

FRICTIONS AND FLOWS: AFFECTIVE ECONOMIES OF FIRE DANCE IN THE THAI  
TOURISM INDUSTRY

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines Thai fire dance, a form of labour in the Thai tourist industry, as a platform through which fire dancers confront and negotiate the tensions of increasing tourism, marginalization, capitalist expansion and neoliberal ideologies. In particular, this research highlights the ways in which affective, embodied and spatialized practices in fire art communities form political interventions and group solidarities that are also intimately entangled in the reproduction and recreation of social hierarchies and unequal relations of power. While fire dance communities hold utopic potentials and moments of sharing across spectrums of social difference that allow for the reimagination of geopolitical, cultural and ethnonational boundaries, they are also spaces and practices fully implicated in the issues they seek to address. The affect born and danced into being in these communities is the nexus through which these complex negotiations are worked out through the body, and is the basis for micropolitical and “messy” solidarities to form in the midst of capitalist and neoliberal times and spaces.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation would have been unimaginable without the support and love from those who raised me. I am forever grateful to my parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends for their encouragement. This work is dedicated to my mother, Heather. She continues to inspire me to live an unconventional life, to dream and to imagine the impossible. She has taught me to explore the world with a desire to learn, and to do so from a place of kindness and humility. This research has greatly benefited from her knowledge and guidance, and I am incredibly thankful.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Unlike many touristic performances that seek to demonstrate national or ethnocultural specificity, fire art is not originally Thai. The form emerged from “flow art,” a movement practice brought to Thailand by tourists in the 1980s and 1990s<sup>1</sup>. Beginning as a participatory practice shared informally among Thais and tourists on beaches and in parks, today it is an infamous “Thai” performance that is integrated into the tourist economy. Almost every evening on every tourist island one can see fire dancers performing for tourists at beach bars and parties. In Thailand, unlike other countries where this movement practice is found, fire dance is only found in tourist contexts and is not widely considered to be a significant artistic practice or an appropriate form of labour, partly because of its immersion in the tourist beach party scene. While the transnational art form includes women, fire dance in Thailand is very much a male world. The dancers typically come from poor rural areas, and they must navigate marginalizing social discourses that position fire dancers as deviants who are involved in this art form so that they can have access to, and sexual intimacies with, female tourists.

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<sup>1</sup> There is no formal (academic) history of flow arts, but people often associate the beginning of this incarnation with North American and European rave culture in the early 2000s and the Burning Man Festival in the late 1990s. Indeed, some of the master fire dancers in Thailand also stated this lineage and mentioned Burning Man, specifically. One consultant, Nah, however associates the beginning of juggling practices to as far back as ancient Egypt. He says, however, that this form came to Thailand “with the hippies, you know, and John Lennon” (Nah, personal communication, June 10 2016), although he could not say when exactly this was. Thus, I would like to keep the possibility open that flow arts, likely has a longer lineage than the brief oral history I can provide here. Most recordings and documentation of fire dancing in Thailand, however, suggest it started happening with the beginning of the infamous Full Moon parties on Ko Phangan, which started as small gatherings at Paradise Bungalows in the mid to late 1980s. Many of the dancers I spoke with are from what I refer to as the Bangkok lineage, where flow arts started becoming popularized in the late 1990s and 2000s. Given Thailand’s positioning within regional trade routes, movements and cross-cultural encounter in this area, often grouped within Austronesia, have been happening across “borders” for centuries. Thus, there is also the possibility that fire dance came to the islands in the deep South long before tourists brought it. Nah says that he knows men in the South that have been doing this for over 60 years. Another consultant says that the style they did was “island style” and she related this to Polynesian dance, specifically.



A theme running throughout this research is how fire dancers seek to legitimize their participation in this art form, and how their claims to idealized forms and practices of fire dance are ways in which the tensions of various transnational and translocal encounters, alongside changing socioeconomic circumstances and wider social discourses, are negotiated. These encounters, which have created market shifts in the tourism industry, have provided productive avenues for intercultural exchange and employment; indeed, this is precisely how flow art started in Thailand and it is through the tourist industry that it has become a form of labour and economic income. But, the so-called “global flows” (Appadurai 1994) always have points of “friction” (Tsing 2005); as the movement of ideas, culture, capital, people and media meet in particular spaces, negotiations and tensions, and also generative potentialities, are created and worked through. In this dissertation, we will see how particular idealized aesthetic, spatial and affective practices of fire dancing – which include performances and aspects of daily life in fire dance communities – mediate this friction. At times this mediation produces productive avenues of exchange across various intersections of social difference, and at other times, it reproduces and recreates gendered, sexual, racial and ethnonational hierarchies *within* the fire dance scene.

Central points of tension in the fire dance scene emerge from a sharp intensification in tourism since 2009 when Thailand began to expand its market into Russia and China and orient the industry toward mass packaged tourism (Kontogeogopoulos 2016). Since living in Thailand from 2010 to 2013, and revisiting for fieldwork in 2015 and 2016, I can say with certainty that the opportunities for small-scale businesses and labour in tourism are decreasing drastically. This dissertation acknowledges dance as a form of labour (Srinivasan 2011) and highlights the ways in which these market changes have impacted fire dance and produced tensions for dancers as they grapple with the interrelations of art and labour in this context. While fire dance began as

a communal and informal practice shared among Thais and tourists, its move into a market economy is confronted through embodiments of idealized affects, aesthetics and exchanges in particular types of spaces. These highly-valued affects and aesthetics are often set in opposition to the ever-expanding capitalism that some Thai dancers associate with the beaches, but at the same time, they are intimately intertwined with capitalist and neoliberal modalities.

As tourism has greatly expanded in the country, so too have fire shows and the demand for cheaper fire dancers. The Thai tourism industry now relies heavily on Burmese labour migrants who are often undocumented and underpaid by their employers. Presently, many “Thai” fire dancers are actually Burmese, which is unbeknownst to tourists, and because of their precarious positions they will often work for very low wages or only tourist tips. In the last ten years, Thai dancers have lost jobs or are forced to work for less money. As will be demonstrated, particular modalities of dance and practices in fire dance scenes are ways in which fire dancers seek to reposition themselves as “artists” – who are opposed to capitalist accumulation and the immorality associated with the beaches – and this is often done in ways that Other Burmese dancers and position them as immoral beach labourers. Thus, fire art in Thailand requires a nuanced analysis that considers how the movement of cultural practices, capital and people across geopolitical spaces can be productive and generative, and yet also reverberate with a multitude of social, economic and cultural factors. This dissertation elaborates on the ways in which dance interacts with “scattered hegemonies” (Kaplan 1994) of transnational capitalism, which intersects with notions of gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, region, race and class.

I have chosen to centre the discussions in this dissertation around economies, and affective economies more specifically. While labour is central to the discussions here, an economy encompasses much more than production and consumption, and monetary transactions.

Economies are centred in movement, and what better lens through which to explore the complexities of moving exchanges of intensities than through dance. Fire dance is fully integrated into market economies but I focus on the ways in which capitalist and neoliberal ideologies are both confronted by, and intertwined with, affect. Discussions of affect tend to be delineated into two different strands, which are sometimes referred to as new materialist or ontological, and build off the work of Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari, versus queer or cultural affect theory. For new materialists, affect is understood as pre-conscious intensities that affect a body's capacity for action or inaction. Affect is not relegated to the realm of a subject, but is a set of forces that works on and through bodies which are understood as being in states of becoming and as part of wider ecologies (Barad 2007; Brennan 2004; Clough 2008; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Massumi 2002; Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Manning 2006). Queer affect theorists have approached affect in different ways, most notably, by thinking about affect as sets of emotions which are brought into the realm of language and subjectivity, but can also be shared among bodies to produce particular publics (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2011; Cvetkovich 2007; Kosofsky Sedgwick 2002). This dissertation does not make a clean distinction between these different renderings, but understands them as being on a continuum, whereby a sensation moves a body to action and that sensation might then go on to be expressed in language or understood as either a subjective or intersubjective feeling state. I maintain that both strands of affect theory attempt to elaborate how feelings and bodies materialize.

While understanding the fragmented ways that affects – which operate outside of language – are brought into sociocultural legibility, this dissertation recognizes the porousness of the binaries of affect theorizing. By building on the perspectives of fire dancers, and Thai and Buddhist logics of subjectivity and emotionality, I think of affect on a continuum of sensation

and emotionality that is always forming and reforming bodies, spaces and collections of bodies within diverse cultural codes of meaning. As will be highlighted, fire dancers consider the exchange of affect to be at the heart of the “product” of this danced labour, as intensities produced through bodies move back and forth among dancers and tourists. Affect, however, also informs relations among bodies that move together, and thus, affective economies, when placed in conversation with other key frameworks in this dissertation – such as space, aesthetics, and labour – elaborate the political work that the exchange of intensities do in shaping relationships, bodies, resistances and solidarities, but also hierarchical power structures. Affective economies draw attention to the complex interconnections that the movement of energies across various spatial scales – through bodies, capital, and dance – generate in spaces of tourism and how social actors understand, value and employ affect in their lives.

The affective aspects of fire art resonate with particular moral economies, and Thai dancers build relations and communities with other dancers who have similar moral logics (Fassin 2005, Wilson 2004); these logics directly and indirectly relate to Theravada Buddhist ideologies and Thai sociocentric ideals that are positioned and understood by dancers as being in opposition to the ideologies of individualistic neoliberalism and capitalism. It is through these mechanisms that Thai fire dancers not only negotiate these ideologies, but form alliances, communities, solidarities and political resistances as ways to “endure” (Povinelli 2011) the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) of tourism. These communities, and the frameworks which underpin them, however, tend to align through ethnonational and gendered affiliations, typically Thai versus Burmese, and with very few Thai females. Thai dancers work through these issues, labour inequalities and the violence of tourism through their communities, and in conversation with

wider nationalist narratives that Other the Burmese, and yet also position Thai fire dancers as unruly deviants within the space of the nation.

Fire communities are actively involved in the production and maintenance of spaces to speak back to these marginalizing constructions. The spaces they create and section off have particular affective tenors, which are understood to generate idealized affective and moral economies that are thoroughly embodied in dance styles. Because of the tensions in the industry, their spatialized communities are sometimes exclusively Thai. Yet, as we will see, there are also spaces of fire dance which reimagine and reconfigure these boundaries and ethnonational divides. Thus, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate both the utopian and dystopian potentials of danced labour under capitalist regimes (Morcom 2015), and the productiveness of affective relations within dance and dancing communities that are generated when people, across various spectrums of social difference, move together (Hamera 2007).

This research contributes to conversations on affect, tourism, economies, gender and sexuality, dance and the anthropology of Thailand. I have chosen, however, to centre discussions on how performers, as labourers, interact with transnational tourist economies and capitalism. By examining the affective economies of fire dance, this research demonstrates how social actors grapple with changing contexts and reconfigure their own subjectivities and positioning within social and economic hierarchies through the corporeal. While many studies of dance and labour have looked at the reshaping of moralities and identities (Maciszewski 2006; Morcom 2015, Pilzer 2006; Quereshi 2006; Tochka 2014), this research highlights the importance of the affective components of bodily movement, experience and space, in how moralities, solidarities, hierarchies and subjectivities are formed and (re)formed through danced labour. This dissertation showcases the “messiness” of solidarities, and in turn, the complexities of thinking about

movement – of people, ideas, expressive cultural practices, ideologies and capital – in a world in which spaces are radically reconfigured and instilled with various affective, social and economic power. Danced labour, thus, is a complex site of political intervention and tension – even as it is intertwined with capitalist projects – through which resistance and solidarity take form. It is through the labour of fire dance that the projects and discourses that seek to “exhaust” (Povinelli 2011) and marginalize fire dancers are confronted with embodied micropolitical moments that are imbued with particular affective intensities.

### **Methodologies**

The methodology for this research is ethnographic and was conducted over seven months in 2015 and 2016, although much of my knowledge is also drawn from my experience living in Thailand for almost three years (2010 – 2013). While I lived in the outskirts of Bangkok during these years, I traveled extensively in the country and became acquainted with fire dancing, fire dancers and the wider tourist industry. My research is multi-sited and is centred on two islands, Ko Samui and Ko Phi Phi primarily, although I also conducted some interviews and participant observation with fire dancers who currently live in Bangkok and practice at a small park close to the backpacking hub of Khao San Road. Ko Samui is the largest and most developed of the Thai islands and is located in the Gulf of Thailand next to the backpacker havens of Ko Tao and Ko Phangan, where the infamous Full Moon parties are held each month. Ko Samui is a hub for travel and even has an airport. Ko Phi Phi is much smaller and located on the Andaman coast. It is more remote, and accessed only by boat from Phuket or Krabi which takes about two hours. Ko Phi Phi is very small, is completely walkable on foot and has no vehicles. These islands will be discussed in-depth in the following chapters, as they are where the majority of my participant observation took place. I also conducted one interview on Ko Phangan, where I attended the

infamous Full Moon Party, as some of the dancers I was working with on Ko Samui also perform with teams on Ko Phangan. In turn, I spent time with friends on Ko Lanta, an island close to Ko Phi Phi, where I conducted one interview.



(Figure 1: Tourist Map of Thailand)



(Figure 2: Tourist Map of Southern Thai Islands)

I conducted over twenty-three formal interviews, some of which were with the same dancers multiple times. I did, however, conduct numerous informal interviews with dancers, a style of interaction I found to be more comfortable for them and me. Dancers preferred to tell me about their lives at moments they felt were appropriate, and thus, I was always ready to listen. I kept track of these conversations through making notes on my phone or writing in a small note pad. I was often in the position of a student, and the dancers would teach me their craft, and thus they were superior to me in the social hierarchy. While Western education is based, typically, around the Socratic method, in Thailand, a teacher imparts knowledge and the student listens, often without questioning<sup>2</sup>. I also had this relationship with my *ajarn* (professor) at Chulalongkorn University who oversaw my work as a requirement of the National Research

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank my friend and colleague Jelena Vasic, an expert on intercultural education who has spent a great deal of time in Thailand, for helping me understand this difference.



Council. Fire dancers shared their knowledge with me in this manner, that is, when they felt I was ready to know something and not necessarily when I questioned. I began to call these “moving” interviews as they often spontaneously happened while I was riding on the back of a dancer’s *motocy* (motorcycle), while we were both practicing a new move, or eating or working on something unrelated. Always, though, interviews happened in the midst of doing something else and I came to build knowledge with them as part of daily interactions.

The choice to do multi-sited research emerged through a methodological approach that followed fire dancing and fire dancers. Fire dancing is a very mobile scene, and most dancers typically move and dance all over the islands and travel back and forth to Bangkok or their home villages frequently. I learned that even the dancers on Ko Phi Phi, in the very South of the country on the Andaman Sea, knew the dancers I was working with in Bangkok and on Ko Samui in the Gulf of Thailand. Thus, I moved like they moved and I traveled back and forth between the islands, the mainland and Bangkok multiple times on buses, boats, trains and planes. Through this approach, I developed a sense for feeling how life unfolds in particular rhythms for fire dancers, and also for tourists who move around the country, on these same routes. This type of movement, in fact, structures the lives of many people in Thailand and Burma who have left their homes in rural areas to work in tourism centres, and travel home frequently. Thus, while much of my knowledge comes from interviews, conversations, dance lessons and other forms of textual analysis, I have also built a type of bodily knowledge (Sklar 2004), and gained trust, by getting into rhythmic, affective and spatial affinities with dancers.

My methodological approach is strongly rooted in the belief that embodying the experiences of particular ways of life and movement practices provides valuable ethnographic insight (Kisliuk 1998; Sklar 2001). While I learned movements and particular fire equipment –

poi most prominently – my embodied experiences moved beyond the dance. Following Lefebvre (2004), I placed importance on feeling my body in the rhythms and tempos of the everyday worlds of fire dance. I am influenced by dance ethnographers such as Sklar who reminds us that “ways of moving are also ways of thinking” (2001, p. 4). Sklar implores ethnographers to learn the “sensual particulars” of place and those who live there (2001, p. 27) through the body. She used both texts and her own bodily experience as an instrument of analysis to learn the rhythms and cultural knowledge of her interlocuters. In turn, my participant observation was structured around feeling the everyday, the spaces and the affective socialities that were produced within them.

Fernandez (2003) argues that participant observation is “an effort to turn the spaces we go out to inhabit into places with whose feeling tones we are familiar. Participation enables us to feel something of what our informants feel in the spaces they occupy and in which they act. It is essentially a method aimed at the experience of place” (Fernandez 2003, p. 187). To get at this feeling required me to move like a fire dancer in different places and become attuned to the indirect communicative powers of affect and feelings in places. This sometimes entailed traveling all over the country, sitting for hours and napping, or perhaps sharing food and cleaning up. At other times, it meant helping to set up for performances, riding around islands on motorbikes collecting equipment and kerosene, smoking weed and “jamming” at reggae bars, and even getting up on stage for tourists with fire whirling around my head. In so doing, I was able to gain a feel for the spaces of fire dance, which is a pertinent aspect of knowledge in a country where many things are left unsaid, or simply cannot be said<sup>3</sup>. One often has to feel one’s way through the social landscape in Thailand.

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<sup>3</sup>Because of the country’s strict, and archaic, lese majeste laws, saying anything even remotely critical about the Royal Family is a crime punishable by 15 years in prison for each offence. Trials are typically not public because

The key thematic areas and perspectives found in this dissertation have been formed through these embodied modalities, alongside conversation and extensive amounts of time spent with fire dancers. Doing this intensive participant observation has allowed me to appreciate the fire dance scene and dancers' ways of being in the world. This dissertation's theoretical orientations have been developed organically throughout fieldwork through an approach rooted in grounded theory which builds theoretical frameworks from the data collected (Charmaz 2006). Thus, rather than entering with a specific question and framework, I opened the project to have theory emerge from patterns – linguistic, spatial, affective and embodied – that came about through our interactions, movements and discussions. In analyzing this data during and after fieldwork, I examined how and where particular patterns emerged and looked at them alongside wider sociocultural codes and my own embodied experiences.

While the fire scene locations I conducted research in are composed not only of Thai men, but also Burmese dancers, the main perspective that is discussed in this dissertation is that of Thai dancers. I was only able to interview two Burmese dancers because of language barriers and also because of concerns for my own and the Burmese dancers' safety. The abhorrent treatment of Burmese people, many of whom are undocumented labourers in Thailand, is the focus of many human rights organizations and activists in Thailand, although because of the tense and difficult political moment, this is becoming increasingly dangerous. This focus on human rights abuses tarnishes the image of the country and the ruling military government,

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even repeating what has been said is an offence. Under the ruling junta there has been a serious increase in lese majeste charges and the law is widely interpreted so that almost any form of protest or criticism can be manipulated in this way. As another method to silence dissent, the military has put bans on using certain words at academic conferences (Haberkorn 2017) and has "attitude adjustment" camps where people are taken if they do not comply or are publicly critical. Thus, Thais and expats find other ways to discuss political life, through coded language, material culture (Tausig and Haberkorn 2012), and even gestures (Herzfeld 2009). Other things are left completely unsaid and there were many times during fieldwork where I felt that myself and the people around me wanted to discuss an issue but were too scared. You must sort of feel how the people around you feel before speaking about anything political in Thailand and it can take years to build trust.

actively attempt to hide this dirty secret. The recent story of the two Burmese labourers on Ko Tao who have been used as scapegoats for the murder of two tourists has gained international attention. While it is widely known among Thais and expats that a member of a powerful mafia family on KoTao committed this murder, evidence has been created and tampered with to ensure that these two young Burmese men will get the death penalty. This is a very sensitive topic as it brings to light the corruption and inhumanity that the elite ruling Thai exhibit in relation to Burmese workers. Thus, at the tense present moment, people asking questions and interviewing Burmese workers are met with great suspicion. All of the islands are economically and politically controlled by powerful families, and tourists or expats who cause trouble usually do not make it back to the mainland. These deaths are almost always treated as “suicides” and never fully investigated. Thus, I felt it would be too risky to interview and work directly with Burmese dancers, although I often spent time with them informally and just simply hung out. The two Burmese dancers I did interview and share time with on Ko Samui happened to be students of a Thai dancer we all trusted. Still, however, one can never be sure that they would ever tell me the realities of their lives or about what they truly thought for fear of losing their jobs, being deported or worse. I do, however, feel that these two dancers trusted me and fully understood my project. On Ko Phi Phi, I did have small conversations with some of the Burmese dancers and workers, oftentimes after the shows and during the beach parties, but I was warned by people on the island that writing anything even remotely critical could be very dangerous for me if I want to return to Thailand. Not surprisingly, I found the teams of Burmese dancers to be quite close-knit and somewhat suspicious of a person like me who was not quite a fire dance student, not quite a tourist and not quite a labourer.

Because of the gendered and sexual dynamics of fire dance, and Thai social mores concerning gender roles, I found it best and most appropriate, as a white Western female, to learn fire dance as a student from dancers. Not only did this greatly enrich my perspectives by providing valuable embodied experiences of the movements, but it also provided a more socially-acceptable purpose to my continued interaction with fire dancers, although this “acceptance,” and my positionality, was always fraught with tensions that I discuss in depth in Chapter Four. Intimate relationships between fire dancers and Western women are widely known, and even despite my best efforts, my presence with dancers aroused suspicion and sometimes anger, never from fire dancers but from others who were involved in their worlds. Being a student also helped to slightly balance the power dynamics that were present in our interactions. As an educated *farang*<sup>4</sup> (ฝรั่ง) female I recognized that, at times, I held a powerful position on the beaches, where I (sometimes) had more money and mobility. In turn, I was older than many of the dancers, which also holds its own amount of respect in Thai hierarchies. By being a student, I inverted some of these dynamics while also appropriately recognizing who the experts are in this case. As we will see, however, power shifts and changes on the beaches, and at particular times and places, I was not the one who had power, but had to follow the demands and desires of those around me. With these shifting positionalities in mind, the methodological approach was relational, that is, it was thoroughly guided by those around me, and the affects, vibes and emotions they communicated; these are indirect forms of communication which are very common in Thailand, and which I discuss below, that differently shaped my interactions and the spaces I was in.

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<sup>4</sup> *Farang* is a word used to describe a “foreigner.” It is most often applied to white Western people from countries in Europe, North America and Australia, but also people from “non-Western” countries such as Israel and Brazil who form a large percentage of tourists. On my most recent trip to Thailand, however, I heard *farang* increasingly applied also to Burmese workers and Chinese tourists. While it can be a friendly term, there is a certain ambivalence that lingers around the term. In this dissertation I use *farang* in the common usage towards white “Westerners.”

While I studied Thai prior to fieldwork, I found that dancers preferred to speak with me in English. Many of the dancers have been in tourist areas for years and speak excellent English and some are fluent. Sometimes, a dancer might use a Thai word in an interview or conversation to be precise, and some questions I framed in Thai to ensure there was comprehension, but most of our interactions happened in English. Because of the intercultural nature of fire art, particularly on Ko Samui where there are Thai, French, Russian, Japanese, American and Burmese artists who work together, the only language that is available for the majority is English. I have also witnessed teams translate through multiple languages to ensure everyone present understands. Because of this dynamic I often had to go back to dancers and ask specifically what Thai word they may have used. For instance, words like “sharing” and “energy” can have different meanings. The quotes in the dissertation have been left almost exactly as they are said in the creolized English-Thai that itself takes some practice and time in the country to fully understand. Sometimes, I also spoke in this way in interviews. The only times I changed words or structure was to ensure that an Anglo audience could understand the creolized forms. When using Thai words in the dissertation, I have followed the Royal Thai General System of Transcription and italicized them. Some of the authors I quote and engage with have used other transcription systems, and I have left their spellings as they were in the original text. The reader, thus, may see different spellings for words such as *kalatesa/kalathesa*, *palang/phalang*, *riap roy/riap roi*, *kreng jai/greang chai*; *jai/chai*. For key concepts that are being employed in this dissertation, I have also provided the spelling in Thai, although only on the first usage.

Defining dance, and choosing appropriate terminology is inherently problematic in anthropological work where different conceptions of what constitutes “dancing” and how it

should be approached, are prevalent (Hannah 1979; Kaeppeler 1978). Among fire dancers, there are many terms used to describe their art, and even the same people would articulate their practice differently at different times. It is variously called fire dancing, fire art, fire spinning, fire juggling and playing fire. I have, in this case, chosen the word “dance” as this is a term almost all people used at some point or another, although in interviews, and for stylistic purposes, I also employ these other descriptors. What is interesting, however, is that sometimes different descriptors are used to invoke differing degrees of authenticity, morality or style and/or are used to frame hierarchies within the scene. Thus, in thinking about “dance,” I am not so much concerned with the cultural meanings or experiences attached to the “thing” called “dance,” but rather view “movement as a performative moment of social interchange that is not merely reflective of prior political, personal, social and cosmological relations, but also constitutive of them” (Henry, Magowan, Murray 2000, p. 253)

The use of the terms “tourists” and “locals” present very incomplete and generalized labels for vast intergroup differences. This is particularly important to recognize in the tourism industry in Thailand where there are “local” labourers from different regions, cities, provinces and countries. On Ko Phi Phi, for instance, there are not only people from Thailand’s Northeast, called Isaan, but also Burmese, and even *farang* labourers who come for a vacation and stay around, some for years. In turn, Thailand supports many different types of tourists: young Western backpackers on a budget; English teachers employed throughout Asia; organized tour groups from China and Russia; families from a wide variety of countries; wealthy professionals; and digital nomads. While any categorization will gloss these intricacies, we must find ways of distinguishing the differences between those in the country for leisure and those who labour. For the sake of clarity, I use the term tourists to describe those on the beaches who are there for

leisure and not working directly in the tourist industry. When speaking about so-called “locals,” I use “inhabitants” (Ingold 2011) and/or labourers, although I qualify if I am speaking about *farang* labourers or expats, as their lives are a complex mix of tourism and work. When speaking about fire dancers, I am generally referring to the Thai dancers and I distinguish if they are Burmese. Ingold employs “inhabitant” to reflect how cultural knowledge is not necessarily localized, but develops through ways of moving within particular spaces, which he calls “wayfaring” (2011). While tourists move from point-to-point, the wayfarer or inhabitant develops an “alongly integrated, practical understanding of the lifeworld” (2001, p. 154). Thus, I recognize that Burmese and Thai labourers, most of whom are not “locals” on the islands, have developed a particular knowledge of the space and live the everyday in a much different way than tourists and the *farang* labourers.

### **Chapter Overview**

The ethnographic chapters are centred around key words and concepts that came up frequently in the field: *phalang* (พลัง) energy; *baeng pan* (แบ่งปัน) sharing; *chut mung mai* (จุดมุ่งหมาย) goal/intent; *kalathesa* (กาลเทศะ) suitability of time/space. As stated in the methodologies section, most of my interactions with fire dancers were in English, but as I began to recognize common words, I asked how they would say them in Thai. The only word that did not come up in conversations or daily life is *kalathesa* which is a concept that is not often verbally articulated, but very much understood and made evident through social interactions. While most of the interviews were in English, having titles with both English and Thai signifies the ways in which fire dancers are on the borders of different worlds: cultural, social, economic and linguistic.

Chapter 1 Theory and Literature Review: This chapter outlines the theoretical framework and literature used in this dissertation. While this dissertation touches on multiple conceptual and



disciplinary areas, this chapter focuses on discussions surrounding performance as labour, space and affect most prominently. This review brings these conversations together to elaborate a framework emerging from dancers' perspectives and practices. It highlights how space, affect, performance and labour interact to provide new insights about relationalities, intimacies, colonialism, gender and sexuality, and politics in capitalist tourists contexts.

Chapter 2 *Phalang* (Energy): This chapter examines the labour of fire dance as a form of affective labour that intersects with sexuality and the performance of erotics in complex ways. It explores both the front stage and back stage labour of performance, honing in on what fire dancers describe as energies (*phalang*) that, through their bodily performances, are generated and move among tourists on the beaches. Importantly, this chapter considers affect from the perspectives of fire dancers, adding nuanced and contextualized layers to theorizations of affect, affective labour and sexual-affective labour. Paying particular attention to the space of the beach, and the energies that coalesce there, this chapter thinks about how fire dance labour intersects with intensities and spatialized gender and sexual hierarchies which dancers must negotiate.

Chapter 3 *Baeng pan* (Sharing): Drawing on research conducted with dancers from the Bangkok lineage of flow art, this chapter elaborates on the ways in which dancers have confronted and attempted to negotiate the movement of fire dance from a participatory and shared communal practice to a presentational performance genre that is integrated into a market economy. I trace these changes through two specific spaces— a park in Bangkok where fire dance began and a new fire dance studio on Ko Samui – where people have tried to create a particular feeling and intercultural sociality that intervenes in market capitalism through a concept and system of affective exchange called sharing (*baeng pan*). Sharing is centred directly and indirectly in Buddhist and sociocentric moralities, and even as it is a mechanism of resistance, it is also

entangled in market processes and hierarchical power relations. This chapter showcases the ways in which sharing provides a set of embodied and affective micropolitics for dancers.

Chapter 4 *Chut mung mai* (Goal/Intent): This chapter is situated on the small tourist island of Ko Phi Phi Don. It thinks through the ways in which the violence of tourism is complexly intertwined with environments, lives and bodies. In particular, I examine the ways in which space and time are entangled with sexual, regional and ethnonational hierarchies which have formed in relation to different stages of environmental damage and increased tourism on the island. I centre the discussion in the insights of one particular fire dancer, Nam, and elaborate the ways in which he survives, resists and strives (*chut mung mai*) to live hopefully amidst the violence of tourism and new forms of capitalist expansion on Ko Phi Phi. His striving elaborates on how politics and resistances can be centred in personal affective dispositions rather than direct confrontations.

Chapter 5 *Kalathesa* (Suitability of Time/Space): This chapter features the perspectives of female fire dancers – three Thai dancers, myself and one *farang* dancer – on some of the key issues that have been discussed throughout the dissertation. It highlights the ways in which social mores – particularly concerning gender and sexuality, and notions of appropriate time/space (*kalathesa*) – have created restrictions that limit female participation in fire dance scenes, and which female dancers must navigate carefully. The chapter explores the fluidity of gendered expression, and how certain spaces and times in fire dance scenes allow for explorations and resistances to colonial representations of Thai women and economic nationalism, that seek to render Thai femininity in very particularized, and static, representations.

Conclusion: The conclusion revisits the arguments and perspectives in the dissertation through a look at how each of the above phenomena – *baeng pan*, *chut mung mai*, *kalathesa* – coalesce and

converse through energy and affect, which is the concept of *phalang*. I examine these concepts as a wider set of knowledge and an affective economy that is born through the frictions and gaps of encounter (Tsing 2005). This highlights the ways in which these knowledges interact with, and provide more nuance and complexity to widely circulating conceptions around identity, affect, gender and sexuality, agency and the political.

## **Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

This dissertation is situated at the intersections of the anthropology of dance, the anthropology of Thailand, transnational and global studies, affect studies, social geography, gender and sexuality studies, and tourism studies. It brings theoretical points from these fields into conversation to elaborate the lives and experiences of fire dancers, while also paying attention to the micro and macro level politics that are at play within these scenes. The theories and perspectives I have found to be most useful, and build on in particular ways, are those surrounding dance as a form of labour (Srinivasan 2011), the frictions (Tsing 2005) and scattered hegemonies (Grewal and Kaplan 1994) within global capitalism and globalizing processes, and how tourist industries, while enacting forms of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) that bodies and environments that must “endure” (Povinelli 2011), also provide generative potentials. Given that many of the discussions centre around affect and how this informs particular moralities related to capitalist markets, Thai understandings of affect (Cassaniti 2015a) are particularly helpful, as is literature on affective labour (Hardt and Negri 2000; Hochschild 2003) and moral economies (Fassin 2005; Wilson 2004). As will be demonstrated, how fire dancers conceptualize and work through the tensions in their scenes is highly spatialized, and thus theories and literature on spatial production (Crouch 2001; Lefebvre 1994; Tooker 2012), space and Thai nationalism (Condominas 1978; Winichakul 1988; Tambiah 1984), and space in the production of Thai gender and sexualities figure prominently. In bringing these discussions together, this dissertation adds new contributions by considering dance as a form of affective labour, and the ways in which space, aesthetics of movement and bodily experiences are phenomena and modalities of lived experience that form resistances and solidarities, but also (re)create and renew hierarchies and power relations. The subtitles throughout highlight these contributions.

This project covers extensive theoretical areas in multiple fields, but this chapter examines relationships between space, affect, movement, dance and labour in various disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields. While this dissertation engages with ethnographic work on dance, it does not discuss or review studies or ethnographies of dance in Thailand for a couple of key reasons: firstly, there has been very few ethnographic studies of dance in Thailand, although there has been a significant amount of research on music and drama genres, some of which involve dance, and which I will dialogue with in some chapters (Dowsey-Magog 2002; Jungwiwattanaporn 2006; Kang 2014; Miller 2005; Mitchell 2015; Taussig 2014, 2015; Wong 2001). Much of the work specifically on Thai dance, however, has provided mainly historical and descriptive information and has been centred on Thai classical dance (i.e. Rutnin 1996). In turn, the ethnographic studies of performance in Thailand have rightly adopted a Thai-centric approach to analysis, by virtue of the fact that these genres emerged in Thailand. Fire dance, however, presents a very different context of emergence and performance that, while similar in some ways, diverges from the canon of Thai dance in significant ways; fire dance has been formed through the tourist industry and is almost cleaved from representations of performing arts in Thailand, while classical Thai dance is intimately intertwined with classed power hierarchies, Buddhist cosmologies and notions of power, and the shaping of national identity (Jungwiwattanaporn 2010; Koanantakool 2002; Wong 2001). Thus, I draw on the literature concerning space, affect, labour and movement in an attempt to elucidate and make legible a popular art form that is simultaneously produced by, productive of and resistant to the movement of tourist capital, culture and bodies across spaces.

## The Labour of Dance and Performance

Research that showcases the tensions and contestations that emerge for artists in capitalist and neoliberal contexts is central to this dissertation. This literature views performance *as* labour, and not as a separate aesthetic sphere that is differentiated from economic systems and value, but as intimately intertwined with them (Shipley and Peterson 2012). Leon (2014) argues,

One thread running through most discussions regarding the relationship between music and capitalism is the assumption that music's ability to transcend, overcome, or stand (at least partially) outside of capitalism stems from its inherent aesthetic or use value exceeding its potential for exchange in the marketplace... What ensues are idealized and problematic separations between transformative art and banal imitation, genius and sellout, producer and consumer, independent entrepreneur and industry stooge, ephemeral live performance and reified musical commodity, egalitarian communal ownership and copyright-driven individual ownership, music as everyday lived experience and music as a form of compensated labor. These issues have preoccupied music scholars for some time, fueling much research and debate regarding the merits and nuances associated with each, and, to be sure, in many instances providing useful insights. At the same time, however, the various lines of inquiry that have emerged from an engagement with this underlying assumption (whether in the affirmative or the negative) are somewhat ill-equipped to deal with a neoliberal environment that collapses public into private, work time into leisure time, consumption into labor, thus undermining the basis for many of those dichotomies. (Leon, 132)

These same sorts of dichotomies emerge in discussions with consultants in this project, for instance, when speaking about “real” and “not real” fire dance, binaries which tend to correlate to notions of non-economic and economic exchange, respectively. But, rather than reproduce these binaries, or invoke particular value judgements, this research seeks to understand their very emergence as forms of meaning-making which express and negotiate the intertwinement of their art-making with entrepreneurship, market economies and the tourist industry. As Shipley and Peterson (2012) point out, the creation and maintenance of these distinctions, which attempt to cull art from the social and render it as exceptional, “takes a lot of semiotic work” (p. 402). Thus, researchers must examine how artistic autonomy and aesthetics are created, understood and naturalized in particular sociohistorical contexts (p. 405-6). To this end, this dissertation

investigates the expression, narratives and meanings surrounding the separation of “work” and “art” in fire dance to elucidate the tensions, but also the intimacies and productiveness, that exist in this industry.

Performance is not only immersed in economic systems, but many genres are born and reshaped through changing socioeconomic processes. These shifts frequently emerge alongside new notions of social morality and acceptability – which informally and formally dictate hegemonic expressions, practices and identities – and often involves gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class. Anna Morcom (2015) demonstrates, through the rise of Bollywood dance in 1990s post-liberalization India, that neoliberalism and capitalism have transformative potentials, creating both utopias and dystopias, social mobility and also social disparity. She states that the booming Bollywood dance industry “reads as a model case of a neoliberal cultural formation, foregrounding ideas, aesthetics and socio-economic realities of work, entrepreneurship, mobility, success, and individualism” (p. 10). Unlike classical Indian performing arts, Bollywood dance has been institutionalized almost exclusively through entrepreneurship and encourages individuals, who would not typically have access to elite dance training, to transform themselves into healthy, energetic and productive citizens. In turn, Bollywood dance is a socially-acceptable way for people to display their newly acquired wealth and gain social mobility; while opening a studio offers significant social mobility, having extensive Bollywood routines as part of one’s wedding is a way to display lavish wealth in way that is linked with the family and notions of social reproduction.

Interestingly, however, during the same period as the growth of Bollywood dance, “dance bars,” which feature women performing for male clientele who shower them with money, also emerged. Although it has roots in courtesan traditions, bringing women into bars as entertainers

was a relatively new capitalist venture to try and get customers to purchase more alcohol and stay longer. While Bollywood features incredible expenditures, this form of giving away money was viewed as “good” by the Indian middle class, while the tips given to dancers at the dance bars, was viewed as wasteful and socially immoral, creating a highly stigmatized industry.

Morcom argues that this immoral framing emerges because the dance bars are part of an illicit nighttime economy, not linked to social reproduction and the family in the same ways as Bollywood. Her work asks us to consider how social morals, particularly surrounding gender and sexuality, intersect with the transformation of performance genres, labour and economies.

The ways in which capitalist economies reshape, and also produce, gender and sexual identities and understandings has been well documented (Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Jackson 2009; Stout 2014; Wilson 2004). Performance is a key social arena where the negotiations surrounding these changes play out. Many respected Asian courtesan traditions, for instance, which offered women agency and independence, have declined or been severely stigmatized through transnational encounters; Western influences and Victorian values that came alongside colonial and capitalist development began to frame these dancing women as immoral (Maciszewski 2006; Pilzer 2006; Quereshi 2006; Srinivasan 1985). Pilzer argues that the disappearance of professional Korean female entertainers – gisaeng – is a direct result of new moral regimes brought by Japanese colonization and industrialization in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Prior to this, institutions of gisaeng, who performed for male clientele, were well established with specific traditions, lineages and schools. But, as the modern sex-entertainment industry flourished in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and as Korea industrialized, gisaeng became associated with, and many absorbed into, the modern sex entertainment industry, and struggled



under new ideologies of female propriety. New “female performer” or “researcher” identities emerged who sought to distance themselves from the gisaeng and the sex industry. Pilzer states,

In Korea the traditional arts of the gisaeng were finally absorbed by the canons of national culture in the era of sex industrialization. The concept of the gisaeng, on the other hand, was absorbed into that sex industry and has been slowly salvaged. So, in South Korea those new notions of female propriety imported in part from the West must be seen to have emerged against the backdrop of the growing sex industry in the colonial period and under military-state-led capitalist development post-1945. Those notions accumulated, in part, as Korean people became aware of the sex industry, and as they took concrete measures to keep themselves or their daughters out of that industry. (p. 308)

Pilzer suggests that this trend is more widely applicable and notes that researchers seeking to understand the disappearance of traditional female entertainers in other Asian and European countries, should consider the influence of industrialization, colonialism and the development of modern sex entertainment, alongside imported views of female respectability.

Dance in Thailand also has ambivalent undertones, particularly for those who labour in genres outside of the Classical traditions. The modern sex entertainment industry has also impacted the way dance is viewed. The infamous “bar girl” entertainers that perform for men in the sex entertainment districts throughout Thailand may also have had pre-existing roles, an area beyond the scope of this project. Regardless, they are highly stigmatized and any discussions of dancing tends to be “haunted” by the figure of the bar girl or prostitute (Haritaworn 2011). As we will see, particularly in Chapter Five, these notions of dance and deviancy leak into perceptions about fire dance, particularly for the few females who work as fire artists. As many of the other chapters reveal, however, these tensions surrounding dance and sexuality in capitalist industries also affect male fire dancers, and this research will show how they contest and undermine the dangerous sexualities ascribed to them. Fire dancers (re)construct themselves as acceptable and moral citizens despite wider discourses which position them otherwise. A key way in which this

is done is through positioning themselves as artists who are not motivated by money, or by having access to female tourists, but rather who are motivated by the love of the fire art itself.

Butterworth argues that exploring these various positionalities and subjectivities enacted by performers are valuable ways that scholars can “write against” forms and systems of economic precarity and domination. In the context of neoliberalism, he encourages music and dance scholars to “write against,” not as an ideological critique, but in a way that reveals the operation of various moralities, ideological stances and resistances that happen in its midst. He states that critical interventions are not always necessary or helpful because, “the world is already ‘otherwise.’ Neoliberalism does not operate in a vacuum; it intersects with other phenomena, processes and ethics, generating both correlations and contradictions. As Aihwa Ong writes, neoliberalism ‘encounters and articulates other ethical regimes’ and ‘catalyzes’ other debates” (Ong cited in Butterworth 2006, p. 213). Thus, scholars must pay attention to the ways in which musicians, who often straddle “economic, social, aesthetic and ethical dimensions,” labour in ways that might simultaneously reproduce and reconfigure these systems (Butterworth 2006, p. 213).

In his work with Huayno musicians in Peru, Butterworth examines the formations, correlations and contradictions of ethical logics, and how their music can be motivated by simultaneous economic, aesthetic and ethical goals. He demonstrates how musicians’ moral positionings, which are linked with an ethics of Catholic suffering, are expressed through song as a way to intervene in market logics, although in so doing they simultaneously “endorse, contradict and mediate the ideal of the neoliberal subject in practice” (2006, p. 215). This research is in line with research by Tausig (2013), discussed more below, who finds that the moral world of a musician who played at the Thai anti-government Red Shirt protests of 2010,

was developed in relation to his need to make money, his neoliberal strategies of entrepreneurship and his personal politics that aligned with the often-underprivileged Thai working-class.

Like Butterworth and Tausig, I seek to “write against” the capitalist tourist industry in a few key ways; rather than only demonstrate the issues and unequal power relations inherent in transnational tourist economies, this work examines what emerges in its midst, how fire dancers understand their subjectivities as artists, contest positions ascribed to them and make their lives meaningful within these systems. Thus, we will see how fire dancers form moralities, resistances and solidarities in the midst of capitalist relations. As will be demonstrated, fire dancers have specific ideologies which correlate with dance styles and particular aesthetics that they argue are able to showcase their moral and artistic positionings to audiences and other dancers. As they do so, the need to make money and their positions as labourers never fully disappear but are negotiated through their moral worlds and claims to authentic artistry. Their interventions and negotiations, however, can also be formative of new hierarchies within the fire dance scene.

The emergence of hierarchies and transforming notions of artistic integrity in changing market economies is discussed by Tochka (2014), who demonstrates the ways that newly formed ideologies intersect with generational divides and aesthetic practice. He finds that in post-socialist Albania, where music production has recently become privatized, composers must navigate new modalities of entrepreneurship, which they believe enables ethically and musically suspect practices. He states, “as agents manage their new position within this field, a market rationality informs and inflects their negotiations, fragmenting and repurposing pre-existing aesthetic orientations toward new ends” (p. 196). In the new commission model, where wealthy singers now direct a composer, some feel there is little room for creative control and they are

beholden to the desires of singers who wish to sell songs, rather than produce what they understand as “good.” The older generation of composers, who were trained under socialist models, have had difficulty navigating this privatized field, particularly because they do not have the start-up capital and technological training needed to thrive, and thus, divides tend to emerge along generational lines. As Tochka states, “senior individuals charge it with proliferating professionally suspect practices. Capitalism encourages ‘music of the moment’ – ‘fast music, just like fast food’ – unlike socialism, which fostered songs that ‘stand the test of time.’ Collaboration itself has become ‘fast’” (personal communication cited in Tochka p. 299).

This same discourse surrounding speed and artistically suspect practices underlies many of the discussions I had with Thai fire dancers. Often, the aesthetics of the new generation of Burmese dancers was considered to be informed by market ideologies, and thus, less morally sound and aesthetically pleasing in the perspective of Thai dancers. Thai fire dancers would comment that these immoral dancers can only “spin fast.” This notion of speed articulates more widely with discourses that position capitalism and the globalized world as “faster.” Music and dance research has shown iconicities and homologies between socioeconomic systems and aesthetics in performance genres (Franko 2002, Kunst, 2011, Martin 2011). Morcom, discussed above, relates that Bollywood’s carefully planned and choreographed routines, for instance connect with “a quintessential rational, neoliberal quality,” and thus were respected, while the semi-improvised aesthetic of the dance bars performances, was viewed as being of lower quality (2015, p. 304). Martin, in turn, argues that each era has a “social kinesthetic,” which references how stylistic features of dances emerge at particular social, historical and political conjunctures (Martin 2011, p. 34). He posits that a neoliberal “regime of risk” has been embodied in dance styles, where expressions of danger, speed and exertion have been key features since the 1980s,

and isomorphic with social and economic conditions (Martin 2011, p. 36). An ideal fire dancer, we will see, is one who has “flow,” which features slow, controlled movements rather than “fast spinning.” Having this “flow,” they relate, allows them to connect with the audience, and engage them in more deeply affective or emotional modes of encounter, which are often positioned against “fast spinning” for economic gain.

### **Dance as affective labour**

Importantly, this dissertation adds to these discussions by considering the affective components of these negotiations of labour, hierarchies and moralities in capitalist contexts. Fire dancers speak about making affective connections with the audience as part of their labour. Their understandings present new insights into the affective labour of dance and on affective labour, more generally. While we might be inclined to consider performers as necessarily connecting affectively with an audience, the increased importance of emotional accessibility is rooted in neoliberal ideologies and late capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2000; Hochschild 2003). Much of the literature on affective labour has focused heavily on women, and the male fire dancers bring a new perspective to these discussions by sharing their experiences of the ways in which masculinities, sexuality, capitalism and morality are negotiated through their affective labour.

Dance, as a form of affective labour, has received little comment and this dissertation highlights the ways in which affect, dance and labour are intertwined. Törnqvist (2013), in her extensive ethnography on tango tourism in Argentina, discusses dance as a commodity that circulates as part of a tourist economy that is heavily centred on the production and consumption of emotion. Rather than view dance solely as bodily labour done by teachers and male dance partners in Argentina, she discusses how people are producers of particular intimate and emotional attachments in a market economy, an economy that is sometimes in tension with what

she calls the “intimate economy” of tango in which different forms of emotional, social, artistic and cultural capital are exchanged. Srinivasan (2011), in turn, in her book, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labour*, touches on this, as well. While focused on transnational labour and the politics of citizenship, in theorizing dance as labour she importantly points towards the ways in which the body produces not only particular aesthetics but also energy and a “liveness” as part of the dance product.

While both of these works understand dance as labour, and the body as a producer of discourse contained within larger political and economic structures, this dissertation extends the conversation by considering how affect is understood by fire dancers as bodily energies that are transmitted through fire dance labour. In adopting such a perspective, this research understands danced labour as a bodily labour that is fully corporeal. Thus, rather than reduce the body’s materiality to its visible physical form, this dissertation takes into account the felt components of bodily movement. In so doing, I am influenced by the work of Kelly (2014) who argues that the ephemeral and affective sensations experienced and produced through dancing bodies are themselves generative of culture, power and connectivities. Thus, and as will be elaborated upon in Chapter Three, these discussions offer an opportunity to extend conversations of what has been termed immaterial (Hardt and Negri 2000), emotional (Hochschild 2003), intimate (Boris and Parreñas 2010) and/or affective (Hardt 1999) labour. While these theorists have engaged with the ways bodies manage and produce affects and emotions for consumption, the research has been gendered, focusing mainly on women. In turn, they have also not considered the full corporeality of the body, and how, for instance, the affective ephemera of bodily experiences and movement, what fire dancers call energy (*phalang*), shape and are shaped by this type of labour.

Affect has often been understood by new materialists as an intensity operating outside of language and the subject, but discussing sensations and the “affect” of affective labour – in performance or other practices – brings these felt intensities into the realm of particular sociocultural systems and structures of legibility. Thus, we must be mindful of how subjectivity, emotionality and “affect” are rendered into language and understanding by fire dancers and in Thailand, more generally (Cassaniti 2015a; 2015b). To this end, this dissertation employs the affective language and perspectives of fire dancers which elaborates new ways of thinking about how sensations, intensities, emotionality and intersubjectivity move along an affective continuum, a perspective which leaves space for blurred lines between the supposed divisions between sensational and emotional experience.

