

Chapter 2

Methods: Exploring the Interconnected Global and Local

This research was driven by my excitement over the possibilities for political mobilization offered by new information technologies (NITs), especially the Internet, and my desire to return to the border to see how the border-based opposition groups were using them. Were these new technologies contributing to the dialogue between groups widely considered the key to peace and national reconciliation in Burma? Were they increasing contact between these groups and the outside world? These technologies were also relatively new to me as I prepared my proposal for this research, and I wanted to know whether Burmese activists shared my excitement. How was “surfing the Web” affecting people’s understanding of themselves? Were they feeling part of a larger community, part of a national Burmese society, maybe, or of the transnational opposition movement against the Burmese government? What implications would any of this have for political mobilization and the development of a more equitable, democratic Burma? And how would one go about trying to understand the impact of NITs on something as ill-defined and dynamic as the Burmese opposition movement?

The following sections lay out the epistemological foundation and specific methods that guided this research and analysis. The concepts of situated knowledges and partial perspectives provide a particularly good fit with recent proposals for a “multi-sited” ethnography that can adequately theorize the connections between the multiple sites linking communication and media use in our increasingly interconnected world. I

explain how discourse analysis is useful in examining international communication and its impact at the local level. In exploring the role of the ethnographer in this type of project, I detail my personal involvement with Burma and the Burmese in the multiple sites involved in this study. Finally, I discuss the processes of transcription, translation and analysis and reflect on some of the dilemmas I encountered in doing this research. Ultimately, I contend that by examining a situation from the perspectives of those marginalized in that particular context we can gain the greatest insight into the issues that lie beneath the commonly understood story or political rhetoric of the situation. In other words, what seems most natural in any situation usually masks some form of dominance which only becomes clear when examined from the perspectives of those most marginalized in that context. What I aim to demonstrate in this dissertation is that this is true at multiple levels: globally, regionally, nationally, and within the community and the home. It is true at the most personal level, where the recognition of our individual blind spots is the first and most crucial step in understanding how systems of oppression operate.

**Site: Women's Issues panel, Free Burma Coalition Conference,
Washington, D.C., October 1997**

I walked into the buzz of conversation in Burmese, English, and Karen. The room was arranged with a circular table in the middle, and the audience seated in a circle of chairs facing the central table. They were primarily women, of various ages, Burmese and American. A few men were present, most conspicuously a prominent male leader of the self-proclaimed government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the

Union of Burma (NCGUB) and a prominent male leader of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), who sat a few seats to my left.

Around the table sat the panelists about to present: Naw Ellen¹³, a Karen woman living in the United States who had been making trips to the Thai-Burma border for years, and who I first met during my own stay there; Khin Ohmar, a Burman student leader during the 1988 uprisings who had been forced to flee the country and who had been actively campaigning in the U.S. on behalf of Burma for years; Naw May Oo, a young Karen woman who I know from my own time in Huaykaloke refugee camp, where she was studying in the high school, and who had since moved with her family to the U.S.A. where she was a college student and very active in the Burmese democracy movement and the Karen struggle for justice; and a woman I had never met before. I gathered from the conference bulletin that she was called May Pyone Aung. She stood up.

“Why are so few Burmese women involved in politics?” she demanded. The room, which had gradually been quieting down for the panel, was suddenly silent. Women have participated in the democracy movement since the beginning, she continued, so why don’t they also have equal status within the movement? During the time of U Nu's government, before Ne Win's coup in 1962, the role of women in politics and parliament was stronger. But since the military took over, she argued, women's participation has steadily decreased.

¹³ Naw’ is an honorific title for a woman in the Karen language.

“In the National League for Democracy, less than 3 percent of the leaders are women, so it is men-dominated politics. In the U.S.A. I can say this, but in Burma, it is in their consciousness that politics is men's business. This is the fault of both men and women. Who is telling women that politics is men's work?” she asked. “Grandmothers and mothers as well as male relatives. I challenge this.”

May Pyone pointed to Ohmar. Ohmar has had a lot of political experience, she said, maybe more than most men. After her involvement as a student leader during the 1988 demonstrations, Ohmar spent time living on the Thai-Burma border, working with the students there. Since obtaining a visa to live in the U.S.A., she had struggled daily for the movement, organizing and traveling around the country on speaking tours. She had testified in front of the U.N. and other important international bodies. “So why when we have a big conference is she always put on the Women’s Issues panel? It makes us sad.”

Not only Ohmar. May Pyone continued. Her voice was strong, not at all shy. She continued. Many of the female students work equally as hard as the male students, but were not represented in the Central Committee of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), the main dissident student organization. Many Burmese women of older generations had also been working very hard in the effort to change the situation in their country. And despite the fact that the wife of the military regime’s top general, General Khin Nyunt, began a woman's group which takes the position that Burmese women don’t need equal rights, May Pyone countered that this was not true. “SLORC can do this, but we are the democratic movement and we cannot accept this.”

As I listened to the women speaking on this panel, I realized with a sudden shock that I had not considered the Burmese women as relevant or interesting as the Burmese men I was meeting in the course of my research. I had not even considered it important to ask for their input as I formulated ideas for possible projects on the border, although I had thought it important enough to consult the leadership of the self-declared government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which was (and remains) predominantly male.

Perhaps the force of this revelation was greater than it might otherwise have been because I **knew most of these women**, and had known them for some time, yet had never before talked to any of them about these issues. I realized that I was far less knowledgeable about the Burmese situation than I had come to think. I had not recognized, or at least had not given much thought to the fact that the top leaders of the Burmese democracy movement were (and remain) almost exclusively male. It took the women on this panel to show me the marginalization of their voices I had not seen.

It is in these moments of surprise that the value of self-reflexivity becomes apparent. As I began looking further into the issues raised by these panel members and by the literature on Burmese women, I came to believe that there is more to be gained collectively by examining these issues than may be seen at first glance. And while this experience helped me to realize that I need to attend more carefully to the words and experiences of women, this was not so easy to do. The fact that I had difficulty doing so despite my desire to unearth naturalized conceptions of gender roles demonstrates how deep-seated is the tendency to see things the way they now stand as natural. To avoid

this trap, it is necessary to actively seek out the perspectives of others, and to accept the impossibility of such a thing as “objective” knowledge.

The interpretive turn and the situated nature of knowledge

That any knowledge arises from a location of some sort – a set of experiences, understood through cultural norms, determined by a particular way of seeing the world – is a truism among interpretive researchers and increasingly more accepted within mainstream academic circles. This view recognizes the limited nature of our own perceptual systems and that we all possess what Donna Haraway (1988) has called “situated knowledges.” Knowledge cannot be separated from political and personal concerns, since all knowledge occurs within individuals, each of whom sees from a unique, inescapable and incomplete standpoint. There can thus be no “objective” approach to knowledge. Research must include an exploration of how our visual systems work, how all eyes “are active perceptual systems, building on translations and specific *ways* of seeing, that is, ways of life” (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). Only by confronting head-on the partial and situated nature of all knowledge can we become answerable for what we learn how to see and for what we write.

