

ON THE CORPOREAL EXCHANGE: THAI BOXING'S SACRIFICIAL MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Paul William Schissel: On the Corporeal Exchange: Thai Boxing's Sacrificial Movement
(Under the direction of Christopher Nelson)

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of Thai boxing (muay Thai) understood as sacrificial exchange, exploring the practice of this martial art in the context of contemporary Thai society. Drawing on two years of apprenticeship and participation research in Northeast Thailand and Bangkok, I consider the fighters' integration in broader patterns of seasonal labor migration as they move between rural, regional tournaments and Bangkok stadiums. Focusing on the training of one particular boxer, I investigate interactions between trainers, managers, family, patrons and ancestral spirits. The boxers' embodied actions as they unfold in time represent the sovereign relationship between living and dead, nature and culture, performatively establishing the boundaries between growth and decay. As the living move through a world of animate social relations, accruing debt, the boxer's embodied patterns of repetition and exhaustion in training, and of destructive action in combat, create a possibility for shifting this balance, accruing merit for those otherwise occupied in handling materials which support the powerful, and transforming the established hierarchical order of everyday life. Against the background of the impermanent, closed, linear, cyclical or progressive temporalities of monasteries, factories, the military and the monarchy, the temporality of the ring remains open, giving fighters the elbow-room to performatively engage crucial symbols of life and death, male and female, human and animal, affording otherwise politically disempowered Northeastern Thai families the opportunity to create meaning and possibility in their lives. Acting as both victim and executioner, fighters accrue credit for the assembled audience, reinvesting each tier of the community with a degree of

responsibility for life. I argue that these practices occur within a 'deathworld', in which the heightened attentiveness to the limited possibilities for action reaffirm the local position of the individual within the collective. With embodied motion that cuts across local categories of stillness and mobility, the living and the dead, with ever-greater stamina, Thai boxers become increasingly valuable and credit-able, paying the debts, material and spiritual, that their assembled supporters have incurred as they live their kinetically excessive lives, allowing men throughout the community to remain accountable to Kings, Buddha, ancestors, factories and patrons.

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I tried Thai boxing (muay Thai) training in an Ottawa area martial arts club, I quickly realized that my abilities to respond to, represent, analyze or otherwise reflect upon practice fell far short of the obligatory timing I was exposed to in basic training. I needed a memory of what needed to happen—what sequence of strikes or blocks needed to be returned—which was pre-reflective; a memory composed in the continuous movement of my limbs, which could be converted to correct action well in advance of any opponent. To keep up with other muay Thai practitioners and trainers, I was continually thrown into movements needed to sustain an effective exchange—a jab, knees, kicks. These exchanges did not always allow for a re-composition of my own personal space in a time of self-reflection. In Thai boxing practice, there was a temporal delay which belied my own abilities to process sequences of action as part of my already established historical record of correct causality and physical limitations. This temporal delay in the exchange with trainers or sparring partners; this duration indicated a place in which cultural change (along with the possibility of an other way of life) could take hold at a wholly significant, even ‘bodily’ level. It was into this time that I decided to carry out an ethnography of Thai boxing.

I pursued a practical understanding of Thai boxing, on the ground in Thailand, where a world of global inequalities and problems could be locally expressed, pursuing an apprenticeship of muay Thai technique which extended to all aspects of daily Thai life. Encountering this different relation to the world meant encountering a different proximity to others, a different carriage, different postures, gestures and uses of the anatomy. Training in Thai boxing meant enjoining a different set of perceptual capacities, coming to view different openings for

interaction within Thai surroundings. The series of alterations I experienced during training—sometimes gradually accrued damage to nerves, sometimes the gradual accrual of stamina and agility—were furthermore, incremental adjustments to dispositions under which the particular individual articulated a temporal/historical relationship to the general group. As I continued to age over the thirteen years I carried this project out (and my participation alongside relatively younger boxers in Thailand appeared increasingly incongruous), I became less concerned with the interstices of apprenticeship-methodology—the transcribing of my own experiences of learning in fieldnotes behind the scenes—and more concerned to follow through, intensively, on an ethnographic project which would document the particularly generative life Thai boxers from the rural northeast lead.

In many ethnographic treatments of martial arts communities which involve apprenticeship as method, the bodily disciplines which challenge practitioners constitute moments for analyzing the wider community's methods for remembering or forgetting violence. The clash of martial practitioners provides a clear, organized frame of reference for analyzing the taken-as-given spaces maintained between people in a society more broadly. In the ideal execution of these martial ethnographic projects, the particulars of martial practice, once recorded, reveal how communities of practitioners incorporate histories of violence into their movement aesthetics (e.g. see Downey 2005) or structural inequalities into the ideologic parameters of their daily lives (e.g. see Wacquant 2006). These studies make plain that each martial 'art' is entirely technical and political, generating a particular subject with reference to the powerful, to distributions of historical-material resources, and to the memories or forgettings of violence which constitute community.

Among other martial arts (I abandoned Aikido after two months of fieldwork in a local Ottawa area club), I maintained a toe-hold in Thai boxing to further investigate how ritualized

practice forges a memorable relationship between collective and individual. Thai boxing ‘hooked’ me, in many ways because of the immediacy of its execution, but also because I was curious about the ways this crushing, technically effective Thai boxing corpus might be articulated within the gears of global history pronounced in local Thai terms. As I was aware of Thailand even then, before taking up the study of Thai boxing or anthropology in earnest, Thai global economic exports included touristic beaches, endemic prostitution, Buddhist ceremony and royalist pageantry. By taking up Thai boxing, finding it as making memory in motion however, I was moved to encounter a practical, local understanding of the generation of differences, inequalities and the economies of motion constraining Thai life, uncovering the local parameters of a wider world.

In the dissertation that follows here, the position of the boxer in the ring—his handling of the capacity for destruction—scales out to more widely accepted, renewed and maintained social spaces. Examining practice involves examining the boxers’ crucial role in delegating an appropriate awareness (or disavowal) of histories of violence and structural inequality. Additionally, the boxer’s particularly navigation of the inertia of local materials designating living and dead, and each boxer’s expiring movements among attentive obligations and historical materials espousing timelessness, give Thai boxing a particular credible aesthetic, affording Thai boxers a unique, culturally generative position in the ring. It is this unfolding of movement and the life-time of boxing which I have pursued particularly in a Thailand of the last decade—a Thailand which in global news expresses an economic stranglehold of hypercapitalist proportions, but which on the ground reveals a complex assemblage of institutions claiming human movement, capturing the signifying powers of living and dead bodies, and nearly monopolizing a purchase on the value of each life. The longer I practiced Thai boxing,

particularly with sons and fathers in Bangkok, the more appreciation I gained for the ways Thai boxing both upheld and moved beyond of this nexus of present Thai power relations.

Over a period of seven years, between 2007 and 2014, I spent just over two years ‘on the ground’ in Thailand, doing fieldwork. The primary data used for this doctoral dissertation was collected over the course of a Fulbright-Hays funded year (2013/2014), time I spent in the Pasi-Charoen district of western Bangkok, training daily in a Thai boxing camp located among factory and textile workers from the northeastern region of Isan. This research was a logical extension of earlier, predominantly rural fieldwork I carried out to understand the surroundings most northeastern Thai boxers came of age in. Only now, in Bangkok, I aimed to understand how the nexus of relationships, travel and obligations informing Thai boxing were refined in camps composed of boxers who had come of age competing on the rural circuit.

On my earliest trip to Thailand (2007), I spent four months in the Northeast region of Isan, living behind the ring built alongside my trainer’s parents’ boxing-cockfighting focused household in Ubon Ratchathani province, near the Laotian border. The village there had been relocated because of the construction of a multinational hydropower dam built on the Mekong river, between the border of Thailand and Laos. While I stayed in this household during the rainy-season, many of the surrounding villages flooded. The red clay-gravel roads and concrete irrigation ditches in front of each household flowed to overflowing. My trainers’ father had, over a period of years, foreclosed, sold or otherwise lost his original allotment of land. I would collect similar stories about lost land during droughts in Buriram (also in the northeast region of Isan) years later.

During 2010 and 2012, I spent months in a larger, nearly abandoned camp, in a town in the province of Buriram, also in the northeast. With photos of his past champions recorded for posterity in a trophy-room and on tarpaulin signs behind the ring, the camp manager’s long-

standing reputation in the community had now turned to political matters. Though his camp was now relatively quiet (2-3 other boxers trained there), the owner remained active, collecting evidence of land-markers in the Thai/Cambodian jungle, travelling into Bangkok to present his evidence on televised talk shows, showing how the media and business savvy leaders of the populist “red-shirt” government then in power (and former prime minister Thaksin himself, especially) had sold off off-shore oil assets to the transnational corporations, as well as land around the temple of Preah Vihear, subject of a militarized territorial dispute with Cambodia. On one of my last visits to his camp, this owner gave me a red golf shirt that had been printed with his camp’s name years earlier, but with the caveat that I agreed not to wear it in Thailand.

In 2012, I also spent three additional months studying the Thai language in downtown Bangkok, walking the dozen blocks each day to and from classes under highway and train support beams still charred by protestors’ fires, passing the refurbished grounds of the ‘Central World’ mall, a cathedral of modern consumerism gutted years earlier, during public protests of 2010. The unique Thai political cycle of protest, civic election and military coup, (as Glassman (2010) states “The provinces elect governments, Bangkok overthrows them.”) reached another crescendo during the year-long period of my doctoral fieldwork, March 31, 2013-April 1, 2014. Shortly after I left Thailand, on May 22, 2014, a military coup seized control of political power, making plain the comingling of guns, money and natural resources that the political theatre of democratized transnational capitalism had distracted from for years. Advancing the ongoing opportunist arrangement where elite generals and business interests commandeered access to resources, the junta also ‘oversaw’ the period of perceived oncoming political instability coinciding with the death of Thai King Bhumibol (Rama the 9th), and the transition—“long-live-the-king”—of power to his son, Vajiralongkorn (Rama the 10th). The ‘democratic’ elections that have since taken place (on March 24th, 2019) have, to the extent that electioneering cannot be

ultimately verified, further exemplified the extent to which political representational regimes have become divorced from conditions of daily life under which the vast majority of Thai people might obtain greater choice or mobility in their daily lives.

While this spectacular political theatre and the oligarchic stranglehold on resources (and thus ‘naturalization’ of causation or the disavowal in historical patterns of inequality) forms a backdrop to my fieldwork in Thailand, a bustle of activity (the local splintering or spiking of circadian rhythm with sugar, caffeine, alcohol and amphetamines, and the fulfilled obligations to contracted, repetitive manual labor) remains in the foreground, particularly with boxers’ families, themselves migrants from Northeast Thailand. While ecological (and thus historical) destruction, political disenfranchisement, entrenched oligarchy, and the militarized-industrial demands of daily Thai life form a backdrop to the description of Thai boxing that follows, the question of how the values, meanings and durations of human lifetime alter in these contexts is implicitly asked. The northeastern Thai boxers and their families I spent time with, in organizing Thai boxing, redefine what a meaningful, strong life can be, locating a new balance between growth and decay with each movement.

Where present regional inequalities persist in Thailand, I ask where, affectively, has politics migrated, whom and what the practice of Thai boxing gathers, and what relationships boxing allows for forgetting within. In contrast to intensive efforts and focus on muay Thai, the spectacular newsworthy versions of political protest in downtown Bangkok were either actively avoided or deemed inapplicable to the pursuit of a fuller life.

With regards to the Thai cycle of political protest and political spectacle though, two points remain pertinent to Thai boxing: First, the resilience of oligarchy follows a historically prevalent pattern of local elites jostling for position within the palace while peripheral subjects remain relatively undisturbed. Second, an order of silence hangs over public political

proceedings, exemplified in the censorships threatening an order of lese-majeste against political dissenters. This order of silence, accompanied by a hierarchical distribution of monastic and royal ritual practices performed on a need-to-know basis, offered in visual-ecstatic form sufficient for merit-seeking subjects (see Gray 1992), renders an expansive wound within public political discourse. This order of silence upon spoken terms heightens the importance of corporeal capital, ushering sacrificed bodies further through a political system requiring blood on national borders.

The political impasse is borne especially in the relationship between the Tai-Lao northeastern masses and a privileged central Bangkok oligarchy. Those every-bodies, aspiring, bound into the sovereign assemblage, more often than not are those of Northeastern men and women. The Northeast region, Isan, is home to the vast majority of Thailand's boxers, rice harvests, forest-monks, migrant laborers, prostitutes, career-soldiers, farmers, and construction workers. Nearly everyone in the boxing camp I eventually settled in in Bangkok called northeastern regions home: Surin, Sisaket and Buriram. One camp I visited across Bangkok was composed entirely of boxers transplanted from Ubon Ratchathani. During Bangkok's Chinese New Years' festivals, the alleyway I did the majority of my research in, normally bustling with wooden shipping-skids filling with sewn t-shirts, jeans or sandals, shut down while its working inhabitants returned to extended families in the northeast.

The "Thailand" I have an interest in investigating then, is especially this active, productive, mobile vein running between the northeast region (Isan) and the city-state center of Bangkok then. "Thailand" as a place, herein, is perhaps just that level of un-consciousness attained curled into a rumbling seat on an overnight bus/train or folded into the backseat of a truck that makes the trip between Bangkok factory-alleyways and Northeastern rice-farming and fishing villages.

This is also an active context in which to carry out an ethnography of a martial art. In a Thailand defined in that manifold, migratory ‘present’, the parallel migrations of the Thai boxing community belie any ethnographic approach to martial life based on realizing historicized mythologies ‘embodied’ in nostalgic practitioners. Thai boxing herein, is, as with its globally recognized technical efficacy, not merely an antiquated aesthetic form relived by a few, but is approached as a series of historically dynamic, moving contacts with repercussion beyond the ring; relevant to making an inclusive present in Northeast Thailand.

In the dissertation that follows, I consider Thai boxing as a sort of ritual sacrifice. I consider the technical refinement and increasing professionalization of Thai boxing since the inauguration of Thailand’s constitutional monarchy in 1932 as evidence of a sacrificial apparatus under the threat of passing sovereignty, mobilizing peripheral bodies to re-instantiate the order of authority. Thai boxing matches become ritually effective, spilling blood and rendering one opponent less capably conscious while facilitating the movement of his opponent onto a less frenetic plane of motion. The use of sacrifice to analyze Thai boxing is appropriate given the sacrificial procedures boxers encounter approaching the ring, including massages with oils, the framing of ritual boundaries stepping over the rings’ ropes, the honorific dances prior to the match, the music (wailing Javanese pipe, chimes, rapid drumming) facilitating rhythmic motion during competition. Each match, as ritual sacrifice, implicates families, regions, camps, and assembled crowds in the production of life and strength. Given this organizational infrastructure, as well as the prevalence of sacrifices (deemed meritorious) made at ancestors’ shrines throughout Thailand, the present dissertation employs sacrifice as an analytical construct to more closely examine the relationships arranged around one boxer who trains and competes repeatedly at the highest level in Thailand. In the ethnography of ‘practice’ that follows, I focus in on this one boxer to ask how history is made to return for many, with force.

My dissertation begins within an eventful competition and forgoes the chronological rewinding of time leading up to this event to instead describe this particular boxer's accrual of skill as a matter of being intensively exposed to different relationships as a matter of repetitive training and competition. This shows how one boxer—one Thai person—becomes responsible for, and responsive to, violence.

The chapters that follow—titled 'event', 'practice', 'technology', 'consecration', 'weightedness', 'decay', 'horizons', 'return'—describe aspects of sacrificial movement as each surfaces thematically during one boxers' mundane daily routines. The application of these transformative stages from within processes of ritual repetition is equally a transmission of the local Thai terms of sacrificial ritual; local terms by which history is made to return.

CHAPTER ONE: EVENT

Chapter one opens describing an elbow strike a Thai boxer throws in Bangkok's Lumpinee stadium, spilling blood and turning the tide of his match. Scaling back from this moment, the specific match, and muay-Thai in general, is then framed as ritual: a ritual facilitating transmission of knowledge and the local tempo necessary for historical revolution. I describe the community gathered around the boxer—managers, camp owners, sparring partners, parents—relating the interests and conditions required to produce this timely, eventful interruption.

Thai boxing is further discussed as a sacrificial ritual: as action which makes time anew, setting the position of one person to an equal other, and at the same time, performing the position of each person in relation to the many. Given that sacrificial loss is a characteristic of memorable motion in general, and as well as being part and parcel of organized rituals which gather contradictions and provide grounds for making choice or qualitative experience, I suggest, additionally, that Thai boxers' movements must be understood upon the relative volatility of local historical-material grounds; grounds kept meaningfully open through sacrificial dynamics.

I propose a Thai economy of sacrificial motion; motions which expire, to different degrees, in a 'deathworld', where associative power and influence may be attained through stillness. I describe this political aesthetic in sovereign performances—kingly ritual, political protest, enduring Theravada Buddhist cosmologies, and Thai boxing. I show that Thai transactions made to accrue merit and karmic capital veil a kinetic distribution of sacrificed dead throughout the

Thai landscape. On these grounds, certain actors become charged, indebted to the absolute stillness and absolute otherness of death in their surroundings.

“The apprentice, on the other hand, raises each faculty to the level of its transcendent exercise. With regard to sensibility, he attempts to give birth to that second power which grasps that which can only be sensed. This is the education of the senses. From one faculty to another is communicated a violence which nevertheless always understands the Other through the perfection of each. ... We never know in advance how someone will learn ... The limits of the faculties are encased in the other in the broken shape of that which bears and transmits difference. There is no more a method for learning than there is a method for finding treasures, but a violent training, a culture ... which affects the entire individual” (Deleuze [1968]1994: 165).

The Elbow as Event

In late March 2014 [2557 by the local Buddhist calendar], about an hour after the sun sets on the molten-metallic reflective panels of the newly relocated, military-sponsored Lumpinee Thai boxing stadium in Northern Bangkok, Ou slide-steps backward, finding stable ground, heel-toe pressing into the canvas of the center of the ring. Bright spotlights aimed over into the concrete belly of the amphitheater illuminate his every move for a crowd of roughly 3000 mostly elder, mostly shouting Thai men standing in the arena’s concrete, pastel-green painted bleachers. The stadium has not quite reached its 5000 person capacity tonight, and the crowd largely congregates across two sections of the bleachers. That way, gamblers remain in view of each other’s hand gestures, altering bets mid-match, wagering with new partners should both agree the odds have changed. It is just within the time of Ou’s footfall slide-stepping back from his advancing opponent though, that his right elbow also flicks upwards, crossing the forward limit of his advancing opponent’s guard, slicing through his right-left plane of symmetry, opening a cut just above the bridge of his opponent’s nose, nearly between the eyes.

It is better to be cut like that, open, rather than leaving the bruising pressure of a strike to swell further, encroaching on sensible tissue below the skin’s surface. Though the blood does not quite slip into his eyes to obscure his vision, from that point onwards, the rivulet of dark red

which pours between Ou's opponent's eyebrows marks a turning point in the match. Thereafter, the footing on the canvas—each stable position given through a balance of feints and tip-toe steps—shifts overwhelmingly in Ou's favor: his jabs, knees and high-stepping shins slip through his opponent's guard, again and again, just in time. During the standing grappling clinch both boxers lean into during later rounds, Ou repeatedly tips the balance, forcing his opponent to carry both of their bodyweights along a downward fall—crash onto the canvas, landing on top. The referee diligently untangles both boxers after each such descent, renewing the clash as an upright confrontation.

By the final two-minute break, before the fifth three-minute long round, Ou is still fresh, leaving his corner to meet his opponent well before the bell sounds. The ice-cube cooled water our two trainers have poured over Ou's torso during the break is squeegeed off the dampened canvas into a shallow metal trough.

**

In the old Lumpinee stadium, chain link fence would divide an upper and lower level of spectators, while a waist-high metal railing placed at floor level would corral a handful of Ou's closest supporters standing behind his corner—usually his parents, managers and sparring partners. In the newly constructed Lumpinee however, the ring is set apart from seats in the front row, in plain view on the center of a bright yellow painted floor. Aside from Ou's two trainers in the ring, only one supporter, our camp's part-owner Wai, who removes Ou's *mongkon* (ceremonial headdress) prior to the match, stays apart from the crowd, near the ring.

Wai founded the boxing camp Ou had remained in over a decade ago, keeping a space for practicing boxers in the backlot of the concrete warehouse where his family lives, sleeping on roll-away cots curtained off between three narrow floors of subcontracted sewing machines. A picture of Ou around age eleven or twelve, decorated in strings of deep yellow and ivory

garlands after winning a match, hangs on the brick wall behind the punching bags we use. In this photo, while several men have jumped into the ring to pose for the photograph with fists-raised on either side of Ou, Wai stands beaming just behind them, his face raised momentarily to meet the flash of the camera, a thin, reassuring grin jutting out from between the shoulders of those who have jumped front and center. Having watched over most of his fighters through their teenage years, Wai is normally invested beyond composure in later round-breaks, pushing through the crowd at countryside matches to reach through the ropes, pressing a finger-full dab of eucalyptus or a white, plastic nostril-wide inhaler of menthol smelling salts beneath his boxers' nostrils. In the new Lumpinee though, where such actions are exposed under the floodlights, a ringside security man usually holds one stiff arm against Wai's waist as he leans in towards his boxer, feigning attention across the roaring crowd to un-see the moment of exchange. The smelling salts are unnecessary this time though: Wai stands back from the ring smiling. At the matches' conclusion, Ou climbs from the ring wearing large yellow-orange marigold garlands over his shoulders, decorated as with a corpse, for the afterlife. The stadium lights glimmer off his glistening arms and legs, all coated with a mixture of ice-water and the C-Brand, citrus-smelling oil we had covered him with in the dressing room.

Winning this match again solidifies Ou's place as our camp's most dependable boxer in monetary terms. The constancy of his victory reinforces all of our relationships. His father's completely serious assertion, told to me during a pause in the sit-ups completing our training one night, "That Ou is the best—the best—in the country." may continue unquestioned. Wai's role as a long-term provider in the backlot enclave where Ou flourished is again confirmed. The faded sign for Wai's camp, displaying his family's name, Po-Kao, still hangs, its print-room default font fading just above the backlot ring. The sign reads "Phet-Po-kao", or literally, 'Po-Kao's diamonds'. The name is doubly suggestive, implying a long duration for polished results from

the pounding immediacy of training, a reminder of becoming refined and hardened over years of practice, as much as a constant image of the immeasurable value Wai would have for each boxer under his care; each not to be traded away.

As Ou, his usual training partner Jack, Wai's son Sen, and three—then four—other boxers in camp have all come into their late teens and early twenties now, Wai's camp has come under the attention and sponsorship of Sebu P-Napat. Sebu¹, in his mid-thirties, is the principle inheritor of the textiles and clothing manufacturing business-conglomerate which subcontracts fabric-cutting and sewing work to the women and men from Isan hunched over rows of sowing machines spread across this neighborhood in western Bangkok. These enclaves of textile and clothing production include those on the upper floors of Wai and his neighbor Dom's concrete-warehouse residences. Sebu comes and goes on the property odd evenings now, bringing contacts with newspaper and television-men, educated-manners, advice garnered from his brief but precisely awarded and well recorded 'champion' boxing career, and frequent contact with other clothing manufacturers' contracts in the area. The soccer-team we loosely organize to play late evenings on an artificial-turf lot near camp has silk-screened the name of Sebu's grandfather, and then his son, onto the fronts and backs of authentic-imitation Manchester-City² soccer jerseys. During these friendly games, it seems our fastest-footed boxers hang a step back when Sebu takes the ball through midfield, but whether their steps are deliberately being slowed is not a topic up for conversation. Sebu's motorcycle is a racing-quality, machine-metal matte black

¹ Sebu's name—even this shortened version we use in daily parlance—incorporates into its initial syllable the Thai honorific term, “*Sia*”, (derived from Sanskrit's 'sri'), indicating a rich and honorable man.

² Manchester City, a longtime doormat of the English Premier League, purchased by a Sheik of Abu-Dhabi, will go on to win the English premiership this year (2013-2014). The winning season adheres to a Theravada Buddhist karmic logic post-festum, where a pool of riches indicates a density of relations in which to cultivate good fortune in this lifetime.

polished Kawasaki, its raised-to-tilt high seat the machinic equivalent of a poised-to-leap grasshopper among a street of bustling houseflies: the pattering scooter-bikes most families share. Sebu's car is a black Audi sedan with blacklights beneath the front and rear bumpers to spread a blue glow across the nighttime roadway, conspicuous auto-accessories indexing a trans-Asian hood one the move. I once had the good fortune of riding as passenger for a few blocks with Sebu. There are black lights inside the Audi too, casting that blue glow across plush cream-colored floormats, a dazzling incandescence around feet resting as though in clouds. Sebu smokes Marlboro cigarettes, sips glasses of ice whiskey with practiced ease, and brings a cadre of friends from military-college to camp after hours. But somehow, he carries none of this wealth ostentatiously³, and is impeccably mannered among boxers' fathers decades his senior, men who nevertheless are always quick to find a spare chair for him. Sebu is more than capable of brokering matches with promoters twice his age. More than all these resources, his family's good name—a status beyond the other men in camp⁴—comes with monies for backing and organizing high-profile matches and advertising these in major boxing magazines. Sebu's connections hint at a higher order of transactions around boxers, actions outside of those familiar tasks their fathers must continue to do: the steering of transport vans, pouring of roadway-concrete, re-threading fishing nets and sowing machines, repairing greased engine machinery, standing in

³ The Thai Theravada Buddhist doctrine of karma states that those with great wealth in this lifetime have already accrued a great deal of merit in their former lives. Relations or exchanges with those rich individuals may only bring another party into the proximity of a greater field of merit. The storehouse of plenty these rich individuals exhibit in this lifetime indicates the potential for an overflowing of merit onto others. "Unlike Christians, the Buddhist Thai believe a costly act by a rich person is more meritorious than the modest gift of a poor person achieved at greater sacrifice (Hanks 1962: 1248)." (cited in Byrne 1995: 272). Regarding this logic applied to the Thai king, see Brand 1975.

⁴ For a summary of patron-client relations in Southeast Asia see Scott (1972).

noxious-fumes to direct traffic and bending seasonally, returning into the heat of fallow rice-paddies to be planted, then harvested.

On another occasion after a tournament ended, our truck—Wai’s truck, its bed crammed with boxers and trainers, detoured first to drop Sebu at his home, entering a gated community behind a brightly signed mega-mall, then pulling into a tree-lined side-alley cul-de-sac. Perched on the tailgate across from me, balancing heavyweight shoulders, gut and thighs above the younger boxers, was our senior trainer Kout. More than two decades past his own boxing career now, Kout’s bulk presences a massive girth of determined muscle brought now into the present to cushion years of boxers’ strikes, a role he has had more on than off-again here in Bangkok. While our truck idled in the alley outside of Sebu’s residence, Kout turned his eyes, but not his head, wistfully up to the balcony where Sebu’s wife stood waiting, her hair dyed brown-red, face pale with whitening cream.⁵ An impression of her as a porcelain ghost, aspiring worldliness captured immobile to loom in domestic enclosure above us, a ghastly specter projected at dusk. Her phantom pallor though here in Bangkok is perhaps living just as well anyways, a vision comparably as rare as the imagined western women Kout persists in needling me to one day introduce to him. During my first two months in camp, I had assumed Kout to be unmarried, until at a tournament in Isan, I had met his seven year old son. Still heedless of the thin seat the tailgate offers him, glancing back from Sebu’s thin young wife on the balcony, Kout catches my eye and shouts over the heads of the younger boxers: “Do you know how much that house costs?”

“I don’t know.”

⁵ I have noticed not all, but some Northeastern boxers, spouses and their siblings using whitening creams. Isan-ites have been stereotypically portrayed as darker, labour-burnt and backwards in comparison to their cosmopolitan, (i.e. Euro-western), central-Thai counterparts. (See, for example, Hesse-Swain 2006: 268-271; McCargo 2017: 370).

A ‘million-million-million-million baht.’

I lean forward, cocking my ear “Wha..?”

“a million-million-million baht, million million million [*lan,lan,lan*]...’ he trailed away exponentially into the quantity, lolling his head back into the wind as our truck picked up speed and pulled out of the cul-de-sac.

**

As Sebu moves into camp, Wai’s financial backing of older boxers proves either unnecessary or insubstantial. Wai turns frequently to drink, finding in the generalized atmosphere of inebriation the celebratory terms of his relevance. After years of watching over Ou and the others, Wai now needs only lend the name of *Phet-Po-Kao* (Po-Kao’s diamonds), to the camp’s youngest trainees scheduled for less high-profile matches. Whereas when normally speaking to one another, we call each other by the largely monosyllabic nicknames common among Thai people⁶—Jack, Ou, Wai, Daeng, Thoun—it is standard practice for Thai boxers to publicly take the name of their camp manager or sponsor. Even Wai’s twenty year old son Sen, recently coaxed out of an established camp across town to train again behind his father’s working-residence, is now announced for competition under his ring-name, “*Blah-ghat*’ [fighting-fish], followed by Sebu’s family name, P-Napat.⁷ Ou now also takes Sebu’s family name, preceded by his ring-name, “*Banlangngoen*”, the Siam aglaonema, a waxy-leaved, thick-stemmed Chinese evergreen plant associated with luck in money.⁸ Like his ring name

⁶ My own name, Paul, when spoken, becomes something closer to ‘Pau-n’, the ‘n’ being softened or silent altogether. This was initially confusing. I would often turn my head upon hearing someone call their father, ‘Pa’.

⁷ The prefix “*Phii*” here, connoting the respective relation accorded an elder uncle or brother, is also employed among non-kin relations to signify respect (see Palakornkul 1975:12).

⁸ บัลลังก์เงิน, Siam alagomena – *banlangngoen*.

suggests, Ou grows hardy with little water or sunshine, spending afternoons tucked away in training beneath the corrugated tin scaffolding extending off the back of Wai's concrete industrial-warehouse unit. Or perhaps within each of Ou's hardened arms, legs, knees and shins was an excess of life, like the excess color in each leaf of the Siam evergreen, the burst-pattern of blood-pink-red or silver chlorophyll which emanates from each center stem. Ou's limbs in training, the elbows, knees and kicks thrown against pads each day were increasingly sharpened. The custom-made shorts delivered on the spot at Rajadamnern stadium⁹ several weeks earlier, with rounded pink-fabric petals stitched onto each hip, pressed briefly between Ou's father's thumb and forefinger. This closer inspection already reveals single threads coming apart—fabric that is a less than true representation of Ou's resilience, though good enough for use that day. For the match in Lumpinee, Ou wore another pair of custom-made shorts, sans flowers, with P-Napat's name stitched in gold lettering on front. Neither of these are the heavy brown-grey, unexceptional cotton-polyester shorts Ou wears through camp each night as dusk settles in overtop of the concrete warehouses, with the box-square windows on each floor kept propped open to prevent overheating on the sewing room floor. There, where each day's training obscures the sunset through dusk and finds us, after hours of exertions and exhalations of the ring, delivered again into night.

Locations such as Lumpinee stadium give a position to reinforce a militarized patron-client network—immediately after exiting the ring as victor in Lumpinee, Ou had stopped to kneel and wai in front a partition-cleared section of elevated bleachers, where the sponsors of the

⁹ Rajadamnern, Lumpinee, as well as Channel 7 stadium, are among the few officially sanctioned stadiums in the Bangkok area, holding a monopoly on staging matches in metropolitan Bangkok.

evenings' matches, an elderly couple dressed in pink¹⁰ button-up shirts sat. The woman, her hair dyed sharply-black and salon-curled, had smiled and waved a hand aside her waist, an acknowledgement passing over Ou's bowed head. Tertiary matchmakers, older men dressed in similar blue-pink golf shirts and gold watches, had visited our dressing room minutes later. Among the matchmakers and sponsors, the royalist-military hierarchy extending into Thai social relations dovetails with a patron-client worker network such as those surrounding Sebu and families involved with our boxing camp. These political-social networks provide fertile, flexible conditions for the continual reinstallation of cronyism and opportunism of transnational capital—and around our camp, a supportive social network of northeastern families to subcontract further subcontracted textile and clothing manufacturing work at a preferable rate of return.

Results in the muay-Thai ring on the one hand reflect the strength of these communal arrangements; the continually qualified conditions of lives invested around Ou, Sebu, Wai and their families in the present moment. The matches Ou and his peers take up in Lumpinee require a collective pool of investments and returns, bringing families together around boxing and sustaining relationships across lines of class and patronage, where opportunity and economic measures would otherwise remain incommensurate, or, as our trainer Kout indicated, separated by the million-million-millionth order. The shared witnessing, and nurturing of Thailand's performative public-secret—Thai boxing's periodic destruction—further binds us. Memories of financial losses or gains, boxers' slippages during rounds we must unsee, financial windfalls, family or schooling events which must not be discussed when competition looms, wounds not be opened up again in the light—these events and nonevents add a distance to the hesitations and silences shared among us—further structuring relations in camp, ensuring continued

¹⁰ The color pink had at this point been worn by royalist supporters for several years after the then King Bhumibol had appeared in public after a lengthy sickness wearing a pink suit. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7120561.stm>, accessed August 18, 2018.

participation. As with Ou's polyester shorts changed periodically for competition, a rotating cast of sponsors' names and the camp-community's collected monetary support are not, however, the primary determinants of the reliable return of Ou's punches, knees, shins and elbows.

However clothed, sponsored or represented, Ou must make resilience and a continuity in strength from out of the flux of dependable supports and decaying entities that permeate camp life. Part of what this dissertation will show, is that the successful delivery of technique in the ring—i.e. of violent revolutionary history—involves the holding of a corporeal 'quality' exhumed through an exhaustive, repetitious overturning of present sense perception. The knee, elbow or shin raised with gravity in the ring is continuous with an incurring of credit for elusive motion within a matrix of institutional demands which otherwise capture and account for human movement. Movements in the Thai boxing ring are not determined by these other—i.e.

Theravada, factory-highway, monarchial or military—cultural norms for human motion. Rather, the Thai boxers' motion is of a unique—sacrificial—quality, such that the expenditure of boxers such as Ou leave a moving, if not traumatic, trace-mark upon other quotidian, determined realms of masculine Thai life—schooling, factories, military and monastic duties, etc. In the description that follows, I will show that what makes Ou an especially 'good' Thai boxer—what constitutes the resilient component of his participation and allows for improvisational flourishes such as the elbow in the ring—is a holding of corporeal tensions upon which to found improvisational moments, an acquired acuity for harboring strength and timing when otherwise depleted; for making good on delivering moving force where life as motion has otherwise been devalued. The mass of Thai boxers throughout the Thai countryside are not simply superfluous carnal subjects, the body-politic's decorative athletic spandrels, sensationally touristic offerings of elusive, unyielding masculinity ensuring the transnational interest to spur business exchanges for the locally powerful. To grow up boxing in Thailand's northeast however, is more; is to become,

insistently, the sacrificial, active component of a larger political economic movement, a continuity of living-dead flesh historicizing the landscape. Thai boxers' lifetimes are the greatly challenged expenditures, the transgressive human-historic exchanges which intensively and intrinsically inform the pace, rhythm and use of externalized political, military and capital force—the return of the local force of law.

In the measured give and take of interactions Ou engages in daily training between competitions—a sparring partner's momentarily revived grip, trainer Daeng's ulcer-laden rib cage, a single-use polyethylene milk jug repurposed for water or a neighbor's scooter ride home after completing a later than usual training session—Ou accumulates a reliability for further movement, reserving an asymmetrical delivery of strength which will bring him out on top under the ring's floodlights. Like persistent green-black mildew swept back against gutters behind the concrete warehouse we trained behind; like the grains of lost rice washed off melamine bowls after meals; piles of jean-denim hems—scraps swept off of the sewing room floor and stuffed into the red punching bags hanging at ringside; like the miles of sunlit clay-red dust which cannot but settle dully into every pore after morning running on dustbowl northeastern Thai roads; or like blotches of silver-pink-red splashing outwards from the stem of each thick, waxen leaf of the alagoemena, there was an elusive, intensive aspect of sensation accumulating daily, an overwhelming quality which placed sensation on edge, in decay. Under the promise of impending and unavoidable competition, a temporariness in the holding of things accrues at the edge of every shared motion—things which will fall outside of the narrowing of perception with competition. In the seasons of competition and training, for boxers, their fathers, their closest supporters, grows this certain quality of mobility in our shared lives, a quality never fully addressed, but which Ou's continual presence in the ring must bring to account.

The Elbow Strike as Analytical Fulcrum; Muay Thai as Ritual Sacrifice

Within Ou's execution of the elbow strike in Lumpinee Stadium, the horizon of the event, the collective enfolding of the memory of violence, and the apotheosis of Ou's daily practice all coincide in one spectacular instant. Among flurries of kicks, knees and concussive punches Ou and his opponent trade, the elbow strike also makes plain the eventual bloody terms of an escalated Thai-style martial engagement. As a destructive act upon which the eventual outcome of the match pivots, the elbow's slicing of flesh, like the countless abrasions, bruises and micro-concussive blows Ou takes on over years of training, breaks continuity with the politically and historically accumulated order of sense and causality around him. As there is no complete causal chain to place around the history of relations which bring both fighters to bear in the ring, mapping a laterally extensive assemblage of networked institutions risks placing a certain static economy around the dynamic motions of the ring. Where an anthropological phenomenology of embodiment (e.g. Csordas 1990, 1993, 1999; Jackson (ed.) 1996; Stoller 1989) might also risk indefinitely extending a 'body' of causalities between nature and culture, I draw also on parallel ethnographic conceptions of relationality where 'ownership' and 'interests' (e.g. Strathern 1996) characterize the truncation of any political assemblage made actively, through exchange (e.g. Strathern 1990; Myhre 2016: 9-10). Likewise, upon the shared, cultural horizon upon which perception and communication transpires (see Csordas 1993; cf. Merleau-Ponty), intentional movement—always enveloping and enveloped by otherness—must be withdrawn, in active exchange, from the local account of forgetting and indebtedness.