This dissertation looks as much at the “front stage” of performance labour as it does the “backstage,” and elaborates on the importance of aesthetics in shaping relationships, affects and hierarchies, and as a platform through which the tensions, and also the generativeness, of friction (Tsing 2005) are mediated. The labour of creating and shaping particular fire dance aesthetics is central to how communities and relations are forged. Jane Hamera (2007) argues that intimate socialities are created through shared dance aesthetics, which is an interpretive framework that renders the performing body as a site of connections. Hamera states that, “Aesthetics are integral to finished creative products, but also to the myriad ancillary socialites that never take the stage” (3). The labor behind the development of particular aesthetic qualities – the labour of dance technique – is what makes intimacies possible, as it “puts aesthetics in motion” and is the “primary tool by which ideals are incarnated or resisted” (p. 4). This is relational and affective labour, providing a “social and aesthetic bedrock” through which diverse social actors can engage (p. 218). How particular groups of fire dancers articulate and labour to produce certain

aesthetics form the “social and affective micropractices from which complex communities are built” (p. 14).

For Hamera, technique organizes and forms connections between bodies and spaces, creating sites of community and relationality across various spectrums of social difference, and indeed, this is the case in fire dance. Yet, aesthetics and the affective labour of technique can also produce boundaries, exclusive spaces, power relations and hierarchies. My research engages fire dance technique and aesthetics as “a series of tactics for living, not simply a strategy for moving” (Hamera 2007, p. 210). It looks to the laboring dancing body as site where the frictions (Tsing 2005) of global encounter are negotiated and where the utopias and dystopias of capital play out (Morcom 2015). With these perspectives on the entanglement of dance with the affective and the political in mind, this dissertation argues that fire dance is a nexus through which the tensions, intimacies and generativeness of tourist economies and capitalism are expressed, negotiated and transformed through bodies.

## **Spaces and Times of Fire Dance**

### **Encounters across spatial scales**

Politics, economies and culture in the globalized world are intimately linked with, and critically rethought, through attention to movement, space and affect. Massey relates that “This is an era – it is often said – when things are speeding up, and spreading out,” referencing the common idiom of space-time compression brought forth by globalization (1994, p. 146). It is a time of encounter and exchanges that disrupt notions of the supposed homogeneity of place, space and culture. The flows of people, ideas, material goods, identities, and cultural artifacts are deterritorialized and move between and beyond the boundaries of nation states which disrupts ideas about locality in the modern world (Appadurai 1996; Tomlinson 1999). This has produced



global space which is “conceived of as the flow of goods, people, and services – as well as capital, technology, and ideas – across national borders and geographic regions – resulting in the deterritorialization of space, that is, space detached from local places” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, p. 25). Such processes have resulted in new renderings of communities which are less territorially-bound, forming across emplaced localities and geopolitical boundaries (Appadurai 1996).

Thailand, and particularly the South, has been situated in transnational and transregional routes of trade and encounter long before Western notions of globalization even existed. As Jackson notes, “Thailand has been integrated into global networks of transport, trade, commerce, investment and communications since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century” (2003, 19). The beginning of tourism, however, in the 1920s (Peleggi 1996) greatly increased the density and speed with which flows cross in and out of the border. Today, the island beaches where fire dancers live are a complex nexus of the conglomeration of global flows of music, arts, dance, bodies, ideas, languages, nationalities, ethnicities and cultures.

In recognizing the delinking of flows from specific places, however, we must also consider how very specific locales interact to form what we conceive of as a global nexus or a globalized space, such as the beach where fire scenes are typically located. Discussions of transnational movements, for instance, attempt to account for very specific lived experiences of mobility, culture and community across boundaries of the nation state. Much like notions of “the global,” theorizing a transnational world also has the potential to gloss the specificities of locale. As Brickell and Data (2011) relate, “transnational networks are shaped through the specificity of locales” (p. 9). They suggest attending to the local-local connections, translocality, that shape the lived experiences of movement. This closer attention to situatedness, however, must not only be

looked at across nation states, but rather we must examine translocality at various spatial scales that do not privilege the national (Brickell and Data 2011, p. 10). This is particularly important in Thailand where many regional and localized hierarchies of power and connection are prominent. Thus, we must think through multiple scales which is “the spatial dimensionality necessary for a particular kind of view, whether up close or from a distance, microscopic or planetary (Tsing 2005, p. 58). A variety of scales come into focus in the fire dance scene and thinking translocally provides nuanced understandings of how life operates in conversation with the global nexus, and how very specific spaces are involved in the history and continued evolving of fire dance.

These different formations and undoing of space have shaped, and in turn, been shaped by fire dance, or flow art, as it is often referred to. We might consider how flows across geopolitical boundaries helped to develop flow art, a practice that draws on a range of culturally-specific movement practices, such as Maori poi traditions, Hawai’ian Hula dance, and Chinese rope dart, for example. Fire artists I spoke with from France, who identify as some of the original flow artists, claim that backpackers from the 1980s onward, and perhaps even before, learned and took up many of these practices from the countries and cultures they visited, or learned from others who had traveled (Cercle De Feu, Facebook conversation, June 1, 2016; Etienne, personal conversation, June 2, 2016). While it is outside the scope of this project to develop an in-depth historical account, what is important is that flow art is a genre emerging from movements across spaces, and highlights, as Fraleigh argues, that we must attend to “the wide global borrowing of dance during the modern period” (2010, p. 23).

In looking at Japanese butoh, which developed after World War Two out of various back and forth flows between the Japan, Europe and North America, Fraleigh argues that butoh aesthetics emerge through “global scatterings” (Fraleigh 2010, p. 16) of movement practices and

histories of cultural borrowings between the West and East. In thinking about the movement of dance in the global era we must consider how dances not only reconfigure national, regional and cultural spaces, by undoing boundaries, but how they also demonstrate the ongoing emergence of these processes to form and (re)form culture and space. Fire dance is an example of such “global scatterings” that has now emplaced itself and been integrated with particular locally-specific sociocultural perspectives and aesthetics.

The movements and flows that disrupt notions of space across national, regional and local boundaries are organized by markets, power, capital and nation states (Hannerz 1996, Ong 1999; Tsing 2005). As Tomlinson reminds us, processes of globalization are uneven, privileging some and oppressing others (Tomlinson 1999), and others such as Harvey discuss the vast geographical unevenness of capitalism (2006). Initial discussions of how to conceptualize power, capital and space in the globalized age employed core – peripheral models espoused by world systems theory which took an economic approach to think about labour extraction and exploitation of by core areas on peripheral states (Wallerstein 1990). While it is useful to examine large-scale political and economic systems, this type of analysis struggles to account for local and regional hierarchies, contextualized sociocultural perspectives, and, most importantly, how social actors live, work and contest these processes. With such macro-level views, a geopolitical Othering is actually perpetuated by assuming social actors as non-agential and powerless, and by continually reasserting “the West,” if such a thing even exists, as powerful. Scholars studying aspects of cultural globalization have also fallen into these traps assuming a sort of “global” (Western) homogenizing flow that influences and affects “local” spaces. This dissertation, however, seeks to understand the “complex connectivities” (Tomlinson 1999)

between global, transnational and translocal forces and the ways in which they influence power relations, and also cultural, economic and political aspects of lived experience.

Still, however, movements across borders have caused new hierarchies to emerge, and intranational power dynamics to surface. As tourism and capitalist greed has increased in Thailand, for instance, the demand for cheaper labour has ensured a steady stream of undocumented workers from Burma, many of whom seek to escape the country's political and economic hardships. Burmese labourers have been positioned in the country as inferior to Thais and often do the most labour-intensive and underpaid jobs, such as in construction and fisheries. In turn, there are vastly different power differentials among Thais, particularly in terms of class and socio-economic status, which ensures the maintenance of powerful elites. These internal dynamics of power in fire dance scenes, combined with the positions of tourists who have more access to mobility, and generally a higher socio-economic position, produces a complex mix of power hierarchies operating at multiple scales. The concept of "scattered hegemonies" (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, p. 18) is helpful. This is a concept born from the tension between conceptualizing large-scale structures of oppression and the more localized and contingent operations of power. Grewal and Kaplan argue that while postmodernism has thoroughly disavowed grand narratives of domination, and has looked more firmly at the 'local, micro, or regional' distinctions (1994, p. 12), there are still overarching patterns that must be taken into account. Thus, they suggest we look at "cultural imperialism through specific articulations of transnational identities and relationships" (1994, p. 17). While Grewal and Kaplan use the notion of transnationalism, I extend this conversation and look at relationships that also happen within nation states, locales and regions to address the multiple hegemonies that are firmly "local" but also linked with wider geopolitical spaces. This dissertation, thus, engages with the

micro operations of power, even within specific locales, to see how new hierarchies are shaped in conversation with global, transnational and transregional flows. We will see these various scales of hegemonic relations play out in the discussions surrounding global, regional and national masculinities, and ethnic and class hierarchies on the beaches.

Given these emerging hegemonies, we must consider not only the “flows,” as Appadurai might say, of ideas, culture, people and capital across borders, but the ways in which these movements interact with other phenomena. Tsing’s concept of “friction” is useful to think about these dynamics and the contingent and relational interactions between local, regional, national and global forces and spaces. Tsing argues that the notion of flows cannot properly account for how things emerge in encounter and interaction. Movement is never completely unimpeded and is inflected by various aspects and points of friction, she argues (Tsing 2005, p. 5). Friction takes into account how ideas, subjectivities and culture emerge from encounter and “draws attention to “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (2005, p. 4). I employ friction to consider the many points of encounter, such as interlocal, regional and transnational, through which individuals, ideas, economies, capital, culture, media, beliefs and knowledges rub up against each other. In-line with Tsing, I note both the generative and problematic ways in which these frictions are productive. She states, “The effects of encounters across difference can be compromising or empowering. Friction is not a synonym for resistance. Hegemony is made as well as unmade with friction” (Tsing 2005, p. 6). As we will see, while seemingly disparate formations, ideas and affects encounter and rub together, a new space in-between, a gap (Tsing 2005, p. 171), is produced and labored into being in the fire dance scene. This is a gap that is both generative and hegemonic, not Thai but also not *not* Thai; this is space that problematizes multiple divides that I will discuss in this dissertation, such as art

and work, capitalism and affective exchange, Thai and Burmese, and *farang* tourists and inhabitants.

This dissertation contributes to these discussions by revealing how the movement of capital and bodies – across spaces, borders and through dance – in tourism have produced various encounters among lives, objects, economies and environments, which I consider as an intertwined ecology. Here, I discuss the various productive connections that happen through tourism, and also the ways in which inhabitants must “endure” (Povinelli 2011) tourism and mediate a “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) in an industry that provides income, friendship, intercultural connection and cultural productiveness, and yet also exhausts and destroys ecologies. Nixon describes slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (2011, p. 2). While he is speaking about the violence of environmental damage, and its implications for marginalized and poor communities, here I consider how tourism results in forms of slow violence. While the violence of tourism and the inequalities it can produce is well-documented, considering the ways in which unnoticed violences, but also resistances and intimacies, emerge through danced labour is a key contribution of this dissertation. Engaging dance in these conversations highlights how moving bodies form affective connections, how they negotiate violence, for instance through dancing together or enacting particular moralities and aesthetics, but also how dance produces its own forms of violence and exclusions.

### **The production of space in fire dance scenes**

Spaces are not static voids, but are creative, dynamic and produced through the movement, encounters and relations of social actors and the environment (Ingold 2011, Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994). Lefebvre proposed a unitary theory through which scholars can attend to the production of space by examining spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces (1991, p. 39-40). Representations of space are those conceptualized by urban planners, scientists and engineers; this is space that is *conceived*. Spatial practice is the social space of everyday life and is performed by social actors. This is space as it is *perceived* and where social relations are reproduced (1991, p. 50). Representational spaces, however, are *lived* and known through images, symbols and imaginaries. It is space “which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (1991, p. 39). While representations of space and spatial practice are informed by ideologies and histories of knowledge and power, representational spaces “need obey not rules of consistency or cohesiveness. Redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, they have their source in history – in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people” (1991, p. 41). Representational spaces are where humans diversely generate and recreate multiple meanings and, thus, spaces are become differentially experienced (Crouch 2001; Massey 1994). This research keeps these multiple elements of spatial production in mind while focusing on how the representational spaces of fire dance scenes take shape in relation to wider societal spatial practices, meanings and ideologies.

Space is dynamic and it shifts and changes, and thus it must be considered alongside time and movement. Massey (1994) proposes we think about space-times and, similarly, Ingold (2011) suggests thinking about space as a particular world and the processes that take place

within that world as time, which co-produce what he calls “life worlds.” He posits that people are not emplaced, as static beings in a static spatial environment, but rather, they move through the environment, in modes of “wayfaring” (2011, p. 12). Through their wayfaring humans create paths with the environment that interlink becoming a “phenomenon of lines” (2011, p. 14) entangled in the “meshwork” of a particular place (2011, p. 70). Massey, similarly, argues that places are a “particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus... each ‘place’ can be seen as a particular, unique, point of their intersection. It is, indeed, a *meeting place*.” (1994, p. 154). Spaces, however, come into being through the movement people, but also capital, affects and non-human elements of the ecology. Karen Barad’s understanding of entanglement elucidates this relational ontology of interaction and worlding. She states, “Matter is a dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still – an ongoing reconfiguring that exceeds any linear conception of dynamics in which effect follows cause end-on-end, and in which the global is a straightforward emanation of the local. Matter’s dynamism is generative not merely in the sense of bringing new things into the world but in the sense of bring forth new worlds, of engaging in an ongoing reconfiguring of the world” (Barad 2007, 170). Thus, I consider the spatial formations in fire dance scenes as intra-active and pliable worldings that are not separate from other spaces and matter, but entangled with them. Fire scenes and the tourist beaches are complex knots borne from various movements that affect that space. Within the ecological “meshwork,” we must think about the entanglement of social actors, economies and the environment which creates points of both tension and release, giving shape and meaning to the worlds of fire dance or “fire worlds,” as one consultant called them.

To discuss spatial production in fire worlds, I also follow Lefebvre (1992) and attend to how the cyclical and linear rhythms that structure movements co-constitute space. For Lefebvre,



the production and practice of space is intimately linked with the rhythms of the body, the environment and the social (1992). On the islands, everyday life is structured through a diversity of intermingling rhythms – of the workday, capitalism, of the moon and rain cycles, of tourist leisure, boat arrivals and departures, party evenings, and Buddhist and Muslim practices. Inhabitants discuss how people move, their particular rhythms, and the speed at which they go about their lives in ways that link to wider social processes and meanings. The rhythms, in turn, shape the affective dimensions of these worlds.

Spaces have an affective tenor that is created and enhanced through different rhythms (Henriques 2007; Lefebvre 1991; MacCormack 2014; Thrift 2008). Researchers note that spaces can take on a particular feel by nature of the affective energies produced within them. Brennan (2004) argues that the transmission of affect, as a physiological transfer of energy and hormones, shapes the feeling of an atmosphere. Others, such as Henriques (2007) and McCormack (2014) discuss how the rhythmic underpinning of this transmission reverberates with moving bodies and technologies in spaces to create particular qualities of experience. These theorists engage affect as preconscious intensities that move a body to action or to inaction, and as distinct from emotion and not subject-centred (Barad 2007; Brennan 2004; Clough 2008; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Massumi 2002; Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Manning 2006). Affect, in this sense, has a physiological dimension that can transfer among bodies, and is different from the subjective and conscious experience of emotion. Cassaniti (2015a), however, in her work on the affective components of supernatural experiences in Thailand, argues that these delineations do not hold across cultures, as affect is rendered through language and culturally-specific understandings of subjectivity and bodies. In the Thai context, conscious emotional feelings are often described as traveling beyond bodies and not subject-centred; affect, thus, is an intersubjective energy that is

*part of* emotional experience, and not necessarily separate from it. Thai fire dancers discuss the experience and production of space through feeling words that incorporate both energetic and emotional components. In turn, while affect attempts to intervene in Eurocentric understandings of self-contained and individual bodies, we must consider the more sociocentric ways in which bodies are understood by fire dancers, as always already interconnected *because* of emotionality. As such, parsing affect as an either/or does not work, and thus, I centre affect in the ways of knowing of dancers; it is at once an emotion, the feeling of a place, the quality of a person and/or energies through which bodies and collectivities materialize.

Affect in this sense is highly social, and the moving feelings or emotions of one person affect those around them in the space. Thai social relations are very much rooted in this understanding of intersubjectivity. For instance, getting angry in public is a massive social faux pas. Not only does this disturb the smooth image of social relations, but it also disrupts the feelings of others. Because emotion is interpersonal, maintaining and actively constructing the feeling of *chai yen* (ใจเย็น), a cool or calm spirit or demeanor, is particularly socially valued and practiced (Cassaniti 2015b). In turn, social hierarchies are not just known through discourse, but are felt in relational interactions through the notion of *graehng chai* (เกรงใจ), which translates as “awestruck,” but communicates how “one feels deferential out of respect for others” (Cassaniti 2015b, p. 109). Boundary-making and spatial production by fire dancers engages with the affective realm. They articulate how particular spaces feel and comment extensively on how the inner intentions and emotions of a person can be bodied forth and how this affects others. Thai fire dancers form their social networks with others who share similar affective dispositions and intentions, those that feel and move the same way as they do.

There are a multiplicity of spaces in the lived world and each is differentially produced and experienced, and emerges through multiple meanings, contestations and negotiations (Leap 1999; Massey 1994). Tourist spaces, in particular, are very much multiply experienced as they operate on different rhythms, tempos and affects for different people. They are spaces of excitement, long restful days, late nights, sleep-ins, organized tours, and transport. For others, however, tourist spaces are structured around labour and the more monotonous rhythms of quotidian life (Lefebvre 1991). Thus, spaces are felt and experienced differently. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga define contested spaces as “geographic locations where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources and access to power” (2003, p. 18). Tourist spaces are one such example as they “lie at the intersection of diverse and competing social, economic, and political influences” (2003, p. 23). The creation of tourism on the beaches has disrupted the way of life for many inhabitants and continues to significantly structure the trajectory of their days. Tourist sites, thus, have vastly different meanings to the social actors that move through them, and are continually reconceptualized and reimagined by the people entangled within their meshwork (Bruner 1996; Mordue 2005).

Spaces, however, can be (re)produced and demarcated in particular ways to suit the needs and desires of social actors. Scholars argue that inhabitants develop strategies of resistance to tourism, sometimes by creating “physical and temporal boundaries” to protect their private lives (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, p. 23). MacCannell (1976) argues that tourist spaces are divided into different spatial-social stages, each with different levels of authenticity that tourists seek access to. The front stages are constructed to present a particular version of culture for tourist consumption and the back stages are a less-constructed manifestation of everyday social

life. In fire scenes, these spaces are not always demarcated physically, but manifest with slight temporal and affective shifts within areas that may be even directly located within “touristic borderzones” (Bruner 2005). A “touristic borderzone” is a “meeting space between the tourists who come forth from their hotels and the local performers, the ‘natives,’ who leave their homes to engage the tourists in structured ways, at predetermined localities for defined periods of time.” (2005, p. 17). While we can think about how people’s homes or private rooms serve as separate tourist – inhabitant spheres, what I have found is that front and backstage spaces are not always easily delineated. In fire worlds, some of these spaces are constituted in the midst of tourist life on the beaches. Fire worlds invite us to consider how spatial and temporal boundaries are formed and (re)formed directly within tourist space, and not only between tourists and inhabitants; fire dancers create particular spaces of differentiation among themselves, as well.

Spatialized socialities that shift and change in the midst of tourist life delineate geopolitical boundaries between different dancers – often between Thai and Burmese – and tourists and dancers. They spatialize communities that adhere to particular affective, moral and aesthetic dispositions and enactments, often in an attempt to mitigate the tensions of global encounter. Thus, fire worlds are made and (re)made, contested and shaped to suit the needs, desires and imaginaries of those who move within them. These spatial (re)constitutions are linked simultaneously to fears, hopes, anxieties and even utopian sentiments about the varied “flows” that corrupt their homes and threaten to take their resources, but that also provide friendship, love, economic stability and fun. Space, movement and affect in fire worlds form a complex nexus of reifications and reimaginings. Spaces are, however, formed in relation to wider spatial productions, power relations and hierarchies; the dancers (re)produce space in ways that speak back to their own marginalization in Thailand.

### **Space and nation in Thailand**

All societies produce their own space (Lefebvre 1991, p. 31) and spatial production in Thailand is intimately linked with power, ideologies and nation building. While contemporary Western literature on globalization tends to gloss and critique the role and power of the nation state (Hardt & Negri 2000; Piot 2010), Thailand very actively produces a potent form of nationalism that constructs the nation and its Others. The creation and continued maintenance of nationalist sentiment boldly delineates the boundaries of the country and Thainess (*kwampenthai*) which glosses over vast ethnic, cultural, religious and cultural differences. The word “Thai” signifies citizenship in Thailand, formerly Siam, and comes from the word *Tai* which denotes a family of Southeast Asian languages. The name change from Siam to Thailand in 1939 responded to processes of nation building that were taking place elsewhere in Asia (Reynolds 2002, p. 5) and it enacted a homogenizing power over the diversity within the country in an attempt to create a national identity (*ekka lak Thai*).

This production of a national “Thai” identity dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and, in response to colonial powers in the area, began through a spatialized political process that sought to conceal the diversity of regions and ethnicities in what Winichakul (1988) refers to as the mapping of the “geo-body.” Winichakul explains that the geo-body is a “technology of territoriality which created nationhood spatially. It emphasizes the displacement of spatial knowledge which has in effect produced social institutions and practices that created nationhood” (1998, p. 16). In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as Europeans were moving into neighbouring regions in Southeast Asia, bringing with them mapping techniques and Western definitions of territoriality, the Siamese rulers began defining the geopolitical boundaries of Thailand.

Territoriality was enacted over areas previously demarcated through different ethnocultural understandings of sovereignty.

This mapping was followed shortly after by another project of spatialization in which the “Others Within” (Winichakul 2000) were created. Following the Western project of documenting different ethnocultural groups, often through ethnographic projects, the Siamese rulers began to discursively formulate ethnic Others through classificatory systems. This project “differentiated Siamese subjects spatially within the geo-body in relation to the superior space of Bangkok” (Winichakul 2000, p. 40). This spatialized project of nation building was one that tried to represent Siam as *siwilai* (civilized) to Western powers in an attempt to fend off colonial overtaking which was taking place in neighboring countries. To produce *siwilai*, Others who were not *siwilai*, had to be created within the nation and a spatio-temporal politics of civilization and power began to take shape (Winichakul 2000). An ideology emerged that positioned those that inhabited spaces farther away from the centre of power, Bangkok, as less-civilized. Winichakul notes that *siwilai* “became a new cosmic order determining the spatio-temporal relations of cultures and peoples. On the one hand, the Siamese had always been and desired to remain superior to their subjects and peripheries. On the other hand, Siam might be among the Others of Western civilization. The Siamese elite adamantly refused to be placed on the opposite end of un-civilization” (2000, p. 52). In creating a “scheme of ethno-space” within the nation, the Siamese elite were able to position themselves as metropolitan and within the civilized world (Winichakul 2000, p. 55).

That Thailand was never colonized is still a widely circulating source of pride in the country. We must, however, recognize the ways in which a different form of colonization was enacted within the country, and which these spatial-temporal hierarchies are examples of.

Thailand is often referred to as being indirectly colonized (Loos 2006, p. 17), or as having undergone “crypto-colonialism” whereby the state’s efforts at nation-building were modeled on those of Western powers in an effort to stave off direct colonization (Herzfeld 2002). Cultural mandates, particularly during the Phibun government in the 1930s and 1940s, affected gender relations, economics, fashion, religion, language and the arts, and they were formed to present Thailand as a progressive to Western powers (Reynolds 2002). Those at the spatial peripheries were made to adopt this new dominant form of Thai culture, and to even refer to themselves as Thai while still being positioned as inferior to those at the centre (Reynolds 2002, p. 5). The high period of the creation of Thainess, (*khwam pen thai*) – known today as loyalty to monarchy, religion (Buddhism) and nation – was born from these spatial productions.

Spatialized power relations in Thailand follow Buddhist cosmologies and broader Southeast Asian ideologies. Conceptions of space in Southeast Asia contrast significantly with dominant North American and European perspectives, particularly in the ways that space is viewed as dynamic and linked to the production and maintenance of collective identity (Tooker 2012, p. 24). Power and hierarchies are spatially coded in Thailand, as the history of ethno-temporal mapping outlined above reveals. The notion of the powerful centre lies at the heart of these renderings of power, which various scholars in Southeast Asia have commented on (Condominas 1978; Errington 1999; O’Connor 1990a; Tambiah 1984). Tambiah’s (1984) notion of the “galactic polity,” describes the centre-oriented spatial production of traditional Southeast Asian societies. Based off the Indo-Tibetan mandala, which has a core and surrounding satellite elements, the galactic polity is a design “that coded in a composite way, cosmological, topographical, and political-economic features” (p. 503). He argues the mandala was used in various contexts such as “the structure of a pantheon of gods; the deployment spatially of a

capital region and its provinces; the arrangement socially of a ruler, princes, nobles, and their respective retinues; and the devolution of graduated power on a scale of decreasing autonomies” (508). Condominas (1978) employed “emboxment” to describe an organizing principle among various Tai ethnic groups and was among the first to comment on the important interlinking of space, religion and social community in Thailand. Emboxment demonstrates how different sociocultural elements are spatially and hierarchically ordered in such a manner that lower units fit within higher units. For example, the *muang*, or province, as a large area, encompasses the smaller *muang* which we might think of as a city. This smaller *muang* incorporates the village or *ban*, which encompasses the household. Each of these units is also a social entity that has a political leader and coinciding moral or spiritual communities. Even today, we find a “center-oriented pattern whereby a capital names its province and a city’s central district (i.e. Amphoe Muang) carries the city’s name” (O’Connor 1990b, p. 64). The importance of the centre and this type of spatialization also sets up social hierarchies which position “a great center above lesser ones” (O’Connor 1990b, p. 64). This structuring relates to wider Tai<sup>5</sup> beliefs about how power and cosmic potency move out from a centre to protect those within its reach from evil forces at the peripheries (Archmaibault 1971; Kirsch 1973; Tooker 2012).

A spatial politics of power persists in the contemporary moment to shape hierarchies and the boundaries of Thailand and Thainess. While nationalist sentiments work to construct a seamless “Thai” identity to present on the world stage, the creation of peripheral and dangerous ethno-spaces maintains the superiority of the elite. Bangkok, and the central regions, remain the powerful centre, and the peripheries are claimed to be zones of danger, immorality and/or backwardness. The Southern provinces, such as Krabi, for instance, have a much more complex ethnocultural, linguistic and religious composition than the Buddhist Thai of nationalist

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<sup>5</sup> This usage refers to all Tai groups, and not just the Thai.



imaginaries. This Muslim-dominated area, in which Ko Phi Phi is situated, is made up of Thai Muslims and ethnic *Chao Leh*<sup>6</sup>, who live alongside Buddhist Thais. While Ko Samui is more generally composed of Buddhist Thais, and situated closer to the centre of power, islands in general are known as spaces of tourism and thus associated with powerful mafias, capitalism, sex tourism, drunkenness, debauchery and immorality. We might think of these tourist islands, and those that labour within them, as contemporary spaces of the “others within” (Winichakul 2000) that are almost cleaved from the official notion of Thainess. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of research on Thai culture features the North, Northeast and Central regions, and tourist islands are almost non-existent in the literature on arts and culture.

Fire dancers are impacted by these spatialized forms of nation-building and othering in complex ways. Their work and lives are firmly situated within these spaces of otherness, and thus, take on their constructions and associations. While fire dancers work in the South, and some are indeed from the Southern provinces, many others are from the Northeast region of Isaan. An economically disadvantaged area, and one of the main sending locations of migrant labourers into the cities and tourist destinations, Isaan is a temporal Other within Thailand. It is a space of rural villages which are inflected with idyllic nostalgia, but also with a notion of lacking the progress and the modernity of the other regions. Its close cultural and linguistic ties to Laos, in turn, mark Isaan as a place on the “edges of Thainess” (Winachakul 1988, p. 170). In the centre of Bangkok, it is not uncommon to hear fire dancers discussed as dangerous partying beach boys who like *farang* women. Indeed, most Thais I know – friends, university colleagues and professors – expressed their concern about the dangers, not only of the islands, but of fire dancers. I was encouraged to be vigilant and careful around them, and many were shocked and concerned that I would conduct research on this topic. Stories about how *farang* women are

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<sup>6</sup> *Chao* (people from) *Laeh* (Sea) are an ethnic minority group in Thailand

drugged, robbed and raped were shared, and while some of them might be true, the most difficult and dangerous men I had to deal with were actually *farang* tourists.

Burmese dancers face more complex forms of marginalization in the country. Thailand strengthens its nationalist sentiments and borders by creating dangerous discursive enemies. At the time of nation building in the 1930s, communists and ethnic Chinese were made to be the enemies within. New enemies are created today, and Winichakul argues that this is done to reinforce the meanings of Thainess and to justify the policing of borders and migrants. The enemy of the present moment is undoubtedly the Burmese (Johnson 2013). The construction of the Burmese as an enemy has a long and complicated history in Thailand. Relations between the two countries have been strained since the fall of Ayutthaya, the old capital of Siam, which was taken by Burma in 1569 and held for thirty-four years before it was won back by Siam. As the story goes, in 1767 the Burmese came and destroyed the capital, burned and stole all the valuables and left it in ruins. It is this defeat that still fuels constructions of the Burmese as aggressive and barbaric today (Chongkittavorn 2001). Today, the Burmese in Thailand form the largest group of migrant labourers (Pholphirul & Rukmnuaykit 2010). Many of the workers enter the country through informal channels and remain undocumented, so it is difficult to provide accurate numbers. I can, however, say with certainty that the vast majority of people laboring in the tourism industry are from Burma. Given the strained relations between these two countries, it is not surprising to learn about the deplorable conditions in which many Burmese labour; as the majority are undocumented workers, many work for little pay, live in cramped spaces, and work extraordinarily long hours at labour-intensive jobs in factories, construction sites, and on boats and farms.

Throughout my fieldwork, and when I lived in Thailand previously, I was reminded regularly that I must be careful around the Burmese, that they were aggressive, that they were rapists and not to be trusted. In tourist areas, some Thai inhabitants relate that the islands have not only been ruined by increasing numbers of tourists, but by the arrival of Burmese labourers. These same constructions are reified by Thai fire dancers. I regularly heard that the Burmese fire dancers “take *yaba*,” a popular methamphetamine, and can “only spin fast.” They “only do it for money and women.” They “take jobs” and perform for lower wages. In essence, they were not considered artists by many Thai dancers. Johnson (2013) finds that anxieties about the implications of modernization and progress were related through stories of seeing ghosts and Burmese criminals in newly designed, exclusive gated communities in the Northern city of Chiang Mai. The Burmese represented an “unprogressive” foreign entity that lurked at the edges of progress. Stories about ghosts and migrants were told by those living close to the new housing developments to communicate doubts about the outcomes of this development. He states, “Migrants and ghosts have their roots in mobility – whether international refugee networks or on the highway – but when they emerge they are signs of stasis. They each show failed moments of potential and introduce elements into the everyday...they question the power of progress to change lives for the better” (p. 316). The discussions of the Burmese as dancers who devalue art and ruin spaces has much wider relevance and are representative of the tensions and contestations that emerge through fire dance, capitalism and global encounter on the islands.

Like Johnson (2013), I argue that this type of boundary-making and othering in fire worlds links with anxieties about globalization and access to resources. We might consider how, for instance, Thai dancers might project their fears and tensions surrounding globalization, a lack of resources, the movement of bodies beyond borders, and their own marginalization onto the

bodies of Burmese dancers. The undocumented Burmese labourers halt the potential progress of fire dancers. Not only do these constructions help to form spatialized hierarchies on the islands, they are also mapped onto the movement styles and aesthetics, as we will hear about in Chapters Three and Four. This is ultimately a process of space-making on a much larger scale, in that Thai fire dancers demarcate the geopolitical and cultural boundaries of the nation, and their own inclusion within it, by excluding others. In so doing, fire dancers (re)shape the spaces they work in and contest dominant constructions. Their practice of spatial production in this case reifies geopolitical boundaries, and the centre of power shifts from Bangkok, to particular “centres” on the islands.

While the model of the powerful centre, described previously, presents a structuralist approach to thinking about space, we also need to think about how social actors contest these models through their own practices of spatialization. Deborah Tooker, in her look at the Akha ethnic group in Thailand, problematizes the centre-periphery theme for the way it has privileged a top down perspective envisioned from the dominant political centres. This approach, she argues, has perpetuated existing power hierarchies in Thailand that discount peripheral places and societies within the nation (1996; 2012). She contends that we must also look from the peripheries because the dominant models have “skewed our understandings of the mandala away from that of a socially enacted set of spatial codes that communicate and index hierarchical status between individuals and groups, both dominant and nondominant” (1996, p. 324). This dominant centered approach has left little room to think through how these hierarchies might be contested by peripheral groups and what alternative spatialized conceptions and hierarchies might appear. The Akha, while they spatially code hierarchal political and social life, do not replicate the spatial patternings of the higher levels as the emboxment model suggests (1996, p.

325). Rather, they produce different hierarchies through which they have reconstituted themselves as central in relation to other ethnic groups in the region. The importance of the centre remains, but it is reimagined and rearticulated. Thus, the establishment of powerful centres and hierarchical frames come into being through various relational interactions and thus can change depending on contexts.

This type of reimagining of the dominant centre is precisely what Thai fire dancers enact on the islands, as they create new spatial hierarchies. They reconfigure the hierarchies of power and their own marginalization by speaking back through spatialization practices. Particular spaces and specific sites get reconfigured as “central” and more moral, discussed below, in relation to new peripheries. These spaces are physically, affectively and temporally demarcated and may comprise a particular beach, a certain island, one bar in the afternoon, or even the stage of a particular show at night. The creation of communal space is accomplished through the shared affective dispositions and movement styles which generate affective and spatialized socialities in fire worlds.

### **Gender, sexuality, space and time**

We cannot speak about fire dance without speaking about gender and sexuality, and in Thai perspectives gender, sexuality, time and space are intimately linked. Rather than being thought of as what dominant scholarship might term identity, gender and sexuality are envisioned as processes that come together in a specific context. While dominant Western scholarship has typically looked at gender and sexuality as separate aspects of identity (Rubin 1975), this is not always the case in Thailand. As Jackson and Cook explain “linguistically gender and sexuality are aspects of a larger complex rather than distinct items: the word *phet* denotes, biological sex, gender, sexuality, and the act of sexual intercourse and it defies any

precise definition, it is incredibly nuanced based on context” (Jackson and Cook 1999, p. 4). Researchers argue that the Thai gender system is best understood as a non-binary continuum with fluid and permeable boundaries which people can move into and out of through modes of self-presentation and behaviour (Kang 2014; Morris 1994; Van Esterik 2000), although within the fluidity, there can certainly be moments of stasis (Costa and Matzner 2007; Hidalgo 2009). Linguistically there is space for three sexes in Thai – man, woman and *kathoey*<sup>7</sup> – and the three-sex model has typically dominated understandings of the Thai sex/gender system until the early 1990s when researchers began to examine a proliferation of new modalities and categories of *phet* (Kang 2014; Morris 1994), which Jackson argues happened alongside shifts in capitalist market logics (2009).

How *phet* is tied to ‘identity’ or a stable self, is not often aligned with conceptions which consider identity as a stable, true and authentic self. Identity in Thailand is much more relational and contextual and is tied to Buddhist logics of the impermanence of the body (Van Esterik 2000). Van Esterik uses the notion of “gendered surfaces” to communicate the motion of doing gender in Thailand:

Surfaces are transformable, temporary and aesthetically pleasing, while the self – who he/she really is – remains hidden and ultimately unknowable, a worldly accommodation to the Buddhist concepts of *annatta* (non-self) and *anicca* (impermanence). The categories and labels for sex roles and acts suggest that a wide range of gender identities and sexual practices are recognized and tolerated, none of which have to be viewed as defining permanent gender categories. Thus, gender is best theorized as a context sensitive process constructed through interaction with others. Gendered surfaces are carefully and aesthetically presented in public to communicate how one expects to be treated. (p. 203)

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<sup>7</sup> As Kang (2014) explains, *kathoey* is a term that can refer to “all third-gender categories, theoretically referencing all nonnormative gender presentations and sexualities beyond heterosexual male and female. But in practice, *kathoey* seldom refers to female-bodied individuals regardless of their gender expression” (2014, p. 416). The term can be used to refer to gender and/or sexual expression and typically refers to male-born individuals who are considered a third gender and present and embody femininity to varying degrees. The word *Kathoey* can also be considered derogatory and some people may prefer *phu ying braphet song* or *sao braphet song* which means a second type of woman.

Thus, “Identities slip easily over each other like tectonic plates, alternatively revealing and concealing what lies below” (2000, p. 203). Similarly, Morris summarizes, “sexual and gender identity is conceived as a repertoire of public appearances and behaviors that is quite independent of the various subject positions and sexual practices available within the private realm” (Morris 1994, p. 20). Gender and sexuality are presentational and behavioural modes that one does, although how one presents oneself to others in different contexts takes on importance.

Appropriate and contextualized self-presentation is an essential skill in Thai social relations. This emerges from an “essentialism of appearances or surfaces” (Van Esterik 2000, p. 4) that has been commented on by multiple authors (Morris 1994; Mulder 1997; Jackson 2004). The social fabric in Thailand is governed by appearance, face and what Jackson refers to as the “regime of images” (2004) in which “the images one projects about the self are more important than identity in public interactions” (Kang 2014, p. 414). While surfaces, which can shift and change, are sometimes interpreted as “fake,” maintaining appropriate images, which can include disguises, are vital “cultural strategies of interaction” and are a “significant social form” (Van Esterik 2000, p. 36). This sensitivity to image is contextually-based and is essential for ordering social relations. Who is in certain places at certain times, with others, determines how one should present themselves. This might mean slight changes to physical appearance, language, tone of voice and a multitude of embodied prescriptions (Herzfeld 2009). It requires interpreting the felt social hierarchies of *graehng chai*, which I referenced earlier.

Van Esterik explains this sensitivity to context through the noun *Kalatesa* which means “proper, suitable or balanced...It explains how events and persons come together appropriately in time and space.” (2000, p. 213). *Kalatesa* structures how people enact different public appearances and behaviours and how they interact in particular spatio-temporal contexts. Van

Esterik states “It is the contexts of social life that are strictly rule governed and situationally defined, not the consistency of the individual moving through these social contexts” (2000, p. 213) and “It is Thai sensitivity to context –*kalatesa*, knowing how time, locations and relationships intersect to create appropriate contexts – that allows for the flow of multiple gender identities” (Van Esterik 2000, p. 213). Thus, while there is a fluidity of genders and sexual expressions that individuals may enact, boundaries are never completely erased. What is most important is how people move into and out of the categories and where they enact them. Space and time, as part of a particular social context, are what give *phet* its structure, and people can act very differently depending on the social situation.

Sexuality in the West has typically been analyzed through Foucauldian frameworks of power in which private sexual practices are policed and surveilled, but power in the Thailand operates through this careful control of image (Jackson 1997; Jackson 2003; Morris 1994). Generally speaking, sexual behaviours are not policed so long as they are not visible or discussed in public spaces. Regarding male homosexual practices, Jackson relates that even when sexual expression is made public, this is met with unstated disapproval rather than direct intervention (2004). If one maintains public face, sexual expression and desire in the private realm are generally accepted. While gender is presented in particular ways at particular times in public, sexuality should always should remain a private affair (Kang 2014). Demonstrating chaste modesty in the expression of sexuality in public space, particularly for women (Sinnot 2013), is a social standard. Because of the importance of maintaining public appearance, spaces in which sexuality is openly expressed, such as the infamous sex districts in Bangkok, come to be associated with immorality and danger which also stigmatizes those who work, live and play within them, and researchers argue that women in these eroticized zones are typically more



stigmatized than men (Wilson 2004, Sinnot 2013). The tourist islands are considered places of immorality within Thailand. They are widely known for hook-ups, immodest dress, drunkenness and sexual freedom. Moreover, *farang* are known for being sexually uninhibited in public space and stories about *farang* who engage in public sex are rampant on social media and news outlets. While there are more restraints against women in erotized in public spheres, this dissertation demonstrates how Thai men are also subject to stigmatization, regulation and marginalization. Fire dancers certainly take on these constructions and are often considered devious “playboys.” I examine how they manage these narratives, sometimes through redirecting their stigmatization onto the bodies of other dancers.

I employ *kalathesa*<sup>8</sup> to consider how both gendered *and* sexual “surfaces” interact with space, but also how they reverberate with regional and global hierarchies of masculinities, femininities and power in contexts shaped by transnational capitalism. To this end, I follow scholars, and particularly those situated within queer migration studies, who draw attention to the transnational dimensions of gender and sexuality, and how they are shaped by, and constituted through, movement; these movements include migrations of people, and the movement of culture, media and capital across geopolitical boundaries. These are movements which must always be considered in relation to colonial and imperial histories (Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Luibhéid 2008; Manalansan 2003, 2006; Povinelli and Chauncey 1999). Placing these perspectives in conversation with *kalathesa* allows for a consideration of both the micro and macro *doings* of gender and sexuality – across various spatial scales and within specific

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<sup>8</sup> Van Esterik’s conception is developed through linking the fluidity of gender and identity to Buddhist beliefs and cosmologies, yet I recognize the importance in thinking about gender through other non-Buddhist perspectives as suggested by Tannenbaum (1999). While the majority of my consultants were Buddhist, aside from two, the way that gender and sexuality were discussed and presented was absolutely through a nexus of appropriate temporal and spatial contexts. In emailed conversations with Van Esterik, the author suggests that these gendered relations are a product of the types of nurturing relationships, and thus societal relations, which develop around rice growing agricultural practices in the region which supersede analyses that strictly focus on religious and ethnic identities; thus, gender and sexuality as relational social interactions are an essential social practice throughout Thailand (Email correspondence, February 5, 2017). In turn, given the shaping of nationalism in Thailand, we must consider that Buddhist conceptions, at some level, infiltrate many aspects of Muslim, Christian and Hindu social life.

spatiotemporal situations – alongside the histories of movements and ideologies that influence these *doings*.

I situate my own doing of gender and sexuality within this discussion. I was also subject to follow the social rules regarding how I expressed my sexuality and gender, and thus, I had to change my behaviour, dress, language, and multiple other aspects of my body depending on the space, time and sociality I was in. For instance, how I dressed at one bar on an island at 3:00pm had to be different than another space at 8:00pm. I failed multiple times at this which opened me up to public shame and scrutiny. Even though Thailand was never officially colonized, colonial histories became attached to my body in particular ways; I was often perceived as being sexually promiscuous and uninhibited, and as a female tourist, interested in hooking up with fire dancers. This was a constant embodied negotiation for me and the way my gender and sexual presentation were read in different contexts greatly determined who would speak to me and what sorts of things they would tell me.

Fire dance is incredibly gendered, and while there are many women around the world who participate, there are very few in Thailand. As this dissertation argues, it is Thai social mores concerning femininity and sexuality in public space, especially those bolstered through economic nationalism in the late 1990s (Fuhrman 2009), and the continued perpetuation of representations of Thai women as overly sexual, that have made it difficult for Thai women to be involved in these scenes. This will be discussed at length in Chapter Six through the voices of the only Thai female performers I know, alongside my experience and that of a *farang* fire dancer. We will also see, however, throughout the dissertation how the intricacies of time and space in fire dance structure how sexualities, genders and hierarchies get formed and reformed in these scenes among men, as well.

## The Politics of Affective Dance Economies

Fire dance is a danced labour that simultaneously provides income from tourists, and yet is also a platform for the mediation of subjectivities, moralities, economic logics and ideologies born from the very friction (Tsing 2005) that the movement of tourists, labourers and fire dance creates. This is in-line with what Alexeyeff (2009) finds in the Cook Islands, where traditional performances for tourists become a way in which ideas about modernity and globalization – along with different ideologies, moralities and logics – are mediated among locals. Dance, she argues, is a contested site where competing notions of tradition and cultural change manifest as experiments with modernity (Alexeyeff 2009). We will see these same contestations emerge in fire dance, and a key to understanding the tensions in fire scenes is considering how fire dance has changed since its emergence, from a participatory activity *shared among* Thais and tourists, to a marketable commodity that is *consumed by* tourists as part of a market economy<sup>9</sup>. Dancers struggle with this transition and the politics of artistic production in contexts of capitalism. What emerges, however, is a tension between the logics of capitalist economies, and neoliberal ideologies centered on the individual, and moral economies that, in Thailand, centre around a particular set of Buddhist-informed morals, affective exchanges and sociocentric ideals. In thinking about morality, I follow Tausig and consider it “a set of implicit or explicit proscriptions that can help to explain behaviors and social commitments” (2014, p. 259). In his work with Bangkok musicians, he elaborates that “the language of ‘goodness’ (*kwaamdi*) as well as references to concepts such as ‘the good morals of the people’ are common in laws and official decrees... The words morality, goodness, rightness, and responsibility can be wielded like cudgels when deployed without acknowledgement of the many competing claims to their

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<sup>9</sup> Fire dance is not widely recognized and this is an unacknowledged economy in Thailand.

definitions. But whether or not morality acts as a coercive discourse, it has powerful purchase in Thai relationships, including musical ones” (2014, p. 259).

Researchers such as Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976) have demonstrated the ways in which norms, values, and social obligations surrounding the function and meaning of market exchange are expressed and lived through what they term “moral economies.” More recently, Fassin employs this concept beyond this economic realm to think through “the economy of the moral values and norms of a given group in a given moment” (2005, p. 365). He urges the engagement of a “moral anthropology,” which does not take a particular moral stance, but rather “attempts to render visible and intelligible moral issues in a cultural, and consequently historical, context” (2005, p. 341). This dissertation views morality as multiple and dynamic, yet always in conversation with sociocultural histories, traditions and practices. It examines how fire dancers “ideologically and emotionally found their cultural distinctions between good and evil, and how social agents concretely work out this separation in their everyday life” (Fassin 2008, p. 334). The sentiments expressed, and the moral landscapes that I have come to know among fire dancers, revolve around the intersection of transnational market and moral economies and reverberate with ideologies surrounding gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nation and region, and are directly and indirectly shaped by Buddhist and sociocentric logics.

Wilson, in her research on the intersection of social relations and economic systems in Thailand, invites us to consider “the complex interplay between... intimate social dimensions and plural economic systems in a context shaped by transnational capitalism” (2004, p. 11). She urges researchers to examine how the logics of capitalist economies operate alongside, and are entangled with, what she terms “folk, kin or moral economies” (2004, p. 19); these are economies which are not centred on accumulating profit, but rather on developing and

maintaining social relationships. While the exchanges in capitalist systems most often revolve around money, those in moral economies in Thailand are structured around hierarchical relations and affective exchanges between “parent-child, senior-junior, husband-wife, and son-in-law to wife’s family, laity-monk, human-spirit, and friend-friend” (Wilson 2004, p. 14). These exchanges emerge from Buddhist logics, and are shaped by notions of debt, service, and gaining merit; merit enhances and purifies one’s life and helps to secure a position of better rebirth in the in the next (Wilson 2004).

While there are certainly rifts in the neat presentation of a national Buddhist identity, the role of Buddhism in Thailand cannot be understated. It shapes notions of morality and deviance (Eberhardt 1988; Rabiibhadana 1984), underlies kinship patterns and social orders (Hanks 1962; Kirsch 1975), constructs conceptions of self and other (Van Esterik 2000), shapes understandings of gender and sexuality (Falk 2007; Keyes 1984; Troung 1990; Van Esterik 2000), and produces class and power structures (Bowie 1998). Ninety-five percent of the country is Theravada Buddhist, and religion is completely interwoven into daily life and social relations. Still, however, we must be careful to note that the complexities of working through a Buddhist lens in a country that fervently produces nationalist sentiments; there is also a significant Muslim minority in Thailand, particularly in the South, and there are also Christians, Hindus and Sikhs (Jackson and Cook 1999, p. 8). While the vast majority of fire dancers I worked with were practicing Buddhists, some on Ko Phi Phi were Muslim and others identified as both Muslim and Buddhist because of parental lineages. Still, however, Buddhist ideologies and cosmologies form the social mosaic, relations and ideals of morality<sup>10</sup>. As Van Esterik so poignantly states, “To be Thai is to be Buddhist” (2000, p. 65). We will see Buddhist-informed moralities throughout the

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<sup>10</sup> When discussing Ko Phi Phi in Chapter Four, I provide a more nuanced discussion for how Buddhist and Muslim cosmologies play out, although Islam and Buddhism in the South have long histories of intertwining (Horstmann 2001)

dissertation, as dancers speak of having “enough,” *pho phiang* (พอเพียง), rather than more than one needs, and we will hear about logics of generosity and “sharing” (*baeng pan*) among communities of dancers who are immersed in systems of capitalist exchange.

