

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences
(GSASS)

Spring 5-21-2022

Body-Based Activism and Embodied Protest Art, Community Engagement Project With Karen and Karenni Young Adults

Ivy I. Kuhn
ikuhn@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kuhn, Ivy I., "Body-Based Activism and Embodied Protest Art, Community Engagement Project With Karen and Karenni Young Adults" (2022). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 641.
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/641

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

Body-Based Activism and Embodied Protest Art, Community Engagement Project With Karen and

Karenni Young Adults

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 21, 2022

Ivy I. Kuhn

Dance/Movement Therapy

Donna C. Owens, PhD

Abstract

This paper explores body-based activism and embodied protest art as a means to connect to others and participate in social activism. It serves to identify embodied and body-based practices that allow individuals to settle in their bodies to be present and in connection with others in order to feel empowered and motivated to sustain social activist movements. The author further identifies how community arts-based projects help give voice to marginalized, refugee communities that can often feel isolated or voiceless in their displacement. The author engaged in a community engagement project with a group of Karen and Karenni young adults to create an embodied protest art piece in response to the one-year anniversary of the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021. Before the project, participants shared feeling immense concern and specified feelings of hopelessness and wanting to do something, but not knowing what, in response to the coup. This project offered an opportunity to engage in the resistance movement through protest art and led to participants feeling more connected and inspired to continue protesting and supporting the cause.

Keywords: embodiment, body-based, activism, protest art, refugees, social movements

Body-Based Activism and Embodied Protest Art, Community Engagement Project With Karen and
Karenni Young Adults

Introduction

For my capstone project, I am exploring protest art as a means of embodied activism. I chose to do a community engagement project because it gave me the opportunity to work directly with individuals in a social action capacity. This project is inspired by the Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar and the global campaign Raise Three Fingers, fighting for democracy through art following the military coup on February 1, 2021 in Myanmar. I was interested exploring how to connect activist movements and protest art with embodied, body-based practices that serve to help people be present in their bodies while participating in a creative arts process. It was my hope that in the process of doing so, individuals can feel less powerless and more connected to others to continue social resistance or civil disobedience movements that lead to lasting change.

In this project I define what embodiment and body-based practices are and how they relate to how trauma and oppression is experienced in the body. With this framework in place, I then explore how making protest art in community settings with refugee populations in body-based and trauma-informed practices can help give voice to both the individual and collective experiences.

I met with a small group of young Karen and Karenni young adults over Zoom to create an embodied protest art piece together. We discussed how art can help activist movements and about how they see their own role in helping protest the military coup in Myanmar and what they can do to continue to support the resistance movement from their home in the United States and support their community back home in Karen and Kayah state in Myanmar.

To put this resistance movement into context, it is important to recognize what has occurred in Myanmar over the last 14 months since the elected government in Myanmar was overtaken by its own military on February 1, 2021 (“Myanmar coup: A year of protest”, 2022, para. 1). The coup put Myanmar

citizens back under military leadership and once again stripped their rights to democracy and human rights. This battle between military and civilian, pro-democracy leadership has been ongoing since 1962; however, there was recent progress in 2011 when the country gained a “quasi-democracy” (Goldman, 2021, para. 3). Immediately following the coup, millions of civilians in Myanmar and around the globe gathered in protests to demand their freedom from military rule. These protests sparked a nationwide resistance movement that became known as the Spring Revolution. However, the protests quickly turned deadly with the military junta enacting mass violence, torture, and attacks on ethnic civilian groups. Myint (2022) states,

By the end of March 2022, independent news organizations and NGOs in Myanmar and border areas reported the Myanmar military had murdered 1,735 people and arrested 13,171, in addition to bombing and burning down houses in villages and towns. In addition, the United Nations also estimates 912,700 people have been internally displaced from fleeing the Tatmadaw’s various military campaigns since the coup (para. 1).

At the center of the resistance movement is the Civil Disobedience Movement, a non-violent protest and mass resistance movement enacted by civilians in Myanmar who are refusing to work for the military and have foregone going to work in hopes of bringing the government to a standstill and force the military to relinquish control (Myint, 2022, para. 4). This movement is led by hundreds of thousands of government employees, teachers, nurses, students, and workers. In addition, social media platforms have continued to lead the resistance movement in brilliant and creative ways, often run by Myanmar young adults and students from both inside the country and out. Global social media platforms like Raise Three Fingers have given voice and amplified the protest art and political commentary by Myanmar artists as well as the work of other artists around the globe standing in solidarity with Myanmar citizens. Their slogan “fighting for democracy with art” highlights the empowered collective action of those in resistance without resorting to violence (Raise Three Fingers, n.d., para. 2).

For the past 14 months, Myanmar people have shown their resilience and denied the success of the coup “without the direct material help of a single country on the planet” (Myint, 2022, para. 21). One way people can continue to support Myanmar citizens is by donating to the Civil Disobedience Movement and continue to spread awareness about what is happening in Myanmar through social media platforms that highlight the work activists and protest artworks. This was the impetus for my community engagement project.

Literature Review

This thesis project is primarily about the body and how it is the vessel of everything that is experienced in life. Because I chose to do a community engagement project, I had the opportunity to work with others and apply this body-based lens directly to our project together. It was important to me that this project was centered on the participants' own experiences and that as the facilitator, I provided an informed and attentive opportunity for participants to connect to their bodies through embodied practices that offered a chance for self-awareness and self-expression through creating a protest art piece together.