Hence, this research proposes that a continuity between a sovereign collective territory and perceptual responsivity is sustained through Thai boxing, and act which, emblematically concentrates investments around what must be forgotten and made credible/credit-able in Thailand. The Thai cultural world is similarly cut, delineated perceptually, in motions signifying

the ownership and interests of actors. The generative action and ever-more-exhaustive violence of Thai boxing holds this distribution of debt and interest in Thai society in a corporeal tension arraigining the present; a present where ‘mobility’ is gained at cost. The debts taken on by Thai men through their very motions—their distribution of ‘mobility’—is thus made not equivalent to a market-based, internationalized economy, but expires in a duration involving debt and interest as expressed by the affront of Thai human motion, kinetic indicators of growth or excessive life; indicators against the captured stillness of Theravada Buddhist merit or the enclosures of globalizing rationale logics.

To measure how corporeal destruction in the Thai boxing ring ‘reverberates’ (see Lambek/Bloch below) or resonates, I will track back from the spectacular moment of the elbow strike in Lumpinee (applying a version of Gluckman’s Situational Analysis (see Evens & Handelman (eds.) 2006; Kapferer 2005) to the event), describing the situation of Ou and his companions in rest and repose during the days, weeks and months of training and competition preceding Ou’s successful bout in Lumpinee.

Where Ou would gain weight, lose weight, increase strength, rest and repeat, in the negative, forgotten moments of corporeal plasticity and exhaustion, where the shadows of receptivity to sensation alter, in moments which stand, more generally, to rearticulate the composition for the underlying structures of inequality in Thailand.

The description which follows throughout the rest of this dissertation accompanies Ou through hours prior to Lumpinee when his weight was depleted and quickly rehydrated/regained, and then tracks further back chronologically, to instances occurring around prior matches when Ou’s injury and recuperation were handled. This explication remains true to the process of learning (i.e. enculturation) involved in boxing, where improvement, growth and restrengthening are managed through a process of consistent training and competition—repetition.

This dissertation takes a negative of that spectacularly visible moment of the elbow strike in Lumpinee Stadium. As a study of dynamic culture—culture as practically enacted—I describe, through Thai boxing, processes of skill acquisition, (cultural) change and (revolutionary) timing, focusing on the mundane times when Ou was exhausted during regularized, repetitive cycles of training-competition. In these ritually produced spaces where the boxer is tried and tired, where distraction in the face of oncoming crisis/contact/conflict is mitigated, the inner workings of this world, and the actors that regularly populate it, provide a political snapshot of how Thai influence over practical action moves. By paying attention to how boxers prepare to give and receive ‘bodily’ damages in the ring, I describe not just how a form of intimate violence is organized and permitted among Thai men, but the dimensions of a specific cultural world. This world is made regular and total through the regularized destruction of young rural Thai men’s memories/bodies. The contemporary international combat ‘sport’ of Thai boxing is more clearly a present-day concentration of sacrificial ceremonies required to instantiate natural authority in the uncertain political power-vacuum, be this among Buddhists in the ‘wild’ and fertile jungle northeast of the ancient Kingdom of Ayutthaya, or among Lao-Isan ethnicities negotiating their place within a globalizing economy at present. Mobility not as politically represented or consciously understood, but as experienced and structured, is made precisely through the boxers’ expenditures; through the constant testing of his finite, mortal limitations. The descriptive [phenomenological] of the boxers’ everyday life that follows thus describes a continuity between cultural norms for perception, bodily habits and mobility that is maintained to extend unto a local Thai hierarchy of people and things. Considering also the older men, families and investors involved in Ou’s match, my results emphasize the unique role of local forms of human sacrificial activity—i.e. here, Thai boxing—in distributing free time/mobility, and the role thereof in constituting community. I consider Ou’s elbow strike as one particular evidence of practice

learned;¹¹ practice with influence reaching unto the dimensions of a sovereign assemblage/ontology/community. I suggest factors such as human finitude and responsiveness vis a vis a vertically stratified distribution of historical-material actors be emphasized in current anthropological treatments of culture, value and relationality more generally.

In describing portions of Ou's routine hereafter, I privilege consideration of moments where the hierarchy of Thai things/actors are held briefly in suspension,¹² where exhaustive participation in Thai boxing's destruction generates a state where attention to tiers of Thai historical-materials, or equally, a propensity for settling into pleasure or 'enjoyment' of these things, is at stake. Time is redistributed in these qualitative, uneventful times: the credits and

¹¹ Taking 'skill' acquisition or learning as 'change' in the context of muay-Thai's bone-bruising contact, amidst local Thai oligarchic holding patterns, requires a bracketing of notions such as 'creativity' or 'innovation'. Considered in radical empirical terms, repetitions in training and competition extend measure unto collapse, providing the qualitative ground upon which new, meaningful differences are generated. The standing stance of the Thai boxer, as a particular negation against grounds, moves to expand the jurisdiction of sensation—the differences matter will yield, confounding his corpus' relative relation to nature's time of decay. As a practical disjuncture in the merits by which movement is measured among Thai people, boxers generate power structures by interrupting formal expectations for movement. Their migrations dragging dead and ancestral actors up to the ring are movements better expressed by a generative tension in the negative and dialectical components of radical empiricism (Deleuzian or otherwise), in the interruptive cutting of circuits, contra unlimited connective-assemblaging, where "we may be *of* this world, but we are certainly not *for* it. Such out-of-jointedness is a distance. And distance is what begins the dark plunge into the many worlds eclipsed by the old." (Culp 2017: 8). Media theorist Culp's point is that the world as produced and indefinitely connected veils another darker, generative negative mode of life in which finitude yields a multiplicity, the affirmation of a plurality through negation. In Thai pedestrianism or muay-Thai sparring, this tarrying with distancing procedures or eluding of direct engagement, where connection which may have yielded a myopic affirmation ignoring stratification, instead finds a dissensus in the negation of all order, wherein the remaining corpse post-exhaustion, becomes generative. {To bring this conversation to contemporary anthropologies of practice, compare the 'dark' ethnographic turn catalogued by Ortner (2016).}

¹² Resting, collapsing in sparring, travelling to tournaments in vehicles, joking through the tedium of daily training, cutting and rapidly regaining weight, these are moments, repeated in sequence, where Thai boxers are not only dependent on the handling of a larger community—but where, as always with the challenge of training, there is an opportunity to form a new understanding of causality, of quality of life and the limits of sensation/perception.

debts¹³ by which Thai men constantly maintain position vis a vis the mobility are made anew. Attending matches like Ou's, each boxing enthusiast not only ideally realizes, but materially repositions themselves vis a vis the causal limits of excessive violence. In this way, the scarring strikes of Thai boxing also marks the terms of Thai history and memory, informing the tempo of learning, cultural continuity and the borders community at large.

Ou's match in Lumpinee also occurred nearly at the conclusion of a year of my own doctoral fieldwork on Thai soil. As a moment unfolding heedless of the apprenticeship-participation role that had anchored my research, I want to reflect further on the elbow strike that turned the tide of Ou's match in Lumpinee stadium.

Strictly assertive martial apprenticeship had proved insufficient in my effort to understand the structures and sensory proclivities of Thai society. The awe inducing story of the heroic ethnographer who learns the martial ropes to master an understanding of an exotic, violent nature (part Levi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*, part Chagnon's *Yanomamo*) more closely resembles a particular genre of ex-pat composed literature, where muay-Thai provides an avenue for self-discovery or truth (e.g. Garrigan 2012). But there was still a composition of style and cruelty permitted in each day's non-observances of contact or damage, whether this was the delayed attack in a cockfight, a parent leaving toddlers to fall on concrete, or teenagers to crash repeatedly to the canvas. The cumulative quality of training and becoming accustomed to hesitations and interjections, conversations and shared silences among Thai men, Thai dogs, Bangkok traffic, the religious icons out front of rural stores conveyed a worth of life in motion which I could only begin to approach from my different historical circumstances.

¹³ In Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* ([1887] 1967), particularly book 2, creditors-debtors are described as being distributed in relation to their enjoyment of public sacrifice/execution. Also see Nietzsche's 1886 preface to the *Gay Science* on the variable sickness-health of bodies as being *the* undercurrent driving philosophical thought in general.

From this limited perspective, from where I stood outside of the ring in Lumpinee, I could consider the elbow strike there an articulate point upon which to rotate time; to retrace the terms by which ritual violence must both take account of and make (cultural) change and continuity in Thai society more broadly. As a particular instance of technical proficiency, a strike and wound across which the transmission of (cultural) knowledge transpired, that single elbow was also a place where care and values could be visibly transmitted between generations of boxers, as sons and fathers, trainers, uncles and sparring partners. The irrevocable, bloody cut of the elbow, within the match, also generates meaningful differences between parties around the ring: the monetary values attributed between winning and losing, but also the interpretive and affective dimensions attached to the match's resonant violences are absorbed by those both present and beyond. Especially in Lumpinee stadium, where matches are arranged by military generals, the arc of the elbow strike also traces a political territory: it is publicly permitted contact. The bearing required to both disavow the uncapturable intimacy of the violence exchanged between combatants, and then to recoup it in leisurely enjoyment is a bearing required to thrive amongst the industrial-militarized institutions organizing young Thai men's lives: monasteries, elders-monarchies, conscripting military police.

For its recipient, the elbow strike also does irrevocable damage—a scar; a bruise; a loss of corporeal structure; damage which actualizes the public re-adjudication of a bloodily contested, and duly valued territory. The two fighters, doubled incongruously for up to five three-minute rounds, may no longer overlap within the same space. The masculine Thai provocation for gambling, assembling fighting matches poised around the orchestration of equivalence and production of abrupt animation, be these leaping fighting-chickens, thrashing fighting-fish, vibrating beetles (see Rennesson, Grimaud & Cesard 2012), kites (see Benedict 1952:23) or boxing men, indicate the preferable frames for the ritualized match. Decisive

moments in these competitions more often than not pass within the blink of an eye and are characterized by flickering, snapping, jaggging forces distributed along the outside edges of combatants' anatomies. Shins or elbows, as much as a nestled beak or absently-scratching talon, a low-lying fingertip or toehold, become the distal points which sway a whiplashed force—imparting imbalance, asymmetry announcing the passage of time amidst an otherwise balanced stillness—timelessness which will again be often exemplified in equally mirroring, upright, unperturbed opponents. Over days months and years of muay-Thai training, in session after session of clinchwork, torquing hips further with each kick; finding the off-kilter pace of Thai shadow-boxing, holding each step tip-toe turns to close-then-open a balanced guard with one knee raised, these corporeal adjustments provided their own inherent logic. The 'body', delivered as such, habitually, already inhabited an 'understanding' of when and where distal collective meetings and everyday person-to-person exchanges would be admitted: when a stranger's footsteps would intercede in a thick crowd, how an older Thai man might bump my elbow in passing to lead my hand into a marketplace-transaction; how a collectively agreed upon departure might be delayed, when steps to intercede, to resist, to migrate, to build or to lay low might be taken. Over time, through participatory action, I moved into a largely muted acceptance and corporeal 'understanding' of these political and interpersonal spaces.

While muay-Thai is Thailand's 'national sport', recently having been granted 'provisional status' as an Olympic event¹⁴, this transnational symbolic capital attests to a resilient vein of participants on the move between peripheralized Isan and cosmopolitan Bangkok. The concussive impact of two fighters in contact, and frequently, the cuts or bruises they inflict upon

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/sports/olympics/cheerleading-muay-thai-provisional-olympic-status.html> accessed August 1, 2018.

each other, those wounds¹⁵ generated within the spectacular parameters of each match, forge a certain forgetting subjectivity. The training programs Ou repeats for Lumpinee, preparations carried out under the backdrop of impending corporeal destruction, conveys the pace—the pace under ‘present’ conditions of variably indebted patronage—at which other supports—i.e. 2nd managers, half-brothers, erstwhile laboring cousins, fathers, communal meals, returns home for harvest—may be afforded remembrance or relevance ; where particular horizons and roles become certain and eventful again.

The regular bouts of muay-Thai held in rural temples, regional and centralized stadiums across Thailand, sustained by a populous northeastern working class, actively generate ‘cultural value’, performing an asymmetrical whiplash through the order of things/actors in contemporary

¹⁵ French writer Georges Bataille continually describes a ‘wound’ as being analogous with a life (see especially 1985:193), where continuous expenditure is characteristic of excess production. Bataille locates the sovereign upon a transgression of an unknowable death—i.e. the Negation and institution of humanity’s grounds—to an act of sacrifice that is a ‘subterfuge’ (1990: 19, 20), an identity with the animal or sacrificed with the sacrificer, affirming a Hegelian/Kojevian dialectic for consciousness up until a point in which ‘sacred horror’ “transfigures all things and destroys their limited meaning” (1990:21). The Nietzschean apparatus of ‘gay anguish, anguished gaiety’ (1990:25) Bataille stresses at the moment of dismemberment/death gestures towards a powerful transfiguration, but does so exemplarily, in Bataille’s examples, through versions of Catholic transcendentalism—his examples include the Irish wake and Mexican days of the dead (Bataille 1990; also see Lingis 2015:138). Compare these celebrations of death to its Thai quotidian faces (e.g. especially Klima 2002): statues of corpses, fetus’ preserved in temple jars, ‘gory’ car crash victims on the front pages of newspapers. Where Bataille’s developed treatment of sacrifice finds in excess wastage—in anguished death inclusive of ‘joy’—an avenue to the sacred and sovereign power, Thai boxers’ movements, like their entanglements with oils, powders, funerary ash, amulets and other historicized debris, offer occasions for extending association through the non-sensing and interminable, forging influence within a hierarchical material realm which orders living and dead. The generalized, uncaptured aspect of Thai boxing’s movement, that transgressive instant occasioning a loss and a relative Negation of grounds in sacrifice, is not merely a glorious expenditure (the poststructuralist’s non-subject). Rather, destruction in the muay-Thai ring provides the means for making headway into the realm of non-sensing, with the as-yet sensible. The stance of the Thai boxer makes association through the unyielding responsivity of a hierarchical materiality. Death—i.e. the corporeal destruction promised in muay-Thai competition—in this Thai case is not only a moment of anguish/joy, but an indeterminate state for opening up association. This is not simply the joyful anguish of the particular Nietzsche Bataille employs, but the inauguration, in falling alongside finitude, of new mobility and economy.

Thailand. Openings boxers find during competition—hesitations within hesitations pressing through the limits of an opponent’s guard, folds across welts of dull-scarred bone, disregarded broken skin, bruised ribs or snapped folds of muscle—illustrate with their very flesh the limits of exhaustion an active, Thai migrant person may endure in their travels back and forth between Bangkok’s core and the populous periphery of Isan. The apparitions of strength and beauty—beauty being that which confounds the material and symbolic-sovereign (natural) order—flashed briefly in the ring, again given residence in the realm of the possible.

My fieldwork during 2013-2014 saw the continued decline of the former elderly King’s health (then aged 85-86) amidst recurrent anti-government street-protests directly preceding a military coup. In such a precarious political state, the question of who would be ‘in charge’—i.e. responsible for holding territories of living and dead—seemed increasingly uncertain.

This precarious political situation demands the constant restrengthening of a sovereign subject familiar with a means for life found outside the vacuuming pull of Bangkok’s convenient, spectacular pleasures: elite country clubs, ‘massage’ parlors, air-conditioned shopping malls using more electrical power than entire provinces in Isan (Baird & Quastel 2015:1228), sun-baked tennis courts alongside gated Universities, privatized skyline apartments countersunk into swampland, faux-European coffee shops, neon, flat-screen television, plush chartered vans and the accompanying service infrastructure for this hypercapitalist¹⁶, cosmopolitan dreamworld.¹⁷

¹⁶ This ‘hypercapitalist’ core of Bangkok, framed—often in gold—by the looming personages of advertisements, kings, monks, spirits and minor deities, constitutes a whirlpool of both increasing commodification—of things, services, experiences (cf. Jameson 1990), an extension of the dualistic process of enlightenment and industrialization (e.g. see Harvey 1989) via colonialist visitation—but also a (sacrificial) matrix of entities prioritizing the purchase of attention as *lifetime*; an extemporization of aspirations and deferred mobilities.

¹⁷ In her study of spirit mediums in Northern Thailand, Rosalind Morris’ anecdotal mention of Terry Gilliam’s Thatcher-weary dystopian film *Brazil* (2000: 287), whose hero imagines escape

For boxers like Ou, with bows in ancestors' steps, animal-quick-motions which therefore we become, elders' repressed desires for affluence, festival calendars coinciding with tournaments and regional aesthetics, family mythologies all frame the violence of the ring. A constellation of different daily associations are arranged around training. Thai boxers like Ou that raise their limbs repeatedly, resisting gravity and transgressing conventions for personal space, pass through a series of local material and historical inertias to make a difference in the ring. The angle of each strike Ou delegates in the exhausted stages of training or competition indicates pathways for folding time back restfully, for retaking the (interest) rate of (collective) memory in the animate force of each limb. With the paint still drying on the walls of Lumpinee's newly relocated stadium, with martial arts tourists following the word-of-mouth-meets-fist grin of generations of foreign military-men on leisure-leave, and even with my own highly visible presence at ringside cheering Ou on that evening, the globalizing, changing, 'modern' parameters of muay-Thai, boxers' motions are not delineated primarily by discourses of global aspiration. To be sure, the particularly open initial Thai hospitality with the foreign semiotics and things unto a greater degree of committed exchange (e.g. Pellegi 2002), a pattern historically recurrent in a Thai elite's contact with foreign missionaries, explorers and ambassadors. There is, however, a base inverse to this elite economizing opportunism composition of sovereign contact—a de-composition of time written in flesh and blood. The present given for life among Thai boxers is impinged upon by the material-conditions made constant to their immediate lives—those horizons for mobility which must be forgotten, placed at arm's length, then effectively traversed through seasons of practice, through a honing and dulling of nerves, through

through a landscape of industrial waste hemmed in on all visible sides by touristic holiday billboards, gives a baseline surrealist-dramatic representation not that far off the everyday ethos required for visionary Thai progress in this case. The refuge in magical realism, unfortunately, is not, however, as far as I can tell, always available.

competitions between villages and on into Bangkok.

To be a ‘good’, or ‘beautiful’ Thai boxer—as Wai would often comment on one boxers’ kicking, kneeling or stance in shadowboxing as being ‘beautiful’ or not—is to compose strength and an awareness for an appropriate time for wielding destruction or eluding interpolative force from out of the series of temporal debts and incursions on lifetime interwoven in everyday Thai life. These include routinely keeping aware to duck ever so slightly in the shadows of statues, to bow to shrines, to *wai* when driving past ordained and ornate trees (see Darlington 1998; Tannenbaum 2000) or auspicious temples, to bow further, quickly, to monastic and monarchical paraphernalia in passing, to uphold practices of genuflecting to elders with a full bow, or when walking past them unnoticed, to maintain a casual duck of the shoulders, assuaging the hierarchical postural debt built into everyday invisibly granted greetings such as the *wai*—those artful maneuverings of non-recognition around obligatory hierarchical gestures in which neither party may be wholly invested in indulging. These are routines Ou’s father ensures he follows to a tee—and over years, routines Ou’s father no longer need be present for ensuring he follows to a tee. In addition to these public-religious norms for motion are the meditative-repetitive purchases upon northeastern Thai mens’ kinetic potential such as that required by farming (particularly during rice-planting and harvest seasons), factory or service work, road-travel or construction contracts.

The witnessing of the unspeakable violence of each match instantiates parameters for inclusion and community—the position of one to each other, and one among many—as well as the pace of authority in Thai life—what events must be taken or given for granted at present. Larger political instabilities—the constancy of transnational capital projects in Thai borderlands (hydro-dams, factory-work, the employment, refugee incarceration or warfare upon ethnic minorities, Karen, Burmese, Cambodian, their lineages uncanny-close to a national Thai

identity—require the constancy of Thai boxing’s spilled blood or concussed anatomy. The indeterminacy of the King’s rebirth—quickly, “Long Live the King”—when the Thai Prince’s reputation was deemed lacking, requires a steady offering of dramatized heroic lifetimes and hopeful narratives to reconstitute the vacuum of power in kingdom, economy and community; to putatively re-place the order of living and dead things. The controlled destruction of a community’s strongest, ostensibly healthiest youths—by chronological linear measure, theirs being nearly the greatest loss of life potential—is a larger affront to the fleeting and sacrificial character of local mortal life. What each muay Thai contest redistributes is not merely the ‘good’ as material fortune and status, but more immediately, for those witnessing the pace of limbs raised and fallen, the ‘good’ as ethical an temper. From the urgency of each match, the sacrificial character of local human life, haunted in its passing—the grounds for making choice and encountering difference therein—are again rearticulated.

Where corporeal expenditure may transgress the established order of reason and sense, where physical efforts may be expelled unto material and nonsensical categories, and then reappropriated through repetitive exhaustion as such for the planning and rationale of another possible life, muay-Thai is an interruptive force—for its participants, making every living quality of the present.

As anthropologist Marc Auge writes describing an anthropology of global contemporaneity,¹⁸ conditions of commodification in daily life intensify the desire for, and

¹⁸ An ethnographic output composed in relief from Parisian academic passages in a time when direct European colonialism has become capitalized, Auge’s anthropology of contemporaneity (see also Auge 1999) may be read under these conditions as a meditation on the temporal fecundity of ritual’s creative/destructive potential. For Auge, subjects’ experience of contemporaneity—i.e. a present in which to act keeping any given duration at hand—necessarily includes the meaningful project of composing rituals (e.g. Auge 2000), compositions with which any historicizing subject persists:

“A relation to the other, even in the form of memory, promise or project, forms part of him; he reanimates it incessantly in his everyday behaviour and seeks its traces or proofs in the

receptivity to ritual as a means for marking time and remaking meaning. The harnessing of Thai lifetimes into tourism, lese-majeste muzzled curriculums of ethnic nationalism (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 2009), privatized construction, offshore fishing of indeterminate duration or pay, service or factory-work, and even the expectation of sleepless repetitive work, with its complimentary dose of methamphetamine (*ya-ba*) pills, are arrangements shackling subjectivity—arrangements where the indeterminacy of quantitative sensory acuity during repetitious action becomes a means of taking time, and sapping surplus life. These broader Thai capital rhythms do not eliminate the resilience of ‘older’ ritual practices. Rather, precarity and commodification preclude an intensification of subjectivity in exhaustion, a negative memory in which repetitive ritual comes to roost. For Auge, to have a socially inclusive position upon which to build memory or relation in the global techno-capitalist present, is to have a ‘future’ proposed upon the continuance of conditions for having meaningful change while living amidst increasingly rationalized universals (see 2014). Anthropologists such as Clara Han (2011) and Kathleen Millar (2014; 2015) among others who at present give attention to how precarious life endures (see Muehlebach 2013; O’Neill 2014; and Campbell 2016 on Burmese migrants in Thailand; and

surrounding world and its events, including such adulterated forms as the ‘personalization of political life’ or a sporting competition. We have to be able to think of time as a plot outline but at the same time, in complementary fashion, as an inauguration. That is why ritual still attracts us today, why we sometimes feel the need for it and seek it out. For the absence of ritual characterizes the society of transparency and the eternal present in which we now live.” (Auge 2014:27).

To take from this passage the suggested course for an anthropological exposition of particular temporalities, Auge’s ominous ‘*eternal present in which we now live*’ is shadowed by a manifold ghostly historicity that fractures the cosmopolitan ‘we’ into locally bound travelers with particular (im)mobilities—where relatives and relations pass their finite, mortal days. Thai political-religious aesthetics of motion; genuflections and hierarchical bows and spatial observances around temples are composed in relief of the mobile output of each muay Thai match, where tucked chins, dipping shoulders, rigid necks and thickened shins combine to overcome a postural constriction on the body politic. The processes Ou undergoes at growth, rest and play—the negative of the eventful, spectacular match—are the coinage through which the trace of an ‘other’, the desire for growth in life, is collectively held open.

for an earlier study of contingent ‘care’ which might be included in this vein, Scheper-Hughes (1992) may be read as primarily exploring different local projects of composing meaningful lives under conditions of precarity and ongoing debt imposed by larger transnational and world-historical economic treaties. Similarly, the generative lives–movements of Thai boxers are composed with a possible future in hand, though the debts Thai boxers negotiate are variegated, perceptually enforced by the material institutions-entities which stake claim to their mobility—debt which enslaves and immobilizes, rescinds and slackens constraint, through a corporeal economy. Upon this corporeal duration of credit-debt, value and authority are attributed through stillness—a lack of visible disturbance or exertion. Mobility-future is contracted from out of the debts, attentions and lines of causality imposed by an abundance of local historicizing actors making a claim to time—be this the king, Buddha, military generals or the marketplace.

In the contemporary moment, as anthropologist Marc Auge writes in introducing his essay suggesting the ‘oblivion’ of forgetting as an intrinsic aspect of memory,

“one must know how to forget in order to taste the full flavor of the present, of the moment, and of expectation, but memory itself needs forgetfulness: one must forget the recent past in order to find the ancient past again.” (2004: 3).

Auge’s statement underscores the process of recurrence and periodicity inculcated in memory—a contractual, if not phenomenologically contracting arrangement between returning and forgetting, by which the weight of the past is transferred forcefully into the present. This is a rate of return requiring a Nietzschean, ‘robust form of health’, a ‘forgetting’ for action (see Nietzsche [1887]1967:58). Such a rate of return within the immediacy of any act requires a bonding to a ritualized frame where the terms of forgetting are contracted/writ-large. The transmission of a muay-Thai punch, a knee, a kick or elbow in the ring, a ‘flavor of the present’ which eludes sensation in delivery through the very destruction of human sensory apparatus, are the destructive rhythms by which a collective history may be made resonant, and present.

This locally strong motion is prepared at a cost: the narrowing of attention required in each match dulls the regular passage of time. Those organizing traumas: the dull thwaks of meeting shins; the pressing of a shoulder to break through the holding crux of an opponents' elbow-lock; ribs compressed, twisting away-then-against a thrust knee-cap; or when running, the residual particulate matter of traffic exhaust fumes in a tightly held throat; thrumming engines; a scattering of mongrel dogs; lung-fulls of air snuck between charcoal fumes of street-food grills; a padding toehold on dilapidated sidewalk covered in tarps or blankets for sellers' wares—amulets in unceremonious piles, wilting magazines, used kids' clothes, the shorts and shirts in stacks. In the alleyway coming back to our training grounds, the unlocked gate of a daycare for toddlers, so often ajar then, swinging above orange and blue fractal-floral tiles and the noxious, tar-heavy concrete of the alleyway. Unresolved exchanges, glimpsed pedestrian pathways and increasingly uncertain terms of care, of life carried on in other places inhabit the margins of our daily pathway as muay Thai becomes routine. Among these so many other avenues, the choice to do muay Thai is upon us time and time again.

Commenting on a collection of articles describing instances of sacrifice across cultures, anthropologist Michael Lambek writes:

“We already know about sacrifice, through practice, story, or discourse and, more deeply, through our experience in the world: that we must continuously and irreversibly give up or postpone some things that we care about for the achievement of others.” (Lambek 2014: 430).

With particularized human experience always already in a sacrificial state, ritual sacrifice, as a violence directing or marking collective memory, provides one political degree of performative commentary upon such an unsettled state. Ritual sacrifice becomes an accounting

for time lost, taken and given. Lambek's comments¹⁹ on discourse–experience as sacrificial applies as readily also to human movement—i.e. muay-Thai—where movement open to improvisation becomes by necessity beyond necessity. The cut, the kick or knee thrown quickly during mid-step overruns the mundane and is a provocation to reassess and revalue life. A similar sentiment haunts the Marxian dialectical assessment of action and memory—relative alienation—where actors, through the particular contingencies of their movement, forge distances between each other and a non-essential relation to socially naturalized reproduction for the conditions of life (see Marx [1857-58]1973: 88-100, 239-256; Turner 2008; Schmidt [1962]2014). After Turner, Lambek (see 2013) proposes extending such an analytical framework for culture as production beyond the category of labour, to performance more explicitly. Extending this reading to muay-Thai, the grounds for surplus 'cultural' meaning, value and the powers of differentiation are cultural capital-abilities extracted from out of the life-times of those engaged in performative-motion. With historically significant movement generated upon the basis the corporeal capital of participants, the marginal routine of the boxer being a substitute for the traffic in social violence, authority and territory more generally, the bloody act of boxing constantly performs the ethical rule, grounds from which persons cohere, choose and have footing among other actors in the Thai state.

Enfolding memory and history in an active corpus both responsive to otherness, and responsible for particular debts in time, the Thai boxer's movement directs value within a larger field of generalized reciprocity and social interaction. As a type of practical exchange; a martial action transmitting cultural knowledge; exchanges in the Thai boxing ring generate value in excess outside the ring's ropes. The corporeal excess and aesthetic asymmetry generated out

¹⁹ Lambek's ethnographic appraisal of the ethical as being composed in action also stresses the frame of ritual sacrifice, not market-economics, as being primarily generative of cultural value (e.g. 2008).

of Thai pugilistic exchange echo an insight from Maurice Godelier regarding the prioritization of a sacred economy superimposing upon gift exchange or rational economy (1999; also see Pyyhtinen 2014). Thus, the description of Ou’s days below will demonstrate that the carefully measured Thai economies—social/postural hierarchies, accounts of merit accrual, piety, censorship and the presently-unspoken, forms of obligation such as *bunghun*, debts of gratitude between parents and children (e.g. Embree 1950:183; Lyttleton 2000: 112-115; Phongphit & Hewison 2001: 118-120; Rabibhadana 1984), as well as the apparently archaic though abundantly present *sakdina* {ศักดิ์นา} prestige system²⁰ are haunted, upheld and ultimately moved off-kilter by the corporeal sacrifice engendered through Thai boxing. With muay-Thai being performed regularly at both the popular center (e.g. Lumpinee stadium) and then at the limits of community (e.g. the household-camps I stayed in for months near the Thai-Lao and Thai Cambodian border) in present-day Thailand, the corporeal sacrifice par excellence—and hence prime cultural mover of subjectivity—continues to be the sweat, blood, folded muscle, scarred skin and calcified bone of the boxer.²¹

The general system of exchange practices available to men in Thai society—military or monastic duties, farming contracts, labor over sowing machines, cooking grills, motorcycle

²⁰ Historians Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit, relating *sakdina*’s relevance in early twentieth century epic Thai poetry, write that the term “may mean something like ‘dignity value’” (2010: 926).

²¹ The description of corporeal resonance described here—the particular-to-general ethnographic project locating dehiscent perception and motion amidst locally rationalized political controls—exercises phenomenological description for a methodological acuity which is less an absolute Weberian methodological individualism, and more that suggested by phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty in a moment concerned with the political capacity of human subjectivity vis a vis fascist or run-away destructive processes: “To understand and judge a society, one has to penetrate its basic structure to the human bond upon which it is built; this undoubtedly depends upon legal relations, but also upon forms of labor, ways of loving, living, and dying” (Merleau-Ponty [1947]1969: xiv). Beginning from a relativist position bracketing judgement, engaging these ways of loving, living and dying—of passing time in boxing—gives tangible reference to legality, or the permissible limits of community.

engines, in slaughterhouses, recycleries, for concrete pouring, or salt-bag carrying, jostling in the public marketplace—the steps composing these arrangements—are routines carried on within the shadows of an interruptive rhythm, a punctuation of bodies in festivals. This series of recurrences deeper than political recognition; with a timing undercut by (human) sacrifice. The sacrificial exchange is, like trauma, carried in corporeal memory to inhabit sociality more broadly. The purported field of Thai ‘society’, a generalized field of mutual recognition and reciprocity, is mobilized, off-kilter, with a trace of shared violences (cf. Hertz [1907]1960).

In Lambek’s recent summary of sacrifice, gift exchange circulates, while sacrifice, involving a destruction of that which can not return in total, ‘reverberates’. He writes:

“The effects of the sacrifice rebound, in Bloch’s terms (1992), onto the sacrificer or reverberate, in my terms, through history, across the community, within the family, and in the heart. Reverberations are not instantaneous and not all of a given frequency.” (Lambek 2014:431).

Both Maurice Bloch’s concern with the political instrumentalization of bloody violence in sacrificial ritual—in his words, the rebound²²—as well as Lambek’s term, ‘reverberation’, involve some aspect of frequency: a regularly assured return. This ‘return’ connotes both monetary/worldly wealth and a reanimated historicity—the influence of the dead among the living. Sacrifice’s reverberations influence what may be (socially) given–taken as significantly

²² Bloch identifies three potential political directions of the rebound of symbolic violence in sacrificial ritual. “The first possibility examined was a matter of the symbolic construction of a permanent order of balanced reproduction; the second was the turning of the final conquest outward so that it became an idiom of military expansion. In the third, the same aggressive element as in the second possibility is not turned towards outsiders but towards insiders of lower status, thus producing an ideology of social ranking.” (Bloch 1992: 81). With Thai boxing, the three rebounds might be seen as 1st, Northeastern fathers-sons becoming fathers, composing a field of practical reproduction, 2nd, the media and discourse driven representations of nationalistic masculinity (e.g. see Kitiarsa 2011), and 3rd, an affective measure of the traumatic contact which implicitly communicates the expendability of dirty, peripheral, animalian bodies vis a vis a spectacular-gold-gilded throne and air-conditioned shopping-cathedral state, buttressed by the hardened positionality of soldiers and construction workers. Responsibility, ‘for the taking of a life’, as much as the making of a life, in the ring, is politically wielded, through responsivity.

memorable/valuable, while informing the rate (the collective interest) upon which historical violence may return.

Where reverberation or delay indicates a recall, through the destruction of sacrifice, the positive/active role of forgetting framed by Auge above—that forgetting of the recent past to find the ancient past—the constructive, memorable component of ritual’s immanent action involves imposing an apparatus of substitutions in place of the loss of lifetime or intended victim/deity of sacrifice.²³ The organization of these substitutions—the political, moral actors accepting responsibility for the sacrifice (cf. Valeri 1985; Weiss 2016:185-179) channel their respective share of responsibility into the formal composition of the larger social hierarchy. A vertical chain of power upon which the required output of kinetic energy decreases in climbing may be traced upwards through the boxer-prisoner-labourer-familyman-ancestor-richman-patron-military general-king-Buddha.

Considering this semiotic and hierarchical chain of associations draped across the shoulders of the muay-Thai fighter further (his sponsors, his ancestors’ paraphernalia, his steps, his handlers), whether imposed through anxiety-denial, mimetic or semantic reference, both responsibility (to an otherness) and relative responsibility to these larger political handlers combine under the imperative to move aesthetically in the ring. The grounds upon which substitutions and political actors—deceased grandfathers, alcoholic trainers, passionate

²³ The organization of symbolic hierarchy in ritual ostensibly reproduces hierarchy through the violent imposition of a transcendent order. “For all [theorists], sacrifice is defined by substitution. It is, in the first-place, a substitute for an impossible or prohibited real act, such as the actual coalescence of the divine and the human, a real suicide, or unritualized violent aggression and murder. All substitutions within a sacrificial ritual are therefore substitutions for a prior, and definitive, substitution. ... The substitute victim is, as a symbol, a representative of two (or more) different and even contradictory things or beings.” (Doniger & Smith 1989: 194-195). The drama of rising and falling, life and death, re-enacted in the ring carries the force of an absolute loss and destruction through jaggling, planar slippages.

managers—extend resolutely in boxers’ limbs, into the ring, is, as for phenomenological philosopher Levinas, the grounds upon which an ethical condition reside, a coinciding within the trauma of contact positioning one vis a vis an other.²⁴ In every charged step within the ring, is the possibility of repositioning a political distance between self and other, as with one and many. It is this political-memorable level upon which values and ‘returns’ transpire; where movements become meaningful, paying debts those at arm’s length from the boxer could otherwise no longer pay through their own motions among esoterically inclined, powerful peers.

There is a political aesthetic logic to the upright fighter, a corporeal-memorable nexus of responsibilities, loss and lifetimes being communicated in each step—the violence of the ring is not a wholly irrational enterprise. Each boxer sequences steps and gathers actors into each step, arranging time. The corporeal, ritually generated time is far from that time merely regained from a field of myth and imposed meaning interwoven as nature, as anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss would have it.²⁵ The myths retained separating culture from a natural immensity, those categories for action proposed by Levi Strauss, for example, are distant from the everyday

²⁴ Reinforcing what Levinas states as his ‘central idea’, an “asymmetry of intersubjectivity” (1998:105), in discussing the intransigence of ‘Substitution’ to living with choice in finite, historical terms—living in *Otherwise than Being*—Levinas writes, “For the condition for, or the unconditionality of, the self does not begin in the auto-affection of a sovereign ego that would be, after the event, “compassionate” for another. Quite the contrary: the uniqueness of the responsible ego is possible only *in* being obsessed by another, in the trauma suffered prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable *before*. The one affected by the other is an anarchic trauma, or an inspiration of the one by the other, and not a causality striking mechanically a matter subject to its energy. In this trauma the Good reabsorbs, or redeems, the violence of non-freedom. Responsibility is what first enables one to catch sight of and conceive of value.” (Levinas 1998: 123).

²⁵ Here, Levi-Strauss’ placement of time and continuity in cultural processes outside the agonistic subject—time thus ‘regained’—has disagreed with the nauseous temporality of authenticity Sartre proposes vis a vis nothingness (Sartre 1965; 1992) or the destined practico-inert shortfalling of institutions and organs (Sartre 2004), though a further dialogue with Merleau-Ponty might have generated an opening for temporality, a concern with how the structures of inequality are naturalized, or even buttressed in perception.

training routines boxers make time with; distant from the memory unfolding living-dead assemblages through each step.

Where Levi-Strauss writes that “classificatory systems belong to the levels of language: they are codes which, however well or badly made, aim always to make sense. The system of sacrifice, on the other hand, represents a private discourse wanting in good sense for all that it may frequently be pronounced” (Levi-Strauss 1968: 228).²⁶, he counterposes the seriation of myth, categorizations of nature and language to the correspondences of sacrifice, according sacrificial motion a fundamental irrationality.²⁷ Where sacrifice, for Levi-Strauss, is derivative of more perduring cultural prime-movers of language, myth, etc., ‘regaining time’ therefor involves positing a practical being composed from out of the tensions between linguistically assembled series—where the freedom of a distinct individual was, as Levi-Strauss repeatedly stated (e.g.