The process of interpretive inquiry makes strange what had once been familiar and unremarkable. The perspectives of those in subordinate positions in a social order offer the most assistance in this regard, since they often question what is taken for granted by other groups. In a society structured by a gender hierarchy, for example, beginning an inquiry from the standpoint of women’s lives makes questionable practices

that appear natural from the perspective of men, especially those of the dominant cultural group (Harding, 1991). Those subordinated along racial lines, on the other hand, will have a distinct set of experiences and a lived reality not shared by those in other groups. An individual's material conditions and social class stimulate a distinctive consciousness, or standpoint, rooted in real life experience (Collins, 1991). Those within the dominant culture but not of it, who Patricia Hill Collins (1991) calls "outsiders within," can see most clearly the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies, and the negative consequences of their claims to knowledge. Attending to the historical particularity of different people's lives can be a resource for those who believe we have much to gain from a process of "intellectual participatory democracy" (Harding, 1991, p. 151).

Attention to any particular standpoint in this way, however, makes research not only more challenging, but also vulnerable to charges of relativism. Recognizing multiple perspectives requires an acceptance that belief is shaped by historical context, but this is not the same as saying that all competing knowledge claims are equally valid. Accepting such an "equality" of all views is a way of denying responsibility for the need to critically examine knowledge claims (Haraway, 1988). Understanding partial perspectives provides not an omniscient view from nowhere, but rather "the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision . . . of living within limits and contradictions – of views from somewhere" (Haraway, 1988, p. 590). It is discovering what connects these partial perspectives, and the insights we

can gain from looking at different contexts simultaneously, that offer the most fruitful rewards of this approach to research.

Attention to standpoints is also undeniably political, privileging the perspectives of marginalized groups with the recognition that they offer us a means of widening our field of vision, making it more complex by incorporating the perspectives of those whose voices we hear least often. Relevant here is Patricia Hill Collins' (1991) vision, in which "dialogues among and coalitions with a range of groups, each with its own distinctive set of experiences . . . form the larger, more general terrain of intellectual and political discourse" (p. 36). Or as Alice Walker puts it,

I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story. And the whole story is what I'm after. (as cited in Collins, 1991, p. 37)

Methodological frameworks

The foundation provided by the concepts of situated knowledges and partial perspectives guided the choice of methods used in this research. My research objectives were 1) to map out patterns of access and use of new information technologies (NITs) among the Burmese opposition groups in Thailand, and 2) to interrogate the cultural meanings of these technologies in order 3) to analyze how these meanings articulate with global institutions and discourses to influence the work of various groups within the opposition movement, and to further the goals of democratization and inter-ethnic dialogue for peace. This study draws on a variety of methods in order to better

understand the complexity of the Thailand-based component of the Burmese opposition movement.

The borderland that hosts many of the opposition groups straddles two countries using very different approaches to communications. Various private organizations and international institutions are also key players in this border region, and the discourses they employ help to shape the goals and activities of the opposition struggle. In order to understand how technologies were incorporated into life on the border, and what their presence meant for different people and groups, I needed to go there, to observe and talk to people about their experiences using new technologies. This desire to understand the impact of technologies in people's everyday lives has made ethnography an attractive method for media researchers trying to understand the cultural meanings of technology and media. It was for these reasons that during the years I was studying at Ohio University I formulated a plan to return to the border, but my experiences in the classroom and the computer lab, far from Thailand and the border, greatly influenced how I came to understand what was happening back there.

Site: Ohio University, Athens, Ohio

When I returned to the United States and to the academy in 1995, after nearly seven years in Asia, the Internet and e-mail were exciting new means of communication that played a key role in keeping me connected with my friends in Thailand and elsewhere working to change the situation in Burma. I founded the Ohio University chapter of the Free Burma Coalition (FBC), an umbrella group made up of Burma

advocacy organizations, based mostly on university, college and high school campuses in the U.S. and other countries. The FBC is devoted to raising awareness of the situation in Burma and of the implication of American and other Western companies in the subjugation of the Burmese people through their investment deals with the Burmese military regime. I have always had ambiguous feelings about the coercive nature of U.S. foreign policy measures through which sanctions are imposed inconsistently upon countries deemed undeserving of an economic relationship with the United States. But in this case, I thought it best to follow Burma's elected leadership, the National League for Democracy (NLD), in its call for foreign companies to withdraw operations from Burma until the situation there had changed. My activism continued during my graduate years, and the Ohio University chapter of the FBC shifted membership and focus. Throughout these changes, the Internet remained central to our organizing efforts.

The Internet provided a fascinating window on the unfolding events concerning Burma. The Burmese struggle became a popular cause on university, college and high school campuses, especially but not solely in the United States and Europe. In April of 1996, *USA Today* made reference to the decision of PepsiCo to pull out of Burma in the most high-profile of the corporate withdrawals up to that point.

Few students took to the streets to shout about the victory. No campuses were shut; no armories torched. The e-mails were burning up the Internet, though, as a modern-day student rebellion celebrated its accomplishments not with bullhorns and fist-pumping, but with the furious clatter of fingers on the keyboard. (Urschel, 1996).

Various e-mail listservs, including *BurmaNet* and the activist *freeburma* listserv, had become key tools for providing updated information to anyone interested in the situation in Burma, and I read them regularly. Like many other activists, I subscribed to the *BurmaNet* listserv discussion group for awhile, which at that point was unmoderated. I soon became overwhelmed by the flood of daily messages. Wading through them proved too time-consuming for what I got out of the effort. Most messages were personal diatribes and interminable, circular debates. When they started getting nasty and personal, I stopped my subscription. I later heard many other activists describe similar experiences.

I can in hindsight recognize my own blindness to the gendered conceptions of technology use. My use of the Internet to gain access to most of the information I received on the situation in Burma also shaped my understanding of what was actually happening among the activists in Thailand, and of who was providing the information I found on the Net. Away from the border at my university, reading magazines and logging onto the Internet, I became accustomed to certain kinds of information about Burma, and grew to accept certain issues as more legitimate and worthy of study than others. Also, because I found websites and statements in online listservs from various ethnic minority, women's and other opposition groups involved in the movement, I naively assumed that all of these groups had access to the Internet. I imagined the opposition activists I knew sitting in small offices along the Thai-Burma border, busily writing messages to post onto *BurmaNet News* and building the many Burma-related websites that were springing up.

It was imagining this situation while reading literature on globalization and identity that set me wondering what it must be like for people who have lived all their lives in Burma, especially if they lived in the rural areas, to come suddenly into contact with the Internet and the world it reflects. I imagined the kinds of wonder they would feel at things they saw and read as they “surfed” the Web, eager to read more. I imagined sitting with them, watching as they moved from one website to another and talking to them about the experience. I imagined the revelations this would provide into issues of identity, globalization, and their perceived place in the new global “community.” I imagined visiting various opposition groups and learning about the different ways they were all using the same technologies. And as I studied, I became more convinced of the value of ethnography in exploring the issues I wished to better understand.