The moral economies and worlds of Thai dancers are not only discussed but are highly spatialized and emboldened through particular affective dispositions and aesthetic features. Communities of dancers often coalesce around particular notions of idealized or moral fire dance, which often reinvokes geopolitical boundaries, particularly between Thai and Burmese dancers, but also regional boundaries, as well. While Wilson notes that moral and capitalist economies operate alongside each other, their boundaries can be a source of tension, and are often ideologically marked through ideals surrounding gender, sexuality and ethnicity (Wilson 2004, p. 195). Thus, the geopolitical markers that seem to disappear in the highly globalized spaces of tourism can be (re)mapped and (re)drawn in fire scenes as dancers seek to create their own moral spaces, such as in a particular bar, a shop or even a studio, as we will see in Chapter Three. This sort of boundary-making demonstrates the desire to (re)establish borders and controls. Yet, it is also through fire art and moral economies that these boundaries become pliable and can be undone to open up space for affective ties and social bonds to form across intersections of social difference and unequal power relations.

Through a linking of shared sentiments, affective dispositions and moralities, generative spaces of solidarity emerge on the islands and communities form in relation to how people move and feel in the similar ways. Such moments and spaces invite a consideration of the complexity, and as Morcom says, the utopias and dystopias, of capitalism, movement and power in the contemporary moment. While some spaces are exclusively dedicated to Thai dancers, others are opened up to Burmese and even tourists who “feel” the same way. Crouch argues that

“spatialities of feeling” (2001) can be created through the ways in which people engage within spaces. Thus, what people do in space establishes, and can reconfigure, their affective and subjective relationship with it through what Crouch terms “space-ing” (2001, p. 69). Fire dancers challenge the inscribed meanings of particular spaces, and the wider systems they find themselves in, through different practices and economies that change their relationship to tourist spaces. Places are sectioned off from tourism and the tensions of the scene. “Space-ing” is also related to the production of subjectivity and thus spaces “are performed for ourselves in constituting and refiguring our identities and in relation to the world and performed for others in a practice of who we feel we are at the time” (Crouch 2001, p. 71). Thai fire dancers remake space to (re)constitute themselves in particular ways, as moral artists, relevant labourers and acceptable subjects.

## **Conclusion**

Dance, and the spaces that emerge through it, invite us to think through the micropolitical moments of everyday life that form resistances, intimacies and new imaginaries in the midst (Butterworth 2006) of oppressive, unequal and problematic systems and logics. Spaces, affects and movements are pliable and can get reconfigured by dancers to become what I understand as political interventions which require us to think about agency, resistance, solidarity and the political in new ways. Discussions of politics in dance must account not only for the ways in which bodies are represented and positioned in power relations and hierarchies, but also for the ways in which dance gathers bodies in particular spaces to share time (Martin 2011). I would add that in thinking about this gathering, we consider the affects that forge connectivities among dancing bodies. While keeping in mind the violences of tourism, this dissertation does not foreclose the political possibilities and affective socialities that emerge through tourism; there are

also generative moments that happen precisely because movements – of people, cultures and capital – exist and gather bodies in particular ways.

In fire scenes, spaces are shared and produced in very particular ways which form political interventions and speak-back to wider issues in ways that might be overt and immediately tangible, but also in subtle ways that rely on ephemera, memory and feelings. Cassaniti states that “Personal agency refers to the ability to create change and act in the world. Most Western, universalizing assumptions about agency view it as something akin to free will – the ability of an agent to act apart from the constraints of his or her culture” (2015b, p. 178). Rather than privileging agency as an act, she finds that her consultants in Northern Thailand enact agency “oriented to particular kinds of emotional practices and religiously influenced ontological assumptions that work to create effects through the acceptance of change” (p. 179). This is a Theravada Buddhist model, based on accepting the impermanence of all things, and detaching through cultivating calm acceptance. This is not acceptance in the Western sense, but an agency that is enacted through letting go so that one can be more in control (p. 180). Thus, changing the movements and affects in a particular space, or in their own body, can shift a person’s relationship with the wider industry, issues and spaces they find themselves in. In so doing, and as this dissertation will reveal, fire dancers (re)define and (re)imagine their relationship to the tourist industry, the nation and the “global” by creating sites and movements – formed in the gaps of encounter – that mediate, produce and are produced by frictions (Tsing 2005).



### Chapter Three: *Phalang* (Energy)

*After a long day of teaching on a Friday in May 2011, and a 4-hour van ride from Bangkok, myself and three other white Canadian teachers boarded a small boat in the darkness heading toward the island of Ko Samet. I remember the feeling being magical as I imagined what my first experience of a Thai island would be. I had heard the stories about the great parties and long sand beaches. Pushing through the water in the Gulf of Thailand under a starry sky seemed like the penultimate exotic experience, one I had thought about from my small one-room apartment next to a factory on the outskirts of Bangkok. As we approached, I could see lights and swirls of fire illuminating the beaches in rhythm with the pounding bass lines. As we pulled closer to the sand, I saw the dancers whose fire reflected off the colourful small lights that were hanging amongst the trees. Our boat pulled up on the beach to a crowd of farang tourists laying on beach loungers smoking hookah and drinking infamously potent Thai alcoholic buckets.*

*I jumped out of the boat and into the water, and crossed the beach space towards the back of the bar where we booked a room. After dropping our bags, we went straight to the bar, where the girls flirtily chatted with the fire guys and bartenders. Having lived in a very reserved community, which at that time had very few farang, I was surprised to see how the men touched and flirted back with my friends. I did not know quite how to participate, although it reminded me of being at a pick-up bar back in Canada. I made my way to a bar stool under the covered area, at the very back of the beach, and sat and waited for the big fire performance to start. Ten Thai men, who I later learned were mostly Cambodian, emerged from the shadows with sticks and poi. They began lighting their equipment and performed the infamous fire show which has shaped the trajectory of my last seven years. Flames, bodies and loud beats from the DJ moved*

*us as we watched. The men performed tricks and stacked on top of one another's chiseled, shirtless bodies. Some looked as young as twelve years old, and many were small enough to stand on each other's shoulders. I was mesmerized and full of wonder as I watched an artistic form I had always associated with European and North American rave culture: how did fire art come to Thailand? Why is it all men? As the show ended, the DJ, through the microphone, joked about which of the dancers were single and the farang women giggled and hollered. As more buckets were consumed, the fire dancers joined us. I watched as farang women talked with the fire dancers who were masters at flirtation, often winking, joking and smiling, their full attention on the women. Many joined on the dance floor in flirtatious partying, and I learned that some dancers and women disappeared into the shadows of the beach. A big blur of lights, skin, buckets, beats and moving bodies is all any of us could remember the next day, along with that magical feeling of excitement and anticipation that I have come to associate with beach parties and fire shows, feelings that dancers, I have come to learn, labour to create.*

This above experience fueled and structured my initial questions as I applied for a PhD and pursued fieldwork some four years later. I had often viewed Thailand's tourist industry as brimming with sexual appeal for *farang* men. The popular images of Thai women with white men were something I came to see as common in tourist areas, although looking back, I wonder if that was something my Western mind had already been trained to see. As a white female in Thailand for the first time in 2010, myself and other female expats often discussed this dynamic and how Thailand was a playground for the colonial desires of Western men. Seeing the fire dancers with *farang* women and the very different sexual dynamics that the beaches generated was striking. I soon learned that many Western expats (typically female) dated the fire dancers

and the beaches were a common hook-up site for female tourists. I was determined to unpack how sexuality operated within this realm in an effort to complicate the commonly held beliefs about sexualized tourism in Thailand that have significantly focused on Western men. I structured my PhD and fieldwork plans precisely around these questions. But, the insights of dancers showcased vastly different understandings of these sites, interactions and labour.

I often started my interactions with dancers by asking what they thought I should know, and almost every dancer wanted me to understand that they do not dance to have access to *farang* women, and that there were deeper layers to what they do. I came to understand, as well, that many of my initial questions risked perpetuating constructions of a country whose image continues to be constructed through a sexualizing, orientalist and Western lens (Jackson and Cook 1999). The association of Thailand as a place of erotic fantasy has not only been shaped by tourists and popular media, but also by numerous academic studies that focus explicitly on sexuality, sex work and sex tourism. This has had damaging affects for Thai people, and in particular Thai women, whose mobility is limited through the suspicion aroused by applications for visas and relationships with *farang*. That fire dancers speak back to these constructions is not surprising and I have taken seriously their resistance, as these discourses have positioned them as deviant figures in Thailand. Fire dancers asked explicitly that I focus on other aspects of their work, and I do. Yet, how might we begin to analyze the ways in which their labour intersects with sexuality? We certainly cannot deny the fact that a vast majority of fire dancers have *farang* girlfriends or have had at one point<sup>11</sup>. While it might seem easiest to look at their work through

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<sup>11</sup> While fire dancers are not engaged in direct sexual-economic exchange with female tourists, in some relationships, there are instances when economic dynamics might manifest in a diversity of sexual-affective exchanges. These relations may or may not involve exchanges of resources, although this certainly does not foreclose possibilities for emotional connections, attachments, friendships and love (Cabezas 2009). In fact, I recognize that monetary exchange is a substantial part of many relationships.

the lens of sexual labour, as there are parallels with studies of female sexual tourism (Albuquerque 1999; Dahles and Bras 199; Jacobs 2009; Frohlick 2013; Kempadoo 2001; Meisch 1995, Pruitt and Lafont 1995, O'Connell-Davidson and Sanchez-Taylor 1999), I am reluctant to reframe fire dancers' understandings and, thus, this chapter analyzes the labour of fire dance, and its intersections with gender and sexuality, from the perspectives of the dancers; the ways in which they understand their labour opens up room to consider the importance of affect, movement and space in the organization of sexualities, gender and labour on the tourist beaches. This chapter draws on ethnographic data from multiple sites to elaborate the ways in which these dynamics coalesce in the space of the beach. While recognizing that each specific site and beach bar is unique, the nightly beach shows and bars are strikingly similar, even across the country, and what is presented here are the voices of beach fire dancers who work these evening shows and have done so on multiple islands over periods ranging from five to fifteen years.

We cannot speak about the beach without thinking about the diverse ways in which this space is understood. For tourists the beach is a space of fantasy and freedom, that buzzes with eroticism. This forms part of the affective economy of tourism in which tourists are sold "an 'experience,' a set of feelings that is packaged and predictable" (Cabezas 2009, p. 93). These "sets of feelings," are often formed through colonialist constructions of exotic and Othered people and landscapes, which are co-constituted with ideas about sexuality, gender, class, nation, ethnicity and race, among others. Indeed, the idea of Thailand is refracted through imperial and colonial tropes, as an infamous destination for exotic, free, and unrestrained sexuality (Bishop & Robinson 1998; Manderson 1997). Over the years, I had heard Thailand's "energy" was "laid back" (*sabai sabai*), "friendly" with a "no worries" (*mai pen rai*) attitude. I was thus, not surprised when tourists would comment on how Thailand and the beach were "sexually-charged"

or felt more “free” than their home countries. Indeed, the island beaches are spaces of abandon for tourists, where long lazy days morph into fiery drunken nightly parties.

This chapter broadens discussions of affect in tourism and affective labour, and provides insight into the ways in which masculine hierarchies, sexualities and subjectivities are negotiated through the labour of fire dance. In particular, I highlight how the danced labour of fire dance, including the shaping and practicing that takes place “backstage,” produces what fire dancers refer to as energies (*phalang*) that affect tourists in particular ways, and which intersect with sexual and gendered hierarchies on the beaches. As will be demonstrated, these energetic intensities, shape and are shaped by what tourists often perceive as a sexually-charged environment of the beach space, which implicates fire dancers’ labour into circuits of energetic eroticism through corporeal labour that they learn to perform for tourists. This chapter extends theories of affective labour and sexual labour by highlighting the role of space in creating particular imaginaries and affects that intersect with dance. In turn, it makes important contributions to the literature on affective labour, which has focused heavily on women, has not discussed the bodily work of dance, and has been centred in Eurocentric notions of affect which seek to parse out understandings of emotion versus intensity. As will be argued here, fire dance labour is a complex form of affective labour in which bodies become conduits to move and generate energies (*phalang*) – which can be an emotion or an ephemeral intensity – that are not easily captured by dominant understandings.

### **The Labour of Affective Attraction**

Nam, a long-time fire dancer on the island of Ko Phi Phi, explained to me that fire dancers “like to make Phi Phi beautiful. [And] make people be happy.” (Nam, personal communication, July 23, 2016). Nam’s words help to unravel important aspects about the types

of labour involved in fire performances. Making things beautiful in the context of fire dance requires physical labour, such as the shaping of bodies in particular ways and the perfecting of moves through detailed attention to one's balance, speed, concentration, weight and effort. But it also entails a whole set of affective and energetic components. Srinivasan (2012) explains that "Although the dancing body is often viewed only in aesthetic terms, it is also a laboring body and works in multiple ways to create art" (p. 11). The bodily work of fire dancers extends beyond the spaces and moments of dance. We might think about the different ways in which fire dancing bodies are shaped to perform, and how they labour and practice not only to produce specific movements that are watched by tourists, but also how this labour evokes and stimulates particular affects.

Even before the performance begins, the bodies of fire dancers are fine-tuned to produce a fire dance show and particular types of affect. In addition to practicing daily, many of them workout to craft a very specific physique; a fire artist's body is perfectly muscled, hard and brown, and often tattooed. The dancers are almost always topless and the sweat that builds on their skin turns into a glimmering sheen when touched by the light of the fire; this accentuates their physique, something I often overheard women in the audience speaking about. The first day that I was practicing with a fire dancer named Som on Ko Samui, we were both spinning poi in front of a mirror at a special fire art studio where he practices every day. He was watching me in the mirror and related that fire dancers don't only have to be masters of the equipment, but they must also have nice bodies. I wondered if he was referring to how mine might need to be shaped differently, perhaps harder, to give the full effect. The softness of my body stood in contrast to his well-defined muscles. He related, "This is art of body and equipment. Everything must

look nice – music, costume, even equipment you use” (Som, personal communication, June 26, 2016).

I spent many months at that studio practicing with Som and others that frequented the space, and I noticed that many of the artists worked out with weights, and did push-ups and sit-ups daily. Pi, a Burmese dancer, worked out much more than the others when I first arrived. He had been back home in Burma for a while and his fire dance body was not as hard as it had been previously. Over the months, his soft belly turned into more chiseled abs. I asked him about this and he responded candidly, “Because when I do the fire show, we take off our clothes and many customers want to look at our body[ies], and how they move” (Pi, personal communication, Sept. 11, 2016). Indeed, it is rare to see soft and unchiseled bodies doing fire shows, although as bodies age, they get softer and more difficult to mold. Jack, a dancer on Ko Phi Phi who is in his mid 30s, considered “old” for a fire dancer, would run every day before the shows. I asked how long he will keep dancing; “Not sure because body get old” he replied, patting his softening belly (Jack, personal communication, July 30, 2016).

Fire dancers relate that the goal of their performances, and one of the most difficult things to do, is to “attract” people and keep their attention; having what *farang* tourists consider to be an attractive body is part of this attraction. Desmond (1993) argues that by studying the body in motion, “We can analyze how social identities are codified in performance styles and how the use of the body in dance is related to, duplicates, contests, amplifies, or exceeds norms of non-dance bodily expression within specific historical contexts” (p. 34). The brown muscled bodies of fire dancers play on exotic imaginaries of Thailand and Asia in interesting and complex ways. While colonial, racialized and imperial tropes have sexualized Asian women, Asian men have typically been feminized through the construction of the Orient (Said 1978; Haritaworn 2011).

The fire dancer body is one produced in the image of a heavily Westernized aesthetic of “work” and seduction. The fire dancers have learned to perform and embody what many *farang* females find to be a “surprising” sexiness, one that is bolstered by the exoticness of shirtless, brown moving bodies.

Naomi, who is originally from Canada, and whose Thai husband used to be a fire dancer, relates: “The first time I ever saw Tan he was fire dancing. Ya. I thought he was the sexiest man I’d ever seen. But I didn’t notice him earlier in the day, in the bar, until he came out with fire dancing. And then I was like ‘Holy shit!’” (Naomi, personal communication, October 9, 2016).

Her friend Noa, who is originally from Israel and married to a former fire dancer, also participated in the interview. We spent much time discussing the attraction to fire dancers:

Naomi: Sometimes I think its unexpected. Like for me, just in my own experience, I didn’t know that Thai men were like super hot... So when I got here I was kind of shocked by it, like the sexuality that they put out. They are very comfortable with themselves, with their bodies, with what they do, with tourism, with women. They are used to it. Some of them aren’t new to the industry. They’ve been working in it since they were quite young and so they have a comfort and a confidence about them that I never really noticed in a man. Even I was talking about this in our first year [she turns to Noa] about how they are in-tune with their masculine and feminine side.

Noa: Yes! Oh so much! And I feel like it is very obvious in the dance. The way they move their hips, the way they move their body. Not only in the fire dancing. In general, I feel like, I don’t know... that they are much more connected to their feminine sides than men, then Western men in my country that I know.

(Noa and Naomi, personal communication, October 9, 2016).

Like Noa and Naomi, Sylvie, from Germany, who is the girlfriend of a fire dancer on Ko Samui, stated, “First time I came [I thought] Never I will be with Thai boy. They are small. They are skinny. They have small dicks.” (Sylvie, personal communication, September 6, 2016). While she was reluctant at first, Sylvie has lived with her fire dancer boyfriend for over four years. Sylvie regularly discussed how handsome her boyfriend is, although she would joke about what she thought to be his skinny body. While she struggles with the attention he gets from women



when he performs, she admits that she understands the attraction for tourist women because “Fire is sexy” (Sylvie, personal communication, September 6, 2016).

While it is clear that there is a “surprising” attraction, each of these women understood that the ways in which fire dancers are able to converse and connect with women was a highly-honed ability. As Noa states above, she feels that they have a “comfort and confidence” that she had not previously known in men. While they were “surprisingly sexy,” this ability to create connections, conversation and laughter with tourists was a part of their charm that these women felt was irresistible. Indeed, in a Facebook message between Naomi and I before I left for fieldwork, she expressed her concern that I was in a serious relationship in Canada. She felt that fire dancers’ ability to draw in women was something about which I would need to be careful. Indeed, I was also told a story by a professor of another graduate student who had tried to do this same research before me but had disappeared with a fire dancer and never came back. Indeed, I often admired the ease with which fire dancers interacted with people, and how knowledgeable they were about other cultures, economies and languages. As I came to understand, however, fire dancers are not only masters of the “body and equipment,” as Som states, but are also astute affective labourers.

Thailand is known “as a destination for bodily, sensual and spiritual fulfillment,” (Sunanta 2014, p.8). As Sunanta notes, “Gendered representations of Thailand and Thai culture, and the reliance on the bodily and emotional labour of Thai women, have been central to the development of the tourism industry” (2014, p. 20). While I agree with this statement, since returning to Thailand in 2015, I noticed more men in these positions, particularly as massage therapists, although I may have simply not thought about it before. Scholars have sought to define this form of labour through frameworks such as immaterial (Hardt and Negri 2000),

emotional (Hochschild 2003), intimate (Boris and Parreñas 2011) and/or affective (Hardt 1999), and all have particular aspects in common; namely, people in these positions produce and manage particular affective intensities, bodies and relations in the self and/or between self and other. Because this work is typically gendered, much scholarship has focused on women. Hochschild suggests “As traditionally more accomplished managers of feeling in private life, women more than men have put emotional labor on the market, and they know more about its personal costs” (2003, p. 11). Boris and Parreñas (2010) relate intimate labour to women’s labour, as well, but expand this view by stating that we must also pay attention to how “larger macroeconomic processes spur the formation of ‘new’ forms of intimate labor” (p. 9) as it “emerges as a mechanism that maintains and reflects socioeconomic inequalities” (p. 10). Similarly, Hochschild and Ehrenreich (2002) argue that wider systems of inequalities structure these exchanges, and that imperialist histories of resource extraction from the Global South persists as “emotional resources” are consumed (p. 27) through a clear “transference and circulation of affect between global North and global South” (p. 11).

These dynamics are particularly important to think through when looking at labour in the tourist industry. Cabezas insists that our approaches need an “integrative framework that considers the extraction of affect and passion as crucial components in the enterprise of travel, hospitality, and the empire of global capitalism” (2009, p. 11). Given this information, it is essential to consider how men have always, and continue to, participate as affective labourers in tourist contexts. In Thailand, men are masseurs, servers, taxi drivers, sex workers, tour guides, and of course, fire dancers, labouring in ways that perhaps we have failed to recognize because of this gendering, and because of a much wider feminization of Thailand. Fire dancers are a

poignant counterpoint to the focus on women, providing an example of how men also work within affective economies, and how they are masters at managing feelings<sup>12</sup>.

While most fire shows are similar to what I describe at the beginning of this chapter, as the night progresses, their performances become increasingly more interactive. Usually, about halfway through a set, young women from the audience, which is typically between the ages of eighteen and thirty, are invited up on stage and fire dancers spin around their bodies, manipulating the poi and keeping the woman safe. The timing coincides with how much people have had to drink, and performer-audience boundaries begin to breakdown and become more fluid. At around this point in the show, a fire dancer will usually walk around the crowd with a tip jar, and I often noticed that these dancers would interact with the crowd, sometimes winking and joking with women. It is difficult to say if fire dancers consider this “flirting,” or perhaps a performance of flirting, although I do know that this is an integral part of their labour, and they have specific strategies for these interactions, which I discuss in Chapter Four.

The interactive nature between audience and dancers becomes more pronounced as the night moves on, and as more alcohol and drugs are consumed. Typically, at the end of the two-hour show, all tourists are invited to participate with dancers in fire rope jumping, fire limbo and various games that involve danger and alcohol shots as prizes. These are the times when fire dancers might converse with tourists, sometimes even carry women under the limbo sticks, drink and party with them. These types of interactions are very much in-line with conceptions of affective labour and are explicitly done to get tips or as a way to keep people at that particular bar having fun, and thus, purchasing more beverages. These interactions, of course, sometimes lead to sexual intimacies. In thinking about this as labour, I certainly do not want to suggest that

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<sup>12</sup> Cabezas (2009) does speak of male entertainers in resorts as a form of sexual-affective labour, and Törnqvist (2013) discusses male tango taxi dancers in Argentina as intimate labourers in the tourism industry.

friendships and intimacies are not possible. Like Cabezas (2008), I do not view money as corrupting of felt socialities. We must recognize that sensational connections are made and felt among dancers and tourists, even while those interactions are situated within capitalist relations.

Som, who has worked the beach scene for over seven years, and often performs at the infamous Full Moon parties on Ko Phangan, sees himself more as an “entertainer” who must be well-versed in a variety of skills to keep tourists’ attention. For instance, Som often dresses up as a “clown” at Full Moon parties after his fire show. He is particularly charming and walks around making balloons for people, and he very humorously would fashion penis balloons for female revelers. Som was incredibly friendly with me and would often joke around about making my partner jealous. He would frequently offer me massages, try to tickle me and try to make me laugh. He also gave me a special crystal after my fieldwork was finished. While I know Som as a joker, and do not feel like he was flirting with me, his ability to form a connection so confidently is one that many fire dancers possess.

While they have learned to perform what *farang* might understand as erotic or flirtatious behaviour, we must recognize that they do not necessarily view these interactions, or their labour, in the same ways. In fact, fire dancers are adamant that gaining access to *farang* women is *not* why they dance, nor why they started, although all recognize the prominence of tourist-fire dancer intimacies, something Som refers to as “the system of the bar” (personal communication, Sept. 6, 2016). Interestingly, almost every male fire dancer I worked with on this project told me that partying and having sexual intimacies with *farang* women was something they did in the past, but that they are now more focused on their art and not partying. Som, Nah and Jes on Ko Samui discussed how they used to be “playboys,” while Nam on Ko Phi Phi said he used to be a “bad boy.” Perhaps, given the amount of time they have been dancing, they are indeed focused

on different things. I view these statements, however, as ways in which they seek to gain legitimacy for their art and move themselves away from the deviancy that tends to become associated with their labour. It is difficult to say whether fire dancers were performing for me, a *farang* researcher who would ultimately write the first representation of their art. Regardless, we must ask how and why these discourses are employed and what type of cultural work they do for fire dancers.

Linda Malam is the only other researcher who has looked at Thai male beach labourers. Her fieldwork took place on Ko Phangnan, where the Full Moon parties are held, in the 2000s. Her findings, specifically in regards to how notions of deviancy are spatially organized, are still relevant today. Malam (2008) found that Thai male bar workers, many of whom were migrants from peripheral areas in the Northeast region, were viewed by Thai locals as lacking social power and systems of morality because of their displacement from their families, and their presence in the tourist party scene. In turn, the men's experiments with their subjectivities in the transnational spaces of the tourist bars often produced "rebellious" styles of dress and behavior that were disliked by local residents. She contends that an empowered hyper-masculinity, that of the *nak leng*, was essential in the bar where they worked with tourists; this masculinity was constituted through heavy drinking, toughness, fighting with male tourists and "womanizing." But outside of the bar spaces, their *nak leng* subjectivity was interpreted differently, and thus, she draws attention to the "microgeographies" of power on the islands. She states, "local elites position barmen very differently: they are not seen as credible nak-leng because they do not display equanimity and self-control, they are seen to be unpredictable, errant and, importantly, lacking in strength of will/character (which a nak-leng must have). Migrant workers lack the connection and responsibility to the local community that nak-leng ideal entails, they also lack

any solid power base for asserting nak-leng subjectivity” (2008, pp. 146-147). Thus, while they could enact this masculinity in the bar, and in fact had to in order to perform their labour appropriately with tourists, outside of the bar spaces, they lacked social power. While Malam does not reference Van Esterik’s concept of “gendered surfaces” (2000), which discusses the importance of spatiotemporal context in the organization and expression of gender and sexuality in Thailand, it is clear that particular spaces are imbued with vastly different power dynamics and ideologies that affect fire dancers’ subjectivities.

Fire dancers’ ability to perform erotics, dangerous fire art and have access to *farang* women, who are often admired as very beautiful, provides power on the beaches, but it also places them in lower social positions outside of this space. For most who have come from very poor families in peripheral areas, fire dance has provided access to education, income, languages, skills, friendships and intimacies that would have been unimaginable otherwise. Nah and Som often joked with me that I would have to hear this village-to-beach story so many times. Som for instance used to pick coconuts when he was young to support his family, and recounts going to school in a dirty brown uniform which should have been black. Nah, who is from the Northeast often said that before he was a fire dancer, he was poor and could not get a girlfriend. In turn, it has allowed them to move higher up in the masculine hierarchies, although only those specific to the tourist beaches. Connell (2016) argues that studies of masculinities must historicize global hegemonies as processes of struggle, deeply linked with imperialism and globalized neoliberalism, which shape localized gendered hierarches. These hegemonies are “constantly under construction, renovation, and contestation” (2016, p. 314). Thus, we must take into account how Thai masculinities themselves are refracted through and how they, in turn, interact with tourist masculinities.

Malam (2004) also finds that Thai men are defined by tourists as less-masculine because of their corporeality and lower economic status. The Thai men, thus, assert a hyper-masculinity that is performed through particular behaviours in the bar space, for instance by sexually pursuing female tourists. While they are initially positioned as subordinate to a Western hegemonic masculinity, as workers in the bar, the Thai men came to occupy a dominant position in the tourist space because of their ability to provide tourist women with free beverages, and through their hyper-masculine performances of dancing and, interestingly, “fire twirling,” although she does not discuss this further (Malam 2004). As the women’s statements above reveal, the Thai male body, in their imaginaries, was a desexualized and feminine one, a body that is smaller, for Sylvie, and one that is graceful and moves in more “feminine” ways for Noa. This “smaller” and feminized body, coupled with its ability to perform particular erotics, and the ways in which it plays on exotic colonial imaginaries, becomes desired.

Alexa, a white female from the Netherlands who has worked in beach bars for over ten years, related that she has watched many Scandinavian women become enthralled with the “different” brown bodies of fire dancers. While this aesthetic, and in particular, the dark skin born from days spent on the beach, is a draw for *farang* women, colour hierarchies in Thailand work quite the opposite. Dark skin is not considered attractive, and there are all sorts of lightening creams and sun protectors in Thailand. Normalized beauty ideals in Thailand surround lighter skin, and a look of wealth which is translated through one’s ability to be well-dressed and appropriate, *riap roi* (เรียบร้อย). While non-Thai researchers might be inclined to think about this in terms of globalized racial hierarchies and anti-blackness, this colour hierarchy is much more complex and is related to Thai-specific class dynamics, Asian power relations and transnational culture; in Thailand, those who work outdoors are typically of lower socioeconomic status. They

typically have a darker skin colour, which is also associated with people from peripheral regions, such as the Northeast and the South. The desire for whiteness or lightness, however, is not always, and only, a desire for *farang* or Western beauty ideals. Rather, and as Kang's work demonstrates, this relates to a desire for East Asian whiteness, and bodily aesthetics brought through the Korean Wave (*hallyu*) which features a "soft masculinity" with a prominent cosmopolitanism. These "white Asian desires," are, however, hybridized with North American and European beauty ideals (Kang 2017). Fire dancers, generally, embody almost the complete opposite of these masculine ideals. Their typically heavily tattooed bodies, long hair, piercings, hard bodies and hippie clothing position them outside of these desired aesthetics. Fire dancers do, however, understand that through fire dance, they become attractive.

In talking about why he thinks *farang* women are attracted to fire dancers, Jes, a Burmese dancer, states,

People like different. Me too. When I came the first time here, I don't like my skin because it is tan or brown and we want to be white. You know in Thailand and Burma everyone want to be white and they love white ladies and man. The Thai ladies and Burmese ladies love white people and you going to see when you go to 7-11 you going to see white cream and everything. So for us, it's like wow that lady is so beautiful. She's white. And white people love to be tan haha! For us, it's like crazy...Like no, we don't want to go outside if the weather is so hot, but for you guys no. You want to be tanned. Ya, people like different. But now I understand it. When I was young I used to like white, but now I love my skin. I love myself.  
(Jes, personal communication, June 19, 2016)

For some dancers, however, it was not only their physical appearance in this space that changed their social standing and their own feelings about their bodies, but their abilities.

Nu states, "If you hold the fire you feel like you king. People watching you feel like 'Oh! He holding the thing that I am scared of.' You know what I mean? 'He handle the thing that I'm [afraid of], that's so strong!'" (Nu, personal communication, Sept. 19, 2016). This aspect of being able to handle danger, to play with it, and to manipulate it, makes Nu feel powerful. This



is similar to what Jack, on Phi Phi discussed as his desire to learn: “I want to win fire. It’s so hot. Everyone scared. I want to be in the fire.” I asked if he was scared at first and he related, “Ya, everyone is at first but then you do it and you beat fire” (Jack, personal communication, July 27 2016). For Som, having talent provided increased social power:

Som: You very beautiful you very cool you know [he touches my face], like ‘Wow. I want to touch this girl.’ If I don’t have talent, I never touch you, right?

Tiffany: You think it works like that?

Som: Ya I have talents and... That’s how people think ‘wow!’ and older people you do for them and they like ‘wow!’”

Tiffany: Is that respect?

Som: Ya because the talent. For example... they [points to people] try your toy [the poi I am playing with] and they do many tricks you already love them, you know? They get you already and you want to learn. They have talent and you respect.

(Som, personal communication, June 16, 2016)

While Som is explicitly speaking about how his ability allows him access to *farang* women, he also mentions how it gives him respect from older people. There are strict age hierarchies in Thailand, as well, that determine one’s social standing. Having talent allows Som access to respect that he would otherwise not be able to access. For all dancers, however, this newfound power must be carefully negotiated on the beaches, particularly with *farang* men.

“Did it get agro down at the beach last night?” I was asked this question more than once on Ko Phi Phi by my *farang* friend Darren. “Agro” in this context refers to the behavior by (typically) white men at bars and clubs who aggressively try to pick-up women. This aggression may also be directed towards other men. Tan notes that “the dance floor often translates into ‘hunting grounds’ for male clubbers impelled to secure a girl by the social pressure of having to perform an aggressive masculinity, and this is compounded by a fiery urge of lust” (p. 726). Indeed, I often saw this hunting, and was hunted numerous times, which at some points was scary. I remember one man at Rock Bar on Ko Phi Phi who watched me for an entire evening as I danced with the *farang* bartenders who work there. He never came up to dance with me, but just

watched, well into the early hours of the morning. At one point, and in his field of vision, a man approached me and started dancing with me. This “hunter” got very aggressive with him, walked over and pushed him out of the “territory.” Overall, I found men to be quite aggressive during these parties, oftentimes just coming up to me and joining my space, sometimes rubbing up against my body.

I began to think about how perhaps these behaviours resulted from *farang*'s “failed” masculinity (Tan 2013) vis-à-vis the “surprisingly” attractive and powerful fire dancers. Nu shared his experiences with misbehaving men at the Full Moon Parties where he works and notes that he believes they are jealous:

Nu: I have one guy come [up]. We spin in the party. He come and take his pants off and he put his bum next to the fire and his girlfriend take a picture for him. Like fuck! And we are on the stage. Then it happens like a thousand times, then he come again. Now he take his penis out and his girlfriend take a picture for him. That was the second time. The third time, we have a seat next to the stage, and he come. He take a seat and then his girlfriend come and sit with the four or five of us. And he take his penis out again and do this [holding his penis] and take a picture again. So he did this 3 times, so the first time I walk to him and say, ‘Hey. I think you need the last picture with your clothes off...He drunk. Haha! I say ‘You take off your clothes. Naked and take picture with us and then you just go home.’ So he [get] naked. I take his clothes, dip into kerosene and burn. Poof! So he naked to go back home hahaha! And all the people they see. A lot of people at the party. And the noise it comes ‘Yaaaaa!’ because they see that we try to handle him in a good way.

Tiffany: Hahaha! You tried to be nice!

Nu: You don’t know how rude [people are] when people drink, drunk, on holiday and no one know them in this place. ‘No one know me. I can do whatever I want. And free. I will leave this country.’ So they can be super rude!

Nu: I have a guy that come beside the fire. I stand and then I feel the water close to my leg and then I turn and he standing and pee. Next to me. He tried to pee on me.

Tiffany: Wow! Do you ever have problems with women doing stuff like that?

Nu: No, woman is different. Women will come to you like ‘haa haa’ [panting sexually and wobbling like they are drunk] like this. But I not drink, so when I see people drunk, for me it’s ugly. Come on, like you are human, we can sit speak and get to know each other. That is the better way, you know, for me.

Tiffany: But do you still have to be nice to them?

Nu: Um, no. I just cut communication fast like, ‘Oh sorry I’m working. Thank you, thank you.’ I try to make myself like this [puffs out his chest and closes his body posture]. It is already a sign that I close myself. I give a sign, ‘Thank you’ [he turns away with his

body], you see? I close myself. ‘Don’t get close to me.’ Already two signs I give to you, you know what I mean? Ya and then they understand the sign.

Tiffany: It is interesting about the problems with men who do things like that.

Nu: Yes. For the man is that they jealous when they see all the girls watching. You know? They like [them] so the man jealous. So they will act different.

(Nu, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

I spoke with Nu about some of the behaviour I had witnessed. At Star Bar on Ko Samui, for instance, no matter how many times the fire dancers asked people to stay behind the rope barrier, which was there to protect everyone during the fire games, white men continued to lean on it, try to go under it, over it, and hop the line to get into the centre for fire rope skipping. During a different performance at this same bar, a group of three white men entered the performance space and sort of danced *with* the fire dancers, who looked on confused. A small crowd formed around the white men and they relished in the attention they were receiving. The fire dancers were sort of forced to engage with them; they poured kerosene around the three men and lit it, so the *farang* could do their own mini show. I only ever saw men, who were mostly white, exhibit this type of behaviour. Nu responded, “Ya it’s about jealous. It’s about feeling. But I’m not talking about good or bad, but I’m talking about [an] affect of the mind. Jealous just come.” (Nu, personal communication, September 19, 2016). Indeed, this jealousy seems to emerge on the beaches and produce these behaviours. Stories abound of *farang* men getting beaten and even killed by Thais, and anybody who has been around long enough knows that the *farang* likely provoked this aggression. My friend Pit on Ko Phi Phi, who owns a guest house, constantly talked about the bad behaviour of *farang*, both men and women, and would say after each story, “*farang* want to show power.”

While *farang* men are also invited on to the stage during the shows, it is rare to see a fire dancer do the move where they spin fire around the person, having them lean back, enveloping and protecting them. What is more common is to have a man come up and sit in a chair, and hold

a cigarette in their mouth, as a dancer tightly winds the poi to spin it in a small circle and light their cigarette. What I have also seen, numerous times during this trick, is for the fire dancer to spin the fire directly on the man's genitals, often when their head is tilted back. The tourist often reacts with fear and with laughter, sometimes trying to get away from the fire in fear. While I certainly do not think that Thai and Burmese fire dancers would interpret this as anything more than "fun" and playful, for the *farang* tourists, these moves are emasculating acts. Their genitals are put in danger by the dancer that holds the power. Desmond states that "Every dance exists in a complex network of relationships to other dances and other non-dance ways of using the body...Its meaning is situated both in the context of other socially prescribed and socially meaningful ways of moving and in the context of the history of dance forms in specific societies" (1993, p. 36). Thus, it difficult not to consider how the giant spinning fiery sticks that the dancers control and manipulate, are not in some way interpreted as phallic, although this was never explicitly mentioned. What is clear, however, is that fire dancers differentially produce affects for *farang* women and men. While there is obviously an assumed heterosexuality, which I will comment on later, erotic, desirous, powerful and jealous affects are generated through the bodies and performances of fire dancers; these are different "energies" which must be carefully negotiated and managed.

### **Energetic Economies**

While keeping in mind fire dancers' resistance to discussions that position them as deviants who seek access to *farang* women, I want to think about how their labour intersects with sexuality. As people such as Cabeazes note, touristic labour is affective, and often involves sexuality in diverse ways that do not always include intercourse and physical intimacy (2009). Importantly, however, we must remember that while fire dancers do not necessarily view their

labour as sexual, they understand their labour as affective and as possibly involving erotic components. Interestingly, it is through discussions of the affective components of their labour that fire dancers actually appeal for more legitimacy and understand themselves as “real” artists, rather than deviant beach labourers. The discussions that follow highlight the complexity of their labour and the affective knowledges needed to be a fire artist.

Srinivasan (2011) gestures towards the ways in which the body produces particular aesthetics *and* affects through dance. She states,

In dance, even more than in other disciplines, the labor of dancing cannot be separated from its means of production, the dancing body. Dance is also unique in that labor is equivalent to the product in dance the dancing body’s very ‘liveness’ and the display of its labour in performance produces a dance product. Therefore, the dancing body as a laboring body disrupts traditional Marxist understandings of the act of labor, the means of production, and the produce. In the aesthetic realm, audiences are trained not to see the labor of dance, but they are still consumers of that effort.” (pp. 11-12)

Srinivasan does not explicitly theorize affect, although words such as “effort” and “liveness” are indicative of what is consumed and produced in moments of dance. While she situates the dancing body as a discursive manifestation that is contained within larger political and economic structures, I want to think about a more fully corporeal dancing body. Thus, this research takes into account the complexity and importance of felt components of bodily movement and embodiment.

“Energy” was a word I heard a great deal hanging out with fire dancers. How they must “give it,” “feel it,” and help others “feel it” were skills that were practiced and shared. As I learned, the fire dancers use and draw on energy in very specific ways during their shows. They often discuss their roles in terms of giving energy to the audience, and making them feel particular qualities such as comfort, happiness, fear, and even though they may not explicitly try, desire. About the parties on Ko Phangan, Som states, “You make the energy” and each party has

a different overall energy a performer must work with (Som, personal communication, June 15, 2016). Nu, who dances with Som for the Moon parties Ko Phangan, talked about this energetic aspect with me, as well:

Tiffany: So, when you are performing at full moon or something, what are you trying to give to the audience? Are you just enjoying yourself or do you do something for the people watching?

Nu: Energy.

Tiffany: Energy?

Nu: Ya energy. First is energy. Like show your energy because you is the one holding the fire. It's like a million years ago, people who hold the fire is like the leader, you know? You feel like 'Rrawwww' [roaring] when you go to the war, you know what I mean? Ya so you can give that energy, because we are energy. You know what I mean?

Tiffany: So do you feel strong and powerful when you are...

Nu: For sure. Because its energy. It depends on if people understand this word energy, because we are energy. Like if I sit here and you sit there and if I'm moody, it might feel not good. You can feel me. You can feel me like, 'oh something is not right.' Know what I mean? If I feel good, you will feel 'wow'! He have something that good in him.' Ya same like that. So you give the energy. Ya people can feel it. It depends on how you give to them.

(Nu, personal communication, Sept. 18, 2016)

Similarly, Nah related that it is important to "make them [the audience] feel something" through sharing energy (personal communication, September 2, 2016). He states:

It comes from yourself. Everybody have different energy to come out, you know? Everybody have energy to come out. Example, for my own show I like to get deep inside the music and I let people feeling the music with me. It's like an add-on, you know? You understand? It's like [when] you've been to a concert and everybody play guitar, bass and all go the same together and you feel chicken skin [goosebumps]. You know? It's same thing. Many time when I make a show people say, like 'ah this feel chicken skin' with the music, with the passion.

(Nah, personal communication, Sept. 12, 2016)

Interestingly, it was often because of these affective components that fire dancers viewed themselves as artists, and not just deviant beach labourers. Scholars such as Mitchell (2011) and Tausig (2013) have written about the moralities that underlie musician-audience relations in Thailand, relations which are centred in reciprocity and affective exchanges. While somewhat of a different context, it is important to note that establishing a connection with the audience allows

for a mutuality to develop. As many related, creating this connection is the work of very skilled and dedicated artists.

Som was very adamant about the amount of practice that was needed to master different pieces of equipment and to attract people and keep them interested. Out of all of the dancers I met, he could perform with the most toys – poi, sticks, rope dart, fans, double staff, fire juggling, clowning – and was very skilled at all of them. Som’s days were often spent at a beachside guesthouse where his friend worked. When I would go to interview him, I knew if he was there because his toys would be scattered all over the beach. He explained to me the importance of practicing for serious artists, as opposed to those just doing it for fun:

Som: They [not real artists] just do it for fun. It’s not enough. For me it’s no good, you know? You shit on the equipment. Every equipment has a charming inside, you know?

Tiffany: What do you mean by charming?

Som: Like when you really love something and when people do that [thing] they get your eye. They get you, [and you are] like “Oh! That’s amazing!” That’s very hard to do because they need to get you, you know? So need to practice a lot. And you see people do [badly] and you like ‘what the fuck?!’ It’s stupid, you know? I practice very deep. This is the main [thing]. This is the charm of all of the toys, the equipment. You study deep and then when you perform you happy because you like ‘look!’ You get them [the audience], you know? Ya I do very deep.

(Som, personal communication, June 15, 2016)

For Som, respecting the equipment and practicing “deep” are key in fire art. Serious artists are those who can draw out and display the *sane* (เสน่ห์), which translates as “charming” or charm, of each toy. As my Thai friends explain, this is a type of attraction that involves more than attracting people at a visual level. Having *sane* or charm (*mi sane*) is more like an essence which touches people in a deeper, more affective way, “something that you really love,” as Som expresses. A fire dancer must be able to bring out this charm and attract the tourists at a deeper level, and of course, this takes time, labour and practice with each of the toys. For Som, such

practice, and being able to “get them” through the special qualities of the toys offers respectability for the art form and oneself.

For Nah, in a similar way to Som, it is not only the physical and practical aspects of fire art that make a respectable performer, but how one can affect the audience. For Nah, going deeper involves bringing people into the show with him, and he compares this to a song. He discussed how some fire dancers just get up and spin fast: “Just like a beat – tuk tuk tuk tuk tuk – it’s not a song. Song have beginning, have end, go up, go down, you understand? It needs [to be] like music; go straight, go up, down, like build people’s feelings up, down and keep their eye. [They] follow because they understand what you are doing” (Nah, personal communication, September 12, 2016). Nah indicates that he needs to feel the audience, while they simultaneously feel him. He would often describe this as “putting his heart” into the audience to assess their feelings and attempting to “feel what the customer feels” (personal communication, September 12, 2016). For Nah, a good fire show is one where there is an affective exchange between audience and performers, and where he can play with people’s feelings, providing affective heights and lulls to engage them.

Key to being able to have an affective exchange and connection is having control over the equipment and being able to manipulate it in a variety of tempos, and with different music. “You need to build them,” Som told me during one of our interviews where we were speaking about how a good fire artist engages an audience (Som, personal communication, June 15, 2016). Building the audience requires careful attention to affect and one must have the ability to layer energetic intensities on top of one another; importantly, to do this correctly ensures that people will pay attention, and thus, provide better tips:

Som: I know how to get people to clap, you know. And how to feel energy. It means you have to be really cool first, you know?



Tiffany: Like cool person?

Som: No, no.. the best!

Tiffany: What do you mean, do you give them energy?

Som: Yep. To get a tip

Tiffany: How do you give the energy?

Som: You need to build them. Show [equipment], talk first, show a little bit and [then] make it hard. Because a lot of people they say fire dancer and fire performer is different. Performer mean you [know] art of everything – how you organize the show, how you affect the people until the end, how you show people toy by toy by toy. Not only like da da da [he does easy spinning motions] and get money, you know?

(Som, personal communication, June 15, 2016)

He explained that being able to keep people's attention was part of "the energy of artists":

This is the energy of artists. It's not only "oh nice, clap, clap, ok let's go." Not like, "When you going to finish the show? I bored." This feeling not nice, you know. This very hard to get to this point. You need to be very patient artist. Practice a lot know all the tricks and how to get people.

(Som, personal communication, June 15, 2016)

For Som, a fire performer is an artist and is different from a what he calls a "fire dancer." There needs to be a deeper dynamic to "get people," although he recognizes that being able to connect with the audience has financial benefits.

He discussed this aspect again with me in a different performance context, after I had viewed his and his three friends' Full Moon Party performance in Ko Phangan:

Tiffany: You said the Full Moon energy was good when I was there.

Som: Energy is crazy, man. Good crazy...Because we work there and they pay for us. But another way is that we earn money by tip so we need to really organize the show and the show need to be all the time set up and get more, more, more feeling to finish. We get every time 4000, 5000 baht. For me every Full Moon is very challenging, you know? Because every time it's young people coming and hard to get them to tip, you know? So, it's always a challenge and we think a lot for how to make more money.

Tiffany: What do you guys do to make more money?

Som: Need to be organized, you know? Sometimes you use affect for fire, sometimes you use technique of the equipment, sometimes feeling the energy of people and follow the music.

(Som, personal communication, September 6, 2016)

Where Som performs for the Full Moon parties is an open-air beach space, so as soon as people get bored, they will walk away to visit the next bar or space of excitement that awaits. This

happens on all beaches but is magnified during the Full Moon where there are multiple performances, events and bars set up along Haad Rin on Ko Phangan. The beach parties involve younger people and it takes precise planning to affectively engage them.

When I went to the Full Moon party in August 2016, Som's team of four began by simply lighting some equipment on fire and soon a circle began to form around them. They provided a surprise to the audience, when one dancer on the team took a lit torch and ran around inside the circle, pointing the fire close to tourists' bodies. This got people's attention, playfully, while also creating the fire dancers' space. They worked the audience, building intensity and each trading off on particular pieces of equipment - fire injector, rope dart, poi, fire juggling, and finishing with LED poi that made designs of hearts, flags and words such as "love" in the open air. I asked what they do if they feel that the energy is getting down. "We try to change. With the last show [the Full Moon Party] what's really important is the finale. We need to talk about before finished then people give me some tip and they like it, you know? Normally people they come and they done" (Som, personal communication, September 6, 2016). Indeed, the time and building of intensity is paramount because if the energy dips, people will leave the circle, which means there are less tipping potentials when the tip bucket is passed around.

For Nah, building the audience involves trying to feel with them to understand how to create intimacy, and this directly impacts earning potential. Nah told me many times that the first step in a show is to make people comfortable, and little by little, to add and channel different intensities through their bodies and toys. He described how one must be completely attentive to the audience to build them properly and to see who is paying attention, which determines how much money you will make: "See, we have to make them feel comfortable at first, show them, ok, that it's not dangerous and then build it." (Nah, personal communication, June 7, 2016). The

proper building of energy in a show is paramount. He explained that the energy affects how much people will drink, how long they will stay, and how they will tip. He said you can't do more than thirty to forty minutes or people will not drink, and the bar will not make money. Thus, while balancing how much they will receive in tips, a dancer must also be attentive to how much money the bar is earning. Nah says that dancers need to make an impressive, affective show but also know when to let the energy down at times, and become part of the background so people can mingle and go to the bar (Nah, personal communication, June. 7, 2016).

Not only are dancers giving particular energies to the audience, they are, simultaneously, feeling them, changing their routines, and trying to assess the audience to maximize tips. We can see this in the way that Som, above, describes how he must pay attention and change his equipment to reflect and engage with the audience. Nah, in turn, relates that “You have to know your audience” (Nah, personal communication, June 10, 2016).

Jes, Nah's Burmese student, explained how he is learning to read the audience:

Jes: For me when I am playing fire, I love to watch the customer, into their eyes – do they like it or not? You can learn one thing from customers and that is, you gonna know how to control people...how to attract people to you. So you gonna know about people, how to read people's minds.