²⁶ Describing the cosmology forged through sacrifices between human and divinity in Ancient China, Michael Puett cites this same passage of Levi-Strauss, pointing out that the non-evolutionary logic of totemic classification, ‘the science of the concrete’, is largely absent across Eurasia (Puett 2002: 152-154). Following Puett’s concern with ritual practice, in Thailand, I propose that the logic of Thai boxing sacrifice enacts a degree of substitutional abstraction which, in the synthesis of ritual, distributes the concrete and ‘real’ to those around the ring.

²⁷Revising Levi-Strauss, Chris Roberts commends an altered structuralism with renewed ethnographic attention to ritual repetition as reflexivity: “Indeed, ignoring altogether the thread of ritual theorizing by such ‘Dark Durkheimians’ such as Robert Hertz, Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, each of whom took their lead from Mauss, Lévi-Strauss rejected the study of ritual in general and sacrifice in particular on the basis of an arbitrary, scientistically immaculate exclusion that he presented as a direct corollary of structuralist premises.” (Roberts 2011: 329). Rene Girard, also questioning the structuralist treatment of sacrifice, writes, “myth and ritual are treated quite differently by Levi-Strauss. Ritual is severely rebuked for entertaining artificial representations of something language cannot really express. In myth, the same representations are praised, at least implicitly, since we would not even know without them that the myth intends to distinguish certain objects.” (1976:404). Applying his mimetic theory, Girard also contrasts ideal-Christian political tendencies imposing transcendent ideologies via sacrifice to the Vedic Indian tradition, where Brahmins surreptitiously require sacrifices out of a perpetual rivalry that stages the conflict between gods and demons, and where sacrifice, concluding these rivalries, generates value in and of itself (2011: i-24). The plethora of Thai fighting-games—beetle-fighting, cockfighting, soccer—for gambling among Theravada Buddhist Thai men (men practicing a renouncer’s religion derived from these Vedic codes) might thus be interpreted as a preferable execution, once removed, of Vedic sacrifice via mirrored-conflict.

Levi-Strauss 2004: 72-75,82), superfluous to the ethnographic project of cultural contrast and categorization. Culture and value, within structures and naturalized series, and the tension of subjectivity upon which choice may be launched, inhabits dually proscribed tensions. For Levi-Strauss, unlike the unique historical Being Sartrean phenomenology considered moving out of a nauseous paralysis, “[s]tructures also existed in time; they, too, were historical. They were occasionally catalysts of change.” (Faubion 1993: 40). Actions immanent to contact, the loss and finitude heightened during sacrifice, are thus dispelled as superfluous and secondary processes by Levi-Strauss (also see Kapferer 2004: 52).

Working with the translation, when Levi-Strauss describes sacrifice as that “*private discourse wanting in good sense*”, this wording, rather than disparaging sacrifice in general, reads doubly, containing the kernel of a *wanting*—a lack.²⁸ Within the ‘wanting’ of composing sacrificial gesture across the Kantian passive, inert material base of a proper-structuralist project however, are the radical-empirical bearings with which to reconsider a duration for life in the Thai present. The privacy of sacrifice, the deprivations of its preparation, practice and training, the intimacies of its execution, are the motions around which Thai responsibility is renewed.

Kicks, punches, scars, the sweat-through-citrus-liniment generated in every clash of shins, forearms and shoulders eludes any full capture of its intimacy in the category of individual ‘experience’. As an admissibility of that violence which reverberates through the crowd and greater society, the asymmetry of the violent incursion of flesh into flesh puts the question of responsibility to any perduring social order, leaving spectators, trainers, boxers; all of those who are called to be more or less presently involved, to answer for or repress the incommensurability

²⁸ Though this lack effectively indicates a desire transpiring across the project of structural linguistics (see Derrida’s critique, [1967]1978: 278-294), where my consideration of Thai boxing’s cutting and damaging runs counter to spoken articulations, its limb to limb articulation is not necessarily an absolute disorder.

of the match's potentially bloody outcome—for consciousness and footing lost or gained there. That is, the traumatic, uncapturable aspect of the sacrificial act, as a negative mark upon the social body, sets a rhythm and pace for the organization of memory, and as equally, sets a space for the relative forgetting or disavowal of others among a 'self'. The organization of sacrifice, for 'the good' and sensible, the pace of the political world; of intersubjective interactions, is enfolded within the sacrificial violences of the ring. Equally, the undertaking of sacrificial movement, of destruction in the ring, requires a Thai boxer to constantly be involved in refining the (political) project of rearticulating the limits of sensation, mobility and receptivity.

Where for Levi-Strauss, occupied bodies often fall under the mute, silent, secondary order of non-linguistic expression,²⁹ Thai boxing places a larger share of sociocultural change, relative causality, relative nature/culture, givenness, responsibility/responsivity back within the jurisdiction of an expiring, finite corpus. This is not the recreation of a privileged Kantian subject, but rather an admission that articulation inhabits a significant aesthetic landscape beyond the formalized tensions of categorically correct language and mythic time—as in the exhalations and growls accompanying a series of kicks, repetitiously eradicating that discernable command-word uttered to begin training in the ring, expiring in new time.

When those kicks end in the ring, after the concrete scaffolding and corrugated tin at ringside stops ringing, those 'reverberations', of the expiring breath, the corporeal exhaustion,

²⁹ In criticizing Sartre, Levi-Strauss writes, "For it is striking that the situations which Sartre uses as a starting point for extracting the formal conditions of social reality — strikes, boxing matches, football matches, bus-stop queues — are all secondary incidentals of life in society; and they can not therefore serve to disclose its foundations." (Levi-Strauss, 1968: 250). Thai boxing shows though, that this in-formative potential—a matrix upon which the base of an ethical ground, collective and individual values might be attained—is drawn from out of the organization of these 'secondary incidentals'. These Thai communities channeling an abundance of life—the strong from each matriarchal village or region—in sacrificial debts undergird, in their corporeal remainders, a basis for articulate, aesthetic motion, for speech (for speakers and those held silent), hierarchy, category and difference.

the bloody elbows' incursion of flesh into flesh leave a negative trace with historically significant rhythm.

Therein, the Thai boxer becomes a violent-machinic³⁰ corporeality, composed to regain, to retake and remake 'time'. Where Levi-Strauss' delegates sacrificial matters a secondary place in the production of cultural meaning, held back from the primary tension he locates in myth, Thai boxing indexes historical material change through a transverse, planar continuity with a third other made present between fighters in the ring, or over time in practice, within the shared corporeality of the boxer. Taking practical action—i.e. Thai boxing—to be first and foremost sacrificial and memorable, stepping back from the nihilist-absurdist tee-totaling precipice of Sartrean existentialism, my theoretical touchstone in asserting this position has been the generative, 'porous' and 'pregnant' 'corporeity'³¹, an ontological fecundity of the non-Cartesian body suggested by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. With Merleau-Ponty, I take the 'body', in its overlapping of both subjective and objective capacities, to comprise a bundle of unresolved tensions, opening unto a world in the making of sense. In light of the exhaustive throw of each muay Thai kick, the gradual bruising and dulling of shin-nerves, this implies a historicizing 'body'³² composed of both living and dead tissue, open and closed allotments of

³⁰ For two anthropological examples of Deleuzian concepts applied to desire-laden, generative bodies, see Danny Hoffman's *War Machines: Young Men and Violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (2011) and Bruce Kapferer's *The Feast of the Sorcerer* (1997).

³¹ When Merleau-Ponty writes of the reversibility of sense and nonsense, flesh touched and touching, contradictions which open unto the generative capacities of a subject, he builds on Husserl's consideration of the 'interior horizon'. This horizon is "a new type of being, a being by porosity, pregnancy, or generality, and he before whom the horizon opens is caught up, included within it. His *body and the distances participate in one same corporeity* or visibility in general, which reigns beneath them and it, and even beyond the horizon, beneath his skin, unto the depths of being" (1968:149, italics mine). For Merleau-Ponty's description of dialectical motion, see the opening pages of the epilogue of *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1973).

³² Merleau-Ponty writes, "In every focusing movement my body unites present, past, and future, it secretes time, or rather it becomes that location in nature where, for the first time, events,

sensation. Thus, I favor the term corpus, corporeality, or corporeal capital, in reference to the Thai boxer's ~~body~~, corporeality indicating a concrete, historicizing mass extending unto the world in definite terms. The corporeal is generative of positionality in finite time, where the humanly other holds choice uniquely among living entities, demanding anew the anarchic address of ethical and political grounds amidst processes of destruction.

Along with the fall of the Thai communist party during the 1980's, Marxist analysis and methodological vantage points have been neglected or as in the past, outright suppressed in Thai social science (see Reynolds 1987; Tejapira 2001). Summarizing leftist threads in contemporary Thai historiography, Thongchai Winichakul notes, "more of the kind of history the academic left have done is needed even though it has become academic and without political mission" (Winichakul 1995: 107). This need to problematize what Winichakul points to as a 'Changing Landscape of the Past' (1995), is, given the intertwined positions of monarchy, oligarchy and marketplace in the censorship-prone Thai police-state, likely a much more difficult a task for native scholars. In recent decades, the growth of American cultural capital in Thailand—and perhaps, I would add, the omnipresent threat of lese majeste charges—have precipitated a shift in Thai scholarship toward Foucault's idea of discourse as a tool for examining power relations in Thai society (Wongyannava 2010).³³ While Foucauldian scholarship bypassed investigations of

instead of pushing each other into the realm of being, project round the present a double horizon of past and future and acquire a historical orientation. There is here indeed the summoning, but not the experience, of an eternal *natura naturans* [I translate this as an active, perhaps abundant, nature, opposed to a passive receptive, rationally inert ground of the Kantian-royal worldview]. My body takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present; it is not a thing, but creates time instead of submitting to it." (1962: 278-279).

³³ The constellation of Thai studies specialists gathered around a revisionary dialogue between Benedict Anderson and geographer/historian Thongchai Winichakul would be a critical exception to this trend (summarized in revised editions of Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (2006: 175), see also the more recent volume of essays responding to this 'imaginary', Tanabe (ed.) 2008), though the dialogue, through Anderson, focused on the imaginary, advances in media technology and the geographic cost thereof, often strays towards arenas of political theatre

how social class and inequality were carried everyday by the masses in favor of examining processes of behavioral normalization and state control in marginal institutions (on this critical lapse in general, see Zamora & Behrent 2016:157), bringing this description of Thai boxing into dialogue with Western Marxisms and critical continental philosophies concerned with life amidst a growing fascist, or efficient-economizing backdrop, is, if untimely, still in concert with human efforts to address a current limited time for life. Thai boxers, whose movements between Bangkok and Isan echo those of a population of itinerant labourers, address in dynamic motion the unequal position of an actor and her generation of a larger social totality. It is as an actor whose corpus expires across institutions that lay a claim to Thai persons' movements, that the Thai boxer redirects value in greater Thai society.

In his late work proscribing a critical social scientific methodology for appraising time, a rhythmanalysis, Henri Lefebvre suggests that the ascertainability of a periodicity of movement, the 'measure' thereof, relies upon the imposition and intersections of linear and cyclical times (2004: 6-8 especially). Any such position asks for an awareness of the 'work', the violence, the harnessing of attention required to sustain linear production, or equally, the suppressions required to assert the infallible regularity of cyclical, naturalized time—dawn, dusk, wakefulness, sleep. Upon these differences, the critically framed spacetimes of Lefebvre resonate with anthropologist Maurice Bloch's essay on sacrifice, which emphasizes the political control of human life in sacrificial rites. Dispelling ethnological depictions of an innately aggressive human nature, Bloch notes that "I do not base myself on some innate propensity to violence but argue that violence is itself a result of the attempt to create the transcendental in religion and politics." (1992: 7).

and national identity, perhaps at the expense of further delving into day to day practices buttressing structural inequalities.

Like the meditative Buddhist insistence on impermanence which asserts a nothing-instant repetitively,³⁴ like wilting flower petals, decarbonating sodas and molding bowls of rice left on concrete walkways in front of ancestral shrines (in Bangkok among migrants see Johnson 2012), like those decaying offerings tucked at the foot of family shrines in the back of the concrete manufacturing units we trained along, Lefebvre's manual for approaching a total rhythmic, dialectic measure of everyday life stresses that there is "[n]othing inert in the *world*, no things: [instead only] very divisive rhythms, slow or lively (in relation to *us*). " (Lefebvre 2004:17).

Where sensation accrues; where phenomenal perception and the constancy of human life are (in)formed in the thrum and throttle of fleeting objectivity; within a collective where the established sensory order collectively assembles a shared weight of immanence, things, issues, others, attain their given form, plasticity or concern, resolute from out of a heraclitean flux. Lefebvre writes, "Our sensations and perceptions, in full and continuous appearances, contain repetitive figures, concealing them. Thus, sounds, lights, colours and *objects*. *We contain* ourselves by concealing the diversity of our rhythms: to ourselves, body and flesh, *we are almost objects*. Not completely, however." (2004: 10).

This characterization of a temporarily contained self without termination in object state, enfolding, concealing its surrounding rhythms, an intersubjective holding never wholly given over to the singular subject, is of certain resonance with the Thai Theravada assertions of impermanent life: a fragility holding space through some relative repetition, an interruption among others that signals one's particular time of living among so many dead.

Engaging training on through unto the limits of exhaustion—holding new patterns, silences from out of the overwhelming noise—thus becomes crucial to my apprenticeship in Thai

³⁴ With Thai monastic meditation, any distraction from breathing, for example, involves a practice of making a repetitious command, "thinking, thinking, thinking" to interrupt distraction and bring the meditator back to task. (e.g. Cook 2010: 76-77).

violent contact and intersubjectivity. Despite our physiological and chronological-age differences, by spending my days sweating alongside Ou and his peers, I inhabited a certain urgency. The relative abruptness, the brilliance, strength and lightness of motion in the muay-Thai ring, feints and hesitations, ducks and staggered tip-toe steps, deliver an opening for permissible contact and corporeal damage—an organized violence—which should hopefully add an account of the corporeal management of temporal debts to an anthropological conversation attending to *time* (e.g. Bear 2016; Faubion 1993; Lee 2017 (on rhythmanalysis); Munn 1992).

In a geographical backwater tucked between empires, among populations eluding permanent political conscription (e.g. Scott 2010), exchanges with the realm of the deceased or foreign other are exchanges providing potent avenues for gaining longevity, political power, economic wealth or meaning amidst catastrophe. Along with my informants' consistent bows, pauses and genuflections among ancestral shrines, the ethnographic record includes numerous accounts of Southeast Asian ghosts presented among the living: Vietnam's unsettled wartime dead (Kwon 2008; 2014); Indonesian men and women who submit gifts to unsettled ancestors in 'spirit-debt' (Langford 2009), Thailand's unhappy ghosts of family strife (e.g. Mills 1995), or those recurrent victims of politically motivated massacres carried out in Bangkok (see Haberkorn 2017; Klima 2002; 2006; Winichakul 2002). This widespread regional spectrality lends itself to a Marxian/Benjaminian approach to historiography and event, where monsters, ghosts, zombies and aliens (foreigners) collide (consider Johnson 2012; Klima 2002) to inform action at present. Where these ghosts of the past weigh, as Marx would have it, 'like a nightmare upon the brains of the living'³⁵, their exhumation in discourse less rarely manages to surmise positions for their persistence, or relative periodicity among the dynamic movements of the living.

³⁵ This phrase, is taken from Marx's study of recurrence in revolutionary Europe—the 1848 French Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte ([1852] 1998) which borrows prior revolutionary French and Roman symbols, in lines written as, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as

On the other hand, the Theravada Thai impermanent non-self (e.g. see Webster 2005; Collins 1982), always becoming foreign other (i.e. flowing toward the minor-political, as in stranger kin(g)ship), shares certain resonances with the becoming-minor political deterritorializing subjects conceptualized in the work of Gilles Deleuze (w/ Felix Guattari).³⁶ Therein, a subject is never fixed³⁷, but like Deleuze's concept of the Body Without Organs suggests, flows³⁸ desirously from patron to patron. Deleuze suggests that the empirical accumulation of affects in sensation is not a detour of will power. Rather, the articulation of certain qualitative sensations as categorical and sensible (as liable to register historical changes), involve a layering of qualities made concrete to value in repetition. Accordingly, a limb's motion is not the resultant of any singular force, but instead grasps, flickers outwards, a precipice-key

they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." Marx's premise indicates a semiotic cultural regime one part 'borrowing' of materiality, and another given unto slippage in repetition; a semantic exhaustion opening the door for the material weight of history to recur: a 'borrowing' from the past with interest, at a rate of return tied to the memorialization of the dead.

³⁶ The flow-state of beings-becoming already surfaces in Husserl's language regarding the lifeworld, at least as translated: "What becomes, in this life, is the person himself. His being is forever becoming; and in the correlation of individual-personal and communal-personal being this is true of both, i.e. of the [individual] man and of unified human civilizations." (Husserl ([1938]1970: 338). By bringing Thai boxing into dialogue within a tension between a local Thai rationale-radical empiricism reordering sensibility and a certain material-dialectical phenomenology, the relative order of reused things and people in the boxers' daily purview gain new traction within a local history of violence.

³⁷ In considering movement across Thai contested, often reincarnated temporal orders, Gilles Deleuze's serialized, playful commentary on the Logic of Sense ([1969] 1990; in particular, the 'Sixth series on Serialization' regarding incidents of signification; Appendix on Klossowski/Nietzsche; p123 on Husserl) provides assistance.

³⁸ In a work discussing the frenetic-brushstroke images of British figurative painter Frances Bacon, Deleuze clarifies the concept of a body without organs (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1987:149-166): "The body without organs is opposed less to organs than to that organization of organs we call an organism. It is an intense and intensive body. It is traversed by a wave that traces levels or thresholds in the body according to the variations of its amplitude." ([1981]2002:44-45, also on cruelty.) It is from within this 'intensity', as the libidinous Deleuze and Guattarian project of Anti-Oedipus (2003) suggests, that historical inequalities reside or may be altered.

from a selection of crumbling or rapid monumental series or archival recurrences in open historicity, temporal conditions where subjectivity must be held, cared, acknowledged as being in passing.

The wholesale endorsement of such a nominal radical empiricism though seems to very rarely factor in the costs of translation, transformation and transmission of beings from one state to another—becomings, as celebrated affects, may not necessarily attain reference to a dynamic totality, appraising relationality as particularity without reference to a general apparatus. Considering Thai boxers however, whom each mirror their matched ‘other’ opponent briefly, scars, bruises and minor concussions stand between the winner and loser—each is made different, though bound by the violent transformations internal to their events. As with the match’s divisive strikes, at risk of stating the obvious in other words, living Thai agents, once dead, become so irrevocably, losing a certain potential agency. Ignoring the structuring violence which produces them as such, only to portray a flow-state of relationality, effectively risks truncating description prior to historicity.

I have largely bracketed the question of how the living and dead are treated or remembered except insofar as it becomes a matter of practice. At stake in the commensuration of the treatment of the dead portrayed by these theoretical positions is a refiguring of the relative degree of cruelty and responsibility accorded a sovereign Thai actor at present. At stake as well, is a fleeting position from which to articulate historical volatility and inequality in Thailand’s hypercapitalist present; ethical grounds upon which to find duration for other lives amidst junta-borne discourses of ‘happiness’ and civilized progress.

An earlier generation of Thailand-based ethnographers had foregrounded questions of how social inequality and hierarchy perdures in Thai society (e.g. Embree 1950; Hanks 1962; Tambiah 1976; Keyes et al. 1975; Keyes 2014; Kirsch 1973)—a concern echoed in the framing

of political-scientific discourse surrounding recurrent Thai coups and power struggles (e.g. Baker 2016; Glassman 2010; Hewison 2014; McCargo 2005; Sopranzetti 2014). The description of Thai boxing that follows gives a practical account of the footing upon which Thai structural inequalities persist or fold. The subsequent phenomenological/dialectical description will explore, with Ou, how Thai boxers in general repeatedly instantiate a quality of strength and vigor (*raeng*, ๑๕๓) among the repetitive tasks and things present in their world. Where I began this research as an exegesis of muay-Thai practice in the mode of other practice-based ethnographers engaged in the martial arts (e.g. Alter 1992; Boretz 2011; Downey 2002, 2005; Samudra 2008, Valiani 2010; Wacquant 2004; Zarilli 1998), the staggering, exhaustive pace of participation in Thailand moved me to reflect on the more specific (s)paces of living and dead Thai boxers from Isan must negotiate while accumulating strength.³⁹

A compliment given to each strikingly authentic technical innovation, each articulate ‘ability’, each spectacular win in the ring, are those dozens, hundreds of other opponents fallen away, those which remain, the inarticulate, silent and lost components of praxis (i.e. Marx’s position)—those cruelly enjoyed and consumed by each sovereign individual (see Nietzsche [1887] 1967; Deleuze 1968:165-166; Derrida [1999]2008:113-116)). Understanding more clearly how this memory transpires, and how sovereign movement unfolds, requires a composite picture of the Thai baseline composition of historical materiality/sensory order, or:

³⁹ It is this explication of Thai boxers as people with a highly developed, locally informed sense of hesitation-striking-timing and openings for change which may prove ‘useful’ in understanding the revolutionary mechanisms in Thai historical events, as well as in moving a theory of subjectivity amidst the critical impasses of radical empiricism, American pragmatism and a phantasmagoric Marxism or a contemporary phenomenological purchase in realism (e.g. Dreyfus & Taylor 2015; Dreyfus & Spinoza 1999), magical or otherwise. Where the acquiescence unto both magic or realism rescinds the generative contradictions and tensions of a hermeneutic corporeality, with Thai boxers, I choose, rather than an anxiousness over the ontological validity of impending contact, a steadfastness in choosing thrownness through debts in time.

The Thai Economy of Sacrificial Motion, Stillness and Merit

In interpretive anthropologist Clifford Geertz's application of phenomenologist Alfred Schutz's reworking of the Husserlian concept of "lifeworld"⁴⁰ unto *Person, Time and Conduct in Bali* (1973:360-411), the experience of Balinese lifetime, as predecessors, contemporaries-consociates, and successors, passes through a nexus of religious-political calendars producing the status of a person. Associations in such a 'lifeworld' gain a lived, phenomenological dimension under the overarching guidance of their commanding intersubjectivity as textuality.⁴¹

Before relating the Balinese passage of time with festival calendars, Geertz makes his goal explicit:

“What is needed is some systematic, rather than merely literary or impressionistic, way to discover what is given, what the conceptual structure embodied in the symbolic forms through which persons are perceived actually is. What we want and do not yet have is a developed method of describing and analyzing the meaningful structure of experience (here, the experience of persons) as it is apprehended by representative members of a

⁴⁰ The lifeworld, introduced by Edmund Husserl, approximates a pre-objective, and multiplicitous subject's having of world—a consciousness co-founded in both 'I' and 'we' (Husserl 1970:107-110), or of being composed through collective, inter-subjective interactions.

⁴¹ Much of Schutz's Weberian phenomenology rests upon the composition of a semiotically composed self retaining motion through a primary tension between an 'idealized', authentic counterpoint to a 'real' (e.g. Schutz 1967), stressing a particular dimension of Nietzsche's oeuvre—the ideal and charismatic archetype. A different conception of 'self' emerges when the exhumation of cultural value is considered vis a vis a reading of the Nietzschean philosophy of credit-debt and life. There, the flagrant enjoyments of flesh-rending excess in festivals are the underpinnings of a modern, countable and counting person (see [1887]1967). Where a Marxian dialectic of revolution has its beginnings in primordial expropriations of land and tortures, the Nietzschean residence for suffering in an exposition of credit implies an additional temporal dimension for revolution in practice—a return, or waiting on repayment of the terms of life and death. Reading with this Nietzsche tempers a Weberian approach to Thai social order (as with Tambiah 1973, who opposes Weber's dismissal of Buddhism as unentangled with an economizing world-building ethic, pace Protestantism). I suggest a quotidian corporeal economy shot through with historical debts—the economy of Thai boxing—feeds the carnal underbelly of any purportedly charismatic structure. Relative reason and rationale in the constitution of Thai merit's distribution installs hierarchy and builds structure not through the esoteric management of ritual, but precisely through the ongoing expenditure of expendable corps in sacrifice, a violence that necessitates the silences which buttress the local political-religious system.

particular society at a particular point in time—in a word, a scientific phenomenology of culture.” (Geertz 1973: 364)

While this project shares the interpretive moment’s aspiration for a systematic, scientific phenomenology of culture, a phenomenology of Thai (boxing’s) culture, as a description of the continuities between individual perceptions and larger structural violences, requires an additional dimension (of loss, of forgetting, of sacrifice) to be included analytically in the dynamic of life-experience. This immanent destructive contact demands an updated concept of ‘embodiment’—i.e. the somatic mode Csordas contrasted to Geertz’s hermeneutic (Csordas 1993:136) must be folded again onto present conditions⁴²—for a finite, precarious Thai subjectivity. Thai boxing locates a subjectivity given in a present disclosed in sovereign movement that becomes sacrificial unto the production of qualities.

From the violence of contact, those sacrificed become drivers of value within a corporeal economy, exhaling, snarling across a horizon of generalized exchange. The acute strength of the boxer describes a variation on phenomenological operations of a ‘lifeworld’, an arena where choice (and nature) are keyed especially to the terms of finitude/mortality. In this ‘deathworld’, Thai boxers’ management of the tension between stillness and decisive action uncovers new relations, status’ and abilities. The active management of time in the ring implicates a ‘deathworld’⁴³, where choice is engendered through an opening of one’s finitude and mortality in hesitations, embracing a decay unto further association and growth.

⁴² In the hermeneutic for open human meaning running through anthropology’s interpretive moment (‘70s) reanimated within the phenomenological take on ‘embodiment’ cresting in the ‘90s, a problem resurfaces now, where cases of timing and skill in open time are frequently privy to the impositions of a larger global pattern of structural violence (e.g. Ortner 2016), ecological and historical collapse. We are frequently challenged, under these conditions, to express motion and life as being otherwise than anxious.

⁴³ The term *deathworld* has been coined in philosopher Edith Wyschograd’s meditations upon modern consciousness marked by the possibility of mutually assured destruction and the hauntings of mass-death—i.e. concentration camps and atomic bombs (1990). Ironically, my

This sacrificial movement and perceptual acuity (the nearly somatic-affective mode of local practitioners neither wholly occupying subjective or object states) reverberates through the local hermeneutic order (generations of soteriological masculinity, institutionalized esoterism, political silences, virulent nationalism), though this model for ‘new’ motion is fostered in the negative-relief, or resting beats, between structural orders—the transcendental and cyclical times imposed by predominantly articulate Thai institutions. This arraignment of movement and memory immanent to corporeality is implicated in the act of balancing these accounts: the upright balance and stillness the Thai boxer presences within the chaos of a match is the very expression of a motility exceeding that account reserved for outstanding creditors upon living mobility—creditors being those (i.e. the king, monks, police) who are rarely required to initiate movement. Curating favor within this order of motion, in the ring, involves this certain *balance*. The Thai boxing ring is *the* place to make this summation of balanced, still motion and permissible destruction present. Maintaining a consistent place where one of two strong people will be taken down to the ground, the muay Thai stadium cuts through and goes beyond the jurisdiction of the Thai force of law unto that of:

Thai (Temporary) Sovereignty in the Balance

On January 21, 2013, in the face of anti-government protests gathering in Bangkok’s major intersections, the Thai Center for the Administration of Peace and Order orders that no more than five people may gather in a public space at any one time.

flight into computer-based-technology to verify any co-incidence of the term proved circuitous, the electronic googleplex returning me to my bookshelf, only an arm’s length behind me, and Edith Wyschogrod’s work on the ontological condition of a world historical moment of assured mass-death. In a section titled ‘*the end of the life-world*’, she describes “the creation of death-worlds, a new and unique form of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life simulating imagined conditions of death, conferring upon their inhabitants the status of the living dead.” (1990:15).

A week later, celebrating Chinese New Years' Festivals, I found myself, along with most regular supporters of our boxing camp, amongst a large crowd gathered on a Bangkok roadway closed off for an evening-long boxing tournament. The matches would continue late into the night, with vendors spread out along the center of the closed roadway and with the ringside crowd extending, thinning into groups of pedestrians sauntering down the block, browsing the clothes, snacks and toys displayed for sale. Arriving in the afternoon, we had parked Wai's truck several blocks away, and I walked alongside one of the youngest boxers' fathers, carrying bamboo mats which will partition a small space within the crowd for our boxers' rests and massages before their matches. "We had muay-Thai when I was young, but it was not like *now*." Aek's father says to me. He rocks, rotund with each step—Aek, though twelve, is almost his height already, but not nearly a third of his weight.

"Like now?"

"Busy, with so many people. The money..." Aek's father gestured up the road, towards the multitudes gathering in the intersection. "There's lots of money..."

A few hours into the wailing din of the afternoon's matches, I feel Aek's father tap my hip, pulling me out of the crowd by the elbow and dragging me blocks down the sidewalk to a noodle-shop. On the way, he insists the meal is so great, that when we arrive, he simply orders over the server's counter on my behalf and then, to my disappointment, leaves me to eat alone—perched on a plastic stool over one half of a rickety metal table, facing an empty chair, faded calendars and Chinese money-traps covering the back walls of the restaurant, listening to footsteps on the sidewalk and puttering engines in the street at my back.

The soup arrived in a murk of broth. It is pork, but seemingly all gristle and fat, a mish-mash of cartilaginous joints sunken in the grey stock around a scant few, thin noodles.

The tournament continued all that night, outdoors. In the late hours, when the closed-off street is illuminated at center by the rows of hawking vendors' fluorescent bulbs, Aek and his father return from walking with a purchase: a long sleeved, black vinyl "Chelsea Football Club" jacket Aek wears daily thereafter. After finally returning to camp in darkness, I am told that I had forgotten to bring back the bamboo mat we had spread on the ground within the crowd.

Evidently, clashes between Thai boxers required a space for rest and gathering on/of the concrete well outside of the formulae of Thai political theatre—the crowd had been far more than five at that tournament, and would be so again, fathers, trainers and mangers gambling around every match.

The public place of the Thai boxer is not properly exempt from political decrees or military force—military-men, an industrial-oligarchic infrastructure perform their responsibility for the proceedings, a sacrificial gesture to assume legitimate paternity over the delegation of life and death (cf. Jay 1992). These Thai military matchmakers organize so many of the bouts, particularly those associated with Lumpinee stadium. However, the pace and abruptness of motion that unfurls within the ring, and those small concentrations of gesture, the hic-cups of ribs in slipping training each day, the cumulative hesitations around each limb's impact and reception—these affective movements directly revivify the entire Thai sovereign apparatus. There is an intimacy between the balanced movement of muay-Thai and Thai political, sovereign freedoms:

To illustrate this sovereign connection by way of example, another muay-Thai/martial arts enthusiast, foreign (American) boxer Mark Sawyer, describes a period of training in Thailand which culminated in a match being arranged for him within Bangkok's Klong Phem prison. Inmates there were said to have the opportunity of attaining 'freedom' or reduced

sentences by winning boxing matches. He recounts being escorted into Klong Phem as opponent for a Thai boxer-prisoner:

“And the whole edifice of the prison kind of has an element of intimidation to it that I’m sure is intentional by design. I mean, you walk about 100 meters to where the courtyard is where we were going to have the press conference through this, like, chain-link tunnel where there’s a whole row of about 100 new arrivals who are kind of being broken in, who were in kind of a squat position and manacled, who were not allowed to take their eyes off the concrete. And so I’m walking by this row of prisoners. And then just one guy with a full face of gang tattoos breaks from staring at the concrete and kind of looks up at me and stares daggers at me with his eyes. And that definitely, you know, contributed to the ambience” (NPR, Sept. 4, 2015).⁴⁴

As telling as the local equation of Thai boxing skill becomes with sovereign freedom, where prisoners’ skills may overturn the sentencing of the state-incarceral apparatus, Sawyer’s description of practices of shackling recently imprisoned inmates is equally revealing of the bonds used to make stillness and *immobility*, inscribing a positionality to subjects—to those ‘*not allowed to take their eyes off the concrete*’.

Since May 2014, the torture techniques used by Junta troops on dissenters, academics and journalists, in the months following my fieldwork, alternate between forcibly disappearing or alternately immobilizing victims. Tactics include burying captives up to their necks in the ground,⁴⁵ drowning, electroshock and blindfoldings (see also Haberkorn 2018). Overall, the military regime attempts to extract truth, right or good by not just holding a person against their will, but by demobilizing, shackling or restricting limbs; holding the body of the condemned in place for unspecified, undocumented and unverifiable durations—the unknown duration itself becoming a large part of the discomfort, or the effectiveness of torture.

⁴⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2014/07/11/330681652/brokedown-boxing>, accessed September 9, 2015.

⁴⁵ <https://prachatai.com/english/node/5825>, accessed September 18, 2018.

This element of controlled stillness and balance as an aesthetic avenue to power is echoed on stage during times of festival. Though largely discounted as unverifiable armchair ethnology, as a document attempting cross-cultural comparison, and thus, scientific thought (see Willerslev 2011), James Frazer's *Golden Bough* relates Siamese efforts at regenerating the natural world through divine sacrificial acts, where "the temporary king stands leaning against a tree with his right foot resting on his left knee. From standing thus on one foot he is popularly known as King Hop; ... [in] another ceremony where he personates the king ... [t]he time during which the Lord of the Heavenly Hosts has to stand on one foot is about three hours. ... If he lets his foot down 'he is liable to forfeit his property and have his family enslaved by the king; as it is believed to be a bad omen, portending destruction to the state, and instability to the throne.'" (Frazer [1922]1998: 343).

More recently, with the decline in health of King Bhumibol, Thai monarch from 1946 until his death during 2016, the then Thai prince, now Thai King Vajiralongkorn, also accrued a reputation for irresponsible exercise of authority, excising commoner wives, and according to rumor, willfully infecting his partners with HIV, boarding diplomatic airline-flights unceremoniously displaying yakuza-styled tattoos and crop-tops, and fraternizing with military cronies (to the point of being himself easily manipulated). In the waning days of his father's life, where demonstration of a mastery of public infrastructure and concern was required, it was abundantly appropriate that the Prince mount a cyclical vehicle to demonstrate the naturalization of a fearsome Thai war machine within his domain: a bicycle. With Vajiralongkorn balanced in the saddle, riding a two-wheeled bicycle through closed-off Bangkok streets,⁴⁶ the Prince deftly cut a linear-machinic line between himself and eerily sustainable urban modernization. Sengers

⁴⁶ <https://www.newmandala.org/dog-v-dog-theatrics-of-the-thai-interregnum/> , accessed October 23, 2018.

(2017) notes that in Bangkok, the bicycle is fast becoming emblematic of a futuristic urban imaginary.⁴⁷ Vajiralongkorn, now king, was then balanced in the public eye, pedaling into an association with his father's eternal 'sufficiency economy'. The former King Bhumibol, installed after the probable assassination of his elder brother in 1946 (see Handley 2006:4), was in his old age a 'revered' patriarch (where public dissent would be nearly impossible—on one recent exception indicating a groundswell of 2010 protestors seeking democracy before paternalism, see Marshall 2015:14-18), creating associations with the cyclical regeneration of nature and eternal sustenance for the Thai citizen, exemplified by the 'sufficiency economy' he designed.⁴⁸

Bhumibol's hands in public, moving off the uncriticizably magisterial, 'authentic' quality of his jazz trumpet, and onto the bowed heads of rural villagers, leaves an economic-agrarian trace of timelessness with 'sufficiency' in the late stages of his lifetime—the promise that natural order of dirt, water and rice would outlive military power squabbles as much as urban decay. Eli Elinoff points out that, "because notions of sufficiency are now ubiquitous in Thai development policies, they have become essential to defining the binds and possibilities of citizenship, particularly in poor communities." (Elinoff 2014:90). Meaning that those who demonstrate the work of a dedicated lifetime within the king's version of a self-regenerating natural cycle stand to gain the status of revered citizens. This discourse of sufficiency economy harnessed to

⁴⁷ The ubiquitous Thai motorcycle-taxi, perhaps, zipping between locked vehicular traffic, occupies another war-machinic vector for balancing power in the streetwise navigation of political life (cf. Sopranzetti's ethnography of Bangkok's motorcycle taxi-drivers (2017)).

⁴⁸ Spotlighting the King's Sufficiency Economy in the 50th year of his reign, a publication put together by the Royal Projects Development Board, read between the lines, gives indirect evidence of both the fear/impossibility of dissent, and also the bureaucratic appropriation of kingly speech and authority. The text, by name, authorless but for a collective 'advisory board', includes statements such as "Technical experts often have found that His Majesty's ways to solve problems are so simple that nobody has thought of them before." (1997:12) ... "*At present, problems caused by droughts have been reduced through the efforts of his His Majesty the King and his Royal Rain Initiative. They are one more sign of kindness and concern shown by His Majesty through such Initiatives for the lives and problems of his people.*" (1997: 95).

citizenship in turn can not encompass those others who do not reinforce cyclical timing exemplified by royalty; those, like Thai boxers, who, in holding a foot or knee up, may temporarily redirect the sovereign balance.

Stillness, Theravada Buddhist Cosmology and Human Sacrifice

A knack for extending stillness in balance, superimposing a shining symmetry over the decay of moving, faltering entities, relationality through a mortified stalemate, is imperative to the bearing of subjects-objects-nonbodies in Thai public spacetime. Whether this be in the unharnessed steps of construction workers several stories above the Bangkok concrete, a monk holding his meditative posture beneath a buzzing fly, the temporary King of festivals, protests or royalist processions, each requires a stable, balanced corpus amidst an economy of motion. Therein, people grow and live amidst admonishments to consistently pay accreditations to higher powers with their every living step—bows, crouches, kneeling, pausing, waiting, admitting a distant pounding rhythm of decay in one’s bones: tissue held compact through calluses and bruising.