Embodiment & Awareness Practices

Terms about a person's relationship and awareness to their body include mind/body connection, mindfulness, embodiment, body-awareness, somatic, body-based, felt sense (Sandmaier, 2017) body sense (Fogel, 2007), or bodyfulness (Caldwell, 2018). While all these terms differ in small ways as defined by various body-based practitioners and psychologists, they are referring to the same sense of connection to one's relationship to their body. Alan Fogel (2020) defines the concept of embodied self-awareness as the “present moment experiencing of sensations that arise from within our bodies, including our emotions. To be embodied means that experiences are felt directly as arising from within the body without intervening thought” (p. 39). This is a process and practice that takes time and is often unfamiliar to many. On a day-to-day basis, there is a tendency for humans to prioritize the mind

over the body and view them as two separate entities. Most people tend to operate from a disconnected and desensitized state from their body further marginalizing the body as a source of identity (Caldwell, 2018, p. xxvii). When there is a problem or situation, most people will approach it by thinking and communicating verbally, very rarely approaching it from any sort of felt body sense.

Yet, everything a person experiences in life is experienced first through the body, not the mind. Christine Caldwell (1996) writes, “We shape our bodily experiences as we grow. All the joy and pain and minute mundane happenings that life presents us are processed and expressed through our bodies” (p. 8). In this vein, the body then becomes the site of all lived experience and is an incredible source of information and knowledge to the individual if one has access to the resources and practices to attune and be in relationship with their body.

The field of somatic psychology, dance/movement therapy, bioenergetics, and other body-oriented therapies is centered around reconnecting and integrating a mind/body connection so individuals can live and experience life more fully with a greater sense of aliveness, pleasure, and connection to self and others (Caldwell, 2016, p. 7). This work can be done in many ways. It could be in a therapeutic setting in individual or group therapy or it can be done on the person’s own time or in community with others. Regardless of the setting or environment, when working in a body-based context, it is essential to understand how oppression and trauma are also experienced and stored in the body and will affect people differently based on their lived experience.

Oppression & Trauma in the Body

Research studies in the field of somatic and body-oriented psychology in more recent years confirms that trauma is a bodily-based phenomenon. Trauma can be defined as anything that is “perceived by the body as too much, too fast, or too soon” (Menakem, 2017, p. 125). It then actually can remain “stuck” in the body and physically impacts the tissues or fascial system of the body (Long, 2020, p. 81). If the trauma is not resolved or continues to be consistent and recurring, the body will cope as

best as it can, however, often it shuts down and will withdraw from any sense of aliveness or vitality (Caldwell, 1996, p. 8). As a way to try to cope with trauma, individuals can develop defense mechanism behaviors to protect and separate themselves from feelings such as shame, anxiety, or avoidance (Granieri, 2017, p. 2). These behaviors can look like a type of hold or constriction in the body and as a result a person may experience body numbness or a resistance to bodily awareness (Conger, 1994, p. 93). Similarly, another form of trauma that people experience in the body is oppression.

Oppression can be defined as “the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal disempowerment of people based on sociocultural location” (Cantrick et al., 2018, p. 191). Oppression can affect the body in different ways. Bannerman (2017) defines three distinct ways oppression may present in an individual’s body: “*Embodied memory*, or the body’s tendency to hold onto the physical sensations of oppressive memories, *somatic vigilance*, or the development of an especially sensitized and attuned nervous system, and *somatic withdrawal and alienation*, or disconnection from the body” (p. 187). Furthermore, individuals that are oppressed may also develop internalized oppression. Holohan (2022) states, “Internalized oppression affects the very foundation of self-concept, narrows our window of tolerance and lessens our ability to resist and filter oppressive acts we experience at the interpersonal and institutional level” (p. 31). This framework is vital to understanding and recognizing how oppression can affect an individual's body and lived experience. Because trauma and oppression are primarily experienced and stored in the body, it then makes sense that only body-based focused practices will serve to address the trauma.

However, historically there has been a disconnect between somatic/body-based work and social justice initiatives:

In the past each field of research has often held one element of the without the other: somatic counseling focuses on the body but tends to leave out how injustice affects us; social justice work focuses on oppression but often leaves out the body. (Caldwell, 2018, p. 2)

It is vital that body-based practices address both the internal experience of an individual within the greater contextual understanding of the social and political context of an individual's experience. Activist Eli Clare (2001) remarks:

Sometimes we who are activists and thinkers forget about our bodies, ignore our bodies, or reframe our bodies to fit our theories and political strategies. For several decades now, activists in a variety of social change movements have said repeatedly that the problems faced by any marginalized group of people lie, not in their bodies, but in the oppression they face. But in defining the external, collective, material nature of social injustice as separate from the body, we sometimes end up sidelining the profound relationships that connect our bodies with who we are and how we experience oppression. The work of refiguring the world is often framed as the work of changing the material, external conditions of our oppression. But just as certainly, our bodies- or, more accurately, what we believe about our bodies- need to change so that they don't become storage sites, traps, for the very oppression we want to eradicate. (p. 359)

This quote encapsulates how the body needs to be included in social change and social justice movements and how individuals and activists alike also need to work with their own bodies through body-based practices to work through their lived trauma and oppression.

Settling Bodies & Co-Regulation with Others

To frame the context of my community engagement project, I first wanted to define what embodied and awareness practices can offer in terms of noticing internal sensations and becoming more present with oneself and in relation to others. It was important to me that I ground my definition of embodiment and awareness in a trauma-informed lens that connects trauma and oppression as bodily-experienced because my project was with a group of individuals that historically are one of the most persecuted ethnic minority groups in one of the world's longest running civil wars (Yarris et al.,

2014, p. 113). It was important to me that I ground my project in a framework that acknowledges their potential experiences with trauma and oppression.

