Borderland City in New India
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The Lai Haraoba, the ‘pleasing of the gods’, is a pre-Hindu festival said to be at the ‘heart’ of Meitei culture and worldview (Parratt and Parratt, 1997: xiv). The festival involves dance, music, oral poetry, flowers and other offerings, and spirit mediums that channel lai – female and male deities that are sacred and numinous. The Lai Haraoba is performed to honour these deities at the village and neighbourhood level, a rich cosmological and transcendental experience that I won’t even attempt to describe (See Parratt, 1980; Parratt and Parratt, 1997). In May 2014, the month of Kalen in the Meitei calendar, I was invited to attend a neighbourhood Lai Haraoba with my friend Anya and her family at Ima Khunthokhanbi Shanglen, a laishang (temple) on the edge of the DM College campus close to the centre of the city. It was the final day of the festival, Lairoi. A large crowd thronged on the road inside the campus where stalls had been set up adjacent to the temple. It was night when we arrived but the area was lit up beautifully. The state security forces were present, guarding the entrance to the college campus. I had been lent appropriate clothing for the festival and settled down on the ground to watch the Ougri, a part of the sequence of performance on Lairoi.

Transfixed by the spectacle, I was startled when one of the elders of the locality tapped me on the shoulder and invited me to shift to another spot with a better view. Uncomfortable with this idea, I conferred with Anya who suggested it was easier to accept than decline. I was placed next to a non-Manipuri who began a conversation about my origins and my purpose for being at a neighbourhood Lai Haraoba. I asked a few tentative questions in return, conscious of the security personnel that loomed behind us. Mr Joseph was from south India. While taking photographs and shooting video of the Ougri, he replied enthusiastically that he had recently arrived in Manipur as a member of the armed forces to work in external relations. He had been posted all over the country, including Kashmir, a fact few armed forces personnel fail to mention. I disclosed that I was researching the city as a member of the armed forces to work in external relations. He had been posted all over the country, including Kashmir, a fact few armed forces personnel fail to mention. I disclosed that I was researching the city and this included understanding the role of the army. This seemed like a very good idea to Mr Joseph. ‘People must know the truth!’ he exclaimed, before telling me that there was too much misinformation about the armed forces, a problem he planned to fix. I asked if this was a difficult job given the behaviour of the armed forces in Manipur over the previous decades. ‘No,’ he replied, ‘Good people know the truth. And now we have social media also'.
After bidding farewell I joined my friends to cover the short distance to their house. Anya recognised Mr Joseph from the media and started to tease me about my newfound ‘military connections’. I gave a recap of my conversation with Mr Joseph and asked whether she thought he would have much luck in his campaign to improve the image of the armed forces. Anya continued chewing sunflower seeds and spat out the husks as she replied. ‘They have no idea what people think of them,’ and she added that they only meet with government people and occasionally some well-vetted NGO representatives. ‘So why come out to be among the people on Lairoi?’ I asked. Anya agreed this was an unusual move and added that in past years there is no conceivable way that someone working for the military, even in a civilian role, would be allowed to venture out at night to a neighbourhood festival given the risk of attack. I asked whether this meant Imphal was now safer than it had been in recent past. Anya rolled her eyes, ‘safer for them!’ she said pointing at a cluster of armed forces vehicles making their way along the road.

This chapter sketches the prevailing spatial order that has emerged since the city was declared disturbed in 1980. It is concerned with a set of simple questions: Who has the power to control urban space in Imphal? Who can enable and deny place? How does this manifest on the urban landscape? Focusing on space and who controls it, or attempts to control it, provides an illustration of fragmented sovereignty in the disturbed city where space is controlled and contested in microsites; a street, a neighbourhood, a corner, a memorial, a hill. The previous chapter was concerned with belonging, on the places where residents feel safe and where they enact identities – in expected and unexpected ways – in contrast to the disturbed city ‘out there’. This chapter is concerned with the city ‘out there’, while also being wary that the distinction between the ‘out there’ of the city and the ‘here’ of places of belonging is continually dissolved in the disturbed city.

I begin the chapter by outlining the spatial practices of the armed forces, civilian government, and non-state actors arguing that the armed forces control space through security, the civilian government through development and planning. Underground groups and residents fill, and create, the gaps in between. In the second and third sections I illustrate this diffuse hegemony – and attempts to challenge it – through memorials that mark Imphal’s landscape. Memorials to the lives of those lost in conflicts, whether against the British, against India, or between communities, mark the landscape of Imphal. They demonstrate the desire of different actors to produce and control memory in the city and in turn mark the urban landscape with symbols representing different groups, conflicts, movements, and moments.
in the life of the city. I will focus on resistance and nationalism, insurgent memorials, and the burgeoning industry in visiting memorials to dead foreigners from the Second World War.

**Spatial Control in Imphal**

Spatial control in Imphal is fragmented, a prime example of the ways non-state actors ‘crosscut or superimpose themselves on the territorial jurisdiction of nation-states’ (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002: 996). In much the same way as ethnically composed neighbourhoods discussed in the previous chapter, there is a temptation to think of the city as divided into distinct zones of control – some run by the armed forces, some by the civilian Manipur Government, some by underground groups, and some wherein control appears absent. While helpful to a degree, it is important to iterate that control of such zones is never absolute, and the boundaries of these zones shift constantly in response to the ways space is contested in the city. As Gazit has argued in the case of the Occupied Territories, ‘the efficacy of a state’s power during contested political circumstances is shaped not only by formal and internationally recognised sovereignty but rather generated by a series of interactions among social actors in and through the occupied space’ (2009: 84). This is certainly true of Imphal, where spatial control is affirmed by different actors at different times, overlaps in some sites and dissolves in others. Even in sites where control appears firm, such as paramilitary barracks, bomb blasts, civic pressure to relocate, and even dissenting graffiti on the walls suggests some volatility. With this disclaimer in mind, I will outline the prevailing order of spatial control in Imphal by focusing on the armed forces, the civilian government, and non-state actors in turn.

**The Armed Forces**

The armed forces have the power to erase place, disrupt rhythms and rituals, regulate, and impose law and order; which in the disturbed city includes killing, torture, and abduction. They also have the power to enable, or at least permit, some of the activities that help to enable the rituals and rhythms of everyday life. Simply put, they are intrinsic to the ways space is controlled.

Headquarters and barracks for various armed forces are situated throughout the city. As the city has grown residential areas now surround
some barracks, such as on the hill at Singjamei in the city’s south and at Chingmeirong on the northern edge of the downtown area. Others, like the enormous Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) complex at Lilong, in the city’s west, remain relatively isolated from the rest of the city. Some barracks have been moved, such as the Assam Rifles Inspector General headquarters from the Kangla Fort in 2005, and the relocation requires farmland and new infrastructure, expanding the city in various directions. Smaller posts exist on main roads, street corners, bridges, outside public buildings, the airport (fully administered by the CRPF), banks, major hotels, and certain religious sites. Checkpoints are set up on main roads transecting the city and the main roads out of the city. Armed personnel patrol on foot and in vehicles through markets and residential neighbourhoods.