This preference for finding time in death’s stillness—time being the terms for taking credit for others’ motions—is cultivated in contemporary Buddhist meditation communities (e.g. Cook 2010; Klima 2002), and equally promoted in the enduring texts of orthodox Theravada Buddhism. The ‘exemplary stillness of the religious virtuoso’, as Christine Gray phrases it (1991:43), reflects a cosmology upheld through the ritual enactment of learned men’s extra-terrestrial leanings. In royal rituals, an economy of detachment and measured disinterest, glances or steps delegated by those in higher social standing (the king, monks), demonstrate the enlightened state of a being “more capable of seeing past the illusory face of men and events than are the ritual audience. In contrast, the ritual audience is placed outside the temple, literally

and figuratively far from *dhamma*” (Gray 1991: 48). Defining *dhamma* as the truthful teaching of Buddha conveying cosmic order, speech ‘about’ the meritorious speech employed in ritual maneuvers (which was not a volunteered topic of discussion among my informants), on the other hand, are speech acts which may upset the tiers of this order, betraying envy, anger or a non-meritorious state.⁴⁹ For those masses outside the immediacy of the speaking officiant then, an economy of images (cf. Jackson 2004, 2004b) and silence, reverie in decaying materiality over the scattering of words, uphold a cosmic order and separation between beings which extends to social structure. Words which when used by hierarchically assembled actors such as the king, a father, an elder monk, communicate meaning on a need-to-know basis only. For those outside the enlightened order, rituals remain efficacious, emitting merit, as images—shining, conveying a relation to truth and cosmic order. For purposes here, Gray’s crucial insight is that men of lesser merit or status may not know the intention, insight or truths those of higher merit have (see 1991: 45-50). A discoursing on the speech-acts of the higher realm would itself decelerate the accrual of merit. (Correspondingly, living under this dictum, a gestural economy attains increased importance—especially gestures which transgress or reset the axiom of silence and stillness, for a moment—i.e. Thai boxing.) This patriarchal upholding of aesthetic structure, and the bonding of ensconced speech or written words to acts to power—like unread scrolls locked away by generations of caretaking monks in temples (see McDaniel 2008)—is controlled expertly in royal-monastic ceremony. The corpse and torture ridden, otherwise gory imagery of

⁴⁹ In her description of royal Thai Theravada Buddhist ritual, Gray describes the access to different times stratified actors arranged around ritual frames enjoy: “The placement of lay participants by ritual owners also signals the relative time periods within which men are capable of properly interpreting events, i.e., of telling the truth. The men at the centre of the performance may speak truly of relatively long temporal stretches, past and future, whereas ordinary men may speak only of the immediate present, that which they have 'seen with their own eyes' and can therefore 'know for sure'. All else is guesswork, rumour, gossip and other types of careless talk that characterize the beasts and beings of the lower levels of the Buddhist cosmos, including men who must work for a living.” (Gray 1991: 48).

orthodox Theravada Buddhist sermons (e.g. Lithai/Reynolds 1982; Anderson 2012; Klima 2002) evidence those levels of corporeal deprivation equally locked away from the articulate sensory order, that which may be considered the hermeneutic remainder complimenting a field of structured gestures and hierarchical silences—violences which shared, separate Thai men.

A reading from the Theravada Buddhist orthodox cosmology dictated to attending monks from the Sukhothai throne during the mid-fourteenth century by royal Phya Lithai, King Ruang, describes a deeply vertical, hierarchical world split into three primary levels and thirty-one distinct realms: 11 lowly “Worlds of Desire”, the fifth of which is the terrestrial ‘realm of men’, above the hells of inarticulate animals, suffering ghosts and *asura* [*a lowly anti-god*]. Above these earthly terrestrial grounds are 16 *Worlds with only a Remnant of Material Factors*, and 4 higher *Worlds Without Material Factors*, indicating tiers to ascend when escaping being reborn into a cycle of forms, bodies and decay in time [the mortality that is our historicity]. One of the sixteen worlds with only a remnant of material factors are populated by ‘brahma without perception’ who “are like golden images that have been newly polished by an artisan”, who upon dying while standing “remain without quivering and without making the slightest movement with their bodies; not even the eyes of the *brahma* blink or look during their entire lifetime”, who sit in spacious castles with gems and flowers that “never wither, never die, and never fall off”, with fragrances which “never fade” (Lithai/Reynolds 1982: 249).

Among the 16 Worlds with only a Remnant of Material Factors, the level where brahma reside without perception require fewer material ties (Lithai/Reynolds 1982: 255). The brahma without perception are especially inert, composed without articulations and differentiation⁵⁰,

⁵⁰ The text reads: “Only the brahma who live at the level of those who are without perception have a form that is motionless and does not quiver; the *brahma* at all other fifteen levels have some movement and quivering. They have eyes and see; they have ears and hear; they have noses that breathe in and out but cannot smell either good fragrances or bad odors; and they have tongues that speak and converse, but do not taste sour tastes, sweet tastes, spicy tastes, bland

being reborn without the vitalities in sensory organs which allow brahma on neighboring tiers to move in the absence of sensual desire (1982: 254-255). Devoid of organs, impenetrable and beyond desire, the brahma is precisely not outside of time, but encapsulates all other tiers of being in undifferentiated access, through its non-articulate stillness.

With this imperative for stillness overcoming sensual desire, descriptions of the lower realms' rotting subjects echo contemporary monastic mediations imputing a distaste and mistrust for the 'body', which is in turns compared to an anthill, abscess, or prison (Collins 2000: 191; cf. Klima 2002; Jackson 2004: 191-192; Dissanayake 1993: 126-127). In the lowly worlds of 'desire', awareness narrowly focused on the body's suffering effectively condemns lower beings to an expansive time of kinetic repetitions. The sermons' repeated descriptions of the anguish lowly suffering beings must endure time and again over time—impalings, burnings, self-cannibalism, hungry ghosts' pin-prick small mouths and distended stomachs (see Lithai/Reynolds 1976: 205-206; Tambiah 1976: 38⁵¹)—in historical context, alongside public

tastes and salty tastes. The flesh and skin of these brahma, even if a hand hits it, does not feel pain. These brahma never eat or drink at any time, but only practice jhanic attainments by themselves; and they do not enjoy having contacts with others.

The faces and bodies of these brahma are smooth and very beautiful, and are a thousand times brighter than the moon and the sun; ... The bodies of these brahma are very beautiful indeed; their knees, elbows and other joints are rounded and very beautiful, and the points of connection cannot be seen. These brahma never realize that their bodies have any limbs at all, and they do not have any dirty excrement." (Lithai/Reynolds 1982: 251). In this Thai cosmology, the exponential 'opening' of time is paralleled by a depletion of articulation or differentiation. Articulate joints, the waste of consumption/production all vanish. Perception—smell, taste and tactile sensation—in the suspension of time, becomes negligible. The golden statues distributed in shrines or temples behind the sermon's orators threaten this timeless immateriality, where the ethical constitution of the incarnate's mobility distributed—a mass of fellow human beings—might easily be dismissed, and suffering ignored in pursuit of a 'world without form' (also see Swearer 2010:101), or in other words, a world without finite responsibility or historical material.

⁵¹ Tambiah also summarizes the lower worlds of men, animals, ghosts and demons in King Ruang's cosmology (1970: 35-41; also 1984b). He recounts demons, which include "the ghosts of dead humans who ... are condemned to live in a kind of hell or may wander about on earth, haunting the places they formerly lived in. Although in themselves not harmful to man, their appearance and attributes are disgusting. They are of gigantic size, they have dried up limbs,

executions and the organization of war-parties, constitute a political threat. The repetitious tortures and disjunctive corporeality connote the flesh-rending powers of King Ruang in a time when raiding rulers throughout the Mekong valley often achieved more permanent rule through intimidation and torture of captured subjects (e.g. Marshall 2015: 50-54), and Lithai himself was a ‘prince with a mission’ to revitalize Buddhism, literally making casts of himself as a future Buddha (see Tambiah 1984b: 79), materializing the conspicuous goods to expand his kingdom. Lithai’s enduring description of paradise and hell is not simply a religious text, but in context, also a political decree, in underhanded terms, describing the threat of tortures its orator might visit upon those uncivilized opponents of the Sukhothai regime. Records of female courtiers as young as 8 years old, accused of stealing from the queen, who, among other dismemberments, are forced to eat their own flesh (Marshall 2015: p.53), the burials of commoner-pregnant women under Bangkok municipal statues, towers and monoliths (McCargo 2015: 120-125; Klima 2002:174; Terwiel 1978; Van Vliet [1638]2005:114-115), or even at present, the homunculus-like, on-site reenactment of crimes accused prisoners are asked to recreate for Thai national media (e.g. Haanstad 2008: 157-161 especially; for a similar phenomena in China, see Fiskejo 2017), leave distributed, repetitious, de-intentionalized, de-natured bodies—often female—strewn throughout the Thai historical record of justice, the cessation of their lives and intentions being of an order against ‘natural’ (matriarchal) growth.⁵² At any moment, like the

loose skin, enormous bellies. They continually wander about, consumed with hunger and thirst, yet are never able to eat or drink because of their small mouths, constricted throats and the scorching, boiling heat that emanates from their bodies” (1970: 38-39). Also see Mills (1995) on Thailand’s hungry widow-ghosts.

⁵² A notable cross-cultural comparison may be drawn with the ethnographic work of Lisa Malkki, who documents how Hutu media accounts of Tutsi people prior to their slaughter in the Rwandan genocide frequently depicted Hutu’s as monstrously transgressing the natural order by forcing upon prisoners the cannibalization of children or pregnant women, generating an incommensurably traumatic affect in Tutsi readers and listeners (1995). Analogously, with despotic practices of torture in Thailand, and their circulation in discourse, historiography and

off-beat in a northeastern Thai *mor-lam* concert, the dance of the living may crash, uncannily, into a state of death, a brief (perhaps regenerative) interruption upon the pace of forward-central-capital growth. These so many denatured bodies leave a repetitious trauma across the record of Thai public life, interrupting the hermeneutic composition of a sovereign Thai subject with a sense of the uncanny recomposed, marked in the carriage of the living.

To be of value and demonstrate mobility, one must live in exchange across this traditional order of stillness, where relative levels of corporeal (in)dependence, and a range of powers from demonic to divine, are accessed by inhabiting practical durations outside that occupied by humanity. Historian Craig Reynolds' summary of King Ruang's enduringly popular cosmology condenses an insight applicable to understanding the local terms historical duration in these contexts:

“The duration of an existence lengthens as one proceeds away from the center with the *brahma* deities and the damned destined to live for eons—the former in a state of tranquility, the latter in a state of torment and suffering. If one could propel oneself through this cosmos from the terrestrial level, one would find that distance, as well as time, telescopes. The levels nearest to that of mankind are measurable in comprehensible numbers; the farthest distances are incalculable.” (Reynolds 2006: 163).

Expanded duration is accomplished through a stillness which heightens the indeterminacy of time's passing. To draw upon powers of association with entities on tiers of higher or lower merit is to become engaged with someone or something, only to find one's surroundings outside that arresting temporal-relation to have suddenly been given over to rot and decay—to have had time's passing thus relatively naturalized.

For comparison, Ernst Kantorowicz describes a model of sovereign power in the western world composed of *The King's Two Bodies*, earthly and divine ([1957]1997). Kantorowicz posits

myth, the arrangement of inconsolable pain transgressing nature's order of growth—i.e. the cannibalizing of youth, host or matriarchy—inversely imposes, over time, the omnipresent threat of uncategorizable, wholly-altern violence within a duly subdued Thai popular imaginary.

a transcendental pathway for a suffering subject to exemplify the processes of coming into sovereign power, illustrated by ‘the man-centered Kingship’ of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (Kantorowicz [1957] 1997: 451-506). The vertical distribution of pleasure-suffering, and Dante’s narration of an ascension to a realm determining powers over life and death, receives its sacrificial compliment in a direct, priestly, uninterrupted line; an equivalence between victim-executioner—a vertical line expressing the divine authority of sacrificial violence. (In functional terms, this is the sacrifice analyzed by Hubert and Mauss ([1898]1964). Dante’s divine cosmology stands only insofar as is held together with a transcendent sovereign, where the king’s two bodies, human and divine, indicate an absolute line of judgment and separation between worldly and heavenly realms. In contrast to this unilineal ascent between suffering and pleasure in Dante’s cosmology, the telescoping time of King Ruang’s cosmology invokes a corpus which achieves broader power by becoming distributed—processes of abject sensory decay, interment and collapse are not to be transcended, but sunken into, tarried with.

And appropriately, in another contrast with Western medieval sovereign apparatus/ontology, the Thai order of materiality—the sovereign corpus—is widely distributed. Just as the Thai stranger-king remains socially entombed in networks of secrecy within the palace (see Grey 1992), the Buddha is said to have *at least* two bodies: his physical body, and that of his teachings (e.g. Swearer 2004: 186), or more materially, multiple bodies, distributed in relics and stupas across the landscape (e.g. Tambiah 1976; Byrne 1995). This source of power is further distributed in images (e.g. Jackson 2004), as in the day following Thai King Bhumibol, RAMA IX’s death, when his family gathered to ritually wash his corpse inside the palace, 1000’s

of black-clad mourners gathered simultaneously in on the palace grounds outside, lining up to simultaneously wash a photographic portrait of the King.⁵³

Presenting their images of splendor, actualized Buddhist monks, saints, kings and devata provide vast ‘fields of merit’ (cf. Tambiah 1984; Collins 1990: 219) for laypeople to transact with. To engage in exchanges with those materially rich entities is to expand the space of relatedness, and of eventual association with the encompassing immobility of enlightenment. The light shining off of a gambler’s gold encrusted watch as he raises his hand to signal the odds, the dazzling frame around a royal’s portrait, the flecks of gold applied to statues of the Buddha (e.g. Lefferts 2018:245) lining a deceased monk’s stupa in temple grounds, become attractive nodes for exchange and the collective making of the good. The draw of many to an individual source of wealth, the collecting of somatic attentions and corporeal capital, further enhances the overall ‘good’ of any entity in the corporeal economy. A gathering crowd exponentially enhances the conferment of merit.

Joanna Cook, who carried out ethnographic research among female Thai Buddhist nuns [*mae chee*] explains:

“Intending to transfer merit to another is itself meritorious and both persons thereby acquire merit. Sharing merit with another augments the original amount of merit created through a meritorious act; the more people share in a meritorious act, the more merit is created” (2010: 121-122).

In seeking out busy interchanges or fields of merit, moreover, there is already, given within this lifetime, a direct association between merit and wealth. Within categories of beings destined for greater or lesser reincarnations, there is a continuum of merit differentially distributed between classes of animals, enlightened beings, demons and living persons seen as more or less desirable

⁵³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37653448>, accessed November 20, 2017; also, http://www.nationmultimedia.com/news/life/art_culture/30298053, accessed November 20, 2017.

associates. The Buddha, to take the prominent example, had been a materially wealthy prince in the lifetime just before his enlightenment. The Thai King, overseeing the welfare of his subjects, *may* be reincarnated as a *Bodhisattva*.

Karmic Rationale, Merit and Sacrificial Order

Where the Thai ‘deathworld’ I propose to think with is marked by possible nodes for transacting merit, acts of engaging in exchange relation with meritorious beings are always already sacrificial—as with moving or sustaining immobility. The idealized karmic return accompanying a meritorious act however, in Thailand, veils the extant terms of a sacrificial economy.

As James Egge explains, *Religious Giving and The Invention of Karma in Theravada Buddhism* (2002), historically involved the substitution of merit-making acts over an Indian inspired, Vedic order of sacrifices organized in devout communities.⁵⁴ James Egge shows that the authors of Pali texts upon which Theravada Buddhist practices are based “actively appropriate Vedic sacrificial ideology by representing almsgiving as an act of sacrifice in which the Buddha or a Buddhist monastic replaces sacred fire and Vedic deity as recipient of the offering.” (2002:10). As Stephen Collins explains, “[i]n non-Brahmanical religion, the life of the renouncer and his support by the laity simply replaces the support of Brahminical sacrifice by its patrons” (1982: 57). The forceful presence of the deity is substituted for by a monastic (Egge 2002:28), or in subsequent acts of merit-transference, an elder, ghost or lesser deity.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ In karmic sacrifice, the balance of forgetting/remembering/class instantiated in the Vedic act falls to the repetition of action. This can be understood in the local casual terms for action: *ka(r)m̐ma*. “In Vedic/brahmanical Hinduism, one of the dominant religions at the time of the Buddha, the word *kamma* (*karma*, in Sanskrit) denoted ritual action and referred to actions performed by or on behalf of the sponsor of a ritual. Such rituals, which are still performed today, involve sacrifice and oblations into one or three sacred fires” (Crosby 2013: 113-114).

⁵⁵ It is also the Vedic sacrifice (of animals) which Hubert & Mauss’s ethnological study indicate as being the paradigmatic example of a sacrificial act ([1898]1964:19).

Steven Collins, considering Indian Vedas, Sanskrit scriptures as founding texts in both Brahmanical and Theravada Buddhist thought, interpret these texts to show men and gods acting together: in their sacrifices, producing time, enacting a fit between cosmic cycle and sacrificial action (1982: 42). The offering a layperson places in a Buddhist monk's bowl, the exemplary meritorious gift, is simultaneously a sacrificial offering. Underpinning the distribution of karmic rebirths, Collins explains, is a 'world of sacrificial merit', where a correctly performed sacrifice instantiates a relationship to god-like (i.e. grandly associative) power (1982: 46). Doniger and Smith also point to the importance of the (substitutional) identifications between immanent and transcendent actor-pairs in Vedic ritual, wherein the doing of ritual introduces a third, active, (dialectical) component, literally enacting cosmology (1989: 196-207).

In Thailand, as Egge's evidences assembled from Pali texts indicate, karmic discourse has supplanted politicized sacrifice (Egge 2002), and karmic theory has expedited a rationalization of motility, efficiently recapturing and measuring sacrificial procedures. These localizing efforts to harness sacrificial asymmetries as still, karmic potentiality—in shrines, statues, stupas, talismans and temples, in country houses, concrete urban warehouses and stadiums—are efforts which uphold a soteriological, patriarchal, esoteric, temple-bound order, authority accorded to caretakers of death and memory amidst matriarchal village-lands. The maintenance of this karmic ideal has spread—as with Buddha's relic-bones—across the topography of Southeast Asia, in stupas, temples and statues, making a corporeal spacetime. The Thai monastic capturing, performing and institutionalizing of these sacrificial procedures continues to be a political process.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ The placement (actual and discursive) of Buddha's body-relics in temples, as well as those ascetic monks' bones ground into amulets (cf. Tambiah 1984; Swearer 2004; Reynolds 2004), could be interpreted as evidence of a sacrificial meal reincorporated, served for consumption of the masses; a communal-state meal of the Buddha/victim's body spectacularly consumed (cf. Freud [1918]1995), partitioned across landscape, temple, monument, forest and concrete.

Transactions which make merit, or merit-transference⁵⁷, sending generosity in rituals unto the transference of credit onto elders, the dead and ghosts, the merit spread beyond a singular lifetime working doubly to raise the status of the giver and recipient upon their reincarnation. Acts transferring merit or karma are acts which aim to recoup life's overflowing fullness and excess signification for the symmetrical and homogenous non-time of nirvana-death⁵⁸, the notion of karma is by no means fatalistic (Keyes 1983) or non-interested. Rather, karma—as described by popular contemporary Thai monk, P.A. Payutto, is a type of rationality (in Swearer 2004:240)—one type of causal explanation for the occurrence of acts.⁵⁹ Regarding the cessation of karmic cycles in enlightenment, contemporary Thai learned monk P.A. Payutto's counsel,

⁵⁷ Charles Keyes explains that the option of transferring merit's credit to others (including elders or ghosts) nevertheless implores karmic individuals to take on responsibility in this life. The chance to uphold a moral individual's social imperatives in this lifetime, delivered with a resolve to accept one's current level of suffering, is a religious imperative which proves equally crucial in stabilizing established hierarchical order during periods of unrest, particularly when there may be a vacuum of political power (see Keyes 1983:283). Deborah Wong (2001: 73-74), summarizing the merit-transference involved in *wai khruu* (teacher honoring) ceremonies, cites Keyes' explanation as 'functional'(ist), indicating instead that her informants seek 'empowerment'. Regarded from either side of such a structure/agency debate, merit-transference, for those whom employ it, provides a powerful construct for extending causality and expanding relation (see also Cassanati 2015: 155-156).

⁵⁸ Likewise, as with karmic actions in general, Steven Collins' account of *The Body in Theravada Buddhist Monasticism* relates monastic practice as a series of rational maneuverings to distance 'consciousness' from the non-rational events and intensities of birth, death and sexuality/desire (Collins 1993: 187).

⁵⁹ Karma, as one locally relative form of reason, far from being popularly altruistic, may not be immune to sheltering nihilist or fascist destructive impulses by placing causality or a human, hermeneutic meaning at arm's length. Without discounting the history of proxy-wars, extractions and crypto-colonialism facilitating Eurowestern consumption and outsourcing intraregional conflict to Southeast Asia, recent volumes documenting warfare in Buddhist societies (Jerryson & Juergensmeyer 2010; Tikhonov & Brekke 2012), should make plain that warfare and commensurability with a laissez faire market logic unto subsumption of life/politics in Southeast Asian Buddhist polities is the rule, rather than the exception. Similarly, Marxist philosopher Slavoj Zizek, in calling attention to Buddhist violence for its capacity to make history, notes that the detachment encouraged in 'Western', new age Buddhism is ideally complimentary to cycles of capitalist consumption (2014:57-59).

read with a Nietzschean genealogy of moral orders in mind, also reveals terms for the legitimization of hierarchy via an economy of merit. Payutto explains:

“When we stop acting with attachment to what is good and bad, and these notions of good and bad no longer exist, whatever we do can no longer be referred to as kamma, because kamma must be one or the other—either good or bad. The actions of noble people proceed, therefore, according to reason and what needs to be done within a particular context. Their actions have nothing to do with craving or internal attachments. Noble people do not perform bad deeds, because they no longer have any reason to do so” (Payutto 1995:188).

Comportment insinuating the accrual of merit unto enlightenment suggests a trace of exiting karmic cycles, attaching such ‘reason’ and its accompanying unquestionable hierarchy, to any assertion of self-worth. Nobility and riches, an enjoyment of the shining splendors and gratuitous spectacles of a belaboured world-mass, are thus the legitimate provincial luxuries of nobility. As anthropologist Stephen Carlisle explains, Thai people use karma as an ordering construct for building narratives which stabilize a ‘knowing self’ (Carlisle 2012; also see Cassaniti 2015). Carlisle writes:

"Karma works as a bridging concept, one that spans the gap between the mundane and easily considered realities of daily life, and the great, abstract order of the universe. ... Karma poses a problem on the practical level. Although the idea that every moral action is eventually met with an appropriate response—a sort of ethical first law of thermodynamics—there is no way of knowing exactly what that response will be, or when it will come. Because of the existential firewall that exists between incarnations, allowing karma to carry over from one lifetime to the next while blocking out memories of the past, there is no way of harnessing knowledge about an individual’s karma for practical effect. No one can say with any certainty what will happen, and, except in cases where one’s karma returns during the same lifetime, why something will happen.” (2008: 196-197).

Where karmic discourse supplanted sacrificial discourse within practices of religious giving in Southeast Asia, the sacrificial logic of a Vedic order—the inequality produced in cosmogenic ritual—perdures. The karmic return, in a context of generalized exchange, a return

repossessed as merit, is a political redistribution of a Vedic-cosmic-body⁶⁰, a sacrificial order spread across the social topography of Southeast Asia. All exchanges therein are implicated within this sacrificial economy, becoming parts of a corpus, parts relatively valued or devalued through association with the immense, immanent materiality of death.

This state of death in life is managed via association with materials implicated in a cosmological certainty, all things in decay unto:

A Thai Ordering of Historical Materials and Bodies

Thai statues gold and clay, relics, temples both termite-infested and lacquered in brilliant gold red varnishes, charnel ash, loose threads, bones, human flesh moving and rigorously inert, animals living, dead and meat, plants, blood and water are all imbricated in this layering of living and dead matters accorded relative degrees of ‘merit’ upon a sacrificial exchange. In this cosmology/ontology/sovereign apparatus, time is *made and paid for* through the somatic attentions, genuflections, hesitations and postural stoopings of lower classed entities pursuing, through their meritorious deeds and downward-carriage, transformation onto a plane of being devoid of the particular needs and sufferings of their position.

The order of meritorious association is mediated by each person in a plurality of contemporary Thai religious practices, be these Theravada Buddhist, Hindu Brahmin, or of the spirit-cult variety—often Khmer, ancestral and/or ghostly. Often, the personal introduction or hosting of an unsuspected foreigner, or peripheral item into the order of things—for example, the Southeast Asian stranger-king (Sahlins 2008:192; Graeber & Sahlins 2017: 233-234, 354-360;

⁶⁰ Brian K. Smith, on Vedic *Sacrifice and Being*: “In Vedism, ritual activity at all levels does not merely "interpret," "symbolize," or "dramatize;" it constitutes, constructs and integrates. Ritual forms the naturally formless; it connects the inherently disconnected; and it heals the "sickness" of excess which is the state toward which all things and beings perpetually tend.” (1985: 72).

Peleggi 2002)—is the abrupt, surprisingly powerful introduction of otherness which indicates residency on a higher plane of knowledge. Practices such as making offerings of food and drink at ancestral shrines, ordinating trees to establish territorial associations with the King and Buddha (Tannenbaum 2000; Isager and Ivarsson 2002), consecrating statues so as to bring their solid deities a formlessness (see Swearer 2004; Terweil 1994) or caring for talismans or amulets (see Tambiah 1984), involve the work of careful maintenance in vertical space, chanting, and often attendant intermittent silence and stillness. These rituals are also bodily, corporeal actions intended to create associations which will move things/selves/communities through the categorical order of nature. Supplicants in ritual invoking impermanence and indeterminate duration extend the associations made through their acts, their postures, into a hierarchy of things.

This considered, the non-Cartesian body of the boxer is already given, from before birth, within a confluence of living-dead forms in exchange, jostling for merit. This is precisely not an ethical ground based upon the (Kantian) willful motions of the living performed over a passive, inert material ground.

My description of Ou and Thai boxing describes a case of how practice (culture as practical action) and learning, how the corporeality of the learner—i.e. the plasticity of culture—unfolds in these contexts.

The items and actors interred in ritual are accorded a relative degree of receptivity to decay which places them within the Thai deathworld. To be dead in these contexts is not merely to cease living, but to become transformatively interred within an economy of exchanges and obligatory gifts local Thai people maintain an order of memory with. The corpus' of the living are on the one hand excluded from higher or lower planes of perception which correspond to degrees of access to powers beyond the duration of life and death. On the other hand, it is this

very exclusion from benign and non-suffering materiality, which heightens responsibility and care the human living must have for their physical form.

Asian studies scholar Wimal Dissanayake describes this Theravada Buddhist cosmology in bodily terms:

“According to Theravada Buddhism, the world as we know it does not exist independently of our senses; it represents a dynamic process. The world is constantly being created and reappropriated by our desires, our imaginings, our thoughts. Our perceptions of the world constitute an important element of the world. Buddhism maintains that the world has arisen through our sense, is known through the senses, and is destroyed by the senses. In the light of these assumptions, it can be said that the body assumes a position of indubitable centrality in the construction of the world.” (Dissanayake 1993: 127).

To move; to live as an expiring corpus through Thai social space, is to be involved in cultivating a sensory and perceptual acuity for formidable exchanges within this hierarchy of animate relations,⁶¹ a hierarchy that extends through community/individual forms, on through materiality, through geography—ancestral shrines in the northeastern corner of homes and rings, temples bordered by stupas for the dead. The subject, by living and expiring, is always in reciprocity, on a sliding exchange with tiers of living and dead demons/animals/spirits. If we die

⁶¹ Kaj Århem postulates an ontological/cosmological structure in Southeast Asian animism which, to be so distributed, might be seen as achieving such a stratified structure through a sovereign movement wherein ritual generates asymmetry, hence difference. “[T]he majority of indigenous groups of Southeast Asia represent a particular variety of ... hierarchical animism. Like standard animism, hierarchical animism posits a universalized subjectivity – but one that is graded along a vertical scale rather than segmented along a horizontal plane. While, in standard animism, beings are integrated by a principle of symmetric intersubjectivity between ontologically equivalent beings and differentiated along a somatic axis on the formula ‘same spirit (interiority), different body (physicality)’, in hierarchical animism beings are integrated by a principle of asymmetric intersubjectivity between ‘unequal souls’ and differentiated according to the formula ‘different degrees of spirit/potency, different body’. ... In sum, where standard animism posits a horizontal, egalitarian and symmetric cosmos, Southeast Asian cosmologies assume a vertical, ranked and graded cosmos in which objects contextually present themselves as subjects and vice versa but where all subject-objects, human and non-human, are graded in terms of degree of power and agency.” (Århem 2013:25).

in Bangkok welding accidents under failed concrete construction girders⁶², if our consciousness is concussed by forarms-elbows, or punctured by the metallic snarl of urban automobile skeletons, our corpses are carried back to rural temples, rotting over a period of up to a week—or for more distinguished monks, up to a year (see Swearer 2009: 66)—cremated and then placed in urns under stupas upon the borders of each temple: each assuming our place-holder in the topographic resonance of mandalic time.

The capacity of each Thai person to accrue a record of generosity through their corporeal matter is measured throughout and beyond the boundaries of biological life. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bangkok for example, corpses were disemboweled and laid upon charnel grounds in local temples with the intention of providing a generous meal to vultures and other carrion (Tiyavanich 2003: 229-235). There is a particular value imparted in realizing components of the living-already-as-dead body to be give-able, politically effective as already turned over within the ground. When Wai's son wins his match in a prominent tournament on the other side of Bangkok, his father promptly cuts his own hair, returning dead tissue to the ground, an act of making merit. During 2010, after popularly elected media mogul Thaksin Shinawatra's sister Yingluck has also been excised from her elected post, her 'red-shirt', *Thai-rak-Thai* ["Thai-Love-Thai"] party supporters filled buckets with "500 liters of blood"⁶³, splashing these bottles of human fluid upon the gates of government house, the temporary

⁶² In the weeks preceding Ou's match, while street protest violence swelled, 10 Thai/Cambodian construction workers met less politicized deaths, and at least 17 others were injured in downtown Bangkok when a concrete support beam on an Italian-Thai multinational's construction site collapsed on them, February 25th, 2014: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/burmese-woman-among-10-construction-workers-killed-bangkok.html> accessed November 2, 2018.

⁶³ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703734504575125263805678560> accessed October 25, 2016.

residence of then prime-minister Abhist Vejjajiva.⁶⁴ In a protest-move that arguably takes working-class revolution a corporeal volume beyond the transcendently conscious Kantian-conscious workers revolution outlined by Lukacs ([1923]1971), Nattawut Saikua, one of the “Red Shirt” protest leaders calling on the junta-installed government to assemble free elections, noted that “The blood of the common people is mixing together to fight for democracy, ... When Abhist works in his office, he will be reminded that he is sitting on the people’s blood.”⁶⁵ Blood spilled—an uncanny sign of life as inchoate, lost; an instance where corporeality becomes inert being given over to a space beyond the sheltering boundaries of biologically enclosed skin is inherently invested with transgressive power. Blood, a not uncommon auspicious sign across cultures (see Carsten 2011), often signals an intensive redness—of blood—which stands out, held out among other shades of red through the participation of the viewer (cf. Merleau Ponty 1968:131-133; Lingis 1981:166), a qualia (see Chumley & Harkness 2013; Harkness 2015) of local red-shirt revolution, of ground red pepper paste, a color for Sunday shirts’ for the Hindu Sun-god. This blood pouring down to paint the canvas of the muay-Thai ring is seized from out of these everyday Thai associations and becomes especially compelling when announcing an arrival of a participant heedless of the boundary of living and dead in the territory of the ring. The arresting, absorbing quality of blood is not necessarily marking a specific victim or a specific life given, but is accentuating a confrontation and responsibility beyond skin-bound life, a responsibility which finds forcefulness by signaling an exchange outside the jurisdiction of the living.

⁶⁴ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/thai-protesters-pour-blood-in-bangkok-1.946257>, accessed November 20, 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/16/thailand-protesters-blood-government>, accessed November 20, 2017.

⁶⁵ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/thai-protesters-pour-blood-in-bangkok-1.946257>, accessed November 20, 2017.

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On the upper level of the old Lumpinee stadium, having shuffled past the abandoned popcorn machine on rickety, warping wooden bleachers, I recall leaning up against the chain-link dividing fence to watch Ming compete. Ming was then the most renowned boxer to frequent our camp. At that time, he was still handled by a group of promoters on the other side of Bangkok. His reputation had already been made competing under this other camp's name, though he joined our evening training sessions at his convenience. Under the fluorescent lights of old Lumpinee stadium, Ming sustained two cuts early in the match, wounds which were stoppered with Vaseline between rounds, but rubbed open repeatedly with the action of each round. With this blood pouring from his forehead down his face, Ming still won the match, plowing through his opponent. Between the later rounds he would climb the ropes and wave his gloved fists at the spectators, grinning between the dark red rivulets pouring down his chin, showing the lost fluid to be inconsequential to his claiming of another plane of mobility in life.

In each muay-Thai match, the uprightness of the boxer's stance, the impassability of his plane of motion, the consistent turning outwards of each knee raised to shed off an opponent's swung shin—all of these planar slippages and reassertions, tucking oneself just inside the full range of impact; this movement, a bone-hardened phalanx inverting the furious torquing of an opponent's lower degree of movement—that planar resilience indicates a well-performed match.

On another occasion, this in relocated Lumpinee, I had been alone among trainers and supporters from our camp in assuming Wai's son Sen to have lost a match—he had been knocked repeatedly to the ground throughout the later rounds. Only in hindsight, with the benefit of Wai's explanation, did I learn that Sen had merely righted himself each time only to show arms held higher than his opponent in strength, composing an insistence of presence upon one plane of motion, plowing repeatedly through his opponent's heavy shins and knees. The grounds

upon which the victory of the match was measured did not equate to the materiality of the canvas beneath the boxers' feet. Rather, the grounds upon which motion were launched were traversed on Sen's terms, upon the exchange-rate and rhythm of motion he chose. Unperturbed by those brief falls, on this occasion Sen had not collapsed to the ground, but merely re-pointed his plane of being vertically (for every kick is launched from on tip-toes), making irrelevant of the presence of his opponent.

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Similarly, Thai boxers like Ming, Sen and Ou provide an opportunity to reconstitute the 'naturalized' terms upon which larger transactions and orders in the community extend. Beings in this order, be these The Buddha, the Brahminically ritualized King, royalty, military, commoners, animals, insects, spirits and their accompanying ghosts, constantly jockey for memorable position.

This order of beings in referentiality to impermanence and immanent death traverse the social hierarchy of the living and dead with a plethora of religious iconographies and personalized practices (see McDaniel 2011). In an ethnographic commentary on Thai spiritual practices, Bernard Formoso explains that the orthodox Theravada Buddhist state has been complimentary to the proliferation of Thai Spirit cults (2016).⁶⁶ Like Tambiah before him, and much of the current scholarly commentary on Thai religious practice, the different Buddhist,

⁶⁶ "By relating human destiny to the undecipherable balance of good and bad deeds accomplished through successive lives, the doctrine of karma makes the afterlife an open-ended issue." (Formoso 2016:131) The two unsolved issues of the afterlife and the fate of souls have developed complementarily with the ubiquitous presence of the supernatural, while increasing concern about the proper ways to reconcile it. The Buddhist response to this concern has also contributed to the development of spirit cults. These spirits extend beyond the family to most categories of supernatural agents: "It has come to include great kings and Buddhist saints of times past, both believed to be reborn in heaven as *devata* or Buddhas-to-be, and whose patronage is highly sought after through pilgrimages and the blessing of amulets. Transactions with these figures are characterized by asymmetry in merit-making." (Formoso 2016:131).

Brahmin, animist and spirit-cult formations are seen to compose a plural field of religious practice, facilitating agency.⁶⁷ Formoso adds an additional insight, explaining that within this richly plural context of religious practices, “[t]he patron–client relationship, which is the dominant pattern of the Thai social structure, finds a logical extension in the ways that transactions with the supernatural are interpreted and managed.” (2016:132). This patron-client social relationship, the relation of being indebted, by motion, to a patron or creditor, is a social extension of a cosmological-historical-material distribution, Southeast Asian hierarchical animism (see Arhem & Sprenger 2015), such that the relative permanence of shared material icons and objects of worship are charged through motions of the living; those in active exchange—making gestures of merit or offerings to shrines—with the dead, and with each other—through postures of deference and/or greeting.

Where there is a definite local structure and hierarchy of movement which attempts to accrue merit (on merit-transference, see above), beings, given and taken for granted, share a generalized space of corporeal reciprocity—a shared and distributed body—which deals in degrees of otherness—the absolute otherness of death. This is a being-given which extends through human patron–client bonds, as much as through those material and immaterial entities given religious or spiritual significance.

⁶⁷ Scholars faced with this multiplicity of Thai religious forms as of late have not emphasized this hierarchical space of ritual symbols on Thai bodies political and personal, instead describing Thai religion as, for example, a cache of repertoires (McDaniel 2011), imaginings (Taylor 2008) or networks (Johnson 2012; Wilson 2008; also Kitiarsa 2012), portraying an exemplary field for individual expression or creative resistance. While each study referenced above provides richly nuanced accounts of everyday Thai religious practice, as a collective intellectual enterprise of the moment, this scholarship falls short (for a comparison of McDaniels’ ‘repertoires’ with Bourdieu’s propensity for reproducing structuralisms at the expense of agency, see Borchert 2016), of cutting to the intensive role of religious ritual in unequally distributing agency, responsiveness, responsibility and material wealth throughout Thai society.

CHAPTER TWO: PRACTICE

After opening by describing this Thai economy of movement and sacrificial exchange, in chapter two, I take a closer look at how Thai boxing practice generates the possibility of newly valued time, as well as a practical sense of timing. I describe how Thai boxing involves repetition unto exhaustion of the physical (body), unto quantitative values and vocal commands.

Describing several of the Thai boxing camps I visited while searching for a more permanent fieldsite, I note that the communities of practitioners often feature a contingent arraignment of attention or abruptly delegated destruction amidst the frequent decay of so many ignored living things. This series of interactions suggests that improvement in Thai boxing does not involve the straightforward gain of skill, as much it involves negotiating different demands on one's own time and comportment, finding restfulness and regeneration amidst decay, and producing movements already indebted to the dead.

The credit-able movements of Thai boxers prove incommensurate with sustained methodologies of practice-based ethnography. I go on to situate this research among:

- 1) ethnographers of muay-Thai.*
- 2) an anthropology of the martial arts.*
- 3) philosophies of human movement (particularly Wacquant's 'carnal' sociology).*

Highlighting the repetitive aspect of training/competition, I then briefly describe another competition for the same boxer, noting the dissonance between spectacular representations of Thai boxing and the corporeal damages sustained practice in Thai boxing entails.