Ethnography: exploring communication technology and media use

Ethnographies of media and communication technology use are relatively new, and have largely been carried out in “developed” countries with a focus on a particular text, genre, medium, or technology. In recent years, however, researchers have begun calling for greater attention to the situated conditions of technology use. Research in telecommunications, for example, has paid little attention to the meaning of communications technologies and the messages they bring to the lives of rural and marginalized peoples, particularly in the “Third World” (Berland, 1992; Samarajiva, 1994; Ubonrat, 1989 & 1991; Wang, 1994a; Wang, 1997). The primary concerns regarding new communications technologies in Southeast Asia involve development, the

preservation of cultural values, and the sovereignty of the nation-state. For this reason, much of the research on globalization and the growth of mass media in the region has been problem-based and development- and policy-oriented. Some have argued, however, that popular understandings of the impact of telecommunications in the “Third World” that are based on dependency theory, theories of media imperialism, or ideological domination theories are simplistic and do not consider the meanings and uses constructed by media audiences for themselves (Appadurai, 1990; Ubonrat, 1991; Wang, 1997). Other scholars have argued for a more varied approach to studying telecommunications (Dissanayake, 1988; Hukill, 1994; Tehranian, 1991; Ubonrat, 1989).

Forays into media and ethnography have been motivated by the recognition that in order to construct meaningful theories, we must consider the receiver and the decoding process in addition to the communicator and the encoding process (Dissanayake, 1988; Gibson, 2000). Cultural studies have shown us that the meaning or significance of a text emerges in the act of decoding, “where socially situated readers bring their own particular cultural and discursive resources to bear on the act of interpreting media” (Gibson, 2000, p. 255). Attention to the ways media texts are incorporated into everyday life can reveal both macrostructures of power (such as patriarchy or capitalism), as well as microprocesses of coping and of resistance. In criticizing an overemphasis on text and genre-based studies, however, scholars have argued that we need to avoid, as Gibson (2000) put it, “celebratory accounts of the power of audiences to subvert cultural texts to meet their own ideological needs” (p. 256). The concern is that these celebrations of audience autonomy may lead us to ignore important concerns regarding the social and

historical environment out of which audiences generate such meanings. By understanding what factors are at work in the processes of making cultural meaning, we can better understand how ideological discourses reproducing relations of dominance are experienced in everyday life. This approach would also help us to better understand “the cultural and ideological challenges facing progressive, social-democratic, and political movements” (Gibson, 2000, p. 271).

Recognizing that people’s day-to-day experiences are vital to the cultural meaning of technologies and media, new approaches to exploring these experiences have emerged. One approach that has proven useful in this regard is Stuart Hall’s (1986) concept of articulation, which theorizes the relationship between culture and society as a series of temporary, contextualized relationships between elements of a social order (“articulations”). These elements could include social practices, discourses, ideological positions, groups or other social forces, including social movements. The concept of articulation is one in which unities or identities can be formed and reformed in ways that are “specific, particular and non-necessary” (Slack, 1989). Specific articulations vary in their strength and their relative power in different contexts, and make possible different opportunities and practices (Slack, 1989). Slack (1989) provides an example worthy of attention by media scholars: the articulation between the development of new technologies and the idea of progress, which she argues is “neither determined nor necessary” (p. 331). This example demonstrates how articulation offers a way of theorizing technologies that is not tied exclusively to place-based cultural ideas. The articulation of local experiences with global discourses works to create cultural

conceptualizations of technologies that then help to constitute the meaning of **places** through the decisions made regarding technologies and their specific, daily uses within these places.

Writing in 1988, Janice Radway noted that researchers in media and cultural studies have had trouble grappling with ways of theorizing “the dispersed, anonymous, unpredictable nature of the use of mass-produced, mass-mediated cultural forms” (p. 361). She called for a recognition that multiple, publicly constituted discourses are both produced within and permeate a social formation, leading to discourses that overlap and contest each other in addressing social subjects. She argued that what we need is not a focus on the text, but rather on “the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it” (Radway, 1988, p. 336). With a switch in focus from the text and its interpretation to the examination of media’s integration in people’s daily lives, the challenge then becomes one of understanding how people are interpreting the dominant discourses, and to what extent they can “produce for themselves, through articulation, subject positions that do or do not accord with the needs of the dominant culture” (Radway, 1988, p. 372).

There have been other suggestions for developing a more sophisticated ethnographic approach to the circulation of information and meaning that moves beyond the single-site approach (Clifford, 1997; Rodman, 1992). To focus on movement, for example, would require a conception of “culture” as “sites” of travel encounters as much as a place-based phenomenon, and would include as a focus those migrant laborers, refugees, and others previously relegated to the margins because of their mobility

(Clifford, 1997). Such an approach would call into question the very meaning of “the term ‘culture’ – seen as a rooted body that grows, lives, [and] dies” (Clifford, 1997, p. 25). Clifford (1997) has urged us to focus not only on “intensive fieldsites” but also on travel, and on “local/global historical encounters, co-productions, dominations, and resistances . . . to focus on hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as on rooted, native ones” (p. 24). Yet this focus must not emphasize movement without recognizing the different ways of moving (as refugees or tourists, for example) and their meanings and consequences in specific contexts. A multi-sited method must examine how people are socially, culturally, and politically **located**.

An ethnographic approach that explored the uses and cultural conceptions of **communications technologies and media** as its object would help us to identify how global ideological, economic and political structures are reproduced by different technologies in various ways and across multiple media. Patterns of communications access and use, the movements of people, money, and other things between and through sites, including the movement of discourses and their uses – these and other as-yet-unrecognized linkages between sites are the interests of a growing number of scholars (Burawoy, 2001; Marcus, 1995, 1998; Molyneux, 2001; Weber, 2001).¹⁴ Burawoy (2001) defines a multi-sited ethnography as building “a montage that lends greater insight into the whole, into the connections, disconnections and reconnections” (p. 156). Weber (2001) calls for a “multi-integrative” approach to ethnography that focuses on the

¹⁴ The recognition of the interdependence of places is not limited to discussions of ethnography. Geographer Doreen Massey (1994), for example, has suggested that we move beyond the global/local dichotomy to think of places as being themselves constituted through their networks of links with other sites, near and far.

interaction between people and sites, exploring “the chains of mutual knowledge and interdependence that constitute them” (pp. 485-486). A similar approach is proposed in calls for a “global ethnography” (Burawoy, 2001; Molyneux, 2001), described as a reaction to globalization that “speaks, first and foremost, to those left behind on the ground” by studying the daily lives of marginalized people (Burawoy, 2001, p. 148).

The Burmese opposition movement is not a homogenous group or coalition of groups with uncontested ideas about its overall goals and the strategies best employed to reach them. It is rather a multi-sited, loosely-configured and shifting collection of member groups and individuals all over the world focused on a wide range of issues and concerns. In Burma’s case, then, an attempt to understand the opposition movement calls into question the notion of place as conceived by conventional anthropological approaches. The best-known ethnographies generally take as their object of study a distinct group conceived of as bounded within a single research site. But as the movements of people have become more frequent and more often transnational, identity has become less tied to a locality than ever before. As Appadurai (1991) has pointed out, “the *ethno* in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality” as groups migrate, become refugees, exiles, immigrants, tourists and other world travelers (p. 191). If the world is not made up of discreet cultures bounded geographically, the idea of fieldwork as moving in and out of “the field” no longer holds (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). A multi-sited approach can grapple with the shifting, transnational locations of cultural production common in today’s world system (Marcus, 1995). It is most appropriate when the

subject's physical location is uncertain, subject to change, or occupies more than one place – in other words, is a system involving associations and connections among sites.

A multi-sited approach presents a range of possible ethnographic research methods. In addition to participant observation and interviewing, research methods now also include attention to the media, the use of government and organization documents, tracking discussions on the Internet, and traveling.

