

Testimony and Identity in Burma: women's voices over time

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Abstract

The oppressive force of the Burmese military continues to inflict abuse upon the many different ethnic groups within its borders. Women have been at the forefront of resistance using testimony, using the medium to resist the oppression of the state military through language. This article examines the testimonial as a site of resistance through a dialogical analysis of two texts representative of historical moments in Burma's history of state oppression. It argues that the language of testimony creates spaces for identity formation as a form of resistance. Through a dialogical analysis of two testimonies representative of different political moments, this article builds upon this notion, and argues that the testimonial not only represents a site of resistance and space of identity formation for women oppressed within the bounds of the state, but also allows for the reassertion of collective identities that stand as a foundation for collective action.¹

Keywords: *Burma, women's testimony, dialogism, identity*

I. INTRODUCTION

Burma's turbulent history² and resistance to its powerholders have become ever more present for the civilians who continue to resist the military after decades of struggling for democracy. These struggles have received much attention, from ethnic struggles for autonomy since the country's independence to the mass pro-democracy demonstrations of 1988 to the recent protests in response to the February 2021 coup. It is perhaps disheartening, at this moment, to reflect on how little seems to have changed in Burma over time. But it is worth noting that a continuity has also existed over time in terms of *responses to oppression*. Women have been at the forefront of

1 The author would like to thank Dr. Susan Banki, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sydney for her contribution and expertise regarding grassroots activism in Burma and Southeast Asia. Her reference to the KWAT report and knowledge of activism on the Thai Myanmar border contributed to paper's discussion.

2 Myanmar is the more commonly used term in the academic literature at this moment. However, the testimony tellers that we analyse in this paper have used 'Burma', which was the name used by opposition groups for many decades prior to the country's (now laughable) 'transition.' In solidarity with these actors, we use 'Burma.'

such responses, using the power of testimony to document their experiences, and through their words have shaped and re-shaped their identities in the process.

This paper addresses how the language of testimony creates new spaces for identity-formation, allowing for the potential to subvert oppressive realities in the process. It argues that the subjectivity of personal experience within testimonial narratives – and here, this medium is defined broadly – is represented through the different contexts, events, and discourses that the individual may experience throughout their lives. Through examining the testimony of women from Burma, this paper explores how the testimonial authors shape their identity through decisions about how to tell their stories: the focus, order, and substance of their narratives, particularly as these relate to the authors' interaction with other voices encountered through the interpretation of personal experience.

The examination of the testimonial as a site of resistance centres upon an understanding that the subjective personal experience(s) of the author exist in relation to other 'voices' representative of social and political contexts, including oppressive voices and/or formal discourses that shape the lives of the women who narrate their experiences through testimony. This can be illuminated through Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and the concept of the dialogical self where, as Bakhtin argues, the self is formed through an interaction with multiple voices throughout different life contexts. It is through the use of language to interpret the subjectivity of experience that spaces of resistance can be created to challenge the voices that represent oppressive contexts and discourses. This paper will examine two different forms of testimony produced by women from Burma through the theoretical lens of Mikhail Bakhtin. In examining these testimonials, the concept of the dialogical self is applied to analyse the interaction of different voices within the testimonies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Social Construction of Identity

The study of identity within the field of sociology was first introduced by sociologist George Herbert Mead.³ Mead's conceptualisation of identity envisaged the self as a process rather than a set construction, influenced by the dynamics of the social world. Specifically, his notion of reflexivity entailed the interaction between the self and the other within 'social experience'; a reality that allows individuals the capacity to see themselves as subject and object through communication and interaction with others in society.⁴ This interaction situates the social actor in relation to others and, similarly, to their interaction with others. The basis of this interaction is premised on the understanding that without the 'social experience', there would be no self.⁵

Mead's concept of the self, although useful in gleaning how identity is formed through social experience, is limiting in its unitary understanding of 'the other'. Mead

3 Stevi Jackson, "Self, Time and Narrative: Re-thinking the Contribution of G.H. Mead" (2010) 7:2 *Life Writing*, at 126.

4 *Ibid.* at 126.

5 *Ibid.* at 126.

emphasises that the self, through reflexivity of social experiences, is formed by taking the voice or attitude of the other and internalising it. In this sense, the individual forms an identity by evaluating oneself as both subject and object, creating a sense of identity that is influenced by the other in relation to the self. Yet in reality, many diverse voices illuminate our identities: voices that represent community, solidarity or advocacy, and voices that represent oppression, displacement, and violence. The articulation of identity does not symbolise an internalisation of **all** voices encountered, particularly in relation to oppressive voices. Rather, the language of testimony represents many different voices, often linking the personal and collective. In analysing the formation of identity through language, a richer understanding of the complexity and multiplicity of voices within the story is needed. To address this limitation in Mead's theorising, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism further illuminates the potential for new spaces of identity formation to be created through the language of testimony.