Different army, paramilitary and state police forces (‘armed forces’ hereafter) have different territories and responsibilities. These are divided into forces under central command – answering to the Indian Government, and those under state command – answering to the Manipur Government. Such is the paternalism between the centre and the borderland that an appointee from Delhi heads some of the forces under state government command. For instance, a senior ranked member of the Indian Police Service heads the Manipur Police Force. Forces under central command are under the extraordinary provisions of the AFSPA discussed in chapter 1. Despite ‘disturbed’ status being lifted from Imphal in 2004, the various central and state forces remain in the city. State forces do not operate under the auspices of the Act, however; they operate in what I have termed elsewhere ‘the frontier culture of violence’ that persists in the borderland (McDuie-Ra, 2012b).

The distinction between central and state forces is also an ethnic distinction; the former staffed by non-Manipuris and the latter by locals. The central forces are experienced as an occupying force. Most conspicuous are the Assam Rifles, the oldest paramilitary force operating in Imphal under the authority of the Ministry for Home Affairs in Delhi. They have been in Manipur since before Indian Independence, the 1949 Merger, and the creation of the state government. Also conspicuous in the urban landscape guarding public buildings are the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) and the CRPF, both under central command and composed of recruits from outside Manipur.

State security forces are made up of members of Manipur’s ethnic groups, though indigeneity does not equate to popularity or legitimacy. Rather than an occupying force from India the state security forces represent the militarisation of law and order at the local level, particularly the Manipur
Rifles and Manipur Commandos. Personnel from these forces can often be seen wearing face masks obscuring their features lest they be identified and subject to retribution by members of the public and underground groups. The Manipur State Police undertake more of the mundane actions controlling what happens in different parts of the city, such as evicting illegal vendors, raiding premises serving alcohol, enabling and denying access to sensitive locations, and traffic duty. Some of these tasks are left to the Village Defence Force (VDF); voluntary militias armed by the Manipur Government to provide security in villages and neighbourhoods.

The VDF are an interesting case and worth a brief aside to demonstrate the ways in which armed groups are created by the state to assuage the threat of other armed groups. The force was created in 2009 and initially 1550 volunteers were recruited. The VDF was created in response to calls for protection from underground groups in Heirok village outside Imphal, but was then expanded as a youth unemployment strategy modelled on a similar system in Kashmir. VDF members are entitled to a 3000 Rupee honorarium minus ration fees (about $60 USD) per month. In the five years since they were created, members of the VDF have been arrested for black market activities, smuggling, car theft rackets, extortion, and they often appear in the media for bumbling exploits like accidental shootings and amateurish attempts at organised crime.
During fieldwork I encountered many VDF personnel. They patrol neighbourhoods in plain khaki pants and shirts, some wearing boots and others rubber sandals. Most have an aged 303 rifle over their shoulder though some get by with just a bamboo _lathi_. They tended to stay out of the way of other armed forces, coming around after other patrols had moved on. Off-duty VDF in plain clothes would be pointed out to me in the neighbourhoods. One could see that they carried a certain status, though not necessarily much admiration. Residents have responded to VDF vigilantism and there have been several cases of VDF members being beaten and killed by other civilians. Though mostly perceived as a menace that provides very little security for anyone, and as a somewhat comical footnote to the story of militarism in the disturbed city, the VDF have taken strike action demanding better pay equivalent to the police force. They have formed their own welfare association and held sit-in protests, _bandhs_, and a rally at Keishampat Junction in 2013, the latter of which created one of the more bizarre scenes in Imphal's street protest history; a hundred or so men in khaki uniforms marching while being guarded by around the same number of men in khaki uniforms (though carrying weapons) on one of Imphal's main downtown streets. In 2014 the film _VDF Thasana_, a comedy about an honest VDF volunteer played by one of Manipur's most famous actors, Bonny Sharma, was showing across the city. The lead character, Thasana, turns to the VDF after failing to find other work and bumbles through life and love. The phrase ‘VDF Thasana' has become a popular term referring to the hapless and tragi-comic exploits of the real VDF.

From the members of the Assam Rifles drawn from as far away as Tamil Nadu in south India or Rajasthan in the west to the VDF officers from the house next door, the spectrum of armed personnel in Imphal is vast and they impact urban space in many ways. I focus on two here that have the deepest impact in everyday life. First, mobility is obstructed and redirected by encounters, and the possibility of encounters, with armed forces personnel. Some residents go to great lengths to avoid such encounters by taking circuitous routes or staying home. Young men are questioned about association with underground groups and wanted or recently apprehended operatives. State security forces also harass young men about their appearance, their friends, and accuse them of being drug or alcohol addicts. Manipur’s interethnic tensions are also at play in these encounters and members of Kuki and Naga communities are often accused of being members of the relevant underground groups. Respondents reported that this was even worse if their skills at _Meiteilon_ (Manipuri language) are below proficient or they had a strong accent. For non-Manipuris these encounters
could be even more charged, even if those in question were born in the state. These encounters are designed to intimidate and then extract bribes, but they also have an odd social and moral policing component. Needless to say they have a lasting effect on young men moving about the city, or simply passing through, trying to leave the state or return home.

For women these encounters are to be avoided wherever possible. Extreme sexual violence committed by the armed forces (and by underground groups) has a disturbing legacy in Imphal (see Goswami et al., 2005). Women avoid routes where they might be harassed and an encounter can escalate into violence. Public vehicles provide a modicum of protection, but many women are wary of riding in them without other passengers or if the driver is unknown to them. Older women tend to be more mobile, in part owing to their place in the social and political culture of Manipur and especially in resisting the excesses of the armed forces. There are class elements to this, too. Women and men able to travel in private cars usually have better mobility when compared to those who travel on foot or on bicycles and motorbikes, although cars are stopped and sometimes fired upon. Couples face their own challenges as the moral policing culture of Imphal sees men and women riding together on motorbikes and in cars stopped and asked questions about their relationships. From dusk the lack of street lights and the sporadic power outages make the city very dark and few people venture onto the streets in the evenings, unless they have their own cars or are in the confines of a familiar neighbourhood.

When I began research in Imphal I used to record these stories of obstructed mobility. By my second stint of fieldwork it was clear that these stories are so common that it was more difficult to find anyone without a story of encounter with the armed forces. Some stories were banal, just part of everyday existence in the disturbed city. Some were tragic, involving family members that never returned. Some involved personal experiences of violence, corruption, or blackmail. All suggested that the armed forces controlled the city; at least enough of the city to impinge upon everyday decision-making and mobility. Each encounter can leave residents having to pay a ‘fine’ or make a ‘donation’ to the personnel at the checkpoint. These may appear to be minor inconveniences, yet they affect choices residents make about mobility and the mobility of family members (especially women), and each encounter has the potential to escalate.