Tiffany: How do you do that? While playing are you looking at them?

Jes: Ya. Cause after playing fire I'm going into the customer [area] to get some tips. So I do it every day and lately I think about, who loves our show? Who didn't watch? And I can read their mind too...I read a lot of books about people, [about] how to read the people's minds. So, I think it's great because I only watch their eyes and I know what they want.

(Jes, personal communication, June 19, 2016)

It is clear from fire dancers discussions, that “building” the audience involves artistry and feeling the audience very precisely to be able to create climatic moments, comfort and intimacy.

Fire dancers, through their ability to labour affectively as dancers, (re)position themselves as artists who are able to connect with the audience, who can move with the music

and not only do tricks, but who can fully entertain, as Nu and Som explain. In so doing, they seek to remove themselves from the deviancy and illegitimacy that surrounds this art, and the beaches. I found, however, that discussions about the affects they are able to produce, and their relationship to the equipment and “real” artistry, is often used not only to legitimize their art, but to define themselves in opposition to the newer Burmese generation. Som, and many of the dancers I spoke with, feel that the increasing number of Burmese fire dancers are responsible for devaluing the art and for giving fire dancers a bad name. Som states, “They have so many good Burmese people. This no good because they steal our job and they not do cool show. They just do for money. It’s not art, you know? Like me, I’m artist.” (Som, personal conversation, June 15, 2016). Others felt that the Burmese spinners only do fire art to seek access to *farang* women and for money, rather than for the love of art. Pi Oud, an original fire dancer from the late 1990s relayed, “That’s why they want to do, because they want to upgrade their life. If they know this stuff, they get more money. And they get clever and get girlfriend or boyfriend that maybe can bring them to Europe or America.” He went on to say that they are not really artists, and that they cannot tell a story with the equipment and move appropriately to different types of music (Pi Oud, personal conversation, June 7, 2016). Nu, similarly shared, “You know their country is hard, so they start to move here. They work hard and they see the fire show and see the fire spinner get the girl and, you know, get money as well” (Nu, personal communication, Sept. 18, 2016).

While certainly some Burmese dancers are newer at the practice, we must consider these conversations in relation to masculinities on the beaches and the competition for resources. As stated in the introduction, the influx of cheap Burmese labourers has meant that Thai fire dancers lose jobs. I view these discussions, thus, as ways in which the tensions and “friction” (Tsing

2005) of capitalism and migration are managed. The Burmese dancers, who are often younger, threaten the livelihoods of fire dancers, possibilities for social mobility and also their power on the beaches. These renderings, however, also invoke sexuality and the Burmese dancers were often discussed as only doing it to gain access to *farang* women. Given the deviant sexuality that surrounds fire art and the beaches, we must consider how this re-mapping of deviancy might be a way to further distance themselves from the illegitimacy of fire dance and the sexual-affective (Cabezas 2009) charges of the beach.

### **Sexual-Affective Economies**

Throughout the “building” of the audience that is described above, fire dancers are layering intensities and also creating more and more intimacy with tourists, preparing them for the more participatory encounters that take place as the shows ends, when the spatialized boundaries between fire dancers and tourists blurs. Part of this building, of course, is to fuel the energies, the *phalang*, on the beach, encouraging the tourists to drink more buckets, clap, scream, and eventually, dance. This energy is not viewed as distinct from that of fire dance, but as a wider ecology of intensities that are generated by and passed among bodies. Fire dancers, as they perform and then act as social lubricants help to share and generate the *phalang*. As Jackson relates about clubbing, “The dancefloor is built in various stages as people get more comfortable, energized and intoxicated” (Jackson 2004, pp. 17-19) and this is a key role of fire dancers who, along with alcohol and pumping music, act as social lubricants. By the time the customary fire limbo stick comes out where people compete for shots, the crowd is ready to participate. This affective lubrication, I argue, is very much co-constitutive of other affects, particularly sexual and desirous energies, which circulate on the beaches as bodies become lubricated with alcohol, movement and affect. Cabezas’ notion of ‘sexual-affective labour,’ seeks to capture the

interrelations of affect and sexuality in transnational tourism and explores “how intimate forms of transnational labor are interwoven into the tourism product and how it is exploited by both transnational corporate capital and people on the ground” (2009, p. 10). While somewhat still situated in a sexual tourism framework, her approach opens up room to consider the multiple ways that affect and sexuality are integrated in spaces of tourism.

Nah: I saw a woman get orgasm just from watching a fire show

Tiffany: Really? Ok I would love to hear this story hahaha!

Nah: Ya in Ko Phangan.

Tiffany: She was just sitting there?

Nah: Ya she was just sitting there with her friends, a group of girls, and she was just screaming and she have an orgasm. I don't know why it's like that. Even before, when I worked, my girlfriend said the same thing, you know. When do fire you sweat, you do your moves and...and I don't know haha! I'm not a girl. I didn't think this way when I perform. I didn't show off too much, but some style of fire spinner, they do – they show their muscles, you know, and of course they are very attractive...like I say I put my heart in the customer first to see how they feel because um sometimes I get tip, sometimes if I go to get tip if I go to the girl too much, they guys start to, you know, get jealous hahaha! Ya, it's like that...Its kind of psychological thing, you know? Even if you are ugly, and you in the middle, in the middle of attention, you look good already. And people feel that you are important, you do something good. People give a clap. But maybe in their life nothing is good at all and they just go spin fire there...”

(Nah, personal communication, September 11, 2016)

A few weeks after the interview with Nah where he told me the story about the woman who orgasmed from watching a fire show, I asked what he thought caused this woman to orgasm from just watching the fire dancers, and Nah explained that it was the “energy” she felt. While Nah was laughing and perplexed at how this woman reacted to fire dance, he was, like other dancers noted above, aware of how his body became sexy and powerful through dancing. But for Nah, it was the energy produced through his body, and not only his physical appearance, that fueled this reaction. Before delving into how energy relates to sexuality in fire dance labour, I first want to look at how the space of the beach supports erotic flows. We must, however, keep in

mind that although fire dancers understand their labour as potentially evoking desires for tourists, they may not feel this energy in the same way.

It is not only fire dancers who fuel energies and intensities for tourists; they are one component in a set of affective “technologies” (Tan 2013). At one beach bar that I frequented on Ko Phi Phi, a sort of sexual game was played after the fire shows which encouraged men and women to get naked together as the more participatory club atmosphere got started; after the fire show, *farang* who work for extra travelling cash, would come out with large signs that read “Topless ladies. Free bucket. Naked men. Free bucket.” As the night continues, a club atmosphere is evoked and groups of men and women come together on the dancefloor, sort of merging into heterosexual couple forms. At the place where I stayed, the guesthouse owners had posted a sign discouraging those staying there from bringing guests back to their rooms; it was a 2000 baht fine, which is approximately \$75.00 CAD. The beach at night is a place of hook ups, sex in the sand, kissing strangers, grinding, and make out sessions; the stories of what Thais would consider deviant sexuality, by nature of their publicness, are shared on social media frequently and often discussed embarrassingly in inhabitants.

The beach, and especially the nightly parties, however, have a very specific quality that needs unpacking; this sexual intensity is incredibly hetero. In her look at the creation and performance of “affective heterosexualities” in club spaces, Tan (2013) explores the “ways in which ‘becoming (hetero)sexual’ is felt as affective intensities that are transmitted among dancing bodies” (p. 719). She finds specifically, that “Sexually affective touch and movement are two ways in which an affectively (hetero)sexualized atmosphere can be sustained in a club” (p. 721). As dancers move their bodies, touch, flirt and perform (hetero)<sup>13</sup> sexual and gendered scripts they create and feel their way into fashioning the heterosexuality of the space (p. 723).

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<sup>13</sup> This is following Tan’s usage of (hetero)sexualities (2013).

While Tan is referencing women performing these scripts, fire dancers and tourists are certainly doing so on the beaches and (hetero)affects are brought into danced motion.

Music, while often thought of in the abstract, has a direct impact on bodies as the sound waves enter, move between bodies and encourage particular relations. Scholars have noted how atmospheres are created sonically as sound waves produce vibrations imbuing dance spaces and dancing bodies with a particular vibe (Henriques 2010; McCormack 2008). Indeed, I began to notice that throughout the evenings, the musical intensity would build to a climax and people's bodies would follow; from slower, quieter, less bass-heavy EDM to faster tempos, more well-known songs and much heavier bass lines at the end; people's dancing intensity followed this same progression and often involved overt displays of sexuality. For Tan's consultants "music is perceived as an infectious energy that can get sexually provocative, its throbbing beats, arousing the movement of rhythmically gyrating bodies caught up in the kinaesthetics of passion" (p. 725). Henriques similarly states, "Such kinetic, not to say frenetic, participation offers some powerful techniques for intensifying affect" (2010, p. 69), with deep bass and increasing volumes providing "musical 'material'" (2010, p. 63) that work through dancing bodies. One can feel this sexual energy build throughout the show, into the dancing and towards the end of the night when new friends and lovers are made.

Tan examines the "numerous technologies that are being deployed in order to incite, transmit and sustain (hetero)sexual desire – which is a forceful affective orientation to particular bodies" (2013, p. 719). Fire dancers are one of these technologies "building" the crowd on the beaches, arousing various sets of affects, some of which may be erotic. Other technologies include alcohol which "lubricates bodies to affect and be affected sexually" (Tan 2010, p. 774). All these elements combine to make heterosexual coupling a tendency and the norm, which in



many ways feels like an expectation on the beaches. In fact, I was approached by men so many times during beach parties that it was actually difficult to work and build relationships with female tourists and dancers. I used to play a game to see how long it would take for a man to approach me. I would watch men circle my table where I was viewing the show, as they would gain confidence and eventually come to sit with me and ask why I was alone. About the beach parties, Som states, “So your job is to make people have fun. Doing something [to] make the man and the girl come to the same group. They get the girl and then they are gone. But that’s my job” (Som, personal communication, June 16, 2016). Creating possibilities for coupling and working with these affective flows of (hetero) desire is something Son considers as part of his role.

Noa and Naomi, the *farang* wives of fire dancers that were mentioned earlier, also view the space in this way. They relate that it is the beach space itself, and not fire dance or fire dancers, that make things feel sexual:

Noa: Like for me, the bar scene is... was very...um...something with a lot of sex, you know?

Naomi: Sexually charged

Noa: Ya. Sexuality. Very charged with that.

Naomi: Constantly sexually-charged

Noa: And the fire show really added to that. I mean when I saw Tune [her husband] go onto the beach and do his fire show, one way I thought was wow I am so proud of him, and he’s so sexy and I so love him. But on the other way I also felt not very comfortable about how other women responded to his dancing. Ok? Umm I’m sure that if I was doing it, like normally they do it without a shirt, but if I was doing it wearing something very very umm..

Naomi: Provocative?

Noa: Not provocative because I would also say that Tune is not a provocative guy and I believe that if you are not a provocative person, you can’t look provocative...So, I could imagine that Tune would also not like it. It’s not that he is provocative. Not at all. For him its art. It’s his art. It’s the way he talks with people with his body. But the response around, especially from women – young women who come to a bar, spend a few nights in Thailand and think the guys in the bar are really hot and you know flirt – you know, that part was not really fun for me.

(Noa and Naomi, personal communication, October 9, 2016)

Noa discussed this extensively and elaborated again later that “I don’t think it is the fire dancing itself. I think it’s the setting and context. Because if Tune [her husband] would have danced here, where some of the customers are forty years and above, families with kids, I wouldn’t feel that at all” (Noa, personal communication, October 9, 2016). Referring to “here” is the new bar and music spot that Tune and her are making together. An outdoor setting with benches, small private tables, a petting zoo and various stages, it is an open-concept venue, a space in which they hope to tame the vibes she associated with the beach bar scene. I asked Noa what she meant by the sexually-charged aspect of the bar where Tune used to dance:

Um it’s a bar on the beach. A lot of people came. And it wasn’t a bar that I imagined this bar to be [the one they are building]. It was a bar like designated to young people, where young people want to get drunk, young people who want to meet cool Thai local people and hang out, *farang* girls who want to hook up with Thai good-looking men who work in the bar and look cool. So, in that sense. And then I really didn’t like it. I don’t know how I handled it for two years. I trust him completely 100 percent, but I just feel like when I’m there I’m just torturing myself. I mean why I need to hear people, women’s reactions, you know?

(Noa, personal communication, October 9, 2016)

Noa explained that it was “The energy of the people,” in reference to both tourists and bar owners, who compete for income, that create this sexually-charged situation (Noa, personal communication, October 9, 2016). For Noa and Naomi, the fire dancers are simply doing their craft in a space that is already laden with sexual energy from vacationers seeking fun, risk, sex, danger and intimacy with locals and other tourists.

I think their viewpoint is much in line with my own, fire dancers’ and Cabezas’ argument that labour in tourism seeks to continually engage the “sets of feelings” that tourists expect of particular people and places, and this happens to intersect with sexual desires (2008). As Frank notes, “sex and travel have lengthy historical associations, and the search for sex, bodily pleasures, intimacy, or erotic excitement are also acknowledged motivations for many travelers

more generally (some, but not all, of who might be considered ‘sex tourists,’ depending on how the term is defined in contemporary discourse)” (2007, 164). Thus, in labouring within this affective tourist economy fire dancers may be unwittingly providing and channeling the desires of tourist imaginaries.

### **Energy Work**

Hardt and Negri (2000) argue that in the change from imperialist forms of bounded power towards a decentralized system, labour has increasingly become immaterial, which is “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication” (p. 290). They outline three aspects of immaterial labour, “the communicative labor of industrial production that has newly become linked in informational networks, the interactive labor of symbolic analysis and problem solving, and the labor of the production and manipulation of affects,” (p. 30), the last of which is most important for our discussion here. They relay that “This labor is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (p. 293). Surely, aspects of fire dance labour encompass this type of work, as they use their own energy and bodies to affect audiences in particular ways. They make them comfortable, excite them, lubricate them and potentially create desire.

Their work also involves what Hochschild terms “emotional labour.” She states, “This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others... This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality” (2003, p. 7). Part of this management, she argues, requires the labourer to partly detach themselves from their emotion work through various types of boundary setting, and she

argues that there are personal costs to performing emotional labour as part of one's job in that "it affects the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel" (2003, p. 21). In giving their own energy to others, or "making people happy," as Nam explains at the beginning of this chapter, fire dancers are careful at managing their own energy.

Som and Nu also shared that in order to transmit the proper energy, one's own affective dispositions must be managed: "At the party you make energy. You need to build yourself. Example even if you angry or something you need to make people have fun," states Som. I inquired about this further to understand how Som builds himself. He states, "I listen to music. I do beat box[ing]. I do guitar or something like boxing, you know? Like, killing my energy. Killing my anger. Or [I] drive around. I like to go to Big C [a department store] for racing car game (Som, personal communication, June 15, 2016). Som's strategy again signals his role as an energy giver, but this energy must be of a particular quality when it goes out to the audience. Killing his energy involves moving it beyond his body, getting it out. His strategies are active and embodied modes of cleaving bad energy to allow good energy to be built in the body. Nu also spoke about this dynamic and how his energy changes when he holds the fire:

I have a daytime [job] and then I have a night time [job]. So many times I get tired. [Sometimes] you give much more energy or give less energy. When I start to burn, when I see the fire, my mood just changes. You know like 'whoosh' [moves hands over his body] because you are in it. You already in it. When you burn you start. Maybe you cannot give much more energy than when you are in a good mood, but you still can give. (Nu, personal communication, September 19, 2016)

As Som and Nu relate above that sometimes they have to "kill" their energy, or be energized through fire to prepare themselves to give affectively to the tourists. Nah shares that his strategy in changing his energy, particularly with difficult tourists, is to move in closer and attempt to create an even deeper relationality:

One other thing is the technique I use to do the show is also to use in my life is that I put my heart in their heart to see how they feel. Ya to pretend to be them, you understand? So, it means that we cannot choose how we are born, how our culture. Even myself, I am thirty years old. I look back on my past and how I've become and I've seen other people how they've become, so I cannot blame them if bad behavior. You know, it's how they were born. If we understand that we just feel more like, ok I feel pity but I not hate you. (Nah, personal communication, September 12, 2016)

Boris and Parreñas (2010) relate that intimate labour encompasses diverse practices of care, sex and domestic work. Fire dancers, I argue, also perform this type of labour. Intimate labourers maintain particular social relations and attend to the needs of individuals and communities. It is “work that involves embodied and affective interactions in the service of social reproduction,” that is, it maintains people, communities and relationships (p. 7). Doing this work involves “bodily or emotional closeness” (p. 2) and relies on face-to-face interactions. This management and emotional work is not only important during the participatory aspects of the beach parties where they work as social lubricators, but as we have heard throughout this chapter, energy work is also essential in performance to “get them,” as Som says.

Fire dancers' labour does not fall neatly into categories. This is particularly evident when we think about the intersubjective ways they frame their affective labour, as both energies and emotional connections. And, these are not unidirectional flows but energies that circulate among tourists and performers. Fire dancers tell us that they negotiate energies on the beach, both their own and those of *farang*, and do so by feeling people or “putting my heart in their heart,” as Nah explains. In feeling for particular affects and emotions of tourists in the space of the beach, and as they perform and give energy to the audience, fire dancers move within a network of affects that they are channeling and working with.

Cassaniti (2015a), in her look at the emotional components of supernatural encounters in Thailand, finds that affect theories, in how they centralize “fluid movement and

intersubjectivity,” are useful frameworks for interpreting Thai emotional experiences (p. 133). The “energy” (*palang*) that people describe feeling in their supernatural encounters “can be free floating, not necessarily associated with an individual” (p. 134). “This energy, it is thought, escapes and permeates the social landscape. When one encounters ghosts, they are, in a very real sense, encountering, or affected by, the free-floating, inchoate desires and feelings of others” (p. 135). While fire dancers are not discussing the supernatural, their rendering and conceptualization of “energy” is strikingly similar: “The quality of the felt supernatural may be thought of as affect, with its interpersonal energy travelling in the space between people and becoming coalesced into an emotion within individual bodies” (2015, p. 137). Indeed, we hear about how their work with energy can create emotions of desire and jealousy, and connections of intimacy.

## **Conclusion**

I have attempted in this chapter to keep at the forefront fire dancers’ experiences and understandings of energy and I have taken seriously Cassaniti’s suggestion that scholars pay “attention to the culturally variable and locally articulated ways that feelings and desires escape the body and meet, or affect, each other” (Cassaniti 2015a, p. 140). In keeping with this commitment, we must reconsider ways in which affect theorists tend to discuss intensities, or affect, as different from emotion. Affect is often rendered as pre-conscious and intersubjective, while emotion conscious and individual. For fire dancers, however, emotions *and* energy are not subject-centred, but rather both flow among porous bodies and can materialize in particular ways. A feeling can be articulated and brought to consciousness, but still be understood as intersubjective. Thinking about how sensation, intensity and emotion move along a continuum is helpful in considering how *phalang* moves a body to action, yet also to a feeling state and always

in relation to other bodies and energies. Thus, as Som and Nu so carefully explain, one must “kill” their own bad feelings before interacting with others. This porous and collective self, which permeates much of Thai social relations, is opposed to a Eurocentric idea of the self as independent, and emotional life as interiorized. Even when Som describes his need to manage his emotional life, which we might read as interior – him “killing” his anger – he does this so as to not affect others in negative ways. Nah’s notion of “putting my heart in their heart” also exhibits these same principles. He can enter someone else to understand them, to feel them, and then change himself. Thus, I argue, that fire dancers are not only creating affect or feeling on the beaches, but also moving and channeling particular energies *and* emotions which are shared. They are “conduits” for particular affects that are already floating in the air (Wissinger 2007). Their understandings require a rethinking of the very concept of affective or emotional labour as both affectively productive *and* reactive.

Wissinger, in her look at the affective labour of models, similarly, finds that current frameworks conceptualize emotion and affect as subjective qualities that labourers manage and work to produce. Modeling, she states, “not only sells products, but also calibrates bodily affects, often in the form of attention, excitement or interest, so that they may be bought and sold in a circulation of affects that plays an important role in post-industrial economies” (2007, p. 251). She proposes that we must find frameworks for being able to discuss the “non-subjective aspects of affective labour” (2007, p. 259). She argues that “Focusing on the subjective qualities of affective labour minimizes an important dimension of the concept because it does not adequately explore affective labour’s additional tendency to call on changes in energy that take place below the level of consciousness” (p. 260). Like the fire dancers, models “are called on to channel the mood and energy present in the room, to open themselves up to the possibilities of the moment,

to collaborate with the team assembled in the hope of capturing something unexpected, something that moves beyond the norm, toward the unknown” (2007, p. 260). Fire dance performances work with the energies of tourists, their expectations of what they might experience in Thailand, their preconceived imaginaries, which reverberate with representations of Thailand and the beach as a space of erotic and exotic fantasy. Fire dancers use their bodies and equipment to move these affects through themselves and back out to the audiences, to “build them” as a “conduit of affective flow” (Wissinger 2007, p. 263). At every moment, fire dancers are assessing the most minute affective changes and shifts in atmosphere to respond appropriately and (re)produce tourists’ desires through their energetic work.



#### Chapter Four: *Baeng Pan* (Sharing)

This chapter focuses on the moral economy of a particular group of fire dancers that I refer to as the Bangkok flow art lineage. I demonstrate how these dancers express and negotiate the changes and tensions that emerge as fire art has moved from a participatory and informal practice to a more a presentational performance form that is integrated into capitalist exchange in the tourist industry. In particular, I trace what dancers refer to as a certain “feeling” of fire dancing and how they attempt to (re)create this essence in a tourist performance context. This group of dancers spatialize their community and practice at a fire art “studio.” There, they engage in acts of “space-ing” (Crouch 2001, p. 69), which, through embodied modes of interaction and particular aesthetics, fosters particular moral ideologies that are said to recreate the “feeling” of fire dancing.

In a similar vein to the previous chapter, capturing and recreating this feeling of fire art links with what these dancers consider to be “real” art. The moralities and ideals that surround their practices are generated and organized through the concept of “sharing” (*baeng pan*) which is directly and indirectly informed by Buddhist logics of non-attachment and generosity, and Thai sociocentric notions of moral exchanges and relation-building (Wilson 2004). Their moral world is thought of as a counterweight to capitalist tourist economies, yet as will be demonstrated, there is not a strict boundary between these realms as they are entangled in this scene. Rather, a management and negotiation of the “frictions” (Tsing 2005) between differing systems and ideologies takes place. Buddhism and “sharing,” like the labour of dance, are intertwined with capitalism in complex ways that social actors grapple with. While monetary exchange is often juxtaposed against “sharing,” this chapter argues that these discussions

showcase the ways in which fire dancers negotiate and attempt to reposition themselves as moral artists in contexts of transnational capitalism.

Unlike in other areas of the fire dance industry, Burmese fire dancers also dance *with* Thais in this group and participate in the moral world of the studio; like Thais, they share similar Buddhist moralities which help to provide common understandings which lend themselves to generative solidarities centred around sharing. Still, however, we will see that at times, the Burmese dancers are a source of tension and sometimes are employed to mark a boundary between the old “feeling” of fire art and what Thai dancers perceive as the new capitalist version. The studio and fire dance are sites where ideals of a sociocentric self, which is dedicated to the common good, are managed in relation to notions of individuality, ethnonational boundaries, neoliberal entrepreneurship and wealth accumulation.

### **The “Spirit” of the Park**

I get off the bus on the far outskirts of Bangkok in Bang Bua Tong. Pi Oud, one of the original Thai fire dancers, and the master teacher of many of my consultants, arrives in a taxi to bring me back to his home for our interview. He greets me and, as custom, asks if I would like anything to eat at the market across the street. I kindly decline and let him know that I brought food for us to share. We get in the taxi and he says, almost immediately, that the “spirit of juggling<sup>15</sup>” has been lost. When we arrive at his small home, he takes out a magazine that he has been featured in and some photos of the early days of fire art, back in the 2000s. I spot Pi Oud in one group photo, with long hair, likely in his late 20s at that time. He recounts how he and a group of close friends would gather in Santichaiprakan Park to “play” juggling together. Over the course of our three-hour interview, he tells me the story of his juggling group. It is a story

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<sup>15</sup> Juggling, the art of coordinating one’s bodily movement with pieces of equipment in rhythmic patterns, underlies all descriptions I have heard of fire dance, despite the different names given to it (i.e. fire art, fire dance, playing fire, juggling).

underpinned by loss, nostalgia and even anger about a movement form, a space and a group of people that lost the “spirit” (Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016).

Sakpong Mahayort from Nakhon Si Thammarat is known to his former students by his Thai nickname, Oud, and with the respectful Pi or Master in front that indicates his seniority<sup>16</sup>. Pi Oud asked that I use his real name alongside his birth city. He did not like the idea of having a pseudonym because juggling, he says, taught him to be “true.” Pi Oud learned to juggle from American tourists on the island of Ko Chang in the early 1990s, where he had been working in a hotel. They used to play together on the beaches and he relays that one of his American friends’ girlfriend gave him his first set of juggling balls, which he kept and brought out to show me. This informal way of learning and the act of giving are important; they are forms of participatory sharing, a practice that was highly valued for the way it helped people form the interpersonal connections and intimacies that underpin what Pi Oud calls the “spirit.”

After seeing so many tourists playing with different juggling objects on Ko Chang, because flow art was quite popular at that time, Pi Oud moved to Bangkok to try and earn a living making and selling this equipment on the infamous backpacker strip of Khao San Road. This district, which is a tourist hub filled with bars, hostels, and shops, is a ten-minute walk from Santichaiprakan Park – a quiet space near the river enjoyed by Thais, expats and tourists – where Pi Oud and newly made flow art friends would go to play juggling. It would become a hub for the participatory sharing of flow art in Bangkok and the group that formed there were the first to start doing fire art as an organized practice (Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016). In the 2000s, the group used to practice and have weekly fire shows there, and many went daily to play and simply hang out with each other. They were a mix of French, American, Canadian,

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<sup>16</sup> All Thais usually go by their nickname, instead of their formal name, in day to day interactions. The title *Pi* is a mark of respectability for addressing those who are older than oneself and *nawng* is sometimes used to address someone younger.

Japanese and other expats, tourists and Thais that came together organically and eventually formed a tight-knit community. Tourists who did flow art in their own countries would stop by, often teaching and sharing their knowledge. As a core group formed, Pi Oud, along with some of his *farang* friends, began to advertise “juggle jams.” Some of these original dancers are still active in Thailand, and the park continues to be a meeting ground for flow artists who find themselves in Bangkok, although there are significantly less people and no longer a core group or community.



(Figure 3: Poster for Juggle Jam, early 2000s)

Playing and learning at the park in the early days was based around a system of non-economic exchange that dancers from this lineage refer to as “sharing” (*baeng pan*). As the flyer states, “Come and enjoy, relax, *share* skills, instructions available. All ages and skill levels welcome” [*italics* my emphasis]. People would learn from and with each other. Pi Oud, who has the most advanced, came to be known as the Master teacher. He relays to me that he never charged for lessons, although he expected people to purchase equipment from him. What was

important about the park, for Pi Oud, was the type of sociality that this sharing fostered, a feeling of community – the “spirit” – that he feels has been lost.

Tiffany: Is this you in park? [looking at magazine article]

Pi Oud: Yes, Santichaiphakan Park

Tiffany: How come everyone learned there?

Pi Oud: Ya, that’s like a juggling park, you know, before. Everyday! Now you can see. No people

Tiffany: Yes, sometime I go there and there are only few jugglers on some days

Pi Oud: I think maybe spirit is gone from there. The spirit.

Tiffany: What was the spirit like in the days when you were there?

Pi Oud: It’s very good for me. After competition [came], very bad. Before we have job for performance we [would] go all the group [together], and we share money. After, like we go to MBK [large mall in Bangkok] and we play MBK, and we have agency and they want to give job...and they say you go this, you go this [perform at different places]. And after that they [the group] not come to stay with me. They separate. They give their business card to agency and then they get the job.

(Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016)

Pi Oud relates how when the dancers he trained and shared with started becoming good, they left him to go and make money doing private gigs. Indeed, dancers who I met on Ko Samui and also in Bangkok had left the group in the mid 2000s to go to the islands where fire dance was becoming a lucrative job in the tourist economy. Doing so, after Pi Oud had shared so much, I could tell, hurt and angered him: “They join with me, but why don’t they want to share with me? Not only one time, but they come with me many times. After they get their own company when they go to the park they never say hello to me. They see me like against them” (Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016).

Social relations in Thailand are permeated with, and maintained through, different types of moral exchanges. As Ara Wilson argues,

Exchange is the idiom and mechanism for many, if not most, relationships in Thailand: parent-child, senior-junior, husband-wife, and son-in-law to wife’s family, laity-monk, human-spirit, and friend-friend. The interactions between the monastic order and the laity are depicted in terms of transformative exchange; householders (mainly women) provide the daily sustenance to monks, who act as “fields of merit,” providing the opportunity to accumulate merit (which is calculated quite materially in terms of a store or amount of

substance). Furthermore, at the monk's ordination, the mother's "gift" of her son to the monkhood secures her place in heaven. The enactment and definition of many Thai social identities, such as women's position as "nurturer" or the relations of seniors (phi) to juniors (nawng), can also be understood in this light, as an orientation framed in terms of debt and exchange. (2004, p. 14)

These systems of exchange often run alongside, but are often thought about in counterdistinction to, capitalist market economies. Wilson argues that capitalism assigns value and meaning to products in relation to the market and is a system focused on accumulation (2004, p. 19). This is a logic and organization of exchange that is different from the principles of "folk, kin or moral economies" which are "generally guided not by extracting and accumulating profit...but by the need to define, maintain, or elaborate relationships" (2004, p. 12). These are economies linked to social and spiritual morals and relationships, and, thus, focused on creating affective ties.

Pi Oud's reference to the beginning of competition relates how the dance form migrated from a kin economy, built through sharing, to a more market-oriented system. Once competition and the prospects of making money entered the park group, the moral systems of social exchange, among student-teacher and among kin, were disrupted<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, Pi Oud felt that the creation of juggling as a performance genre and a commodity form in Thailand, disrupted the human relations and sociality being built through sharing. Pi Oud relates that today fire art is a business and that economic exchange is potentially damaging to flow art, particularly in the space of the park, a space set away from the market-driven tourist centre of Khao San Road:

Pi Oud: Some of the people I teaching but when they teach to people they sell the lesson – [they say] if you want to learn [it is] ten hours for 3000 baht. And I give him almost every day – for no baht! [said angrily] ...they not support me.

Tiffany: They teach and take money but you did it all for free.

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<sup>17</sup> The notion of debt to one's teacher (*kruu*) and the relationship between a student and teacher in Thailand are very important. In Thai classical music, this relationship is one instilled with cosmic power, connections to ancestors and the passing down of specialized knowledge in particular lineages. Each year there is a ceremony, *wai kruu*, in which teachers are honoured by students (Wong 2001).

Pi Oud: Ya. I never make internet or website for come to learn...only equipment. If I make a lesson, I say you have to buy equipment from me and I teach what you want to know. Not about ten hours teaching and don't know how you play, and if you want to learn more another 3000 baht – Not fair! I never get money ever – I have a couple of girl who live far away from the park. Their parent want me to teach, they have to pay me. That's ok. I get money. If I teach in school in Bangkok International School, in Harrow [expensive private school] there can pay because we make a lesson and activity for circus arts for ten hours....but not in the public park and you get money! Not fair!  
(Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016)

While a dimension of Pi Oud's juggle jam was his interest in selling equipment, which rooted these sessions in capitalist market exchange, there is something about learning and the sociality in the space of the park that economic exchange corrupts, in his perspective. In turn, he relates that having an economic focus goes against the principles of juggling and can even damage what he considers to be the proper aesthetic.

The spirit of juggling for the park group was underpinned by a disposition which Pi Oud describes as non-competitive. Pi Oud explained that competition was driven by person's desire to be a performer, while a desire to do flow art for increased concentration, coordination and personal well-being was more authentic to the spirit. This description resonates with the notion of a state of "flow" (Csikszentmihályi 1990), for which the art form is named after. The Flow Arts Institute website states,

This is the primary research of Mihály Csikszentmihályi who defines flow as a *mental state of complete focus, that merges action and awareness, while losing the self-consciousness*. Further, he describes flow as an activity in which a person has personal control, which includes a subjective distortion of time and that flow is intrinsically rewarding. This concept has been in Asian cultures like Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism for millennia as the concept of being whole and one with yourself. This moment can be experienced by anyone in any activity when they feel like their body and mind are highly focused. (Dreams 2015)

For Pi Oud, the spirit of juggling comes from a desire for shared relations with others and to learn more about the nature of one's body and mind. He pointed to the quote from the book *The*

*Complete Juggler* on the Thai Juggle Jam flyer (see figure 2) to explain the spirit of juggling further:

Almost anyone can juggle. It's not an art form reserved for circus people, but is a physically and mentally relaxing form of recreation which can help you discover and nurture your innate coordination... It can have the same calming effect on your spirit as playing or listening to good music. For many, juggling is a form of meditation, or integrating mind, body and soul. (Finnegan 1987 cited on Thai Juggle Jam flyer, above)

He felt that performers, those that left him alone in the park, corrupt this spirit by focusing on tricks, money and performance. These principles, for Pi Oud, are embodied. He considers money and competition to be inauthentic desires which produce inauthentic aesthetics.

He states that when learning, one's mind must be free of competition, and one must learn from the way their body moves naturally: "Always there are people that want to be the best or more work or something like that, you know? But the way they start not the same. They start by competition. I start by nature" (Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016). As he showed ways to improve my poi technique, he had me go back to simply throwing a ball from one hand to the other and we spent a long time unlearning the tendency to forcibly throw it. The easiest way, in fact, is to throw the ball gently up in the air and let it fall, the natural way. He said, "Wrong than nature. You have to learn with your body. That comes with your nature" (Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016). What emerges from the natural way, is a somewhat controlled, and yet free flowing movement that is graceful, calm and appears effortless. He countered this aesthetic by showing me great exertion, force and tightness which he referred to as "fast" spinning or tricks, born from a desire to perform.

He states, "I think for performers feeling 'ahhhh spin fast' [motions with his arms quickly]. This [art] you have to open for everyone. If they understand this [spirit] they not thinking 'difficult. I never can.' Have to learn, have to try because your nature. Body nature



everything. Just try, you know?” (Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016). Knowing that he himself had performed a few times with his group at the park, I asked if some performers were able to keep the spirit alive:

Pi Oud: When the beginning I not thinking about that because then no competition. We play what we know. Nature. Put music and spin and follow the music; music fast we spin fast, music slow we spin slow, move slow.

Tiffany: Do some performers still have the spirit?

Pi Oud: They all trick. Not about art or story in the poi or staff. On the beach Myanmar [Burmese people] only fast fast fast fast fast. For me you have to learn everything. That mean you juggler. Not only poi – you have to know staff, diablo, you have to learn contact ball. You have to learn everything because they use same feeling.

(Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016)

Pi Oud slipped between speaking about performers, those who are competitive, and the Burmese.

At one point in the interview, he stated that it was likely the Burmese who had triggered this increased competition that his park dancers had succumbed to:

Pi Oud: Myanmar come few years ago. Maybe four or five years [ago]. Not before.

Before Thai people. That’s why like this, because competition.

Tiffany: Why change when Myanmar come?

Pi Oud: Um because maybe Myanmar cheap pay, you know? Ya. Because they don’t know about fire art. They only know about fire spin you know ‘ahhhh...spin very fast, good good good’ [he motions with arms quickly]. For me after that I don’t want to spin very fast. You have to make story when we spin.

(Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016)

Perhaps the Burmese labour migrants began arriving as his students left for the islands, and thus, fire dance became more competitive than it once was. I am inclined to consider, however, that what Pi Oud is documenting and expressing is his perception of the transformation of a communal, participatory art form into a presentational performance that is fully integrated into the tourist economy in a more market-oriented way. Speaking about the Burmese and performers who spin “fast” indexes anxieties about globalization (Johnson 2013) and the tensions about maintaining barriers between kin and capitalist economies in this scene, which Wilson notes are often articulated through discussions of ethnicity, gender and sexuality (Wilson 2004). Money

had always been exchanged in the park for equipment, yet sharing became the principle through which Pi Oud understood the development of affective ties and the constitution of moral economies (Wilson 2004). As fire dance became a commodity form, an aesthetic of “fastness” emerged, and Pi Oud was quickly left behind.

His story of juggling is somewhat sad. Two main consultants for this research were students of Pi Oud’s who realized the earning potential of fire dance, and left Bangkok to make money in the islands. Both are incredibly successful dancers, but, as they explained, their master, Pi Oud, had not fared so well. While I generally found that people in this community were hesitant about accepting money for interviews, which I will touch on later, I was encouraged by them to give a “donation” to Pi Oud because of his circumstances. At the end of our interview, as I attempted to give him the money, he insisted that in exchange he give me a piece of equipment he had made. He said that even though he sometimes struggles for rent, right now, he has “enough” (*pho phiang*) (Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016). After speaking extensively about the tensions surrounding monetary exchange, I felt uncomfortable even offering, and I could tell that he too was uncomfortable. Pi Oud went to his front room and gifted me a set of Kevlar fire poi, an exchange much like those in the early days, and one he felt was essential among flow artists. Instead of having a strictly monetary transaction, Pi Oud, I understand, wanted to create a relation<sup>18</sup> with me that did not only centre around commodity exchange. As I got ready to leave, I asked if he would ever do it again in the park? He replied, “Not the park - change. Cause when they come there are many groups that separate. When they sit there they go and sit there [he motions with his hands of different groups in different areas]. And not feel together about juggling” (Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016). I left Pi

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<sup>18</sup> I also recognize that giving money instantiates an unequal power relation and perhaps that was uncomfortable for Pi Oud. I do, however, think that part of his gift was to practice and demonstrate the principles of juggling to me since we had spent almost the entire interview speaking about this.

Oud's and took the bus back to Bangkok and packed my bags to head to Ko Samui the next morning. I was returning to a fire studio run by Pi Oud's former student, Nah. It was a place that I came to understand as somewhere that people could "feel together about juggling," a site where kin economies were being reconstituted.

### **"A Place for Artists"**

I took a *motocy* (motorcycle) taxi uphill along the winding road away from the tourist strip of Chaweng Beach on the island of Ko Samui. Tucked away on a small piece of land is an open-air structure filled with flow art equipment, mirrors and *motocycs* parked outside. My *motocy* taxi driver drops me off for the first time at the Fire Art Studio, the only of its kind in Thailand, and Nah, the co-owner, comes to greet me. We perform an awkward dance of greeting as we assess which one of us is higher on the social hierarchy – Nah is the teacher, so he is above me, but I am slightly older than Nah. We both awkwardly *wai*<sup>19</sup> each other at the same time, although my position as a student would be firmly established in the coming days. He welcomes me inside and after some discussion I sit at the small bar on a stool. He points to a picture hanging on the wall of a masked man who looks like a circus performer; "my master," says Nah (Nah, personal conversation, June 6, 2016). The masked man was Pi Oud.

Nah, in his early 30s, with the help of his Swiss *farang* girlfriend, Anik, set up the studio space for fire artists on Ko Samui. Ko Samui is a large Thai island and is highly developed for tourism. Downtown Chaweng has large mall, a Starbucks, multiple McDonalds and expensive resorts lining the beach. The island even has its own airport and is a hub for tourists in the Gulf of Thailand. There are some spaces for budget travelers, but the island mostly supports very high-end transnational hotels, resorts and even private villas. Ko Samui also has a large

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<sup>19</sup>This is the standard bowed greeting, although it should be done first by those of lower social status as a form of respect.

expat community who work as event and wedding planners, bar co-owners, dive shop operators, musicians and managers at the high-end resorts. Given this island's tourism diversity, the fire art scene caters to a wide range of events, and there are many Thai and Burmese dancers, and even *farang* fire performers who labour (undocumented) as a working holiday.

The influx of labour migrants from Myanmar has disrupted the scene on Ko Samui. Many of the male migrants are undocumented and often forced to work for less money, or sometimes only for tips with no hourly wage. The older Thai dancers, who have been performing for years, lose jobs and income because of the increased competition born from these exploitative labour practices. Knowing-well the issues and tensions, Nah sought to standardize pricing on Ko Samui. He attempted to organize with Thai and Burmese dancers to charge the same amount for shows. While not everyone agreed, and there is still much undercutting, Nah managed to establish a group of dancers to create what he characterizes as an agency that is housed at the studio. He takes a small percentage, which is mostly for the upkeep of the studio space, and gives the rest to the dancers. Nah makes most of his own income from his performances. With the help of his girlfriend, who is trained in marketing, the studio has become a central hub and is quickly gaining a reputation as having a very high-level of artistry.

While Nah considers Pi Oud to be his Master, I sensed some animosity from Pi Oud when I asked him about Nah. He denied that Nah had been a student saying that he simply came to the park: "He never work with me. He just perform together with me. He not start together, not live with me, not eating with me" (Pi Oud, personal communication, July 7, 2016). Sharing food is an exchange that sets up a relation of intimacy among people, and in this expression, Pi Oud denies this relationality with Nah. I understood, however, that Nah had a great deal of

respect for Pi Oud. Nah did, however, explain that when he started at the park, things were tense with the Master:

One day they have walking street in Bangkok so I decide to go with my friend and on walking street I saw a group of people and they play something and I don't know what. They do fire. They do throwing things and I go to ask them, 'What is this?' It's called juggle.' I never heard this word before, you know? I see in the movie but only they throw ball, but these toy I never see before and I beg for my friend to borrow me money [lend him money] hahaha! So, he give me and I buy. 250 baht and I very happy hahaha! I play with it for two months but the thing I realize is that you cannot learn in two months with the toy by yourself... You need somebody to share, to share the knowledge. At that time, you don't have the YouTube. Internet is still expensive to use. So, I discovered a park in Bangkok that they have a little community and every day they practice there. I saw on the way back to school. Santichaiprakhan Park. And then I go there and I saw a group of people and I go to ask one guy to teach me. I ask many people and they point to one guy, and he's the master. I go to ask him, 'Please Mr. can you teach me how to play this toy?' And he yelling at me like, 'Who are you?! Come from where?! You buy toy from somewhere else! You come to ask and I didn't get anything from you!' It's very rude, but I understand. So, I just stay there and looking for few days until one day one he come to teach something, a little bit, and ok, I start to be at [in] the community.  
(Nah, personal conversation, June 22, 2016)

Nah's arrival demonstrates how there was indeed a very strict and important economic dimension to Pi Oud's juggle jams, and he showcases the intensity of the master's rules about this. Importantly, he also references the idea of sharing, and how people needed to share knowledge with each other in order for the art form to progress. While it took some time for others to begin sharing with Nah, that is how he became part of a community.

Like Pi Oud, Nah mentions the intimacy of the community and he relates specifically how that was different than now, when performing has become a job:

To be at [in] the community at that time, it's just a hobby. Nobody call it a job. In the community, they do this as hobby and to survive they make a toy for selling in Khao San Road for tourists. And we not do fire for money yet. We do only busking, you know? Like we go our whole community like five, six, seven people busking and share money, like 40-60 baht each. We didn't have like much move like now. We didn't have like a real show. We had to perform as a group to make it more interesting.  
(Nah, personal communication, June 22 2016)

Given that this was Nah's first telling of his history to me, the fact that he mentions this aspect is important. Tensions surrounding the move from a hobby to a job, from participatory jams and busking to more presentational performance styles, underlies this scene, creating spaces, affects and movements of tension within flow art.

For many of Pi Oud's former students, these early days and the participatory nature of the park group had a different feeling. Pi Tha, now in his forties, was at the studio one day. He too had left the group to perform. We were chatting about Pi Oud when he related, "It felt different then. We would play, eat, and even sleep together. The whole park, so many people." (Pi Tha, personal communication, September 4, 2016). I asked Nah about the feeling of the park, and if he also felt like it had changed. He agreed,

Yes, because at that time we love it as hobby. And now it's become part of the job. You speak with your friend and sometimes...like, 'Hey, today we go to busking and grab a beer,' you understand? Now no. All of us busy, have responsibility, have to think seriously, especially if you reach 30. If you reach 30 years old you have to think very seriously about what you doing you know...Even me, if you ask me if I'm very good teacher, I'm good at teach them how to think, more than how to be good at what they do. Because I think that is the most important, you know? Most of the artists are from many places. If they start to make their own show, they start to hate each other. It's not like hate each other, but kind of like competition, you know? It's normal. But I open here [and] it's more like sharing, you know? Sharing.  
(Nah, personal communication, September 12, 2016)

Clearly, and as Pi Oud elaborated, the move to performance brought competition and economic-based exchanges were seen to supplant systems of sharing. As I came to learn, the studio, while very much situated with the capitalist tourist economy, was discussed as being fundamentally run through modes of sharing, which I detail below, as a way in which Nah and the dancers attempted to recapture the "spirit" and "feel" of those early days.

The studio is modeled off a *farang*-run guesthouse in the (white<sup>20</sup>) hippie tourist enclave of Pai. A business venture meant to attract traveling yogis and artists, typically white tourists pay a hefty fee to have a back-to-nature feel, yoga lessons and access to flow art equipment. While I cannot comment on the socialities and relations that might emerge at the guesthouse in Pai, it was clear that Nah felt it functioned through capitalist exchange, a system he viewed as lacking, and in counter distinction to, the affective relations constituted through sharing.

Tiffany: How did you get the idea for this place?

Nah: Pai Flow House. Went with my girlfriend. But mine is different. I feel uncomfortable there. Nobody speak to me.

Tiffany: Why?

Nah: It's more a business.

Tiffany: Wow! Did they not know you are one of the most famous in Thailand!?

Nah: Those people, if they don't see you have a skill, no respect. They don't see me do it. If you see someone on the street or at a show, like 'Wow!' and you respect what they can do. They don't see me do it. It was 400 baht just to go it. I don't have that money. Here [the studio] is all about artists."

(Nah, personal conversation, June 14, 2016).

Nah immediately references the class differences and says that his studio is "about artists." It is clear that Nah views those who make spaces for flow art as a business venture to be different from the artists who share at his studio. Although who gets classified as artists, engages with ethnonational, economic and moral hierarchies in complex ways.

### **Economies of sharing**

The imaginary boundaries between kin and capitalist economies are often created and performed through discussions of Burmese dancers as bringing competition, and of only doing it for money and *farang* women, an aspect that was touched upon in Chapter Three. As Pi Oud related above, the Burmese come to embody the ideological tensions and anxieties surrounding touristic capitalism and (uneven) "development" (Johnson 2013). The studio, however, is a space

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<sup>20</sup> During my last visit to Pai in 2012, the town was overwhelmingly white, although I have heard that more recently that are also many Chinese tourists.

that attempts to reconstitute a kin economy in a way that includes Burmese dancers. Nah characterizes himself as somewhat of a utopian who is “not closed” to the possibilities of intercultural connections, even though he has been taught to dislike and fear Burmese people (Nah, personal conversation, Sept. 12, 2016). The studio has a team of young Burmese dancers who Nah trains and teaches. He managed to secure them a very well-paid contract, including health insurance, at one of the biggest bars on the island. Such a contract is almost unheard of in the fire scene. As Nah expressed on my first visit, and multiple times after, “a place for artists” fosters a type of belonging that is not centred on ethnonational identification, but rather, on particular principles, exchanges and aesthetics. It was more than a space for dancers to hone their skills; it was a place in which people were expected to share: skills, food, conversations, emotions and friendships

During my stays at the studio in June, August and September of 2016, there was a core group of seven Burmese dancers and six Thai dancers who went almost every day. Two of these dancers were a couple, Dao and Song, and Dao was the only female fire dancer at the studio. Alongside Som, featured in Chapter Three, who mostly danced at the large Moon Parties on the neighbouring island of Ko Phangan, they were not original park dancers, but from the second generation and taught by Nah and others who studied under Pi Oud. Some other dancers that frequented the studio were not fire artists, but performers who entertained tourists at the hotels, mostly doing hip hop routines. Anik, Nah’s partner, was not at the studio regularly, as she was not a performer and most of her work involved behind the scenes planning. Nah, however, was there every day. The day would start around 2:00pm as people would start arriving on their *motocys*, often sharing the bike with a fellow dancer. The Burmese dancers, the youngest at the studio, always *wai*’d Nah before they stepped into the space.



As people arrived they typically would sit on the couch or the bean bag chairs as their bodies woke, snack on some food, chat and play on their phones. Fire dancers typically work late into the evening and thus the rhythm of the day begins in the late afternoon. An hour or so later, someone would begin to practice outside in the back or in front of the big mirror under the covered area. One person would grab a toy, which were usually strewn about the space and start. As if all in synch, others would join until everyone was playing and practicing together. This sort of play with intermittent periods of relaxation and chatting went on every day in almost the exact same manner. On some days, tourist flow artists or *farang* performers would stop by and join in. Other times, a Thai dancer friend from another island might come to stay for a few days to share in teaching and practice. People generally left the studio around 8:00pm to head to their nightly gigs. Som, who only worked a few days in the month, sometimes stayed late with Nah, smoking weed and practicing until 2:00am.