The space where Bakhtin and Mead differ is how the self, or identity of the individual, is formed through its encountering of other voices. For Mead, the self becomes itself by learning to put itself in the place of others.⁶ For Bakhtin, identity is formed not by reacting to the other, but by reflecting on all voices or others experienced in any social situation. Importantly for Bakhtin, the formation of identity is a process where the voices of others are equal partners in self-dialogues. This conception of the formation of the self is termed dialogism. As noted by Zavala, 'dialogics is a method of thinking as a whole and a rejection of worldviews that recognise the right of a higher consciousness to make decisions for lower ones, to transform persons into voiceless things. Such spatial visualisation is, in turn, an open dialogue with equal rights of consciousness.'⁷ In this sense, 'otherness cannot be mastered and overcome in the search for the self.'⁸ The self, in other words, emerges on the boundaries of self and other, positioning the teller as an equal in dialogue with the voices and contexts she or he has experienced. This reflects a space of equality in understanding how the other contributes to and forms the identity of the individual.

The use of language to understand the subjectivities of personal experience is central to understanding how the identity of the individual is formed. Bakhtin argues that 'language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of others. Expropriating I, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process...language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other...The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's 'own' only when the speaker populates it with its own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of

6 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self & Society*, ed (University of Chicago, 1934), at 143.

7 I. M. Zavala, "Bakhtin and otherness: Social heterogeneity" in C. Thompson, ed, *Mikhail Bakhtin and the Epistemology of Discourse*, ed (Rodopi, 1990), at 86.

8 J de Peuter, "The Dialogics of Narrative Identity" in MM Bell & M Gardiner, ed, *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words*, ed (Sage, 1998).

appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language...but rather exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.⁹

Bakhtin's theory of language identifies the significance of the language of testimony. Firstly, Bakhtin identifies that language is not a 'neutral medium'¹⁰, but rather exists as 'populated...with the intentions of others'¹¹. In this sense, 'others' (or 'voices') may represent ideology, social and cultural contexts, political identities, and so on. Secondly, language as it is understood and used by the individual, exists between the self and the other, yet is never superior to or completely oppressed by the other it encounters. The word, or language, for the individual, 'is half someone else's'¹², representing the dialogical encounter with the self and other as iterative. Thirdly, the voice of the individual, and it is argued here the identity, is articulated through language with its 'own intentions'¹³ and 'accents'¹⁴ derived from the interaction with the other and the meaning and understanding thus created from personal experiences. Before the voice is articulated, it exists 'in other people's mouths'¹⁵, serving 'other people's intentions'¹⁶, or in other words, is represented by the voice of the other, only when the individual remains silent. The language of testimony therefore represents a site of resistance when the individual takes 'the word and makes it one's own'¹⁷. Testimonial literature supports this assertion, as argued in the next section.

2. Testimonial Literature

The notion of testimony as a form of resistance is not new and has been linked to identity construction through the way it positions the teller as the shaper of the story, pushing back on external definitions and categorisations of the oppressed. Lynda Marín defines the testimonial as a form of 'writing from the margins,' a space where marginalised voices are able to take a subject position that contests the realm of oppressive discourses.¹⁸ Testimonial discourse, or "testimonio" emerged as a genre in the late 1960s, espoused by Latin American female writers such as Rigoberta

9 Mikhail Mihajlovič Bakhtin, Michael Holquist & Caryl Emerson, *The dialogic imagination*, ed (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 294.

10 *Ibid* at 294.

11 *Ibid* at 294.

12 *Ibid* at 294.

13 *Ibid* at 294.

14 *Ibid* at 294.

15 *Ibid* at 294.

16 *Ibid* at 294.

17 *Ibid* at 294.

18 Lynda Marín, "Speaking Out Together: Testimonials of Latin American Women" (1991) 18:3 *Latin American Perspectives*, at 51.