Movement Out of the Fields of Merit Transference

The movements that Ou and other boxers execute are rendered through this economy of motion, where credit may be established for actions which employ restraint and stillness (as in a still monk becoming Bodhisattva, or a dignitary making a casual wave of one palm in place of a formal ‘*wai*’, bow), and equally, where kinetic, bodily excess may signify, and thus literally accrue, a fated loss of status (i.e. those meant to work in construction, to crouch under the passing of the king, to soldier, etc.) or indebtedness to the higher order. Each person’s excessive corporeal capital—that which, unchanneled, might keep them within the realm of downfallen classes and beings—may likewise be transmitted or transferred into merit-making gestures, falling beneath the merit-accruing fields of elders/ancestral shrines/monks/religious and political authority figures. Unlike laypeople, monks or kings, however, whose actions may be further incorporated into this structure, Thai boxers are themselves composed as kinetic corporeally offerings, executing an abrupt violence—a snapping, whiplashing motion—interrupting this economy of stillness, introducing a rhythm which undoes the sovereign order.

This sovereign hierarchy of beings is performed, contested and constantly maintained in Thai public space. Hierarchy is, fortunately or not for fortune, built into the very grounds of Thai sociality. All acknowledged are already within hierarchy, even as seen in the gradations of ‘*wai*’, the quotidian Thai bow of greeting, hands clasped in a “transaction begun by a person of junior rank, age, or status” (Wong 2001: 74; cf. Aulino 2014: 425). Even as Deborah Wong’s description of Thai teacher-honoring (*wai khruu*) ceremonies shows, this *wai* indicates that an obligation to expend motion resides with those of lower age, class or status. This ‘*wai*’, a bow of clasped hands by gradation held higher against the center of the body and for a longer period of time in the presence of those of higher status, instantiates hierarchy in both postural carriage and perspective—the higher a recipient’s status, the more reduced the giver’s angle of vision will be upon offering a *wai*. Ultimately, in the direct presence of a deity, one may not look upwards at

all. The clinchwork struggle between Thai boxers—where hands clasp around each other’s necks, pulling an equal opponent’s face groundward—inverts the conventional Thai manner of giving respect in greeting. The other, rather than being afforded a bow with eyes downcast, is instead intended to be lowered beneath one’s own plane of motion, dragged under the leveling of a boxer’s centrally clasped hands—albeit hands dressed in gloves. Most of the time during training however, clinchwork is done with bare hands and forearms, slipping, leveraging the round of an opponent’s vertebrae, twisting-slamming in the doubled downward pull, weighted under an opponent’s sideways misstep, where an initial downward slip, turned through, provides conditions for one’s own momentous upswing over an opponent’s fall.

With the *wai*, this most benign Thai greeting, an acknowledgement of shared space subsequently induces a hierarchical operation: the obligation to bow. The *wai*, requiring a symmetrical posture from one party, the non-obliged recipient of the bow, already with higher status, equally entertains the privilege of deciding not to move, of not to bother noticing the initiator, or of continuing along one’s way. Similarly, in shared social space among consociates, one may artfully avoid a sequence of initial greetings so as not to invoke obligatorily indebted interactions. It was usual, and good manners, for example, for a number of young boxers to *wai* towards Ming’s grey-haired father when he would enter the camp’s backlot. However, Ming’s father was usually too busy to acknowledge each and every one of them, instead breaking off his series of quick one-handed waves and barely perceptible nods towards these others by beckoning another elder acquaintance or taking up conversation with the boxer of his choice.

Felicity Aulino, ~~who received and opened the copy of my MA dissertation, *Muai Thai and the Embodiment of Fighting Forms in a Northeast Thai Household* (Schissel 2008) I had mailed to Stanley Tambiah when Tambiah was too ill to receive it himself,~~ summarizes this Thai style of comportment as a social body:

“Lowering one’s body in relation to someone of higher social stature, the height of one’s hands when forming a wai greeting, bowing when entering formal meeting spaces, and registered discomfort in the face of conflict: these are all signs of perceptual patterns and corresponding bodily attunement to collectives, as well as of hierarchical norms, all enacted for the well-being of the group as a whole and its constitutive parts. In this way, the physical embodiment of social, religious, and political structures comes into view as habituated modes of being that continually re-inscribe leadership patterns, cosmological truth claims, and power differentials.” (Aulino 2014b; cf. Aulino 2014).

Similarly, in documenting the practices of end-of-life caregivers for elderly northern Thai people,¹ Aulino shows how the necessarily distant routines of caregivers manage to make a moral account for life amidst otherwise calculable transactions accorded the status of merit and karma (see Aulino 2016). With her particular phenomenological approach, drawing from both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Francisco Verela (see Aulino 2014: 421-423), Aulino has also drawn attention to the imposition of structures of violence within the Thai context, and with how the Thai value system will often support “hierarchy over egalitarianism, conformity over individuality, and at times condone surface beauty and wealth without shame” (2014:436). In highlighting what she calls the Thai ‘social body’, Aulino has identified the Thai ‘embodiment’ of social, political and religious structures, and how, whether with caregiving or general socializing, a moral person comports vis-a-vis these orders.

I share an enthusiasm for Aulino’s phenomenological approach and her identification of structural inequalities in Thailand, though perhaps the grounds I locate moral beings upon are

¹ Aulino writes, “Finally, a focus on “rituals of care”—embodied routines and their accomplishments—allows space for caregivers’ ambivalence. Such ambivalence does not indicate moral failing, as my case study makes startlingly clear. Instead, ambivalence—and even a kind of incoherence—seems appropriate, even necessary, for harnessing the energy to perform the work of care in a world of competing interests and enormous paradox. Rituals of care suture would-be wounds of ambivalence by acts of indeterminate correspondence. Precisely because care is free from an emphasis on the internal, caregiving acts can appropriately provide for others in a number of ways, making a moral life—and even the most profound transformations—possible.” (2016:99) Aulino’s sensitivity to the Thai burden in having been perceived calculating karma similarly points readers towards the affect of deferment, disinterest or detachment, an aloofness vis a vis *time* (and here we might echo Bourdieu’s reading of gift exchange) crucial to the navigation of Thai social life.

churning, interred with living-dead bodies—embroiled in oil and sweat, enfolded in bone-muscle ice-water and blood. My questions at this juncture, which the phenomenological description in the latter portions of this dissertation will delve into, have more to do with how responsivity² is distributed through corporeal memory, and with how the differentiation of credible and indebted movements mark horizons of mobility or change in Thailand at present. Nested within the acts of destruction intimately permitted during Thai boxing practice are the perduring structures of a Thai kinetic order. The everyday paces of Thai boxers like Ou, repetitive motions upon which corpuses are thrown across the measures of a larger Thai moral order, are everyday paces which signal the indebted returns for shared perception in Thai society.

When my friend Nog returns to the northeast to compete in his village's annual temple-festival boxing tournament, he waits until after he has won the tournament's final match, after he has been doused in cold water, dressed and separated from the melee of the temple crowd. Only then does he go to give an offering of coins, clothes, and toiletries to the monks beneath the temple's central stupa. Likewise, Ou's every motion approaching the ring involves offerings, visitations and tarrying with shrines—those at the ring we leave in Bangkok, at the spirit-houses of those keeping us overnight in the northeast, or just prior to competition, in front of the shrines out front of stadiums. But all those compositions and bows are eventually broken within the bell, at the center of the gambling ring. The acts in the ring, the generation of force there, is of a different order altogether.

In addition to the merit boxers like Ou and Nog carefully assemble, the boxer's corporeality manages an executioner's task—a corporeal effect by which habituation and leadership are qualitatively undone, where collective memory is given a revitalized cut and

² Responsivity indicates a capacity to be open to otherness and the generation of difference by virtue of a holding experience of alterity, uncanniness, or the o/Other, at the core of one's historicity.

duration with traumatic violence. This is a ritualized violence; a bludgeoned, routinized corporeality which undoes the order of cosmocratic leadership. Acknowledged or not, the aesthetic and monetary involvement of the crowd registers this potential affectively, in such a way that each match reassures the terms of re-membering and turning towards others, radically reworking the empirical and relative-rational causality inscribed on the living.³ Thai boxing in this sense does the maintenance of cohesion, the constant and selective degeneration/decay and destruction of a collected carnality. The imposition of these inequalities is, as Aulino articulates, habituated in shared perceptions. Nonetheless, I would emphasize that these perceptual grounds are (bringing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology into dialogue with Levinas) marked by the violences of a generalized corporeal exchange; these being marked exchanges of a sacrificial quality.

Below, I describe *how*, through repetition, the revolutionary force required to unfold the elbow strike described on page 1 was composed. I take Ou's accumulation of expertise in elbow striking—and his stamina in boxing more generally—to have laid the groundwork for this very particular instant, an event out of which a commentary upon the relative returns in Thai cultural history may be articulated anew.

While Thai boxers do not overtly dispute religious and political observances, but more readily incorporate religious precepts flawlessly right up until the moment of contact in the ring, I am also concerned with the demands these different temporal demands place upon Thai boxers. It is with what ritualized boxing⁴ does in the ring, outside of the avowedly 'moral' code, that a

³ What Thai boxing suggests, ensconced in the play of posture off of posture, in the feinting slip away from planes of direct contact, are the asymmetrical terms (cf. Hertz [1907]1960) of violence available to Thai men, pathways revealed in the unbalancing of each match's organization.

⁴ Regarding the generativity of ritual play, Terry Turner employs a totalizing Marxian framework (see 2008), implying that within the arrangement of the 'liminal' state indicated by theorists of

ground is made to anchor the possibility of choice, and movement. This interplay and management of violence in corporeal memory proceeds along a *Thai corporeal exchange*.

A Thai Boxer's Corporeality and Timing

In her work with Buryat Buddhists in eastern Siberia, Anya Bernstein also finds notions of impermanence (in Thailand, see Cassaniti 2006) and non-self to be problematic with western notions of sovereign law. She points out that,

"[s]overeignty, in the Buddhist sense, is achieved not through claiming the boundaries of one's body but through using one's body as a vehicle to reach enlightenment."(2102: 264). [Bernstein thus does] "not use the term transgression in terms of long-standing explorations of religious notions of negation and taboo (Bataille 1991 [*The Accursed Share*]; Taussig 1998 [a dictionary entry from '*Critical Terms for Religious Studies*']) but in the sense of creative openings that such uses of the body can produce in the workings of larger sovereignties." (2012:265).

For Bernstein's Siberian informants, the Buddhist 'body' is a charged political construct, and its transgressive acts offer, instead of the necessary equivalence between divine sovereignty and individual bodies-political, an opportunity to reorder larger sensory-orders. Likewise, with the small attenuations and the honing of strength Ou and boxers like him cultivate over days, months, seasons, and years of practice, a corpus, as it is frequently exhausted upon the limits of

ritual such as Van Gennep ([1909]1960) and Victor Turner (1967) are the kernels of the structure of the subsequently naturalized higher/lower social forms (see Terence Turner's 1977 explication). As phenomenologist Alphonso Lingis writes of the ceremonies of war and splendor, "Collective performances cannot be understood only from the intentions of the organizers, participants and bystanders, and from their historical, political, economic and ideological contexts. A cultural performance closes in on itself, its scenes and movements adjusting to one another, and evolves with its own logic, that of ceremony and festival." (Lingis 2008: 123), and, "[c]ollective performances do not only exhibit effigies and icons; they continue in throbbing, energizing and transforming music, song and dance. The interpretive movement of the mind that constructs meanings is different from, and clogged up by, deactivated by the rhythmic and melodic periodicities of movement." (Lingis 2008: 126). The play of Thai boxing, moving upon the corporeal expirations intensified in practice, generates collective movement of a rhythmic, historically differentiating order. The crushing contact exchanged between opponents opens new planes of movement from out of the collected symmetry of each confrontation.

established credit-able institutions/materialities, becomes receptive to new accumulations of value and sensation.

The personal ‘body’ [*dtua*] the Thai boxer refines is in this sense neither a Cartesian or object-networked entity, or even a tabula-rasa which effectively becomes habituated (i.e. Bourdieu’s habitus). Rather, in the Thai context, amidst a manifold juxtaposing of living-dead entities, I consider the Thai boxer’s corpus to be a locus of contradictions, a collection of tissue both receptive and inert, alive and dead, and along with the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a *corporeal* being both in and of the world, productive of choice, time, and politically, a collection of thresholds between self and other.

As Merleau-Ponty indicates, writing in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, any act of sense-perception, any turning-toward things, outruns the biological or existential-proper bounds of the ‘individual’:

“The other person is never quite a personal being, if I myself am totally one, and if I grasp myself as apodeictically self-evident. ... In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other’s, and because both are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception.

In so far as I have sensory functions, a visual, auditory and tactile field, I am already in communication with others taken as similar psycho-physical subjects” (1962:411).

For Merleau-Ponty, perception is expressly not transcendental reflection, but a process of shared corporeality, where the limits of my ‘own’ finite perceptual apparatus/body/flesh are opened, rushing outwards into a world, being co-instantiated with that of others.

With Thai boxing, I question how the duration of sacrificial action cuts through the distance between self and other, self and world—how perception is itself particularly delimited through violence—with the way this forgetting of trauma brings continuity to both sense perception and community.

The Thai boxer's particular corporeality, refined unto giving out in abject exhaustion during training, produces difference from among the onslaught of everyday motions, obligatory bows and genuflections required of Isan's men and women in Bangkok:

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Over the years, Ou had been made responsible for understanding the limits of performing repetitive action⁵ unto exhaustion with minimal grounds for replenishment. In sparring or clinchwork towards the evening's end of our training sessions, while others began to feel the weight of the evening's expenditures, Ou, sometimes laughing, would deliver a sharp jab or shin kick in mid-air, even while being thrown against the ropes by his sparring partner. The cumulative effects of training—resting amidst periods of intensive, frenetic activity—cultivated a certain type of focus for Ou, where a familiarity with the abject materiality of his corpus in collapse, in failure, in falling and being thrown—as a familiar state, provided an expansive reserve of strength to draw upon.

Holding such a tension of innervation and the heaviness of regeneration in the balance even when exhausted, conspiring with the plasticity of a relative 'body', boxers like Ou become familiar with the exacting conditions of when violence may transpire among Thai men. What at times seems to be a casual delegation of destruction in training, for Ou was a passable instant within a precise arrangement. The rounds of exhaustive knees and kicks which nightly carried him through his limit were carried on between jokes shared with other boxers or interruptive *wais* of acknowledgement to elders who might enter the camp backlot for a time. In these hours of training, Ou was able to refine his skills, at a cost. While the details of other roles he might have pursued gradually closed, the scaffolding of a regularized social world remained, albeit

⁵ Repetition in practice is key. With Thai monastic meditation, any distraction from breathing, for example, involves a practice of making a repetitious command, ““thinking, thinking, thinking”” to interrupt distraction and bring the meditator back to task. (e.g. Cook 2010: 76-77).

dampened by the exacting moments of training: offerings were given to ancestor shrines and to monks, Ou's parents' basic sewing contracts were completed, trains and buses for extended family still in the northeast remained on schedule, and daytime school lessons were meted out with a modicum of concern.

Unlike others among the cohort of older, grown boxers in camp who had either returned from camps with bankrolls Wai had not been able to match, like his son, Sen, or those from Buriram who had moved into Bangkok to attend colleges, Ou had trained exclusively in Wai's backlot for a decade, attending the local technical trades' high-school nearby. Sebu was able to arrange big-money matches for Ou without the complication of recently involved rural managers or prior sponsors. Ou's mother and father took a reliably minor share of subcontracted sewing work, being dependably at hand within Sebu's nexus of textile family-business contacts. The professionally disinterested interests of family, the patronage and clients contracted in camp and factory work, Ou's education prospects and their location in Bangkok were held in a careful reciprocal relation, conspiring to continually deliver Ou conditions for sustaining an uninterrupted focus—a lap(p/s)ing upon waves of exhaustion at the borders of his corporeal sense—building through long evenings of training, building across the years.

Over the months as I train alongside Ou and the older boxers, the group of four younger boxers in camp—those ten to twelve years old—for a time grows to five. A motorcycle taxi driver without childcare during evening work-hours leaves his thin, rubbery-armed son at camp. This son stays with us until just after dark each evening, largely ignored by the other boxers his age. Wai tries in vain one evening to correct this new boxers' stance, though the rubbery, thin forearms wobble downward each time they are raised in front of his face. The punching bag which normally reverberates with kicks sways gently when the boy strikes it, each fist swung

back, wavering even over his head, instead of torquing from the shoulder. He does not hold for long.

During the close of the rainy season, while his mother stitches, cuts and sews the daylight hours on the upper floor of Dom's buzzing warehouse-residence, her son, aged six, who usually plays in the alleyway between sweatshop-residence storefronts, begins to hang at the edges of the sparring skirmishes of the younger cohort of boxers. Whereas out front of the long concrete warehouses that hem both sides of our alleyway, neighborhood food vendors, clerks, regular workers and older children after school all keep an eye on this six-year old, in the boxing-camp backlot, his wandering reveals him as out of place. One afternoon, he leaves a plastic mask on the ground next to the ring. The mask's garish plastic red-gold-green plating and grey-silver visor display the shiny metallic personage of a cartoonish robot; readymade heroism to traffic through the time of childhood. I place the mask up on the wall for our young visitor to see—to find again. Another boxer's father waves me back, taking the mask off the wall and dropping it back to the paved ground. I reach for the mask, gesturing across the lot towards the boy who had brought it into camp days prior. The boy is roughhousing with one of the ten-year olds, pushing near then skirting away from the jabs and forward tapping 'teep' kicks that warn him off. Before I can pick the mask up again, the boxer's father interjects: "No, not up here, ok?"

The cartoon mask stays down, not up on the wall at or above eye level, at heights reserved for the laminated photos of boxers, the golden spandrel-framed pictures of auspicious monks⁶, the ringside shrine or the paper-calendar kept open on a portrait profile of the king, one

⁶ The structural/symbolic regime of authoritative patriarchal figures, the omnipresent power of soteriological hierarchy is upheld in everyday Thai materials, (in what, in a seminal article for Thai-studies specialists, Peter Jackson calls the "Thai regime of images" (1995), in focus-sharpened portraits of royalty, photos of elders and monks mounted and cared for amidst the otherwise discarded dust and crumbling thing-ness of our day to day. Donald Swearer writes that "virtually all Theravada Buddhist rituals conducted in front of the image ... are mechanisms of reciprocity and appropriation of power" (1995:33). The raised height of Buddhist images

finger raised thoughtfully beneath his chin. The cartoon robot hero mask, until then an object of play, remains thereafter forgotten on the ground. The following week I notice a crack has split the faceplate, and it is swept up as debris, tossed into one of the empty polyethylene rice bags kept near the drainage-catch at the entryway behind Wai's family-sewing-home-warehouse leading into camp. These polyethylene bags periodically fill with plastic and glass bottles from whiskey, beer and sugar-caffeinated energy drinks: M-150, Red-Bull and 'Sponsor' Brands. Under these conditions, with his father sewing or digging late through many days, it was not difficult to see how Ou had tried on the personage of boxer indefinitely, playing at ringside each afternoon, for months, years—and now, for Ou, just over a decade here in Bangkok.

With home near camp, Ou arrived earlier than others for training after school, usually driving his family's motorcycle the six-seven blocks to camp, crossing under the raised highway. After training each night, Ou would leave with his father, returning home. The passing of his youth had been marked by seasons of intense training, times where pushing his receptivity to the limits of exhaustion, followed by weeks and months between major competitions where Ou fell back on routine to maintain this edge even while resting, regenerating strength. These tensions between corporeal plasticity and rigidity, repose and animate resilience, were carefully managed—as his age and reputation increased both Ou's father, Wai, his trainers Daeng, and especially Sebu, scheduled more big-money matches for him. The matches were arranged regularly enough—usually almost twice a month—to maintain Ou's edge, though not so frequently as to leave him overtaxed or nursing cumulative injury.

demands not only our attention and deference, but each series of deferential postures requires a certain duration, suspending or withdrawing supplicants from association with the abundance and difference of life emanating from other actors around them. It follows that daily Thai postures and movements, the kinetic acts that keep collective memories in play, are themselves motions in reciprocity with the dead.

For weeks, months and years between bruising competitions, Ou had managed regeneration after injury, his own musculoskeletal growth and the careful reduction of his weight prior to each match. His circadian rhythm, a series of afternoon naps keyed to morning/evening runs and training sessions stretching hours past dusk, was periodically extended for late-night competitions at village festivals. During each bout, Ou sustained an output of bone-jarring strikes to throw through his opponents, concentrating his efforts during high-tournament season at the conclusion of harvests in February and March. As the months of training next to Ou and travel to these tournaments that comprised my fieldwork continued, I grew gaunt and exhausted, wiry bones given to plunging into an abyss of sleep at the slightest sign of a makeshift bed. I became practically narcoleptic in gently rocking truck-seats or upon bamboo mats in the shade at festivals. From the cycle of travel, competition and always more training however, there was no expectation of extended rest or conclusion for boxers such as Ou or their fathers. Muay Thai marked the parameters of their lives, and win or lose, its regularity was omnipresent. When I did ask boxers during training about their future, these plans were never fully fleshed out—some indicated maybe returning to the northeast to farm, some working as mechanics, but never the time to plan directly for attending to those options in the moment.

As repetitive action, training required an intensity of focus to bring an ever renewable consistency and improvement to any given technique—another knee, another strike, a slip above the shoulder of one's opponent—a precision improvised from out of the circumstances of the day, be this alternations in diet, travel, sleep, an unforeseen interruption in family or business affairs. With muay-Thai at hand, the horizon of those possible other matters for consideration were hemmed in exponentially closer given each step made towards contact. In contrast to their peers, to young men and women in the village whose social world, opportunities for fraternizing and romance opened up during festival-times, boxers like Ou, while momentarily the center of

attention, instead became progressively isolated as the days turned towards festivals involving their competitions. Then, boxers gradually took leave of friends, family, sponsors, training partners, managers, and then trainers until finally entering the ring alone, and then, with the bell, entering a situation quite beyond them‘elves’.

During each match, boxers’ actions invert cultural norms for personal space. Their feet were constantly up, kicking, kneeing or blocking the same from their opponent—very much not those Thai feet tucked back from the statue of Buddha, king or dinner-guest. The Thai boxer instead strikes another’s face, his chin often times pinioned against an opponent’s shoulder. He is, objectively, dragged groundward, his arms clasping the neck or head of the other, anatomically transgressive, relatively in a speed of movements more animal than man.⁷ As if to reinforce this transformative animality which transmits the order of our humanity, Ou and Jack train among other boxers from Isan with fighting names like Golden Eagle and Tiger-Head. After months of being pulled downward during clinchwork session by training partners, in the absence of their interlocking grips, walking was as simple as toe-dancing, shoulders, ribs and lungs were perceptibly lighter, always flying back, away and up. The bony limbs; collarbones, shoulderblades, bruised hips and shins—a boxer’s entire skeleton—took on a bird-like speed and lightness.

A boxer like Ou succeeds alone in the ring, but his corpus has already been extensively animated, invested with the traces of his sparring partners and trainers. In the most intensive training days preceding competition, two to four boxers would take turns in the standing-clinch, throwing Ou—Ou himself was not given a rest against the ropes, should he be tripped to the

⁷ These techniques include, for example, “Twisting the Serpent’s Tail (p.133), Breaking the Elephant’s Trunk (p.135), the Serpent Diving to the Underworld (p.143), The Monkey Beating the Giant (p.163), casting the fishing net (p.169), turning the land upside (p.173), the soldier hitting with the lance (p.195), the monkey giving the ring (p.203), the broken-wing swan (p.205)”, among others (all in Kantamara 2010).

canvas during the training sequence. Always another of the group of boxers would come forward, fresh, to engage him. Superficially, a boxing match features ‘one man’ finally brought alone in the ring, but this ‘one’s stamina, to rise, to kick again, is composed from out of the haunting pull and pressure others have already long-placed upon his shoulders.

**

In evenings training, as my lungs burned and legs wavered through the final sequences of padwork Ou’s father or a generously unoccupied trainer would offer me, beyond the aerobic capacity I struggled to find, this balance of breath and rest within the downswing of each kick continually eluded me. That sense of timing—for well-being and for a good-life in Bangkok—for rest and regeneration, for inhabiting a decay unto strength, continually eluded me.

For Ou however, training sessions kept his edge for competition. Ou had been doing this dance for years, with his ratty, thin red bag-gloves whirling, one off-hand held up from his side, the other swinging gently out front of his chin and hip with each thrown shin, a counterswing always brought back just in time to fend off a retorting jab. Daeng orbited Ou patiently with the training pade, a quiet, stout conscious, reigning in attention to find a new limit. Less rest on some days, more routine on others... There was no set time for Ou’s round-break rests during these padwork sessions, only Daeng muttering when the break or a chat with Jack had allowed Ou to find one too many breaths:

Then, “Come on, come on, come on... [*ma,ma,ma*]” Daeng would whisper across the mat, and both trainer and boxer would stumble forward to find each other over gravity again, the percussion of limbs against pads proceeding until Ou’s shin would emerge a fraction higher than before, then—pads turned up a fraction for a combination of punches, and finally a 1-2-elbow to signal both trainer and boxer’s collective collapse into another brief break. Ou’s attention, kept at lax, was reserved for arriving upon that tension in these exchanges—the plane of exhaustion, for

equally intense periods of repetitious kicking, kneeling; for combinations in the ring with our trainers. Daeng, glancing at the second-hand spiraling on the clock mounted to the wall above the ring, always took Ou far beyond the regular three-minute round limit he would meet during competition. It was not just the time set aside for these combinations in the ring though, but the different social cues, the periodic acknowledgements of elders Ou would perform, his posture—dipped shoulders for the correct moments—and the required moments he took at shrines both in camp and then outside of stadiums prior to each match, that delivered Ou to a restful state in the frame of competition, inscribing the correct duration of hesitation in his every breath.

Interactions with so many temporalizing Thai entities—each given their own time and focus—were lined up over hours, days and weeks, layered to free Ou’s focus for those moments in the ring. Out of all of these actions of being brought low, in repetition and correct sequence, there was a balance of concentration and relative strength to be delivered, given out through Ou.

A boxer like Ou engages in competition so frequently (dozens of times each season), that within these repetitions, he must find the shared means for accruing rest and restrengthening; for finding choice and awareness within a sequence of otherwise exhausted dietary, weight and training obligations. Where to live in Thailand is to move amidst entities left to display the onset of decay and rot (human fetus’ displayed in formaldehyde jars in temples, stray dogs left seething through open sores in the street), Ou’s victories, defeats and his persistence in boxing punctuated the inertia of such a death-present decay with a quality of resounding growth and transgressive mobility. There was a way in which the encouragement of Wai to achieve ‘strength’ during training required accepting being consistently casually distracted, being discarded among everyday routines, but then just as abruptly becoming thrown beyond any sense or finality.

When Wai would instruct me, it was usually in interrupting a series of kicks I'd teetered through in front of the long punching bag. With a hand-wave from his usually slow, deliberate and elderly body he would direct me aside and then demonstrate a percussive series of kicks himself, tucking cargo shorts harboring cigarette packages and jangling coins up against his thigh before demonstrating again—"yeaaanag; rrraaauuung; rraauuuuung"—always a further exhalation, change purse and lighter left on a nearby table—"ok?"—Wai would stand back after four or five of these hard kicks, the bag, metal stanchion, brick walls and corrugated roofing behind the ring now shudder-ringing as I nodded my comprehension. I would nod, but the instructions given, me in my mid-thirties, hips still negotiating the sedimentation of office-academic ergonomics, a world of other travel opportunities awaiting me after research—the instruction for throwing all of my leg into that whiplash, perhaps I never fully appreciated during the time of my fieldwork. And the sustained just-downward angle of the shin which would deliver a plane of force unperturbed by an opponent's guard in the ring—this degree of strength and health might only have effectively translated through long hours, dry-rainy-cool seasons of practice, maybe dozens of competitions during each season of my youth. Over years, perhaps this practiced angle was an inertia, an abject materiality at the end of each limb added to the core-swing of kicking musculature, an upending of gravity, a haunting through a shin turned on an opponent, that boxers like Ou and the others there were always already involved in meeting.

Collecting Money, Collecting Time

Immediately after Ou's victory in Lumpinee, I follow Ou back to the dressing room. He is approached by promoters—they take Sebu's contact information from Wai while Ou's father and Daeng *wai* and smile in greeting. Ou says little, but for the politely affirmative "Yes,... yes,.. yes." 'Krap... ', as the promoter congratulates him, nodding while our trainers unspool the long

medical cotton handwraps, the ribbons of white-now-sweat stained ivory thread spiraling off of his knuckles. While the older men exchange contacts for organizing the matches to come, Ou holds his arms limp, wrists rolling-snapping gently through the air aside his hips with the unwinding. Ou's success in the ring also brings me some relief—had he lost I would have worried that my constant presence at his side these past nine months, intensified in the week directly preceding the bout, had been a distraction. Or worse, that my presence in camp—maybe my unsuccessful attempt to help Ou fill out the narrowly demanding English grammar exercises he had brought back from school earlier...—had somehow slackened Ou's singular focus upon a boxing future or interfered with his focused routines.

In the weeks before Ou's matches, I cut back on grappling or jabbing-playing with him during training, pairing up whenever possible with others during group clinchwork sessions, understanding that I was mismatched—too old, oversized and slow to effectively help further refine Ou's reflexes. This next year will be Ou's final attending technical high school, and his days of learning practical skills there—welding, concrete mixing, projects operating portable noodle carts and barbecues—will all cease in a few short months. When I ask Ou about these other ventures through school, he waves me off, insisting they are not for him. 'Training Boxing, Thai boxing... practice, practice, practice—that's enough.' Ou is focused now on taking his place among the handful of other grown Thai boxers in camp. Among them, Ou, like his father, has a noticeably smaller stature. This size, however, has proved advantageous for holding stamina, practicing extra rounds with the trainers and finishing the daily run sometimes as far as two or three blocks ahead of the rest of us. Where over the years, his larger sparring partners have tripped him with ease, Ou has necessarily learned to choose his openings with greater care, to slip his weight that much more accurately within the trajectory of an intended strike, and to apply meaningful force inside the destructive range of an opponent's reach with ever-greater

precision. Though these advantages are not necessarily visible to outsiders, the training dynamic in camp, constantly challenging Ou at the right times, allows Sebu to confidently place Ou in prominent stadiums such as Lumpinee more frequently.

After this latest win, after Ou's handwraps had been removed in the dressing room, I accompanied him, his father, and two of the younger boxers from our camp through the stadium's back hallways and out to the admissions ticket windows. There, first Ou and then his father sign to collect the body-price (*ka-dtua*), his winnings. At 20000baht (approx. U.S.\$600), this was a significant financial windfall for his family during the coming weeks. I follow Ou, who walks away from the admissions window with payout in hand, the younger boxers stepping between us. Stepping through a swinging doorway into the adjoining hallway, Ou walks nearly lock-step into the path of his opponent, who is now re-dressed in a red, black and gold football jersey, the swollen cut between his eyebrows daubed neatly closed. Behind Ou, I nearly seize up walking, until I realize Ou's opponent has also effectively non-reacted to the near-collision. An initially minute nod-smile of non-recognition in our direction turns instead away and pathwards toward the anterior stadium exit, leaving Ou to also amble on without comment, taking the opposite curve of the hallway back towards the stadium amphitheater. Outside, as inside the ring, there is no mutual aggression or even dismissal. It is as though—quick smile, whether win or lose—both boxers had effectively passed through each other, keeping a separate trajectory.⁸ This

⁸ In the (frequent) absence of a knockout decision, muay-Thai's ringside judges score more highly the techniques of those boxers who do not compromise, collapse or alter the plane of their stance to cross-limb strikes or advances of their opponent. Losing balance and failing to remain upright is undesirable, though a momentary upending is not nearly as serious as having one's plane of intended motion altered by the position of one's opponent. Where at a glance, both boxers may appear enclosed, in immanent confrontation with each other, the most effective boxer demonstrates a state within the violence of the match of being right there, but well outside, beyond the angles, planes and advances of his opponent—proving by motion to literally be inaccessible to his opponents' terms, uninterrupted in time.

same taking of steps onto always other long-committed pathways, the project of mutual non-recognition, had characterized their footholds in the center of the ring during the pre-bout dance, both kneeling and waving arms through the choreographed sequence, arms rotating a mere hand's length apart, yet not in contact, only moments before the opening bell.

The money Ou collects, pooled, is readily transformed into goods and other aspirations, generating further value. And the collective interests, and classed relations organized around Ou are made resilient in turn, with each gambling investor receiving a return on his investment. Meetings and relationships between men of otherwise incommensurable classes are upheld in their shared witnessing of each match. It is not only with the bonding of this extensive social-economic network that Thai boxing becomes a ritually transformative event within greater Thai society though. As performative violence, muay Thai *makes itself* foundational to the distribution of memory and forgetting among Thai men. The trace of an otherness-in-life, the conscious movement encapsulated in the timing of the ring, moves not just through interpretation, but in the rhythmic production of memorable grounds upon which a hermeneutic subject writes its exchange. The hermeneutic dimension, the relative openness of cultural narrative, includes this rhythm. Interpretive commentaries⁹ and investments on boxing, the pinioning of a self vis a vis masculine institutions, first require a grounds: a basis upon which kinetic lives provision a relation to history and to each other. In the generation of that interpretive measure; in the immediacy of action and its enfolding in recall; in exchanges which, through repeated procedures, invoke the importance of sacrificial ritual. Beyond the socially and generalized economic structuring aspects of the ritual however, the care, management and sensory muting the boxer engages in also provides a basis for producing desires—for making a return on

⁹ Here, Thai boxing runs counter to the social/individual order as encapsulated in the drama of, say, Clifford Geertz's account of Balinese cockfighting, a form of 'deep play' where Balinese men engage in competitions to tell themselves stories about themselves (1973).

memory, for marking change, and for distributing again responsibility and the potential for meaningful movement among those gathered firstly around the ring, and then again, in Thai society at large.

In each of the movements Ou and his opponent manage in close proximity, be these *wai-kru* dances ostensibly honoring lineage and teacher, hesitations, knees and clinching holds during competition, or again in the concrete passageways of amphitheater or street, where measured distance threatens a certain collision, both parties commit to lost steps now unwaveringly, managing yet to continue moving. This ability to continue going onward nearly amidst the space of what would otherwise signal dangerous contact or destruction is not exclusive to muay-Thai. Rather, this penchant for motion in the midst of decay or destruction¹⁰ generates its tempo, decisively, in the Thai boxing ring.

¹⁰ For example, In August 2011, a Thai news story reported 169 bodies found in mass-graves inside temple grounds in central Thailand, only three months after violent clashes in Bangkok left missing pro-democracy protestors who had clashed with soldiers deployed by an oligarchic elite. The temple abbots recount accepting the bodies from two men working for a local charity; men whose explanations that the bodies were legally unclaimed was deemed sufficient to proceed with a mass-burial (Matichon News, August 18, 2011). Similarly, in 2009, after fishermen off the Thai coast began netting human skeletons and families of protestors missing since 1992 urged officials to have eight similarly dated shipping containers found submerged on the seabed there opened, the colonel in charge of the investigation opted not to immediately excavate the containers, saying that “[a]lthough some human skulls and skeletons were found nearby, it’s not something unusual given that some fishermen might have drowned there” (The Nation, May 14, 2009). These incidents highlight a question I have about how Thai men organize the memories that imbue action in their daily lives. At bottom, this is a question about from where the possibility of social change and historical movement is gathered. How do Thai men differentiate between matters—and materials—of life and death? What conditions make some bodies insignificant, keeping certain doors of inquiry submerged, while other avenues of violent exchange open repeatedly? The relative disavowal of corporeal destruction Thai men demonstrate in the episodes related above, while perplexing, is consistent with compelling attitudes towards physical violence I have experienced among Thai men: in the shrug of a village headman in wake of his motorcycle crash; in a grandfather’s rolling of cigarettes, steps from his toddler grandson, who teeters, machete in hand, across the concrete lip of an irrigation ditch; in marketplace crowds where elder Thai men would tap my elbow or hip, turning me aside the instant before my foot reached ground. Nowhere, however, have I found this particular masculine Thai aesthetic for relatively abrupt, forceful motion organized and transmitted more prominently than in the Thai boxing (*muay Thai*) ring.

Amidst the boxers' frequent returns to resting, disengaged postures, the audience might miss the welling up of animation, the crucial distances established with a lingering knee or a rolling-pinioned shoulder—weighted distances often preceding decisive strikes. Motion within the ring achieves a frequency of these animate wellings-up from within the crisis of confrontation—the snap-jabbing and clinching peppering the early time of each match would in late stages of close bouts, give way to a climbing of limb over limb, the application of a shared weight of exhaustion, shared until one pronated edge, a shin or elbow, a knee in the ribs pointed its recipient through-ways.

To take the most quotidian of Thai terms, within the cacophony of the match, each boxer remained '*sabaii*'¹¹, in a state of comfort or relaxation. On those nights in camp while Ou worked longer in the ring with our trainers, Ou's father would pace just off the side of the ring with me, holding the pads high out from his chest for my kicks. Even as I begin gasping for breath too early on, Ou's reliable percussion of strikes on Daeng's pads could still be clearly heard clearly just behind us. Pacing both of us through my shorter rounds of padwork, Ou's father would exhale softly between each combination of kicks and strikes, un-counting our turning toe-steps "jusshh-juung-shuu-juung-shhh-shhh", twisting just away from each kick, then snapping both pads forward at the last instant to counter the impact of my much heavier shin. And whenever I became predictably winded or verged on overtaking the height of his forearm-pads, he would utter just loud enough, "sabaii, sabaii", the cue for both of us to relent. Or, when a younger boxer began to struggle and thrash against a larger, grown boxer holding pads over

¹¹ Mary Haas'—briefly a student of Edward Sapir's school of linguistic anthropology at Yale (see Matisoff 1997: 594-602)—translates the ubiquitous term, 'sabaii' as both a verb, "1. to be well (in health), happy, comfortable", and "2. (a place) to be comfortable". The active state of the verb, kwam-sabaii, Haas translates as "well-being, comfort, ease, happiness". (1964: 521). Where the chains of etymology fall short though, 'sabaii' finds use in repeatedly diverse contexts.

him: there, from the older boxer playing at trainer, was the command to make this state of relaxation: ‘*tam-sabaii, tam-sabaii*’; to find good in waiting; to become relaxed within the indeterminacy of an outcome.