Second, and closely related, the presence of armed forces on the streets and in neighbourhoods provokes fear and anxiety. Violence by the armed forces is widespread and even those who have not directly experienced it usually know a relative or friend who has. As the armed forces can enter any
premises without a warrant they collapse any distinction between public and private space. Violence includes executions, rape, battery, torture, and disappearances (HRW, 2008; Dobhal, 2009). Few of these incidents capture broad public attention, however, two incidents in the last decade made national and international headlines and had an impact on the ways space is contested in the city itself: the 2004 abduction, rape and murder of Thanjam Manorama Devi by the Assam Rifles and the 2009 execution of Chongkham Sanjit by the Manipur Commandos. While the Manorama case is better known, the execution of unarmed Chongkham in broad daylight in one of Imphal’s busiest market streets brought public anxiety to new levels. Chongkham’s execution was captured by a photographer and published in a national news magazine, Tehelka (Rehman, 2009). Respondents often mention the Chongkham incident as evidence of chronic insecurity and elusive justice. The spot where he was murdered is unmarked. Armed forces personnel patrol the area throughout the day, when it is crowded with people, and night, when it is empty save for trucks loading and unloading goods. As I was often told when Chongkam’s murder came up in conversation, if it could happen at that spot in 2009, when attention to human rights abuse by the armed forces was far greater than in decades past, and with AFSPA lifted, then it could happen anywhere at any time.

Physical proximity to the armed forces exacerbates fear because of frequent attacks on barracks, posts and patrols. For example, over a 30-day period from October to December 2012 – a period when I was in Imphal – local press recorded ten explosions targeting armed forces posts claimed by four different groups. This does not include explosions aimed at other targets or those outside the city. This was a period with no major agitations or inter-community conflicts that might increase the frequency of incidents. It was, for Imphal, just a ‘normal’ season. Residents are often caught in these attacks or face retribution by the armed forces searching for the perpetrators afterwards.

The armed forces counter their poor reputation by advertising episodes of community service in public spaces. At the State Bank of India branch in Thangal Bazaar there is a bunker built into the front of the building staffed by members of the CRPF. The bunker has camouflage netting, iron bars, and a small door where customers can enter into the bank one at a time. Along the external wall of the bunker and facing the busy street are a series of newspaper clippings enlarged to poster size showcasing recent community endeavours by the CRPF. These posters include the following headlines: ‘CRPF observes world environment day 2012’ with a photograph of CRPF members planting tree saplings, ‘CRPF honours Md. Ismat All-India Class
12 Topper’ with a photograph of a successful local student being awarded a certificate at the CRPF barracks, and ‘CRPF aids injured man’. Similar public displays of community service can be found elsewhere in the city. Not only do these posters play a role in attempting, poorly, to shape public perceptions of the various armed forces operating in the city, they also demarcate and claim territory of the various forces: a building, a street, a lane, a park, a ward. In places the armed forces have no control such posters are swiftly removed.

Civilian Government

While the armed forces control parts of the city by enacting security, the civilian government controls parts of the city through development projects. As discussed in the previous chapter, the built environment of Imphal appears chaotic. This is a result of a number of factors. First, rapid population growth has increased density, leading to new informal settlements and to new construction in existing settlements (mostly vertical) to increase rental spaces for migrants. Second, endemic corruption in urban planning means that those able to violate planning laws and land boundaries usually escape penalty, resulting in oversized dwellings for those with connections and shrinking allotments and public land for everyone else. Third, monies gained from the illicit economy, illicit border trade, extortion, and corruption are laundered into construction, resulting in mammoth private dwellings alongside more modest ones. The remittance economy also furthers this phenomenon – so-called ‘diaspora housing’ throughout the city. Fourth, investments are often begun and then abandoned, owing to various factors from extortion to structural collapse (especially in the swampy soil of the valley) marking the landscape with half completed or disused buildings. Fifth, public works are a major source of contracts for developers and thus certain parts of the city are subject to constant ‘improvements’, such as digging up and relaying the pavement in downtown streets, whereas others lie neglected for years. Sixthly, insecurity results in high walls around many private residences and compounds (usually inhabited by an extended family) with steel gates and broken glass on top of the walls and watchtowers outside the houses of ministers and other high-ranking public servants, furthering the perception that the city is unsafe. Finally, the dysfunction of the local state, including the municipal authorities, leaves waste uncollected, damage unrepaired, and services inconsistent – especially water and electricity supply. This landscape reflects and exacerbates the inequalities produced by Manipur’s politics. While the
civillian government is implicated in the production of this landscape, it also seeks legitimacy by trying to impose order upon it.

Damage to significant public buildings through explosion and arson, such as the state assembly (2001, 2012), the state public library (2005), the public works department (2011), and the residence of the Chief Minister (2008), combined with the visible presence of armed forces, many under command of Delhi, depict a weak civilin government barely in control of the city. Similarly, the rundown and dysfunctional services escalate grievances against the civilian government among residents. Public works serve as a mechanism to instil some faith in the civilian government and address, or at the very least avert attention from, urban dysfunction.

The Imphal City Development Plan 2007 encapsulates the spatial practices of the civilian government. The plan seeks ‘urban renewal’ and notes, ‘there is a strong need to develop physical infrastructure. At the same time, the growth in population places a severe strain on urban amenities and infrastructure such as housing, public transport system, water supply, solid waste collection, sanitation and sewer systems. Unplanned development leads to unplanned growth and clustered settlements’ (Imphal Municipal Council, 2007: 5-6). Thus far it has proven far easier to dismantle unplanned settlements than improve amenities, though new settlements are appearing all the time as will be seen in chapters 6 and 7. Within the plan is the stated desire to ensure Imphal befits its status as a state capital. In the years since the plan the Manipur Government has commissioned several major public works to construct a modern and orderly capital, including the disastrous Bir Tikendrajit Flyover (2007) built to a quarter of its intended width, the new market complex (2010), the new State Assembly (2013), and the Manipuri Film Development Corporation Complex, Cultural Complex, and Convention Centre (2012/13).