Menchu¹⁹ and Domitila Barrios de Chungara,²⁰ whose respective accounts of oppression in Guatemala and Bolivia adopt collective narratives.²¹ The significance of their stories is that they deliberately eschew the first person singular subject, declaring, in the words of Rigoberta Menchu, that the personal is also collective: 'I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people...The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.'²²

In reading the testimonial as both personal and collective, Lynda Marin observes that it's 'as if each speaker feels the necessity to warn us to resist the power of our Western obsession with individuality.'²³ This has significant theoretical implications for the self-identity of the subject who narrates her or his life experiences. The testimony implies the inextricable connectedness between the personal and the collective, rather than the Mead-ian self/other dualism. Further, this simultaneously personal and collective act of identity formation, carries an implicit suggestion of the power of the collective, thus giving the testimonial teller the chance to narrate experiences of oppression through a lens of resistance. Marin therefore defines the testimonial in contrast to other forms of literature and narrative in the following way:

'Those privileged to belong to the dominant class, race, and/or gender write Scripture, literature, autobiography, or ethnography. From the point of view of privilege, the testimonial has been seen as the means by which those who are not privileged talk about themselves and particularly about their struggle against the powers that claim privilege over them.'²⁴

George Yudice's analysis of testimonial writing goes a step further, arguing not only that testimony can be a site of resistance, but that oppression catalyses testimonial writing. In this action-reaction sequence, oppression requires a witness account that denounces it. The narrator of testimony, according to Yudice 'performs an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective.'²⁵

Paula Moya, in her examination of identity through narrative and literature, argues that a realist theory of identity avoids the debilitating binaries of essentialism and postmodernism, which asserts that identity is either stable and unitary, or

19 Rigoberta Menchú & Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *I - Rigoberta Menchu*, ed (London: Verso Editions, 1984).

20 Domitila Barrios de Chungara & Moema Viezzer, *Si me permiten hablar*, ed (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1978).

21 Lynda Marín, "Speaking Out Together: Testimonials of Latin American Women" (1991) 18:3 *Latin American Perspectives*, at 52.

22 Rigoberta Menchú & Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *I - Rigoberta Menchu*, ed (London: Verso Editions, 1984).

23 Lynda Marín, "Speaking Out Together: Testimonials of Latin American Women" (1991) 18:3 *Latin American Perspectives*, at 53.

24 *Ibid* at 51-52.

25 George Yudice. "Testimonio and Postmodernism" (1991) 18.3 *Latin American Perspectives*, at 15-31.

fragmented and fluid. Moya challenges these theoretical assertions through an examination of the testimonial writings of the Latin American feminist writers whose writing, Moya argues, can be seen as another form of ‘writing from the margins.’ It is within this space that the marginalised assert their voices, identity and experiences through the language of testimony, signalling that realities and experiences of race, class, gender and sexuality ‘function in individual lives without reducing individuals to those social determinants.’²⁶ I concur with this analysis, but as this paper signals below, descriptions and analyses of marginalisation carried out by community members, in which the marginalized produce and assert their identities, can take more capacious forms than have previously been understood.

III. METHODOLOGY

The analysis builds on the methodology of Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al (2009), who argue for the importance of using a dialogical approach as a method of discourse analysis in researching the concept of identity of refugee women.²⁷ These editors apply Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogical self to the experiences of refugee women. They argue that in researching women who have been displaced, the site of the self is in continual iteration with changing circumstances.²⁸ The focus of a dialogical discourse analysis is the relational nature of language and identity. When applied as a method of research, it operates as a conceptual bridge between language and identity. This conceptual bridge, it is argued, is diverse in its reach and applicability to understanding how identity is formed through language. They state, ‘Dialogism views identity as a continuous and relational process...making organic connections between the contingent and the universal, history and story, the self and its context, philosophy and anthropology, the ‘here’ and the ‘there,’ the past and the present, men and women in the lived context of their relations, tensions and movement.’²⁹ Similarly, this paper uses dialogism to analyse the identity construction of two forms of testimony, asserting that testimony can be defined quite broadly.

In the first case, this paper examines a ‘classic’ testimony in which Van Sui Chin, an ethnic Chin refugee, relates her experiences of political activism, jail time, and refugee precarity in an edited anthology *Women’s Voices* edited by a well-established advocacy organisation, Altsean.³⁰ In the second, we expand the notion of testimony to include a report produced by the Kachin Women’s Association Thailand (KWAT) that includes various tools for communicating human rights violations in the context of the February 2021 coup - maps, charts, which can be defined as testimony by proxy. This innovation - expanding the definition of testimony - marks an important step, this paper asserts, in highlighting narratives that move between

26 P. M. Moya, "Postmodernism, 'Realism,' and the Politics of Identity: Cherrie Moraga and Chicana Feminism" in MJ Alexander & CT Mohanty, ed, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed (Routledge, 1997), at 136.

27 Hajdukowski-Ahmed, M., Khanlou, N. and Moussa, H., 2009. *Not born a refugee woman*. New York: Berghahn Books.

28 *Ibid* at 29.