Or, when planning to travel with several men in Dom’s truck to a tournament in the Northeast, this meant showing up at the appointed time and then waiting hours to depart in the late afternoon, or on another occasion, showing up hours early only to find I had arrived with minutes to spare. In either case, I could just ‘do/be/make *sabaii*’. When we travel further into the countryside, after driving through the night, an exodus from the neon-marked cacophony of a festival, the ringing of our ears now settling upon the buzz of night crickets, the countryside is ‘*sabaii*’; the late-breakfast the next morning, ‘*sabaii*’. Not exactly idyllic, not exactly a content form of happiness, but comparably in a place with a fullness of available time. The countryside was often ‘*sabaii*’, regenerating in comparison to Bangkok. This term, so common in Thailand as to be prominently reproduced on tourist t-shirts, most often doubled in speech: “*Sabaii, sabaii*”—that incommensurate relative temporality became enfolded within the repetition. As this often-doubled insistence in speech suggested, “*sabaii*” meant not just to be happy, but to subside in a healthy state; to hold a sort of contentedness which insisted on bearing lightly, hesitating, waiting and inhabiting things or events into a fullness of unfolding. It was an imperative I arguably never settled into definitively, though a space of restfulness Ou and other boxers found readily—a rest and ready-standing-angle bearing only the necessary motions, for being thrown unperturbed in the ring. But learning to relax in the ring, to relax while another person swung at you—that took practice, practice, practice. Never enough practice.

Putting Muay Thai to Practice

After semesters of research years prior among family-village and abandoned camps in highway towns in the Northeast, when I returned to Bangkok for a year of doctoral research, I intended to find a ‘community of practice’ (see Lave & Wenger 1991), where a number of grown boxers could engage in repeated technical exchanges to refine technique. I found plenty of opportunities to pay for training at foreigner-friendly camps throughout Bangkok, and yes, surely this too was ‘muay Thai’: the influx of martial-arts enthusiasts onto Thai beaches and resorts has altered the parameters of muay-Thai’s world, lending it a cosmopolitan flair. It was not surprising that late in the year, after my own competitions had proved less than lucrative in the traditional sense—i.e. I lost, simply, and the lack of expertise I had been able to garner training among younger, smaller Thais showed in competition—Sebu asked me to promote the camp to other foreigners, or as with other trainers or boxers I had worked with in Isan, made tentative plans for me to invite them to teach at the boxing camp that I would open in Canada or North Carolina—somewhere, anywhere in North America. While these expectations for being hosted in American clubs died down as I remained in camp, their frequency at least suggests how the travel of some few boxers and trainers I met—to tournaments in Tokyo or Morocco, for example—had altered the aspirations for travel and worldliness many held.

As my age, limited strength and stamina began to show, Sebu had been generous enough to suggest this avenue of participation to me in passing. Sebu understood, perhaps more than others, how the roles of each supporter, each variegated ounce of strength around the ring, could be maximized—how contacts, drivers, family networks could be called upon at the right time. Each person then remained involved, directly or not, in the accumulating pool of cash and interest preceding each upcoming match: a father picking up equipment; a friend offering his taxi, off-duty to shuttle us to and from a stadium; a smaller boxer sustaining a minute of knees against the larger boxer who required five sparring partners that same day.

By being situated in these Thai boxing camps, this research contributes to a longstanding social-scientific discourse examining the body's capacities between individual experiences and collective history. Whether in Plato's Republic as both guardians and rulers (333e, 422c-d), in exteriorizing Sartre's violent economy of existential scarcity (1985: 17-50), or in the "time-bound" struggles of American boxers working to "transcend the merely physical" (Oates 1987: 15, 111; cf. Wacquant 2004), the character of the pugilist has a central role to play in the production of force connecting disparate aspects of communal life. Boxing in Thailand, however, is taken up among locally salient notions of time, life and death, non-self (see Collins 1982), corporeal impermanence (e.g. Klima 2002; Reynolds 1982) and desire deferred (cf. Payutto 1995; Webster 2005). The subject produced through Thai boxing thus also has different ways of operating upon the world and of marking time. The Buddhist notion of non-self (*anatta*), in particular poses a challenge to the usual ethnographic treatments of athletes or dancers, which frequently focus on the 'embodiment of identity' (e.g. Dyck & Archetti 2003), employing a theoretical turn which follows from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's redressing (1990) of Marcel Mauss' notion of habitus (1934). Bourdieu considered Algerian peasants as calculators of action in a closed time, fixed by cyclical land and marriage exchanges (pace Levi-Strauss among the Bororo of Brazil; Bourdieu 1990: Book2; cf. 'Simple reproduction and cyclical time' in Algeria 1960, [1963: 8-29]), bound to habitually reproduce the historical structures that constrained them. Their very ability to carry on playing a game was predicated upon the conservation of a doxic (Platonic) space of illu(sio)n and mystification obscuring a totalized social system behind every bodily movement. Such an 'embodied' actor thus resides in a familiar dialectic reproducing self and world, though a conceptual framework for understanding alterations to the grounds and periodicity with which their time unfolds is lacking, (as evidenced by calls for historicized practice theories, e.g. Ortner 2006, pace Sahlins). As Thai boxers like Ou and those I

trained with repeat movements unto exhaustion among local materials designating hierarchies of attention and motion; times of the living and dead, Ou's actions provide context to move anthropological theories of ritual, practice and the body—or *corporeality*, a term I have favored to connote the non-Cartesian, open and ultimately historic (i.e. mortal, finite) quality of the human practitioner's moving 'body'.

The exhausting challenges of Thai boxing practice, however, were not separable from their human geographies—each camp was at turns, insulated and then integrated within the hubbub of city and country life. No kick or punch was launched from out of the void, but rather, in counterposition to inertias in other historical migrations. Giorgio Agamben considers the 'camp' (paradigmatically, the concentration camps of the holocaust) as not simply an anomalous historical event, but a place where conditions of humanity were extended beyond choice in life, and thus became “the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living” (1998:166), a non-place (to borrow Auge's term (2000); cf. Sharma 2009) of rationalization that packaged humanity unto the self-erasure/destruction of a choiceless natureculture state. I consider the 'camp' especially as a place producing this political order or nomos, where in micropercussive strikes and daily beatings, we make persons in the act of permitting what can and cannot be done to others. I searched for a 'camp' setting where the day to day routines of its practitioners and supporters were integrated with training routines, where the limits of nature/culture and collective life were constantly tended, and where the local variations of a Thai ethical life, its violences, would be held in between fathers, sons, brothers, trainers and managers.

The greater city of Bangkok, its concrete at present imposed over a series of aquatic tributaries (see O'Neill 2008: 86-95), pedestrian weavings in the city-state-capital, encounter a layering of obstacle-projects disused and misused, highways looping back on themselves and

sidewalk brickways breaking up. I almost did not find Ou's camp. With my American spouse and one-year old daughter in tow, with their natural surroundings privately controlled by gardeners, contained in the month-to-month domesticity of a private apartment unit on a major highway in Western Bangkok, I began looking for, and arguably never found, the 'ideal' Thai boxing camp. After having lived several years previously for four months in an Isan household-camp near the Lao border, and then taken preliminary 3 and 1 month stays at a camp in another Northeastern town nearer the Cambodian border, I had no illusion of finding *the* authentic camp, but was also weary of doing research where the stoking of my martial ego would be a primary task of boxers and trainers. (In this respect, I withdraw somewhat from the autoethnographic tendencies of strictly phenomenological/existential anthropology.) I looked for a camp where boxers, trainers and their families around the ring were not at monetarily rewarded pains to keep the other aspects of their lives separate from a spectacular boxing life. I was 'apprenticeship', not just of the rhythms and challenges of boxing technique, but of all the Thai tendencies, prohibitions and norms for moving, eating, sleeping, stretching, praying, greeting. Muay-Thai was the intimate foothold I took to grasp broader Thai/Southeast Asian political aesthetics, necessary local cruelties, structural violences and perduring social inequalities.

The Camp as Duration in the Deathworld

In Bangkok this time around, with my new family—with my suddenly newly expanded personal life—that rattling tremor in traffic, the collusions of oil-dirt-plastic debris, that excess of impartially designed life in decay, was already rushing to meet me, even as I struggled to find the long-term fieldsite Ou's camp finally became. When I settled into Ou's boxing camp in western Bangkok's manufacturing district for the final nine months of my doctoral fieldwork in 2013/2014, I had already been doing what I thought of as practice-based participant-apprenticeship anthropology (e.g. Downey, Dalidowicz & Mason 2015), training in boxing

families' household camps in Thailand's populous rural northeast region (Isan), splitting parts of the Thai dry and monsoon seasons of 2007, 2010 and 2012 there, taking summer and spring academic break-semester 'in the field'. Instead of the close familiarity of rural family life I had become accustomed to in Northeast Thailand though, training with Ou and his cohort of sparring partners in Bangkok had left the collective life I had imagined in the intended trajectory of my research in an atmosphere of quiet, unfulfilled interruption and nearly constant exhaustion. Not only was I still training at 35, but this time around, I was accompanied by my American wife and our one-year old daughter, both of whom usually remained sequestered in that gated and fenced-commercial apartment complex several minutes by motorcycle-taxi down the highway. My daughter's first-steps taken there on linoleum over concrete, and then walks in a rare, small green-space of frangipani-flowers and security guard nods outside the apartments, were as if to pronounce a foreign refusal to live within the *pace* of Bangkok, the throttle-dust of industry and hubbub of mechanized bodies in transport, the transient sidewalk-blocks laid over-top of fetid canals turned to rank sloughs of brown, bubbling open sewage and oily industrial waste dregs, sowing-machine stairwell alcoves and semi-feral rat-like dogs out of which the swell of life flourished. Eventually, training alongside Ou and the other boxers in our camp cut a space of consistency out of this clamor.

The living arrangements I had accepted on earlier excursions to Thailand I had made alone, unaccompanied by family. Only now, those residences I had envisioned for integrating my family into the community alongside either of two camps I had scouted in Isan proved untenable. When I checked back with my former trainer and his family in the countryside, the thatch cabins behind the ring next to his family home I had stayed in seven years prior, modeled after those rented to Thai boxing tourists at the 'Fairtex-Chiang-Mai' resort, were now piles of rubble. Weeks before my arrival, a cobra had emerged from one of these piles and ripped the forearm off

my previous boxing trainer's eight year old nephew, putting him in a coma. When I travelled into Ubon's hospital to visit him, the amulet I had seen him wear as an infant several years earlier was re-tied in place, doubly reinforced where it had been cut, re-blessed with monks' incantations, his mother explained.

Back in the village I had called home, alongside my boxing trainers' parents' house, the concrete walkways poured between thatch cabins years prior were now crumbling into dust, never to become pathways for foreign boxing trainees who had never materialized. The fish-pond my trainer had envisioned poured between the cabins, inspired by just such an idyllic set-up at Fairtex Chiang-Mai, was an incomplete intention, a cracked white concrete furrow crumbling into the soil behind his parents' residence. The series of paved depressions made steps after dark hazardous, while each daytime revealed always impartially filled pools of mud for spawning mosquitos. My first boxing trainer, Chula, hung an amulet above the headboard of my bed before I slept, a few scant meters from where the cobra had slithered off into a rockpile the previous week.

**

At the other Isan camp I had hoped to settle in, I realized I would be equally unable to ask my new family to eat, sleep, breastfeed, toddle—to live off of the camp-owner's residence, with a literal hornet's nest in the ceiling of the trophy-room he had set aside for us. I try again and again to imagine my family's days in the nearly deserted camp, an architectural languor of projected boredom, blocks off of a highway via a series of back alleys full of dangers—charging traffic on blind corners, stray dogs, the periodic alcohol-induced harshness of neighbours... For example, the last 'champion' boxer, his old picture laminated on the camp's wall, now slurring his words regularly through whiskey, frightening the children at camp when not pushing a rickshaw-barrow through alleyways and schoolyards to collect bottles and trash. In the academic

years between my visits to this Northeastern town, this last ‘champion’ succumbs to consumption.

**

To find residence in Bangkok near other potential camps, I visit an assortment of modern apartments in various states of construction off of main thoroughfares, following many roads off of major intersections which eventually turn to gravel. Leaving one such apartment through the shaded parking garage on foot, the uniformed security guard gives me a departing smile, then continues with his precise extermination of a finger-thick, footlong brown, giant centipede, stabbing sharply down with the end of a long broom-handle. The sharp downward smack—sound of a pinioned, snapped exoskeleton on concrete—echoes with my footsteps as I walk back away into the blistering sun. Somewhere else then...

**

After an afternoon training at one camp built on top of a garbage dump behind a technical college, I ask after housing for my family. The smaller boxer who has been tasked with keeping me occupied while the others pound fastidiously through their padwork routines directs my question to another trainer. This trainer calls a neighbour into the training facility. I follow this neighbour into the back of the training warehouse, past rows of waist-high concrete-water tubs, doorless shower blocks shielding ground-level urinals, past boxers’ bunks and finally outside behind the training warehouse, down a short path to a two-story concrete-boxed parking lot, its foundation framework sunk into long-compacted trash. The smell I ignored while training, wafting up again, demands my further unseeing the layers of fluttering plastics indiscernible from meat-mush fungi heavy brown wet ground—a rot-mulch neither organic or artificial seeping towards the cracked-bubbled concrete poured for the parking garage. So much of the ground, anything not poured concrete—offers no foothold. Inside the grey-dark of the parking

garage we walk past a line of cars until my guide opens a short, thin pressboard door on crooked hinges set into a back wall of translucent, fogged glass bricks. I crouch beneath the doorframe, peering in to see an unwrapped, fetid mattress leaning against one wall, three cockroaches scurrying ceilingward. Exhaust fumes and headlights from the upper floor of parking-lot floor refract through the wall of cracked-fog-glass¹² bricks next to us.

“Here, ok?”

I look again into the low-ceiling lot’s crawlspace, searching for another stairwell or doorway which has perhaps not been indicated. No... “My family...” I begin again.

“Yes.” He gestures towards the fetid mattress. “For sleeping-ok?”

**

At another camp, my taxi rolls through blocks of dust until crossing a roadway into Bangkok’s low swamp once more, pulling up outside an array of wood-slat residences punctuated by satellite dishes and corrugated tin roofing, open windows on upper floors looking out over the network of sewage/swamp canals. I walk between the buildings on narrow concrete pathways an inch above the waterline of klong-plastic-garbage-sludge and barbed wire, steps disturbing the gnats and mosquitos. My taxi-driver, purchasing grilled chicken from a table at the mouth of the pathway, deposits bones at his feet as a trio of mutts scurry out from between buildings... A small boy from the neighborhood walks us between the square buildings on a

¹² Writing about the sense of smell in a Bangkok alleyway (1988), Erik Cohen points out that garbage left undisturbed for days in the street follows a pattern of disposal exercised in rural households where many alleyway inhabitants hail from. I can also verify that trash in Isan is often left to accumulate, dropped directly outside house-windows, against building foundations or doorways, only to be less-rarely swept together, eventually burned and reincorporated into the land (cf. Cohen 1988: 41), a practice with increasingly noxious results as much contemporary Thai waste is non-organic plastic. The more pertinent overall point Cohen raises regards the differential application of olfactory sense—i.e. a sensitivity to minute body odors develops alongside the non-recognition of fermenting trash. But the other Thai senses—taste, touch, sight—are all differentially distributed as well.

maze of concrete just above the water, until I am back at the training grounds, a concrete yard with a collection of rusting exercise equipment and a split punching bag next to a ring with two ropes on dry ground. Three ‘boxers’, young men, share a flask on two benches under awning alongside the waterline, watching the steady flow of brown klong-water. Their rooms are on the second-floor behind us, above the swamp water. On the second floor, their one trainer, heavysset with whiskey on his breath, introduces himself cursorily, waking another charge to shadowbox next to me. After an hour of feigned routine training on my behalf with two of the drinking boys, one boxer volunteers to motorbike me back to the main road as dusk sets in. “The trainer hits us.” he explains while slowing the bike along the aquatic pathway.

“For training?” I call from the seat behind him.

“No. He hits. He drinks. At night...hits the boxers.” I step off the back of his bike when we reach the main road. The word “MuayThai”, in English lettering, is tattooed between my driver’s shoulderblades. The profiles of two figures wearing red and blue gloves, their knees raised, completes the tattoo across his lower back. On departing, we make vague plans that I will return to hire him on as a trainer for the American Thai boxing school I will one day open. There is no way, sans motorcycle, of entering the neighbourhood on top of the *klong* unescorted, even without my family in tow.

**

After visiting another Bangkok camp only blocks from the grounds of Radjamangala University and the National Sports Center, I follow directions from a trainer, cross a canal and walk under a highway underpass to find potential housing—a skysrise apartment residence. The front desk staff accompanies me by elevator up twenty-seven floors. The elevator doors open onto a quiet grey concrete hallway, empty but for plastic-tied garbage bags outside the doors of three units. The entryways to half of the units remain unlocked and unbuilt, the walls along half

of the hallway erected only to waist height. The end-unit, opened up for me, includes a triangular balcony perch with a low rail looking out—vertigo—on the neighbouring mudbrown lot, where insect-sized yellow bulldozers roll through constant preparations. The vertiginous lapse of perspective at this height gives the impression the grey-corner balcony outside has slid horizontally, into the skyline.

**

On the other side of Bangkok, I have walked for blocks and blocks off of the highway bus stop, locating a camp in question before walking further blocks and blocks on grey-stone gravel for the corresponding potential apartment residence. Every step further away I calculate as being repeated twice daily to and from morning/evening training. Maybe, I tell myself, I will bike each day, to and from this two-story apartment complex I visit at the trainers' recommendation. On the second floor, one wall of the sample unit shown to me is built of aerated brick, allowing a carbon monoxide breeze from the highway traffic to slip through. The apartment's two floors of boxed concrete are connected by an open-air stairwell. I am already monoxide-dizzy on this platform, but there is no railing on these mid-opened-stairs joining the apartment's two narrow floors, as though Escher had whispered interruptions to the local architect during the design of these few vertical square feet. Next to this drop between floors where I imagine my toddler falling again and again is an appliance equally incommensurate to square-footage. My eyes settle there on a three-quarter sized fridge—a modern convenience for any Thai family—its cracked siding oozing a molding puddle.

**

As the initial three months of my fieldwork trickled away, I searched Bangkok this way, largely by word of mouth, visiting camp after camp. Months later, I would sometimes see the

owners and trainers I had visited for a day or two at most, sending them a brief *wai* in greeting across crowded stadiums or fairgrounds.

Eventually, I resolve on a ninety-minute commute from the apartment my family will remain in, and training day in and out at a boxing camp behind the national Muslim university—the permanently cross-eyed trainer there nods his approval when I join his boxers in clinchwork on my second day in camp. An Indian ESL teacher sees me on the grounds and beckons me to his office. An older British expat might help me find housing closer by for my family. He teaches on campus also, has married a Thai woman, so is not leaving, but “wants to fucking kill himself man. I mean, he goes home and sticks the gun in his mouth *every night*. He really wants to die.” So, yes, I was doing this anthropology project, but would I like to teach English there with them soon? Perhaps next term? The shadowy harness of this overly grammatical academic-contract flutters momentarily in the backdrop of my sun-lit fieldwork, until I have excused myself and boarded buses and trucks for hours of jostling, crouched seating then stand-hunching into rings suspended in bus aisles, depositing my face for sleep on my arm, moving back to my family. When I leave this campus after dusk, massive herons glide above the roadside canals, settling on drainage pipes running alongside the corrugated tin housing. Hours later, at the apartment complex I return to, when I crane my neck to the strips of skyline between our manicured, blocked-in apartments, these herons float across the narrow skyline above the buildings, shadowy wings over treetops above the blocks of the gated apartment complex, the cosmetic grounds my spouse and daughter... and I, will call home the rest of the year.

After all, we viewed dozens of apartments—railings, balconies and doorways covered in a carbon-based layer of oxidized scum-smog-soot, before settling there. Our apartment’s bedroom window overlooks the highway and partial cityscape horizon, occasionally revealing distant fireworks, megaphone-volumed *mor-lam* concerts in neighbouring lots, or industrial fires,

further back, nearer the vast Chao-Phrya river. If I press my face against one corner of the window the visible city skyline includes a tall riverside skyscraper where, as a Thai couple in our apartment explained to me, three work-men who had been hanging an advertising banner off the side of the building, had just drifted away, 'caught on the wind'.

As weeks turned to months, my plans for finding a camp alongside living arrangements for my family languished beneath a film of urban traffic carbon-dust, animal waste and sludge-creeks bubbling up from beneath concrete. I reflected further on the ill-fit of my family, for another week commuting up to four hours a day on Bangkok trucks and buses, to and from our sequestered metro-cosmopolitan apartment complex. By some combination of spuriously located canal-bridges and developers' non-communication with the placement of highway exits' locations, this requires me to taxi past our apartment complex on the opposite side of the highway for five minutes, then double-back at a turn-off. It is at this turn-off where I finally spot Ming jogging one afternoon, then return to the next day, waiting to follow him to camp the day after, etc., etc. By that point, my search for a fieldsite and for the logics of Thai boxing practice had become a more pointed question about what life in the camp could tell us about how people lived and moved in the cacophony, dust and debris of Bangkok. How did the involution of migrants converging in seasons of work torn from alternately flooding and then drought-dust spiraling Northeastern roads move through this space? It was this pace of life, the hum and throttle of action hammering out the Thai city-state, and state of wakefulness and rest Thai men and women employed therein, which more and more demanded my attention as I solidified my commitment to training, to staying put, until the monies and the visas ran out, with Ou, Wai their families and friends.

The Decay of All Habit

What sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls the habitus, or only the disposition of a ‘habitus’¹³, was a construct for considering ‘embodied’ knowledge, but a construct of increasingly ill-fit in allowing me to understand how the noise rhythms and demands of movement in the Thai city state played out across exhausted persons therein. Behind Bourdieu’s notion of ‘doxa’, behind the established way of comportment, the way of moving in and among Thai shrines, apartments contracted and abandoned, dogs ignored and ignoring, spines stooped in sewing or raised in running, there was always a hall-of-mirrors relay of doxa over doxa over doxa, an escape-hatch from calculation and memorable culpability in every exchange—a fissure of disinterestedness in sense I only moved closer to feeling by Thai boxing—the practice itself had become a space for sensory refuge, for a recompensing of possibility amidst. The Thai logic for motion, and the accompanying forms of misrecognition (to borrow another of Bourdieu’s terms); the local misrecognitions of discomforts or violence, the continuities for cruelty, discreet attention and then disavowal of damage were all compounded in my waiting for the unexpected, cheekbone-dulling smash of Jack’s ratty red gloves. Like a Thai caravan driver’s swig of whiskey while passing oncoming traffic on the highway between Bangkok and the northeast,

¹³ Recalling Bourdieu’s thoughts on the allocation of symbolic violence (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 162-173, 200-205) through the ‘habitus’, speaking on the financial opportunism accompanying globalization, Bourdieu also notes, “You cannot cheat with the *law of the conservation of violence*: all violence is paid for, and, for example, the structural violence exerted by the financial markets, in the form of layoffs, loss of security, etc., is matched sooner or later in the form of suicides, crime and delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence” ([1996]2010:117). The surplus movements extracted by Buddha images in consecration (e.g. Swearer 2004), by Thai monks during alms-giving, by the Thai king in passing, by patron in greeting, by foreign sewing contracts over days—these cont(r)acts once removed, all impose upon Thai men certain durations of immobility accompanying their assertions of linear or cyclical time. The act of Thai boxing though, *and* drinking and gambling around Thai boxing, is a concentrated reappropriation of the terms of violent exchange—which precisely upsets kinetic accounts and balances, reordering the local logical order of sense around moments of corporeal distanciation exposed in exhaustive performance—violence not by law of conservation, held in reserve, but by an opening unto death in life in death.

every machination was in the timing—hesitations permitting the the shuttling of humanity or goods in passing, upholding the city-state with corporeal capital, the possibilities of rending a system were being-shaken through us every day, with not only the public secrets and censorships we needed unsee every day, but behind these, the assertion of a grounded mortal innocence which would undo these constructs—with time. Timing became every-thing.

With the modern apartment duly rented for my family, I need not ever settle into Bangkok, though perhaps Bangkok settled interminably into me—into all drawn in, season to season. There was a disjunction in pace and urgency between Bangkok and the Isan villages I had visited; a jaggging in the pathway familiar to many boxers which became increasingly difficult to deny.

Before I had found Ou's camp, I had emailed reports of fieldsite incommensurability to American, Spanish and Canadian academic friends, many of whom rapidly recommended I look for camps and housing in the Northern city of Chiang Mai. My excursion there ended after a single afternoon of boxing-camp visits, heavy shins curled back into the seat of the overnight bus to Bangkok, back to my family. What Rosalind Morris termed the 'place of origins' (2000), a layering of representations and spiritual heritage covering Chiang-Mai's downtown temples, was equally a tourist-friendly urban epicenter, a radial municipality street-cleaned by law and sanitized to represent Northern Tradition. That being-shaken I felt between Bangkok and Isan would clearly be put aside in the urban space of Chiang-Mai, a café-sidewalk to comfort intellect without requiring exposure to the price of producing satellite relations. The sanitized clean streets, grocers and suburban homes around the few camps I did visit in Chiang Mai all tantalized with the promise of manageable creature comforts and spiritual exegesis, but after seasons of living in Isan years prior, this Northern air seemed somehow vacant of the motile pulp of Thai life—its costs and asymmetrical violence.

Chiang Mai, and by extension, perhaps the Thai north may indeed be this ‘place of origins’, where practices of representation—nostalgia, the self-promotion of spirit mediums, the metanarratives of information-pamphlets outside each temple—abound. However, taking on the question of historical change while prioritizing a record of the shifting terms of the politics of representation¹⁴ for me held too high a price, risking leaving behind a portrait of the material volatility and corporeal debts which sustain life-in-motion in the Thai present.

Shuddering, shaking motion in travel, the overexposure to toxicity, the heavy-moist air, filters for dust, for sun, for sludge... for these very sensory reasons I was obliged to continue my investigation in Isan-Bangkok, along a human vein driven under city-state topography through the insistent movements shared by generations of Thai boxers—scars, hardened shins, cauliflower-ears, bludgeoned cartilaginous cheekbones, cracked ribs, strained tendons, a dead-set uprightness in torso and shoulders; a shared corpus put to grind.

A Clinchwork-Arrangement of Martial Ethnographers

While I am hardly the first ethnographer to consider muay-Thai as a field of study, my time in Isan and Bangkok, as well as my commitment to investigating muay-Thai as action generative of cultural values and worldviews, allows me to make new contributions to 1)

¹⁴ In an article appraising the role of Southeast Asian ghosts in political trauma, though Rosalind Morris writes that “[w]herever there is violence in Southeast Asia, ... there are ghosts” (2008: 230), she goes on to suggest that the gathering of Southeast Asian crowds portending violence or change is a phenomena best explained by the poststructuralist category of the “accidental” (2008). Gatherings for Thai boxing however, explicitly incorporate things that designate territories of the Thai dead: honorific dances, stances and striking techniques passed from elders, prayers, mortuary dust, amulets, and garlands otherwise reserved for corpses, or ancestral spirit-houses. Additionally, Thai boxing delegates these forms of the dead in popular, crowded underclass arenas, where they can be evaluated in relation to efforts to accrue power and fortune in the present.

ethnographies of muay-Thai, 2) ethnographies of the martial arts and 3) anthropologies/philosophies of movement more generally.

Prior ethnographic research on Thai boxing includes Peter Vail's doctoral thesis, drawing on Erving Goffman's frame analysis to convey a seriated history of 'heroic' matches¹⁵ punctuating Thai national history (1998; also see reprisals 1998b; 2014). By his own description, Vail had lived extensively in Thailand before choosing to write on the widespread practice of muay-Thai. His dissertation opens with a compelling personal account of being confronted at gunpoint while drinking with Thai associates, friends who chose to disregard the brandished weapon until the disagreement had passed. Aside from his valuable, canonical historicized accounts of muay-Thai, the gun-toting scene that opens Vails' dissertation serves as as good an introduction as any to highlight the question of how Thai men manage threats of immanent, destructive violence in their lives—according Vail's account, by disavowing the threat until its presence is no longer directly...present. To pick up on the direction of Vail's scholarship—in which, if I read this correctly, martial kings and boxers sustain Thai statehood in time through the grand narratives generated around their actions within the ring—with my accounts of muay-Thai in Isan or Bangkok, I consider the intensification of Thai boxing's popularity in contemporary decades as a pleasurable symptom of repetitive ritual sustaining a certain continuity of state-sanctioned, permissible force in the Thai political/social structure.

Peter Vail's student, Loh Han Loong has also published a scholarly account of the aspirations and lifestyles of foreign boxing trainees in Thailand, *The Body and Senses in Material Culture* (2016). Loh Han Loong's attention to this demographic adds a useful addition to ethnographic studies of muay-Thai. While I might consider further how the aspirations of a

¹⁵ Suwat Sidthilaw also mentions a Thai-Burmese tournament organized to demonstrate to conquering kings the supreme fitness of Thai fighters in 1767 (1997:8-9), the final year of the Ayutthaya empire.

global martial clientele articulate with local Thai techniques of the body, the focus of my study has been the particular local aesthetics and economies of motion which sustain Thai boxing itself. Keeping these foreign interests in Thailand in mind, I would look again at the western notion of ‘embodiment’ presented by Loh Han Loong and take this a bit further, emphasizing that the Thai ‘body’ and ‘senses’ are far from stable technical conduits immersed in material culture. Through the efforts of local Thai boxers, enthusiasts, gamblers and family members to engage with the wider parameters of their world, the modicums of *corporeality* and sensation, instantiated in efforts to sustain participation, are themselves responsible for attending to the order of local material grounds.

Pattana Kitiarsa, recently deceased academic of so much northeast Thai masculine life¹⁶, also wrote a memorable account of childhood Thai boxing, stressing muay-Thai as an agentive avenue for Thai masculinities (2005), a position echoed in his account of a Thai boxing hero’s downfall in the local media (2011). Kitiarsa’s posthumous discussion of “*The Boxing-Buddhism Nexus*”, posted to Southeast Asianist scholars’ site The New Mandala (2013), sees Kitiarsa further exploring muay Thai as a conduit of hegemony. He writes,

“As key male personalities, they [boxers and monks] exemplify the materiality of Thai national manhood from the ground. The nexus of boxing and Buddhism shows us that there are integral hegemonic modes and venues of masculine expression in each human society. The social functions of these modes and venues are to engender boys and men and groom them for the hierarchical structures of leadership and membership in the society.” (2013: 11).¹⁷

¹⁶Staying off of my persistently inflated, bruised ankles for three weeks during preliminary fieldwork, I met Kitiarsa by chance while opting to study Thai language at Khon Kaen University in 2010. We spoke very briefly before he excused himself for a lunch with Thai colleagues, our conversation never to be picked up again. Kitiarsa died of pancreatic cancer in 2013.

¹⁷<http://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Pattana-for-New-Mandala-30-September-2013.pdf> , accessed October 26, 2013.

Kitiarsa's emic perspective also notes the obvious—he refuses to separate boxing from other Thai state institutions. To build on Kitiarsa's perspective, I suspect something unique in the practice of Thai boxing, or more acutely, in its mass-accessible delegation of violence, which allows its movement to operate, as Kitiarsa says, alongside hegemony, but as Kitiarsa does not say, in a category of motion and life which knocks hegemony off of its feet, which turns a notion of hegemony on its head (to echo the Marxian inversion of Hegel), and resets the clock. Like Kitiarsa's other research, *Mediums, Monks and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (2012), or the subsequently Agamben-inspired, detailed study documenting the “bare life” of Thai migrants—abroad, in Singapore (2014; also see Johnson 2018 for an account of Thai migrant-workers' desires on hold), Kitiarsa's detailed account of masculine Northeastern practices often stress a subject's position to be negotiated under state powers. Given his position as a northeastern Thai academic operating under frequent Junta installations, this position, nearly overtly critiquing established power-structures, is prescient, if not downright brave. My research here in part heeds Kitiarsa's call to investigate Thai religious practice in ways that move considerations of Theravada Buddhist communities “Beyond the Weberian trails” (2009; echoing Tambiah 1973), which I take to especially mean analysis outside of analytical constructs which understand movement or religious expression to be but variations of idealized archetypal individuals or dispensations of a charismatic order. I read Kitiarsa's work overall as tirelessly explicating practical life in Isan, be this religious expression, ritualized boxing, or migrant aspirations, an explication in terms which aim to slip outside of the structure/agency binary, often indexing a Thai masculinity, consciously or not, vis a vis the strangleholds of nationalist hegemony.

It is within the ringing in of this hegemonic narrative however, that my research slips away, where Thai boxing involves movement which *makes* time outside the debts transmitted via

a construct of temporalities indexed by Thai mens' motions; debts accorded to the king, the factory, the military conscription lottery, or the iconic Buddhist statue.

Stephane Rennesson, who, with scholars Emmanuel Grimaud and Nicolas Cesard, has drawn on Gregory Bateson and Gilbert Simondon's attention to ecological and ethological communications to write of the pre-signaletic, vibratory communication involved in Thai beetle-fighting (2012), has also published pieces of his research on Thai boxing, appraising the attention given transgender Thai boxers as evidence of the civilizing process accorded a broader Thai body (2011), a chapter which likens muay-Thai to the 'networking of a polymorphous clinch' (2011b). The research I do, still, is not aimed at the assembling of a 'network' however, but is concerned with the internal potentialities of the ritual arrangement that cut such a 'network', and assemble permissible violences in Thai social life—the verticality and hermeneutic depth generated through the match.

I might also stress that I practiced to compete in muay Thai, however ineffectively, and that this temporal urgency and orientation places a different lense upon my work, though with the general ethnographic tenor of Rennesson's research, I share enough in common. In the political conjuncture that formed a backdrop to my fieldwork though, given the daily training I shared, movements transpiring amidst the fall of the king, the rise of populist media politics, consumerism, classism, environmental destruction, militarization and the rise of the Thai Junta, I have become markedly more focused on a continuity between the phenomenological experience of Thai boxing and the buttressing of historical inequalities between the Northeast and Bangkok—debts and credits attenuating sacrificial motion in the Thai city-state.

I have approached muay Thai as an anthropologist concerned with encountering an ‘other’ way of life¹⁸; with life as being haunted and innervated with a trace of otherness. This focus on memorable motions unfolding amidst karmic, merit-laden space-time, also stands perhaps as a response to more experiential, existential or universalizing phenomenologies.

In this commitment to analyze muay Thai as dynamic, historicizing movement, I am standing on the shoulders—if not slipping through the elbows—of a series of martial-ethnographers before me.

Like the haunting images of Franz Boas’ museum-staged reconstructions of Northwest Coast Hamat’sa Dances (see Hinsely & Holm 1976), anthropological efforts to catalogue movements of the other run the risk of being taken out of context, or threaten to become static, catalogued as heritage property or otherwise referenced as cache for identity-politics. In writing of muay-Thai as not just a particular case, but also in terms which may allow for some comparative referentiality to other lives—i.e. making a contribution to a scientific anthropology—I have drawn upon a subliterate in the anthropology of the martial arts, and particularly those ethnographers who have taken up apprenticeship participation.¹⁹ Exemplary monographs have

¹⁸ I will not be the last ethnographer to write any pretense of a final word on muay-Thai, though my commitment to staying ‘out there’, in the village (see Schissel 2008), pursuing the local-peripheral perspective, has opened me up to admissible criticisms suggesting I downplay the importance of tourism, the media and royal-central patronage in contemporary Thai boxing (see Forestal’s comments, link below). I suspect Forestal’s forthcoming ethnomusicological study of muay-Thai’s rhythms will add an additional, musically nuanced understanding of the rhythms informing Thai martial comportment (cf. Downey 2002), though as per his critiques, I might also refer him to Schissel (2016).

<http://hemiolasandhematomas.com/bibliographies/muay-thai-bibliography/> accessed September 2, 2018.

¹⁹ Though I embrace the principle methodology of apprenticeship, I have clearly set my analytic priorities apart from ethnographic writing which relies heavily on relating a researcher’s own experience—a singular approach to a field of practical inquiry defined by the ethnographer’s heroic facing of hidden dangers (e.g. Wacquant 2004, final chapter, following Bourdieu, following Heidegger 1926[1962]: 279-348). My personal trials in learning do not take center

appraised ascetic cultivations of the body in Indian wrestling, both northern (Alter 1992) and southern (Zarrilli 1998), a pugilistic class in inner-city Chicago (Wacquant 2004), bodily comportment in Brazilian Capoeira (Downey 2005) and martial ritual channeling the Chinese underworld (Boretz 2011). While Wacquant and Downey²⁰ provided early methodological templates for my execution of this study, Jaida Samudra's account of apprenticeship with Indonesian Silat practitioners (2009) also served to sharpen an interpretive question I had also considered through sociological writings of Nick Crossley (2005, 2007). Again, as with the political appropriation of static cultural images Boas wrestled with, this question is about how to express the experience of motion in such a way that it does not lend itself so readily to static political capture, or practico-inert heritage institutionalization—how to unharness a style of motion in writing, but also in general interactions with informants. This methodological dilemma approximates the praxiological version of the Marxist conundrum of alienation encountered as readily in performative movement as in labour: the question about *how* to write about kinaesthetic motion (as experience or otherwise), the totality of which is always escaping those engaged in motion, is something each practice-based ethnographer must deal with, and deal with in the terms of their informants' everyday concerns.

Jaida Samudra takes a counter-interpretive approach to the question of how to write of embodied movement, terming this an analytical problem of 'thick participation', 'translating' the memory enculturated through practice in tactics which pay attention to somatic

stage in writing or translating the experiences of Thai boxers, but are instead tools to be analyzed in fieldnotes, most importantly providing an understanding of others.