For my community engagement project, I wanted to create an environment that offered individuals a chance to connect to themselves and others and engage in body-based activism that empowers and offers new opportunities to create protest art. However, often when people and their bodies come together, people can often be out of sync with one another. This is a common aspect of living in a Western, individualistic society (Menakem, 2017, p. 181). There are certain body-based practices that can help regulate and attune bodies together in a shared space so that individuals can then be present and in community with one another. As Menakem (2017) states,

Whenever trauma is involved, the first step in mending any relationship– or any emotional dysregulation– involves working through that trauma. And in order for someone to do that work trauma work, he or she must first learn to slow down, observe his or her body, and allow it to settle. A settled body helps the other bodies it encounters to settle as well. (p. 125)

This concept of settling is key to being in community with one another. Being present, embodied, and aware of one's own body allows for connection to others.

Similarly, there is a term co-regulation communication that is very interesting. When people are together in a space and open to mutual influence, the process of being together can “create new information that was not entirely available to the participants prior to this instance of their joint engagement” (Fogel et al, 2007, p. 252). So simply by being in space together, a group can create new material that can further breathe life into a cause or social movement.

Body-Based Activism & Collective Movements

At its core activism is about action. However, in any social movement involving groups of people there are questions of how to optimize time and resources, mobilize, and communicate needs. People can easily become frustrated and feel disempowered or burn out. When people in community groups

are grounded in body-based practices, there are more opportunities to take collective action and connect to the creative process like protest art that sustains social activism and civil disobedience movements (Menakem, 2017).

There is amazing potential in gathering. Activism can be both an individual and collective experience. However, it is vital that people physically gather together to access this sense of collective attunement that can help connect and fuel social movements. Menakem (2017) states, “In order to heal the collective body, we also need social activism that is body centered. We cannot individualize our way of out nor can we merely strategize our way out. We need collective action— action that heals” (p. 238). This aspect of collectivism is key. Streater (2022) emphasizes, “Healing-centered or healing-justice approaches to trauma, including community practice, ritual and action, understand healing to be collectively experienced and are grounded culturally and politically” (p. 37). Designating a space for this kind of gathering and connection is a large part of sustaining social activist movements among community members. Caldwell (2018) states that by attending to “body stories of trauma, oppression, and neglect, whether in ourselves or others, we foster a type of activism that enables us to use our moving body as a force for recovery and reparation” (p. 206).

Community Creative Art Projects with Refugees & Marginalized Populations

In order to understand more about how engaging in body-based and artistic narrative projects, I researched case studies where the arts were used in the context of social action among refugees in their new country or home place, especially following civil persecution and political violence. One theme that emerged is how participating in community-based art projects can offer participants a chance for empowerment, connection and social support that is critical to adjusting to life in their new home (Murphy et al., 2020). Sutter (2019) reported refugees often experience slower integration when resettling after long-term encampment and lack social networks in the resettlement country (p. 7). This applies to the majority of Karen refugees who lived in camps in Thailand, often for a period of several

years, before relocating to the new host country (Yarris et al., 2014, p. 113). So, by providing opportunities for creative or art-making processes- through movement, singing, drawing, painting, and so forth, it helped combat feelings of social isolation and powerlessness refugees often experience following the relocation process and acclimation to the host country (Arnada et al., 2020). Movement and dance offer a particular accessibility as it offers participants a chance to both witness others and be witnessed as well as move together as a collective oneness that supports connection and building relationships (R. Dieterich-Hartwell et al., 2020, p. 8).

Another takeaway from several research studies was simply providing a safe space to engage and connect (Arnada et al., 2020; Murphy & Alexander, 2020) and specifically engage in the project as both an individual and as a collective entity (Marnell, 2021, p. 93). One study highlighted the value of offering participants the choice of art medium and in doing so had greater success in participation and expression (Rivera Lopez et al., 2018). Finally, research around participatory art projects with marginalized populations helped support that art-based projects can help give voice to a movement or collective experience, often on behalf of those who feel voiceless (Murphy & Alexander, 2020, p. 161).

Specifically, I wanted to apply how engaging in an art-based process, in an embodied manner could help support a social movement among refugees living outside of their home country. My community engagement project is specifically tied to the activist community supporting the Civil Disobedience Movement and Resistance in Myanmar following the military coup on February 1, 2021.

Myanmar Youth Resistance & Social Media Platforms

For the last 14 months since the military coup there has been an enormous outcry from Myanmar civilians in the country and the Myanmar diaspora including internally displaced people (IDP), refugees, and those who have left the country (“Myanmar coup: A year of protest,” 2022, para. 17). While the persecution of ethnic groups like the Karen and Karenni people are not new and have been ongoing since the country’s formation in the 1950’s, the level of displacement has reached exponential

numbers in recent years, especially in this last year since the coup. Just this year alone, there are 910,000 internally displaced people in Myanmar (RFA Myanmar Service, 2022). One of the largest communities of Karen refugees in the United States is in St. Paul, Minnesota with approximately 22,000 refugees including some Karenni and Mon refugees as well (Karen Organization of Minnesota, n.d., para. 3).

Protest Art

Protest art can be one of the best ways to mobilize large-scale people movements. Protest art is created to amplify an issue in objection (Nichols, 2021, p. 20). Nichols (2021) states, "Protest art helps social movements inform the public of issues, challenge the status quo, convey collective goals and messaging, imagine a vision of change, and persuade others to take action" (p. 14). In this lens, protest art is a type of activism that can be utilized to help amplify a message and cry for democracy and human rights.

Since the coup in Myanmar, there has been a huge outpouring of protest art across social media platforms (Rao & Atmakuri, 2021, para. 3). Myanmar artists, poets, singers, rappers, and dancers have been creating art in order to help spread awareness about what is happening in Myanmar and share in the outcry for the injustices and abhorrent human right violations happening at the hands of the military.