29 *Ibid* at 29.

30 *Burma, women's voices together*, ed (Bangkok, Thailand: Altsean Burma, 2003).

individual and collective voices. Both the 'classic' form of testimony (Van Sui Chin's) and the expanded form (KWAT) move between individual and collective voices, illuminating women's voices as a means of not only shaping the identity of the teller, but also creating a space where marginalised voices are able to take a subject position that contests the realm of oppressive discourses, whether they are writing, speaking, or, importantly, editing.

This paper also notes the role of editor because the charge could be made the language of testimony is diluted through the selection of passages that order an experience in a certain way. In both of the cases examined, the final products underwent an editing and publication process. But while editors certainly do have the power to shape a story, the fact that in these cases they were from the communities themselves, makes them part of the process of collective identity construction.

This is supported by other editors engaged in testimonial work. In assessing how language creates new spaces for identity-formation through testimony, Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, editors of the feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, offer an important comparison for understanding the dynamics of identity construction.³¹ What is central to the contribution of their anthology is that the concept of 'identity' is not merely constructed through the language of autobiography and testimony, but is also, in the words of Moya, 'relational and grounded in the historically produced social facts which constitute social locations.'³²

In applying the concept of the dialogical self to the texts analysed, a richer understanding of how identity is formed is the focus of analysis. In this sense, the dialogical self does not form identity against the other, but rather through a process grounded in experience, through interpretations of multiple voices and contexts. The dialogical reflexivity of the individual does not take the other as his/her own or define themselves against the other. In applying a dialogical discourse analysis, one voice is not privileged over another; the voice of the author, through its interaction with other voices, will engage with how new spaces of identity formation are produced.

IV. TESTIMONY AS A RESPONSE TO OPPRESSION IN BURMA

The shared commonality of testimonial literature is that it speaks against forms of oppression. As already noted, these may be centred on race, gender, or class. In the case of Burma, state violence has been enacted against marginalized groups along these vectors, and others. From the time of the 1988 student protests until the present, an incredibly rich trove of human rights and documentation literature has emerged, from a wide range of ethnic groups and focused on a diverse array of issues. It would be impossible to do a testimonial analysis from the huge number of

31 Cherie Moraga & Gloria Anzaldúa, *this bridge called my back*, ed (Albany, N.Y: Suny Press, 2015).

32 P. M. Moya, "Postmodernism, 'Realism,' and the Politics of Identity: Cherie Moraga and Chicana Feminism" in MJ Alexander & CT Mohanty, ed, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed (Routledge, 1997), at 127.

community-based organisations that have produced reports. This paper focuses on two produced by women, because women have been at the forefront of responses to oppression in Burma (as elsewhere) and are also the recipients of much of the suffering wrought by oppression.

The dynamics of identity-formation and the subject position which is asserted through Latin American autobiography and the *testimonio*, draws similar parallels to the *Women's Voices* anthologies. The women's stories are written 'from the margins', articulated from a context of oppression and protracted conflict in the authoritarian state of Burma. In assessing how language creates new spaces for identity-formation through testimony, Cherie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, editors of the feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1984), offer an important comparison for understanding the dynamics of identity construction as it is written 'from the margins.' In assessing how the language of testimony subverts oppressive realities, whilst also forming the identity of the author, it is essential to consider the historically mediated position of the author within the narration of their personal experiences.

In the following two accounts, this paper uses a Bakhtian dialogical process to examine two forms of testimony – produced nearly two decades apart – commenting on the experiences of oppression imposed by the Burmese military. As discussed in the previous sections, the subjectivity of personal experience within the testimonial is represented through the different contexts, events, discourses, and so on that the individual may experience throughout their life. This subjectivity is linked to the problematic of this discussion. Firstly, the narration of personal experiences within the testimony, and the consequential interpretation by the individual, relate to how such experiences may or may not have contributed to the identity, or voice of the author within the testimony. Within the subjective personal experience(s) of the author, there exist other voices; social, political and cultural contexts, and oppressive and/or formal discourses, to name a few examples.

What I wish to consider in analysing the language of testimony, is how the language used by the author forms an identity based on an interaction with other voices encountered through the interpretation of personal experience. This, I argue, can be illuminated through Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and its theoretical implications for the social aspect of language, and, as will be examined below, for social upheaval. As discussed in the previous chapter, I will use the concept of the dialogical self to analyse the interaction of different voices within each of the testimonies. First, I examine an individual testimony by a woman of the ethnic Chin minority, written in 2003 in an anthology produced by refugee women living in Thailand. Second, I will analyse a report produced by Kachin women produced nearly 20 years later, in 2021, that documents military reprisals to anti-coup activity. The findings reveal that testimony opens spaces for resistance through identity formation, both individually and collectively.