Two of these ‘showcase’ developments warrant brief attention. The first is the rebuilding of the city’s main markets in a two-storey roofed complex in the centre of the city. The three buildings housing the markets have neo-traditional Meitei roofs echoing the architecture of Southeast Asia and locating Imphal between South and Southeast Asia – a manifestation of its recalibration as a gateway city between South and Southeast Asia. Most tribal traders were not given places in the new buildings and were instead moved to the ‘Tribal Bazaar’ at New Checkon – a site further away from the centre of the city and the main junctions where goods come in from the countryside. Meiteis were granted the showpiece development at the heart of the city connecting the market to an historical polity and a unique architectural form, while tribals are sent to a less desirable location and a
separate market. Cases like this are used to equate the civilian government to the interests of the Meitei population. Many vendors, including Meiteis, tribals, Pangals, and mayangs (non-Manipuris) sell their wares illegally on the pavements, staircases, and ‘gullies’ around the Ima Keithel. This is a popular spot for crackdowns by the Manipur Police and VDF, who clear (or threaten to clear) the area every hour or so with loudspeakers and lathis. Vendors, mostly all women, gather their wares and run to safety around a corner. They are rarely pursued, rather police wait until they return and then extract bribes. This compromise can benefit both sides, though vendors are highly vulnerable to repeated requests each day from different authorities. Unlicensed traders have also occupied other spaces in defiance of the civilian authorities’ attempts at spatial control – including permanent occupation of a nearby market area created to temporarily house licensed traders during the renovation of Ima Keithel.

The second is the construction of the new legislative assembly. A modern capital helps to counter the image of Imphal as chaotic and lawless while also putting the city on par with other state capitals in India. The new state legislative assembly is a modern building for a modern polity, further reflecting the desire to put the city on the map as with the National Games in 1999. The assembly holds some 500 staff; the grand, domed building in three connected segments with blue-tinted windows and a shallow pool
out front, reflecting the building on clear days, is a staggering contrast to the haphazard construction in most of the city. The site provides a visual contrast between the bold statement of a powerful civilian government capable of steering Manipur into the future and the vulnerability of the same civilian authorities. The building is situated a considerable distance from surrounding roads to avoid the sort of grenade attacks that damaged the previous assembly. Watchtowers are located along all the high walls of the perimeter fence staffed by machinegun toting security personnel. There is a pedestrian path passing in front of the building, though an armoured vehicle with a gun mount is stationed there, dissuading anyone from walking along it.

Spatial control is enacted from the top down by the armed forces and the civilian government. While the armed forces control parts of the city by enacting security (occupation, violence, and harassment), the civilian government control parts of the city through development projects that seek to create order and patches of urban landscape befitting capital city status. Both undertake spatial practices to demonstrate that they have control over the city: control of movement, of territory, and of how and when space is used.

Spatial control by the armed forces and civilian government has not gone unchallenged. The most spectacular challenge was the naked protests by members of the Meira Paibis (Meitei women's association) in 2004 that resulted in the Assam Rifles vacating Kangla Fort. Kangla Fort is the geographic, historical and spiritual heart of Imphal, at least for the Meitei community, as the seat of the former kingdom and as a central element in Meitei cosmology (Ray, 2009). The Assam Rifles occupied Kangla after the British took control of Manipur in 1891 and thus its occupation is synonymous with British and then Indian colonisation. Given its size and location, residents of Imphal passed Kangla on their way in and out of the city and in the course of their daily lives. For several generations of residents, passing an occupied Kangla that they were forbidden from entering materialised their vanquished sovereignty. They were denied access but also had to witness the occupiers' visible control of the site, baring arms that meted violence on their own community and uniforms that granted immunity through AFSPA.

After the rape and murder of Thanjam Manorama Devi in 2004 by members of the Assam Rifles, a group of Meitei women from the Meira Paibis staged a naked protest at the entrance to the Kangla Fort, daring members of the Assam Rifles to rape them. The incident received coverage throughout India and abroad and has been the subject of exhaustive academic analysis in the decade since (Bannerjee, 2008; Bora, 2010; Chakravarti, 2010; Gaikwad, 2009; Misri, 2011). The naked protest and the events that followed offer a striking commentary on space and power in the city. The protests took place
at the gate. The women could not enter because the fort was controlled by
the armed forces delineating the boundaries of civilian space. Yet even to
occupy the small area in front of the gate itself was a bold and courageous
act. As respondents in Imphal often noted during conversations about the
incident, the gate was not somewhere where residents halted. It was a site
that you moved quickly past, preferably on the other side of the road. The
attention received by the protests eventually led the Prime Minister of India,
Manmohan Singh, to lift the AFSPA from Imphal and to return Kangla to
the people of Manipur. An idea mentioned as far back as 1992 when the then
Home Minister M.M. Jacob visited Manipur (Kangla Fort Board, 2009: 24).

As a public space, Kangla is now enjoyed by families, teenagers looking
for privacy, tourists, and pilgrims – especially to sacred shrines within the
compound. In a city of few public spaces it has become a focal point for leisure.
Activists brought the occupation of the fort onto the national political agenda.
However, it took the Indian Government in Delhi to remove the Assam Rifles.
The civilian authorities, including the Manipur Government, played a very
minor role, though the Chief Minister of Manipur since 2002, Ibobi Singh,
has discussed the issue from time to time. The Assam Rifles still use Kangla,
mostly as a shortcut for their vehicles to avoid busy traffic on the main roads
that skirt its boundary, as there are several Assam Rifles posts in close proxim-
ity to Kangla and they have their own gate into the compound on its northern
side. There is also a helipad on the site. They relocated their headquarters to
several sites, the largest of which is in Mantipukhrì in the city’s north.

In 2010 a replica of Kangla Fort gate was opened at the relocation site
within the new Assam Rifles headquarters. At the unveiling the local press
included a statement from the Assam Rifles claiming the replica gate ‘is
dedicated to the historical legacy of Manipur as well as a tribute to the
glorious decades long presence of the paramilitary force in the state. It is
a telling testimony of the selfless love and respect of Assam Rifles for the
people of Manipur’ (quoted in Sangai Express, 2010). The press photos show
the high-ranking members of the Assam Rifles in uniform with their wives
in saris, a very typical Indian dress, in front of the replica of the very same
gate where the Meira Paibis protested. I mention this because the imagery
depicts perpetual occupation. The Assam Rifles may have been evicted
from the Kangla Fort through extraordinary civic activism after more than
a century of occupation, but the imagery of that occupation is recreated
at Mantipukhrì, just 5 kilometres away. They have built their own replica
Kangla that they can continue to occupy in their compound. Moreover, the
recreation of the scene is accompanied by a press release that speaks of
‘love and respect’ at an event where men in uniform – the same uniforms
that have terrorised the population – stand with their wives at a function attended only by the military establishment and their families safely within the compound, shielded from the city they claim to protect. The Assam Rifles are either unaware or uncaring of the symbolism. Such overt challenges to the armed forces are rare. Their control of the city is more often challenged in other ways: explosions, abductions of personnel, memorials and graffiti.