It is important to note, that even as the studio was inclusive of Burmese people, not everyone shared the same sentiments as Nah. For Som, the competition they brought to the islands, along with what he felt was a lack of artistry, was unacceptable, and thus, ethnonational demarcations were sometimes invoked. As we talked about fire artistry one day on the beach, Som relayed the following:

Som: You can ask the fire dancer here, ‘You know hybrid? You know isolation? You know anti-spin?’ If they say don’t know it mean they not in the poi yet. You just asking this question. This isolation of the toy, the equipment. This isolation of body. Not many people know. You can ask the Burmese, ‘You know hybrid?’ No.

Tiffany: The students who go to study with Nah, how did they get to go study there?

Som: Actually, before they work in my friend bar and they work no good and they think they cool. And then we kick them out of the bar and everyone not have the job because they have ego. Burmese people, that’s how I feel, you know? And they have nowhere to go and Nah have no choice, you know? They have so many good Burmese people. This no good because they steal our job and they not do cool show. They just do for money. It’s not art, you know. Like me, I’m artist. But I don’t care. I have enough. I work six day a month. Enough. I get 30000 baht [1000.00 CAD].

(Som, personal communication, June 15, 2016)

Som is obviously not pleased that the Burmese students train under Nah, particularly because they cut in on jobs, and his discussion, like Pi Oud's, attempts to use the Burmese to differentiate a good artist from a bad artist. This interview took place at a beach bar where Som sometimes practiced in the day. He never spoke disparagingly about the Burmese at the studio, where I often saw him teaching the Burmese students, and even joking with them and chatting. On another occasion, however, he related that he is only at the studio to repay a debt to Nah, who taught him when he first began. But, despite his personal feelings, at the studio he shared.

Although the dancers and studio were very much situated in the wider capitalist tourist industry and all performed for money, similar to the park, everyone taught each other and shared their knowledge without economic exchange at the studio. Given that I was initially considered somewhat of a tourist, I was asked to pay for lessons with Nah, but I was soon incorporated into the sharing system. After two lessons, in which Nah showed me some basic moves and techniques, I was then told not to pay, but to learn from sharing with others at the studio. I typically would stand outside at the back where there is a large cement floor, a mirror and picnic table. This was the place that the Burmese students often practiced. As I stood and practiced, a Thai or an advanced Burmese dancer would come over to chat and share a move with me. Many of our interviews took place playing with equipment in front of this mirror. I would still contribute the 40 baht studio fee, which was required of tourists and performers who had secure jobs, but during my final month, Nah encouraged me to stop doing so.

Sharing also involved an even division of duties to maintain the studio space, assist with promotions and organize shows. Resources were generally split among the dancers. There was not a surplus for upkeep, so all were expected to clean, help build new parts, materials and

equipment, and maintain the space. Performances, too, had shared aspects even if not all people were dancing. If there was a big show or event, even those dancers who were not performing were expected to help in planning, taking photos, driving people or by providing refreshments. This sharing system operated quite smoothly, and even tourists who stopped by to jam or to learn were encouraged to share their knowledge with others in the space. Thus, it was a space very intentionally attempting to create a system in opposition to market exchange, even while it was entangled in transnational capitalism.

Because I was the least experienced, and thus, did not have a repertoire of techniques to share, I was expected to share in a different way. I was often asked to clean or help out with workshops that the studio held for expat children or the international school. I helped to edit documents and copy for their upcoming website, take photos and videos, clean performance sites and carry equipment. Naively, I began this research thinking that the most ethical way I could work with the dancers was to pay them for their time and the knowledge they would share with me. But this was not welcomed at the studio. When Nah, Anik and I had a discussion about me paying dancers for interviews, they advised that one donation would be best and they would use it for something shared among all the dancers so as to avoid conflicts. Nah, however, briefly mentioned that maybe I could pick some special toys to purchase instead of giving money. When I approached Nah about this matter privately, when Anik was not there, he asked specifically that I not give money, but rather a tangible gift. He related that if I give a special piece of equipment that dancers can hold, play with, touch and share to remember my time there, it would be much more meaningful. It was clear that money was seen to corrupt the sociality of the studio, and that it did not embody the intimate connections that objects – that we all touched, used and shared – did. I interpret my offering of an economic exchange as having the potential to disrupt sharing

and, perhaps more significantly, the relationships that dancers felt were being built through this mode of interaction.

Dao expressed one day that tourists had once shared with Thais in the early days and that this system had remained essential for flow artists who often meet each other in parks and become friends through movement: “Many tourists like to share for free because...because the feeling of art. They are artists. If I am artist and if people there and want to learn, why don’t I share with them?” (Dao, personal communication, June 14, 2016). When I returned home from fieldwork, I was chatting with Dao on Facebook about sharing and she stated so succinctly, “We share to get happiness and friendship” (Dao, Facebook communication, April 5, 2017). Sharing – whether it was through sitting and chatting, eating food together, cleaning the studio, or teaching each other fire dance techniques – was, at its core, doing relational work. Sharing, I argue, is a form of affective labour, that is productive of something more than the functioning of a studio on limited resources or ensuring the longevity and progression of fire art. Rather, it creates a particular felt sociality and closeness, rather than competition and distance that dancers associated with capitalist logics. Sharing reconstitutes kin economies, even within systems of capitalist exchange such as tourism, and is a product emerging from the friction of encounter between different moral and economic logics in this industry (Tsing 2005). Sharing comes to be understood as fostering a type of belonging among a diverse group of individuals at the studio, and even while there are internal tensions, I came to understand the space as a site of solidarity among Burmese and Thai dancers who work in an industry that separates and places them in competition with each other. Sharing provides a system of intercultural and intergenerational relational labour unimaginable in other spaces of the tourist industry where tensions are more generative of boundaries.

The studio's kin economy and ideal of sharing is thoroughly embodied in the particular aesthetic through which the studio dancers seek to style their bodies, an aesthetic that is considered to embody the "art" of fire art. As discussed in Chapter Three, fire dancers think about their labour and relations with the audience as affective; their bodies become conduits of energy (*phalang*) to either create a feeling or forge a felt connection with the audience. These exchanges create what they understand as reciprocal, and thus, morally good relationships (Tausig 2014; Mitchell 2011). I learned from Nah and the other studio dancers that these affective relations are part of the complex of sharing. In order to share with the audience, one must be a master of technique and be able to create the aesthetic of "flow"; this is a smooth and personalized set of rhythmic patterns and tricks that can be adapted to different music and audience energies. For Nah, artists must perfect the technical basics in order to develop an individualized flow. He is adamant about only teaching the basic moves so that his students do not copy his style, but, rather, find their own flow. This is an aesthetic that at first seems individualized, and in contradistinction to sociocentric modalities of sharing, but as we will see, an individual flow still requires sharing.

Almost daily, I observed dancers honing their flow. Oftentimes, they would share different tricks, techniques and patterns with each other, but the way people combined them and made subtle stylistic differences was individualized. Certain dancers were experts with particular pieces of equipment and would help others to try and get a smooth flow going. I even saw, on occasion, the hip hop dancers teaching Som and Dao ways to combine features from breaking and popping into their flow. People frequently practiced in the mirror, often many at a time, and would combine moves over and over again until it was smooth, until just the right level change, positioning and bodily movement could come together to make a particular pattern of tricks that

person's own. Of course, like Pi Oud's aesthetic of naturalness, having a flow had to be natural and look effortless, and it was also juxtaposed against "fast" styles.

Dao worked with me frequently to help my flow. She was an expert at fire hoop, but was also incredibly talented with poi, both of which I would practice at the studio. She explained that developing flow was something attained by sharing with others. That is, one must learn different moves, techniques and styles from peers in order to combine them and gain an individualized flow.

Tiffany: What did you mean when you talked about having your own personal flow?

Dao: Ah! Like trick one, trick two, trick three. My own flow, I can do all these trick, but I only combine one and I count to three first and then two. Something like that.

Tiffany: Is this different for every person?

Dao: Ya. Ya. Like there is no particular pattern of these tricks. To be your own flow, you combine them all. And sometimes when you meet people who are like you, you talk to them. They might share something and you might share something and now you got something, a new more thing. And it keeps adding on.

(Dao, personal conversation, September 22, 2016)

One day, Dao showed me different ways to combine all of the tricks that I knew, and how to move my body in more creative and graceful ways to start a flow. I practiced endlessly trying to transition between moves and turn my body in a circle at the same time. Dao cheered when I finally got it, the beginning of a flow that was individual to my body. Som, on another afternoon, worked with me on a transitional movement called the waterfall, and showed me various bodily twists and turns that I could choose from when I executed this trick. After months of practicing, I could go through many of my movements and I would often think about whose patterns, tricks and help were embodied in my personal flow. My flow, had small pieces of Dao, Som and other studio dancers in it.

While not always slower than the 'fast' spinning that is often referenced as the disembodiment of flow and artistry, having flow certainly feels more continuous, slower and

controlled than doing trick after trick. But, more importantly, underpinning the aesthetic of “slow” flows, was again this ideal of sharing, and it was an ideal that I came to understand the dancers expressing when they talked about the importance learning *with* others to develop a flow. This aesthetic is one that embodies a type of individuality born from relationality. What is important is not to copy another, but to combine things in a way that makes a personal, and yet, relational style. It is an individual flow born from exchanges of movements and the affective labour of sharing. Like Pi Oud’s rendering of natural style being the embodiment of a non-competitive ethos, a slow flow not only signified a person’s artistry, but their ability to share, and thus, was viewed as being able to express how well they followed the moral principles of flow art. This is, however, a technique firmly situated in a market economy through which they make a living, a tension I discuss below. Dancers outside of the studio community were understood as only be able to “spin fast,” which signified that were only interested in making money and having access to *farang* women, rather than doing fire dancing for the love and purpose of making art and sharing it.

While the Burmese dancers at the studio participated and followed these same principles, it was clear that they were viewed somewhat differently than Thai dancers. The Burmese students were definitely positioned as the most junior, and thus, lowest on the internal hierarchy<sup>21</sup>. In turn, and because of this, it was the Burmese dancers were the ones who performed the nightly shows at the party-style bars, while almost all other dancers strictly did performances at the hotels, private villas and for weddings which were more lucrative and steeped in a type of “luxury” and somewhat more acceptability than the beach shows. Given that

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<sup>21</sup> While I often found that the Burmese dancers practiced somewhat separately, outside at the back, I always thought of the them as fully incorporated into the studio and a part of sharing that took place. Given that there was a significant language barrier with some of the more junior Burmese dancers, some of whom could not speak Thai or English, I understood their space at the back of the studio as simply a way for them to communicate with each other comfortably, to take up their own space in the studio.

they were the least experienced, except for Jes, Nah's prized student, Nah felt that he had to teach them to be moral artists, a role he took very seriously. Nah repeated a discourse we have come to know well throughout this dissertation, often expressing to me that Burmese dancers did not understand the "art" of fire dance, and that they just spin fast and are eager to do it for partying and women. Interestingly, he attributed this not so much to their ethnonational identities, but more so to their young ages and inexperience. He related that he too had a fast style, used to party with *farang* women, drink and take methamphetamines such as *yaba* ("crazy medicine") when he first entered the exciting transnational tourist scene<sup>22</sup>:

Nah: I was the same. Yes. When you are young, your energy is different. When you do poi when you spinning, you not see yourself. You not see yourself and you just going doing fast fast fast fast fast. And I do the same until after one day I saw my video and [I think] 'Oh! Why so fast? Why have to do fast?' And more I have to feel what the customer feels. If you not spin fire before you do five moves in five seconds, you [the audience] not understand a thing. You just see spin spin spin, you know? Of course, it looks fast, look quick, look good. But not understand a thing about what I'm doing. It's [a] waste. It's [a] waste. So, my style is more like I want you to see and feel and understand my show. That's why I change a lot. I see my video like um maybe six, seven years ago I do quick. I do very quick. Ya people learn, learn by experience.

Tiffany: and I guess people who need money right away just go on YouTube and learn fast and go to the beach.

Nah: Yes, this is the thing. I can see which performer comes from that. Yes, it's very easy because they [have] very less basic. They just come and show only difficult moves, only difficult moves and you cannot find any basic or any simple move at all, you know? That is for me not...not an artist, not beautiful.

(Nah, personal communication, September 12, 2016)

He feels that the Burmese have had to learn quite fast, and often in this manner, although he understands their motivations for quick money because of the circumstances in their country:

I see the Thai community of spinner is bigger than before, of course, but it's growing slowly. But, from what I see, they are real artists, Thai. Ya they do from what they love. Not because they come like to do to survive. In Thailand, it's very hard to find Thai people to come to do this because you need the real people to have this passion to do it. Burma is more easy, because they come to Thailand not to be lazy. When they're here

<sup>22</sup> This methamphetamine, incredibly popular on the beaches, was also said to be one the reasons for all the fast spinning, and it was juxtaposed with marijuana, a drug that could actually enhance one's slow flow, and something many at the studio smoked.



they have to survive and fire show is one of the things that can make good and quick money. And I can find easy Burmese, but to find real artist is not easy. Ya, so technically all my students, I teach them to be artists.

(Nah, personal communication, September 12, 2016)

While Nah is sympathetic to their need to survive, I interpret Nah as saying that Thais are more natural artists, by virtue of the fact that they can do it out of love, but that the Burmese are better workers because of their more urgent economic needs. Still, however, we must remember that Nah understands their lack of artistry also as a product of inexperience.

It was through Nah's discussions of what he teaches the Burmese – the “art” of fire art – that the principles and moral ideals of the studio and the aesthetic of flow began to crystallize.

Jes, the most senior and advanced Burmese student, very succinctly captured this ethos of artistry:

Jes: If you are doing just for fun or money, it's not really nice... And if you don't think about money, you will never get ego. Ya and if you a people [person] who love art you can like open up and give to other people and make other people love with this art. So, he [Nah] make me love and he let me know how ... like um.. he teach me what we are doing, we have to feel it and we have love it. If you feel it is about art then you don't care about money anymore. You just going to do what you love.

Tiffany: Are many of the dancers on Ko Samui artists or just do it for money?

Jes: Umm there is two kind of people – like someone only want to make money and some people love art and they are doing really great. And they can go art really high than people who love to make only money. And their talent will never stop – keep going, keep going because they love it. Like him [points to Som, practicing close by]. He love it. He don't care about money. He just learning. I love it.

(Jes, personal communication, June 27, 2016)

For the studio dancers, the key to being an artist and making fire art beautiful was to develop a felt motivation that was not born from a desire for money. It was this underlying ethos that helped to create a beautiful flow, rather than fast spinning. Art, for them, had, like sharing, a specific feeling that could be generated from a desire based in curiosity and love, but that had to be separate from economic motivations.

The studio, I argue, and the principles of art that manifest there, creates a space in which dancers attempt to reconstitute what they consider to be moral relationships and exchanges. The ideal of sharing, and of motivations that underlie this type of exchange, are ways in which the tensions surrounding an art form that has moved from a participatory practice to a tourist commodity are expressed and negotiated by some dancers. In so doing, dancers seek to (re)position themselves as moral subjects and artists within contexts of transnational capitalism. While we must acknowledge that multiple moralities exist within one sociocultural system, morality in Thailand is incredibly significant and woven into everyday life. I follow Tausig who explains how systems of morality and notions of goodness (*kwaamdi*) are powerful social metaphors that structure daily life and social relations, and particularly, musical relations. As Tausig and others such as Mitchell (2011) note, mutuality and reciprocity are essential components of audience-performer relations, particularly in popular genres. Thus, economic exchanges that have some underlying affective aspect to create a relationship are highly valued and are precisely what Wilson describes as the role of kin economies (2004). As we saw in Chapter Three, performers sought to make an affective connection with the audience and idealized this ability as characteristic of an artist. What emerges at the studio is a morality and system that idealizes non-economic exchanges, which are thought to create and sustain affective relationships through kin economies and very particular aesthetics.

I understand the ideals of non-economic sharing as not only an aspect of kin exchanges and more sociocentric modalities of living, but also as guided by Theravada Buddhist moralities which consider worldly attachments, and especially material items, to be a source of suffering which can affect one's rebirth. The over-accumulation of money beyond one's needs, or having more than enough (*pho phiang*), can signify greed and immorality in Thailand. Money is the

ultimate form of worldly attachment, which goes directly against Buddhist teachings of the impermanence (*anicca*) of all things. To practice letting go is to recognize this impermanence and attachments as a cause of suffering (*dukkha*). To reconstitute a moral relation with money, those that have larger amounts of accumulated resources often perform public acts of donations to temples, to village ordinations, and other initiatives to redistribute wealth, and also to demonstrate the virtue of generosity (Reynolds 1990). Importantly, these redistributions allow one to gain merit (*bun*). Merit-making (*tham bun*) is central to Thai cosmological beliefs and social life. It generally involves giving gifts or donations to monks, who act as fields of merit for lay people, transferring back increased cosmological power. There is, however, a whole range of acts that Thais might consider as providing merit that are outside of the monasteries and monkhood, such as giving to the poor, for instance (Bowie 1998). The merit one is able to gain directly correlates to one's rebirth and is governed by the laws of karma; the more merit one has, the better their rebirth. In turn, immoral behaviours can result in penalties (*bab*) against one's merit. While merit determines a person's position in the cosmological hierarchy, it also determines one's position in society. Those that are rich, powerful and generous are thought to have accumulated more merit in past lives and, thus, have had a better rebirth (Hanks 1962).

While most Thais are not experts at Buddhist philosophy, and do not read Buddhist scripture, these ideals permeate everyday social life and are significant in the formation of national moral ideologies and policies, particularly in terms of economics, gender and sexuality (Furhmann 2016). As Furhmann relates, the 1997 economic crisis, "prompted renewed engagement with notions of Thai culture and heritage and its profitable integration into political and Buddhist-coded economic programs such as the sufficiency policy. Sufficiency (*khwam pho phieng*) [to have enough] designates a Buddhist-coded notion of economic, political, and

affective moderation, or a localized notion of austerity” (2016, p. 5-6). As will be discussed in the Chapter Six, these principles have had a great impact on gender and sexuality in Thailand. For the purposes here, however, we must consider how notions of having enough (*pho phieng*), and not becoming overly attached to money and material items, are linked with Buddhism for the studio dancers. Importantly, while they are Others in the Thai state, the Burmese dancers at the studio were also Buddhists, and thus some principles were shared and allowed for solidarities to form around particular moral views and practices.

The language and practices at the studio contain threads of Buddhist ideologies. For instance, people were never required to “pay” for lessons or using the studio, but were encouraged to give a “donation,” a word that directly invokes merit-making rather than economic transactions (Cate 2003). In turn, Nah told me that when he would busk and do beach performances, if he really needed money he would thank people at the end of the show and ask for their “support” rather than for tips (Nah, personal communication, September 12, 2016). Som, who talked about his large salary, and his ability to make a lot of money as a dancer, often also described how he redistributed his funds: “I do a lot of busking and put all of my money to the temple. Three time already in my life.” (Som, personal communication, June 15, 2016). On another occasion, when he was about to do a tour in China with a circus group, he said that he would be making 60 000 baht (2300.00 CAD), a hefty sum in Thailand. When he returned, however, he told me about how he was going to “share” this with his other team mates on Ko Phangan who had not been able to go to China with him.

While it is clear that Nah feels that economic exchange has the potential to disrupt and taint the intimate sociality of the studio and one’s artistry, he also feels that money can upset the

affective relations between with the audience and performer, even while it is a performance situated within a market economy:

I always explained to them [his students] that when you make a show, the show comes out from your feeling and people they can feel it. I don't recommend them to get money before the show. Customers sometimes do that, and I not recommend that because when they get money, when they feel like they got it, they not feel the energy to come out after. And, example, like if you go to see when people give tips you can see like how they react. If they really want money when they go with the box, 'hello money money, tip tip.' When people not give, they just go another table and get tip and go to another table. I don't recommend them to do that. I tell them, ok, the point of the show is to make them enjoy. If they want to give you, they give you. If they don't give you just say 'thank you. Hope you enjoy the night. See you.' You have to say goodbye, you have to make friend a bit. Even when you do that, sometimes they walk back and give to you. You have to make them feel comfortable. If you make a proper show, have respect, smile, make them feel comfortable, if they not give, still give them respect. It makes them even themselves [the performer] feel better.

(Nah, personal communication, September 12, 2016)

This quote suggests that if one is not desirous of money, one's ability and energy can be embodied in a way that affects the audience and oneself more profoundly. It is this feeling that should compel an audience member to give, not a tip jar.

I interpret the shift away from money, and more towards the language of sharing and references to Buddhism, as signifying money as somewhat dirty, and potentially corrupting for the dancers. The studio, I argue, provides a space where money is moved through moral exchanges – between patron and client (Nah and dancers), teacher and student (Nah and students) and among kin (general sharing) – rather than through what they interpret as the more capitalist relations between tourist and performer. This tension is also negotiated through discussions about motivations and performances that are centred in desires for affective relations with audience members, rather than money, which I interpret as dancers' way of creating a kin or moral economy with audiences, even while it is one firmly situated in the context of market-exchange. While dancers may parse out affective relations and monetary exchange, it is essential

to note how in the scene, these relations are completely intertwined. Thus, I view these discussions as elaborating the moral world of the dancers at the studio, albeit in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, rather than as strictly adhered to ideals of living and dancing. The studio, however, ensures that money is evenly distributed according to hierarchies based on experiences, and it seeks to ensure that everyone has enough (*pho phiang*) and that one person has not over-accumulated resources, which, as noted above, are principles situated in Buddhism. This principle was what underpinned Nah's desire to organize an agency that would support fair wages for all fire dancers in the first place.

During one interview, Nah randomly shared a story of the Buddha as we were talking about art, and it helps to elaborate the studio's moral positioning further:

He [Buddha] has one rule that if you a monk and then you study until you get like a power that's like out of [more than] the human, you cannot show this power if it's not important. But one day he showed the power to open other dimension, paradise and hell, to the human, so they all can see so they can believe that paradise is real and hell is real. After that he goes up to see his mother for many months. People on the earth miss him so much so they create the statue from wood. And people every day they go to pray. And the Buddha come back and he saw the people doing this [and said] 'Why you do that? You do that [worship a statue] and you didn't get anything. You didn't get your spirit to be more pure.' Because to be pure, for your spirit to be pure, you have to do meditation to silent all the frequency that you receive so you can know more, other frequency around you. For example, you can see the past, you can see the future and before you die your spirit isn't too much dirty. When you receive too much material things, when you receive you addict too much. Material things make your soul more dirty and come back in the same circle after you die. It's the same like if you love somebody so much, one of the life, maybe in the next hundred life you are born, you going to come to each other again in a relationship, even if not husband, maybe parent or something. It's like attraction. That is why they call it like a circle. To get out of that you have to understand and then you reach another level, reach another level until the top and you not going to come back again... From what I believe, I cannot go to that pure of life but I try to not make bad karma, especially my own self, to feel anger, to feel hate too much on myself. Try to understand things around.

(Nah, personal communication, September 12, 2016)

What Nah expresses directly relates to the principle of non-attachment that underlies the sharing that the studio functions through. One is made impure by attachments to power and

material items. What he also references, however, is the principle of humility, of not showing one's powers, and thus not developing an ego, which is an attachment to self that can affect other people in harmful ways. Developing an ego is common for fire dancers, and dangerous, as Nah states:

Everyone wants to feel important/accepted. Me I was poor and cannot get a girl. I do this and everyone gives a clap at the end. One of the only jobs where you get this. But this can cause ego especially if you only do it for women and party. Too much ego though is not good. You need to put your heart to the audience. Make them feel something. Even though we know what to do, they think fire is dangerous. Have to make them feel excited. Maybe the girls like it if the spinner has ego, but we are like no [raises hand in dislike] That's how you get money.

(Nah, personal communication, September 2, 2016)

Being a fire dancer comes with a certain amount of social power on the beaches, as was discussed in Chapter Three. It is a power that Nah feels has the potential to boost one's ego, and thus an attachment to self. Nah spoke to me extensively about how he teaches and encourages the dancers to have "low" or "small" egos. When I asked why there were so many Burmese dancers, he stated, "Easy money and get the feeling you important when you a fire spinner. It make you feel good...one job where people give you a clap at the end...Some people when become artist get an ego...can ruin your career. I try to teach my students not to have big ego" (Nah, personal communication, June 26, 2016). Thus, having a big ego, or being motivated by the increased attention, is viewed as similarly corrupting as money, and it too can disrupt affective exchanges.

In our conversations about ego, dancers connected it to desires for money and discussed how they felt that ego and economic desires can both create boundaries to relationality with audiences and other dancers:

Tiffany: You have talked to me a lot about not having an ego as an artist. Did you ever have one?

Nah: Yes, of course. Of course. It's something that is part of the human thing, you know? Haha! But you have to understand that, understand that and keep it down. Sometimes I go someplace, example, um I go... maybe I go Phi Phi [island] and go to sit look fire show and they play like shit, but I cannot blame them. I cannot go to show. If I go to show I know they are going to feel like 'ahh he comes to show off,' you know? If I really want to show, I make friends with them first and come to show another day, and show something simple not too much. Keep respect to the players. Keep yourself low. And also keep yourself safe from other people's minds.  
(Nah, personal communication, September 12, 2016)

Here Nah relates that having a "high" ego makes sharing with other dancers impossible and that sometimes one must be humble and hide their skill set to create a relation that will make sharing possible. Som echoed these sentiments in one of our final interviews where he told me about the moral rules among fire dancers. He explained that if one is in a dance competition (i.e. breaking battle) one needs a "high" ego, but not during a flow art performance:

Som: Need to be a little bit ego like 'yeah man' make people feel down. Try to win.  
Tiffany: How come cannot have ego when performing?  
Som: Because you cannot cling to anyone. You cannot go with anyone because your ego. How you going to perform? Need to respect.  
(Som, personal communication, September 6, 2016)

Som's explanation of not being unable to "cling" to anyone if one has an ego, clearly articulates how a high ego breaks the possibility of connection with others. Similarly, Jes explains,

Ego is like if you can do something and you going to have ego you just think yourself like a hero, like you can do everything. But in fact, it's not like that. If someone who has ego, they don't want to talk with other people and they don't want to talk with or working with people. Like if someone come to spin poi but they never try this before, it's their first time, but for me I can do it. But if I have ego, I don't want to talk with these people and I don't want to teach them. Because I'm just going to say you are useless – so that's people who have ego. And Nah he teaches me every time – ego can destroy your mind. Because it's very dangerous. Ego not only artists but it can have everyone. If someone can do something, he can have ego like 'I'm the best.' Like this. Not good for people around. Not good for everyone.  
(Jes, personal communication, June 27, 2016)

For Jes, non-attachment and having a low ego was not something new to him, but principles he had learned in his Buddhist upbringing in Burma. He related that his father used to teach him to



be humble and have a low ego, especially because he used to anger quickly when he was young. As these dancers relate, the boundary that an ego creates is not only disruptive of social relations among dancers, but relations with the audience. Nah explains, “I teach my students not to have high ego. The audience will know and they don’t like that. ‘Oh, look I spin so fast and can do a trick’” (Nah, personal communication, June 10, 2016). What these conversations reveal is that, in their perspective, one cannot “cling” to an audience or other dancers, or develop any sort of relationality, with an attachment to self (ego) or material desires.

Interestingly, discussions surrounding the corrupting nature money and ego are also in tension with idealized notions of morality and artistry. While we might consider that Nah is discussing how an audience might not appreciate or feel like they can become comfortable and engaged with an artist who has a big ego, when read against other comments, such as the quote above, it is clear that being able to have a low ego has a direct financial benefit; it allows for more audience relationality, and thus, the potential for more tips. After talking to me about learning to keep one’s ego down, he states, “That is how you get money” (Nah, personal communication, September 2, 2016). In turn, he encourages his students to affect the audience in a way that encourages tipping:

Cannot ask for tips but have to encourage. We look while we perform to see what tables are smiling and paying attention and then we go over to them at the end and say loudly ‘Hi! Would you like a picture with us?’ Everything depends on the first table you go to. If they don’t tip – no other tables will. You must choose the first table carefully. We never ask but have to make them feel like they want to give you some tips.  
(Nah, personal communication, June 10, 2016)

Nah knew that I regularly went to see the Burmese team’s nightly shows at the beach bar, and every once in a while, he would ask if they had walked around with the tip jar. I always told Nah that I had to leave before that point and thus I was not sure. Of course, the team walked around with the tip jar every night, from table to table asking for tips, but I never told Nah. I believe,

however, that it was not so much the act that bothered him, but rather the purity of artistic intentions; that is, one should want to affectively share art, with an audience and their fellow fire dancers, rather than desiring money. This is similar to the aesthetic of flow, discussed above, which is thought to signify a low ego and a desire to share, yet is a technique of relationality within a capitalist system of relations through which they make a living. We must recognize that the desire for money is never fully erased and that affective relationalities exist and manifest *within* capitalist relations. In turn, the focus on affective sharing, and embodying its aesthetics, are also, at times, done so that dancers can receive more money from audiences. Yet, for the studio dancers, making money and feeling powerful through art needs to be reconstituted and reframed in moral ways.

Given these contradictions and tensions, I view discussions about the corrupting nature of money and ego, and the idealized position of artistic sharing, as ways in which dancers manage, negotiate and (re)position themselves as moral figures in the landscape of transnational capitalism. The ideal of sharing, and the kin relations this constitutes, becomes a mechanism through which the lost “spirit” and “feeling” of a formerly participatory artistic form is renewed for them. Upholding these principles not only allows for spaces and art making to feel differently, but perhaps it also allows the economic dimension, the flow of money from tourist to dancer, to also feel differently, as a matter of shared relationships through the exchange of energy, rather than a production – consumption chain. Jes captured this essence:

Tiffany: You talked before about how Nah taught you that you are an artist. What did he teach you?

Jes: Ya because one year ago I didn't know myself that I am making art because I was only thinking of this for fun or for make money. But if you ask me do you love it? I love it. But I don't really know that I am doing something art or is amazing work. But now I understand. Because every time when I do this it make me so happy and comfortable. So, I was like feel in love with this...start to understand that is something I love and like...But one years ago, I didn't know. I just think that this thing make money good and

I play just for fun. Not really jump into this. But now everything. I do everything about art – painting, drawing.

Tiffany: Oh wow! Everything after this?

Jes: Ya because I love everything

Tiffany: How did Nah show you that it was art?

Jes: Before I didn't know about art because I just make for money. That's it. But now I can feel it.

Tiffany: What does it feel like?

Jes: It feels like really good. Its happy.

(Jes, personal communication, June 27, 2016)

While Jes struggled for words during this conversation, as many of us do trying to explain felt intensities, what is clear is the distinction between doing art for money and doing it for love. This was a type of moral artistry that the studio fostered and it was absolutely embodied, felt and real. Just how Pi Tha, Nah and Pi Oud said the park felt a certain way, so too did the studio, and the affective exchanges born from the love of doing art. Dancers at the studio navigate between the need for making a living and their flow art moralities.

### **Embodied Micropolitics**

The studio was the only site in my fieldwork, and my three years spent living in Thailand, where I saw Thai, Burmese and *farang* working together in such a shared way. I began to see the studio itself as a special space, a site of solidarity among fire dancers, where an undervalued immoral beach art, could be reconfigured and reconstituted through attention to slow flows rather than fast spinning, and to kin economies rather than capitalist ones. We might think about these discussions of speed as political and consider the ways in which particular social rhythms are embodied and felt, and how they are contested and recreated to suit the needs of social actors.

While the tourist experience of islands may create a feeling of slowing down, a time of relaxation and long, unfolding sunny days, it feels much differently over long periods of time working in the spaces of tourism. The longer I spent living on the islands, the more I began to feel the rhythms of the everyday as intensely fast; old establishments are torn down, new bars are

built in days, trees are cut for more land, boats come in and out carry hundreds of tourists upwards of ten times a day, piers fill with impatient people searching for their luggage, taxis rush to get people to their booked tours, and cleaners busily remake rooms for new arrivals; all this to continue the movement of the capitalist tourist economy. Lefebvre argues that capitalism has a rhythm: “The rhythm that is proper to capital is the rhythm of producing (everything: things, men, people, etc.) and destroying (through wars, through *progress*, through inventions and brutal interventions, through speculation, etc.)” (Lefebvre 2004, 5p. 5). Others describe how capital accumulates and expands, proliferates and reproduces itself in new spaces and markets for profit (Harvey 1990; Tsing 2005). As Massey relates, the internationalization of capital creates a feeling of things “speeding up, and spreading out” (1994, p. 146). The rhythms of capitalism are disruptively fast, making time a valuable commodity.

Fire show performances are firmly situated within the context of “fast” transnational capitalism. As I listened to the Thais around me, on multiple islands, I realized that it was not only this lineage of dancers who linked an embodied “fastness” with immorality, a lack of artistry and capital economies. “Fast” was used as a boundary-setting mechanism with tourists, more generally. Tourists moved too fast, drove *motocycs* too fast, walked and spoke too quickly, and had bodies that vibrated with stress; they were busy and demanded speed from those who worked in the industry. Indeed, my Thai friends even asked me to slow down, and to not rush as I took time to forge relationships with them.

Spaces such as the studio and the park, just down the street from bustling tourist centres, position themselves outside of, and resistant to, fast capitalist exchange and sterile production-consumption interactions. The practices of art that take place within them, although they may constitute particular “feelings,” are still intertwined with capitalist systems that dancers negotiate

in complex ways. Sharing in these spaces (re)creates kin economies and forges affective relations that are *felt* as more moral, less-capitalist and artistic. This is not only accomplished through teaching each other new tricks or forging connections with audiences, but it also manifests in the everyday intimate labour performed among people who share long periods of time together. Time becomes valuable not for earning potential but for who one might be able to connect with and how that relationship is fostered. These acts change relationships to time and allow people to share in a similar daily rhythm, perhaps one that feels slower.

Crouch argues that “spatialities of feeling” (2001) can be created through the ways in which people engage within spaces. He states, “Through activities and dispositions, touch and movement, it is possible to express feeling, subjectivity and unique personality that endow spaces with particular values. The body can express its emotional relationship with – and in - its immediate surrounding world” (2001, p. 69). Thus, what people do in spaces establishes and reconfigures their relationship with it, and others, through what Crouch terms “space-ing”(2001, p. 69). The inscribed meanings of particular spaces, and the types of economies and movements that sustain them, can be challenged and produced anew as social agents engage differently and recreate their subjectivities. Thus, even in the context of performance, firmly situated on the tourist beaches, a focus on sharing with the audience allows the space to also be reconfigured through a different type of exchange. Through “space-ing,” Thai fire dancers remake spaces to (re)constitute themselves as moral artists through a thoroughly embodied micropolitics.

As Sklar reminds us, and as the dancers demonstrate, “Social meanings are embodied not just as symbols but also as kinetic dynamics...ways of moving are ways of thinking” (2001, p. 3). As an embodied ideal of slow moral artistry, a politics of sharing, is bodied forth through “flow.” Social power in Thailand is primarily felt through *graehng chai*, a feeling of respect for those

higher in the social hierarchy (Cassaniti 2015b), and demonstrated with the body, through gesture, bodily comportments and ways of moving (Herzfeld 2009). Thus, I view the idealization of flow as doing political work for dancers who change power relationships, moralities and relations through their bodies, speaking back to marginalizing state discourses and the tensions brought through “fast” touristic capitalism. We must remember, however, that flow never completely erases the tensions and hierarchies, particularly among Thais and Burmese, but provides a platform where they can be eased and where people can participate in a common artistic and moral ideal through the body. Sklar finds that engaging in movements and gestures have transformative potential, particularly for the ways they offer more embodied awareness (2001, p. 184). The slow aesthetic of flow is an engagement with the nature of one’s body as Pi Oud might say; one feels its movements with an astute kinesthetic attention. One takes time with their body, sensing how it reaches and extends into spaces, how it touches and relates to others.

As we chatted one day about why fire art was popular, Nah explained that it’s gestures – and particularly the extension of limbs – fulfilled some basic human need to feel powerful. He cited research by American social psychologist Amy Cuddy who had a viral Ted Talk entitled *Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are* (2012). She related how one’s bodily comportment could transform ideas about the self and Nah thought that a desire to feel powerful fueled fire art throughout different countries and historical moments, which was also discussed in Chapter Three. Limbs, made longer by equipment, allow the body to take up more space, as they hold onto an element that can simultaneously give life and destroy it. For dancers marginalized through their work in tourist spaces, their bodily extensions assert power<sup>23</sup> in ways that would

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<sup>23</sup> People who are lower in a social hierarchy in an interaction in Thailand would typically take on more reserved and “lower” bodily stance; the head may be bowed slightly, the back crouched or perhaps even bent over. For instance, if one is walking past a university professor, it would be expected to do a slightly bowed *wai*, rather than stand up straight. I believe that this relates to how dancers describe “high” and “low” egos.

not be possible in other situations. Through flow art, the body practices these transformations, although the studio dancers are careful about not getting attached to this power and developing an ego.

For the studio dancers, the very act of practicing and flowing is transformative for the ways in which it allows them to reconstitute themselves not only as powerful, but as different “versions” of themselves:

Tiffany: I saw the website and you said that the hoop makes you a “special woman.”

Dao: Ya hahaha! Special in this case is not ordinary. You’re not somebody else, you’re you, but a better version. More beautiful version...like if I didn’t try that circle, I don’t even know what I am hiding. I’d never know what I am capable of. Like why did I learn so fast? Why did I click with this circle, you know? And even sometimes when I perform, when it comes out I don’t even know how I made it that way. Like I don’t even know how it comes out like that, so I learn it is my nature.

Tiffany: Does the hoop help to bring it out more than poi or salsa dancing [she used to dance salsa]?

Dao: Ya. It’s more than that because it’s not particularly dancing that has the moves and all this stuff. I just flow with the hoop, flow with the music. Everything comes out naturally and that is my style. That is me...I feel myself more beautiful.

(Dao, personal communication, September 22, 2016)

On another occasion, she had said, “If someone turn on music and tell me to dance I feel shy. But when I grab the hoop its calming” (Dao, personal communication, June 14, 2016). For Dao, embodying flow with her object brings out a “special” version of herself, one that is calm and powerful. For Jes, the practice of embodying flow allowed him to be a more moral person:

And that’s why I love juggling. I really love juggling. It’s like, I can focus only one thing. So, if you can control yourself after you play a lot because your mind is not going everywhere. It just stay here. Only focusing on one thing. Your brain and body you have to control it. If you cannot control it, it’s going to go another way. When I was young, I was really easy to angry and blowing up, but now I am not. I can think because my mind is not going everywhere, and keep calm.

(Jes, personal communication, June 19, 2016)

It is not only their moral subjectivities as artists that are created through attention to sharing and the embodiment of flow, but the physical act of doing transforms their relationships to self and others.

## **Conclusion**

The micropolitics embedded and embodied in some fire dancers' understandings of flow and sharing, confront, and are a product of, the frictions (Tsing 2005) of capitalism, tourism and their marginalization. It is a reminder of how Thai modes of resistance, might involve how one changes their own positions and affects to a particular problem, rather than direct confrontation (Cassaniti 2015b). Fire dance allows a reworking through the body, as affects and movements body forth different affective relations, which are considered more moral, even though they are entangled with market economies. While many are not able to confront systemic issues, and the immorality that drives unfair labour practices and capitalist competition, in direct ways, flowing, on the beaches and in the studio, allows them to *feel* art as a transformative experience, rather than simply a means to economic survival<sup>24</sup>. The studio "as a place for artists," provides a platform for dancers to produce, feel and share the same rhythms and moralities as they recapture the "spirit" and "feeling" of juggling in a new context.

Within this (re)capturing, however, there are also embedded tensions that are never completely resolved. While the frictions of capitalism are confronted, new frictions are born and others persist. The need for money, and the recognition that one's survival is entangled in capitalist markets is ever-present. Money, while a site of discomfort that sharing seeks to address, is also a necessary desire that fuels the informal fire dance economy and fire dancers' lives. The Buddhist ideals of non-ego and non-attachment are intertwined with these needs, and

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<sup>24</sup> While this may not, to Western audiences, be necessarily considered a political act, as scholars such as Cassaniti (2015) argue, political acts in Thailand may focus on one's feeling towards an issue, rather than direct critique of others, which in general is frowned upon and certainly not available to those in a lower social positioning.



thus, sharing and specific types of affective and bodily engagement become sites through which these issues, and the fact that they are irresolvable, are managed, negotiated and engaged with. In turn, while these similar moral principles and acts of sharing have made it possible for Burmese and Thais, and also people from various other countries, to work together and create affective social bonds, the hierarchies are never fully erased. The Burmese remain somewhat different to the other dancers in the encounters that take place in the studio; they are junior and are viewed as developing artists, and because of this they still perform on the beaches, while others get the more lucrative jobs in hotels and for weddings. Yet, the Burmese students at the studio are among the most privileged in the industry and have a stable form of labour and a community that is unheard of in other realms of the tourist industry. The studio, thus, asks us to consider how communities, resistances and friendships can be simultaneously utopic, dystopic, hopeful, oppressive and generative, and implicated in the very systems and ideals that they seek to address. These social bonds are “messy” solidarities and yet very much vital for survival and for living otherwise (Povinelli 2011) in the midst of capitalist and neoliberal ideologies.

### Chapter Five - *Chut mung mai* (Goal/Intent)

*I begin the long walk around the back of the busy tourist lanes towards Nam's shop in the Gypsy Village, which references the "Sea Gypsies or Sea People" (chaao laeh/ชาวดูเล<sup>25</sup>) who are some of the original inhabitants on Phi Phi. I am thankful not to have to dodge tourists, carts and the shouts of farang who are on working holidays selling tourists diving trips and promoting parties, and often making much more money than the inhabitants. My pace is slower and calmer as I gaze out at the lush green around me, a stark contrast to the shops, bars, backpacker dorms and bikini-clad farang that clog up the alleyways behind Loh Dalum Bay. This is my fourth time on Phi Phi and I have come to appreciate the ways that quietness hides in small spaces on the island. I pass by the local market where Thai and Burmese people collect food for their shared meals. I continue on and I start to see more Thai Muslim women wearing tudung<sup>26</sup> and pushing their pancake and donut carts for the labourers around. I think about what is likely happening on Loh Dalum, the other side. As tourists' days wind down, the fire dancers' will be starting to emerge from their rooms and making their way to the beach to begin the work of building the sand stages.*

*I arrive at Nam's shop, a one-room enclosure with a shed-style door where he also lives. The outside is rustic-looking and he purposefully put up wood logs to create this "hippie" style, as he calls it. I step over a couple of chickens and Nam's kittens and am transported to a different world. The shop is filled with leather, artisan jewelry, log seats, a guitar and dreamcatchers all over the walls. Job2Do, an infamous Thai reggae band plays. Nam sits in front of the small fan which barely cools the temperature, and he carefully sews a leather bags. He is preparing for the upcoming high season when (hopefully) more tourists will wander by his*

<sup>25</sup> Chaao (people from) Laeh (Sea) are an ethnic minority group in Thailand

<sup>26</sup> Head coverings worn by Thai and Malaysian Muslim women

*shop and purchase his wares. This space makes me feel nostalgic for the Southern Thailand I knew in 2010, one filled with Thai hippies and rastas. Nam recognizes himself as among the last rastas on Phi Phi. He makes sure the space of his shop persists in this style which he believes is being crowded out by the “new style” of large corporate bars, hotels and capitalist ventures that support more neatly-packaged tourist products. One of Nam’s friends sits on the floor, and I take a spot on the couch beside his guitar. They eat and smoke weed together, offering me some. I relax and fall into the beats of Job2Do. My body settles. I used to find it difficult just to sit here in the shop and chill out. Nam explained, however, that I “need to take time with Thai people” as I get to know them and “move slowly” (Personal conversation, Aug. 3, 2016). So, this is what I do on afternoons in Phi Phi. Sit, listen, quiet my body with Nam and Job2Do.*

This chapter explores how forms of social “endurance” (Povinelli 2011) are entangled with the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) of tourism on Ko Phi Phi Don (also referred to as Ko Phi Phi or Phi Phi), a small island in the Andaman Sea that is completely dedicated to tourism. It showcases the “frictions” (Tsing 2005) that emerge when tourist economies encounter inhabitant lives. The tensions have generated very distinct spatial, temporal and moral modalities of existence on Phi Phi that are overlaid across the physical geography of the island. This chapter examines the ways in which the island is said to have shifted and changed under new tourist economies after the 2004 tsunami, and how particular subjects and practices of fire dance have come to be forgotten and exhausted under increased capitalism.

I focus on one fire dancer, Nam, whose insights and experiences contribute to an “ethnography of the particular” (Abu-Lughod 1991), although his voice is contextualized, compared and contrasted with other inhabitants. Nam, and some of his fire dancing friends who oppose the “new style” of fire dance, persist doing the “last original fire show on Ko Phi Phi.”

Like the previous chapter, elements of particular aesthetic, moral and spatialized differentiations – ethnonational, regional and economic – are threaded throughout the ways in which Nam seeks to (re)position himself in opposition to the “new style” that he feels has taken over the island. I argue that his dancing, alongside some of his other socioeconomic ventures, are ways in which Nam intervenes in, reconfigures and forms resistances to, the social forces which seek to exhaust (Povinelli 2011) him and his friends.

### **The Other Side**

Ko (island) Phi Phi Don (often referred to as Phi Phi) has very distinct vibes that are different from any other place I have visited in Thailand. I use the word ‘vibe’ like Frohlick (2013), to invoke the “materiality” and feel of a particular place (p. 83). While very much ephemeral, Phi Phi’s vibe is material in how it is produced by the bodies that move there, and how the intensities feedback and affect the ecology. The vibe of Ko Phi Phi shifts and changes throughout the year. I remember my first arrival in December of 2015. It was the peak of high season so the ferry was absolutely full. We travelled from the mainland for nearly an hour and half in a high-speed ferry filled with young, mostly white, rowdy tourists, some Chinese tour groups, and Thai and Burmese people who work on the remote island. Out of the vastness of ocean, Phi Phi emerges, and as the boat turns the corner into Tonsai Bay, the island glows as beaches sneak out of shadows between massive limestone cliffs and bright turquoise-blue water. The beauty of this small island, which is completely walkable on foot, is almost hard to take in when one first arrives. No matter how many times I visited, I could never fully grasp its shape and size as it glowed such a vibrant turquoise that my vision was distorted. Embarking off the ferry, the island’s excited hum gets into you; backpacks are unloaded by dark-skinned boat workers, tourists scramble to find their belongings, Thais and Burmese pick up their tiny bags,

vegetables, meat and food, which are unloaded on the dock. Tourists walk towards the baggage carriers at the end of the dock who are sent by hotels to pick up guests. There are no vehicles on Phi Phi and the Burmese luggage haulers use massive carts to bring tourists to their lodgings.

Ko Phi Phi Don is the largest in the chain of the Phi Phi islands and is completely dedicated to tourism. It breathes and cycles through a different pattern of time than the rest of the world. Everything is timed around the rhythms of tourism. *Farang* who have been on Phi Phi for months, or even years, working in bars or in dive shops, describe how they have to leave to reset to clock time, and how the endless nights of partying creates an everlasting weekend. A rhythmic and temporal pace of quick and slow emerges that is calculated around high and low seasons, dry season and rainy season, nightly beach parties, tours, and boat arrivals and departures.

Inhabitants know these rhythms well, and often discuss which sending countries have vacations at which time, what months are good for taking a rest, and which days tourists will disappear as they go to the monthly Full Moon Party in the Gulf of Thailand. When I arrived for the second time in the low, rainy season of May, I watched as the island filled up more and more. The pace quickened as the sun dried out the land and tourists began to flock to the island. The middle of October marks the beginning of high season which culminates in the busiest time of year, December. The vibe and tempo changes as inhabitants are a little more cheerful with the coming of high season because of the money it will bring, even if they are ambivalent about the increase in tourists and the frantic pace that takes over the island.