1. Van Sui Chin

Van Sui Chin's story is one of 39 testimonials in *Women's Voices Together* anthology, edited by a group of refugee women living in Thailand. The personal experiences of Sui Chin establish her ethnic and political identity within Burma, and later her identity as a refugee. She begins her narrative establishing her name, birthplace, and family members. These clearly articulate her Chin identity, one of Burma's most oppressed ethnic minorities.³³ Her ethnic identity therefore speaks of her marginality within the national context of Burma.

Throughout her narrative, Sui Chin chooses to articulate her Chin identity as she recounts her personal experiences of suffering and oppression, overlaying this with the broader country's struggles. She narrates her memories as a student at Rangoon University, participating in student demonstrations that have become synonymous with the fight for democracy in Burma's national memory. Through the narration of this experience, the language of testimony is used to demonstrate her agency in choosing the identities that she wants to adopt.

'In my second year, the 1988 uprising began and I participated in many of the student demonstrations. On March 13, I heard that Phone Maw³⁴ had been killed at the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT). My friend and I rushed there, but only saw his clothes, shoes, and bag, stained with blood. The army had taken the body to the hospital. When we saw this, we cried. There were many other students with us, and we later demonstrated. General Ne Win's³⁵ photograph was burnt, and we hung our national flag upside down.'³⁶

The graphic reflection of Sui Chin transports her identity as a Chin woman, identified at the beginning of the story, to one of student and political activist. As the students fought for democracy, many were arrested and killed by the army, ethnic affiliation notwithstanding.³⁷ In her narrative, Sui Chin highlights symbolic actions with countrywide relevance (performatively desecrating military photographs and flags). In so doing, she complicates her identity as a Chin woman and her identity as a citizen and student within Burma. The narration of the event allows her to locate her individual identity, formed through dialogical relationships with a range of voices or experiences: her ethnic background, the senseless death of Phone Maw (and Sui Chin's implicit association of herself with that tragedy: *it could have been me*), and the collective symbolic gestures in which she engages with her classmates.

33 Human Rights Watch, *"We are Like Forgotten People" The Chin People of Burma: Unsafe in Burma, Unprotected in India* (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

34 Phone Maw was a student activist who was killed during the pro-democracy student protests at Rangoon University, Burma in 1988. The day marking the anniversary of Phone Maw's death has been dedicated as Burma Human Rights Day.

35 In 1988, General Ne win was the Head of State in Burma, leader of the Burmese military.

36 Van Sui Chin "A Chin Woman's Story" in *Burma, women's voices together*, ed (Bangkok, Thailand: Altsean Burma, 2003), at 17.

37 Linnea M Beatty, "Democracy Activism and Assistance in Burma" (2010) 65:3 International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis, at 619-636.

Sui Chin's participation in the student demonstrations led to her arrest and later release from the country's most notorious prison, Insein prison.³⁸ After her release she was forcibly returned to Chin State along with other Chin students who had participated in the demonstrations. On September 18, 1988, the army took control of the whole country, forcing herself and her friends to flee to Mizoram State in India for safety. It is at this point in the story that Sui Chin recounts her experiences as a refugee, thus reflecting upon a new identity created by the crossing of a border. At this moment in her testimonial, Sui Chin describes her individual precarity working from 4am to midnight in a tea stall for no money. But this narrative soon shifts to a larger picture of (ethnic Chin) refugee suffering, demonstrating how the personal experiences of Sui Chin are connected to other voices and situations within the context of her identity as a refugee in Mizoram State. She narrates:

'It is very difficult for a woman to survive in Mizoram. Women who work as domestic servants never get paid...The employer threatens to go to the police and report us. Because we are foreigners, we will be sent to jail.... The army suspects returnees of having connections with the Chin National Front.³⁹ Some women are too scared to return to Burma, cannot get a salary and become prostitutes. Before we came to Mizoram, we had never heard of prostitution, but many are afraid they're going to die of hunger and will do anything to feed themselves. Many women working in houses are raped. If a man's wife finds out, she reports it to the police, the Chin woman is arrested and faces deportation.'⁴⁰

The above extract demonstrates how Sui Chin navigates the boundaries of the personal and the collective whilst simultaneously articulating her voice. What is of salience in the above passage, however, is how the language of testimony also allows Sui Chin to construct her own identity against the oppressive experiences she encounters.