²⁰ In particular, Greg Downey's attention to the historical record of the elusory comportment of Brazilian slaves informing formal Capoeira practice (2005) was one particularly clear example which drew my attention to the viable political aesthetics of martial motion.

communication.²¹ Samudra emphasizes that while no martial practitioner may communicate the fullness of their personal experience, transmissions of technique or exchanges between individuals indicate a field of intersubjective knowledge, a kinaesthetic best fit between otherwise closed-off individual-bodily experiences, for cultural transmission.²² I apply Samudra's interpretive version of this question, and her insights about shared kineasthetics, to the negative iterations of violence and trauma in Thai public-secret life, the incommensurabilities of unspeakable experience, Junta censorship and the silences which accompany comportment in Thai public space.

Thai boxing for days, months, years at a time, practitioners take on imperceptible postural alterations, making incremental increases in their range of motion. Improvements in technique are accompanied by altered practical dispositions and proprioceptive²³ holdings—sometimes this

²¹ Samudra writes, “We do not have to demonstrate that our physical experiences in the field are identical to those of our consultants. The moving body transmits information only approximately, as does language” (Samudra 2008: 667).

²²Samudra's insight regarding shared ‘kinesthetic systems’ of commensurable understanding has much in line with a dialectic of a shared corporeal schema emphasized by Merleau-Ponty (see 1973:Epilogue). Merleau-Ponty's dialectic of perception, in this case, additionally emphasizes that the corporeal is, in actively making sense, already always rushing outward to what is other. Kinaesthetic communication in this measure takes place across a shared horizon of perception which is ontologically generative, holding grounds for relation and communication within each act of contact—there never being a point where we are isolated experientially outside of history. Thus, even the act of speech entails a gathering up of shared, historical grounds unto vocalization (see Merleau-Ponty 1973b).

²³ Proprioception indicates the relation of one person's internal parts, their substance in standing together. By its clinical definition, for kinesiologists, proprioception entails: “The sense of position and movement of the limbs and the sense of muscular tension. The awareness of the orientation of the body in space and the direction, extent, and rate of movement of the limbs depend in part upon information derived from sensory receptors in the joints, tendons, and muscles. ... Sensory information from certain proprioceptors, particularly those in muscles and tendons, need not reach consciousness, but can be used by the motor system as feedback to guide postural adjustments and control of well-practiced or semiautomatic movements such as those involved in walking.” (Lamotte 2014). Where this kinesiologist's definition adds an internal, collaborative, positional compliment to Merleau-Ponty's notion of corporeal/bodily schema (1962: 103), with both perhaps offering a tensile addendum to Deleuze

entails a readiness to squat on hips while resting, or to extend the spine backwards, as though stretching over the ropes, or to find a reprieve from gravity by suspending one's arms above the head as during round-breaks. Doors, cupboards or gates at foot-level, once closed, begin to open with varying degrees of toe-tap precision.

These kinetic and proprioceptive changes happen over a time—a time of training punctuated by derisory dismissals of speech, ill-timed parries and off-kilter strikes, trips, smacks and collapses on the canvas. After months, years, uncountable mistakes, the bruises which once marked hips, ribs and shins no longer well up in debilitating fashion. Tissue calcifies as much as one learns to rotate a torso or limb just enough to avoid damage. Under these conditions, Crossley emphasizes the contingency in 'observant-participation' apprenticeship methodology²⁴, and the importance of a *written* record; of looking back on fieldnotes (see 2007) to understand the 'embodied' skill acquisition that settles into muscle memory imperceptibly, being taken for granted. In other words, a methodology which accords for, and indeed expects the loss in memory, akin to the scattering, scrabbling, memory-scratching practice of writing,²⁵ this phenomenological component of martial ethnography, applied to the page, composes a record *through* dynamic motion, an interpretive surplus which must not be taken for granted, but is rather composed, articulated through the Thai boxers' muscle, cartilage and calcified-bone memory.

and Guattari's *Body Without Organs* (2004), the collaborative positionality entailed in corporeal proprioception involve a subcutaneous interplay in sensation, composing a rate of motion, a return which informs corporeal resilience among others.

²⁴ As one example of "*researching embodiment by way of body techniques*", Crossley describes his own apprenticeship in a local muay Thai class (2007: 88-89), learning to use his hips to throw a whipping shin-kick.

²⁵ see Walter Benjamin's Archive (2015), "Excavation and Memory", opening pages.

In relating Thai boxers' learned motions to larger social processes, I share methodological leanings with what sociologist Loic Wacquant terms a 'carnal sociology'. Drawing on his apprenticeship in an inner-city Chicago boxing club, Wacquant explains the empirical advantages of an intimate, 'carnal sociology',

“a sociology not *of* the body (as intelligible social product) but *from* the body (as intelligent social spring and vector of knowledge), exemplifying a distinctive manner of doing and writing ethnography that recognizes and takes full epistemic advantage of the visceral nature of social life.” (Wacquant 2005:446).

Elsewhere Wacquant writes that *For a Sociology of Flesh and Blood*, the subject-actor is, in addition to being 'symbolic', 'sentient', 'suffering', 'skilled', 'sedimented' and 'situated', that most crucially, “all six of these elements are jointly *structured* and flowing as well as growing through *time*.” (2015: 3-4). Where the general critical (Nietzschean) project of explicating a body from within its terms of suffering, gives this project common carnal ground with Wacquant, in the context of Thai boxing, the dynamics of growth amidst decay and ancestral steps interrupts mimetic learning. Thai boxing shares a certain harmony with Wacquant's carnal sociology, considering the temporalized subject, the violences—silences and lookings-away from loss or damage, a haunting loss in the parameters of participation— of intersubjectivity, of sparring even, have made prominent for me the question of how local Thai actors perceive, structure and *make time*.²⁶

Applying Bourdieu's practice theory to an ethnography of the martial arts, and the scaffolding implications of misrecognized structured structuring structures (see Bourdieu 1990) to the boxing clubs of inner-city Chicago, Loic Wacquant writes, “Becoming a boxer, training

²⁶ The measure of the operant Bourdieu-inspired 'habitus', a behavioral apparatus of misrecognitions, as a summation of structures and histories in the subject, is that producing behaviours through its epistemic juxtaposition between social structures. In this position, the habitus-laden subject is re-productive of value (Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice* (1990), part 2, which locates the subject within its reproduction of dualist-oppositions, night-day, etc), though not altering of ethical or ontological/temporal grounds (see Evens 1999).

for a fight is a little like entering a religious order. *Sacrifice!*” (Wacquant 2004: 235). Such a sacrificial gift given, if consistent with Bourdieu’s formulation of the gift, is inherently poised upon the expression of dutiful and obligatory reciprocation in time; the time of reciprocal obligations in economic, symbolic or cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1990; 1979). While operating with Bourdieu’s theories of practice in mind allows for a fleshed-out depiction of the inequalities of life in inner-city Chicago (a western, transcendental context for ‘work’), the repetitions and rhythms which return the presence of a fully, ontologically generative actor (i.e., here, the Thai intergenerational concern with ghosts) requires additional analytics for time and life, where actors may not be only wholly calculating, obligated or duped in misrecognition. The practical investments of the working class boxer in Chicago, by that definition of sacrifice, as Wacquant’s ethnography shows, does not open up onto a new plane of possible natures or ancestor-borne flights outside of capital, but instead seem most readily to instantiate the ideologies of working class submission necessary to uphold a nobly valorized world of racial inequalities.

This is not to say that the political assertion of sacrifice across an irrecoverable, transcendental limit may not be efficacious. With another recent ethnography of pugilism, Leo Hopkinson (2015) reiterates the viability of Cartesian dualism as a socially reified reality in Canadian and Scottish boxing gyms, noting how boxers readily instrumentalize their bodies in disciplined routines. Hopkins stresses that a dualistic sense of self may be ideologically imposed as a social construct. This measurement of practice however, does not emphasize how a transcendent dualism is at odds with historicity itself—with the (finite, living) preconditions for movement²⁷, which, like life and relation, are characterized by asymmetrical flows, exchanges (e.g. Hertz [1907]1960; Mauss; Deleuze) and finite expirations.

²⁷ Consider here the frequent supplementation of Bourdieu’s practice theory with phenomenology (e.g. Atkinson 2010; Bar-On Cohen 2011; Crossley 2001, 2004; Dalidowicz 2015: 839-840; Downey 2002; Throop & Murphy 2002). Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, in placing

With Wacquant and Hopkinson, we may talk about sacrifice and dualistic thinking *as ideology*—i.e. as being politically imposed, as with the admonishments for correct gesture Thai people navigate and impose on each other—to make merit, to absolutely respect elders, monks, and Kings. However, the exposition of sacrifice in dualistic terms misses a certain quality of openness and a surplus of meaning residing in historicized movement and living matter.²⁸ The slippages of the Thai pugilist in differentially attentive, animate living-dead Thai conditions, challenges the linearity and inevitability of sacrificial ideology.

In the anthropological-phenomenological approach, in the Thai setting, the possibility of change is implied, as Wacquant notes, in that which is “jointly *structured* and flowing as well as growing through *time*.” (2015:4). However, ‘structuring’ and time are of an order as-given through local sacrificial exchange. The unfolding of the subject, the taking responsibility for, and responsivity vis a vis others, happens not through a hardening of materiality, but through a

‘embodiment on trial’ (2015), echoes these concerns with superficial studies of ‘embodiment’ in general, reminding her readers of Husserl’s stress on a moving ‘animate organism’, a crucial component of life in motion. “Movement is indeed our mother tongue” (Sheets-Johnstone 2015:35), she writes, and it is this relative Thai primacy of movement inculcating a sense of coherence and continuity which my experience of learning muay Thai pursues. After training in Isan and Bangkok, embracing the coming-apart of any rigid self over the course of months; after undergoing the slippages of limbs and alternations of posture and kinetic potential in Thai Boxing, I prefer to bracket any claim to ‘embodied’ knowledge or martial mastery. Consequently, I aim to convey Northeastern Thai men’s Boxing subjectivity as a temporal holding requiring constant effort, as open movement which structures contemporary Thai life.

²⁸ Reading Hopkinson (2015) and Wacquant (2004) on boxing again, the perfect (transcendent) linearity of a sacrificial order proposed in Cartesian dualism may be ideologically imposed upon living actors, but cannot, as a dynamic construct, ‘exist’. Like an ‘ideal’ geometric shape (cf. Derrida 1989), the perfect subject/object of dualism achieves no closure (e.g. Husserl [1938]1970: 60-64), having no placetime in/of nature. As an ideal construct, dualist subjectivity operates over the expectation of an always reasonable time; a rate of return paralyzed in pure submission to a godhead. The perpetuation of linearity or absolute homogenous balance is only a relinquishing of the messiness of the living unto causal determination, hence fascist appropriation. Thus, sacrifice in the structuring-structured-structures’ sense allows a certain type of imposition through, as its proponents in the western sporting world would often have it, ‘hard work.’

tarrying with material-orders unto exhaustion of the antipodal status' of living-dead and thus, the through the generation of new qualities, in time.

The 'corpus' of the Thai boxer involves a proprioception, a shared kinaesthetic²⁹ knowledge which knows, which instantiates the necessary conditions for continued sacrifice—cruelties and forgettings—in a style of carriage. Knowledge of what needed to be done in the ring, for Ou, accumulated vis a vis the material orders—haircuts, bows towards shrines, sleeps after weight-loss, rests upon rehydration—which he took on, 180plus times over, in correct sequence. Demands on Ou's time were similarly flayed away as he approached the ring. Boxers like Ou are always already moving through spaces of indebtedness, their training conditions upheld by an arrangement of elders, religious icons, interminable silences with ashes, tattoos, animals like fighting cocks, cooking in the sun beneath their cages. The boxers' very being expires in exchange which is already temporally marked by traces of sacrifice, loss and irrevocable finitude. Participation in training, the repeated battering of limbs unto strength within the matrices of entities—shrines, elders, kings—encounter anew these terms of relative decay in local history.

While building an effective repertoire of hesitations and strikes, dropping weight and rehydrating, jogging and sparring, Ou becomes familiar with the local terms of payment for time. For his role, in the ring, will be slipping-cracking open the ontological foundations of collective life.

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²⁹ Husserl ([1938]1970:103-111, 106-107 esp.) indicates that with *kinesthesia*, there is "a quite unique way the living body is constantly in the perceptual field quite immediately," ([1938]1970: 107), and that this holding of a particular kinesthetic 'moving' and 'doing', binding an ego to sensibility. In grappling collectively among boxers each night during training, some weeks more earnestly than others, I grew into a shared tension and readiness, a template for motion set between us. The muay-Thai ring offered a collective space to heighten and concentrate movement as doing—and hence, take on a relatively distanced sense for/of motion.

By some combination of coming into the locally useful limitations of my ill-fit timing and decrepitude, taking on measured *wais*, and by generally employing a non-confrontational mutedness, I found a temporarily accepted place within Ou's camp. Alongside boxers such as Ou who had trained for years, my struggles in practice only heightened a sense that their movements were preternaturally, prereflectively timely in their arrival. I knew well the hours and variations of training invested so that Ou could deliver technique with assured proficiency: kicks upon a life-time of kicks which crafted resilient shins to strike through any guarding leg or rounded shoulder his equally matched opponent raised. For Ou, holding position in the ring required the stamina to repeatedly deliver this destructive force without reserve, throwing the full weight of his anatomy behind every kick, repeatedly lifting, swinging, drop-swinging his tibia inside and down, on just the right angle, at just the right time. Among the thicker, larger boxers in camp, Ou had the more slight build of a marathon runner and it was already clear he would not grow much heavier than the 101 pounds he weighed in at now.

The sort of refinement and growth Ou developed over years of weight loss prior to each match was not the growth of an empirical biological quality. Growth for Ou was an accumulation of the logics of sensation and the permissions of destruction, the seeping of excess, alterity, immanence and immensity of time's passage contained in the ritual organizations of each day. The violence of the ring—that which is not simply fetishized, endured or repressed as trauma, but celebrated as being interruptive of the economy of exchanges and expirations of lifetime upon which community/individual are founded—allows us to reincorporate a sense of this otherness, the capacity for choice, value and moving, meaningful life, back into our midst.

In being pre-reflective, movement nurtured through routine; movement thrown during sacrificial ritual invokes the inauguration of an open, reflexive community. Confrontation, as much as cultural contact, under these circumstances, tends not toward chance, but to reclamation

for political history. The finite subjectivity—the intensive-extensive tension of having a trace of negation against one’s grounds—with which historicity holds court never attains governance on full universal value, but is haunted by the ‘the generative, ambiguous, uncaptured, pregnant and alien’ shared between inter-corporeal beings (see Merleau-Ponty 1964). We rush across what Merleau-Ponty calls a ‘chiasm’, an occlusion of subject-objecthood in flesh out of which cultural value and nature—the given—is generated, becoming invested in exchanges in the cultural realm. As that cultural-socialized ‘body schema’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962), as well as pedagogical studies and human infants’ prolonged periods of dependency (care never being clearly ended) indicate (not to mention, in Thailand, the exchanges with living and dead reincarnations), that our perception and our very existence—ergo, conscious choice, differentiation and valuation [the relative economies of life]—operate through exchange: active transfers, transformations and translations across, on the one hand, the limits of cellular-biological life, and equally on the other, in narratives across the monolithic vestiges of history.

Action, and spectacular incidences demonstrating technical expertise and innovation (i.e. revolutionary ‘culturally’ productive turns), are thus elements of historical repetition, layering and sedimentation within which a relative rate of return on memory, an unfolding of the terms of choice and of ‘having’ humanity, reside. Certainly, Ou’s victory in Lumpinee that evening was anything but an ‘accident’. The series of actions Ou took leading up to this competition, as with so many other competitions, had been strictly managed, over and over, to eliminate any corporeal wavering, inconsistency or *doubt*.

Captured Live on Channel 7

In the wake of Ou’s victory at Lumpinee, it was easy to forget how uncertain his performance had become as of late. Between the series of matches he had faltered through earlier

in the year was a training routine: managing gradual strengthening and growth amidst the repeated bludgeoning of competition, managing wakefulness and regeneration in time for festival bouts, knowing weight gradually lost and abruptly regained for competition. All of these routines armed Ou with a sense of stability facing the contingency of competition. His efforts and movements over time also imparted a corporeal pace: a *giving out*, and series of exchange-relations and values, which redistribute (free-)time and the possibility of new, generative life, among those collected around the ring. Losing, for Ou or others in camp, cast a sort of pallor or heaviness over training proceedings, a memory which needed forgetting, a memory of now owing a win to replace that loss—as losing indefinitely, would be necessarily implausible.

Six weeks prior to his decisive victory in Lumpinee, Ou had been pummeled spectacularly under the bright lights of the Channel 7 warehouse-stadium, his being one of several matchest that afternoon broadcast from this warehouse next to the television-station's headquarters in northern Bangkok. The late stages of Ou's match were marked by the sound of his face and torso absorbing strikes—the gloves, forearms and knees of his opponent. Ou's defeat had by then become so obvious that the crowd, once roaring, had largely quieted, leaving only that dull, fleshy thudding to echo over the canvas between the ringside cameramen and first-row placards advertising rice, pesticide and pharmaceutical products. Even before the action of the match had begun though, there was something not quite right, overcomplicated in the day's proceedings. Ou's father Thoun wore a black t-shirt displaying the stylized name-logo of one of Channel 7 stadium's main promoters, *Kaewsamrit*, that day, and was called out of the line by the military policemen guarding the corral of those seated outside the stadium, waiting entry. Thoun was allowed to enter the stadium only after renting a collared shirt from a shop across the street. This formal dress-code was not applied to non-Thai spectators inside. In the tightly packed crowd, three rows up on bleachers behind Ou's corner, two of our camp's eleven and twelve year

old boxers eventually sat directly on my thighs to discourage security's repeated attempts to pull me into the rafter-to-ringside section reserved for foreigners, a cross-section of seats which would display my exotic foreign physiognomy among others in a background cameras would frequently show on air. In the minutes before Ou's match, I watch a European father direct his son's gaze to the action in the ring, then listen while my young friends typecast the other foreigners in the stadium: sunburnt American muscle men, wrestlers still in tank-tops—they must have come directly from beaches in the South. Then the vodka blistered, pink-skinned men—Russian Mafioso. And two young European women, anomalies in flowing dresses and thick brown braids—yes, my companions decide, these women are Portuguese, like Ronaldo (the soccer player), and the heavysset business-man accompanying them—with that blanched white shirt and watch—he is from Hong Kong then. With these identities comfortably established, the ring again corrals our attentions.

Even as the pace of the band increased, with cycles of conjoined notes so loud as to verge upon noise, with chimes, drums and wails from the Javanese clarinet urging Ou and his opponent to clash, it became impossible not to *feel* the thud-thud-thud of Ou absorbing punches. As those combinations continued to land, Ou's neck and shoulders tucked further, his chin set rigidly to reduce some of the rattling. Several times in those late rounds Ou fell forward, clasping his opponent's shoulders to retain footing. This was Ou's "182, 183...185th" match—I had never pushed them on why two or three matches fell away from the count—and both Ou and his father had told me, separately, that Ou had never been knocked out in the ring...

As Ou continued to struggle, I looked through the crowd to floor-level at ringside where both trainers stood just behind a short metal gate. Behind them, Ou's father stood, not watching Ou taking on damage above him in the ring, but increasingly directing his gaze abstractly into the vest-covered backs of our equally morose trainers. As the match continued, our contingent of

supporters gathered behind Ou's corner contracted viscerally within the crowd, lowering arms, shrugging to each-other, making small-talk and disavowing eye contact with bookies and gamblers who might gauge our confidence in putting up side-bets—bets at odds which grew increasingly improbable by the moment.

Afterwards, outside the television-warehouse-stadium, Ou's father leaned with me against the wooden packing skids which had been propped vertically, then tied end to end to form an open-air dressing room for boxers. When I leaned in, he explained that his son's taller opponent had been much too big once rehydrated. This seemed to underscore an advantage Ou might better maximize, rehydrating himself in the future. A few feet from us on the other side of the skids, Ou stood removing his gloves, pulling at a strand of white tape stuck stubbornly between two knuckles. Deciding the better of it, Ou dropped the tape edge and left his hands half wrapped, instead dumping a cup of ice-water over his red-beaten face and abruptly walking off to restrooms on the far side of the building. There was *nearly* nothing, at the time, to be done for this latest loss.

Necessary Cruelties

I had never seen Ou so nearly brought down, though at Channel 7 stadium, even I feared he might lose not just his footing in the ring, but consciousness altogether. To hold an instance of violence, a traumatic disbanding of sensory tissue, a destructive relation of explicitly unacknowledged, disavowed, experience of 'pain'³⁰ at the center of each competition, is to carry out affirmatively in public what Nietzsche designates as premodern 'cruelty'³¹, a disavowal in

³⁰ These privations of pain elude capture and comprehension via language (e.g. Scarry 1985).

³¹ Commenting on 'modern', mass-produced/producing life, Henri Lefebvre remarks, "Undoubtedly people have always to be fed, clothed, housed and have had to produce and then re-produce that which has been consumed; but until the nineteenth century, until the advent of

the composition of social orders not yet given to the moralizing or commercialized soft-control of populations' desire. The match, whether as concentrated in the strike, or as a generalized social exchange to revel in during festival-time tournaments, transmits this unspeakable order of permissible destruction—the terms of life and death and time's passing within the surrounding community. The Thai men next to me in Channel 7 stadium are, during the other hours of their lives, school teachers, taxi drivers, construction workers, and traffic cops. By turning to Thai boxing though, these men accede to Thai boxers the ability to generate credit for a life's passing that cannot otherwise be accounted for.

The cruelty Nietzsche designates within his *Genealogy of Morals* [1887], as that ancient enjoyment of the suffering of others, the 'cruelty' in apoplectic consumptions, expenditures of the living in deliberate sacrifice, goes part and parcel with a being who is able to stand in

competitive capitalism and the expansion of the world of trade the quotidian as such did not exist, and the point we are making here is crucial, it is indeed one of the major paradoxes of history. In the heart of poverty and (direct) oppression there was *style*; in former times *labourers of skill* were produced, whereas today we have (commercialized) *products* and exploitation has replaced violent oppression. Style gave significance to the slightest object, to actions and activities, to gestures; it was a concrete significance, not an abstraction taken piecemeal from a system of symbols. There was a style of cruelty, a style of power, a style of wisdom; cruelty and power (the Aztecs, Rome) produced great styles and civilizations, but so did the aristocratic wisdom of Egypt or of India. With the rise of the masses (who were none the less still exploited) and with democracy (the masses still being exploited) great styles, symbols and myths have disappeared together with collective works such as cathedrals, monuments and festivals." (Lefebvre 1984: 83; cf. Derrida 1979). Questioning *the value of performative acts*, anthropologist Michael Lambek also draws a distinction between making (material production) and doing (action), insisting ethical value is generated outside formal commodity production (see 2013). Lefebvre's critique of modernity's uniform homogenization of value implies a contradiction, in that time in the corvee of premodernity left a person with a skill, a qualitative state of time and being, a way of repeatedly accessing deep meaning. Such a 'style', of cutting good from bad in bearing kept basically outside of the value-producing structures of homogeneity. With Thai boxing, this element of style is visible in a willing of time even unto self-brutality, outside sufficiency or efficiency economies, where the festival repeats a certain destruction and disavowal of damage. While a 'cruelty' (in Nietzschean terms) may be at the center of this interruption of the everyday time-clock, it is a cruelty which also generates this 'style' of unreasonable motion, motion outside of sovereign capture, where meaning again attains fullness.

Nietzschean terms, well afforded in the forgetting of one-self, and of making oneself thus promisable (man, the promisable animal), an affixing of memory that for Nietzsche becomes a marker of nobility.

Taking Nietzsche's exposition of morals to also indicate a concern for the mapping of sovereign cruelties, the grounds of any perceptual exchange, any intersubjective contact in the ring or street, becomes neither fixed in the antipodal unknowability of violence, nor limitless in irrationality, but instead are indicative of a relative finitude—parameters and durations of memory—delineated in sacrificial ritual. In modernizing, civilizing (Winichakul 2000), eruptively, ghastly, politically violent (see Haberkorn 2018; Klima 2002) and spectacularly touristic Thailand, Thai boxing provides sacrificial ground which would be otherwise quickly co-opted, in razor-quick motions once-removed from political representation or devout hagiographic soteriology, an extended series of moments, pathways out of submission. As mere possibility among so many other ways of life, the Thai boxer becomes paramount in setting the value of a person's lifetime.

In a step away from Weber's Nietzsche, or the narratives of hegemonic Thai masculinities, the Thai boxer is not an ideal archetype, one who heroically overcomes or undergoes history. Thai boxers are a managed process of destruction, destruction absorbed and paid for each in his turn. Embracing a Theravada notion of impermanence³² encourages the

³² On impermanence, the orthodox Thai Theravada cosmology reads: "As for the people in this world, they have no stability or permanence; everything fluctuates back and forth as has been mentioned. Sometimes things are good and then take a turn for the worse, and sometimes they are bad and then improve—but they are not ever permanent in any way, and thus the people in this world are always subjected to changes. The people who have wisdom should keep such indications in mind; they should think about impermanence and the cycle of birth and death; they should hasten to make much merit and to show zeal in practicing the Dhamma in order to free themselves from that cycle of birth and death in which nothing is permanent." (Lithai/Reynolds 1982: 326). When these destabilizations of debt (of credit) are carried across one life-time and transmitted as merit, the 'choice' and history that comes with mortality is discouraged. The passage of time brings an indeterminacy, in depth, of credit—where lifetime owed, and motility

affirming of *this* time always again, and responsibility similar to that suggested by Nietzsche's eternal return.³³ The necessary cruelties of muay Thai training—the repeated laughter employed to cover successively absorbed, jarring jabs; the rapid admonishments of Wai and other men when during training, Aek, a younger boxer, would break into tears while kicking—these are cruelties allowed, as with the spectacle of violence generated in the ring, because they enjoin movement eventually undoing the bonds of a many-headed Thai sovereign apparatus. Without the presence of the king, whom is dying, whom all must do the work of reincarnating, the apparent 'brutality' of the national sport, the clacking of shin-bones and opening of wounds unto their scarring—this degree of cruelty would not be present. The corpus of the boxer, however, does its flaying, lacerating and bludgeoning unto a manifold temporality.

Ou's countenance in the backlot where we trained gave little indication of this exacting intensity he brought to competitive bouts. Indeed, during my first weeks training in camp, I had assumed he was only an afterthought for the camp's managers. It was just the opposite. For long periods during evening training, Ou seemed to lounge around his peers, until I noticed that when trainers or sparring partners arranged the correct conditions for him, he was fully focused in the ring, and could muster a combination of strikes, then another, and another—another combination repeated, another that few others could sustain, the echo of his snarls holding court over the brick, concrete and rusting tin of the backlot. On one of these evenings, as Ou sat back against the torn foam seat of the exercise bike that no one ever exercised on, I paused shadow boxing

realized is not necessarily designated as present. In the indeterminacy of this context of merit-transfer, then the presencing of matriarchal fluids, elders' tattoos and steps provide a corporeal presence for these creditor-debtor relations to realize exchange forcefully, across the boundaries of individual life-times.

³³ Nietzsche at times proposed his concept of the eternal return as a sort of European Buddhism. That is, a Buddhism without finality or a ceasing of the will (see Morrison 1997: 153). (cf. Monohan 2007, who frames martial arts in Buddhist contexts as exemplary instances of Nietzschean self-overcoming.)

and tried to ask him about his father's occupation. Unlike the others' fathers, Ou's father was in camp, at ringside, almost every evening.

Ou looked up from the MuaySiam daily boxing newspaper he flipped through on the bike: "My father???—He is a *poor* man."

"But..." I began again "But, what does—" Ou's father was always willing to offer me an extra anecdote in translation, or padwork on mats below the ring while the camp's official trainers engaged in the more pressing task of training his son. "Your father helps—"

"No." Ou cut me off again, insisting. "He is a *poor* man."

As the months went on, I learned how Ou kept this narrative uncomplicated. Ou's father, Thoun, younger sibling of two brothers, migrated to Bangkok from his parents' farm in Surin, in the northeast. While Thoun's elder brother now managed the family property there, his family's residence for the past decade had been a low-rise corrugated tin longhouse abandoned by construction workers, yet still standing amidst the more standard four-story warehouse-apartment buildings casting shadows over several blocks around our camp. On long afternoons between training sessions, when I help Dom, who ran a successful t-shirt manufacturing enterprise from out of his family's share of the warehouse in front of our camp, to deliver bags of pre-cut polyester and cotton fabric to families subcontracted to sew shirts throughout the neighbourhood, Ou's family home was our final stop.

This meant driving beneath the elevated section of highway, past the neon bathed Seven-Eleven storefront-landmark, where sometimes girls Ou's age stood waiting on the concrete driveway, making arrangements through phones. These were, "bad-girls...see...tattoos", one of the motorcycle taxi drivers explained to me the first day I had waited there to join the boxers from our camp on their daily run. "Bad, bad..." he had muttered to me just out of their earshot, straddling his motorcycle beneath the shade. Again the taxi driver raised his eyebrow ever so

slightly, directing me to the waifish, almost emaciated girl—about Ou’s age—in her short black dress. On her shoulder, an indiscernably shaped tattoo flashed in the sunlight as she ducked into a black Mercedes-Benz with tinted windows. A tattoo, perhaps the mark of handlers inscribed as arbitrarily as the sentence in Kafka’s penal colony.

Half a block behind this Seven-Eleven convenience store, over a roadway-section of metal gratings left permanent to bridge a tributary of Bangkok-klong (open-air creek-sewer), is the lowrise concrete dwelling Ou’s family takes up—a reliquary from a time when the neighbourhood had experienced rapid construction. On that final stop, we would usually deliver Ou’s father and mother a long, transparent plastic bag of mixed polyester cotton fabric—the literal scraps of the sewing room floor. These Ou’s mother makes into dish and dust-rags, reinforcing pleats, hunched over her sewing machine kept in open air on the concrete walkway beneath the awning of their residence. There, away from our training grounds, with his light-hearted jokes about my wife and other deadly accurate adolescent jabs folded away, Ou would be revealed as many years my junior, politely delivering Dom and I bottles of soda his mother insisted we take upon having completed our deliveries. On the gravel driveway between their low-level residence and the alleyway road are the debris of the family’s ten-year residence in Bangkok: loose strips of fabric, twine and plastic wrapping given over to soil seeping from crushed gravel; a rust-coated Komatsu excavator parked interminably in the high grass; a fighting cock kept under its wood cage for Sunday afternoon matches. These items stand not so much in storage, but as though dropped in mid-use, walked away from in the afterburn of time, [like the rice, fruit and incense offerings in front of each house’s spirit shrine], as though the high grass would yield them as abruptly to use among the living again at some unspecified future instant.

Visiting camp late most evenings, Ou's father appeared equally non-contemporaneous³⁴, usually wearing a faded baseball cap with the stylized crest of the Thai police shield on sword, an iconic affiliation from an evening of brief deputization directing traffic, his bejeweled off-measure leather purse-bag, with a western-cowboy's jade-stone clasp providing the sewn flourish of a once cancelled contract, enclosing funds with just enough of an association to recall an earlier state of steady employment, to evenings not poured into ringsides around his own son. Though they have lived and worked here in Bangkok for nearly a decade, the family returns 'home' to Surin, in the northeast, for the occasional festival-holiday. In Bangkok, hands converge on machines, monies, foods and substances to sustain life *now*. To the northeast go notions of rest like ancestors' bones, 'home', the elephant parades, assertions of origin with the necessary taint of nostalgia, the mythic past shielding children and parents alike so that they may play in the precarious present. In Bangkok, where there is no full night's sleep and no day of complete wakefulness, the demands of industrial production, the close proximity of so many vertical aspirations have shaken us. Avoiding constant indebtedness to the inevitable anonymity of urbanity requires a putting off of lost time to find ourselves engaged in another routine—the boxing which will return time to us. Being credit-able, credible in those terms, is what Ou does.

³⁴ For Ernst Bloch, historically significant motion involves not simply reference to a prior history (e.g. Marx 18th Brumaire), but includes a dialectic moving upon an emotionally volatile non-anxious state precluding connectivity: hope. He writes, "Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong." (1954). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bloch/hope/introduction.htm>, accessed October 23, 2018.

CHAPTER THREE: TECHNOLOGY

Chapter two concentrated on Thai boxing practice as facilitating learning through repetitions unto exhaustion, a method which opens opportunities to gain further credit on motion, demonstrating the ability to make meaningful events (hence, history) by drawing in powerfully distant, foreign or dead actors through a minimal conscription of boxers' musculature. While chapter two described this exercise of local corporeal capital, chapter three addresses the technical aspect of Thai boxing practice. I ask how the particular articulation between the relative body/self and the technical apparatus/world are maintained in Thai boxing.

I draw on both Mauss and later Heidegger to stress the inherent violence and corporeal losses underpinning the very asking of the question of how collectives or individuals operate vis a vis technology. This segue suggests guidelines to attend to histories of violence, inequality and asymmetry in appraising political aesthetic movement.

I then discuss the recurrent political conjuncture in Thailand, where spectacular political processes are largely divorced from the material conditions which consistently reproduce inequalities. The newly built Lumpinee boxing stadium is shown to be a logical architectural output of this spectacular Thai military-industrial complex. The technologies of Thai boxing include this entire political apparatus: a theatre for new muay-Thai which is both wholly modern, promoting the representative capture of boxers' every motion, but also intractably engaged in a sacrificial economy, drawing peripheral northeastern fighters into the city-state. Sacrifice is shown to be wholly intrinsic to these 'modern' Thai 'sporting' conventions.

A Question Concerning Techniques of the Body

Ou's elbow strike is part of a larger movement of credit gained through selective mobility: the notable mark of hours spent developing an elusive-then-rebounding bearing when faced with contact. Among the grown boxers in camp, complaints rarely accompanied injuries and bruises, discomfort or collapse on the canvas. Strikes which may have been damaging were, as a matter of operational course, tucked away and dulled by a selectively sensing corpus. If a boxer began to waver during competition, the judges at ringside might never subtract the point.

Using the sharp edges of his anatomy in combination, wearing gloves and colorful boxing shorts, and sometimes arm-bands made from threads of mothers' skirts, the Thai boxer seems, after removing the *mongkon* headdress for competition, to be minimally dressed. Shorts often seem a hindrance to the raising of a kicking limb, and many boxers fold these over at the waist, cinching the excess fabric up. In competition, some boxers still incessantly drop one glove between kicks to arrange this fold, adjusting their waistlines as though wearing blue-jeans now sizes too large after seasons of weight-lost in training. The form of clothing, the forms of ancestors and matriarchs brought into the ring through ceremonial paraphernalia, already implicate the deeper historical content in boxers' steps. As Greg Downey reiterates in discussing techniques developed by mixed martial arts competitors, even the most primordially promoted 'naked' body is already a technical object, clothed in rules and norms, leveraged against equipment (2007).

Muay Thai 'bodies', maintained in careful practice, may be continuous with technique, while the articulation of technology, their grasping of pedagogy, may arrive from without—from the cares of a generalized social community. But repetitions in corporeal practice confound the precision of this inside/outside directionality for technical transmission. The articulation of

technology memorized in muay Thai corporeality, reappraised, should shed light upon the local allocation of historical-material change.

Each boxer's elbow, his hips when kicking, his knees pointed in contact with ribs are both instrumental of and receptive to historical timing. Ou's technical expertise marks the human apotheosis of a mass architectural sublimation to the factory-fetishization of material-technological determinism. Alongside his aged father, toiling mother and his younger sister nourished on processed-food, Ou's pinpoint strikes and exertions delineate a narrow avenue for growth and responsivity, a particular receptivity pounded onto repeatedly dulled nerves in the percussion of training. The regularity of corporeal damage occurring during Ou's Thai boxing career required a sensory acuity, but also, always, a readiness for movement willing to exceed the present measure of inert, objective-subjective, 'sense'.

Ou's actions in the ring, honed to repeatable skills exceed reflection or narrative capture, and yet the most powerful techniques of Thai boxing all indicate an outside power—a stranger king in the sovereign force of law. As with muay-Thai's hesitations, askance angles and the interruptions of upright posture which score with judges, the steadfast transmission of great muay Thai is conversant in local time. The Thai boxer's pulled punch or kick slips through as with the crash-motion time scale of a Northeastern Thai or Lao *mor-lam* band, the alive-then-dead-in-step-again percussion punctuating the wailing festival march, as much as a vendor's rickety snack-cart turning into-then-just-away from traffic. It is this pace of interruption in executive volition; the distancing from nature in each corporeal act, that exhumes debts and draws motion contractually, in reference to the abundance, immensity and immanence of time/grounds. A certain pace and hesitation performed in the muay Thai ring—the disowning of immanent contact unto a moment of imbalance—appears again and again in so many refined corporeal techniques required in day to day Thai life.

And similarly, there is a haunting in the expertly timed muscle-memory of the Thai boxer. *How does one locate a relative human articulation with ‘technology’, or a ‘technique of the body’ in these contexts?* To approach this question, I will counterpose the hauntings and ghosts within the programmatics of two theorists of technology whose schools burst forth within the backdrop of twentieth century atrocities.

One approach to technical violence: Mauss, Totality and Total Social Facts

Marcel Mauss, nephew of sociology’s founder Durkheim, addressing a gathering of the Societe de Psychologie at France’s Institute d’Ethnologie in 1934, pulling notes from a file of miscellany incompleated while teaching (Fournier 2006: 290), called for attention to different societies’ “*Techniques of the Body*”, stating that researchers may “make the mistake of thinking that there is technique only when there is an instrument. ... [t]he body is man’s first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time, his first technical, means, is his body.” . ([1934] 1973: 75).¹

¹ Mauss’ address is intended to supply categories for classifying the different aspects of cultural production which would bear recording as part of a total humanity or a total-man, although within the interstices of his description, this totality expires. As Mauss indicates, a bodily technique indicates at best an articulation, a turning point, however stable or incandescent, for the instrumentalization and de-valuation (for the use-valuation), of an extensible ‘body’. This body as *form*, gives Mauss, for lack of other terms in the time, a Cartesian propensity, and then equally, the Kantian predilections of Durkheim’s sociology, predilections still inherent in anthropological treatments of corporeal ritual. For Kant proposes a phenomenology in which judgement adheres to reason, the body designates “the place of sensibility” (Malabou 2015: 14). and, as Daniel Miller summarizes, the tension between individual and universal order is, for those following Kant, prescribed by ‘reason’. “Anthropologists, in the main, assume that all people have, as Kant argues, an essential moral vision of the world linked to reason but that this vision takes shape within each specific cultural context rather than within a universal humanity.” (Miller 2010: 416). The non-Kantian deposition of grounds (cf. Gadamer 1977) circumscribed in muay Thai practice however, executes a jaggging or splitting of reason and sense through sacrificial motion—the social/hierarchical distribution of moral and ethical proclivities that follow from such a historically generative violence distributes intentional motion throughout the hierarchical Thai order of differently animate materials.