Within a week of the coup there was a massive outpouring of hundreds of thousands of civilians taking to the streets in protest movements from major cities like Yangon and Mandalay in Myanmar to small villages ("Myanmar coup: Mass protests," 2021, para. 2). Globally there were protests in dozens of cities— in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia home to large groups of Myanmar refugees—demanding a return to democracy and freedom. Civilians protested for weeks in Myanmar until the military started to crack down arresting and detaining thousands of people and killing thousands of others ("Myanmar coup: A year of protest," 2022, para. 30).

On a global scale, large social media movements like Raise Three Fingers, a social media platform on Facebook and Instagram were created to center the narrative and reflections of artists responding to the gross human right injustices happening in Myanmar at the hands of the military and their fight for democracy through art (Raise Three Fingers, n.d., para. 4). Hashtags like *#whatshappeninginmyanmar* and *#fuckthecoup* started trending in efforts to try to spread awareness to the world about the atrocities happening in Myanmar and new content and art being posted regularly to continue to fuel the resistance movement. The Raise Three Fingers (2022) campaign states, “Every single action, image, or message for Myanmar will give us hope to live one more day” (Raise Three Fingers, 2022). The majority of the protesters and artists engaging in the resistance movement are students and young adults. From on the ground protests to social media campaigns, Myanmar Youth refuse to accept the military dictatorship. Su Mon Thant (2022) states:

The youth of Myanmar has taken the military coup as a direct threat to their lives, their futures, and their rights. After witnessing arrests, tortures and killings of their beloved friends, family members and relatives, the military coup has only become more personal. At the same time, as youths from political or other backgrounds have continued protesting, many have come to learn more about social and political issues and believe there is now a chance to build a nation that respects self-determination, equality, freedom, and human rights. In the longer term, there should be space and platforms that youths can use to raise their voices. (p. 14)

The students and young adult’s voices in Myanmar are also being amplified by those outside of the country through social media and platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. In particular, YouTube functions as a platform that encourages “digitally mediated correspondence that redefines cultural, social, political, and national identities in virtual coexistence” (Hill, 2022, p. 46).

Methods

It was my hope that the community engagement project with Karen and Karenni young adults in Minnesota could offer a sense of connection to other global youth movements. By creating a protest art piece through an embodied process, the experience and piece can further give a voice to the collective movement by centering their own stories as part of the larger cry for democracy and hope for Myanmar. My hope was that by grounding the work in body-based activism practices with others there is a chance to create new experiences together through the protest art and tap into the intrinsic creativity and connection that will serve as an infinite resource to continue fueling social movements.

I reached out to a contact I had met in St. Paul, Minnesota who runs a non-profit organization for the Karen and Karenni community in the St. Paul/Minneapolis area. There are many young adults and families that utilize the space for community programs. I asked him if there were any young adults or adults that would like to do an artistic project and if he had any idea what topic or theme they would potentially be interested in talking about. He shared that a lot of the young adults and teenagers expressed feeling like they did not know what to do in response to the coup. So, from that initial conversation we decided we would center the conversation and community engagement project around embodied activism and creating an artistic response around the 1-year anniversary of the coup.

My contact from the non-profit reached out to several teenagers and young adults he thought would be interested on my behalf. One group was a Karenni traditional dance group and others were young adults that had been involved in protests and rallies last spring in St. Paul when the coup first happened in February 2021. He reached out to 15 individuals and put me in touch with them in a WhatsApp group. I wrote the group and described a bit about the project and my background as a graduate student. From there I asked if weekday nights or weekends were better for them to meet over Zoom and the group landed on meeting for ninety minutes twice in February of 2022.

On the first meeting, five young adults attended the zoom meeting. Four female students and one male. They were ages 15, 16, 18, 21, and 23. Three of them identified as Karen and two as Karenni. All of them shared that they were born in Thailand in refugee camps to parents that had fled Karen and Kayah state in Myanmar following civil war fighting and displacement. They then moved to the United States between 6 and 12 years of age. Some of them moved immediately to Minnesota and others moved to Minnesota later after being placed in other cities.

For the community engagement project, I wrote out an outline for the session with plenty of flexibility. I started the session welcoming them to the Zoom space. I first introduced myself and my background as a graduate student. I shared that I had lived abroad myself in Yangon, Myanmar for the past 4 years and I, myself, was grappling with how to help those affected by the coup and make meaning of what was happening. I asked them each to introduce themselves and their connection/experience to art/dance making. I then talked a bit about art activism and what they thought of the relationship between art and art as a protest movement. They each took turns sharing and speaking in response to each other as well.

Next, I asked about their relationship to the coup and what are some of the things they have felt or were currently feeling. At this point, I made sure to preface that sharing was optional and they could decide how personal they wanted to be. They all chose to share. From this conversation I asked if they were interested in doing an artistic response to further explore what they were feeling. I said I would be happy to lead a bit of a movement experience if they were interested or they could choose to do their individual artistic response in other formats, like visual arts or writing. All five of them expressed interest in doing a movement response and were curious about my background in dance and dance movement therapy.