In 1995, Sui Chin's husband dies, leaving her alone with two children and no income or support.⁴¹ That same year, she decides to go to New Delhi to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office to seek assistance. After their arrival in November 1995, Sui Chin and her children received assistance from the UNHCR and lived with the Chin community in New Delhi. This experience led to Sui Chin learning English through a UNHCR-sponsored program and later being offered a position as an interpreter for the organisation.⁴² Whilst pivotal in offering support and opportunities, Sui Chin's experience with the UNHCR also changes her voice and identity within the story. Through the assistance offered by UNHCR, Sui

38 Van Sui Chin "A Chin Woman's Story" in *Burma, women's voices together*, ed (Bangkok, Thailand: Altsean Burma, 2003), at 17.

39 Human Rights Watch, *"We are Like Forgotten People" The Chin People of Burma: Unsafe in Burma, Unprotected in India* (Human Rights Watch, 2009), at 68.

40 Van Sui Chin "A Chin Woman's Story" in *Burma, women's voices together*, ed (Bangkok, Thailand: Altsean Burma, 2003), at 19.

41 *Ibid* at 20.

42 *Ibid* at 20.

Chin is able to work and support her children, even though they live in a foreign country as refugees. She no longer relates to the experiences of oppression, or identities she has resisted to maintain her own. There is then an immediate jump in the story from her experience with the UNHCR to a description of her work with the Chin Women's Organisation (CWO). She states:

'The Chin Women's Organisation was formed on June 28, 1997. I am the vice-president. The aim of our organisation is to encourage Chin women to have more self-confidence - to stand on their own two feet, to gain knowledge and skills, to have solidarity among other Chin women, and to cooperate with other organisations in our struggle for democracy and peace in Chin State. We must unite first before we can move forward. We have to start with our family, then the community, our villages and finally, our whole country.'⁴³

The above passage represents a symbolic change in the personal testimony of Sui Chin. Her testimony begins with her place of birth, Chin State, defining her ethnic identity. As her story develops, she narrates personal experiences of oppression and relates them to other voices and experiences within context(s) of contested, enforced, and chosen identities. The statement of her role as vice-president of the CWO, and her summary of the aims of the organisation, reflect a voice that identifies not only with an ethnic Chin identity, but also a voice that advocates for change and a hope for the future. And it is noteworthy that there is no mention of an individual or collective refugee identity in this assertive portion of her testimony.

Through the language of testimony, Sui Chin's personal experiences represent a site of resistance. As she navigates the boundaries of personal and collective voices she encounters, Sui Chin develops her own identity through oppressive realities. The final passage of her testimony highlights this position and offers a final site that defines her voice as she recognises it as her own. Furthermore, the final passage of her testimony also constructs another space, a space that advocates for the other voices she considers have experienced a similar journey of oppression. This collective understanding highlights the dynamics of her identity formation through the language of testimony.

2. *'Deadly Reprisals': Multiple Forms of Testimony*

The Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) was founded in 1999 by women from the Kachin ethnic minority in Burma, a group, like the Chin, that has faced innumerable human rights violations by the Burmese military. Over the past two decades Kachin leaders followed a rather inverse path from other ethnic minority groups in Burma, establishing a ceasefire agreement with the government in 1994 and ending it in 2011 at the moment when many other groups were trying to appease the government after the country's purported political transformations in the early

43 *Ibid* at 20.

2010s. The reasons for this shift have been explored elsewhere⁴⁴ but at this moment, post-February 2021 coup, the Kachin find themselves aligned with nearly all ethnic minority groups in Burma, protesting the enactors of the coup and suffering from the disproportionate responses of the military.

KWAT has produced many reports about the difficulties faced by Kachin people over the years, some more in ‘classic’ testimony form⁴⁵ and others less so.⁴⁶ This paper analyses the *Deadly Reprisals* report⁴⁷ for two reasons: first, it is a recent report, written post-coup, which allows for the asking of the question about what testimony means in the most relevant contextual situation. Second, the report contains elements that push the boundaries of classic testimony, and thereby allows for the consideration of whether such an expanded definition passes the testimony ‘test.’ This paper argues that it does.