Instead of a royal road to holistic knowledge of “another society,” ethnography is beginning to become recognizable as a flexible and opportunistic strategy for diversifying and making more complex our understanding of various places, people, and predicaments through an attentiveness to the different forms of knowledge available from different social and political locations. (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 17)

The multi-sited approach has much to offer analyses of social and political movements, since so many movements are now either defined as or involved in larger, transnational struggles. Social movements are the result of specific, historical processes of articulation in which some identities, perspectives, and practices become viewed as more correct or natural than others (Gibson, 2000). The multi-sited approach explores connections, associations and relationships within the world system in order to “bracket” or make strange these naturalized discourses. This provides insight into the “modern interlocking institutions of media, markets, states, industries, universities – the worlds of elites, experts and middle classes” (Marcus, 1995, p. 97). The goal is not an ethnographic portrayal of the world system as a totality, but rather the recognition “that any ethnography of a cultural formation in the world system is also an ethnography of the

system” and cannot be understood only in terms of a single-site approach (Marcus, 1995, p. 99).

Edelman (2001) has proposed that ethnographies of social movements are “most persuasive” when they move beyond a focus on a single organization or single issue to a broader analysis of the political and social fields within which people take action. In the past, ethnographies have tended to overlook or avoid discussion of the larger political contexts within which mobilizations occur, or “the pre-existing militant traditions and the organizing processes that constitute movements’ proximate and remote roots” (Edelman, 2001, p. 309). There has also been a lack of attention to the heterogeneity within social movements, and a tendency to downplay movement tensions and divisions (Burdick, 1995; Bourgois, 2001). These details must not be overlooked if research is to avoid “ahistorical pseudo-explanations for phenomena with profound historical roots” (Edelman, 2001, p. 309). By missing this kind of complexity within a movement, “we rob ourselves and the movement of precisely the kind of nuanced understanding necessary to deepen mobilizing, outreach, and coalition-building efforts” (Burdick, 1995, p. 368).

Guidelines for a multi-sited approach

Some specific guidance as to how to conduct multi-sited research has emerged since the mid-1990s. By that time, multi-sited research had become influential in anthropology, but there existed few guides to conducting such research (Marcus, 1995). Marcus (1995) suggested several ways of conducting multi-sited research centered

around a search for linkages between sites, arguing that association among sites defines a multi-sited ethnography. The most relevant “modes of construction” his framework offers this particular study are his suggestions to “follow the people”, “follow the metaphor”, “follow the story or allegory” and “follow the conflict” (pp. 106-110).

Following the people as a research strategy fits well with migration and forced migration studies, and has led to the development of new objects of study, such as a diasporic world independent of people’s specific movements from one place to another. To follow the story or allegory means examining narratives told within a specific site for the views they provide on people’s “own situated sense of social landscapes” (p. 109). Following the metaphor involves tracing the realm of discourse and modes of thought through the circulation of signs, symbols and metaphors. This process is effective in showing linkages between sites of cultural production that may otherwise have remained hidden. Following the conflict involves analyzing contested issues in contemporary society invoked in such spheres of everyday life as legal institutions and the mass media. Marcus’ (1995) approach explores the system as much as it explores local subjects, thus situating the subject, the researcher, and the “field” quite differently than the single-site approach to ethnography.

It was my hope that by comparing the different sites of the Burmese opposition movement, I could begin to understand those things that seemed natural within the movement instead as the product of specific conditions. This promised to provide hope for imagining and enacting change. It was with the aim of conducting such a multi-sited study that I returned to the border in 1999.

Site: Thailand and Burma, 1999-2000

In preparation for conducting this research, I studied in an intensive Burmese language course for the three consecutive summers prior to my fieldwork. I believed that learning Burmese would be useful in situations where inter-ethnic dialogue in Burmese was likely to occur, especially during the participant observation I planned as one of several research methods. I also planned to travel to Burma to get a sense of the communication environment inside the country, and any training in the Burmese language was sure to be useful then.

My language abilities provided me with advantages when I returned to the border, but caused some unexpected resistance as well. Although my Burmese was far from fluent, with the Burmans my efforts broke the ice as people at first reacted with surprise at my abilities, then with humor as the limitations of those abilities became clearer. My use of Burmese took on entirely different meanings, however, in my relationships with Karen people. When my Karen friends realized that I had forgotten a good bit of my Karen but had studied and was now at least proficient in Burmese, several of my Karen friends commented that I had “become Burmese.” Although these comments were usually said jokingly, they mirror deep-seated resentments on the part of minorities who believe that the Burman dissidents have received comparatively more attention from foreigners. Nevertheless, my commitment to studying Burmese seemed to be interpreted by most people as an indication that I remained committed to the struggle for change in Burma, even if my focus had moved beyond the specificity of the Karen situation.

For the first six weeks of the research, I traveled to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Mae Sariang and Mae Sot to “map out” who was using which technologies where, and to decide which was the most appropriate site for my research. My plan was to gain an overview of the Burmese opposition movement in Thailand. During this time I met many opposition group members and non-governmental organization staff. In Mae Sariang, I stayed in the compound of one group of activists and sat in on a portion of a three week computer training session offered to Karenni refugees who were working with various labor, social and youth groups. In Mae Sot I met with many friends I had not seen for several years. In December I returned to Bangkok and flew to Burma’s capital city, Rangoon.

Burma

In planning my fieldwork, I recognized that my analysis of communications use among the Burmese opposition groups would be lacking without any firsthand experience of the communications environment in Burma itself. The activists inside the country were a vital part of the overall communication network integrating them with the activists-in-exile in Thailand and overseas. Fearing that my presence with Burmese opposition groups on the Thai border might come to the attention of the Burmese military intelligence there, and might then give me trouble getting into Burma and cause problems for those I met inside, I realized that I needed to make this trip before settling into my research site. Unable to enter Burma officially as a researcher, I obtained a month-long tourist visa. Before going, I gathered the names of a few contacts who could help me

arrange other meetings in my quest to understand how and under what constraints the Burmese inside Burma communicate with each other and outsiders.

I left Bangkok in mid-December, 1999, and spent the next month traveling and meeting with people in Rangoon, Mandalay, several towns in Shan State, and Pagan and a few nearby towns. I arranged meetings with writers, students, NLD activists, and others opposed to the government. I met the family of one of my former students from the Huaykaloke refugee camp. During the course of my travels I also met people in teashops, the owners of family-run guesthouses, taxi drivers, street vendors, and tour guides. Because I was unable to safely use a tape recorder in Burma, I took notes during all of my meetings, and then as soon as possible after the interview wrote them out, adding what I could from my memory about the circumstances and other details. I was careful to take precautions with this journal by keeping people's names in code and other references vague, an issue I will return to in the next chapter. My visa expired in mid-January, when I returned to Bangkok and then headed directly to Mae Sot, where I'd decided to base my fieldwork.

Site: Mae Sot



Figures 3 (above) and 4 (below). Mae Sot.
One of the two main streets of Mae Sot, with its collection of motorcycle taxis (above) and one of two Internet cafés (below).