I had prepared a few ideas of what to do with the group if they were interested. At this point, I led them through a gestural movement prompt inspired by choreographer and dancer Liz Lerman. I

prefaced this as our chance to make a protest dance together. I asked them to share a word or short phrase along with a gestural movement in response to how they were feeling about the coup. Each participant took a turn sharing and the other members of the group echoed back the movement. Once we all had a chance to share, I asked that we all unmute ourselves on Zoom and go around one more time saying the word or phrase and doing the accompanying gesture together. After we went through it together, I asked us to repeat it, but this time just with the gesture. One by one we went through everybody's turn without speaking. At this point, I invited them to again mute their microphones and I would share music. I shared music from my computer and again we went through the 5-gesture phase. Then, when we reached the ending gesture, I invited a new prompt to expand upon the movement—first to make the movement as large as possible, then as small, then in slow-motion, then as fast as possible. I invited them to stand if possible and invited them to carry the movement phrase through the space, traveling in their individual spaces. We repeated this three times with the music switching to a new song and finally I invited them back to the screen to sit down and face each other making eye contact with each other over Zoom and do it once more together and finally for the last pass to do it with our eyes closed, seeing if we could stay together without any verbal or visual cues.

After this last time doing it together, I asked them to sit and take notice of how their body was feeling and what the experience felt like to them. I turned off the music and gave everyone a few moments of silence. Then I asked if they were comfortable sharing what the experience was like for them as an individual and anything else they cared to share with the group. They each shared and were reflective.

At this point, I had my notebook open on the table and was taking quick notes of what they shared along with any body language or affect I was personally noticing. I noticed I was very aware of how they perceived the experience and if it was something they enjoyed or found meaning in. After hearing their responses and reflections I asked if they wanted to carry this same kind of prompt to make

their own dances to share the following week. Many of them smiled and there was some laughter. I invited them to make a three-gestural dance around three things they are feeling or have experienced in relation to the coup. For the last 20 minutes, I turned on more music and invited them to choose the three words and start to build gestures for each one if they wished. At the end of 20 minutes, I asked them to come back together. At this point they had all started building their own phrase and agreed to work on their phrase over the next week before we met for the final time a week from the first gathering.

After the first session, I left time to journal and sketch immediately after the Zoom meeting. Personally, I felt a sense of connection and care following the call. I appreciated spending time with five individuals I did not previously know and felt respect and appreciation for them giving their time and attention to an experience that they did know was going to entail. I appreciated that through Zoom we could gather from Minnesota, Arizona, and Massachusetts. I felt encouraged that from their sharing points following the dance activity they shared they felt more encouraged and like they had a voice and together they made a voice through the phrase as well. This fell in line with my previous research on collective action through artistic activism (Nichols, 2021) and I appreciated the chance to engage with others.

The next week, four of the five individuals were able to gather, and we met for an hour over Zoom again. We checked in verbally at the start of the call and I asked if we could do a grounding gathering experience. I shared that this practice of settling our bodies was inspired by body-based practitioner Resmaa Menakem. I asked them if anyone had a nursery rhyme or song we could sing together. One individual recommended "row, row, row your boat." I checked that everyone in the group was familiar with it. They were all familiar with it so I invited them to unmute their microphones and together we tapped our chests or one part of our body and sang the song together through twice. I

explained that this can help us all arrive in the space together and help settle and transition our bodies to the space together even though we are in separate places.

Next, I invited them to share their gestural dance phrases if they wished. They all shared, and we then discussed how the art-making experience was for them. I posed the question of whether their dance felt like a protest piece. Three of them said yes, the other individual said it felt more like a personal reflection. Again, I took notes throughout their sharing. We ended the call on a positive note and I welcomed them to be in touch if they wished. Otherwise, I thanked them for taking part in the community engagement project.

Again, I journaled for 30-40 minutes following the second Zoom call. This time I did a sketch. I wanted to capture the essence of their movements and the gestures they chose to express their reaction.

Results

I did a community engagement project because it gave me the opportunity to work directly with individuals in an existing community in a social action capacity. I was grateful to connect with a small group of individuals that were interested and curious in the experience.

When we first met on Zoom, I observed that participants seemed a bit nervous and unsure of what to expect. I started by talking about who I was and what I was doing in school. I framed the community engagement project as a chance to work with people and as a dancer, body/based person I shared I am always more interested in doing and moving than writing. I also shared more about myself and my background as a dancer. I did disclose that I lived in Myanmar for three years and I had known people who have been detained for protesting in Myanmar. I spoke about how I volunteer for a few organizations raising money and awareness for what is happening in Myanmar. Finally, I shared that although I have my own feelings and relationships about what has happened and is actively happening, I by no means share their same experience in any capacity. To me, it was important to acknowledge my

positionality and privilege going into this project so they understood why I was passionate, but with the recognition that I view myself as an outsider to their community.

I noticed that after I spoke, and people had a chance to respond and ask questions there were a few moments of laughter and smiles that felt as if the group was more at ease. In the first session after the check-in and before the engagement activity, several participants mentioned feeling helpless and like they wanted to help but they did not know how. That theme was then echoed by others as the desire to do something but feeling like they did not know enough about the situation to talk about it or feel confident being a spokesperson for the situation. After I opened the conversation to how they currently engage with artistic processes, I was inspired to hear about their experiences as dancers, painters, and artists. It was helpful to then bring up the concept of protest art and if they had ever heard of it or done work themselves. I felt it helped ground the project to mention the Raise Three Fingers Campaign at this point, “a campaign hub founded by artists and creatives in Myanmar to bring the global art community together and highlight the unfolding human rights and humanitarian crises caused by the military coup” (Raise Three Fingers, n.d., para. 2). Some of them were familiar with this social media campaign. It was helpful to situate or chance to build a protest art movement phrase within this larger global campaign. I did share that although it would be an option to record the phrase and submit it to the campaign, that choice was completely up to them, and we could discuss later.