Non-state Actors

In Imphal the significant non-state actors are underground groups, ethno-nationalist organisations, student unions, neighbourhood associations, and religious actors. They challenge spatial control of the armed forces and civilian authorities and make claims on various spaces in the city. Claims do not necessarily equate to complete control, though there are certain neighbourhoods and areas of the city where they ‘run things’. More common is partial control, reflecting the fragmented sovereignty of the city and polity more broadly. It helps to consider the power of non-state actors spatially as in the precise locations non-state actors have influence and the locations where that influence wanes, in the realms of everyday life that non-state actors influence, and temporally as in when non-state actors have influence – in what circumstances and at what times of the day, month, year. In certain locations non-state actors deliver services, provide safety, and advocate for justice where civilian authorities lack the will or capacity to do so and where the armed forces are the source of insecurity. Further, it is not simply that non-state actors fill gaps left by the state; some of these gaps exist because of the strength, support, and legitimacy of non-state actors.

Non-state actors are not always distinct from the communities in which they are embedded or from which they originate. Most are membership organisations. These members also have friends, relatives and neighbours who may be supporters or opponents, or who may face very real dilemmas around the role of their friends and loved ones in various organisations. Some organisations are legal, some illegal. Some are legal but engage in some illegal activities and vice versa. Some cooperate with the civilian authorities and, on occasion, with the armed forces. Some are co-opted by one or the other on certain issues.

Neighbourhood associations are very well established in Imphal, especially among the Meitei community. Most prominent are the Meira Pabis (neighbourhood mothers’ associations), who have been at the forefront of protests against the armed forces and also in movements to maintain the territorial integrity of Manipur, and various Nupi Lup – groups organised for
collective action around particular issues. Members of other ethnic groups have their own neighbourhood associations, though ethno-nationalist organisations and/or underground groups ‘stand in’ for neighbourhood associations for the non-Meitei population of the city, especially those with a shorter history in Imphal.

Underground groups garner the most attention from residents and authorities and the expression ‘UG’ is frequently used to refer to people (‘He is a UG’), places (‘UGs are big here’), and causality (‘It happened because of UG’). ‘Underground groups’ is a blanket term to describe armed organisations, some of which are active in nationalist and ethno-nationalist struggles, while others are involved in extortion, licit and illicit trade, construction, or patron-client relations with a range of people from political elites to singers to property developers. Ethno-nationalist organisations are ‘above ground’ actors who pursue the interests of their various communities through public activism. Some are tied closely to underground groups while others are more distant. Some have good relations with the armed forces, though there are so many different armed forces (central, state, volunteer) that good relations with one force, battalion, or command does not always mean good relations with another.

There are plain-clothes intelligence officers from Indian and Manipur intelligence, off-duty armed forces personnel, and incognito members of underground groups moving about the neighbourhoods and markets. When someone makes a demand on another resident for money, to follow them, to give them something, to sign something, to stay away from somewhere, many residents can never be completely sure whether the person making the demand belongs to one of these groups, or is well connected to one of them, is just an opportunist, or is a broker of some kind. During everyday encounters residents must contend with this ambiguity. As a result, residents prefer to live, work (where possible), and consume in spaces they know and where those making demands, and providing protection, are known or at least knowable as part of their ethnic or tribal community.

**Contesting and Co-opting Memory**

The armed forces control space through security, the civilian government through development and planning, and underground groups fill, and create, the gaps in between. When the distinction between space ‘out there’, controlled by the armed forces and civilian government, and the ‘here’, where residents find belonging, is dissolved, residents find ways to mark
a patch of the city and construct an alternative narrative about its significance. Memorials made by residents, non-state actors, the armed forces, and the civilian government mark the landscape of Imphal, revealing the desire of different actors to signify moments in the life of the city. Indeed, the politics of memorial provide a snapshot of fragmented sovereignty.

There is a vast literature on landscape and memory. As Lowenthal famously wrote, ‘The place of the past in any landscape is as much the product of present interest as of past history’ (1975: 24). Present interests shape the landscape through symbols, constructing and evoking the past to reflect contemporary claims on territory, sovereignty, and state-making. These symbols can be recreated and replaced accordingly and can also be contested through protest, demolition, or the creation of counter-symbols and counter-memorials (see Legg, 2005). As Mitchell argues, ‘both memory, and its corollary, forgetting, are hegemonically produced and maintained, never seamlessly or completely, but formidably and powerfully nonetheless’ (2003: 443). Memorials thus serve as ‘texts’ that can reveal the interests, actors, and histories behind their creation; as ‘arenas’ where different groups debate and contest the meaning of the past and the future; as ‘performance’, places where rituals, festivals, civic ceremonies, public dramas are enacted and, at times, subverted (Dwyer and Alderman, 2008: 166). The tactics of producing identity out of memory and place are often similar whether enacted from above or below. As Hoelscher and Alderman put it, ‘what subaltern and dominant groups share in their efforts to utilise the past is the near universal activity of anchoring their divergent memories in place’ (2004: 349). The location, condition, and permanence of a memorial or monument suggests a position in relation to dominant narratives of the past and present and in relation to sovereign power in its various concentrations; concentrations that are fragmented, overlapping, and contested in Imphal.

There are official narratives of the past in Imphal, but official is not a singular narrative in the disturbed city. There are also unofficial narratives – rebel memorials as it were – and again there is no singular counter-narrative ‘from below’. All are subject to performances marked by ‘bodily repetition and the intensification of everyday acts that otherwise remain submerged in the mundane order of things’ (Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004: 350), including performances by state, quasi-state, and non-state actors making claims on the past and spaces where the past is materialised. Given the contentious nature of Imphal’s politics, the fragmented sovereignty, and the physical density of the city, this makes for a fascinating interplay of politics in microsites of control and contention.
Resistance and Nationalism

During fieldwork I was advised to visit certain memorials. Sometimes friends and acquaintances would take me to personally significant memorials or memorials they had noticed when they learned I was interested. Other times I was lucky; I would find a plaque or a statue or a pile of cement in a laneway, a neighbourhood, a wasteland. Some are relevant for this chapter, while others simply enriched my understanding of the city and the way its inhabitants celebrate, grieve, and mark the landscape with objects and words that signify claims on urban space; small pockets of belonging.

The largest and best-maintained monuments in Imphal are memorials to heroes of Manipuri resistance to external aggression. Across the Indo-Myanmar Highway from the southern periphery of Kangla Fort is the Nupi Lal Memorial Complex. The complex features a marble mausoleum-style building at the top of a flight of stairs. A statue depicting three unarmed Manipuri women confronting two members of the colonial armed forces, grabbing their weapons, sits atop of this. The Nupi Lal (also Nupee Lal) is the name given to the Second Women's War of 1939 (the First Women's War was an uprising against forced labour in 1904), an uprising against a rice shortage manufactured by British export and taxations laws, the control of rice milling by Marwaris (merchant-class migrants from other parts of India), and a poor harvest after excessive rains. With the price of rice rising and supply diminishing, groups of women from the women's market began blocking the export vehicles taking rice out of the city in early December. The situation escalated as thousands of women protested against the shortage and the heavy-handed response. The uprising featured hostage taking, rice mill sabotage, stoning of soldiers, and violence against the protestors. Numerous scholars have argued that the Nupi Lal was a turning point in Manipur's politics as it exposed the impotence of the maharajah, the brutality of the British, and the power of the non-Manipuri mayang traders (Parratt and Parratt, 2001; Yamben, 1976). The Nupi Lal is woven into Manipuri culture in writing, theatre, and in contemporary protests movements.