Mae Sot is a provincial town in northwestern Thailand. I was familiar with the town and its surroundings, since it was the access point to the Huaykaloke camp where

I'd lived previously. A stop on the Asian Highway, Mae Sot is a hub for local travelers and merchants, and a home to Thai citizens and immigrants from Burma and elsewhere. Mae Sot is also a thriving jade and gem center, and the tourist trade is somewhat successful there as well, mostly with backpackers wanting to know more about Burma and the refugees. When I returned to Mae Sot in 1999, Huaykaloke camp was gone due to circumstances I explain in Chapter 6. There had been significant new construction in the town, but overall it felt much the same as it had ten years earlier. It was fairly easy to adjust to life in Mae Sot, since I was familiar with the atmosphere of the place and how to get things done there.

Mae Sot had also become a much more important site for the opposition movement than it had been years earlier, and had been dubbed by some as the "second Manerplaw," referring to the opposition alliance headquarters that fell to the Burmese troops in 1995. Since the fall of Manerplaw, many of the ethnic minority and other opposition groups had resettled their offices in or near Mae Sot. Mae Sot sprawled outward for several miles beyond a center consisting of two main streets that hosted a collection of businesses including a post office, several banks, a large daytime market at one end of town and a night market at the other. Mae Sot residents who lived in houses generally lived in either traditional Thai houses built from teak, or in the newer houses made of cement that were going up around the town. There were other small homes, however, in poorer neighborhoods such as the one a former student of mine lived in with her husband and their two small children. Her home was a small wooden shack amidst others like it, consisting of a small main room and two smaller side rooms. She owned a

refrigerator and a radio but very little other furniture except for the small television that formed the focal point of the main room. Burmese opposition activists and their families generally lived communally in houses that doubled as offices for their organizations during the day.

My prior experience on the border was invaluable in providing me an “in” with many in Mae Sot. Several of my former students had moved on to take jobs in the leadership of their organizations or with NGOs, and there was very often a personal connection between the people I interviewed and people I knew during my earlier time on the border. And while there were now several foreigners working with the opposition groups who had committed their lives to these efforts and who could speak one or more of the local languages very well, my feeble language abilities nevertheless distinguished me from the increasing number of foreigners who passed through Mae Sot on brief visits, often volunteering for a short time or just wanting to learn more about the situation of the Burmese refugees and dissidents.

Although my original plan was to live in a neighborhood of Burmese or Karen people, what I’d imagined was significantly different from the options I found available to me in Mae Sot. There were several compounds in or near Mae Sot in which Karen families or Burman families lived in close proximity. Security in Mae Sot, however, was especially precarious while I was there, and most opposition groups were hesitant to invite the notice of the local police by having a foreigner living with them on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. It also became clear fairly early on that there remains a great

deal of factionalism in Burmese opposition politics, and that living near or with a specific group might make it difficult for me to meet and interview people from rival groups.

After a few weeks of looking for a place to live and feeling increasingly frustrated, I finally rented a house in a neighborhood near the center of Mae Sot. I also bought a bicycle, which became my trusted means of getting around town on a daily basis. My house was about equidistant from the opposite ends of town, each one about a ten-minute bike ride from my house. Every day on my way home, I rode my bike through the meandering alleyways and past one of the town's many garment factories employing illegal Burmese migrant workers, the rhythmic clicking sound of the weaving machines reaching me as I rode past the building's high concrete walls.



Figure 5. An opposition group office in Mae Sot.

I began visiting the offices of opposition groups in Mae Sot, offering to edit English documents or assist in whatever ways I could. This was a frustrating process. People were welcoming and generous with their time, but how could I establish myself as a presence in the town, as someone to call and include in meetings and events? How could I gain the trust of those I was meeting for the first time, and establish my credibility as someone with a serious and long-term commitment to Burma, a resident of Mae Sot rather than a Western tourist or volunteer staying for a limited time? People understood me first as working with one of the non-governmental aid agencies that had proliferated along the border during the ten years since I had first arrived in 1989 in a trend described by one longtime Western resident of the area as “the professionalization of the border.”

Being associated with the group of humanitarian aid workers was a source of anxiety for me. It was difficult for me at that time to clearly explain to people my “function,” since the benefit of my work to the community was not as clear and understandable as that of a teacher or an aid worker. I found that even after beginning each interview with a description of the purpose of my research and how it could be useful, at the end of interviews people occasionally asked me what NGO I was working with. I did my best to explain the possible import of my work, mostly by describing it as research that might help policy makers or lead to more informed decisions by NGOs regarding the promotion of information technology use. This seemed to satisfy some people, while others seemed happy just to know that I was a foreigner with a long-term commitment to the Burmese peoples and their struggles.

During my time in Thailand, I visited many offices and homes in Mae Sot, but also traveled to Umphang, Sanklaburi, and Mae Sariang along the border, as well as to Chiang Mai and Bangkok in order to meet people, participate in events and follow linkages between sites in the production of opposition media among Burmese activists. I paid special attention to the details of everyday experience wherever I went, whether it was to visit a group, join people for meals, drink a cup of tea, travel somewhere, attend a meeting or ceremony, conduct an interview, or just to hang out. I tried to be useful in whatever ways I could while learning whatever I could about people's uses and understandings of communications technologies and media. I did a lot of English-language editing for different groups, and in Mae Sot I held several English language classes and information "training" sessions on the basics of the Internet. This work clearly demonstrated my own alliance with the opposition movement, a political stance that must be acknowledged.

The ethnographer as circumstantial activist

Although the use of ethnography in the study of social movements is well-established, it is seldom theorized and therefore incurs risks (Edelman, 2001). The use of ethnographic methods provides researchers with access to the lived experiences of activists and non-activists and to features unique to a specific movement. But there is also the danger that ethnographers will succumb to the pitfall of "overidentification" with the movements they study, representing social movements as more cohesive than they actually are, or accepting activists' claims at face value (Edelman, 2001). There is also

the risk that ethnographers will become blind to certain dynamics within the social movements we study. This can be a serious problem since social movements are notoriously ephemeral and factionalized, and rarely attract more than a minority of the constituency they claim to represent (Edelman, 2001). Some have proposed that researchers should pay more attention to people who could be attracted by certain social movements but for some reason are not (Burdick, 1995). Others note that this would entail focusing not on the movement itself, but on the broader social field within which it operates (Edelman, 2001).

Marcus (1995) advises that multi-sited ethnography requires a keen awareness of the researcher's place within the landscape, a place that must be renegotiated at each new site. Consequently, a different sense of doing research is required as the ethnographer embraces "a constantly mobile, recalibrating practice of positioning in terms of the ethnographer's shifting affinities for, affiliations with, as well as alienations from, those with whom he or she interacts at different sites" (Marcus, 1995, p. 113). This method demands that a researcher become somewhat of an "ethnographer-activist, renegotiating identities in different sites as one learns about a slice of the world system," at times seemingly working with and at times working against changing sets of subjects (Marcus, 1995, p. 113).

The multi-sited ethnography fits comfortably with the recognition of the partiality of perspectives and situated nature of knowledge, and is ultimately an openly political undertaking.