As we were doing the movement portion, participants chose gestures that were symbolic in nature. The word they chose to go with the gesture was often an action item or a state of being. Participants shared gestures and words such as “justice will prevail,” “seeing yet helpless,” and “helping hands.” They used gestures like the raise three fingers symbol, covering one eye while extending a hand out, and hands reaching out with open palms. At one point when I asked them to make the movements as large as possible, three people moved from a seated position into a standing one and moved around their space.

As we came together after the movement experience and I stopped the music, there was a moment of silence. I asked them to notice how their bodies were feeling, if any emotion or feeling was arising, and if they wanted to share. In generalized terms, they shared they had never had an experience like this before and they wish they could do it in person and with more people talking about the coup. They shared how they felt they were telling everyone's story so it was both about their voice, but also all our voices together. One participant who is a painter, shared that it reminded him of painting emotions, but with movement instead. He also shared that he wished for his parents to have the experience as well. He said they dance some traditional Karen dances, but he wonders if they would dance their stories like this. One other participant shared that it made them feel more connected to the resistance movement. They shared that as the military continues to persecute and bomb their state in Myanmar, it is a direct attack on their culture and homelands, yet, she herself has never been there.

Personally, I noticed I was very aware of how they perceived the experience and if it was something they enjoyed or found meaning in. I found it difficult to work over Zoom when paying special attention to attunement and settling our bodies in the space. This was difficult to do, and one participant had their camera off for the majority of the time; however, I did want to offer them flexibility for their own comfort and agency in how they wished to engage in the project.

I feel the gestural phrase was a great jumping off point for the protest art piece. It offered the chance to talk together, but also the opportunity to move together and build connections that way. All the participants were artists who had some experience in dance or artistic practices. They were, however, still hesitant about the idea of dancing together and this practice of choosing a gesture to share was accessible. Our discussion focused largely on the personal experience and the idea that we all have a voice and how we can use it. I framed the community engagement project within the context that part of helping this movement is keeping the energy and awareness alive.

Discussion

I lead a community engagement project with a small group of individuals that identified as caring deeply but feeling helpless and like they did not know what to do in response to the political coup that occurred in Myanmar on Feb 1, 2021. Together we created a collaborative protest art piece that was inspired by the Raise Three Fingers Campaign, a global campaign fighting for democracy through art, and the Civil Disobedience Movement, a large-scale nonviolent protest movement happening in Myanmar. To prepare for this project, I researched embodied and body-based practices and I looked at existing literature on understanding how oppression and trauma affect and are stored in the body (Bannerman, 2017; Caldwell, 1996; Cantrick et al., 2018; Conger, 1994; Granieri, 2017; Holohan, 2022; Long, 2020; Menakem, 2017). I then identified key aspects to body-based activism and protest art that allow for individual and collective expression in a grounded and present nature (Caldwell, 2018; Fogel et al., 2007; Menakem, 2017; Streater 2022). Finally, I looked at other community engagement and arts-based projects with refugee and marginalized communities (Arnada et al., 2020; Dieterich-Hartwell et al., 2020; Marnell, 2021; Murphy et al., 2020; Rivera Lopez et al., 2018; Sutter, 2019; Yarris et al., 2014) and applied that insight into building the engagement project working with this group of Karen and Karenni young adults.

My initial hopes for this project were to address how through an embodied art-making approach, individuals can feel less powerless and more connected to those around them to continue social resistance or civil disobedience movements that lead to lasting change. It was important to me that I ground this project in body-based intelligence and embodiment. It was an interesting challenge to both research and then apply this body-based lens to working directly with individuals. I think at the forefront it is important to ask the question- Why does one need to be present in their body? What insight can it offer? I feel I then took this exploration one step further and asked, what can body-based activism and embodied protest offer?

Implications of the Findings

In my literature review I address the practices and work of other body-based practitioners and dance movement therapists to understand how embodiment in general offers the body the chance to regulate the breath, to settle, to be grounded and aware of one's presence (Menakem, 2017, p. 125). As I reviewed in the literature review, people tend to shy away from any sort of uncomfortable feelings and will unconsciously develop a sort of body numbness (Conger, 1994, p. 93). People often develop physiological defenses to deal with pain/stress/trauma that can look like avoidance, denial, and resistance. There is research that shows that these psychological defensives affect our emotional and physical well-being and that the more opportunities people have to be present in their bodies and connect to others, the more access they have to energy and fulfillment (Caldwell, 2016, p. 7). The best practices grounded in embodiment practices that acknowledge how trauma and oppression are stored in the body, offer the body chances to regulate the nervous system and to be grounded, and a chance for expression and healing on both the individual and collective level. In order to sustain social activist movements, people need to be able to come back to their body to process and re-engage through body-awareness and community connection (Caldwell, 2018; Menakem, 2017; Streater 2022).

By researching the ongoing youth led social protest movements against the coup in Myanmar and other community arts-based projects with marginalized and refugee populations, it solidified my research that engaging in body-based activism through making protest art helps give voice to the larger social movement. So, when looking at ongoing people-driven movements led by activists and civilians alike, it is important to address how individuals can be present in their bodies to fight for lasting change and protest without burning out. The Civil Disobedience Movement and Resistance Movement has been going on for a little over a year in Myanmar and people are continuing to come up with ingenious ways to sustain the social movement.

Protest art is one way to continue sustaining the movement. It can amplify the messages of a social movement and keep bringing awareness to various aspects of what is happening through visual and striking means. Campaigns like Raise Three Fingers continue to highlight the work of Myanmar artists and others around the world in direct response to the atrocities to the many aspects of the coup in Myanmar and the people's fight for democracy.