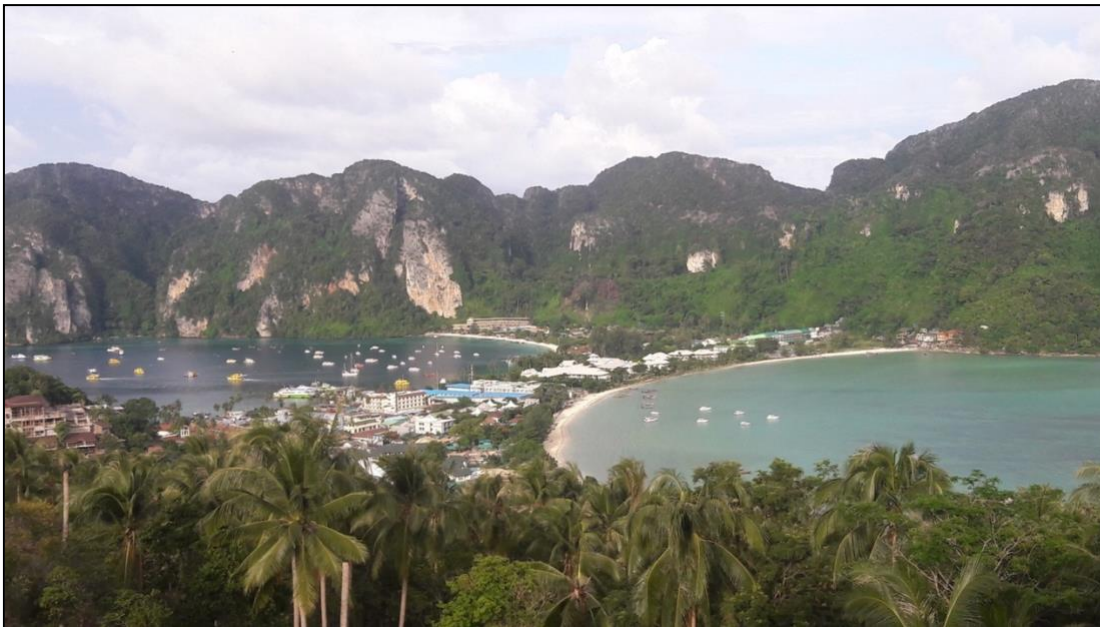
The history of Phi Phi is hard to attain, as many of the people that inhabit Ko Phi Phi Don are not originally from there but came to work in the tourist industry. Yai, who has been on Phi Phi since 1988, shared some key moments that have influenced the island's popularity. A small fishing village that was inhabited by eighty-one families, Ko Phi Phi already had four bungalow-

style guesthouses when she arrived in 1988. 1987 had been promoted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand as “Visit Thailand Year,” and a small number of tourists found their way to this secluded island off the coast of Krabi province. Yai opened a restaurant in 1992 as more people started coming. This was a time, she says when “Phi Phi still had good nature” because most tourists just took day trips from Krabi and the large island of Phuket. She relates that in 1997 Phi Phi was voted as the most beautiful island in the world by an international publication and the tourist traffic greatly increased. 1998, however, was a turning point; the movie *The Beach* (2000), filmed on nearby Ko Phi Phi Leh, secured Phi Phi Don a formidable place on the tourist map. Phi Phi Leh is a protected area and is uninhabited, therefore Phi Phi Don has come to hold and accommodate the influx of tourists wanting to visit this iconic spot.

Yai took my pad of paper during our interview, did a calculation and wrote “2004,” and said, “everything gone and everyone die.” The Indian Ocean tsunami on Phi Phi marks a massive point of change for every inhabitant I spoke with. Like many others, Yai lost everything, but she managed to rebuild her restaurant, although it is now a lot smaller. After explaining this she said, “Now too much competition, too loud, too dirty. No Thai people work here. Many *farang*, from Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia.” While I did not meet any people from Laos or Cambodia, I believe Yai is referring in general to the migrant population, many of whom come from the Northeastern region, and who are sometimes said to be Laotian, and Burma. Since the tsunami, as I was told by all inhabitants, competition, migrant workers, tourism, hotels, dorms and bars have increased drastically on Ko Phi Phi. At the end of our conversation I asked Yai when all of the fire dancing started on Loh Dalum Bay, an infamous party spot that lights up with multiple fire shows each night. She gestured with her head towards the beach on Loh Dalum Bay and said “I don’t know about any of that. I don’t like that” (Yai, personal conversation, July 26, 2016).



(Figure 4: Tourist Map of Ko Phi Phi)<sup>27</sup>



(Figure 4: Ko Phi Phi from Viewpoint)

Not only does the vibe of Phi Phi change with the tourist cycles, but it also shifts as one moves over the geography; different spaces that have different feelings, affects, histories,

<sup>27</sup> The island is 8 kilometres in length and 3.5 kilometres wide.

rhythms and temporalities. Phi Phi has two large bays, Loh Dalum, which is where the nightly beach parties take place, and Ton Sai, where the boats arrive and depart. The space between these two bays, as seen from the Phi Phi viewpoint (above) is quite small, although the difference between them is striking. Loh Dalum and the paths directly behind it are filled with bars, shared dorms for young budget travelers who want to party, guesthouses and restaurants. At night this area transforms into the central party district filled with young *farang*, typically between the ages of eighteen to thirty and travelling in couples or with groups of friends. Each evening around 7:00pm restaurants bring out the infamous Thai buckets, music blasts from bars and the night devolves into chaos. Loh Dalum Bay hosts beach parties every night of the year, minus Buddhist holidays, and the beach is lined with numerous bars, parties and fire dancers. From afar, Loh Dalum looks and sounds like a fiery carnival from 8:30pm until 2:00am, at which time the music is promptly turned off. The three largest bars each host fire shows and fire games – such as limbo and musical chairs with fire underneath, for intoxicated tourists to participate in. The majority, in fact almost all, of the dancers on Loh Dalum are Burmese. While Chinese and Russian tour groups are brought by guides to watch fire shows at two of the biggest bars, Loh Dalum is a space of young white *farang* tourists from North America and Europe.

Ton Sai Bay is almost the complete opposite of the party life on Loh Dalum. The beach is lined with food markets for inhabitants, quiet restaurants, upscale accommodations, art stores, clothing shops, bakeries and diving shops. There are very few bars on this side. This area is where many of the Chinese tourists stay, and where the tour groups from Phuket spend the day basking in the sun. As one makes their way to this side, the fact that Phi Phi is a Muslim majority island reveals itself. Thai Muslim women wearing *tudung*, head coverings, are more prominent and one can even hear the call to prayer on the Western-most side of Tonsai Bay, close to where



the old Gypsy Village is located. Thai children and families share meals, go to school, play and go about daily life in different ways than on Loh Dalum where most of the workers have come by themselves, without family, from Bangkok, other areas in the South, Burma and Isaan.

The different sides of Phi Phi are discussed at length by inhabitants, and, like Yai, others despise Loh Dalum Bay and its party atmosphere. It is a daily part of conversation and I came to see that “the other side,” as it was referred to meant “Loh Dalum Bay.” Invoking Loh Dalum referenced much more than partying tourists, but rather was a way inhabitants recount pre-tsunami times, before the island was over-run with tourists, fire dancers and, also, Burmese migrants. Marked by nostalgia, and also a very quietly accepted despair about the future of Phi Phi, discussions of the other side tell a history and a future from the perspectives of Thais who have inhabited the island since before the tsunami. The exact time when Loh Dalum changed and was built-up into a tourist party mecca was never precisely articulated, although the changes it brought about are well-known. The creation of Loh Dalum happened anywhere from three to ten years ago, depending on who I spoke with. I began to realize that this was not important. It doesn’t matter when it happened, as time does not exist on Phi Phi in the same way. What matters is that it changed the cycles, intensified the rhythms and tempos, and divided the island into two distinct spaces.

The development of ‘the other side’ is tightly connected to the tsunami. As Cohen (2008) points out, there was much post-tsunami conflict concerning land rights during the rebuilding stages on Phi Phi. Some local businesses were forced off their land as authorities decided that over 150 acres would become a public park and landmark, and that new business should be rebuilt on higher ground; this proved to be very difficult because much of the higher land was already owned or inhabited (Bunyamanee 2005 cited in Cohen 2008). In turn, Reuters reports

that rumors spread about collusions between the Thai government and corporations to build luxury resorts on the island, and thus dispossess people of their land (Reuters 2005 cited in Cohen 2008). Prior to the tsunami, the land had been occupied by the same inhabitants for generations and they believed they owned it. As tourism came, land prices appreciated, and conflicts began to emerge although nothing formally happened until after the tsunami when officials, and other high-ranking people, claimed ownership and prevented many inhabitants from returning (Cohen 2008, p. 46). The post-tsunami years, not surprisingly, is when the large bars, dorm rooms, parties and a proliferation of fire shows began on Loh Dalum, while others, over on Ton Sai, began to fade.

Phi Phi's changes have happened under the "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) of tourism. This elusive violence on Phi Phi happens alongside, and as a result of, the speed and rhythms of capitalism as it spreads into new spaces (Tsing 2005, Harvey 2006, Lefevbre 2004). Daily conversations with restaurant owners, guesthouse workers and massage ladies surround how the island has changed, and how it continues to suffer and decay. The mass number of tourists leaving garbage everywhere, the overflowing sewers, the massive new construction projects, the destruction of coral and the endless comings and goings of polluting boats leave the island on the brink of collapse. Water shortages and power outages are common, happening at least twice a week, as Phi Phi struggles to keep up with the visitors.

I had to visit the Department of National Parks (DNP) to secure a research permit to be on Ko Phi Phi because it is a protected area, and a government official took an interest in my project. He asked me to talk to tourists about what draws them to the fire shows; the DNP wanted to use this information to assess whether they should fully implement the laws which prohibit fire shows. He explained that fire shows were not well-liked by DNP officials because

of the damage they cause to the ecosystem. He said that the shows “change the ecosystem of the beach” (Seri, personal communication, July 21, 2016). While I am not a scientist, I found this surprising since fire dancers always perform on wooden boards and carefully control the flames and their materials. That the DNP was concerned about fire shows in light of the well-known environmental destruction brought through tourism was astounding to me. I had heard this narrative before, however; Franz, a French diver who has lived on Phi Phi for over ten years, told me that Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, one of the King’s daughters who is beloved in Thailand, visited a few years ago and said that Phi Phi was dirty. In light of this public shame, DNP officials decided to ban fire dancing for a few months, although the mass amounts of tourists could continue coming.

In the post-tsunami years, fire dancers have come to embody and be made responsible for the dirt and decay of Phi Phi by officials. Fire dancers embody the “slow violence” of Phi Phi; they are made into “dirty” non-citizens within the wider Thai state who are the problem of environmental and social decay. This ideal of cleanliness and beauty emerges from the “regime of images” (Jackson 2004) that has been employed since the making of the “geobody” to demonstrate an appearance of *siwilai* to the West (Winichakul 1988; 2000b). We see remnants of this in the way that fire dancers, as an “Other within” (Thongchai 2000a), are made to take on this supposed lack of civility on Phi Phi, although the notion of “dirty firemen,” also persists on Ko Samui. Nam, who was one of the original dancers on Phi Phi relates that fire dancers are citizens that Thailand doesn’t care about, despite the significant amount of money their performances generate. He states, “We get nothing back, you understand? They not see us because we just the small people in Thailand. We cannot show them that we help Thailand. We help Thailand, but Thailand not care. Not see. They not think [understand] that fire show can

make money for Thailand, that we can help them. Nothing. You understand?” (Nam, personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016).

Any big beach bar on Phi Phi that seeks to attract *farang* must have a fire show, and as tourism has increased, so too have bars and fire shows. The DNP would face incredible backlash from bar owners if they permanently closed the fire shows. Fire dancers generate much income for bars as they keep people entertained and consuming alcohol. The police on Phi Phi are paid by bar owners so that they can keep having their nightly shows and so far the DNP officials from the mainland, who are also surely bribed, have not intervened since after the princess came. Alexa, who is a *farang* manager at one of the newest bars, Tribe, says that a fire show is essential to get the party started. Alexa explained that there is fierce competition between the bars for who will get the best dancers, and this tension has increased in recent years. Having been on the Andaman Islands for over fifteen years working in bars, Alexa related that before the tsunami and even for a while after, each bar on the island would take a turn hosting the nightly “party” where there would be a fire show. But, “The tsunami changed everything.” She related that about eight years ago is when all the shows started happening on Loh Dalum (Alexa, personal conversation, July 23, 2016). She used to work on Ton Sai in the pre-tsunami years. Out of the original bars on Ton Sai where the fire shows began – Carpe Diem, Apache, Reggae Bar, Hippie Bar, Tiger and Karma – only one, Antonio’s, remains. While fire dancers have proliferated on Loh Dalum, the few that are left at Antonio’s must work hard to keep “the last original fire show on Phi Phi” alive.

Povinelli implores social researchers to think through the changing dynamics of biopolitical projects, arguing that contemporary subjects are socially abandoned by the state if they are not valuable to the market. Their abandonment happens not through eventful spectacles

that demand political and ethical urgency, but rather, through uneventful processes that go unnoticed, what Povinelli terms “quasi events” (2011, p. 13). Like the “slow violence” enacted at an environmental level, quasi events are instantiated through the everyday, unrecognized “ordinary suffering” of subjects (2011, p. 14). The eventfulness of the suffering of fire dancers is never a crisis that demands critical and immediate attention. It creeps up, rather, in small increments on their bodies, revealing itself through conversations and observations about their work and performances. Nam, and his team who have danced at Antonio’s for years, insist on keeping the original fire dancing style going. Through this, I argue that they attempt to create alternative social worlds, outside of what they see as the capitalist decay of the other side, a space they ambivalently associate with “new style” of fire dancing. Nam and his friends enact what Povinelli calls “social projects” that attempt “to capacitate an alternative set of human and posthuman worlds” (2011, p.7). Under the forces of various quasi events which “saturate potential worlds and their social projects,” Nam, among other inhabitants on Phi Phi, lives and works in a temporal mode of “endurance” (2011, p.13) seeking to survive and create better futures. While our initial conversations centred around the originality of their performances at Antonio’s, over the course of numerous visits, Nam began to also describe the dark sides of fire dancing: “You have to understand that Thai people have a sad life, a hard life. Fire dancers have hard life but have to make people happy. Fire is very hard. Nobody want to do this. It hot, dangerous. But if stop work, no money” (Personal conversation, Aug. 3, 2016).

I had heard from every fire dancer I spoke with about the decay of their lungs. I was always reminded of this when I would watch dancers prepare their equipment, a time when the materiality of chemicals and toxicity seemed more real and less whimsical than during the shows. I dropped my poi and approached Nam one day as he was winding long pieces of cotton

on to the fire staff, underneath the frangipani tree at Antonio's on quiet Ton Sai Bay. Nam explained that they use this cotton to fill holes in the long tail boats, and as fire dance made its way to the Thai beaches, the cotton was used as a fill-in for the more expensive, and less toxic, materials that *farang* used such as Kevlar (Personal conversation, July 30, 2016). Despite the fact that burning cotton is terrible for the dancers' lungs, they still use it, because it is cheap and easy to find on the islands. In turn, while fire artists around the world typically use lamp oil for their burns, the Antonio's spinners use cheaper kerosene, which is much more harmful for their lungs. Many, I was told, had to stop because their lungs simply turned black from inhaling the fumes night after night. We both glanced at my set of poi, gifted to me from Pi Oud, the master dancer in Bangkok, and noticed that they were made of Kevlar.

As he was winding, Nam relayed about fire dance that "It used to be hippie. Everyone have big hair, dreadlocks and rasta. All this side [Ton Sai]. You ever been to Pai? It used to be like that. Now same [as] Ko Phangan." His reference to Pai was one I understood well. A hippie enclave, for both Thais and *farang* along the Northwestern border with Burma, Pai was a place filled with Thai rastas, weed, opium, coffee shops, jewelry and musicians. Pai was unlike the party atmosphere of Ko Phangan, which hosts the Full Moon Parties that are attended by thousands of young tourists each month. Nam's differentiation nostalgically referenced what was disappearing under the onslaught of increased tourism and capitalist dollars. He continued, "The other side now crazy. Parties start on that side about three or five years ago. Many people from Myanmar come." (Personal Conversation, July 30, 2016).

As Phi Phi has developed after the tsunami, fire shows have also undergone change. Antonio's, the last bar on Ton Sai, and where Nam dances, produces the "last original fire show" on Phi Phi. His team, Nam says, are determined to have a different aesthetic than the "new style"

on Loh Dalum. I had missed Antonio's bar the first time I visited Phi Phi in December 2015, as I was immediately drawn to the fiery beach and club music on Loh Dalum Bay. But the rhythms of Phi Phi ensured I would find it when I returned in May 2016. Sleeping on Phi Phi was terribly difficult. The pounding bass of Loh Dalum came through the walls of the dilapidated guesthouse where I was renting a room. Just as my body got used to these rhythms, and was drifting off, drunken *farang* returning from the party would wake everyone up. Sometimes they would even drunkenly play around in the open air guesthouse, waking Plaa, the owner, who would have to ask them to leave. Sleep again. At 4:00am Gai, the rooster, would crow for the boat drivers to begin their day. I rarely slept on Phi Phi and started going for early morning runs. During my run one morning I took the path to Ton Sai and went up to the Gypsy Village. A chalkboard sign outside of Antonio's which advertised a fire show stopped me. It also indicated that they offered lessons. I went back later that day around 4pm and met Kel, a Muslim sea gypsy originally from Krabi province, who gave me my first poi lesson.

I started visiting Antonio's regularly after this first meeting. I felt comfortable in this space, and particularly at the fire shows, where there was overall less drinking and a calmer environment than on Loh Dalum. I sometimes felt very out of place on Ton Sai among the couples and large groups of *farang* who had met partying at the dorms. Antonio's is made of dark wood, is open air with only a roof covering, and has a rustic and laid-back feel that one might expect from a lonely tropical bar. During the day Antonio's is very quiet, and I would often go there to practice poi under a large frangipani tree, where I watched the long tail boats and ferries pull in and out. The first time I went to a fire show, I looked over and saw that the police station was right across the street and I asked Pon, one of the servers, if fire dancing was allowed. "No not really, but we don't have any problems like they do on the other side" (May

23). The show stops around 11:30pm and everything is closed by 1:00am which, together with “donations” to the police, ensures that they can keep their fire show going.

The aesthetic of the fire shows at Antonio’s is different from those that take place on Loh Dalum Bay, which follow the typical pattern described in Chapter Three. The crowd at Antonio’s, for instance, is very mixed with young *farang*, older Chinese tourists, people with families and single travelers. The space is more intimate, with large tables inside and only a few rows of chairs set up on the beach around the sand stage. It almost feels like one is sitting around a campfire. While most fire shows are improvised, except for plans of stacking patterns, Antonio’s fire show is thoroughly choreographed. The group of five Thai men go up one-by-one to perform a set routine with a specific song. Unlike the young shirtless men on Loh Dalum, two of the dancers on Ton Sai wear shirts, and their bodies are not as chiseled as the dancers I was used to seeing. They begin the show through humor, as Neo pretends to drop the fire staff over and over, and then has to do push-ups. Soon after, he wildly spins and performs tricks to display his technique and skills. After this, each dancer takes a turn performing tricks alone on the stage set to music. To finish off this set, one dancer uses a small staff and does dangerous tricks with the fire as he rubs the stick on his body. He gets people to cheer as he shoves the fiery stick in his pants, takes it out and rubs it over his bare skin. While the overall performance is much less erotically charged, this performer mixes danger and eroticism in interesting ways although it is almost meant to be humorous and scary, rather than sexual, and the crowd responds in this manner. The show is interrupted by a recorded voice over that says “Welcome to Antonio’s fire show” indicating that this is just the beginning. The dancers walk around with the tip bucket and ask if people want to see more. Already, it is past 10:30pm, the time on Loh Dalum where the shows are ending and people are beginning to party with the dancers.



Next, the dancers each take turns performing to a specific song using either poi or the large staff. Unlike the typical performances which use almost strictly house music, their songs are well-known Western songs such as Guns n' Roses' *Welcome to the Jungle*, *Why You Want to Hate Me* by Limp Bizkit and *Smooth Criminal* by Michael Jackson. After these choreographies, the dancers all perform together to a Swedish pop song that not many people in the audience know. Like the typical shows, audience members are invited up so that the dancers can spin poi around them and light their cigarettes with fiery circles. This usually signals the end of a fire show, but still, the show at Antonio's goes on, and the dancers continue. Often, I could see their physical exhaustion as they would begin dropping equipment, and it was not unusual to see people leaving at this point. The night winds down with the dancers inviting people up to dance with them to songs such as "The Macarena" and "Jailhouse Rock." This section of the night could be awkward as not many people would go up to dance with them. Each night at Antonio's is the exact same. These songs and the performance in general, I learned, were chosen in collaboration with the *farang* bar owner, a Swedish man, and one of the original *farang* fire dancers who I met in Bangkok. Pon, the server, told me that the owner wanted to differentiate from the other side and thus chose the music accordingly. While on occasion I saw the fire dancers chatting with tourists, sometimes women, this was different than on Loh Dalum where dancers and tourists party together each night until 2:00am. Overall, this is a much less sexually-charged environment than the beach parties and fire shows I describe in Chapter Three, and a more formally structured evening, although it appears to be a much more exhausting one for the dancers.

Nam and his friends attempt to reconfigure fire dance so that the art may be known and remembered differently from its current rendering on the other side. They seek to recapture, and

bring to the present, earlier moments of fire dance and Phi Phi before the tsunami and the making of the other side. Nam was always very open about his ambivalence for the way fire dancing had changed from its “hippie” roots, as was referenced earlier. It was important to Nam that I know this history. In turn, he would often tell me that I needed to write something “good” about fire dance, and even said that it could be “dangerous for your heart” if I only focused on the parties on Loh Dalum (Personal conversation, Aug. 3, 2016). He explained that if I only see the bad parts, I would miss an opportunity to shift the narrative and tell the story of “real” fire dance. Nam saw my project as being in-line with his and his friends interventions to keep an original show known and respected. “And you going to tell people and people going to remember fire show and not [want to] forget, you understand? Because me and my friends do very good fire show and going to finish soon. They thirty-three and thirty. I think in two years going to finish. And no more. But, in Thailand they not care. They want more tourists to come but they don’t want to save something [that has been] very important for a long, long time” (Nam, personal conversation, Aug. 3, 2016). He went on to explain that he wanted to write this history and share his knowledge but couldn’t “Because [people] not trust me because of how I look. Everyone trust you. Not me. Government and police going to trust to you. Not me. I am from South” (Aug. 3).

This rendering of his marginalization was not solely a division between Thai and *farang*, although that certainly was part of it, but was also about his positioning as a dark-skinned Southern Thai man in a country that favors light-skinned Thai-Chinese in the Central area. My association with Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, the most elite in Thailand, alongside my *farang* subjectivity, put me in a position where I could share this social project of documenting and preserving this rendering of fire dancing and its history on Phi Phi. Because of my position at the university, and as Nam well knows, I had access to elite Thais that might listen. Although

the marginalization of fire dancers within Thailand, and the elitist system that decides which art is “art,” which styles get preserved and which are abandoned, made this difficult for me, as well. In fact, this was a theme that I came across with many of the first and second-generation dancers as far as Bangkok and also in Ko Samui. Keeping a particular style of fire dance alive, documenting its presence, and positioning it outside of the capitalist tourism industry is a much larger social project that many participate in.

Aside from these larger political goals of having fire dance remembered in particular ways, Nam incorporates a variety of small interventions and motivations into his life that seek to make Phi Phi and fire dancing more livable and endurable, and even hopeful. It is through these interventions, however, that Nam also differentiates between the two different sides of the island and his subjectivity as an artist. Nam relates his ability to endure fire dancing to his love for his family. “It [fire dance] make you have fun but not good for your life. Because you not get insurance for fire show. No one save you. It’s just you. [If] you finish power, you get sick, same like a fish or a chicken. No one care for you.” He went on, “If I not have my family I not do something like this. I not do fire show. I not going to do this. When we think about family we can do a big thing, more than my body...If I work for my family I can do big things” (Personal Conversation, Oct. 1 2016). While this is partly a metaphysical relation Nam has with his family, who live on neighbouring Ko Lanta, fire dancing also enables him to send money home to the them. For Nam, however, this motivation forms a distinction between dancing on Ton Sai and dancing on Loh Dalum.

During my first informal interview with both Kel and Nam at Antonio’s, they immediately told me that they are sea gypsies and do this for their families. Kel stated, “We do this for our families. Cannot do this job if only for you. We do for the love of our families. From

our heart.” Nam interjected, “We are gypsies. We are sea people. Cannot do only for yourself” (Personal conversation, July 23, 2016). I understood that this ethnocultural distinction was obviously important to them, given that it was the first thing they wanted me to know. This also, however, was said as a distinction from dancers on the other side, as I learned on another day: “We do for family, for Thailand. Other side not do for true. They do because look cool and get many girl” (Nam, Personal conversation, Aug. 3, 2016). Nam stated that he saw this change over time: “Before ten years ago fire dancers not want to do only for girls and fun. Do for family. But now [they] want European girlfriend” (Personal conversation, Aug. 3, 2016).

As I came to understand, for Nam, the other side mapped a geographical area of artistic immorality, where people dance for *farang* women and fun, but it was also a space associated with deviant ethnonational and regional traits. He often, like many we have heard in this dissertation, indicated that the other side had Burmese dancers who just do it for fun, do not know the art form and are less-skilled dancers.

Tiffany: Before you told me about new people do it for fun and *farang* girlfriend. How come you think they want *farang* girlfriends?

Nam: Because now [it is] the new style and if [they do] new style [it is] because they not from here. They come to work in Phi Phi because they want European girlfriend. But before, people came to work in Phi Phi because they want to help their family, for tips.

Tiffany: Oh ok. And now you think it is about having a *farang*?

Nam: Ya. Thai people work for their family but Burmese people work for their country and they just working in Thailand and send money back to Burma...but they steal the Thai people's jobs and then when fire show guys see many Burmese people doing fire shows they go to another island.

Tiffany: The Thai guys go?

Nam: Ya they going to go to somewhere else so they can be Thai. Ya. Burmese guy play only one year and Thai guy play ten year and do the best fire show. Now too much fire show and have to go to another island. And they have to work something else because they get more old every day. And cannot do fire show forever.

(Personal Conversation, Aug. 3, 2016)

Nam seeks to keep the old style alive. He endures societal discourses which work to suffocate his artistic legitimacy, and he persists through desires for cheap labour and wealth accumulation on

Phi Phi that fuel the need for underpaid Burmese labourers, and work to close him out of the industry. Through dancing each night and attending to his motivations, however, he repositions himself within the fire scene, and redefines himself and his space on Ton Sai, although he also projects forms of Otherness onto the Burmese bodies that participate in the “new style.” Nam himself had a *farang* girlfriend for three years, and danced on the other side, but he is able to reconfigure this relationship, and the iconic image of fire dancers with *farang* women, by speaking of the different motivations of the old and new style dancers.

Around the island, and other places in Thailand where I chatted with people about the changes on Phi Phi, the coming of the Burmese was often stated as the beginning of its demise. While the Burmese came to fill labour needs brought through the transnational capitalist tourist industry, they, like fire dancers, are made to bear the burden of Phi Phi’s decay, rather than tourists, capital and wealthy bar and hotel owners. These constructions are often coupled with notions of gender and sexuality. While fire dancers, in general, are linked with female *farang* tourists, and beach-party sexuality, as explained in Chapter Three, the Burmese are positioned as dangerously sexual. One Thai female inhabitant warned me to be careful because the Burmese were rapists (Plao, personal conversation, August 8, 2016), while others suggested that I should be accompanied to the bars on Loh Dalum in case I had problems with the dancers. Nam subtly takes up these discourses when he discusses how it is the Burmese dancers, on the other side, who dance to gain access to *farang* women. This linking of the Burmese labour migrants with immorality and criminality is similar to what Andrew Johnson (2013) finds in the quickly developing Northern Thai city of Chiang Mai; Thai inhabitants expressed their anxieties about progress, modernization and development through narratives about seeing ghosts and Burmese criminals. Thus, while Thai inhabitants on Phi Phi and beyond mourn the destruction of the

island and question the continued development, these dynamics and affects are expressed through discussions about the Burmese, and fire dance, more generally.

These distinctions between the different sides, and the bodies within them, however, are also temporal; they invoke new and old styles which resonate with times before the tsunami and the building of the other side. These spatialized and temporalized constructions of difference and morality are not only entangled with what Nam sees as different gendered and sexualized dynamics, but also economic logics. Doing it for one's family resituates the practice as a moral obligation, an exchange that builds a relation (Wilson 2004), which was discussed in Chapter Four, and not a motivation that is saturated with individualist intentions, accumulation and transnational capitalism.

While intentions are part of doing an "original" or a "real" fire show, they also centre around notions of style and very specific aesthetic features. The dancers at Antonio's discuss the qualities of their fire show style by comparing it with the shows and dancers on the other side. Nam, Kel and another dancer Neo all relate that having an individual style is essential to a real show and a good team. This is juxtaposed with the fire dancers on Ton Sai who they say all look the same and perform the same tricks over and over again. "You get good by moving around to different places. Go everywhere. We learn by sharing. Like go somewhere and share with other dancers and learn from them. That is how you get your own style (Nam, Personal Conversation July 23, 2016). Kel and Sanit, who were also sitting at the table while Nam said this, nodded in agreement. Their moving from place to place and sharing to gain personal style is significant, as I learned that Nam, and Kel especially, felt that this protected the art form from being easily copied by dancers who "don't do for true" (Nam, personal conversations, Aug. 3, 2016).

This notion of style and sharing was invoked also when Kel told me about the first time he saw fire dancing in Railay, which is a tourist beach area on the mainland in Krabi province. “They did real fire shows, then they came to Phi Phi to share, and then people from Phi Phi go there to share. They had the good style” (Personal conversation, July 24, 2016). This conversation, in turn, has very direct resonances with the ideals of sharing discussed in Chapter Four. While many of the “new style” have learned from YouTube or have quickly pieced together moves for a bar show, being a good fire dancer for those at Antonio’s requires a sustained engagement within a community of dancers. It is not a practice that is easily learned and commodified, copied and sold.

Since the dancers compared their “real” show against those on the other side, I asked what differentiated their style and Kel stated, “Here make a real show and work to make people feel good. On the other side, play for one or two hours to attract people to party” (Personal conversation, July 27, 2016). What determined if somebody was a good fire dancer, who could do a “real show,” for Kel, was their ability to be able to move with a style to a particular song. “To have style you work to make it and do it with a song. The song make energy, the power, the style...Music is the key” (Personal conversation, July 27, 2016). He said that this was the most important thing that I should know for my study because people need to know this is art. He related that while other dancers might know a lot of tricks, a real show must communicate the feeling to the audience and this is done through the sharing of embodied style with music, just as Antonio’s show is set up to do. He explained that this was much more difficult in that the Loh Dalum dancers perform altogether in large teams as part of a party atmosphere; they can make mistakes and the tourists will never know. “But here go one by one, so must make a show for seven minutes with only me and poi” (Kel, personal conversation, July 24, 2016).

Having a personal style is still communal as Nam stated, “Everyone must be good and each person still have their own style” (Personal conversation, Aug. 3, 2016). Not only must they learn as part of a community, but he advised that I must look at the entire team to see if they are “doing for true” (Personal conversation, Aug. 3, 2016). Nam felt that telling me about these elements of style would help me determine what was a “real” fire show for my research. For Nam “doing for true” begins with a desire to perform art with a moral motivation (familial) over immoral (*farang* women, personal desires) and is constituted and knowable through style and skill:

Here each have our own style. There [Loh Dalum] everyone same... Big Bar owners, [who] have a lot of money, and get guys from Bangkok or wherever [to spin fire]. They not from the South. Used to be hippies and rastas who did this. You know stick [fire staff]? I know about twenty-five moves. Over there they only need to know about five and just do the same thing. Get boring. You need to learn more to understand about this. (Nam, Personal conversation, July 3, 2016)

Here Nam insisted that I must study more and move around so as to learn about the complexity and intricacies, so I too, could recognize the real and fake fire dancers. It is interesting that Nam did not, in this conversation, mention the Burmese dancers on the other side. Instead, he commented on capital accumulation and the fire “guys from Bangkok” who are not from the South. While I only met two Thai dancers on Loh Dalum, and I am not sure where they were from, Nam invokes regional and socioeconomic hierarchies in Thailand which position the centre, Bangkok, as the most powerful. We will recall from Chapter Two and Chapter Three that the beaches are steeped in a complex global and regional hierarchy of masculinities which Nam must work to endure on Phi Phi, and the other side has been built up from the wealth of Thais who are more powerful than Nam. As a marginalized figure in Thailand, because of his Southern sea gypsy heritage, he reasserts himself as a better dancer and a more moral social actor through keeping with the old style and staying at Antonio’s. While he could easily get a job on the other



side because Nam is very well-known on the island, he will not participate; he explained that he had not even walked to that side in months. Nam had previously worked there but felt that he too was a “bad boy,” and this upset his family. Now he stays on Ton Sai.

In this social project of keeping “a real show” going with “true” style, the transnational tourist industry works to exhaust the dancers at Antonio’s. We must consider how animosity about the new style, in the context of Phi Phi where competition over jobs and money has intensified, also relates the tension of competition for resources and survival. The show at Antonio’s does not draw as large of a crowd as those on Ton Sai, and the calm performance-focused evenings do not offer the same appeal to young *farang* as the parties on Ton Sai where one can stay all night and be more intimate with the dancers. This affects the amount of tips dancers get. Nam explained that the earlier the bars close, the less drunk tourists are, and thus, the less money they give as tips (Nam, Personal conversation, October 1, 2016). The show at Antonio’s, in turn, is incredibly long because they ensure that each dancer goes up one by one, and tourists often leave before the end of the show when the tip bucket makes a final round. The other side, even if Nam and Kel feel like the art of fire dance suffers, offers the partying atmosphere that keeps tourists engaged, drinking and tipping. As tourism, time and the “new style” steal their resources, the dancers suffer under the “slow violence” just as Phi Phi does. Nam worries incessantly about what his friends will do for work within the next few years. For himself, however, he has his shop.

Nam is fully aware of how the tourist industry attempts to exhaust him and his friends. As he mentions above, these original shows will finish in the next two or three years. The “new style” seems much more in-line and popular with the new forms of tourism. Nam lamented that it used to be more families who visited Phi Phi, and now the young *farang* “don’t buy anything.

Only drink” (Personal conversation, July 30, 2016). Recently, there are also large tour groups that visit the island. Inhabitants are quite ambivalent about the infamous “group Jeen” (Chinese tour groups) who take over the beaches and pathways during the days, and head to Loh Dalum for the fire show each night, led by a guide. This new instantiation of mass tourism, and in particular the large groups from China, and also Russia, was discussed with me ambivalently by Thais all over the country. This sort of mass packaged tourism is an overall direction the country has been taking in its tourism market for the past decade (Kontogeorgopolous 2016). That these people often travel in very large tour groups feels much more invasive to Thais. In turn, and an area of research that needs urgent attention, is that Thais regularly comment on how, particularly, Chinese tourists do not follow Thai cultural and social etiquette. It is interesting that these same discourses have been applied to *farang* but are shifting more and more towards this new instantiation of tourists and tourism. While these tourists spend a great deal on their planned tours, much of this income does not trickle down into locally-owned businesses, and they typically do not tip at the fire shows or stay late to drink. Nam, however, has another source of income which helps him to survive, and also practice his personal resistance.

### **Living Otherwise with *chut mung mai***

Nam’s artisan shop, which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is set at the far end of the Gypsy Village, which has a few tourists that pass by. I would watch him make jewelry, dreamcatchers, and leather bags, as attempts to secure more income in this changing tourist landscape. His shop, however, is also a mechanism which reconfigures his relationship with Thailand and beyond. Nam states,

Nam: In Thailand they just want the people who have good study and we are same like jungle boy, us sea gypsies, you know? They don’t care...we take care the tourists. We make tourists more happy than the football team. More than many things in Thailand.

And they should care you know? Because we help them a lot to make people who come to Thailand happy and give money and be happy when they come to Thailand...But they [the state] not see. Now my best friend in the bar they working a lot they tired, you understand? I the young one, I only twenty-eight and they always tell me they don't know what to do. They do something for Thailand but Thailand don't do something for us.

Tiffany: Is this what you are planning for with the shop and learning these skills?

Nam: Ya, but what my best friend going to do?

He continued,

Same like a coconut tree, you know? Phi Phi beautiful because the coconut tree. When not have the coconut tree Phi Phi not beautiful. Same like in Thailand, have the land but not have the coconut tree, it's just the land. Same like Phi Phi island – no have fire show, no have sea, no coral. Now we can see [these things] but in fifteen or twenty years you cannot see. That is why I do something else. I have to help Thailand but help me too.

That's why I make the shop. Not just only help Thailand.

(Nam, personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016)

Nam links the exhaustion of “real” or old fire dance with the slow environmental damage on Phi Phi. Without the old style of fire shows, Phi Phi will not be as beautiful. He resents how the fire shows bring in tourist dollars, yet are completely unrecognized by the state, and how dancers become exhausted, sick or old with few ways to make income. Fire dancers rarely dance beyond the age of thirty-five; his team mates are well into their thirties and it is clear that Nam is worried about them. The aesthetics of fire dance demands chiseled, youthful and energetic bodies that hide the slow violence of decaying lungs, tiny scars and bleeding fingers from the friction of chains and rope. Nam's shop is a social project and a resistance that disrupts and attempts to intervene in the exhaustion that surrounds him. While owning a shop may, at first glance, seem like a relatively individual act, it is, for Nam, a collaborative social project through which he articulates connections with others who he imagines endure with him. His shop, and the skills he practices there, provides a platform for Nam to form regional and transnational connections across vast spatial and temporal areas, connections that are more generative for Nam than encounters that take place today on Ko Phi Phi.

Nam considers himself to be one of the last rastas on Phi Phi. Often, and as noted throughout this chapter, he says that the fire dancers used to all be hippies and rastas, but they have left Phi Phi as the new style has taken over and they could no longer find work. They went “back to Lanta. They fisherman,” Nam told me (Personal conversation, July 30, 2016). Ko Lanta is small island, which is close to Phi Phi, that has not yet been completely inundated with tourism, although it too changes each time I have visited since 2010. It is home to large communities of sea gypsies and Thai Muslims, and for Nam, it is “the real Thailand” (Personal conversation, Aug. 3, 2016). Nam aligns himself with a temporal subjectivity that is pre-new style, and pre-tsunami, which he expresses through being rasta or hippie, and often specifically in reference to the lineage of Thai rasta musicians. Every time I visited Nam’s shop, the Thai reggae band Job2Do was playing. Job Bunjob, the lead singer of Job2Do, is credited as the father of Thai rasta reggae (Sawongchot, 2013). With his long dreadlocks, dark skin and Southern Thai dialect, Job Bunjob wrote songs that appealed specifically to Southern Thais who are often marginalized in the nation. He is credited with introducing a Rastafarian spirit, with songs about “freedom, the environment, sustainability, and the issues of Southern Thai people” (Sawongchot 2013, 150), and he directly questions sociopolitical and economic issues in his music (Sawongchot 2013, p.152). Job Bunjob is “seen as a wild country boy from Thailand’s south” (Sawongchot 2013, p.148), and Nam reproduces Bunjob’s rasta subjectivity in his shop and ideals. About being a rasta he stated, “but they look at us like we have no money, like jungle boy. Have to have short hair and look like Chinese and white skin hahaha” (Nam, personal communication, Oct. 25, 2016). He recognizes how rastas might be viewed unfavourably, but he laughs because for him, this is the ideal way of living a good life.

Somedays in his shop, Nam discussed himself as a rasta, and other days he was a hippie or a “South Thai guy.” Other times he was very specifically a sea gypsy whose parental lineage, with a dad from the sea and a mom from the mainland, had made him both Buddhist and Muslim. Nam, however, felt that there are certain shared principles underlying these various subjectivities and he connects them through particular qualities and skills that he is able to enact at his shop. Nam’s dynamic relationalities requires us to think beyond “identity,” so as to see the ways in which Nam shifts and changes, as he composes himself and his world. Diamond (2007) argues that identity studies now instantiates a performative practice of searching for distinctive categories and patterns of difference. She suggests researchers consider, instead, how and through which mechanisms people both assert and transcend social divisions by thinking through “alliances” (2007). Nam, I argue, not only has his shop as a social project which intervenes in exhaustion, but it is also a way in which he practices and develops particular skills and subjective qualities that allow him to make alliances with others, in Southern Thailand and beyond.

For Nam, “spiciness” is a quality that draws connections between his various subjectivities and unites his shop as a social project aimed at living a different life:

Tiffany: You have told me when we first met that you are “sea people” and also that you are from the South. Is that different than being from other parts of Thailand?

Nam: Yep. Yep. South Thai guy [are] more spicy

Tiffany: Spicy? What do you mean?

Nam: Hahaha! Spicy, like we do so many things. We always go many places. Spicy.

Tiffany: Yes, you said this to me in Antonio’s, as well, the first time we met. “Hot guys.”

Nam: Haha! Ya, spicy. Like bad boy. But now [I’m] good...Every South Thai guy.

Tiffany: What mean bad?

Nam: Bad. Crazy. Ya. South Thai guy. That is why we can do many things. Because if you are just nice you cannot do. My mom and my dad always fighting me [he motions hitting himself] and that’s why I can do many things. Haha! [I’m a] jungle boy.

(Personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016)

Nam had shared that he did used to get in trouble, especially over on the other side where he frequently fought with police, drank and did drugs. He also shared stories, with a great amount of

laughter, from when he was young of getting kicked out of school because a bong was found in his dorm. This gave him a sort of pride, however, and he told me how all the kids at his school cheered for him when he was escorted out.

Being “spicy,” however, also involves one being able to “do many things,” as he states above. Nam’s pairing of this notion of being bad with “spiciness” is important in the way it communicates how Southern Thais, often constructed as “violent, clannish and aggressive” (Polioudakis 1991), become resourceful as they endure their regional marginalization by the state and changing economic landscapes. Aside from fire dancing, Nam has learned to work with leather and beads to make wallets, bags, dreamcatchers and jewelry for tourists, all in what he calls a “Red Indian” style. Most of his money comes from selling these pieces in his shop. He spoke with me about all of his other skills that he had learned outside of formal institutions, such as fishing, crafting, leather-work and farming that can help him to survive without fire dance. Spiciness, it was clear, does not come from formal education, but is developed from life. About learning English, for instance, he says:

We learn by working. That why I always talk in the bar. Not people learn in school, you know? When I worked [driving a] long tail boat, I learn about fish, water and mountains. And then I work in the restaurant and I learn about food. And then I work in the bar and I learn about everything. And [after] long time, I mix together and I can do many things.” (Nam, personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016)

Nam was ambivalent about formal education. He would often point around his shop at all of his creations hanging on the wall to show me all of the things that he can do. We often joked about how little I knew because I had spent way too much time in school. I asked how he gained all of these skills, particularly in his leather work. “By looking. By myself” (Personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016). We would glance across at the big resort which was just recently built in Gypsy Village, and Nam would comment on how one needs a certificate to work there.

He doesn't have one, although he did one year at university in Bangkok, but hated it and came back. He expressed that the education system does not cater to what people need for their particular spaces in the world. "Me, in the village, I need country skill but [university] teach everyone the same. No good. That why two of my friends have no work. All study technology. We don't need this. They don't know what to do about jungle, about sea. Only [know] city" (Personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016). He relates this anti-technological stance to a rasta subjectivity. Rasta, he explained is "Everything...I trust about the nature, you understand? The tree, all the sand, all the water, the bird. Something about the nature. I trust that. I believe something comes from the nature. I not believe things come from technology (Personal conversation, Oct. 25, 2016). Later in that interview Nam had expressed how sea gypsies, like rastas, do not rely on technology, but their knowledge of the sea. It was an upbringing that taught Nam much about nature, and he said that fire dancing and tourism work was easy, comparatively: "I do many things more difficult than fire show" and this is how he can survive and endure on Phi Phi (Personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016). He relates that this type of informal skill-building, and gaining a knowledge of many different forms of art and labour, are part of his heritage and ethos as a sea gypsy, a hippie, a rasta and a spicy "South Thai Guy."

Nam makes his dreamcatchers and other ornaments and bags all very much in what I know as, very broadly, a North American Indigenous style, and what he calls "Red Indian" style. His dreamcatchers reminded me of the Anishinaabe style I was used to seeing in my home in Northern Ontario. I asked one day about how he knew about dreamcatchers. Pointing to a black and white photograph of an American Indian, which hangs on his wall, he said "Red Indian. My grandfather," and laughed. This joke, however, had substance to Nam in a way that I had never

imagined. He explained that “South Thai guy like Indian style.” I asked if it was because it looked hippie, because I had also seen this style in Pai, the hippie enclave in Northern Thailand.

Nam: Ya in Pai. Thai people like because they have strong heart and they want to do something, you understand.”

Tiffany: Can you say in Thai?

Nam: *chut mung mai*. They [‘Red Indian’] straight, you understand? And they have cool style. South Thai guy love...South Thai guy very strong like a Red Indian, you understand?

Tiffany: Yes. Ok.

Nam: Spicy! Haha. And Red Indian people, they are spicy.

Tiffany: What you mean by they are both spicy?

Nam: *chut mung mai*. When you want to do something and you know what is going to happen in the future and you want to do, to go to the dream.

(Personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016)

Nam asserts that South Thai guys and Red Indians are similar because they have *chut mung mai*, which also relates to being “spicy.” It was difficult to find a direct translation, as I was unfamiliar with this phrase. We spoke about this again in subsequent interviews and Nam explained the similarities between South Thai guys and Red Indians: “Mean like when you want to do something but you cannot do yet, but you try to do. Same like the dream, but not dream. When you want to do something and you not stop. You want to make better or when you have competition and you want to win and you just try everything to win” (Personal conversation, Oct. 25, 2016). *Chut mung mai*, I learned later, roughly translates as the hope or goal to get to a certain point, which for Nam, describes the drive to reach a target or a certain point in his life. This concept brings together Nam’s ideals of a hippie and rasta subjectivity, and the marginalization of people who endure by developing skills and learning outside of the very institutions that marginalize their knowledge.

We might think about how having “spiciness,” *chut mung mai* and the ability to endure are of a similar complex of qualities enacted by those facing different forms of exhaustion. Indeed, Nam understood Red Indians, as well as Southern Thais and rastas, as people with



“strong hearts,” who struggle for recognition, resources and power. Nam’s shop, thus, is where he practices *chut mung mai*, along with the photo on the wall of the “Red Indian” and the music of Job2Do. He dreams and plans of a future point, imagining others who struggle towards it with him. Entering this world of *chut mung mai*, surrounded by Red Indian style and the rasta music of Job2Do creates a spatialized articulation of alliances that allow Nam to live outside of the exhausting dance of Antonio’s, and within the old gypsy village, a space on Phi Phi that Nam feels is “still a little hippie” (Personal conversation, July 31, 2016).

These alliances, however, also allow Nam to reimagine and rearticulate spatialized connections and histories in powerful ways. While it is clear that Nam is a sea gypsy from the South, over the course of two interviews, he explained how his “blood” was a mixture that had happened over thousands of years, part of a “secret culture” and undocumented history that had been written out of Thai history books. “I from South Thailand but my dad from the sea, my mom from the mainland. We have different cultures and mix mix mix for one thousand years haha! Like five mixtures together. I am like five mixtures together” (Personal conversation, Oct. 25, 2016). Nam pulled out a container one day with beads to show me how he makes his crafts. “2500 years old,” Nam said about the beads. I had just come back from a museum on the mainland in Krabi which also had examples of these beads, which I told him about. “Ya. In Klong Thom. In the temple. Ya, I have them because I from there. My home just 40 kilometers from there. Have Red Indian and Apache people come with the boat. Ya, we found stones look like come from Red Indian people” (Personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016). He explained that a boat had helped “Chinese people, Muslim people and Red Indian people come to Thailand 2500 years ago” (Personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016).

Intrigued by Nam's account, I asked where he studied about this. "Not study. We know. My friend and I know about the boat very well. We go digging. 2500 years ago in the sea, but 2500 years after, the land" (Personal conversation, Oct 25, 2016). Here, Nam was referring to how the boat, which was filled with treasures, had sunk and over time was revealed as the ocean dried. The Thai solar calendar and the Western Gregorian calendar are not the same, and Nam elaborated that maybe it wasn't 2500 years ago in the way I might be thinking. He thought this year was 2557 in Thailand, which would be 2014, and that the boat had come 2500 years before that. It was, in fact 2559 (2016), but either way I tried to figure out the dates, it simply did not work out mathematically. What I came to realize again, however, is that the dates are not important. Nam used the notion of "2500 years ago" to communicate a multitude of historical events, the same way people on Phi Phi refer nonspecifically to the creation of the other side. It is not the historical date and details that are important to Nam, but the "secret culture" and patterning of global connections that sustains and connects Nam to a heritage.

This boat, as Nam described it, was a mini cosmopolitan formation that found its way to Southern Thailand, albeit with social hierarchies that persist today:

Nam: Have many people on that boat. Muslim people they build the boat, when something broke they fix.

Tiffany: Red Indian come how?

Nam: Red Indian come, oh not Red Indian, like Apache [he is saying the specific name]

Tiffany: On that boat?

Nam: Ya you know Apache? Because me and my friend found the rock look like a red Indian face from 2500 years ago.

Tiffany: Where did the Apache come from?

Nam: America. They working in the boat. They come two or three or one people. But you never know...Have one white man from America. He the boss. You understand? He have big money. He make Muslim people, Chinese people work for him...I think on that boat many religion come together but everyone work different. Chinese people make the stone and then Muslim people fix the boat and then the white guy just tell someone what to do. That's why in Thailand have so many religion. And South Thai guy we like Red Indian style.