Deadly Reprisals outlines the responses by security forces (both military and police) to anti-coup protests in both urban and rural areas in parts of Kachin and Shan state in Burma’s north. It follows a well-accepted structure in human rights documentation: an executive summary, thematic sections (including torture of youth, deliberate shelling of civilian areas, and the looting of property, for example), maps, lists of arrests, and recommendations. It can also be considered as a form of what might be called ‘collective testimony.’ The report is written ‘from the margins’⁴⁸ and, following Yudice, is catalysed by the very persecution to which it refers.⁴⁹

It has a central position, a collective self (that of Kachin opposition), which clearly decries the current situation. It locates the current violations of the military in the context of the coup and anti-coup protests. We as readers have a sense of what has happened on the ground. For example, the report notes that open demonstrations are not possible as a result of violent crackdowns, so protestors have resorted to ‘small flash mobs, dispersing quickly before security forces arrive.’⁵⁰ The use of ‘flash mobs’ manages to be jubilant and sobering at the same time, holding an identity that shows resilience in the face of repression.

The details of that repression – through arrests, violence, threats, brutality – are laid out thoroughly, pointing to the ‘devious’ intentions of the military in entrapping activists. In one instance, the report tells the story of two activists who are arrested

44 Mandy Sadan, *War, and peace in the borderlands of Myanmar*, ed (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016), at 1-26.

45 Kachin Women's Association of Thailand (KWAT), *Pushed to the brink: Conflict and trafficking on the Kachin-China border* (KWAT, 2013).

46 Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand (KWAT), *Submission to CEDAW regarding the General Recommendation on the Trafficking of Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration* (KWAT, 2019).

47 Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand (KWAT), *Deadly reprisals: regime steps up attacks on civilians in retaliation for conflict losses in northern Burma*. (KWAT, 2021).

48 Lynda Marín, "Speaking Out Together: Testimonials of Latin American Women" (1991) 18:3 *Latin American Perspectives*, at 52.

49 George Yudice. "Testimonio and Postmodernism" (1991) 18.3 *Latin American Perspectives*, at 15-31.

50 Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand (KWAT), *Deadly reprisals: regime steps up attacks on civilians in retaliation for conflict losses in northern Burma*. (KWAT, 2021), at 3.

after plain-clothes officers ram their car into the activists' while they are on their way to the funeral of one's grandfather.⁵¹ Another section of the report notes a different funeral where troops shot into a private house and killed a man instantly.⁵²

Two points are worth noting here: first, KWAT strategically considers the intentions of the military (noting 'devious' intentions) in engaging in violence at funerals. This incorporation of different 'voices' allows for a more complex understanding of Kachin victims and what they are up against. Second, this example points to a strong justification for expanding our view of testimony; it is sadly the case that classic forms of testimony are not available to the victims. In the latter instance, the man has died. In the former, the two activists 'are currently being held incommunicado at the Northern Region Military Command base in Myitkyina.'⁵³ Thus the only way to incorporate the voices and stories of those affected is by what we might call 'testimony by proxy,' in which witnessing, and documentation follow the process of testimony, moving from personal to collective voice. Further on, the report notes the *collective* result of these harms, calling the regime's treatment of civilians 'a flagrant contempt of international humanitarian law.'⁵⁴

Even where the report deploys direct quotations, it can be seen as a form of testimony by proxy that incorporates the broader context (in this case, reprisals by the military to the Kachin takeover of a strategic mountain top, Alaw Bum) that has informed the violence. These words from a villager who underwent targeted shelling draw on her own experiences as well as the tragedy of a neighbour:

'At around 10 pm, we started hearing shelling. At 11 pm, a shell exploded in front of our home and some shrapnel came through the roof and hit Ma Aye Pu in the upper legs. She was 19 years old, with a 4-month-old baby. We covered her with a blanket, and her father took her baby and ran to hide behind the house. I also ran and hid in a trench. My 10-year-old child was injured in the knee. Even though Ma Aye Pu was seriously injured, we could not help her because the shelling was ongoing. After three hours, her father took her from upstairs to downstairs, but she died at 2:30 am. Now her baby is being taken care of by her father and aunt.'⁵⁵

Quotes like this add to alternative forms of testimony that the report presents. There are maps that show the specific location of shellings, airstrikes and fighting.⁵⁶ There is a chart that shows the percentage of people from different villages who have been forced to flee (in many cases, 100% of the village).⁵⁷ And there is a list of those who were arrested, tortured, and killed in April and May.⁵⁸

51 *Ibid* at 3.

52 *Ibid* at 4.

53 *Ibid* at 3.

54 *Ibid* at 9.

55 *Ibid* at 5.

56 *Ibid* at 6-8.

57 *Ibid* at 9.

58 *Ibid* at 10-13.