We see the political task not as “sharing” knowledge with those who lack it, but as forging links between different knowledges that are possible from different locations and tracing lines of possible alliance and common purpose between them. In this sense, we view a research area less as a “field” for the collection of data than as a site for strategic intervention. (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 39)

Culture and the “difference” of places

Scholars have begun to posit that we need to escape our taken-for-granted assumptions about the localized and geographically bounded “nature” of culture in order to begin dealing with cultural differences. They critique notions of place that take a fragmented world, understood as a series of distinct, geographically-bound places, as “natural” sites for studying distinct cultures and societies (Clifford, 1997; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, 1997). Such assumptions prevent us from questioning the means through which spaces are constructed as places (as states, for example) to begin with, since we tend to take their already-constructed nature as our starting point when conducting cultural analysis (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). Abandoning the worldview of separate and discrete peoples and cultures, and focusing instead on a set of relations that is **productive of these differences**, “we turn from a project of juxtaposing preexisting differences to one of exploring the construction of differences in historical process” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 16). From this perspective, the enforced “difference” of places can then be seen as the workings of a global system in which difference acts to keep some groups marginalized.

Although people actively make meaning from their experiences, they do so within the constraints posed by their position within society. These meanings shift depending on

context. To understand how this works, it is necessary to first describe the society's larger structures of economic, political and cultural power, how they are organized in this historical moment, and then reproduced within and transformed by the practices of everyday life, including media consumption (Gibson, 2000). Social settings impose their own meanings on the events that occur within them. Different settings involve different norms of behavior, elicit different kinds of emotions, and lead to different interpretations of the events that take place within them (Weber, 2001).

My intent in studying the Burmese opposition movement was to understand how an imagined Burmese society in a particular historical moment was being reproduced within and transformed by geopolitical realities, and how this was reflected in everyday life in exile. This included attention to media consumption, but it was also vital to examine the patterns of access and use of communication technologies within this globally-connected political movement attempting to develop more equitable democratic structures for Burma. These patterns promised to provide clues as to who defined and controlled social discourse in what contexts, and what was at stake for different groups. Employing the insights provided by standpoint theory also meant taking seriously the perspectives of those most marginalized within the movement.

Site: Umphien Mai refugee camp



Figure 6. Umphien Mai refugee camp.

The focus on this site and this portion of the research was made possible by a grant from the Burma Project of the Open Society Institute. The purpose of the grant was to fund opportunities for young people from ethnic minority groups, especially women, to gain educational experiences in whatever ways possible, including developing translation skills and learning how to conduct research. The grant was used to fund the salaries of six Karen research assistants (RAs) who worked on this project, as well as most of the other translation work done during my fieldwork. The ability to hire research assistants on a sustained basis made it possible to carry out an extensive series of open-ended, in-depth interviews in the refugee camps with the purpose of learning about how the refugees themselves described their communications technologies and media use, and how this articulated with their perceptions of their own role in the overall context of the Burmese opposition and, in particular, in relation to other ethnic groups in Burma. Since

much of the refugees' understanding of the world outside the camp came from the media, this portion of the research focuses on the use of the media by the refugees, and the ways they understood and interpreted what they saw, heard or read in the media.

I chose Umphien Mai as a site for this part of the research for several reasons. Although I was not physically present during these interviews, I knew many of the people who lived in the camp. Umphien Mai was a consolidation of two former refugee camps, one being Huaykaloke, where I used to live. My time living and teaching in Huaykaloke smoothed the way in obtaining permission to conduct interviews in Umphien Mai. The camp's proximity to Mae Sot was also a key factor in the decision to work there, because security was especially uncertain for Burmese peoples in Thailand at this time. Thai police regularly arrested Burmese and extorted "fines" from them, usually with the charge of illegal entry into the country. Often this required that they spend some time in a local jail, and always there was the fear of repatriation.

Although the security situation did not affect my ability to visit the camp for short periods, Umphien Mai was not as accessible to foreigners as Huaykaloke had been, and certainly not for the length of time necessary to conduct these interviews. Having RAs conduct these interviews was in some ways an advantage, however, since for most of the refugees it was the first time they had ever been interviewed, and even a Karen interviewer made many of them nervous. My presence would have made them even more so. When I did visit the camp, I was encouraged by my friends to keep a low profile and not walk around the camp much.

Security became even more precarious for the Burmese in Thailand after the October, 1999, siege of the Burmese Embassy in Bangkok by Burmese students, and the January, 2000, raid on a hospital in Ratchaburi by a group of Karen from Burma calling itself God's Army, incidents that are examined more closely in Chapter 6. Starting in November, 1999, Thai police periodically rounded up truckloads of migrant workers and other Burmese people in Mae Sot and drove them to the border.¹⁵ Five of the six RAs working with me had either Thai identification cards or Burmese passports so that the trip from Mae Sot to Umphien Mai was not so risky for them.¹⁶ The other RA was able to move around without notice and luckily never had any problems getting back and forth to Umphien Mai. Travel to camps farther away could have been dangerous, especially if the RAs had been asked to answer questions in Thai by police or border patrol officers or had been found with fake documents.

Five of the six RAs who conducted the Umphien Mai interviews were Karen students studying under scholarships from aid agencies at a university in Bangkok, and the other was a former student of mine who arrived in Mae Sot as this project began and was available to help part of the time. They all spoke English and Sgaw Karen, as well as some Burmese and Pwo Karen, and could thus both conduct and translate the interviews. The group of six who finally conducted interviews in Umphien Mai and translated them were Nant Bwa Bwa Phan (Bwa Bwa), the two sisters Naw Heh Blut Moo (Moo Moo)

¹⁵ Reportedly those workers who could pay a Thai driver (sometimes the same driver who had driven them there to begin with) could often head back into Thailand only minutes after their arrival at the border. There were reports that sometimes, however, they were forced back into Burma until they could arrange another chance to get back across the border.

¹⁶ Fake ID such as a Thai ID card or a forged Burmese passport is a very useful, much-desired and expensive commodity among the Burmese in Thailand.

and Naw Ler Lah Khu Htoo (Khu Khu), Naw Moo Moo Htoo, and Saw Sam, and my friend from Huaykaloke camp, Naw Hser Moo.¹⁷

Before the interviews, I led several training sessions in which the RAs and I discussed the purposes of this study and characteristics of interpretive research. These sessions included exercises designed to clarify the differences between quantitative and interpretive research and how those differences would come into play in the interviews they would be conducting. I introduced techniques for asking non-leading questions, recognizing one's own assumptions during the interview process, and maintaining a relaxed atmosphere. The research assistants were also coached to listen for key terms, note unusual incidents, and ask appropriate follow-up questions without leading the interviewee. There was also a practice run-through of an interview in which the RAs took turns asking and answering questions while everyone listened and discussed how the questions might be rephrased to make them as clear as possible. This led to several adjustments to the interview guide of topics and how questions could be worded. The RAs and I then translated the interview guide into both Karen and Burmese. The group discussed at length and readjusted several of the questions a number of times in order to make them both linguistically and culturally relevant to the people in Umphien Mai.

We approached the interviews as structured conversations within which refugees could identify and discuss issues they themselves considered important. Although the

¹⁷ In Sgaw Karen, “Naw” is the female honorific, and “Saw” the male honorific. Bwa Bwa is Pwo Karen, which uses the female honorific “Nant.” As it turned out, there were many connections between these six people and other Karen I knew from my time on the border. Moo Moo Htoo is the daughter of a man who attended one of my classes in Huaykaloke. Moo Moo and Khu Khu’s sister was also in one of my classes. To confuse things even more, in addition to being a former student of mine, Hser Moo also happens to be Moo Moo Htoo’s aunt.