(Personal communication, Oct. 25, 2016)

I said that I understood now how this style made its way into his art as I pointed at a dreamcatcher. “Yes. Come from my blood because I never learn, just do it. Ya before I never think I am going to do something like this. I never like and then I just make” (Personal conversation, Aug. 25, 2016). He said that he saw dreamcatchers for the first time in Railay, during the old hippie days there. He grabbed a dreamcatcher off his wall and said that it is similar to the nets they make for fishing in the South and laughed. “And then I see and I like it and I [know] I can do this too” (Personal conversation, Aug. 25, 2016). His *da kai chap fan* (ตาข่ายจับฝัน) or “net catching dreams,” hang all over his shop as decorations and as tourist commodities that sustain his connections to a personal history learned outside of schools, the fishing he learned from his father, the ideals of spiciness, and the global alliances that he embodies.

I wondered, and still do, if Nam was performing a heritage for me to make his art more “authentic,” as I am sure he knows that authenticity is a tourist desire. Regardless, Nam’s story opens up ways for him to rethink and (re)speak Thai history, his own positioning and the global connections that have shaped the South of Thailand in both formal and informal accounts. Indeed, the history of Thailand is absolutely skewed to privilege the Central Thais and notions of ethnocultural homogeneity. While I have not been able to find any documentation of the boat Nam speaks of, I do not believe the “truth” of this story is what is important. It is true for Nam and I in our encounters. This boat was used by Nam to explain to me the connections between rastas, Red Indian and South Thai guys who form solidarities under the hegemonic narratives of the elite and the *farang* who tell people what to do.

Nam’s history of the South, allows him, also, to speak the “unspeakable” about Thai history. I asked during these interviews what word he would use for sea gypsies and he said *chon klum noi* (ชน-กลุ่ม-น้อย), which translates as ethnic minority. “Means we are not big. Just only

maybe 500 people that stay together. But the king in Thailand make everyone not be this” (Personal conversation, Oct. 25, 2016). Knowing that any conversation that could be interpreted as defaming the monarchy could result in jail time, even for those who listen, I was nervous about where this discussion was going, especially since the revered (by some) king had died only a couple of weeks earlier. Nam continued, carefully, “Ya. The king make Muslim people, Christians, Jews, every religion mix together in Thailand. My king respect everyone and he make everything for everyone. That why in Thailand we not think about the religion. We think we same family. That why Thai people like to smile if you don’t know them because I think like 300 years ago, you my family too. But before South Thailand, where I be, not Thailand. Before was Malay U [Malaysia]. But they make war and they [Central Thais] take Muslim people and go to Bangkok” (Personal conversation, Oct. 25, 2016). The ongoing insurgency in the Southern provinces, while framed as a religious war, is in fact a fight on the part of Malay-Muslims to separate. This war is rarely discussed in Thailand, although there are casualties almost daily. Indeed, much of the diverse history of the South, alongside all of the different ethnic groups in Thailand, was subsumed during nation building to create the homogenous “Thai” of today. I told him about how I read about some of this history in my books at home. Nam interjected,

Nam: What I tell you is secret culture. Because that’s why in Thailand we have good king and my king just want to...my king forget about who come from there, there, there. If you be in Thailand you are Thai, you understand? And my king tell the teacher not to teach us about your own culture because maybe we have bad memory and then going to fight. You understand? I never learned this in the school. Ya. I think in South Thailand we have a sad culture. People come to make war and take us to work and we don’t want to fight. That why the king don’t want to make me and friends in the school sad and want to fight Thailand.

Tiffany: I understand.

Nam: Ya. [If] you are Thai, have to learn same culture. Not like many culture and then fight together. That why in Arabic and European they fight because learn about different culture. In European, Canada and America you never learn about your culture. You learn about culture from around the world. That’s what make you not trust.

Tiffany: Right – I am here doing exactly that haha!

Nam: And the teacher in Thailand cannot tell you what I say, because they only learn about the culture from North Thailand, like we fight with Burma, something like that. But we from South Thailand and when I young I never think about why my teacher didn't tell me about my culture. But when I get older I see everything. And then I think I want to know about my culture too, but I think the king don't want this, and now I don't know. Because if I know maybe make me get sad and get angry with Thailand. And I don't want to get angry with Thailand. I don't want to know. Going to make something bad and I don't want to know. And one day I think 'why my king not make teacher and me and my friend in the school learn my culture? But now, when he die, I understand. He doesn't want Thai people to know many cultures because he want everything to be good, to be like same family. He tell Thai people you come from the same way and he is the dad of Thai people. The king.  
(Personal conversation, Oct. 25, 2016)

As Nam relates, Thailand has a complex history and is very ethnoculturally diverse – with Arabic, Chinese, Portuguese, and Malaysian, among other, cultural histories– and this certainly demonstrates the problems in thinking through Thailand as generic, and Buddhist, state.

Nam struggles with how Thailand has been officially homogenized, and how his Southern Thai heritage has been social abandoned, but also, accepts this for the way it has helped him maintain *chai yen* (a cool heart) and not be angry. Western conceptualizations around agency may interpret Nam's semi-acceptance as a form of indoctrination by the state. Indeed, I used to consider how ideals about not showing anger, and not having *jai lorn* (hot heart), were disciplining mechanisms which sought to keep Thai people in-line. Cassaniti (2015b), however, argues that in Thailand these forms of acceptance are in fact agentive, as was discussed in previous chapters. Like the fire dancers in Chapter Four, Nam reorients his own emotions and embodied practices to change his relationship to forms of dominance and social exhaustion. Nam's social projects, and the insights he shared with me, sometimes form an overt social commentary and action that help him to endure and create a better future. At other times, however, his practices of crafting and listening to Job2Do among his dreamcatchers allow him to keep his heart cool while he imagines and embodies the history he knows to be true. And thus, he

crafts, dances and lives a different history in his shop, a space that invokes nostalgia for particular types of global connections and a hope for a “hippie” future. His shop, and global and regional alliances it provides through artifacts, crafting and music, allows him to foster a “spicy” and “mixed” subjectivity he believes to be true over the formal version of Thai “sameness.” The space of Nam’s shop endures and embodies *his* history.

### **Conclusion**

Phi Phi, in the space of the nation, is about as far from the “centre” of power as one can get. An island floating in the Southern Andaman filled with partying *farangs*, capitalist ventures, group Jeen, Burmese fire dancers, Southern and Northeastern Thais; it is conglomeration of Others. It cannot get more un-Thai than Phi Phi. I would notice the faces of Bangkok elite Thais drop, ever so slightly, when I told them where I conducted fieldwork. Speaking from the margins is not worthy scholarship, I am sure some of them thought. On Phi Phi, however, inhabitants remake spaces and “centres,” often in hierarchical ways, that help them endure (Povinelli 2011) the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) of tourism. The dancers at Antonio’s secure their space as one of higher morality, and style, compared to what they understand as the Burmese and the capitalists on the other side. Nam, as well, makes his shop the centre of power where he enacts and embodies spiciness, a modality of living and an aesthetic, through which he feels a connection with others and strives towards his goal (*chut mung mai*). Nam endures the changing ecologies of Ko Phi Phi stating “We are like the sea. Just up and down. My life my up and down. I get high when water high. I get low when water low” (Personal conversation, Oct. 25, 2016).

### Chapter Six: *Kalathesa* (Suitability of Time/Space)

This chapter features the voices and insights of four women, both Thai and *farang*, who participate in the fire scene in different ways. What initially struck me about Thai fire dance was the lack of Thai women involved, particularly given that this form of fire art, almost everywhere else in the world, involves women. I asked every dancer I met why there was not more Thai women and every male fire dancer indicated that certainly women *can* do this, and some would reference dancers in other parts of the world. They would then seem a bit perplexed as to why there were not more Thai women.

While I was well-connected with the vast majority of fire dancers around Thailand, I only ever heard of three Thai women who still danced, Dao, Zazi<sup>28</sup> and Khao. I saw no others, particularly in the new generation. This chapter explores this gendering of the genre through speaking with female fire dancers. It examines how certain figures, imaginaries, histories, ideologies and power dynamics manifest and are negotiated by women in the fire dance scene. This chapter begins with a discussion of Thai and *farang* femininities and sexualities in Thailand and is followed by the voices and insights of women. Given that most of the dissertation has been heavily-centred in male voices and perspectives, I have featured separate conversations with different women in the scene to show the diverse ways in which women navigate this male world. The voices of women reveal the ways in which they negotiate fire dancer subjectivities and the labour of fire dance vis-à-vis social mores concerning feminine social obligations and femininity in different spatiotemporal contexts in Thailand. I also include my own experience moving and being in fire communities as a female researcher, as highlighting the research process provides insight into how gender and sexuality are produced and organized in this scene.

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<sup>28</sup> I recently heard of a Thai female fire performer, Ying, who was around when Zazi started learning, but she moved to Germany soon after.

This chapter engages with themes from previous chapters, but highlights and adds to the conversations by centering the voices and perspectives of women. In particular, we will learn how women understand and negotiate the sexuality that gets linked to fire dance labour, and how particular spaces intensify these associations. One of the overall goals of this chapter is to think about why fire dance has become a male-dominated world in Thailand; while discussions of “violence” did not explicitly come up in conversations, I urge the reader to consider the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) of the phenomena that are discussed, such as economic nationalism, colonial representations and semicolonial processes, and how women have slowly, and without notice, been excluded from this performance genre and the times and spaces in which we find fire dance. As will be argued, knowledge about, and the shaping of, spatio-temporal contexts (*kalathesa*) within fire scenes is key to understanding how and why women are not full participants in this performance genre, and the ways in which those women that do participate create space for themselves and shift and change their gendered and sexual expressions in conversation with fire worlds, and wider spaces and discourses.

### **Genders, Sexualities, Times and Spaces**

Thinking through selfhood and power in Thailand requires a flexible notion of “identity” that is less static than Eurocentric models. I understand “identity” and the self in Thailand to be a shifting and relational modality of being, understandings that are based in Theravada Buddhist ideologies of non-self. As explained in the introduction, Van Esterik employs the notion of “gendered surfaces” to communicate this shifting and relational sense of self in regards to gender. Van Esterik uses the notion of *kalatesa* – temporal and spatial context – to communicate the ways in which Thais adjust their surfaces and behaviour which results in “orderliness in social relations, *khwam riaproy*” (2000, p36); such negotiation and management is paramount for



gendered and sexual performances, particularly in public. I want to extend this thinking of relationality to help elucidate the ways in which not only gender and sexuality might be (re)formed in certain contexts, but also how different class, race and ethnic dynamics are read and differentially produced depending on particular contexts and social interactions. Thus, rather than thinking about identity as something someone possesses, here, I ask that we think about the continued forming and (re)forming of selves in relation to specific spatio-temporal contexts.

While intersectional feminist approaches also engage with relational subjectivities, although in a more egocentric framework, Thai and Buddhist logics of a non-self allows for much more fluidity and are formed in relation to others present, and *kalatesa* demonstrates the importance of space/time in a way that intersectional approaches do not always highlight with the focus on “identity.” Selves are not necessarily assumed to have particular “identities”; the creation of subjectivity, and particularly its outward expression, is highly dependent on spatio-temporal context. How people dress, act, speak and behave can be vastly different depending on the situation; in turn, the power relations which influence particular gendered and sexual expressivities also depend on who else is present in certain contexts, what types of social power they hold and where they are positioned hierarchically in regards with others. Van Esterik states,

*Kalatesa* is very much concerned with surfaces, with appearances, but in Thai society these surfaces matter. Knowledge of *kalatesa* is expressed through dress, language, and manner...topics of conversation must also suit the time and place, such as appropriate conversation topics for meals, for mixed company. If you hear a personal conversation you should withdraw. You were in the wrong space and time. Surely this is equally true in polite Canadian settings. “Yes”, said my Thai friend, “But in Thailand the lapses (*phit kalatesa*) matter more.” Someone who violates *kalatesa* loses face and respect (*barami*). A person could be open and friendly in conversation, but still have to consider *kalatesa*. Knowledge of *kalatesa* stops a young professor from arguing with a senior professor. *Krengchai*, the feeling of embarrassment in the presence of powerful people, is the feeling that arises when you have violated *kalatesa*. If you have knowledge of *kalatesa* and a full understanding of context, including knowledge about the people you will be

interacting with, then you will not feel embarrassment or discomfort, will not feel *krengchai*, and will be less likely to *phit kalatesa*. (2000, p. 39)

Kalathesa translates what is often thought of as “fakeness” in the importance of surface and appearances, the “regime of images” (Jackson 2004), into a vital social form that structures relations. And while it is not outwardly discussed by Thais, it is very much known: “While children are taught from birth to recognize *kalatesa*, lest they *phit kalatesa* (make an error in *kalatesa*). But in my experience the concept is rarely talked about or written about, except to correct children. It is so deeply taken for granted among Thais that I knew the concept years before I learned the word” (Van Esterik 2000, p. 38). I too had a similar experience after I moved back from Thailand in 2013 and stumbled upon Jackson’s work (2004). For the first time I understood the reasons why people might behave so differently in different contexts and how Thais had helped me learn, and shape my body and behavior, without ever fully explaining why certain modes of dress, voice, gesture and language were better in some contexts than others.

While *kalathesa* and gendered surfaces showcase great fluidity in personal presentation, wider national, and more static, constructions of gender and sexuality are at play and that must be carefully negotiated by Thai women. While Chapter One discussed what Malam calls the “microgeographies” (2008) that affect masculinities on the beaches, wider macro-level processes must also be taken into account when thinking about female fire dancers. There are ongoing attempts by the Thai government to produce ideal images of Thai femininity, often to challenge and counteract orientalist and hyper-sexualized representations of Thai women. These attempts to render a “fixed” image of feminine respectability appears to contrast the fluidity of “gendered surfaces” and the principle of *kalathesa*. In thinking through the ways in which the Thai nation constructs ideal forms of Thai femininity, however, we might also consider how this is part of a national “surface” which is created at a particular historical moment, as an outward-facing

external appearance that other nations will see. I view these continued forms of national surface management, which of course feedback to affect citizens, as ongoing forms of semicolonialism that respond to transnational powers and discourses.

We cannot begin to discuss Thai femininities without considering how the circulation of images of Thailand has impacted gendered and sexual constructions in Thailand. Imaginaries of Thailand have been formed out of an Orientalizing and sexualized gaze of the West (Jackson and Cook 1999, p. 1). The idea of Thailand as a place of erotic adventure is perpetuated through the international tourism industry; in the 1960s Thailand was a “Rest and Relaxation” zone for U.S troops in Vietnam, and this time period saw the development of many non-domestic sex venues to fulfill the fantasies of Western men. The monolithic idea of “the West” as fueling the sexualization of Thailand, however, requires unpacking; Thailand is also a sexual hub for men from a variety of countries, particularly those in Asia and the Middle East. The Thai government has sought for decades to reverse its sexualized image through the careful control of the country’s external presentation, even while sex tourism continues to be a very lucrative industry. Part of this image management has been an attempt to shift the modalities of tourism, for instance, by marketing Thailand as a medical tourism destination, a spiritual mecca, and in the last ten years, as a mass tourist destination for China and Russia (Kontogeorgopoulos 2016). As Sunanta (2014) argues, these efforts still maintain a linkage between Thailand and intimate bodily care, and thus, are still somewhat sexualized. Moreover, tourism images still employ the bodies of beautiful Thai women, treating them “as part of the aesthetic resources of the country” (Van Esterik 2000, p. 159).

The sexualization of Thailand has, of course, benefited women who seek to work as sexual labourers in the country. The branding of Thailand as a “sex scape” (Brennan 2004),

however, has deeply, and problematically, affected the way that Thai femininities are constructed and read. Jackson and Cook relate that

the gendered and sexualized image of the Thai female prostitute dominates Western perceptions of gender analysis on Thailand. The content of this stereotyping in itself is offensive to both Thai women and men and, as is often pointed out, ignores the vast majority of the Thai female population who dissociate themselves from the sex industry. The collapsing of Thai femininity with prostitution has resulted from the widespread academic, feminist and media attention devoted to Thailand's sex industry. (2009, p. 13)

Haritaworn argues that the figure of the Thai prostitute “haunts” performances of Thai femininity, even for Thai women living transnationally. They find that Thai women living in Europe “performed their racialized genders and sexualities, often in (disowned, reclaimed, extended) kinship with the figure of the Thai prostitute. While interviewees could critique it, disprove it or subvert it, they could never quite get away from its haunting presence” (Gordon 1997 cited in Haritaworn 2011, p. 19). The ever-present figure of the prostitute is born from years of non-Thai constructions surrounding the supposed sexual and gendered sensibilities of Thai women and this figure also haunts the fire scene. This is a complex haunting that evolves not only from the external sexualized imaginaries of Thailand but is coupled with national constructions and mores surrounding gendered and sexual female responsibilities and respectability in public.

Yuval-Davis argues that within nations women are “the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively,” and carry the “burden of representation” (1997, p. 45). Thailand certainly conducts this type of nation-shaping through the bodies of women (Van Esterik 2000) and the social rules surrounding public presentations are stringent. Fuhrman argues that in the post-1997 financial crisis rebuilding, the government's reinvigoration of national identity linked new policies and projects to Thai culture, history and Buddhist ideologies, which also affected women. She states that,

Thai government and non-governmental agencies began to espouse the royally initiated “sufficiency policy” (*nayobai khwam pho phieng*) in parallel with liberal, world market-driven reforms. *Sufficiency* was to apply to sectors of the economy but came to designate also social and moral principles that were to buffer Thailand from further economic and social upheaval. According to its proponents, sufficiency is essentially motivated by Theravadin Buddhist principles of moderation and detachment. The late 1990s were thus a time in which rhetorics of paring down, of rationing, and of exhortations to return to quintessentially Thai ways of living had high currency. At the same time, emergent conservative discourses on sexuality paralleled the logics of sufficiency in the demands of moderation that they made of public femininity. (2009, p. 224)

While we saw the language of sufficiency in Chapter Three, where studio members shared to have “enough” (*pho phiang*), this ideal of moderation also affected how sexuality and gender were policed in public spaces. The bodies of non-binary individuals, gay people and women began to be scrutinized in new ways, while liberal discourses about sexual rights and democracy in the public sphere clouded the bodily restrictions that were taking place under the rubric of *pho phieng* (2009, p. 224-225). Fuhrman relates that these new nationalist policies and moral disciplinary campaigns “relied on anachronisms that were anchored in bodies and sartorial detail. Female bodies, especially, now figured as a baseline cultural good, a kind of heritage” (2009, p. 225). Indeed, this continues; the ideal Thai woman is expected to be modest, graceful, beautiful and chaste, and we see these types of images in tourist advertisements as Thailand projects its national image to the world.

Given that fire dance emerged in Thailand during the exact time as notions of moderation were sweeping economic policy and public gendered and sexual presentations, this may not have been an acceptable form of public display even from the outset. Fire dance requires little clothing, hanging around in tourist areas, and movements which might be considered immodest. Indeed, this type of public control over women’s bodies still exists and has been reinvigorated under the present military regime. Luk Thung (Thai country) singer Lamyai was recently scolded by General Prayuth, the junta leader, for her revealing clothing and “sexy” dance moves.

Her manager offered a public apology and assured the media that this would change (Coconuts Bangkok, 2017). This ideal Thai woman, modest and graceful bearer of the nation, is often placed in juxtaposition to the *farang* female, a figure that is at once admired and reviled.

As Jackson and Cook remind us, crosscultural notions of gender and sexuality always work both ways; just as Thailand has been imbued with exotic and erotic fantasies, *farang* have also been constructed as sex crazed. They state, that “in Thailand the West is often portrayed as a culture that is ‘sex mad’ (*ba sek*), and Westerners in Bangkok commonly find themselves stereotyped as libertines guided by an anachronistic 1960s philosophy of ‘free sex.’ Paradoxically, each side characterizes the other as being more sexually preoccupied and active than themselves” (Jackson and Cook 1999, p. 19). Given the nationalist narrative that Thailand was never colonized, Thai national identity is partly formed around an ambivalence for *farang*. In many ways, *farang* are Other and are often considered to be morally suspect, boisterous, and not able to follow social rules. Thais often comment on how *farang* smell bad (*men*) a sensorial social judgment that more deeply comments on an uncleanly personhood and lack of acceptance. I understand this as a way in which the *farang* “stands out” from the smooth ordering of social relations, a disturbance they cause in particular contexts.

In turn, *farang* do not often have knowledge of *kalathesa*, and thus, sometimes dress immodestly and engage in public displays of sexuality in inappropriate contexts. It is not uncommon to see a shirtless *farang* walking in middle of downtown Bangkok, as Thais, dressed in suits and modest work clothes, who are *riap roi* stare in disbelief. In the wake of the 2014 murder of a British man and woman, General Prayuth implied that the public wearing of a bikini may be a factor in why the woman was murdered: “Tourists think that Thailand is beautiful, safe and that they can do anything they want here. That they can put on their bikinis and go anywhere

they want. I ask, can you get away with wearing bikinis in Thailand? Unless you are not beautiful?" (Reuters Bangkok, 2014). While Prayuth's comments are despicable, and were widely condemned, the construction of *farang* female sexuality as devious, impolite and disruptive is widespread. It is not, however, hard to understand when we consider how their behaviours disrupt Thai social relations concerning gender and sexuality; as tourists, they are often dressed in a way that is considered immodest in public, they drink to excess and publicly display and express their sexuality. Again, this is not so much that sex and sexuality are discouraged in Thailand, but that there are rules about the times and spaces that those expressions and dynamics should emerge in. While I was on Phi Phi, for instance, there was a case of a *farang* female who was videotaped giving oral sex to a *farang* male in one of the laneways. This resulted in a nationwide Thai-led social media campaign to track them down. Indeed, the police did, and they were made to publicly apologize. Given that it is not uncommon to see *farang* women with fire dancers on the islands, the image of the "slutty *farang*" in the fire scene is very much ingrained. Nevertheless, while *farang* females may be considered as excessively sexual and not *riap roi*, our bodies and movements are not as heavily policed as Thai women's, although they bring their own tensions and hauntings to fire communities.

Because of the importance of maintaining public appearance, spaces in which sexuality is openly expressed, such as the infamous sex districts in Bangkok, come to be associated with immorality and thus those who work within them are often stigmatized, and particularly so for Thai women (Wilson 2004, Sinnot 2013). As Sinnot discusses in her research on intimate relationships between Thai women, space plays a key role in their abilities to socialize with each other. She finds that these women – referred to as *toms* and *dees*<sup>29</sup> – must be in "generic spaces" (Wilson 2004 cited in Sinnot 2013, p. 333). These are spaces socially approved for women –

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<sup>29</sup> Tom is from the word "tomboy" and dee is taken from the end of the word "lady."

such as markets, places of employment and schools – that are not linked with sexuality in any way (2013, p. 346). Men typically have much more freedom of movement, particularly in spaces deemed as entertainment zones – such as clubs or bars – which are often also venues for the purchase of sex (2013, p. 343). As I have also noticed, women are not usually in public entertainment areas, and if they are, it is always in a group. While *farang* are not subject to the same types of social rules, it was a point of great concern for my Thai friends that I went out *khon diao* (alone), particularly to the tourist beach parties.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the tourist beach parties, where fire performances take place, is somewhat of an ambivalent site for Thais and is an eroticized zone; nightly beach parties are thoroughly (hetero)sexually-charged spaces. While not met with the same stigma as sex districts, they are still known as spaces of excessive drinking and loss of control over oneself, overt displays of sexuality, drugs and danger. Moreover, these are sites filled with *farang*, who are constructed as being sexually uninhibited and uncontrolled, the opposite of Thai moderation. Thus, the beach is not only a nighttime entertainment zone, it is a space of excessive sexuality. This is not to say that there are not Thais at beach parties, although it is rare at the tourist bars; some young Thais do attend the Full Moon Parties on Ko Phangan. I have, however, yet to see a group of Thai women alone at any beach party. The spatiotemporal context provides a potential reason as to why there are not more Thai women who fire dance. As we know, even the men are stigmatized, so this would be even more pronounced for Thai women who participate in these scenes. I have, however, heard that there used to be more Thai women, and while the reasons for the decline in participation are unclear, I came to learn that reinvigorating female participation is difficult.



As I was practicing at Antonio's one day, Neo was teaching me some moves and I questioned why there were not any Thai women dancers on Ko Phi Phi. He said that there used to be more, but "now no, because everyone learns from friends. Who would teach them [Thai women], he asked?" (Personal conversation, July 30, 2016). His question provides a simple answer to my oft-asked question of why there were not more women. Social relations in Thailand are typically organized homosocially. Thus, if a man and a woman are hanging out together in public, it is usually because they are intimately involved or related. This, of course, is a generalization, but from my experience, a woman alone in the company of men, draws negative social attention. Thus, a Thai woman would likely not be able to learn from a Thai man that she was not romantically involved with. Indeed, out of the three Thai female fire artists who are featured here, two – Dao and Khao – had learned directly from their male partners. Zazi, actually learned in the park with Pi Oud, although her foray into the fire dance industry in the South was with her boyfriend. I was the only woman among those I met, who was learning from men who I was not engaged in an intimate partnership with. But, as will be discussed, even with my *farang* privilege, my femininity could only be extended so far in this world.

### **Zazi**

I met Zazi through a *farang* female dancer in Bangkok, Celine, who is featured below. Zazi was in a transition stage, having taken a break from the fire art scene in the Southern tourist hub of Phuket, during my fieldwork. She is one of the best in Thailand and is also well-known internationally. While I was there, she started getting back into fire art and organized a month-long tour in China. She was widely cited as the best female fire dancer there was and she was known by every dancer I spoke with on Ko Phi Phi and Ko Samui. Indeed, she had also spent time at the studio, as Nah was an old friend from the park. I hung out with Zazi each time I

passed through Bangkok and we became friends. She is a fun-loving person and we often went out for dinners, drank wine together, chatted and went out partying with her friends, many of whom were *farang*. In fact, she only dated *farang* men, as she relates that Thai men never ask her out. She explained that she could not fit the Thai feminine ideal that a Thai man would want, and that because of the industry she works in, doing events and also films, it is difficult to have relationships, in general. She did, however, explain that because of this she is single, but dreams of having a family (Email correspondence, May 2, 2018). While she considers herself to be introverted, she has a very sociable public demeanor that has served her well in the fire dance scene.

Zazi had learned with Pi Oud at the park in the early days, and even then, was the only girl. About why she started, she states, “I was fascinated with fire dancing and I think everyone who decided to spin fire has that same fondness that I felt when I first saw the first moves” (Email correspondence, March 17, 2018). During our initial interview, I asked how she felt about being the only female at the park. She replied laughing, “Oh I don’t mind. I like it. I always prefer to have more guy friends than girlfriends. Less drama, less wah wah wah, you know? I am more like a boyish girl. It’s more comfortable that way. They not like girls, you know? (Zazi, personal communication, June 3, 2016). She understood herself as possessing a different type of femininity than the dominant Thai ideal, which was born from her struggles and experiences in fire communities. Zazi explained that initially she had to fight her way into the fire scene, sometimes only being allowed to perform for ten minutes during a show of all men. It is a “protected” genre, she explained, and was viewed as “a man’s thing to do,” so Zazi had to work hard to be accepted and gain access. The independent femininity she gained which allowed her access to the fire scene, however, caused her to clash with people in other social realms. She

explained that she could not play the “damsel in distress” that her male work colleagues at her job in Bangkok wanted, and thus, she felt that she was not accepted in the office environment (Zazi, personal communication, Aug. 11, 2016). What Zazi references here is the static ideal of female respectability and femininity that she struggles to embody in public work spaces.

Zazi was well-aware of how external imaginaries of Thai female sexuality impacted the lives of Thai women. She has always been very aware of this image of the country and characterizes herself as somewhat “protective” about it (Email correspondence, March 17, 2018). We were speaking one day about an expat magazine that had featured an article on “happy ending” massages. She commented that she hated that so many people associate Thailand with sex, and shared that this has impacted her life, as well. She made a lot of money as a fire dancer in Phuket, and also from her other job as a reporter and event organizer, and this drew criticism and suspicion from those around her. She said that Thai people assumed she was a sex worker. Even her mother, who used to be a beautician, faced stigma about this career because of the association that she was a masseuse and thus associated with sex work and “happy endings” (Zazi, personal communication, July 6, 2016). The figure of the Thai prostitute haunts Zazi’s femininity, but Zazi also struggled with how fire dance was sexualized through these same imaginaries:

Zazi: Usually people who come to Thailand either running away from something or seeking something new. I think Thailand in general is already fascinating for people just like...there’s no rules in this country. I think that already is mind blowing for people and then come to the South and you see some sexy skinny brown guy fire spinning and you are like, ‘Oh my god.’ Usually sex is the drive. Sex is behind everything.

Tiffany: Did you ever feel like that when you were dancing?

Zazi: A lot of people interpret it that way. Like, ‘Oh it’s so sexy.’ I’m like no. I guess it’s because when female do it’s sexy in that kind of form which I can relate to. But at the same time, I don’t want it to be interpreted as sexy. That’s why I don’t like performing for the club. Because everyone there for clubbing and it’s just additional fun for them. Not fulfilling for me.

Tiffany: Kind of like a sexy girl dancing in a club?

Zazi: Ya, I sweat and bleed for this sort of thing!  
 (Zazi, personal communication, June 3, 2016)

Clubs are very similar, if not the same, as the beach parties with heavy drinking and partying tourists. For Zazi, being just “additional fun” for people who are interested in clubbing was problematic. She wants her art form to be watched, but in a more attentive, and less sexualized, way. We can see through this conversation how wider narratives about Thailand have come to shape *farang* and even Thai perceptions of what constitutes expressions of sexuality and appropriate/inappropriate labour. As we will see from other women, the association of dance and sexuality, also affects *farang*.

Zazi has developed strategies to mitigate and deal with this sexualization, although they conflict with other aspects of her personal beliefs, morals and subjectivity. Zazi characterizes herself as a “hippie.” She often talked a lot about current political issues, capitalism and corporate greed. For Zazi, ideals such as “sharing,” as we heard in the previous chapter, living off the land and being kind to others were rules to live by. Indeed, Zazi’s Facebook page was used as a tool for spreading such political messages. Yet, one of the ways in which Zazi has found fulfillment as an artist has been through, what she calls, “going corporate.” Zazi finds that performing outside of beach clubs, in hotels and wealthy elite establishments, mitigates the sexualized aspect of performances, although she was conflicted about how this might “commercialize” her art. In fact, Zazi was one of the pioneer fire artists to bring fire art into five-star venues in Thailand. About “going corporate,” she states,

I think this is the part where artist and the commercial art take a different stance. Because a lot of my artist friend who actually do really good art don’t want to make it commercial because don’t want to lose their soul. But when you swallow the fact of that – the commercial factor – you don’t have to see people getting drunk and wanting to get laid every single day. Not fulfilling for me. I’m a hippie. I would rather walk bare feet and put flower in my hair or something and grow my own food...I had to do a full two full years

of clubbing scene in the touristy part of Phuket, which is annoying, and which is what burned me out, I think.

(Zazi, personal communication, June 3, 2016)

Like those on Ko Samui, I could tell that Zazi struggled with how the form had changed from a participatory form to an economic enterprise. But, her ability to sell expensive shows to hotels and private parties, outside of the beach, was something she came to appreciate, and this new context changed the way her femininity and sexual expression were understood. In her choice to book these types of exclusive events, she would often laugh and refer to herself as a “corporate bitch.”

Zazi felt that this sexualized aspect equally applied to men, but that they might not be as exhausted by it as she was. She is very clear in explaining that both male and female fire dancers are not motivated to start fire art because of the sexual potentials, in the same way that the male fire dancers I spoke with insisted, but she states that “they [men] would enjoy it more. In society, already we have the different way of like sociality. I think for guys it’s always cool to have so many girls. It’s the opposite of the girls” (Zazi, personal conversation, June 3, 2016). She states,

I think because it’s harder for guys to get laid. Also, it’s part of natural behaviour, you know? Men have to span their wings to get attention, you know, attraction. They have to try to impress you. Because for girls we always have people approaching. So, I guess for the guys they actually starting it because in the beach bar when you do something cool, a lot of girls will come to you. It’s part of the game.

(Zazi, personal communication, June 3, 2016)

She again reiterated that even though sexuality might be present, and perhaps more welcomed by men, it was not a reason why anyone would start to fire dance. Rather, it was a desire for a different sort of life outside of the conventional nine to five work life that would be a motivating factor (Email correspondence, March 17, 2018). It is interesting to note, however, that Zazi sees differences in how sexual attention might be enjoyed. While men did not speak outright about not wanting their bodies to be looked at in erotic ways, I interpret the men’s heavy focus on their

affective and artistic performances as a way in which they, like Zazi, attempt to move away from sexualized discourses and constructions. In turn, and as is clear, men do not have to negotiate the same static images – of national ideals of that seek to challenge the figure of the Thai prostitute – that women do, although, as was discussed in Chapter Two, they too must negotiate the unacceptability of their labour, and the beach space, in different ways. For Zazi, moving away from the beach party scene, a context which is laden with sexuality, and “going corporate” offers a level of respectability that she is more comfortable with. This comes at the expense, however, of her “hippie” ideals, but allows her to be fulfilled through her art<sup>30</sup>.

### **Khao**

I met Khao at Santichaiprakan park in Bangkok. Celine, the *farang* dancer who put me in touch with Zazi, also gave me Khao’s contact information and added me to the Facebook group, Bangkok Jugglers and Spinners. While not an original park dancer, Khao is one of the people involved, alongside two *farang* expats, in managing the Facebook page and hosting meetups at Santichaiprakan Park, and also Benjasiri Park which is far away from the backpacker district in the wealthy area of Sukhumvit Road. This group did not regularly meet up while I was there, and it was more so by chance that one might find them at the park. Unlike Pi Oud’s original park community, this group was quite small and not really organized. I only ever met four of the dancers, but the Facebook group allowed travelers to connect with jugglers in the city. On the occasions I met Khao at the park, there was usually a traveler there that had contacted her through this group.

Khao’s partner was a flow artist originally from the United States who had been living in Thailand for many years. She learned from him and from YouTube videos. Khao is a teacher at

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<sup>30</sup> Zazi asked to review this chapter twice; she had me add some material and asked that I use her real name.

an international school. She is originally from the Northeast but lives a quite privileged lifestyle; she regularly travels to different countries and has extensive holidays from the school she works at. While not a performer, Khao is still considered to be quite good and she is also friends with Dao and Nah at the studio on Ko Samui. Like Zazi, Khao recognizes herself as different than other Thai woman, and her sartorial practice also indicated this to me; Khao always wore a tight tank top that showed her midriff, which is very uncommon and not *riap roi*, or socially appropriate, for Thai women, especially in public. Her embodiment of an atypical femininity was made clearer during an encounter with one of the original park dancers from the 1990s, Kai from Japan, who was there practicing. He was showing me some different moves and then went up to Khao to adjust her style. He advised that she stand differently, with her legs straight and more posed for “*pooying* style” (girl style). She replied that she likes “*poochai* style” (guy style) because she has learned from men. Kai posed in *pooying* style to show her and did some graceful movements with his chest, like waves up to the sky, insisting that her style should be changed. Khao just brushed it off, laughed and continued doing her tricks in *poochai* style.

I asked more about this encounter in our interview. She explained that female style is smooth, beautiful and slow and has more bodily movement, sometimes with only a few tricks. Indeed, I had heard this from Som at the studio and also Neo on Ko Phi Phi, who both indicated that the focus on complicated tricks and speed was more for a man. This reminded me, generally, of idealized female bodily practice and gesture, always so graceful, slow and deliberate, and of great importance in Thailand (Herzfeld 2009). Khao said that she is mostly around men in the community and this has influenced her style and personality:

Khao: Ya that’s why I look like guy now hahaha, my personality haha. Like the Japanese guy came to me, ‘Can you do like this girl move?’ No. I can’t. I totally like guy move. I don’t care. I only just like guy move. I don’t really care. I just want to spin like guy.

Because I don't want to pretend. Understand, I can be beautiful but I don't want to do that. It is beautiful but I like spin fast a little bit.

Tiffany: Was he telling you to pose in a certain way or something?

Khao: Ya, like a Chinese or Japanese style, like ballet also cool. They pose straight. But I'm not like this.

Tiffany: Right, you learned from men

Khao: Ya and I watched a lot of men on YouTube. I not watch girl on YouTube... [girl style] more slow, smooth. Maybe they do in the centre [of body] but more body movement, look nice. But there are many girl who do good and many tricks also. But most of the girl are in Europe and America.

(Khao, personal communication, June 30, 2016)

Interestingly what Khao is describing as *pooying* style, is the aesthetic of “slow flow” that we heard from the studio dancers in the previous chapter. For her there is a gendered and racialized dynamic to this, and one that she does not want to always embody. This is different than how flow was rendered at the studio, where it was an embodied politics of moral artistry. For Khao, this is an Asian female aesthetic, one that is “Chinese” or “Japanese,” which she juxtaposes with *farang* women who “do good and many tricks,” more akin to *poochai* style. Khao, as I understand, does not see herself, nor does she embody, the essentialized Asian female aesthetic that men ask of her. It was, however, precisely a certain type of *poochai* aesthetic that had at first deterred her from trying, an aesthetic of fastness and power that she associated specifically with men on the islands.

Khao explained that her *farang* boyfriend's style was much slower and calmer and this is what initially drew her to the art form:

He American, so it's very interesting for me because Thai style of fire dancing also different. A lot of guys do it, so not a lot of girls. So I didn't interest in that. They didn't inspire me. When I was in the islands I saw the guys doing a fast fire spinning and I think this is not a girl thing.

(Khao, personal communication, June 30, 2016)

Seeing the style of her boyfriend, however, and then finding artists she liked on YouTube helped her to find the style that worked for her. It seems that there are disconnects and inconsistencies in



the conversations, particularly concerning her preferred aesthetic; while Khao liked her *farang* female-influenced *poochai* style in the presence of Kai, and refused to change, it also seemed that particular forms of softness and slowness had initially attracted her and made her feel that there was space in the dance form for her to learn. For Khao, these differentiations in style are not only gendered, but also spatialized and linked with social class. For her, the islands were a space of a type of *poochai* style that she did not like. She states,

I mean on the island is different style. On the island they don't really do YouTube thing or sharing different movements. People in Bangkok, in the city, are different. They learn from people who are traveling around the world also. And also they learn from the YouTube so there is new movement all the time, new tricks all the time. So people can be expert more and learn faster, and learn different things and different styles. But, on the island people just don't really care about those things, right? If they get to learn new things they learn from people. Other people coming through, but only sometimes. [In Bangkok] different styles, different props like clubs [juggling clubs]. You're not going to see many island people do clubs or something like that. And they [island guys] like to spin very fast, But, one thing they are different is that they are so full power. So much energy. Crazy energy.

(Khao, personal communication, June 30, 2016)

She continued, “Ya more men doing the fire thing. Because I think it look like dangerous thing and girl not want to try. But if this style [city style] girl might be interested to try because they don't see as harmful or very crazy or very fast. They might think, ‘Ok I can do it.’ And it's beautiful. It doesn't look like crazy spinning” (Khao, personal communication, June 30, 2016). I interpret Khao's comments as expressing a cosmopolitanism that is possessed and embodied by city spinners, one that is born from interactions with foreigners and transnational connections through the Internet, things that she feels are lacking on the islands. It is also gendered in that the island style leaves no room for women; it is a faster and more powerful *poochai* style. The slowness of the *farang* city style, even the *farang poochai* style, was what drew her into the art form.

Unlike, Zazi, Khao does not characterize herself as a hippie, but rather makes very clear distinctions of herself as a city person, an aspect which has influenced how she learned her style of fire dance. The island is a space of men while the city spinning community is more welcoming of females and their style, even if that *pooying* style is influenced by more masculine tricks and *farang* female artists. I do, however, understand that the men Khao learned from were not Thai, but *farang* and thus this ideal of a semi-*poochai* style is also racialized and feminized. These renderings of difficulty, speed and hardness, as juxtaposed to the slower and more graceful styles, reverberate with more widespread regional gendered discourses which position Southern men as rough, hard and aggressive (Polioudakis 1991; Kang 2014).

Khao did not comment on the sexualized aspect of fire dance for women. She did, however, indicate that the sexual associations around fire dancing was a reason there were so many males, which is very similar to what Zazi expressed.

Tiffany: I need to figure out why it is so popular with men who do the fast spinning.

Khao: Can I tell you too about guy? Guy first thing is that it looks cool for them. And they want to girl. Say, ‘Oh my god! Oh my god! [motions about women watching them]

Tiffany: I want to know why *farang* women like to watch so much?

Khao: I don’t know either! They go crazy and they like them! And many friend of mine go sleep with different girls every night. I don’t know really. I think they just want to have a good time and this is maybe something they have never seen in their home. Because normal people don’t go out and don’t really see something like this. And then when they see something like this they like, ‘Oh this make my day. This amazing!’ So, I don’t know, but all my friends – the guys on island – get a girl almost every day. What am I going to get if I’m a girl spinning fire? Hahaha. But all so drunk. Hahaha. So drunk, like ‘He’s so good. He’s so sexy’ haha! Like so funny. But all my friends got very hot girl, very hot girlfriend. Ya, the Thai guys got very hot foreigner girlfriend.

(Khao, personal communication, June 30, 2016)

What Khao is referring to is what Som, highlighted in Chapter Three and Four, calls “the system of the bar,” and what Alexa, the *farang* manager on Ko Phi Phi refers to as “one boat out and another one in” (Alexa, personal conversation, July 23, 2016). It references the never-ending stream of *farang* women who come and hook up with or date fire dancers. Of course, and as was

discussed in Chapter One, every Thai male dancer spoke back to these constructions, often saying that this was something they no longer participated in. For Khao, though, her rendering of *farang* women as beautiful reverberates with wider Thai beliefs which position light skin and Caucasian women as desirable<sup>31</sup>. Interestingly, however, she also characterizes *farang* as excessive and out of control; they are “so drunk” and very explicit in their sexual attraction to Thai men, forms of public display and behavior that are very much un-Thai, particularly for women, in the wider national discourse.

Because of her positioning in mostly *farang* circles, she is able to navigate the fire scene more easily than others. For Khao the city park is space in which she feels comfortable experimenting with different gendered surfaces, in terms of dress and dance aesthetics. Most of her fire dance engagement is at the park and in other countries with travelers; Khao does not perform on the beaches, a context which might shift how her body is interpreted. For her, it is strictly a hobby that has afforded her friends and an enjoyable movement practice. Still, however, the social etiquette concerning femininity, even in the park, is one that Khao must navigate alongside her own desires to be embody a cosmopolitan *poochai* style. Because of her “city” positioning, and her immersion in *farang* worlds in Bangkok, unlike many Thai women I know, Khao regularly jammed and met up with male fire spinners, many of them travelers, without her partner present. In fact, I rarely saw her with women. It is, however, difficult to say if Khao would have ever learned if it had not been for her *farang* partner, partly because of the social rules surrounding Thai female respectability and her own feeling that the island style was not for women. At present, however, Khao has access to an independence and lifestyle that is

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<sup>31</sup> As Kang points out, and as is mentioned in Chapter Five, desires for, and idealizations of, “white” aesthetics are not necessarily in reference to Caucasian features. Rather, they can be desires for East Asian features and the lightness of Korean or Chinese skin. Of course, these racialized aesthetics are “always, already hybridized” with notions of Caucasian whiteness, but they are more complicated than a simple “white” desire (2017).

different from normalized social standards. As she herself stated, she is mostly around men and thus embodies a surface at the park that is her own mix of a style, one that has room for both fast tricks and graceful movements.

### **Dao**

Dao, who was featured in Chapter Four, started fire dancing through her Thai boyfriend. Out of each of the three Thai women, I would characterize Dao as the most conservative and in-line with the idealized forms of Thai femininity mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. For instance, it was incredibly rare for her to be seen in public without her boyfriend. Indeed, if he had to be away for a few days at the studio, someone would be given the role of a “big brother” to pick her up on the *motocy* (motorcycle) and make sure she got home safely each night. Dao did not drink, although on a few occasions I did see her smoke, something not considered acceptable for women. I found her dress to be quite modest, although she did wear more revealing clothing during performances, such as belly tops, tank tops and short shorts. Dao was very soft spoken and almost shy which was different than how I perceived Khao and Zazi. I also got the impression that Dao’s family was more conservative; they did not accept her career move from being a teacher to a fire dancer.

Dao had studied dance growing up but was forced to stop and focus on university. While at university, her boyfriend had been doing poi in the park close by and she joined and found that poi fulfilled her desire to move, but it wasn’t until she learned hoop that her passion for dance was reignited. Song, Dao’s boyfriend, was quite advanced and has a background in martial arts. On a trip to Ko Samui, they went to the studio and Nah asked Song to come and join their team. His parents, unlike Dao’s, were quite accepting of his decision to pursue fire art as a career choice. Dao stayed in Bangkok after university and got a teaching position. She soon met Khao,

who helped her find a female *farang* hoop teacher. Eventually, Dao was asked to join the studio in Ko Samui because they could not find any other women. She left her teaching position and became a full-time fire artist.

In an interview with her and Song, Dao told me that this was not a typical job for a female in Thai society, and that this was likely the reason there were not more female dancers:

Dao: For women, they do fire arts as hobby but not for job.

Song: Maybe it's too manly

Dao: Or, I think it might be that because the woman, if they do this for the job, it's not stable. Like, in Thai society my money go back to my family. They want me to have stable job. I think in Thailand female kind of think like that. You get money every month, something like that, but freelance job like this no...and it involve fire. It's dangerous.

Song: And if you are female [doing fire art], you are very outstanding because the way you do is totally different. The movement of the woman [he shows graceful and slow body movement], people like to look. Maybe it's only in Thailand where is little women but worldwide I see so many women who do this – hoopers, jugglers, poi.

Tiffany: What did you mean about it being manly?

Song: The tools. The way that you spin and your posture. You need power. It look masculine like that, but women *should* do something like this.

Dao: I think if it's masculine stuff and women start to practice and maybe they think it's not for me.

(Dao and Song, personal communication, June 19, 2016)

Again, we see that a female movement is associated with grace and slowness, while the powerful aesthetic of spinning sticks and poi, like they do at the beach bars, is more so relegated as a male practice. Dao typically always does hoop or fire fan, two pieces of equipment I have never seen men use. Dao also communicates how she has taken a different path than many Thai women by choosing an “unstable” job. In speaking about her family obligations, above, Dao references the role for Thai female children, which is to support their parents as they grow older. As stated in Chapter Four, boys are expected to ordain as monks, as a way to transfer karmic merit to their parents and repay their debt for birthing and raising them. Females, however, repay this debt financially or through taking care of the home. Dao is not able to participate in this role. Once

again, we can see how that moral relationship, so important in Thai social relations, was broken when Dao chose a less-stable job.

Like Khao and Zazi, Dao also felt different than the Thai women around her. She states,

When I looking on my Facebook newsfeed many of my friends they are working in Bangkok and I know about their life and I know about my life and they are so much different. A few months ago, there was one of our friends who works in Bangkok and she came here to visit us and be a tourist in Ko Samui. And she had opportunity to see our performance and everything and she feel like it so much fun and time flying so fast. She want to stay in Ko Samui. And she said that what I am doing right now is so great; have fun and enjoy life so much more than her life.

(Dao, personal communication, June 27, 2016)

I interpret from this discussion that Dao is quite happy with her choice and is enjoying her life, more so than those friends. She nonetheless recognizes her unconventional role. In other conversations Dao said that doing fire art, and being the only female at the studio, made her feel important and special, despite how she might be viewed by her parents. She states, “I feel important in a way I never feel before. I’m not close with my parents. They discouraged me from dancing. Now when I love something, I don’t want to tell them. They don’t know what I truly am” (Dao, personal communication, June 14, 2016)<sup>32</sup>. On another day, a similar discussion came up:

Tiffany: You told me before that as a woman doing this you feel important.

Dao: Ya important and beautiful.

Tiffany: Did you ever feel important in other areas of your life?

Dao: Um before I work as a teacher. Teacher is important to students. I feel a little bit like that. But important in like another way, in my career. I’m a teacher. I’m important to students. My job I have to teach. It’s more like a work, career, something like that. In this fire dance or hula dancing its more me. I don’t think that I working, but I play, I dance. It’s important, but a different way. This is dancing and when I was teacher I work.  
(Dao, personal communication, June 27, 2016)

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<sup>32</sup> After this interview, Dao asked me to include that she does understand a reason why her parents did not want her to dance, and that is because it was costly. She relates that learning hoop and poi was “more natural” because it was learned through sharing with friends at the park.

Here she comments that it makes her feel beautiful, and “more me.” She relates that fire art brought out a part that her parents would never know. If we recall, she expressed very similar sentiments in the last chapter that also speaks to this theme:

Tiffany: I saw the circus bios for the website and you said that the circle [hoop] makes you a “special woman.”

Dao: Ya hahaha! Special in this case is not ordinary. You’re not somebody else, you’re you, but a better version. More beautiful version...like if I didn’t try that circle, I don’t even know what I am hiding. I’d never know what I am capable of. Like why did I learn so fast? Why did I click with this circle, you know? And even sometimes when I perform, when it comes out I don’t even know how I made it that way. Like I don’t even know how it comes out like that, so I learn it is my nature.

