everyday acts of one-foot-in-front-of-the-other. See "Hope Is a Discipline: Mariame Kaba on Dismantling the Carceral State," *The Intercept*, March 17, 2021, https://theintercept.com/2021/03/17/intercepted-mariame-kaba-abolitionist-organizing/.

CHAPTER 1. **Securing Subsistence**

1. This argument about remaking and living with resource frontiers in and beyond Myanmar is elaborated in Sarma et al. 2023. See also L. Jones 2014 on the political economy of the borderlands.

2. See, for example, Barney 2009 and Watts 2018. Extractive frontiers are critical sites in which to investigate land and resource grabs, but privileging the role of global capital can obscure the agency of domestic individuals, including landholders, money launderers, or middlemen, who shape the rush for land and subsequent reconfigurations on resource frontiers (Baird 2014; Sud 2014; Beban and Gorman 2017).

3. Frederick Jackson Turner's (1893) frontier thesis celebrated American expansion, linking the Western frontier to the formation of national culture and democratic values. This influential interpretation of US history both justifies and glorifies the extraction of resources, privatization of property, and genocide of Native Americans in the American West.

4. See, for example, De Koninck 1996; Hall et al. 2011; and Peluso 2017.

5. Elsewhere, I link the life and death of Kalay's smallholder rice frontier to contemporary efforts to delineate state and ethnic territory in the valley (Faxon 2023a). Here, I focus instead on the labor of securing subsistence and the socio-ecological forms that follow frontier closure.

6. The establishment, destruction, and reformation of spatial orders occur in historical relation to each other (Rasmussen and Lund 2018). This is particularly true in Myanmar, where, as Rhoads and Wittekind (2018) show, shifts in real property are shaped by cyclical discourses of progress and decline.

7. See, for example, Thompson 1975; Peluso and Watts 2001; and Levien 2012.

8. Hall et al. (2011) articulate these processes as the powers of exclusion.

9. This is one of several road reports by lieutenant W. H. Dent that document expeditions across and around the Chin Hills. These are included as appendixes to the British officers Bertram S. Carey and H. N. Tuck's two-volume study of history, culture, and geography of the Chin Hills.

10. In practice, the delineation of Burma from India remained incomplete in border areas like the Kalay Valley and the Chin Hills, where "Burma and India's poorly defined claims to political authority dissolved, uncomfortably, into one another, even as local life-worlds pushed back at them" (Guyot-Réchard 2021, 295). Nevertheless, colonial property regimes had a major impact on how land was managed and valued across the region, in particular in fertile, relatively accessible areas like the Kalay Valley.