RAs raised specific topics for discussion, they raised these issues with broad, non-leading questions, and examples and details were elicited from the refugees' own experiences. For example, the interviews included discussion of media content, yet through open-ended questioning it was the refugees themselves who determined what media content would be discussed. Questions were phrased such as these: "Is there any program you particularly remember recently? Any that was unusual?" This allowed the person being interviewed to discuss whatever programs they found most memorable or interesting. Follow-up questions would then try to get at why this program was important or interesting to them.

The interviews were conducted in April and May, 2000, mostly in two sessions, April 3-5 and May 1-5, 2000. The rest were done during a few shorter trips by one of the research assistants with different time constraints. An admittedly overwhelming 132 interviews were completed. Umphien Mai is home to people from the two main subgroups of Karen, the Pwo and Sqaw Karen, some Karen Muslims, and some from smaller subgroups. These groups often live clustered together in different areas of the camp, which houses Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and animists. Each RA was assigned a section of the camp, and approached potential interviewees in their homes. In order to interview as many different people as possible from around the camp, I instructed the RAs to begin with an arbitrarily-chosen house in their assigned section of the camp, and from there approach every 20th house. This practice was intended not to get a "representative sample" of Umphien Mai residents, but instead to get the

perspectives of a wide variety of people living in far-flung sections of the camp, which the RAs were able to do.

Before each interview, the refugees were informed of the purpose of the research and their right to refuse to participate or to stop the interview at any time. This introductory preamble can be found in Appendix A, and the interview protocol in Appendix B. The refugees' names were not collected, and they were assured that their answers would remain anonymous. If the individual agreed to the interview, this consent was noted and the interviewer proceeded. The initial fourteen questions asked about the refugee's sex, age, ethnic background, residence pattern, marital status, education, occupation, children, and religion. We also asked about the refugee's family, such as ages, residence, and parents' occupations. Because they were relatively straightforward and easy to answer, these questions helped to set a relaxed atmosphere for the interview. The RAs also encouraged the interviewees to discuss anything they wanted to during the interviews. In this way, we learned about things important to the refugees that would not have emerged in a survey, such as the deaths of family members, reasons for these deaths, experiences of war, and the refugees' feelings about having to move from place to place during the course of their lives.

Following the initial factual questions were several open-ended questions designed to elicit descriptions from the refugees about how they use and understand the media and media messages. They were asked how they got information about what happened in the refugee camp, in Bangkok, in Rangoon and rural Burma, and in the border areas. The RAs then asked the refugees to focus on four categories of media: print

media, radio, TV/videos/movies, and telephone/email/internet. Within each of these categories, the RAs asked questions about access to the media, the type and frequency of use, their source, and the refugee's favorite type of publication or program found on each medium. The RAs also asked about unusual programs the refugees had seen or heard. If the refugees did not have access to a specific medium, they were asked about this lack of access.

The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to six hours, with the average interview lasting approximately two hours. The RAs interviewed people in their homes and interviews were generally informal, at times interrupted by visiting friends or the need to care for a child. Several interviews were taped and transcribed, although during the majority of the interviews, the RAs were instructed to write verbatim what the refugees said. The RAs practiced writing like this during their training sessions, and during the training and the actual interviews often asked the interviewee to wait for a moment so they could write down what had been said. Based on the RAs' comments, this may have helped to put some of the refugees at ease, since it made the atmosphere less intimidating.

After a first round of initial translations was completed, the interview guide was again adjusted on the advice of the research assistants, and another training session was held to discuss the challenges of translation and ways to adjust our methods for more precision and clarity. In order to deal with issues of reliability of translations from different translators, the RAs and I held several meetings during the process of translation in which we discussed the concepts that were recurring and how we would translate them, developing a list of common concepts and the translation we'd agreed as a group

was most appropriate in which contexts. I read every translation and reviewed the sections that were unclear with the RA who had translated them. Often these discussions happened as we all worked together, and the input of the group as a whole was considered. I know that the RAs also helped each other a great deal during the translation process, increasing the accuracy and reliability of the translations.

The RAs also kept a separate log book, and were instructed to complete each entry immediately after finishing an interview. These entries include their impressions of the atmosphere during the interview and any unusual or noteworthy circumstances or events during the interview. The RAs were instructed to write physical descriptions of people and the surroundings rather than value statements such as “he is poor” or “it is a poor house.” These log books provide a useful picture of the interview scene and the degree of comfort established between the interviewers and interviewees, as well as occasional additional information about the refugee or his or her family.

Once the enormous task of translation was completed, the analysis phase of the research could proceed.

Critical discourse analysis

To understand hegemonic processes at work in large-scale discursive structures such as democratization, commodification and the glorification of technology, the use of critical discourse analysis has proven especially useful (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Within media and cultural studies there have been recent calls for the use of a critical discourse analysis to “establish the central cultural premises provided by respondents in

response to media texts” (Gibson, 2000, p. 267) and the ways in which these are structured by implicit assumptions about how the world works (Hamelink, 1985). The field of critical discourse analysis (CDA) emerged in the late 1980s in response to postmodernism’s questioning of metanarratives, and has become a constituent part of the “linguistic turn” in the humanities and social sciences. This linguistic turn has led to a reconceptualization of language as the central means through which we construct our cultures and understand our lives, at least as important in shaping the social world as economic or political processes (Barker & Galasinski, 2001). CDA attempts to uncover “ways in which social structure impinges on discourse patterns, relations and models (in the form of power relations, ideological effects, and so forth), and in treating these relations as problematic” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 449). This approach can show how various readings of texts “often cohere around a discrete set of cultural premises, arguments, and assumptions” (Gibson, 2000, p. 267).

Cees Hamelink (1985) has outlined the potential contributions of discourse analysis to international communication, arguing that this approach provides insight into the relationship between the way messages are structured and the reinforcement of dominant legitimations. Hamelink (1985) suggested that global media produce and distribute messages that cultivate an image of the current international order as legitimate despite its underlying inequities. Discourse analysis helps to uncover how it is that people come to accept hegemonic discourses upholding “an international order which in fact excludes them from participation” (p. 150). In other words, discourse analysis can “probe into the ways in which the differential distribution of resources is supported, made

to look self-evident and acceptable” (Hamelink, 1985, p. 153). Such an examination of how and with what consequences representations uphold the context of social power is a central project of ethnography. Examining language-in-use helps to explicate the process of social construction (Baker & Galasinski, 2001).

Other translations and the process of analysis

In addition to the interviews in Umphien Mai, I recorded interviews with more than 80 members of various opposition groups, mostly in English, Burmese and Karen, but also in other languages such as Palaung and Shan. The introductory preamble to these interviews can be found in Appendix C. I spoke with activists and leaders of both Burman and non-Burman opposition groups, especially those group members responsible for information and media outreach. I also interviewed foreign and local NGO workers, students, and refugees, and participated in many meetings, conferences, and training sessions. Most of the interviews were audio-taped, and then transcribed in rough form. They ranged in length from 30 minutes to over eight hours, stretched over several sessions. Those in Burmese or Karen were transcribed in Karen or Burmese in Thailand, most often by Roseline, a Muslim Karen woman who spoke Burmese, Karen and English, and who helped me with simultaneous translations during many of my interviews. Helping me during interviews was keeping Roseline busier than she wanted to be, so after she transcribed the interviews, I gave them to various translators I was able to hire on a part-time basis. The interviews done in Palaung and Shan were translated on the spot and these translations were transcribed along with the tapes. In this way, I created a

triangulation of verification for my translations, in which the real-time translation on the interview tape could be compared with the written translation of the interviewee's words, and the translation could again be checked against the written transcript and the tape by me back home when there were specific instances of confusion. In addition to the written transcriptions, I gave the translators a copy of the interview cassette which they could use as a guide if they found themselves uncertain about the meaning in the transcript.