Tiffany: Does the hoop help to bring it out more than poi or salsa dancing [she used to dance salsa]?

Dao: Ya. It’s more than that because it’s not particularly dancing that has the moves and all this stuff. I just flow with the hoop, flow with the music. Everything comes out naturally and that is my style. That is me...I feel myself more beautiful.

(Dao, personal communication, September 22, 2016)

While Dao’s life has been quite different than other Thai female dancers who have typically been in *farang* social circles, prior to learning fire art, and in many ways still, she embodies proper Thai femininity of the national discourse; she communicates how fire art brings out another “special” part of herself, one she feels is more beautiful, a passionate self that is unknown by her parents. I recall watching Dao dance and seeing such a powerful and distinct transformation, more than any other dancers I saw. I commented on this many times to Dao; her movements would lengthen, her eyes would brighten and she would move incredibly gracefully, but almost flirtatiously. She herself characterized this transformation as time when she could be “more feminine and sexy” (Personal communication, Sept. 22, 2016). Indeed, she often wore makeup and more revealing costuming in the context of performance, aspects of self which were only brought out with her hoop. As we heard in the last chapter, the act of flowing with the hoop provided a way of feeling power in the context of the tourist industry, but, for Dao it is also a way in which she embodies a “special” and “not ordinary” woman in the context of societal

gender roles. Thus, being a fire dancer allows Dao to experiment with new modalities of feminine labour, expression and behaviour, allowing for (re)formations of surfaces in spaces of performance.

For Dao, however, and much like Zazi, she rarely performs at the beach bars. Rather, Dao performs almost exclusively at high-end hotels which in some ways help to mitigate the stigma around performing. Interestingly, and echoing some of the statements heard in the studio on Ko Samui, Dao feels that the beach shows are not as artistic as those at the hotels. She states, “At the luxury resorts far from Chaweng [the main tourist strip], maybe it is the first time they ever see. It’s like a real show. We trying to say something, you know? It’s more like a dancing show. Something different they [the audience] know is deeper. It’s art. At Star Bar [the beach bar] we still make a show but the point is for excitement for fun and to play with the audience” (Personal communication, Sept. 22, 2016). While she never stated this outright, I believe that the context of the hotel, associated with “luxury” and “art” is a more acceptable place for Dao to experiment with these different surfaces, rather than the context of the beach or even the fire studio that had mostly men, and where she dressed and behaved conservatively and very quietly. It was only in these hotel performance contexts that I saw Dao costume herself with revealing clothing, put on make-up, move in “feminine” and “sexy” ways, as the “special” woman.

### **Celine**

As I learned, it was not only Thai women that felt like their dancing rubbed against particular social standards. For Celine, a fire dancer originally from France who had been teaching in Bangkok for over seven years, doing fire art also posed problems for her. Celine had done very elite shows at parties and hotels in Bangkok. Although she began by doing them for little money, after a year she could make more than what a beach dancer would for an entire



night, for just a 20-minute set. Celine had learned flow arts on the beaches in France when it first started becoming popular in the early 2000s, and she was quite advanced. She had actually been a founding member of the Bangkok group which Khao was now in charge of, but Celine rarely danced these days.

Interestingly, just as Zazi felt that the Thai prostitute haunted her life, Celine's gender and sexuality were haunted by the "the go-go," a figure which she explains is a female that dances sexually for the visual pleasure of men. She states, "I practiced fire dance and went home and told mom I was a performer in Bangkok, but she said she did not raise a go-go [Celine begins to tear up]. Why does my skirt take away my skill? This is why I don't like feminism; you can't be beautiful and intelligent at the same time" (Celine, personal communication, May 9, 2016). Often when performing, female fire artists wear few clothes, and while this may be aesthetically appealing to the audience, it is first and foremost a safety measure; having loose clothing that can catch on fire is incredibly dangerous. She related how at one show, where she showed up wearing a mini-skirt and small shirt, she was asked to change because they did not want her to look like a "sexy dancer." "I'm not a go-go!" Celine exclaimed (Celine, personal communication, May 9, 2016). While it is unclear if Celine was referring to the infamous figure of the Thai bar-girl, I wonder if her mother's association of performance in Thailand with sexuality may have contributed to her disapproval.

Celine struggled with this figure of the "go-go" for much of our interview, and expressed her ambivalence about not being viewed as a skilled artist, one who is intelligent and serious, but who also might be physically attractive. Part of these constructions were, Celine thought, produced through being viewed as a sort of background décor at events, rather than a performer. She related how at events she felt like she was just part of the visual pleasure; this is different

than how male fire dancers, although aware of how their physical appearances were important, viewed their roles as providing affective labour, rather than just “décor,” as Celine describes.

These were issues, however, that extended beyond the critiques of her mother, but reverberated with Thai society’s complicated relationship with dance:

Here, not only fire dancer. Any dancer is a background décor. I’ve never seen anyone here paid for a dance performance on its own, except if it’s a ballet from somewhere and at the in the convention centre. But apart from that, Thai or *farang*, in parties or events, we are just background. Even very good dancers are being paid nothing. And if they are Thai, it’s even harder. Because when you are a *farang*, people can eventually recognize, ‘Ok we’re getting a *farang* so for the price we are going to consider this as a show.’ They take the Thai people and they consider them like nothing, like, ‘Ya you’re a dancer, ya? You can move your ass.’ No, it’s not only this. Like seven years of dance school and like fifteen years of practice and they are like, ‘Who cares. You are a hooker!’ You are considered as a hooker if you are a dancer in Thailand. Unless you work for a ballet company in Thailand, you’re a hooker. It’s not recognized. Not credited whatsoever! (Celine, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

The social limitations around dance in Thailand that Celine describes is a phenomenon that I also find to be true. And, as Dao describes, dancing was not a career choice approved by her parents.

While for Dao this had to do with her responsibilities as a Thai female, I agree with Celine, that dance is somewhat haunted by the figure of the Thai prostitute (Haritaworn 2011) and an ambivalent practice unless in a Classical style. Given that many sex venues feature women dancing, often as “go-go’s,” there is a linkage here that is difficult to undo. I had never heard it articulated in this overt way, but there is always a discomfort that emerges around women who dance in popular styles. This association and discomfort was so strong for Celine that she did not even tell her Thai boss or people where she worked that she was a fire artist.

Unlike Thai women, however, Celine does not struggle with social obligations that dictate her role in the family or with Thai nationalist constructions of appropriate femininity. Rather, Celine struggled with her *farang* subjectivity, a figure that is simultaneously admired and reviled in Thailand.

What Celine also references above is the desire for *farang* performers. This is absolutely true in that there is a privileging of *farang*, not only for idealized beauty aesthetics, but for the cosmopolitan appeal that these performances can be sold through. As stated previously, Thailand has a complicated relationship with *farang*, who are at once reviled and desired. The cosmopolitan appeal, however, is something some Thais seek, and particularly hotels and events catering to tourists, to portray a *samai mai* or “modern” persona. Khao’s discussion of “city” style, discussed previously, engages with this desire for *samai mai*. Despite how this privileging offers Celine better performance opportunities, she struggled with this positioning stating, “You are never really integrated here. No. Never. Even if you speak Thai like perfectly, and I do speak Thai quite well now, even then you will be the *farang* like, “You’re a white face” (Celine, personal communication, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016). This complex social desire and exclusion is another reason she feels that her art is not taken seriously and viewed as visual pleasure rather than art.

Mitigating this devalued artistic positioning, and searching for more appreciative audiences, however, was complicated for Celine.

Tiffany: So you are just part of the visual?

Celine: Yep, unless you do private parties. You are there because you are a sexy lady and there are going to be fifteen men having an expensive dinner and they want a private show having a sexy chick dancing in front of them.

Tiffany: Do you have to mingle with them after?

Celine: I did some private shows but no I didn’t mingle. I always refused to. I specify it before. I’m not a go-go. And also, this is maybe a bit racist, and not something I’ve done, but one of my friends used to do shows for very rich Thai men that basically were like, like they were just so happy to have foreign dancer doing sexy moves in front of them. That is all. She’s American. She’s not very technical and she doesn’t care about improving her technique because she is so beautiful and so graceful, and she absolutely knows that is why she was hired for most of the jobs. And I find it a bit horrible, to be honest, to have a bunch of Thai men like looking at her and being like ‘Ya, she is sexy.’ (Celine, personal communication, May 9, 2016)

Celine highlights the “dance” and technical aspect of her fire art abilities to differentiate herself from the “go-go,” and the excessively sexual *farang*. For Celine, it is her technical ability as a

dancer that she appeals to as a way to be viewed as performer that can be female, “beautiful and intelligent at the same time.”

### **Tiffany**

In the discussions above, we see that female performers seek to distance themselves from sexualized figures such as the “Thai prostitute” and the “go-go” that haunt the fire dance scene. Like Celine, I also had a complicated relationship with the figure of the “slutty” or overly sexual *farang*. As I tried to shape my surfaces and subjectivity as that of a researcher, these figures haunted my gender and sexual performances in certain contexts that had me continually trying to remove their associations from my body. Yet, at other times, when I sought to embody these figures in an effort to fit-in in an appropriate context, my surface was not able to produce and embody the required aesthetic and surface. Below, I present two different experiences, one on Ko Phi Phi and one on Ko Samui, that demonstrate my own doings of gender and sexuality, and my failures at *kalathesa*, in the field.

### **Ko Phi Phi**

I found myself almost embodying the knowledge of *kalathesa* naturally on Phi Phi, although never perfectly. Having lived in a conservative Thai neighborhood on the outskirts of Bangkok for three years, I had learned when and where I could wear tank tops, skirts, and make-up, drink beer or have an intimate partner come to my home. I became adept at picking up on small social cues, so common in Thailand, such as gestures and different smiles, which indirectly help one to shape their social behaviours. On Phi Phi, I immediately intuited that my management of my surface was important in order for me to gain trust with inhabitants. How I had to dress, interact, do my hair, consume beverages, move and gesture were different on each side of the island. Gaining any amount of trust on Loh Dalum, the party beach, required a *farang*

to have *farang*-style social capital which meant a physically attractive body, with little clothes, and a flirty attitude with servers and other tourists. One had to party and drink alcohol. Gaining access to fire dancers on this side, outside of the beach parties, was almost impossible for me. Alexa, the *farang* bar manager, introduced me to a Burmese dancer and said that I wanted to learn and talk, but he replied cheekily in front of his team that I was not attractive enough. Being a good ten years older than most on Loh Dalum, I felt that I was always sort of out of time and place. The only way to access dancers was through partying late into the early mornings, which I did a few times during fieldwork. I was eventually asked to work at one bar, but I declined. I was not sure that my body could handle the nightly alcohol consumption which was mandatory if one were a partying *farang* worker. On Loh Dalum, I needed to embrace and perform the figure of the slutty *farang*, but I could never quite do it properly.

Because of these associations on Loh Dalum, I knew that spending too much time on the that side could disrupt the relationships I was forming with Nam and other dancers at Antonio's, who often spoke disparagingly about tourists, *farang* workers and dancers on Loh Dalum. Nam once said, "I meet many girls in the day. They say they good girls and then I go there [the other side] and see them at night and they like crazy [he motions head banging and dancing]" (Personal Conversation, July 30, 2016). Nam, who used to work on the other side, also told me during this conversation that he knows everything that happens on the island and I wondered whether he knew that I sometimes partied with some of the Burmese dancers at Tribe and Rock Bar.

I spent most of my afternoons at Antonio's practicing poi for a couple of hours. I dressed very modestly, with covered shoulders, longer shorts or pants, no make-up and toned-down jewelry. While Plaa, the guesthouse owner, told me I didn't have to obey the dress codes of Thai

women, such as covering one's shoulders, I wanted to make the effort at Antonio's, particularly among the Muslim women who covered. Over time, and after taking lessons with Kel, I started chatting with the dancers more informally and they would share some insights about fire dancing. Each afternoon, around 4:00pm, I would make my way down, buy a Diet Coke and play poi on the quiet beach under the frangipani tree. The guys would emerge and slowly start to prepare the sand stage for the night's performance. Shoveling and chatting, smoking and drinking tea together outside of the gaze of tourists was a daily ritual for the Antonio's fire dancers that I came to know well. After, they would often wander to the local market to buy food and eat together. One of the dancers, Sanit, and his wife would eat together daily at this time. About halfway through the summer, Kel's wife came to stay with him on Phi Phi with their young son, and they too would eat together. I came to see this as family time at Antonio's when staff and their partners shared food and time outside of the life of tourism. I tried to disturb them as little as possible during these times. Still, however, this was one of the only times that the dancers were available to chat and they encouraged me to come at this time.

My daily routine at Antonio's changed when Kel's wife came to join him in August. She was very kind as he introduced me the first time as his "student," but was quite ambivalent about my presence as the days went on. There were more Thai women present at the bar following her arrival, as many came to see the baby and share food in the afternoons. None would even look at me. I was used to this dynamic with Sanit and his wife, as they did not really interact with me much, but this was different, and an indirect signal of non-acceptance was palpable. It was awkward, but I would go out to my tree and practice as usual, sip my Diet Coke and listen to the music, hoping that they would see me differently than other *farang* women. After a week or so, Kel also stopped interacting with me. I said hello one day when I walked in and the discomfort

on his face and through his body further confirmed my feelings. He never stopped building the stage to show me tricks anymore. I noticed that even Pon, the server who would regularly chat with me in the afternoons, was much less engaged when the wives and other Thai women were around. People, in turn, became increasingly interested in my relationship status. I always said I was married; I was actually engaged, although that is not really understood. But that my partner was not there with me left doubt in many people's mind. Pon for instance, asked a few times, and Chew, the dancer who never spoke with me, inquired through Neo about if I had a "*faen* Thai," a Thai boyfriend. I had moved from *farang* tourist to researcher to friend and then to outsider in a complicated, and sometimes painful, playing out of gender, sexuality and global relations.

A final culminating moment of shame assured me that my presence, and my doing of gender and sexuality, had failed. In front of the Thai women, Pon, who I had come to know quite well, began questioning me about what I did in the evenings, loud enough so that others could hear. I said I mostly went to bed early, worked and wrote about what I had learned during the day. "You need some time to take it easy," she said, and which I interpret as an indirect way of drawing attention to my daily presence in the afternoons at Antonio's. Yes, I agreed and told her that my husband was coming in a week for a vacation. She responded, "Oh you have a boyfriend!?" This confused me, because we had talked about my partner many times. Yes, I assured her and pointed to my ring. "Is he Thai," asked Pon? "No, he is Filipino Canadian," I responded. "Ok. I was worrying that you have a Thai boyfriend. I hope he is not Thai" (personal conversation, Aug. 4, 2016). Pon walked away towards the other women, who had all stopped to listen to the interaction, and left me in my shame. While the magnitude of this encounter is difficult to communicate, this was a clear way of Pon to let me know that my presence, and doing of gender and sexuality, was being questioned. Direct critique is not socially acceptable in

Thailand, but this was a way for Pon to “poke” at me, as Zazi says of these indirect forms of criticism in Thailand (personal communication, Aug. 1, 2016). I interpret Pon’s remarks as indicating that a Thai boyfriend would not appreciate how I was interacting with men. I had been breaking the social rules surrounding gender, sexuality, space and time at Antonio’s.

In my knowledge of *kalathesa* I forgot to consider the change that other people bring to the operation of gender and sexuality in this space. Any one person who enters the space, changes the relations and how one must act and embody *kalathesa*. The Thai women, and particularly Kel’s wife, changed the relations. I was breaking social codes which concerned how men and women interact. I had failed to regard the gender segregation at Antonio’s during the day. Thinking back, the only men and women who interacted were relatives or couples. Otherwise, the men built the stage and the women sat at the table together. I, quite boldly, chatted and practiced with the men. It seemed that there were only certain times a *farang* woman should be in Antonio’s interacting with dancers, and that is during the evening fire shows, where social interaction is a more of a performance. My body was disruptive in this space, which was coupled with the construction of *farang* female sexuality as uninhibited, inappropriate and overt. My affiliation with Chulalongkorn University, my role as a student, my “marriage,” my modest dress and my Thai language skills were not enough at Antonio’s in the afternoon. I decided to stop going after that day because I felt that my presence was upsetting others. As a PhD student intent on collecting “good” data, I sat with the fear that perhaps I would leave Phi Phi with nothing after I had invested time at Antonio’s. Yet, something came unexpectedly from this encounter, and that is how I was able to develop a closer relationship with Nam, who had a different space, his shop, where we could meet outside of the critical view of others.



After this incident, Nam suggested that his shop was the best place for us to talk about fire dance. While my presence there likely drew some suspicion, he was always very quick to explain to his friends who stopped by that I was interviewing him about fire dance. Nam approached the awkward subject of my absence at Antonio's one day. He said that they, the dancers, wanted me to come to the bar, but that they cannot talk to me "because they are tired" (Personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016). I understood that he was indirectly trying to communicate the dynamics in a way that I wouldn't be embarrassed or lose face. They wanted to talk to me, he said, but sometimes they cannot because of certain people who are around. They are not supposed to make friends with tourists, Nam explained. I nodded that I understood and asked why they couldn't make friends, and he said that the owner doesn't like them to. I wondered if this had to do with maintaining the image of the bar as different from the other side where *farang* women and fire dancers often hang out together. "Sometimes we don't talk because we cannot," he went on (Personal conversation, Oct. 1, 2016). I could sense Nam was struggling with this and said that his friends related that they wanted to talk to me "because you are good people and you stay a long time," but they couldn't. The relations of time, space and bodies would not allow my body to spend time at Antonio's, but the proper context aligned at Nam's shop, a space outside of the view of others, and with no females present, to make our engagements possible.

### **Ko Samui**

I also found that my gendered presence was policed at the studio on Ko Samui, not so much by the fire artists, but by Anik, Nah's *farang* partner. I later found out that when I had initially messaged Nah over Facebook about coming to the studio, it was Anik who responded and invited me to join them. When I first met her, however, it was very uncomfortable. She was not at the studio for the first few days I was there, as she had gone to renew her visa in Bangkok.

I went with the dancers to a photo shoot and she arrived. She walked right past me and did not engage in conversation at all. I waited awhile and eventually attempted to get closer to her, as she was watching Nah being photographed. As I approached she loudly exclaimed, “My handsome boyfriend!” I went up and introduced myself. She said hello and then proceeded to ask many questions about what exactly I was studying, what questions I would be asking, and the problematics of my dissertation. I intuitively knew what this was about and explained, as best I could, what I was interested in.

As I got to know Anik more, and develop trust, the dynamic of this first encounter became clearer. In our interviews, she related that they initially opened up the studio to any tourists who wanted to come and learn, and would have the Burmese team advertise this at the beach bar each night. As it turned out, however, this typically attracted women who Anik characterized as “not serious” (personal communication, Sept. 6, 2016). The Burmese dancers would end up bringing tourist women who they had met the night before, who would just sort of hang out with the guys but not be seriously interested in learning. She related,

We spoke with the boys. Because they are the ones who bring the customers from Star Bar. At the beginning, we were like now we have the place, nice place to welcome tourists, so we start to give fliers in Star Bar. I hadn't thought about all these girls and quickly we start to have girls. But girls who didn't want to learn fire. They just want to come to see, and watch and spend time with the fire spinner. So, at the beginning I was like ok we will see how it's moving. And then maybe six or eight months I ago, I was like stop. I don't want all these girls to be here... But we spoke with the students and said, 'Hey listen, the place here is not about that.' They changed and they didn't bring any more of these kinds of girls.

Tiffany: How can you tell which girls were serious?

Anik: I was just watching at them. And like, ok let them do because they are here to enjoy and they are here for one week and so I understand they want to spend time with locals. I think maybe the fire men are the local plus plus. Like you come to Thailand it is fun to say 'I kissed a Thai boy.' You go back home and 'Ya, I kiss a Thai boy.' And this one [place] is an easy one, because they cannot hang out with locals because, as you saw on Ko Phi Phi, it is very hard to get in. So maybe just because it's easy here or they [the guys] are really open... Ya but some of them make me like not pissed off, but like 'Come on girl. Move away,' you know? And I always tried, like at the beginning. But when we

we're starting to create the place I was like, 'Me, I'm not like you. I'm here for work and I'm not want more.' Because sometimes if Nah had to do fire I was sitting alone thinking, 'I'm not like you. I'm already in love since a while' haha! But now it is really different. Before it was full of girls. Every kind of girls. Hahaha.  
(Anik, personal communication, Sept. 6, 2016)

Indeed, this type of policing was also needed at the bar where they performed so that the reputation could remain professional, as she relates:

And also, the thing is that the boss from Star Bar got really crazy like one year ago because, you know the tables you have only for firemen? Every night there was about ten or twenty girls around this table dressing like super short skirt and everything and the boss said I don't want any girl on this table. The only one who can get in is Anik.  
(Anik, personal communication, Sept. 6, 2016)

It was true, I had never seen any women at their equipment table. I was, after many months, allowed to go in that area, as well, but this only happened after Nah spoke with the owner of the bar. Given Anik's adamant rules about only allowing serious women at the studio, and around the Burmese team's stage at the beach bar, I continuously struggled to prove my seriousness to her. It seemed that women's bodies were viewed as somehow devaluing to the art form, and thus, I practiced incessantly if she were present and was made to answer questions about what exactly I would speak with the dancers about.

Anik was not around a lot at the studio, but some of our encounters were difficult and uncomfortable, particularly because I spent a great deal of time with her partner, Nah. Indeed, one particular occasion when we all went out together Anik expressed exactly how she felt about me and challenged me to prove my seriousness to her. Almost the whole studio went one Friday to have a relaxing meal, dance and listen to music at a place called Reggae Bar. We pulled up on our *motorcys* to the wooden structure. There was a small bamboo bar with a variety of mats, tables and wooden planks that had been built around the rock face. The owner, Yim, was a long-time friend of Nah's. Nah knew that this bar was struggling to remain open, so he had the most

junior Burmese fire dance perform there for free each Friday as an “internship.” As it turned out, on the night I went, many got up and did small performances for fun after the Burmese dancer left for the regular gig at Star Bar. It became akin to a jam session and different people would take turns, borrow equipment, and join in quite informally, while others sat and watched. I even got up with the LED poi at one point. We danced to the music of a ten-piece band, composed of Thai and *farang* playing Western and Thai rock and reggae covers with a variety of guitars, a drum kit, hand drums, and even some wind instruments. There were some young *farang*, both expats and tourists, and also Thai inhabitants. Surrounded by photos of Bob Marley, we all ate together, chatted, smoked weed, danced, listened and enjoyed the sociality.

This was one of the only times that Anik came out and socialized while I was there, as her job kept her very busy. We sat together and had wine and Leo beer and I felt that this was the most comfortable the two of us had been together. She confided that she had been jealous when she first saw me on the beach, because Nah had spoken to her on the phone and said that I was “interesting.” She related that she didn’t care that I was a girl hanging out with them, because she was used to that with fire dancers, but it was that I was described as “interesting” by Nah that upset her. Just like my presence on Ko Phi Phi during the intimacy of the afternoon, my presence with Nah, and our discussions about fire art, Thai culture and Buddhism, were more intimate than simply “hanging around” as many “non-serious” women might do. I apologized for her feeling this way and said she had nothing to worry about. She asked if me and my fiancé were “really” engaged and I showed her my ring as proof.

I felt as if we had moved past a difficult affective discomfort. Yet, later in the night, Anik began to insist that I should have my first spin with fire. I really did not want to and expressed that I did not feel ready. No dancer had ever pressured me like this before, and I recognized this

as a very strange encounter, particularly because Anik was not a fire artist and had not been teaching me. I begged not to, but she insisted and told Nah that I needed to do it. It was incredibly awkward. I decided I would need to go along with it, despite not feeling at all ready to dance with fire. Anik, who has learned some moves from Nah, although rarely spins, said she would also do it with fire if I did. Nah, I could tell, sensed my discomfort. He came over with Kai, the Japanese dancer, and offered me some weed to “relax body” and to “help forget about reality.” I smoked hoping it would help, but I was even more hyper aware of what was going on around me. My body shook like crazy and felt light. Nah and I went behind where the band was set up and Anik grabbed the LED poi and stood about ten feet away from us. Nah came over with the fire and I asked him to spin a bit first and then I took them. He told me to turn and face the ocean, saying it is better if I didn’t see him. “Just look forward,” he said, and so I did. He coached me to just spin until I felt comfortable and kept saying, if something goes wrong, “Move them to the ground.” It was a special and intimate moment shared between a teacher and a student, and I knew that Nah had coached many through their first moments with fire. As I was spinning, it was amazingly terrifying and I said “Nah, please stay with me. I am still scared.” I tried again to spin and caught one glimpse of comfort. Again, I said, “please don’t leave,” as I needed someone there with me. After a couple of minutes, I gave them back to him. He took them and was kind with a smile on his face. He passed them to Anik who I realized was directly behind me and she said “No” and wouldn’t even look at us. He asked again – “No,” she exclaimed! I could sense the tension and can only assume that the intimacy and interaction had upset her. They went and sat down and I did as well. I asked if she was ok and I touched her arm but she remained standoffish. I left the table and her and Nah packed up to leave. (All from personal communications with Nah and Anik, Sept. 2, 2016)

I was terrified of seeing Anik again, but strangely, she came to the studio and next day, gave me a hug and a kiss on each cheek. We had our first and only private interview soon after. This was one of the most difficult moments of fieldwork, a moment in which the seriousness of

my femininity was challenged, not by a Thai woman, but by a *farang*. The slutty *farang* haunted my presence in complicated and painful ways, although, unlike Thai women I was not constrained by idealized notions of femininity and social obligations to my family.

Interestingly, while many colleagues, friends and family have questioned and worried continuously about how I would be interpreted and treated by the male fire dancers, the only difficulties I had surrounding my gendered and sexual surfaces was with non-fire dancing females. Thus, I never felt that my femininity and surfaces were controlled or shaped by men, but rather, they were heavily policed and constrained by other women.

### **Conclusion**

While we all have vastly different life experiences, knowledges and figures which haunt our sexualities and gendered experiences, there are similarities that can be seen in looking at the experiences of diverse women in the Thai fire dance scene. We all somehow found ourselves out of time and place (*phit kalathesa*) and had to use a variety of means to be taken seriously. We each, differently, tried to distance ourselves from haunting presences: for Zazi the prostitute; Celine the go-go; the soft Asian *pooying* for Khao; the *farang* slut for myself; and for Dao, the ordinary Thai woman. All of us also attempted to shift our surfaces and how they were interpreted through fire dance in certain spaces, whether that be stylistically, technically, through changing the audiences one performs for or by commercializing one's art.

There are, however, also striking differences in our experiences; myself and Celine had much more freedom, and less consequences, in trying out different surfaces; while we do not have the same social obligations nor the same ideals to live up to, we also were not heavily reliant on income from this movement practice and thus had more room for experimentation. In turn, our outward *farang* aesthetics and subjectivities assisted us in being able to access different spaces in ways that unaccompanied Thai females likely could not. *Farang* women, while not having to negotiate national ideologies and the figure of the Thai prostitute, must work within a system that ambivalently views *farang* sexuality as potentially corrupting, even while our bodies are

privileged through beauty hierarchies. In considering the insights and experiences of the Thai women featured here, however, we must remember that they too are involved in *farang* worlds and have access to cosmopolitan social capital that is not afforded to other Thais, even though these same associations might cause tensions in their lives.

The insights shared here, particularly surrounding the unruly sexuality that is ascribed to females who labour through dance, speaks to the ways in which capitalism has reconfigured the roles of female entertainers, particularly in Asia (Pilzer 2006). Pilzer demonstrates how the movement and intensification of capitalist development is coupled with changing notions of morality which has profoundly affected traditions of female entertainers in Korea, but also across Asia. The development of modern sex-entertainment industries has created stigma around previously acceptable and respectable forms of female performance labour (Maciszewski 2006; Pilzer 2006; Quereshi 2006; Srinivasan 1995). As noted above, changes to economic policy and gendered nationalism in Thailand are intertwined with (especially) female gender and sexual surfaces. While beyond the scope of this research, we must think about what types of Thai female professional performers may have precluded the infamous Thai bar girls that entertain men – stigmatized by not embodying the respectable femininity of neoliberal Thai nationalism – and how these histories, and slowly violent (Nixon 2011) erasures of particular bodies, have also shaped the male-dominated fire dance world.

As Morcom (2015) shows, capitalism brings utopias and dystopias to danced labour, and while tourism has provided opportunities for new types of labour, in this case dance, there are considerable social consequences for taking such a role. Men seek distance from the “playboy” and legitimize their craft through discussions of the various abilities and moralities a real artist must have. Much like the male dancers who shared their experiences and sexualization in Chapter Two, women must also mitigate the social deviancy associated with fire dance, and beach contexts, in diverse ways. Appealing to particular visions of what constitutes art or artistic morality can be found throughout the conversations with men, Thai women, however, discuss the

ways in which they already feel different from the static national constructions and social mores of ideal public femininity, and how fire dance has offered opportunities to experiment with different surfaces. While women did not speak about certain moralities they have as dancers, they did not dance at the beach bars where men do, but rather in high-end hotels, a different context. They have a certain respectability and cosmopolitan appeal attached to them, which helps to mitigate the unruliness that gets ascribed to bodies dancing on the beaches. These spaces, however, invoke white ‘Western’ aesthetics of what constitutes artistry and presents further insight into the complexity of semicolonial contexts, and ongoing processes of colonialism – from outside and also within Thailand – that set standards on which bodies, embodiments and surfaces are appropriate in particular spaces and times.



### **Conclusion: The Affective Politics and Potentials of Movement**

Tiffany: Why will some Thai fire dancers not work with the Burmese?

Nah: About this I see why it happened. Because in Thailand, it happened in culture between Thai and Burma long time ago. It's just about a king thing. From what I know, and I don't know if it's true, long long time ago Burma's king changed, and when they change their king, they have to prove their power by attacking Thailand because Thailand is very healthy with the nature and food and everything, so we kind of rich because we have river, we have triangle area close to China [The Golden Triangle]. With the Buddhists it's the same like Christians – you put all the money inside the temples. But in Thailand we put the gold inside the statues and we cover them with clay. And, they [new Burmese king and army] come chop their head off, take the gold back to their country. We learn at school, you know, almost every year about this history. Of course, when we were young we feel pissed, but if you go to speak with the Burmese now, they don't even know about it. You know, before I opened the studio, Pan [a Burmese dancer], he left to go back Burma, but I asked him to come back to join the team. I bring him to come and work with me in Ayutthaya [the city the Burmese stole the gold from], where the Burma burned. I have picture. Pan saw everything. There were 200 hundred performers performing a war between Thai and Burma [annual historical performance of the fall of Ayutthaya], and me – Thai – and Pan – Burma – we spin fire behind. He like, 'What happened?!' So, I say Burma come and burn it. And he cry. Ya, he's crying and we make a show.

(Nah, Personal Conversation, Sept. 12, 2016)

This dissertation has explored the utopias and dystopias (Morcom 2015) of capitalist expansion, alongside processes and intensifications of tourism, capitalism, colonialism and nationalist projects, and how these phenomena are mediated through danced affective labour. The story above, which was told to me near the end of my time at the studio on Ko Samui, became a key moment which I would go back to as I wrote; it allowed me to reflect on the ways in which hopefulness, friendships and solidarities are complexly situated within, and crystallize through, hierarchical relations and systems of power within market capitalism. Without the expansion of tourism and capitalist logics, fire dance may not have entered the tourist economy, and Burmese labourers may have not found themselves working as dancers. Nah and Pan were able to learn about the inconsistencies of history – the unfounded nationalist narratives that are performed again and again through these historical accounts – because these men dance, work

and have formed affective bonds together. These are relations and affective connections that emerge in the space of the gap that frictions produce (Tsing 2005).

Particular spaces and movements in the world get privileged over others, and some are thought to have more tension and friction, such as the movement of capital and tourists. Indeed, there are violences, but there are also potentials and new possibilities. It is the “messiness” of these encounters that fire dancers work out through their bodies. Flow art is a “Western” implant, which is itself steeped in issues surrounding cultural appropriation, and which privileges particular “Western” aesthetics over others; we must be sure to acknowledge that the very idea of “flow” is one that emerged through flow art in North America and Europe, and Eurocentric conceptions of what a “flow state” (Csikszentmihályi 1996) might look like through bodily movement. And yet, flow art has been brought through tourism, and become a platform through which people who understand themselves as marginalized in Thailand have been able to generate income, relationships, knowledge and lives that might otherwise have been unimaginable. This is not to deny the issues and the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) that fire dance is implicated in. In turn, we must take into account the ways in which fire dancers grapple with their labour and artistic performances as fraught and complex. While I do not want to overstate the importance of Buddhism, it is relevant to acknowledge how an acceptance of impermanence – of continually shifting and changing social dynamics, truths, interpretations and understandings – is at the heart of the conversations we find here. This impermanence invites us to understand fire worlds through the space of the threshold and the seemingly disparate, but completely intra-active (Barad 2007), encounters in which the relations and practices formed through tourism and history are reconfigured and reconstituted. With these interconnections in mind, this conclusion seeks to bring together the main themes in this dissertation. While I have parsed out *phalang*

(energy), *chut mung mai* (intent/goal), *baeng pan* (sharing) and *kalathesa* (suitability of time/space) in an attempt to make these discussions fit within the structure of a dissertation, I encourage readers to see these perspectives as an intertwined complex and a wider affective economy that is produced through fire worlds. At the heart of many of the conversations is affect, or energy (*phalang*), which influences the way that ideas, bodies and relations take shape and take on meanings in fire worlds.

*Phalang* draws attention to the ways in which the labouring body can become a conduit for intensities, erotics and emotions which circulate in, and give form to, particular spaces. Dancers have learned to perform and become reactive conduits for energies – some of which may be erotic – but it is the unsuitability of the way in which time, space (*kalathesa*), gender and sexuality come together to create a “sexually-charged” atmosphere that works alongside nationalist narratives to marginalize this art and labour, and, for Thai women, greatly limit their participation. *Phalang*, thus, adds a new layer to thinking about how gender and sexuality emerge and shift through the movement of desiring bodies in relation to geopolitical boundaries, local spaces and histories (Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Luibhéid 2008; Manalansan 2003, 2006; Povinelli and Chauncey 1999). These are *doings* that are situated within, and productive of, affective networks and intensities.

*Phalang* is also implicated into the relations of *baeng pan* (sharing) and the social bonds that form among dancers, and between tourist audiences and dancers. What underpins sharing, and how bodies hold space together in a community, are particular dispositions. Of great importance is a person’s energy, and how they exchange this with others in ways that might be termed as moral, rather than capitalist and neoliberal, although as we have seen, these are phenomena that are not separate, but entangled. Energy invites a consideration of the ways in

which *phalang* might simultaneously disrupt and reinvokethe violence of tourism, as dancers' bodies and energies are "consumed" by tourists, and yet *phalang* also fosters intimate relations that allow for all sorts of unexpected connections. When talking about the movement of energy, "sharing" was often employed and we cannot deny the ways *phalang* creates social bonds; on the beaches we see the generation of tourist – fire dancer intimacies, which may have unequal relations of power, but are also sites of love and friendship, as are the long-sustaining relationships that fire dancers often create with tourists.

Importantly, it is through *phalang* that fire dancers engage in an embodied and affective politics, often changing and recreating their own emotions as acts of resistance to the capitalist industry and neoliberal moment in which they find themselves. Direct political resistance in Thailand has increasingly become a frightening endeavour under the ruling military regime. While there are certainly historical and contemporary movements that have, and continue to, directly confront injustices and hierarchies in Thai society, this is not a form of activism that all Thais might be able to participate in. In turn, given that direct critique is generally frowned upon for the way it upsets the smooth surface of social relations, people employ different mechanisms of resistance and political engagement which can be based in affect and the body. As has been highlighted, shifting one's own affective energy towards a particular issue, tension or friction *is* resistance and a modality of agentic confrontation. Resituating monetary exchange, for instance, by highlighting and reconceptualizing it as moments of affective sharing that is done for relation-building purposes, is how dancers reimagine the intersections of fire art with capitalist labour in the industry.

It is also through appeals to affect that marginalized histories and subjectivities are reimagined and recreated. Striving towards a goal (*chut mung mai*) is deeply implicated in the

affective realm. A goal is not only something that can be shared with others, but it requires a certain power to fuel one's ability to move towards the goal. *Phalang*, as I learned, can also be understood as a power one has to do something. In the months following fieldwork, as I worked with fire dancers over Facebook to try and understand the Thai translations of the words that they used frequently, Dao advised that *phalang* was not only the energy implicated in sharing. She stated, "This word in Thai is kinda broad. It can mean force, as well. And this pa-lang inspires us to create our own art or do what make us happy" (Messenger conversation, April 5, 2017). *Phalang*, thus, is at the heart of striving and meeting goals. It is, however, a shared energy that is bolstered through the other bodies directly in a particular space, or, in the case of Nam's alliances, connected through an archive of affect one surrounds themselves with.

Following Diamond (2007), who urges researchers not to only apply theory in their work with musicians, but to actually *build* theory from concepts held within musical practices and systems, I ask: What might a politics situated around *phalang* look like in a different context? How might moments of embodied micropolitics that coalesce around *baeng pan* play out in North American academies and activist circles? These questions push us to consider the politics of movement itself and ask, on a much larger spatial scale, who is invited to share, and what concepts and practices are offered the space, time and capital to move? I have attempted to centre this dissertation in the perspectives and concepts of fire dancers, and I have looked for moments where their understandings have aligned with dominant academic theories in interesting ways, but I have tried to avoid "applying" theories. While certainly the concepts voiced and embodied by fire dancers are, like any knowledges, incomplete and fraught, they provide valuable insights and create space for promising dialogues. I hope to add fire dancers' perspectives to these discussions *as* theory, and ask us to consider the productive encounters

between: *phalang* and affect studies; shifting modalities of doing gender/sex (*kalathesa*) and queer theory; *chut mung mai* and political resistance; and *baeng pan* and solidarities. I place these theories side by side as a way to highlight how these concepts emerge *with* one another, and not as mutually-exclusive sociocultural codes, but as conceptual modes that are generated through frictions, gaps and “awkward encounters” (Tsing 2005, p. 4).

*Phalang* communicates a non-binarized way of thinking about affect on a continuum of sensation and emotionality, and when thought about in relation to labour it opens up space to consider “affective labour” as not only emotional and/or consciously knowable, but as a set of forces and intensities that move bodies to act or not act in particular ways. Affective labour, or what might be more appropriately called “energetic” labour in this case, can be extended to consider the multitude of ways in which bodies and energy “work.” While we have seen examples such as the labour of performance, sharing and endurance – work which might easily be recognized as intimate labour – the energetic work that goes into creating and maintaining ideas of what constitutes art, morality and ideal aesthetics are also laboured into being through bodies. This is the affective labour that emerges in the threshold produced through encounters in spaces of tourism. Rather than dwell on the binaries that emerge here, we must recognize the labour that goes into negotiating and attempting to separate very interconnected phenomena in fire worlds, such as capitalism and affective relations, art and labour, fast spinning and slow flows, and Burmese and Thai. These mediations are imbued with sensations of nostalgia, fear, joy, hope and hopelessness; this is the “messy” and unruly affective work of social life that tenuously balances multiple meanings and cultural codes.

This “messiness,” asks us to consider the queerness of friction and the gaps that are produced. I employ “queer” not as an identity (Eng, Munoz and Halberstam 2005; Warner 1993;

Weiss 2016), but as an analytic approach to consider how fire dance organizes bodies and intimacies fluidly, and beyond the binaries that get imagined and imposed in this scene. That an in-betweenness and a world that is “otherwise” exists in this scene is evident through practices, bodies, ideas and aesthetics that are: not Thai, but also not *not* Thai; violent and yet productive of relational intimacies; not sexual but implicated in sexual relations; and capitalist yet staunchly not-capitalist. These are the “queer intimacies” of dancing communities, those unexpected and unimaginable socialities that are negotiated through the affective labour of dance technique (Hamera 2007, p. 18). The queer intimacies forged through dance organizes bodies in unusual and unlikely ways, allowing for the formation of relationalities across space, time and the boundaries of social difference, and the remaking of bodies and selves; and yet, as has been discussed, these intimacies are never always transgressive, but can also be hegemonic, exclusionary and oppressive (Weiss 2016).

Invoking queer in this way, as something in excess of “identity,” invites us to consider the ways in which embodied experiences and the *doings* of gender and sexuality are pliable and interconnected with movement, time and space. *Kalathesa* highlights how forms of queerness circulate in ways that dominant or Eurocentric scholarship fails to recognize. Given that notions of a globalized form of queerness have been critiqued (Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002), we might ask what places already operate in queer modalities, and how and when gender and sexuality take more fluid forms. *Kalathesa* demonstrates that gender and sexuality are understood as modes and moments of encounter, and this perspective can be used to think about the frictions that arise as different doings of gender and sexuality encounter each other across global, transnational and translocal times and spaces. *Kalathesa*, in turn, speaks to the affective and embodied nature of these unfoldings, and of bodies that are always in-becoming, and yet can

emerge as firmly formed in certain contexts. It urges us to think beyond gender performativity, and to the ways in which subjectivity itself might be understood as sets of fluid negotiations, and as contexts that one can move through.

Thinking about how bodies shift with and through affect is incredibly important for considering solidarities and identity-based politics. “Identity” – as a fixed form of social difference – never fully disappears in fire worlds; these formations often surround ethnonational affiliation, *farang* versus Thai or female and male. And yet, these moments of stability are made much more complex when looked at alongside Buddhist perceptions of non-attachment or through the lens of energetic exchange that blurs these supposedly stable boundaries. The energetic transfer that takes place among performers and tourists creates a relation that complicates binaries that situate tourists and inhabitants as separate. *Phalang* destabilizes the subject and invites connections and solidarities based on *feeling* similarly. It showcases the intra-action (Barad 2007) of ecologies and the ways in which bodies float through forms of stability and destabilization as they emerge from, and fall back into, much wider assemblages. Identity-based affiliations, and their boundaries, can be re-thought and changed through an attention to *phalang* or affect (Puar 2007); not only does affect highlight the processual and ever-changing instability and connection of bodies, but it is also demonstrative of the emotional connections that are made and unmade in different times and spaces. Solidarities in fire worlds shift and change, often operating through feelings, intensities and sensations rather than notions of stable bodies and subjectivities. As we have seen throughout, belonging in fire communities is situated around particular dispositions, corporeal engagements and moral actions or affects, and not always necessarily on specific identities. These are affective connections which create communities of people that move and “feel together,” as Pi Oud says.



From this more relational approach, we can view the ways that resistances to power structures, and also violence, can be both direct or also subtle and enacted through ephemeral moments and sensations through bodies. It reminds us to think about the vastly different ways people engage the political, and how what may not initially look like a transformative political act, might be effecting change on smaller scales through bodies that connect and flow together, such as at the studio. Nam's *chut mung mai*, in turn, highlights how "endurance" (Povinelli 2011) takes place through changing affects, embodied styles, and through capturing nostalgia, and "secret" histories and genealogies through the art that hangs on the walls of his shop. We might think about how for Nam and many at the studio, shifting one's own body, sensations and feelings *is* political intervention and agency that reverberates with other bodies – present and not present – to form a connected and affective politics. These are the micropolitical acts that manifest as people survive hopefully and creatively in the midst of tourist capitalism. Such attention highlights the multiple ways in which intimacies are formed *within*, and *produced from*, contexts of capitalism and neoliberal modes of life.

The space in-between the frictions of fire worlds is one of continuous tension and release as the "flows" meet and rub, find ways of colliding, impeding each other, and at other times, moving smoothly along. This turbulent rhythm is echoed through bodies that move their way into relations with objects, such as poi, hoops and staff. Juggling, the movement practice that underpins all movement in fire worlds, is a rhythmic act of controlled tension and a release. It is based on motions of subjugation through which dancing bodies are invited to experience moments of resistance, control and liberation as they extend themselves further into space as object-body assemblages. The bodies of fire dancers enact nightly renderings of control and expansion in tourist economies that are unpredictable, and contain social and economic

violences, but yet also offer generative moments and intimacies. The fire dancing body learns to work with this friction, and to control and shape it into patterned rhythms that manifest the highly prized “flow” of flow art. Fire dance is practice born from “global scatterings” (Fraleigh 2010) with long histories of encounter that manifest in the body tensing and releasing, building and resolving, and throwing and catching. Juggling demonstrates that tension and release are not opposites; rather they are mutually necessary for movement. What emerges in fire worlds is precisely that movement – the “messy” threshold – as ideas, energies, cultures, bodies, objects and ideals unfold in events of friction-filled, and yet always flowing, worldings.

### **Updates and Wishful Goals**

Since fieldwork, I have remained in contact with Zazi, Dao and Jes, and less frequently with the other dancers on Ko Samui through Facebook. Zazi was recently at the studio on Ko Samui performing and sharing, and she seems to be fully reinvigorated as a fire dancer. She has been travelling frequently in the islands doing extensive performances for weddings and private functions. We worked together to craft and refine her section in Chapter Six. Upon looking back on our interviews, Zazi said that she was a bit lonely at that time, and burned out from the scene. When we last spoke she was at the studio and said she felt completely renewed and was reminded of how she first fell in love with it. Her last email to me was very similar to the sentiments shared by others at the studio. She states, “The practice itself is a kind of moving meditation. It help lots of people put their daily obstacles away as you will end up making lots of mistakes in fire dancing if you got too much to think in your head. I get to meet many new generation spinners [Burmese] and also get to learn lots from them when ego is put out of the picture. I think me too that I need to improve more everyday” (Email correspondence, May 3,

2018). It was so interesting to hear her discuss sharing, ego and this striving towards better relations with the Burmese dancers after being in the space of the studio.

Dao, with her partner, has also recently traveled to Malaysia and Bali to participate in global flow art festivals. In Malaysia, I understand that she was working with the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) to advertise and, surprisingly, was using hoop performance as a means to do so. This was the first time I have heard of flow arts being formally acknowledged as a performance genre by the TAT. It is not surprising, however, that it was Dao chosen for this role; she markets herself more as a “luxury” performer who is very conservative, a different representation than the male fire artists who perform on the beaches and may invoke different (perhaps not *siwilai*) imaginaries.

Ko Phi Phi Don persists. I recently learned that Ko Phi Phi Leh, the protected area where the movie *The Beach* was filmed, will be closed to tourists for a few months so that the coral and ecosystem has a chance to recover. Sadly, a fire recently broke out in the laneways that extend behind “the other side,” Loh Dalum Bay. The fire, which started in a kitchen of one small establishment, quickly spread to many others businesses and guesthouses; it is certainly the cramped conditions, with buildings piled almost on top of each other seeking to get a piece of the tourist market, that fueled the quick and destructive spread of this fire. Phi Phi has no fire-fighting mechanisms, and I am told that inhabitants spent hours using buckets to put out the fire. I saw from friends’ photos posted on Facebook that Yai’s restaurant was badly damaged. Given that she rebuilt her restaurant after it was completely destroyed by the tsunami, I imagine she will do so again.

While it has been easy to stay somewhat connected with those I worked with through Facebook, Nam and I have lost touch in a series of unfortunate events. I got very ill with a severe

case of dengue fever the last time I was on Phi Phi in October 2016 and was hospitalized for nearly two weeks on the large island of Phuket. I returned to Phi Phi very weak and it took months to recover. I visited Nam a few times as I recovered to share time and interview him more. I had planned to come back to Canada for a month and then return to Ko Phi Phi for another two or three months to finalize details, do some more interviews and follow ups. On our last day together, I told Nam I would be back in a month and was going to bring him a dreamcatcher from an Ojibwe friend in Sudbury. I left his shop and headed back to a hotel I was now staying in, as I was too afraid to go back to the dilapidated guesthouse filled with mosquitos. I realized early the next day that my insurance would no longer cover me in Thailand because of dengue and the doctor informed me that my case was so severe that if I caught dengue again, I could die. I woke up the next morning ready to catch the ferry with a heavy heart, knowing that I would likely not be able to return as I said. I ran to Nam's shop to try and tell him and say goodbye, but he was not there.

Nam gifted me a dreamcatcher on our last meeting (Figure 6, below). Unlike those I had when I was young, it did not have beads interwoven in the netting, but it had sea shells, representative of the dreams and desires Nam, as a sea gypsy, has. It hung above my desk where I wrote this dissertation, and served as a reminder of the amazingly complex, creative, hopeful, and yet also oppressive, violent and harmful ways in which arts, people and capital move and rub up against each other. It inspired me to think about how, as art travels, it can be picked up, embodied and instilled with new hopes, affects, dreams and desires. The dreamcatcher that is not Thai, but also not *not* Thai, is a potent symbol of the productive and affective thresholds of encounters and gaps. I hope to return to Ko Phi Phi and Ko Samui in 2019 to chat about this

dissertation with the fire dancers featured here. One of their requests was that we write a book together, a shared goal we can strive towards.



(Figure 6: *da kai chap fan* by Nam 2016. Photo: Tiffany Pollock)

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