These tools, which allow the reader to understand the testimony organized by place, date, and severity, collectivize the story of the post-coup military reprisals. They also infuse the report's events with the contradictions of the mundane and the tragic. That is, the brutality described occurs alongside the everyday experiences of those who have been harmed: 11 arrested while doing food donations⁵⁹ and a boy fatally injured in the head while feeding chickens,⁶⁰ for example. This allows the reader to identify with the victims, but it is also a way for those telling the story (the KWAT authors of the report and those who have given them information to include in it) to build their own collective identity, moving between personal and collective forms of understanding persecution. This process of identity formation mirrors Sui Chin's reckoning, even if the forms of knowledge that go into producing the final text (classic testimony or alternative tools) are quite different.

Finally, the report includes important recommendations.⁶¹ These include: the promulgation of a new federal constitution and government; calls that the UN Security Council to impose a global arms embargo on Burma and refer the situation to the International Criminal Court; the imposition of a no-fly zone over Burma and neighbouring countries from which airspace is being used to launch attacks; an endorsement of the National Unity Government; sanctions and suspensions of business operations by outside actors; a request for safe places of refuge in neighbouring countries for those fleeing; and, quite importantly given the position of Kachin state in the outer periphery of the country, the careful provision of foreign aid so that it benefits those in ethnic areas, particularly through cross-border aid. The report notes: 'We ask for direct support of ethnic social service structures, which are the building blocks of a future devolved federal governance system.'⁶²

These recommendations – context-specific, informed by collective knowledge as well as individual suffering – play a specific role in this report. They turn discursive resistance into a concretized form of protest, with KWAT drawing links between the individual suffering and ways that the international community and foreign donors can try to enact change. Here, we might even argue that the subversion of oppression that takes place through the *telling* of the story takes on a new kind of subversion, seeking to turn a collective identity into collective action. Referrals to the UN Security Council and the ability to receive a use independent aid would do just that.

The *Deadly Reprisals* report is an instance, this paper argues, of continual and evolving testimony, in which the Kachin authors themselves construct an identity based on context. The expression of those contexts comes in forms other than merely '*writing* from the margins' (author's emphasis), but of what may also be called *creating/producing* from margins, where additional tools (which are often found in human rights reporting – the use of maps, statistics and witness reports) are used to articulate a wider context that steps beyond the personal, as is seen through the

59 *Ibid* at 4.

60 *Ibid* at 5.

61 *Ibid* at 9-10.

62 *Ibid* at 10.

'testimonio,' or 'writing from the margins,' to reaffirm the collective experience of oppression that necessitates and catalyses collective action.

V. CONCLUSION

The significance of the language of testimony rests in the space where the individual or collective teller forms or articulates their identity through making their voice their own. Through a dialogical examination of two different forms of testimony that bear witness to state oppression and abuse within Burma, it can be seen that the formation of identity emerges from an iterative interaction with different voice/realities, allowing for a space where identity can be reasserted, and the agency of the individual realised. It is this dialogical process that resonates as a site that enables resistance, challenging the essentialising realities that oppression may construct.

This has a few theoretical implications. First, it contests a narrative of disempowerment. Gayatri Spivak's influential essay, '*Can the Subaltern Speak?*' argues that in many debates about the position of the subaltern, a term generally prescribed to include the subject, or, other, of the Third World, it is the subaltern herself who is not able to speak as she can only be heard if her voice is reproduced in the dominant discourse.⁶³ Yet this paper has demonstrated that testimonial literature represents a site of resistance, where the voice of the marginalised subvert oppression through the articulation (through stories, facts, and additional tools we identify) of their lived experiences.

Second, this paper's engagement with testimonials as a form of identity production opens a conversation about new ways to understand testimony. There is the classic narrative form, but there is also information collected through documentation processes, as examined here. The two forms that have been deployed in the analysis are not the only forms of testimony that one might imagine as being produced 'from the margins.' Increasingly, new forms of self-documentation are emerging, whether individual or collective. These include video testimony, social media posts, and artistic expression such as songwriting and painting. This paper suggests that a dialogical analysis of any of these forms of testimony would be appropriate to study to understand how identity is shaped and asserted.

As Burma faces another political chapter in its troubled and oppressive state, the voices of those who have suffered at the hands of the military continue to sound. Such voices have been asserted and shaped through classic testimonies at different historical moments, enlightening an international audience to the subjectivities of experience observed in the social and political contexts of those affected. Yet as the military coup continues to impose the military's power across the country, the voices of those who continue to speak have extended traditional forms of the testimonial to move beyond the self, allowing not only for a space where the identity of the

63 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (2003) 14:27 *Die Philosophin*, at 42-58.

individual can resist oppressive realities, but importantly, a space that allows for the reassertion of collective identities that stand as a foundation for collective action.

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