The memorial symbolises women's agency in resisting colonisation, outsider control of key commodities, and the trope of motherhood. All of these have contemporary manifestations in resistance to Indian colonisation and the AFSPA, the movement to impose the ILP, both of which have involved women's organisations, particularly the Meira Paibis. Furthermore, motherhood remains an integral part of the way women's agency is enacted in Imphal, including as moral authority to oppose conflict, in seeking justice for atrocities and disappearances, to legitimise conflict by equating
maternity with nationalism and/or ethno-nationalism, and in constructing symbols and memories of conflicts (see McDuie-Ra, 2014a). Thus while the memorial is a powerful symbol of women’s agency, it is the agency of Meitei women that is usually evoked.

December 12 each year is Nupi Lal Memorial Day. Various events are held around Imphal and in other parts of the valley. The complex is the starting point for the Nupi Lal Lamjel, a foot race for members of the Meira Paibis from the complex to Singjamei Supermarket Complex approximately 3 kilometres away. The members of the Meira Paibis are married Meitei women, and the racers include women in their 20s all the way through to women in their 80s. Women run down the highway in their phaneks (sarongs), running shoes, and often with turban tied on their heads. Supporters line the route in the cold winter weather to cheer on the participants. As the participants reach the finish they assemble in the closed shopping complex, taking over the pavement between stores for a series of speeches and readings to mark the day. I attended the event in 2013 and it was interesting to see tribal women, mostly from the Kabui community, and Pangal Muslim women also participating, reflecting the blurring of ethnic boundaries among women in the valley and the diversity of the original Nupi Lal activists. The Lamjel animates the memorial complex. The sight of scores of women running through the streets, passing the Raj Bhawan where the Delhi-appointed Governor lives and passing the Assam Rifles headquarters that sits on the hill opposite the supermarket, recalls resistance from below; a spontaneous uprising now etched into narratives of Manipuri nationalism, separatism, and resilience.

Yet the Nupi Lal Memorial Complex is also part of a ritualised performance of state patronage and attempted co-option of the Nupi Lal into the history of local and national state-making. The Nupi Lal Ningshing Thouram is held on the same day at the complex. This event sees the key figures of the civilian government – those holding high offices of the Manipur state – pay tribute along with important guests – those holding high offices of the Indian state, mostly members of the armed forces. Under heavy security detail, the Chief Minister of Manipur, other ministers, and their spouses lay wreaths at the memorial beneath the statue of the women confronting the soldiers described above. The Chief Minister makes a speech and guests watch a dramatic reconstruction of the Nupi Lal performed entirely by Meira Paibis – women even dress as the soldiers that enacted the crackdown on behalf of the British.

As with many government-sponsored events in Imphal the importance of the guests can be deduced by where they are seated. The most important people up the front, a middle section of officials of lesser note, and then invited members of the public in the rear. This is typical elsewhere but
in Imphal the grade of chair is also a signifier of status. The front three or four rows are usually velour and synthetic velvet armchairs with soft patterned fabrics; a few rows back are leather and faux leather armchairs and three-seater couches, and then rows of hard plastic chairs for the public. At the Nupi Lal Memorial on December 12 the VIPs are in the armchairs, mostly senior office holders in the various Indian military and paramilitary forces, as well and the Governor (or a representative), and senior ministers in the civilian government. Seniority decreases as the rows stretch back to the plastic chairs. As many of the VIPs and middle-ranking guests don’t show up or only attend for a short time – leaving once the Chief Minister has spoken, the drama performance is delivered to empty rows of grey and black paisley and fake tiger skin armchairs with the invited public watching quietly many rows back; a stark contrast to the cheering along the route of the footrace and the speeches by women activists at Singjamei.

The official gathering at the Nupi Lal memorial reflects the tactic of grafting the state, both local and national, into resistance narratives. Resistance to British Imperialism is highlighted, resistance to Indian occupation is downplayed and virtually erased; at least on this day at this moment. The rest of the year the Nupi Lal hovers over the Indo-Myanmar Highway close to one of Imphal’s busiest intersections. It is used for other things, even hosting an education recruitment expo (see chapter 7), but for most of the year it remains a powerful symbol of women’s agency in protection of the valley population. Yet it is also malleable; able to be cited in anti-British narratives that are not out of step with narratives of a general broader Indian nationalism, and ethno-nationalist narratives that are deployed against Indian occupation, the armed forces, and AFSPA as well as in the movement against migrants (the ILP movement), and in the protection of Manipur’s ‘territorial integrity’ and its attendant interethnic politics.

Malleability matters because it reflects fragmented sovereignty. There is no singular way that past resistance is interpreted. Manipuri nationalism can be hostile to India and conversely can affirm a shared past (albeit brief) of exploitation under British rule. For instance, the Martyr’s Memorial (Shahid/Shaeed Minar) in Bir Tikendrajit Park adjacent to the Mapal Kangjeibung polo ground is dedicated to two heroes of Manipuri resistance, Bir Tikendrajit and Thangal General, who were hung on August 13, 1891; celebrated as Patriot’s Day in Manipur. The memorial itself features three tall columns with three Kangla-sha (Kangla dragons) on top, sacred symbols of the Kangla Fort (see Singh, 1998: 29). This site, along with the Heecham Yaicham Pat where Tikendrajit was cremated serve as the official sites where the Chief Minister pays tribute on Patriot’s Day. Representatives
of the Indian state also pay tribute, including the Governor and various high-ranking members of the armed forces. These very public memorials fit into a nationalist narrative that recounts Manipuri resoluteness against colonisation and are not antithetical to similar narratives in other parts of India. Yet in the neighbourhoods Patriot’s Day is also used to frame separatist nationalism and recount the last days of Manipuri sovereignty.

Memorials to Jananeta Hijam Irabot Singh (1898-1951) are a little more difficult to place. Irabot grew up in British-occupied Manipur and was a committed activist against both British rule and feudalism; he is seen as a pioneering communist revolutionary in Manipur, especially following the Merger with India in 1949 after which he attacked the acquiescence of the Manipuri elite who supported integration (Parratt and Parratt, 1999/2012). He was instrumental in the Communist Party of Manipur and its military wing, the Red Guard; a group seen, perhaps a little too parsimoniously, as a precursor to the left-wing insurgent movements that have operated in Manipur since. Irabot’s legacy is both as a radical left activist and as a nationalist who opposed the old order, the Merger with India, and sought to unify the Meitei population living in other parts of the borderland.