Limitations

The limitations for this project include a short engagement period with participants and having to conduct the project over Zoom. It seemed somewhat ironic to do research on body-based practices and then not be able to physically be together in the same space. I think this made it harder to settle and be in a sense of shared space together. Similarly, because we only met twice, there was not much time to develop a sense of rapport or relationship with one another. Community work takes time. I appreciate the willingness of the participants, but it was not ideal to only connect twice and then end the project. This project is also based on their experiences and their stories and reflections on the coup. I would prefer if I could use their direct quotes to capture their feelings rather than any potential biases or inconsistencies I may have in framing the project and subsequent paper. The Karen and Karenni experience is a complex and complicated one. Often their history and experiences as ethnic groups have been marginalized by dominant Burmese culture and there are various opinions among the Karen and Karenni community about being part of the start of a new Myanmar unified government or fight for state independence from Myanmar. Regardless this is only my limited understanding and I recommend reading and following the works and social media accounts of Karen and Karenni people directly. Furthermore, it should be noted this is my interpretation as an outsider (white, American woman) and it is not my direct experience.

Finally, one other limitation is that this protest art piece that was created in the community engagement project was not recorded and published on any social media platform like Raise Three

Fingers. Only when it is published can it serve to further promote the resistance movement and highlight the many complexities of the refugee and diaspora relationship to the coup. This decision was made by the participants, and although they chose not to record and share, I hope that by simply engaging in the process, that they feel more empowered to utilize these body-based tools for activism and perhaps feel more inspired to continue making protest art as artists themselves.

Recommendations for Future Projects

There are many ways this community engagement project can inform other social action projects. I think more so than ever before because of social media and technology, individuals are more informed of the many human rights issues happening across the globe. I ask the question of how do we show up for refugees and marginalized populations in the United States? How do we fight for human rights and democracy for all people around the globe?

There are so many organizations, protests, and movements that need a voice and a collective response to recognize the injustices and need for action, and eventually healing and reparations. This community engagement project connects to the larger question of, how can we help move and support people from feeling powerless and isolated and instead supported in community and causes that directly affect their livelihood?

It all comes back to being in one's body. There needs to be more body-based learning and community experiences that help individuals be present in their bodies and connected in mind and body. Furthermore, by engaging in the creative process in an embodied or body-based way, there is a chance for self-expression that can serve to empower people and provide a platform for a sense of autonomy and action. This can lead to more empathy and greater understand about the array of social causes.

Conclusion

Overall, I feel it was a fruitful experience within the guidelines of the community engagement option of the thesis. It did not feel like enough time to only meet once or twice, especially when trying to build some sort of relationality. It was helpful to frame it within the context of a graduate school project. However, it was an interesting situation to be researching how dance movement therapy is applied to a community engagement project that incorporates embodiment and opportunity for personal expression in the form of protest and personal narrative without making it a therapeutic project. I found myself leaning on the same guidelines I have as a dance therapist of setting up the environment, offering as much flexibility and agency as possible, giving clear directives, and so forth.

I can imagine doing this sort of project again on a larger scale- meaning meeting over a series of weeks or months and meeting in person in a community center space. Personally, for any of my future work in a community engagement setting I think it is essential that I address my role as someone who is not part of the community coming in and doing a community engagement project. Especially when working with marginalized communities. I think one of the most important aspects to this relational piece is to share where I am coming from and whenever possible, to partner with someone from that community. The work then becomes about centering and recentering their stories if I am in a facilitator role. It was also helpful to frame the experience within the context of using existing platforms like the Raise Three Fingers Campaign to help create awareness and a place for stories and art to be shared on a global scale.

In conclusion, this paper serves to highlight ways to engage in and continue the resistance and pro-democracy movement in Myanmar through embodied protest art and body-based activism. In working with a small group of Karen and Karenni young adults in the United States, there was a chance to connect and create a protest art dance piece in the larger landscape of the activist and protest movement happening in Myanmar and online through social media platforms. By utilizing the

framework of a gestural-based and embodied movement prompt, the project centered on the stories and reflections of each individual in the group while also being grounded in the collective experience. I hope that this project continues to encourage body-based activism practices in community settings and is a reminder of how much intelligence and knowledge each person has in their body and lived body-experience. It is my hope that in moments of feeling disconnect, hopeless, and powerless in the many alarming and horrific events that are violating human rights across the world, that we can all engage in activist movements and protests that utilize the body as a platform for being present with our own selves and in connection to others to take action. Together, we can be part and lead social movements that lead to lasting change.

References

- American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA). (n.d.). *What is dance/movement therapy?* Retrieved April 8, 2022, from <https://adta.memberclicks.net/what-is-dancemovement-therapy>
- Aranda, E., Hills de Zárate, M., & Panhofer, H. (2020). Transformed ground, transformed body: Clinical implications for dance movement therapy with forced migrants. *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*, 15(3), 156–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432979.2020.1779817>
- Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP). (2022, April 4). Daily briefing in relation to the military coup. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://aappb.org/?p=20919>
- Bannerman, A. (2017). Resisting oppression: Body psychotherapy techniques to empower women. *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*, 12(3), 185–194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432979.2017.1347107>
- Caldwell, C. (1996). *Getting our bodies back: Recovery, healing, and transformation through body-centered psychotherapy*. Shambhala.
- Caldwell, C., & Leighton, L. B. (2018). *Oppression and the body roots, resistance, and resolutions*. North Atlantic Books.
- Cantrick, M., Anderson, T., Leighton, L. B., & Warning, M. (2018). Embodying activism: Reconciling injustice through dance/movement therapy. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 40(2), 191–201. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10465-018-9288-2>
- Christine, C. (2018). *Bodyfulness*. Shambhala Publications Inc.
- Clare, E. (2001). Stolen bodies, reclaimed bodies: Disability and queerness. *Public Culture*, 13(3), 359–366. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-13-3-359>
- Conger, J. P. (1994). *The body in recovery: Somatic psychotherapy and the self*. Frog.