I transcribed those interviews conducted in English during the year after I returned to Athens from Thailand. I collected an enormous number of personal narratives, and the resulting number of pages of text was overwhelming. But the process of listening and transcribing tapes, although tedious and slow, provided me with a chance to relive each interview and begin hearing themes and patterns emerge. This was also a process of self-reflexivity as I heard my own confusions, interruptions, aggressiveness, insecurities and satisfactions embodied in my reactions during the interviews. If conducting research is entering into relationship, as I believe it is, then attending to my own moments of violence, however small, are key to the process, and there is nothing like transcribing an interview word-for-word that brings home the memory of those moments when I interrupted someone, or stopped listening to them. Often while listening to the tapes, I realized that I had cut someone off when they were about to say something interesting, or rerouted the conversation without realizing what possibilities I was nipping in the bud.

Themes and patterns did eventually emerge from the interviews. They emerged in great abundance, given the number of interviews I conducted. The question then

became what to do with all these themes, and how to find patterns among them. I kept lists of themes floating around my desk as I transcribed tapes, adding to them, re-arranging them, and playing with possibilities for juxtaposition. I continually looked for linkages between various sites in which data had been collected, as well as between the local sites and discourses and the larger national, regional or global processes and institutions. And I remained committed to interrogating the uninterrogated and providing perspectives from those inhabiting marginalized positions.

It cannot be denied, in the end, that ethnography is a process of editing, of selective inclusion and exclusion, of juxtaposition, and finally, of interpretation. This work is a story of my making, and needs to be read as such. All writing is a process of interpretation, but ethnography privileges bricolage, the process of juxtaposing things in new ways to stimulate fresh ideas about those things that have become taken-for-granted. I can now understand how, in the same way a visual artist produces a collage of juxtaposed images, the ethnographer presents stories, snippets of conversation, passages from texts, photographs, and her own voice. Through this process the work develops as a story in which the ethnographer's character emerges in the telling, developing along the way her relationship with the characters of the story and with you, the reader.

Ambiguity and Identity

Finding one's way among the various Burmese opposition groups requires navigating an ocean of organizational acronyms and developing a tolerance for ambiguity in many forms. One of the most powerful is the omnipresence of uncertainty and

suspicion all the more sinister because it is directed towards a typically unseen, ambiguous enemy. It has become almost a cliché to note that Burmese spies are everywhere in Burma and Thailand, but clichés are clichés for a reason. Even if there are far fewer Burmese spies about than people suspect, the fear of their possible presence “among us” – since you can never be sure – acts to restrain people, and a furtive, cautious atmosphere prevails inside Burma and along the border.

The stakes depend on one’s situation and the circumstances. For most westerners, the stakes are not much higher than a possible temporary detention and deportation from Burma. As long as they are willing to keep a low profile, westerners also have few fears about engaging in anti-Rangoon activities in Thailand. The feeling of uncertainty and suspicion that permeates the borderland has also become a pleasurable source of drama and intrigue for foreign travelers, journalists and even some aid workers who have little at stake. But for the Burmese peoples, the stakes are far higher. In Burma, any activities perceived as anti-government can result in harsh punishments. Punishable activities include interacting with foreigners in any way deemed suspicious by the authorities. I was warned of this before going to Burma by Burmese friends and other advisors, yet at times it was difficult to know how seriously to take the direst of these warnings, especially since the advice was sometimes contradictory. For example, one academic who had spent a good deal of time with writers in Burma provided me with some contacts, writing in her letter to me that I must be careful not to speak Burmese in Rangoon, as it would attract suspicion. I would then be followed by military intelligence (MI), which would endanger those people I met. Another of my teachers who also spent

a lot of time in Burma encouraged me to use my Burmese, but to be careful how to move around. There are ways to move around to throw off a tail, I learned, such as taking a cab from your hotel to a middle destination, such as another hotel, where you can then get out and take a second taxi to your destination. Telephone calls are screened, so nothing sensitive can be said on the phone. Living on a daily basis with this reality is one thing, but trying to act natural when you aren't sure what is or isn't suspicious is a real challenge, especially if you are wondering if this is all a bit over the top, after all.

This is how I was feeling one day as I went to meet a writer in Mandalay. We talked about what I was doing in Burma, and I told her who I had met with.

“Surely you are keeping your notes with you?” she asked. No, they were back at the hotel room. “So they are in code, then?” she asked. I had started my journal and interview notes using a kind of code, with a separate cheat sheet to help decipher it once I was safe at home. But feeling foolish about it, I had eventually stopped. This writer then told me about another foreigner who had come to meet with her, whose luggage had been searched in her hotel room while she was away. I returned quickly to my hotel room that afternoon after our meeting, worrying that I'd open the door to a ransacked room. All was well when I arrived, and my suitcase was untouched. But I went through my notebook that evening, crossing out names and updating my cheat sheet.

It is inevitable that this climate of suspicion leaves its mark on a work such as this. Identities, like so many things in Burma, are ambiguous. The people I met with were generous with their time, and many spent hours meeting and speaking with me. Many of them, however, must remain anonymous or be referred to using pseudonyms.

For the Burmese activists living in Thailand, pseudonyms are par for the course, and most use more than one name, depending on the situation. Following in the tradition of the famous Burmese independence activists, the Thirty Comrades, many students have taken “noms de guerre,” such as the student leader Moethee Zun. The name “Moethee” means “hailstorm” and “Zun” means June, in reference to his first public speech during his early days as an activist in June of 1988 (Fink, 2001, p. 52). Those living on the border often feel threatened by Burmese military intelligence or by the complex and often changing relationship between the Burmese and Thai authorities. It is the fate of their families inside Burma, however, that is most worrisome for many. This is the primary reason for using a pseudonym, since identification with a family inside can be dangerous for the members of that family.

Even the NGO workers and many of the other foreigners working in various ways with the Burmese have their reasons for wanting to remain anonymous. Foremost among these is the desire to be able to travel in and out of Burma – an especially valuable ability for a foreigner who is also well-versed in the Burmese situation. If one can remain off the military government’s blacklist of “external destructive elements,” one can be of service by traveling in and out of the country carrying out carefully-planned activities. Videotapes of Aung San Suu Kyi speaking to different international organizations and gatherings have on many occasions been smuggled out of the country with the help of friendly and unsuspecting-looking travelers. For other foreigners working in NGOs in Thailand, the need for anonymity has more to do with the illegal or unofficial nature of the work they do with the Burmese in Thailand. Thai officials often look the other way,

but they will continue to do so only if those bending the rules do so quietly, without drawing attention to themselves.

Thus, the secrecy in which much Burmese opposition work is being carried out characterizes this text, populated as it is with anonymous quotes and pseudonyms. As will be shown, this ambiguity cloaks this study in different ways, with significant implications for communications and democratic change.