Memorials to Irabot are found in expected and unexpected parts of the city. Outside the offices of the Community Party of India (CPI) Manipur, behind a high wall in the dense alleyways of Thangal Bazaar there is a large bust of Irabot mounted on tiles and cement with a plaque detailing his birth and death dates. The statue has garlands of flowers draped over it, which are refreshed every day or so. It is situated at the front of an open area used for receptions and meetings, though when I visited was being used as a car park. This is a to be expected, after all, Irabot represented an indigenous commitment to communism and is thus claimed by various communist parties in Manipur and in their literature.

For instance, he is featured on the front cover of the July 2013 issue of the CPI Marxist-Leninist Manipur publication *Anganba Thwanmichak*, where he appears alongside Mao, Lenin and Marx above the hammer and sickle. On the right side of the cover are the passport photos of 18 ‘martyrs’ killed by state security forces in 2001 – mostly protestors taking action against the extension of the ceasefire ‘without territorial limits’, between the NSCN-IM and the Indian Government, seen as threatening the territorial boundaries of Manipur. Also featured in the background is an image of the Kekrupat, the memorial built for the martyrs. Here Irabot and communist resistance to state brutality are connected to Meitei ethno-nationalism and the need to maintain Manipur’s present territorial boundaries. *Anganba Thwanmichak* is not a static memorial marking the landscape but shows the ways in which Irabot’s
legacy is reproduced in everyday life. Indeed *Anganba Thwanmichak* is sold like any other magazine or journal – of which there are scores in Imphal – and people read it on the bus, in the park, and while waiting in government offices.

There is another bust of Irabot on the Indo-Myanmar Highway at Yaishkul in front of a petrol station; there is an Irabot Park on the northern outskirts of the city, Irabot Bhavan (or house), and an Irabot high school in neighbouring Thoubal. Irabot’s birthday, September 30, is celebrated in Imphal, and other parts of the valley, especially in schools and universities. At some of these celebrations students receive portraits of Irabot and these appear in people’s homes – hanging on the walls or in glass cabinets with other paraphernalia.

Other statues of Irabot reflect his construction as a nationalist and ignore or downplay his communism, referring instead to his role as a ‘social reformer’. In the south of the city on Mayai Lambi Road in Pishumthong stands a statue of Irabot standing upright with a finger raised as if arguing an important point. The statue stands beside the Namul River on a small patch of grass and was dedicated by then Governor of Manipur, Ved Marwah, in 2000. Ved Marwah served as Commissioner of Police and Director General of the National Security Guard among other posts prior to being appointed Governor of Manipur. He is also author of a 1995 book that discusses violence in the Northeast as part of larger pathology of terrorism (see Marwah, 1995). As governor, Marwah had the power to declare the state ‘disturbed’, and renew this declaration every six months; which he did throughout his tenure. There are few representatives of the Indian state more symbolic of Indian colonisation and state violence in Manipur, yet this statue of Irabot on a main road in Imphal is dedicated by Ved Marwah, a juxtaposition both ironic and bizarre but also instructive of the ways memorials are bound up in contestations over history, territory, and sovereignty. There are other examples that demonstrate the same ambiguities of nationalist and statist versions of the past: the memorial and remembrance events for murdered left-wing intellectual, writer and founder of the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) Aramabam Somorendra (also spelled Samarendra), the memorial to students who marched against rice shortages in 1965 and were killed by members of the Manipur Rifles known as the Hunger Marchers, and the memorial to civilians shot by the armed forces during a volleyball game at Malom on the western outskirts of the city.

**Insurgent Memorials**

Integral to challenging Indian nationalist co-option of resistance are memorials to those killed fighting against the state, in the violence of military
occupation, and in interethnic conflicts. At Cheiraoching in the city’s north is a memorial site to members of underground groups killed fighting against India. At the top of a hill, which is a popular place for recreational walking and for New Year celebrations, is a memorial site enclosed by a high fence. At the centre of the site itself is a plaque adorned with a red communist star dedicated to eight members of the (still active) People’s Liberation Army (PLA) killed in a gun battle with the armed forces in 1982 at Kodompokpi. Surrounding the plaque are busts of Manipuri’s freedom fighters – Paona Brajabashi, Bir Tikendrajit and Thangal General – alongside Irabot; a merging of resistance of Empire with resistance of India and the Manipuri Kingdom. In contrast to Martyr’s Day and the tribute paid at Heecham Yaicham Pat to Manipur’s martyrs, the memorial at Cheiraoching is locked and attempts to celebrate the memory of the PLA fighters is obstructed, though it is possible to visit through a gap in the fence; which is the only way I have been able to visit the site.

On the anniversary of the 1982 battle (April 13), families of killed PLA members seek access to the site to lay flowers and light candles (Athoubashinggi Ningshing Numit), a ritual banned during the 1990s. Since 2001 families have sought permission from the Guwahati High Court to gain safe access to the site on this day. Student organisations and various civil society organisations also pay tribute, including chapters of the Meira Paibis and even school children. Non-family members are routinely denied entry and have to pay tribute at the foot of the hill, though the crowd at the foot of the hill sprawling onto the road is even more visible than the actual memorial site hidden away on the hilltop. In 2014 the High Court granted permission and relatives were admitted to the site, though the armed forces recorded the names of all the mourners allowed up the hill (Sangai Express, 2014a). With very restricted entry the climb up the hill ends up being a fairly isolated ascent by the relatives. Women dressed in white and soft pink and men in all white, the proper clothes for paying tribute in Meitei society, make their way to the gated entrance to the memorial where armoured vehicles are parked with roof hatches opened and guns at the ready lest there is any trouble from a throng of mostly middle-aged women. As with other years, various underground groups send a message of thanks to members of the public for observing the day. Unable to join the Athoubashinggi Ningshing Numit as a non-relative I have relied on descriptions from residents, journalists, and the excellent photo essay of the 2014 ritual by Shanker Khangembam (2014a).

The reluctance of the armed forces to allow access to Cheiraoching reflects the power of the place to evoke the memory of left-wing insurgency in
Image 3.3  PLA Memorial at Cheiraocking

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Meitei nature of the event, in recent years the name has been changed to ‘Great June Uprising Day and Unity Day’. Relatives also gather here during *Tarpan Katpa*, a Meitei ceremony of paying homage to deceased relatives giving the site an even richer spiritual significance.