- Dieterich-Hartwell, R., Goodill, S., & Koch, S. (2020). Dance/movement therapy with resettled refugees: A guideline and framework based on empirical data. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 69*, 101664.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2020.101664>
- Fogel, A. (2020). Three states of embodied self-awareness: the therapeutic vitality of restorative embodied self-awareness. *International Body Psychotherapy Journal, 19*(1), 39+.
https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A632853568/AONE?u=les_main&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=c755a0de
- Fogel, A., & Garvey, A. (2007). Alive communication. *Infant Behavior and Development, 30*(2), 251–257.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infbeh.2007.02.007>
- Freeman, J. (2022, February 4). Myanmar's spring revolution: A year in photos. *Frontier Myanmar*. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/myanmars-spring-revolution-a-year-in-photos/>
- Goldman, R. (2022, April 27). Myanmar's Coup, Explained. *New York Times*. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/myanmar-news-protests-coup.html>.
- Granieri, A., La Marca, L., Mannino, G., Giunta, S., Guglielmucci, F., & Schimmenti, A. (2017). The relationship between defense patterns and DSM-5 maladaptive personality domains. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01926>
- Hill, C. (2021). Poetic resistance: Karen long-distance nationalism, rap music, and YouTube. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 25*(1), 30–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779211027179>
- Holohan, R. (2022). Working with internalised oppression through body psychotherapy. *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy, 17*(1), 19–33.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17432979.2021.2019118>
- Karen Organization of Minnesota. (n.d.). *About*. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from <https://www.mnkaren.org/about/>

- Long, E. C. (2020). Somatic psychotherapeutic fascial-work. *International Body Psychotherapy Journal*, 19(2), 89+. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A650247202/AONE?u=les_main&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=c11f3708
- Marnell, J., Oliveira, E., & Khan, G. H. (2021). 'it's about being safe and free to be who you are': Exploring the lived experiences of queer migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa. *Sexualities*, 24(1-2), 86–110. <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1177/1363460719893617>
- Menakem, R. (2017). *My grandmother's hands: Healing racial trauma in our minds and Bodies*. Penguin Books, Limited.
- Murphy, E. R., & Alexander, A. S. (2020). The “collective voice that could change the world”: a qualitative interpretive meta-synthesis of arts-based programming for adults experiencing homelessness. *British Journal of Social Work*, 50(1), 157–175. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcz155>
- Myanmar Coup: A year of protest, reprisals and diplomatic inertia. (2022, February 1). *AL JAZEERA*. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/1/myanmar-coup-a-year-of-protest-reprisals-and-diplomatic-inertia>
- Myanmar coup: Mass protests defy military and gridlock Yangon. (2021, February 17). *BBC/Myanmar Coup: Mass Protests Defy Military and Gridlock Yangon*. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56094649>.
- Myint, T. (2022, April 21). How the coup shattered the image of Myanmar's military. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved April 29, 2022, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/how-the-coup-shattered-the-image-of-myanmars-military/>
- Nichols, D., Dagadita, D., Mendoza, M., Saddo, Twist, O., & Becas, D. (2021). *Art of protest: Creating, discovering, and activating art for your revolution*. Big Picture Press.
- Raise Three Fingers. (n.d.). *About*. Retrieved April 5, 2022, from <https://www.threefingers.org/about>

- Raise Three Fingers [@raise3fingers]. (2022, April 25). "No one wants to feel a loss" [Photograph].
Instagram. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ccy-kIVOmhB/>
- Rao, A., & Atmakuri, A. (2021, October 28). The role of social media in Myanmar's CDM: Strengths, limitations and perspectives from India. *Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)*. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/the-role-of-social-media-in-myanmars-cdm-strengths-limitations-and-perspectives-from-india/>
- RFA Myanmar Service. (2022, April 21). 1 in 100 displaced by conflict since Myanmar Coup, UN says. *Radio Free Asia*. Retrieved April 29, 2022, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/displaced-04202022203132.html>
- Rivera Lopez, F., Wickson, F., & Hausner, V. (2018). Finding CreativeVoice: Applying arts-based research in the context of biodiversity conservation. *Sustainability*, 10(6), 1778.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su10061778>
- Sandmaier, M. (2017). Doorways to the embodied self: Eugene Gendlin and the felt sense. *Psychotherapy Networker Magazine*, 41(4), 38-46.
<https://www.psychotherapynetworker.org/magazine/article/1103/doorways-to-the-embodied-self>
- Streater, O. K. (2022). Truth, Justice and bodily accountability: Dance movement therapy as an innovative trauma treatment modality. *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*, 17(1), 34–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432979.2021.2020163>
- Suter, B. (2019). Social networks and mobility in time and space: Integration processes of Burmese Karen resettled refugees in Sweden. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), 700–717.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez008>
- Thant, S. M. (2021.). In the wake of the coup: How Myanmar youth arose to fight for the nation. *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, Brussels*. <https://eu.boell.org/en/young-voices-myanmar>

Yarris, K. E., Stasiun, J. C., Musigdilok, V. V., & Win, C. C. (2014). Generation, displacement, and deservedness among Karen refugees in California. *International Migration*, 53(3), 111–123.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12167>

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

**Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Dance/Movement Therapy, MA**

Student's Name: Ivy I. Kuhn

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Body-Based Activism and Embodied Protest Art, Community Engagement Project With Karen and Karenni Young Adults

Date of Graduation: May 21, 2021

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Donna C. Owens, PhD