Kekrupat is a distinctly Meitei place surrounded by Imphal’s diversity. For the rest of the year Kekrupat sits opposite the Imphal River from one the largest Muslim settlements in the city, across the Imphal-Jessami road from a cluster of several tribal neighbourhoods such as Zomi Villa and Ragailong, and from a notorious strip of grubby hotels used for prostitution. The memorial to innocent protestors killed by the armed forces is a testimony of state brutality and the repercussions for political protest in a disturbed city. Yet the site is also a powerful invocation of ethnic divisions. It has elevated the original 2001 protests to the status of martyrdom in the struggle to maintain Manipur’s territorial integrity in the face of alleged attempts by hill communities to redraw the state’s boundaries. Meitei martyrdom now has a permanent place on the urban landscape. As many tribal residents of Imphal point out, they have no equivalent in the city and must exercise care in marking territory in any similar way.

Residents also construct temporary memorials to family members killed by the armed forces in neighbourhoods made from stones, cement, or clay. Patrolling members of the armed forces dismantle these memorials and sometimes residents return at night and rebuild them. In other places they make the memorials from hardier materials. For instance, in Takhellambam Leikai (or thereabouts) there is a small row of cement mounds memorialising local youths who have been killed by the armed forces. At one point these were larger, almost like gravestones. The top half was broken off by the armed forces and locals have returned on occasion to rebuild. I visited this site a number of times. It is quite public; the narrow laneways and dense housing suddenly give way to a small market, two *pukhris*, a cremation ground, a small field where children play, and the memorials stand exposed in this open space reflecting the ongoing battle between residents and the armed forces to remember the dead, to mark and erase state brutality from urban space.

By far the most well known living memorial is Irom Sharmila. Irom has been on a hunger strike protesting against the AFSPA since 2000 after the Assam Rifles opened fire on a volleyball game at Malom just outside the city. Numerous writers have analysed her story in depth, focusing on the symbolism of her Gandhian struggle (Mehrotra, 2009; Vajpeyi, 2009), the politics fought over her body (Gaikwad, 2009), and the ways her fast exposes the brutality of the Indian state (Banerjee, 2004; Chakravarti,
2012; Sharma, 2014). Sharmila herself has written poetry and prose that is published and translated into English (Sharmila, 2014). Sharmila is a courageous yet complex figure, and much of the complexity is glossed over in accounts of her fast from afar (see Jilangamba, 2009). In the city she is physically present, though inaccessible to most residents, marking the landscape as a living memorial to those killed and disappeared under the AFSPA. Sharmila spends most of her time under arrest in the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences (JNIMS). Along Lamlong Road, which runs along the wall of the JNIMS campus, there is a permanent shelter where Sharmila’s supporters gather to carry out relay hunger strikes, hold meetings, and greet her when she is released from ‘house arrest’ in the hospital and re-arrested every six months. It is also where well wishers, activists, and journalists seeking contact with Sharmila congregate. While seldom seen around JNIMS, Irom haunts the landscape of the hospital. Everyone knows she is there but the public cannot pass near her wing. Those that try risk arrest. And the visible presence of the security forces is a reminder about who controls space and determines access to Sharmila.

**Conclusion**

Place-making from below through memorials like Cheiraoching and lopped cement slabs in Takhellambam make claims to space by compelling resistance, secession, and the resultant state brutality to be remembered; even if actually paying tribute at them is an ongoing struggle in itself. In contrast, there is a nascent industry in memorialising dead foreign soldiers killed in and around Imphal during the Second World War. In 2014 Imphal’s small tourist industry was gearing up for the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Imphal. In 2013 a vote among guests at a function at the British War Museum declared the Battle of Imphal and the Battle of Kohima in neighbouring Nagaland as the ‘Greatest British Battle’ (Copping, 2013). This proved to be a fillip for the local war tourism industry. The Manipur Tourism Forum and the Manipur Government have seized the opportunity and the higher end hotels in town were adorned with ‘Greatest British Battle’ banners when I visited the city in May 2014. New tour operators started up, hoping to benefit from the anticipated boom in tourists to the city and to the battlefields. All battlefield tours include a stop at the war cemeteries of Imphal. The most visited is located right in the centre of town just off the main highway running from Kangla Fort north to Mao Gate and Nagaland, accessed by a narrow street past the Kuki Baptist Convention and into a
cluster of tribal neighbourhoods. The cemetery features a cenotaph where visiting dignitaries, politicians, and members of the armed forces (Indian and Manipuri) lay wreaths on memorial days. On the grass are rows of memorial plaques arranged by regiment. The names span the subjects of Empire – Australian, Burmese, and English. The site is immaculate and maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Children from nearby neighbourhoods play on the grass outside the gate, an unusually large public space in this part of the city. I have seen local youths using the site for intravenous drug use, especially under the tress on the periphery where they escape the view of the caretaker after climbing the fence. This is also one of the very few places I have encountered other foreigners during my time in Imphal. With few conventional tourist sites, foreigners often find themselves here as a way of passing the day. The municipality has caught on. When I first went to Imphal in early 2011 there was a faded blue and white wooden sign at knee height pointing to the access road. Two years later there was a large green and white metal sign at the access road and at other points of the city showing the way to the cemetery. There is another cemetery just behind the Mosque in Hatta, a Pangal Muslim neighbourhood on the other side of the Imphal River and a Japanese war memorial at Nambol just outside the city to the south.

Aside from their abrupt juxtaposition to the rest of Imphal’s urban landscape – even accounting for the radical diversity of the built environment in the city – and occasional deviant use of the spaces themselves, the war cemeteries demonstrate the legitimacy, and potential profitability, of the violence of the Second World War in a city where almost every neighbourhood has seen violence in the decades since. The former is an historical and legitimate conflict between states, empires, and ideologies comfortably in the past. Further, the designation of the Battle of Imphal as the Greatest British Battle gives the city a pivotal place in global history and decolonisation in Asia; a process that ended up dismantling Manipur’s independence. War tourism reflects attempts by the civilian government to control urban space and show that they can keep the city safe, provide necessary infrastructure, and be a ‘destination’.

The memories of a heroic past with global significance help to downplay the messy present. Such ambivalence also demonstrates the ways memory is co-opted by commercial forces in the city. Well-manicured memorials to the (mostly) foreign dead are neutral; they are not of this place, otherworldly and unable to be co-opted by state, quasi-state and non-state actors. Further, they face little risk of demolition by the armed forces. No one will be barred from paying tribute. And they are unlikely to exacerbate interethnic or
secessionist tensions. Thus in Imphal you are able to visit the grave of a foreigner who fought the Japanese for the survival of Empire, but memorials to those who have fought against the Indian state are harder to find, harder to access, and harder for their families to maintain. And that is just for those whose bodies have been found. For the scores of men, women, and children who disappear each year in Manipur there are few memorials in a city where spatial control is fragmented among state, non-state, and quasi-state actors; control that overlaps, dissolves, and is enforced through surveillance and violence in different sites and different times.