The primacy of relation between body and tool which Mauss bases his essay on, the differentiation of self from world, the knot of articulation which allows for variation and refinement, which allows for the difference each time, in technical execution, co-incides with that negative-gestalt of memory: an elusive place into which a certain culturally founding violence may be redirected.

In a flash, the elbow joint, the edge of the tibia, a sharp-notch in the humerus, is instrumentalized-deadened and dulled for striking, but then pulled back, retained as part of a rigidified, rigorous apparatus. With a kick, the tibia, the long-concussed, dulled nerves below the shin, are but dead-matter to be thrown from.... the 'body' [dtua], which, unremarked upon, and if so removed from the immediacy of temporal-action, denied a contemplative status, becomes an ordering of separation, in defining defiance, or in fetishistic celebration, of its techniques.

Mauss suggests recording bodily techniques² as part of a comprehensive survey of humankind, a 'total man', upon which the understanding of particular cultures' motive-motions would be curated as one among a larger record of total societies. Just as each technical aspect of a society, once surveyed, for Mauss, would take its place as part of a whole, each society would take its place as part of a larger picture of humanity. This drive to provide a comprehensive, scientific basis for comparison stimulates the breadth of Mauss' comparatively diverse oeuvre. The aspiration towards totality itself arguably compliments Mauss' will to organize a sociological school pointed towards an overall anti-violence. Mauss writes,

“By considering the whole together, we have been able to perceive the essential, the movement of everything, the live dimension, the fleeting moment when society or

² One Southeast Asianist attempt to follow the cinematic recording of bodily techniques suggested in Mauss' manual of ethnography may be the Freudian inspired photographic work of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in Bali (1942).

rather men become aware of the common feelings they have for themselves and others.” (Mauss, translated in Hart 2007: p. 483).

The total social fact Mauss pursues is, as action, a dynamic part which organizes, articulates and unfolds across each institution. In this respect, Levi-Strauss identifies Mauss as a mathematical and algebraic precursor to his own structuralism³, where there is no assumed functionally rigid use-value for the various facets of human life and collective institution vis-à-vis their more active valuation in exchangeability: “Mauss had in mind a *constant relation* between phenomena, which would be the site of their explanation” (Levi-Strauss [1950]1987: 43). Cultural value therefore, in the arrangement of categories suggested by Mauss, announces itself in a movement of the part vis a vis the whole. For the ‘total social fact’ to overcome reductionism, Mauss is especially concerned with each exchange insofar as it allows differing interests to overlap, maintaining a greater cohesion; a holding providing for a long-term peace in the community (see Fournier 2006: 288). The technique, the aestheticized movement of a corporeal limb, from this proto-structuralist perspective, is anaesthetized by its need to do selective violence against forces of (fascist) homogeneity.

For Mauss, the grounds upon which these overlapping interests accrue are composed in a rational Kantian vein, wherein (moral) action exists in reference to what is reasonably accounted for, if not universally given, in the local derivation of reason.⁴ For Mauss’ uncle Durkheim,

³ “In this sense, it is by reverting once again to the teachings of Mauss that Lévi- Strauss is able to write the manifesto for the new anthropology: a science that strives to make the Kantian project of the study of the laws of human thought, of that which makes man man—symbolic activity—scientific.” (Valeri [1966]2013: 264).

⁴ “The concept of “culture” starts to open up what appears to be an irreconcilable difference between anthropology and Kantian philosophy. For Kant, the vision of anthropology is simultaneously individual and universal. The idea of “reason” implies a direct link between the two, as each individual carries within him or herself the potential for a universal and cosmopolitan morality. This link is sundered by the anthropological discovery of cultural relativism. For anthropologists, the world is organized not by a universal reason but by the much more parochial vision of cultural values specific to different populations. This view effects a

expressing a (immobilized) Kantian universe, the grounds which expressly permit rational law to unfold sensibly, and the grounds which support human beings capable of willing and judgment thereof, are grounds which experience movement off this horizontal center (a zero-point designated by immolation) through reference to a third force, that of the ‘social’, collective effervescence, etc. The gratuitous violence of ritual which inscribed the radius of this collective for Durkheim, his nephew displaces, questions and finds in every ‘body’. Mauss complicates the dualism of religious and immanent movement within the ‘body’, such that *techne* and mobility may be understood as being permitted in a temporal relation to the naturalizing/culturalizing forces of ritual, a relation of constancy. And this notion of ritual is by no means merely mechanistic or physically determinate:

In his *Manual of Ethnography*, suggesting a series of human activities to catalogue, Mauss prefaces comments on industrial production by stressing that “in fact there is no such thing as production by humans - only an administration of nature, an economy of nature” (2002[1967]:48), and later, commenting upon aesthetics: “ornamentation forms part of technology; and to it there are added in addition elements of religion such as religious representations and equilibria. The aesthetic dimension contributes to efficacy, no less than do the rituals” (2002[1967]:67-68).

The practitioners’ ‘body’, for Mauss, is already implicated in a series of administrative practices; in economies; in holdings and exchanges which reside for a particular duration across

repudiation of universalism through an alternative emphasis on a collective that is bigger than the individual but smaller than the universal.” (Miller 2010: 413). Where the grounds for a Kantian subject locate ‘reason’ and cosmology in concrete sensory processes, in the Thai case, the abstraction of this concrete value (e.g. see Sebu’s list of sponsors in this final chapter), the manipulation of a cosmos, is entrenched in a rate of decay, where the intensive-expansion of finitude engendered in sacrificial acts alter the active properties of historical-material grounds. Judgement and value thus lay with the sacrificial movement which engenders meaningful continuity and dissociative sense.

the relative ‘natural’ world. In the classification of the various aspects of collective social life though, Mauss nonetheless exercised a Kantian viewpoint, wherein the synthesis of sensation is accomplished upon a passive material ground, a ground which must remain sensibly, rationally reflected in the pedagogical moment. For Mauss, the ‘body’, and then the ‘person’ (see Mauss 1985), remains resolutely one of many among this larger social totality, a totality redeemable in rational measure. This body holds a series of cultural potentials at its core without a definite natural order: the body ‘acquires’ gait, without any single nature, and ‘the transmission of technique’ which sets (hu)man(s) apart from animals, as Mauss suggests, is instilled through ‘education’ and an imitative capacity for authority which is strong or weak, depending on the child. Even as Mauss insists that technique, to be ‘effective’, must be ‘traditional’⁵, an actor encountering technique remains mimetic, aloof from the open-ended dilemma of the total social fact of her life, residing outside of historical-time. For Mauss, mimetically acquired culture must be bracketed as ‘tradition’, as this ‘tradition’ compliments his due interest for the aesthetics of ritual action. For while his speech inaugurating the anthropological order’s project to record *Techniques of the Body* may be taken superficially as a directive to expand ethnographic methodologies,⁶ Mauss was particularly concerned with technology at that point where it might

⁵ Mauss writes “I call ‘technique’ an action that is *effective* and *traditional* (and you will see that in this it is no different from a magical, religious or symbolic action). It has to be *effective* and *traditional*. There is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition.” (1973:75). That technique is interred with cultural ‘tradition’, where each of these terms (i.e. ends, means, techne, poesis) all indicate that there is no accentuated point of application, change of differentiation, no cut (a holding apart between one and the other), no pedagogical ‘field’ [field of practice for Bourdieu], without an interchange, of basis for exchange between one and the many. It’s at this point that rituals of sacrifice contain an excurses into the collective body more generally, and at which point the ‘body’ is no longer subjectively/objectively fixed as such, but interpolating collective grounds, unto a marked temporality and history.

⁶ Mauss suggests that “Body techniques should be studied with the aid of photography and if possible with slow-motion cinema.” (2002[1967]:25) Prioritizing the recording of their angular aspects this way implies that body techniques, on the whole, remain capturable in a flash. My photographic interest in Thai boxing lies instead with the shadows of the image, the unspoken

articulate with and expose broader systems of cultural aesthetics. His question of technology might also be asked concisely as: with what movement is the totality held together?

And, in the context of this project considering the broader affect of Thai boxing technique, I would add: at what cost is movement transmitted or translated? Where, within terms of indebtedness invoked or payed in boxing motion, is a cultural duration or a continuity in transmission, to be shared? Where does the action of a part, the movement of a part, invoke a technical adjustment to the greater whole? Where, for example, does the Thai boxer's elbow, knee or cracked-rib in peripheral village, modernizing regional stadium or even greater metropolitan Bangkok, invoke an alteration which turns-over, churning the entire organic apparatus of family, of soil, of corporeal plasticity? Certainly, the returns boxers provide to parents in rural or migrant households add a particular resiliency to that soil and land which has proven to be less than reliable in the context flood, drought, migrant work, indeterminate seasonal labor⁷, and amidst the pliability of families challenged by members' temporarily indefinite military duties, police-profiling⁸, farm and tourism-impinged labour.

derivative (suppressed?) in Mauss' essay, the corpse beneath the act of turning towards technology as thing; that negative space uncaptured in a passing instant. As Roland Barthes writes, "the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the "pathos" of which, from the first glance, it consists. ... I wanted to explore [photography] not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe and I think." (1981: 21).

⁷ Regarding unpaid, forced, 'slave' labor aboard fishing vessels in Thailand see: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/23/thailand-forced-labor-trafficking-persist-fishing-fleets> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/15/thailand-labor-abuses-persist-fishing-fleets> accessed October 5, 2018

⁸ Eric Haanstad, whose doctoral research was carried out among Thai policemen (2008), documents cases of temporal subjectivity that emerge in the midst of violent encounters documented by Thai, Vietnamese and American police, among others (2009). With Haanstad, I see the phenomenon of slowed-time described by many informants during violent encounters as evidence of manifold temporalities resonant beneath daily life (2009) and even, evidence of the

For Mauss *to even have begun to ask the question* of what makes a bodily technique different from one society to the next, he required a prominent encounter with the intensity, luxury and price of technology permitting a particular form of European sovereign life. This intensity is invoked by a loss of life—a folding of death and a marching homogeneity within the variegated technologies of cultural motion. It is perhaps these violent trenches dug through European psychogeography in Mauss’ present, which, off-stage, directs the question of human totality. Mauss’ interest in body techniques was driven by his participation in the European theatre of war (cf. Schlanger 1998; Guyer’s 2016 introduction to *The Gift*; Garces & Jones 2009; Hart 2014). The loss of many of his colleagues, including much of the Durkheimian school of sociology in the first world war, personalizes the conglomerate, entrenched meeting of bodies and destructive machinations heralding the death-throes of European classical sovereignty unto democratic political representation. (*Incidentally, these sovereign thrashings echo two historical time-frames, monarchial and a national-democratic-global-market, both of which are grappled with in contemporary Thailand.*)

In the introductory passages of Mauss’ essay, the technical body is pushed to the foreground by a background filled with the shadowy profiles of wartime WWI soldiers, their marching, countenance and gait on the horizon betraying otherness. Mauss’ examples include Australians ‘on the front’ still capable of squatting in water, and the rhythmic marches of national modernity (i.e. a passage comparing the marching of French and English regiments).

manifold chains of causality which unfurl when life or death is irrevocably encountered. I would also emphasize that this violent action instantiating temporal subjectivity *generates* temporality itself, cutting and differentiating, distributing the grounding for memory and cultural continuity. The corporeal bearing particular to Thai men I describe through Thai boxing might even be considered, for those skillful practitioners, a relative dilation of such an immanent temporality held ever more open throughout the most quotidian and routine actions.

‘Techniques of the body’ as a formal category of ethnological investigation, is spoken through these shadowy profiles; the death-pangs of a classical European-sovereignty and the birth of a uniform democratic world, all at once being popularly and violently questioned. That moment, as monarchies gave way to democratic nationalisms, holds much resonance with the (con)temporary exhaustion of democratic political processes within everyday life (see Collins 2012; Theodossopoulos 2014; Graeber passim; The Invisible Committee 2015), debt-laden contexts where, as anthropologists, Keith Hart reiterates, “we need to combine fieldwork methods with historical study of global processes” (Hart 2016: 420). It’s from within a similar economization of time that Mauss’ speech, *Techniques of the Body*, is enacted from out of a scrabbling of notes amidst the demands of lectureship, where the negative and contradictory generativity of a corporeal technicality expands, stowed amidst the demands of the institutional organ. Mauss’ imperative for a very bodily investigation is delivered across an immense tension, an oscillation between, on the one hand, absent, determined individual bodies—the loss of human-figures in wartime dead—and on the other, the propensity for a rational, unitary, organized collective response to the very human catastrophe at hand.

It is with the weight of these losses beneath him, the passage of life-time always uncannily encountering modernity, that Mauss presents his essay—its undercurrents being the basis of a traumatic subject—to the board of psychology. Mauss situates bodily technologies and the imperative catalogue of techniques as part of a larger sociological project, a project which itself becomes, in the anthropological present’s disciplinary gloss, a technology (a study), a record of societies to overcome the flesh-rending, dismembering violences of a negative-deathly historical being.⁹

⁹ Mauss’ *Manual of Ethnography*, introducing a section regarding recording the differing uses of tools, states: “Humankind enters history already equipped; as soon as humans appear, tools are there.” (2002[1967]:28). At face value, the remark is perhaps an inclusive gesture for ‘physical’

To fully follow Mauss' ambition to record techniques of the body then, is to consider a list of body techniques to be a partial articulation of a social totality. In this sense, Mauss provides a proto-structuralist concern with the relations and continuities holding cultures together. The part—bodily techniques—must mesh with the formative mode of exchange—the total prestation—prestations which involve a sacrificial scheme as a resonant mode of reference vis-a-vis totality.

It is a quick practical leap from the concentration of body and technique,¹⁰ to inhabiting a horizon where the 'body' extends through the instruments of its technique, as with those cyborg's eyeglasses (Haraway 1985), as with the blind person's cane¹¹, the pianist's piano (see

anthropologists of the time, though this simultaneity of history-and-meaning with the tool might doubly describe a phenomenal rupture of the negative and of conscious finitude in the social world. Where relative temporality is the context for separation and differentiation; for a manipulation of the world, we find ourselves always already with tools at hand (see Heidegger), within and without technology. Through the inherently political 'use' of technology, where anatomical peripheries of the corpus are asked to do the work of a sovereign center/centrifuge, conceptions of a one among many, and one among 'others', parameters of the shared community are pounded into shape, an expressing of the concentrations, self-sacrifices, of the body-politic which is continuous with technical design.

¹⁰ In opening the discussion of Technology in his *Manual of Ethnography*, Mauss writes, "The industrial system to which the object belongs should be identified; the study of a single tool normally implies the study of the craft as a whole. [new paragraph]... Finally, the position of crafts *in relation to one another* conditions the state of society. The mistake of Karl Marx is that he believed the economy to condition technology: the converse is true." (2002[1967]:24, italics mine). While another reading of Marx's notion of alienation might be generous in its reading of economy as equally dynamic, "'techniques' refers for Mauss to the whole range of material practices, objects, and skills devised and used by human beings in their interactions with their surroundings and with each other", while technology is the study thereof (Schlanger 1998: 193). Hence, in being concerned with these *techniques*, the balance of a society, for Mauss, is to be found not in a single essential motion, but in understanding a motion vis a vis its institutional bounds: a position different from the classic functionalism of, say, Malinowski, insofar as Maussian techniques are privy to change; open to historical violence. Ergo, with Mauss's ethnographic method, it would be possible to move from the mechanics of one practice, to an articulation of the overall sovereign assembly and its unequal distribution of collective memory in a subject's particular range of motion.

¹¹ The blind, says Merleau-Ponty, quoting Descartes, "see with their hands" (1964: 170). And this differently abled example exemplifies the generative occlusions within our corpus—a body

Sudnow 1978), or where even each externalized sign-system is, metaphorically, a ‘cane’ propping up the human corpus (e.g. Kohn 2012: 6-9, following Peirce) with meaning and technique until we should rejoin an immense singular ground. As one contemporary ethnographic example, the Ecuadorian rainforest the Runa people navigate, as explicated by Kohn, extends a more nuanced, signing version of Levi-Strauss’ forest theatre: consciousness and culture per se, may no longer be considered unique to a skin-bound, human ‘body’. My purpose here is not to enter into a critique of anthropocentrism, but to point out that in such an extensible world of signs and relative natures, the relative articulation of technical interface becomes a matter of extensivity-intensivity in time and recurrence. If techniques of the body are to be revitalized as an analytical category at present, the part-as-whole concern with ‘technique’, hardly afforded residence in the antipode of a subject’s bodily presence, might also require a coming to terms with the intensity and intimacy of historical violence.

I recall the anthropological enthusiasm with ‘embodiment’ in reference to Mauss’ techniques, not merely to turn value back upon a valorized subject (the agentic post-structuralist position), but to indicate a subject whose experiential perspectives are implicated in the ghastly debts of an unequal history (see Ortner 2016), where the plasticity¹², proprioception and

that is both seen and seeing with (1964). Similarly, with Thai boxing, our shins may be dulled, our cheekbones become swollen or forearms bruised, but within the arrangement of this sensory collapse, other avenues for sense and proprioception come to the fore: toe-hold gradations within one’s footing in the street, the alignment of one’s shoulders vis a vis others, the tension held in one’s torso while breathing, or the clenching of a jaw proceeding exertion.

¹²Of the term *plasticity*, philosopher Catherine Malabou writes, “—the word plasticity has two basic senses: it means at once the capacity to receive form (clay is called “plastic,” for example) and the capacity to give form (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery). Talking about the plasticity of the brain thus amounts to thinking of the brain as something modifiable, “formable,” and formative at the same time. ... But it must be remarked that plasticity is also the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create. ... We thus note that plasticity is situated between two extremes: on the one side the sensible image of taking form (sculpture or plastic objects), and on the other side that of the annihilation of all form (explosion)” (Malabou 2008: 5; cf. Sparrow 2015).

kinaesthesia¹³ of the technical ‘body’ are in-formed through collective memory’s traumatic markers—in a phenomenology of finitude, a dead-in-living landscape. Within such a knowledgeable ‘body’ challenged well beyond its proper¹⁴ limits, technique would become continuous with the memory of destruction; with irrevocable cuts; with tensions holding between self-creation and self-destruction.

How, empirically, would ethnographers address such processes of relative violence nested in bodily movement, when cross-culturally, divisions between ‘sensation’, experience, affect and emotion are not made uniformly (e.g. Geurts 2003). Re-membering Mauss’ ‘*Techniques of the Body*’ as a question composed across an accumulation of corpses, shadows, losses and absences, it is through this negative being that any single movement articulates a distinct possibility, a style of forgetting (cf. Nietzsche [1887]1967), in reference to a greater totality. Where Kantian-phenomenological grounds, judgement and causality begin to shudder against the strain of these arrangements, the ethical and the valuable remain implicit¹⁵, already

¹³ Kinaesthesia refers to an awareness of the body through movement, while proprioception indicates an awareness the position of one’s own body communicated through the balances and exchanges between internal parts and organs, usually muscles, bones and joints.

¹⁴ Distancing the ‘body’ from the ‘proper’ body of Cartesian dualism, I pilfer this term from the title of an edited volume collecting anthropologies *Beyond the Body Proper* (Lock and Farquhar 2007).

¹⁵ Offering a novel alternative, recalling that Kant’s notions of transcendence preclude an order of judgment issuing between rationally dependable, materially inert grounds and a transcendent moral universal, phenomenologist Alphonso Lingis retains this tension of the immanent-transcendent as an imperative addressing action in all things, animals, and significant others alike. For Lingis, the categorical imperative is distributed outside a sovereign, as we find ourselves mobile via the passivity of a natural world. Lingis describes a world of ‘Imperative Fields’ (1998:68-70), where “the consistency and coherence of the ‘world’ is not given; it is also an imperative.” (1998:68), where “[t]he perception of things, the apprehension of their content and the circumscription of their forms, is not an appropriation of them, but an expropriation of our forces into them, and ends in enjoyment.” (1998: 70; cf. p.209 on technology). Insofar as this imperative introduces the directionality of desire in the immediacy of every motion, there is an ethics in perception: we are compelled to act, though this action be composed beyond the limits of ‘reason’ alone (cf. Levinas). Though causality may readily be displayed in the laws of physics,

implied in every exchange. It is upon the limits of reason (or the lack thereof) that the categorical imperatives gives way, ungrounded unto the conception of categories and classifications with which humanity orders an otherwise chaotic, otherwise unknowable, immense social world of loose and surprise endings, permeable corporeal openings, and living-dead contract(ion)s.

A technology of the body, or humans' studious repetition of technique unto reliable execution/relation then, does more than merely indicate determined cultural differences with its performance. Each technical success also implies the resistance and hesitation which accompanies differentiation; a fissure for ethical being. Though Mauss' categorical sociological project maintained distance from his contemporary Levy-Bruhl¹⁶, the rupture of the event, and the privileging of ritual hierarchical violence within human intersubjective memory, has been slightly discontinued by the 'new anthropology' (cf. Valerio 1966) inspired by Mauss, a Levi-Straussian structuralism where the superimposition upon Kantian grounds were categories and

rational physics is enfolded in ontology: the compositions and turnings-towards in a collect(ive/ed) world are not enacted through physical laws, but through the passions, delays and conscriptions of attention; the cumulative excesses of a natural order which is never fully linear.

¹⁶ Wherein Mauss' consideration, the total 'body' and 'techniques' remain separate, analogous to Kantian categories of 'form' and 'content' respectively, Mauss could in turn criticize the phenomenologically inclined work of Levy-Bruhl for not unpacking social categories as part of a whole, for not placing techniques within the context of their broader social milieu (see Allen 2000:23). In contrast, for Levy-Bruhl, whose 'primitive man' might be generously considered at present to refer to a larger human condition, a pre-rational instantiation of consciousness, where 'destruction' is already at the centerpiece of his notion of 'participations'. Levy-Bruhl writes, "For the primitive mentality, without having to think about it, participations are everywhere from the sole fact that its experience is what it is and that all things have an invisible as well as visible existence—and it is thus irrelevant to ask how they are established and started for the primitive mentality. On the contrary it is necessary to seek how they are little by little effaced and destroyed." (Levy-Bruhl [1949]1975: 98). (cf. Leenhardt 1979: 188 on Levy-Bruhl; Bernasconi 2005); If this phenomenology is not of transcendent-pure-spirit, but of the dialectical motion which finds difference and nature through groups, then Levy-Bruhl's notion of participations is that holding of contradiction (rupture, dialectic) intrinsic to thought/motion/life.

classifications of a linguistic order, thus orchestrated, plucking the tonal tensions of mythic thought and intellect.¹⁷

Mauss also showed discomfort with contemporaries such as Bataille and Caillois in the College De Sociologie, alluding to the fascist, Heideggerian leanings in their projects (see Falasca-Zamponi 2006: 51; cf. Moore 2011: 34-36). Upon this tension between these two thinkers, Mauss the anthropologists' sociologist haunted by loss, and a later Heidegger, hermeneutician concerned with the human disclosure of relationality (see Weiner 1992; 1993; 2001) operating in silent denial, two questions may be developed: 1) the question of how technique and technology disclose a more general human relation to history, and subsequently, given this analytic, 2) how temporality is more particularly generated through Thai boxing.

Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology and Rationalized Violence

If Mauss' *Techniques of the Body* calls attention to a question of how the violence partitioning a part operates to structure a social order as totality, in the midst of the second century's 'great' wars (or the European experience thereof), the comparison to Heidegger, 'thinker' working at distance—or perhaps intentionally *to* distance himself—from the horrors of a second-world war, might further inform the contemporary anthropological conception of technology.

Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology, penned in 1953, after his complicity in the wartime atrocities of National Socialism, may be read as an attempt in late-Heideggerian philosophy to address a blindspot the author himself effectively represses careerlong: the terms

¹⁷ In a 2004 interview, Levi Strauss indicates he is 'probably Kantian', and in conversation with philosopher Paul Ricouer, affirms his structuralism operates upon "a Kantianism without transcendental subjectivity" (1970: 61).

by which a particular historicizing Being—Dasein—duly, a being for one's own death,¹⁸ admits into clearing, a nihilist articulation (see Janicaud 1996). While Heidegger's gesturing towards a metaphysics prior to Greek thought engenders a flattening of the dialectic, a prior time which departs from (Aristotelian/phenomenal) value, to extend Heidegger's conversation/silence then brings questions to a present. 'Now', that is a global world-historical present which finds that life's very functioning—consuming, (re)producing, desiring—within the demands of modern-rationalist life involves burning gasoline to travel unto environmental collapse, consuming overly-packaged commodities to stave off hunger, or rushing anonymously along overcrowded pedestrian overpasses. Every step seems part and parcel of an involitional modern migration staked around the metropole, a suspension of the personal volition of a global working underclass, steps wherein that suppression of the masses and upholding of hierarchy is built into sustenance, unto the eventual consumption of all in warfare, environmental collapse or the scarce logic of an ahistorical market.¹⁹ Under these conditions, what of the value of life, what is the dilation of negation or generative contradiction within destruction? How does a person find reliable grounds upon which to stand, to consider choice, to move?

Leaving a village boxing camp in Northeast Isan, sitting on a canopied bench in the back of a brightly patined deep blue and neon transport truck paying coins for the miles, I watch as a small child who has boarded the truck with his mother is offered a sip of [nam-daeng] red-water soda by an elder monk across the single aisle. When the child finishes all but a few ice-cubes in

¹⁸ The phenomenol (Heideggerian and Freudian) insight that each person must owe a singular death to nature (see Dastur 2012), when applied to ritual action, sees this singularity differentially distributed, as with the responsibility for death and the renewal of its cont(r)act.

¹⁹ Underwear I purchased at a big-box market in North Carolina, post fieldwork, turned out to be made in Thailand—the value chain, extended, unsettles any sense of being at home.

the bag of soda, the monk takes the plastic bag back and lets it drift from his fingers, where it blows out over the highway ditch and into the high grasses. He grins toothlessly in my direction until I nod and look back out over the horizon of fallow rice-fields zipping past.

As with the conscription of the term ‘event’ in his later work, indicating both happening and appropriation (*ereignes*, see Dastur 2000: 187; 1995), the Heideggerian question concerning technology follows consistently from Heidegger’s earlier depiction of ready-to-hand tools, tools granted as means during action (Heidegger [1927]1962: 135-138), comprising a technical world in reserve, appropriable by human beings (see Ihde 2010: p.30-34). Anthropologist Tim Ingold has, over the course of his career, dialogued with Heideggerian terms such as dwelling, building, and thinking, though currently finding these tools insufficient to indigenous making of homelife in the present political conjuncture (see Ingold 2011: 9-16). Heidegger however, particularly in his later work/turn concerned with technology, considers not a purely appropriable ‘nature’ (e.g. the title of Ingold’s earlier work, *The Appropriation of Nature*), but a *physis* (see Feenberg 2005: 12 esp.; Farrell-Krell 1986: 4), a world-making-being which generates, from concentration itself, a non-natural state excoriated in the recesses of finitude. The technical apparatus of Heideggerian ontology nonetheless suggests some reference to the importance of finitude (i.e. mortality) in consideration of technical execution. Heidegger’s ‘being’ [Dasein] is expressly not that of ‘subject’ vis a vis world, but is, rather, that clearing upsurge of “[t]he ecstatic unity of temporality”, a condition of possibility for making past-present-future. Heidegger writes:

“We will understand the light of this clearedness only when we cease searching for an implanted power that is at hand, only when we inquire into the total constitution of the Being of Dasein; this is, care; that is, the unified ground of existential possibility. Ecstatic temporality ... is the primary regulator of the possible unity of all the essential structures in Dasein.” (quoted in Farrell-Krell 1986: 88).

In like fashion then, taking the human, finite condition of having time to access a manifold temporality through its exhaustive and ecstatic states, Thai boxing camps, stadiums, temporary concrete housings, warehouses turned to family homes may be considered to always include the possibility of dwelling, but also the possibility for local rationalities and reasons to overrun the determinations of object architecture—an overlay of the hermeneutic order within a propensity for species-being architecture or homogenous dwelling outside of nature/culture.

For the families whose boxers arrive in Lumpinee stadium, these places become historical spandrels, and to move back to Mauss again, conduits raised on the bones and ashes of those lost or forgotten via construction—(cigarette burns in the eyes of former hosts upon a wall of otherwise enigmatically hierarchical, care-fully displayed images).

The necessary disavowal of the instrument or of the architectural enclosure's historical fullness during action, the narrowing, during sparring sessions of household-warehouse, brick and mildewing canvas into a background of shadows, is nevertheless a narrowing of human focus in training designed to regularly take us beyond our discreet selves, beyond our individual bonds and skill-bearing potentials up until that point. Writing after the second world war, Heidegger's essay considers technological praxis something more: an enframing weary of systemic, run-away rationalizations. Yet this enframing, unfolding, revealing, clearing of humanity in and of time, is hardly suspicious or wary enough of the very actuality of history and nihilistic reason seizing temporal-bodies. Writing his essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger states,

“The essential unfolding of technology threatens revealing, threatens it with the possibility that all revealing will be consumed in ordering and that everything will present itself only in the unconcealment of standing-reserve.” ([1953] 2008:339),

...and even earlier in the essay, Heidegger states,

“Yet precisely because man is challenged more originally than are the energies of nature, i.e., into the process of ordering, he never is transformed into mere standing reserve” ([1953] 2008:323).

Heidegger’s conviction that Dasein—humanity’s being involved in the unfolding of both world and self—excludes the possibility of overrationalization, of automation unto mutual destruction, reads, after the horrors of twentieth century warfare, as both a denial of the inhumanity of National Socialism’s final solutions, and an incomplete philosophy of temporality, an oversight addressed subsequently by biopolitics. Read generously at best, a silence underscores *The Question Concerning Technology*, and it is from this ambiguity, between apologetics and stubborn silence, that Heidegger’s work persists as commentary. For considering structures of violence, inequality or karmically certified patriarchy housing Thai boxing, the question concerning technology demands an attention to historicizing duration stylizing in the very doing *with* technique. Attending to the extent that rationality-repetition resides or accumulates in human motion demands attention to the political and historic aesthetic which accords human responsibility primacy through a relation to particular tools as use-values in processes of ordering and making sense. The Heideggerian management of technology—of world articulating time—is pronounced closely, in reference to the relative, encompassing regimes of reason.

On karma and merit: “Now, I do this, live here...”, my first boxing trainer explains, his scar-crossed brow nodding to the things around his parents’ farmhouse yard: the rows of wooden cages for fighting cocks, the old punching bag wrapped half in plastic on the tree, his nephews toddling in the yard, and the muay-Thai ring where those younger boxers will wrap their hands after our run. “When I am older, maybe I will do farming, then even older still, I will

ordain as a monk, for a long time then. Maybe then, my heart will be happy. It will be good, to make merit.”

From the outset of his essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger states that he intends to move beyond an anthropology which would take technology to be the cause of human differences, instead using the ancient Greek categories of *poiesis* and *techne* as doorways to describe an ontology bearing the dangers of political aesthetics, our traces of inhabiting the landscape—a landscape peopled with technology.²⁰

Taking that essay as a point of departure towards this ‘body’, each ‘event’, each repeated trauma, is marked by historicity, a propensity for meaning, and an ecstatic rupture from reason. The Heideggerian position, particularly as articulated post war-atrocity, intones a human propensity to be pulled *across* an ordering temporality which might instrumentalize life. The relation to technology, in a Heideggerian framework, incorporates a specialized sort of historicity, where being-there implies a mortal fixity within the world.²¹ To execute technique, thus, is to convert, retrograde, the violence of linear or cyclical time through the sacrificial excess of finitude.

It is this heightened mortality, the being-towards-death which accounts for its own being, that adds another element to the conversation of techniques in Thai boxing—those moments which enforce a relative reflexivity, a distancing with mortal-style. With each historicizing

²⁰ A pertinent example from the ethnographic record may be the historicity invoked through exchanges of people embedded in landscape described by Nancy Munn in the Trobriand Islands ([1986]1992).

²¹ Phenomenologist Françoise Dastur explains, “For Heidegger, the world is not the totality of beings, but the *horizon* in terms of which beings may be comprehended as what they are. It is therefore a constitutive moment of *Dasein* itself, not a receptacle into which the latter may be inserted. This explains why the ‘there’ of *Dasein* is one with the being ‘there’ of the world.” (1996:43).

‘body’, a relative (im)balance within the corpus likewise unfolds. Technical, cultural innovation becomes a gestalt for the violence propagating cultural order. Within the breadth of each technical innovation are the siphons of choice, the pull of relative rationality, and the political. The challenge is to include these aspects of relationality in a description of technique.

Considering Mauss and Heidegger’s technical meditations in reference to the atrocities of technologized warfare (Mauss post WWI and Heidegger post WWII), technology as technique, technology as expressed in corporeal relation, becomes technology laden with relative reasons, technology extending unto the reasons given over to forgetting or permitting violence, to containing the incommensurability of being alive. Any attention to a cultural style of movement contracts from a history and memory of violence, be this the raising of a limb, a kick, an elbow-strike, a technique for craftsmanship, for driving, for welding, for cooking or for distraction from contracted labor.

Given this Heideggerian contribution to the conversation, Mauss’ call to record body-techniques may then be considered not merely a cataloguing of postures or recording of deft anatomical manipulations. A question concerning techniques of the body must be to what extent patterns of violence and inequality, asymmetries, are forgotten in movement, over time. The inhabiting of such a technology, which cannot be articulated when time runs out, relies upon the residency of rite, the occupation of which includes the possibility of a mass-violence, incorporates a pace of forgetting. In the words of Mauss again, the “ornamentation forms part of technology; and to it there are added in addition elements of religion such as religious representations and equilibria”.²² Borrowing terms from Mauss’ lost contemporary Robert Hertz,

²² These equilibria are explored by Mauss’ friend Robert Hertz, killed at age 33 during WWI (see Evans-Pritchard 1960: 10). His essay on the pre-eminence of the right hand implies both the necessity of asymmetry to motion and life, as well as the residency of histories of violence and structures of inequality in the ‘mutilation’ of the body—even at the species level. In its predilections toward asymmetry reside a violence and imbalance within the human species which

the cultural style of movement is a style premised on ‘mutilations’ of the body, an installation of asymmetries and inequalities being the pretense to our very movement in time.

Reading between the losses, silences and asymmetries of these thinkers—Mauss, Heidegger, Hertz—the very definition of technology changes. Taking Mauss’ call to record bodily techniques to task with these asymmetries Hertz highlights, and through the controversy of Heidegger’s silence, bearing in mind the bridging of human movement over processed of rationalization (in Thailand, I indicate this to be the relative moralistic rationalizing of a meritorious economy which devalues kinetic, corporeal excess and the frenetic movement of youth)²³, The Question Concerning Techniques of the Body is a question of how corporeal style shelters a trace of the repetitious falling-rising-rolling motion (death in life in death), within a culturally relative human resistance to gravity. A local technique of the body then, becomes not only a part to be recorded as part of a record of the ‘total man’, it is also a praxis which indicates both

pulls us off-rational center, allowing for variation and variability: the imbalance which is both our shortcoming and our precondition towards mobility and memory. This sine wave, our most basic sign of life, a moving off of grounds or any spatial zero-point (to borrow Husserl’s term) of inertia.

²³ The Thai state’s equation of power within the stillness of a deathworld implies a volatility and disorder accorded to the undisciplined movements of youth—the trace of innocence and guilt within the complicity of disorder each living subject carries. Phenomenologist Alphonso Lingis describes this innocence of youth in general: “Each moment of awakening is a return to youth, to the insolence, impetuosity, brashness of youth. In our action there is festivity, license, and puerile pleasure. There is an element of lubricity, of wickedness in the innocence of action.” (1999:206) ... “In death, every life fails. It disconnects from the processes of history. If it is true that its enterprises may go on by themselves, one no longer pilots them and they are vulnerable to being taken over or brought to a halt by others who live. In letting go of the controls, in disconnecting, in dying, there is a fundamental innocence” (1999:212). Regarding the political time of childhood in contemporary Thailand, noting children’s day celebrations featuring military tanks and rifles on parade, as well as nationalist songs required in gradeschool, Guiseppe Bolatta notes that the “military junta seems intent on pursuing an attempt of “restoration” in which the governance of children at school and the public usage of political meanings of “childhood” articulate with the resurgent strength of the monarchical paternalism of “Thainess”, and its military grammar, in the wider society.” (2016: <https://kyotoreview.org/yav/childhood-militarized-thailand/>, accessed September 25, 2017.; cf. Bowie 1997).

cultural change/continuity and the drawing of a (cultural) boundary. While recording the body-technology articulation in this fashion may not necessarily involve the camera-work Mauss recommends, but must include the tracing of violence as repetition enfolding, covering memorable difference.

In Thailand, this means that proper technique continually requires the turning away from certain things and certain others in day to day action; gestures which are the perceptual basis of political change and historical continuity.

Inhabiting the Violence of Technique in Thailand

In Thailand, the balance of proceeding upright through mutually assured construction/destruction, extends amidst the urgency of indentured motions beneath multinational, religico-political, feudal and corvee arrangements, all of which carry a trace in the distribution of luxuries and holding of forms: glass bottles for sugared-drinks, whiskey and beer, transport of all sizes to make do—skytrains, motorbikes, royal phalanxes parting traffic, police's rubber jackets, encapsulate the living in their contingency. In Bangkok, the living breathe through carbon monoxide and industrial dust, but each foothold in urban space is purchased via institutional supports.

This externality to the intensive enfolding of technological instrument involves a relative articulation of life-time, where there is a relation, a tension and distance which permits both choice and ethic to unfold. If anything is clearer with the flicker of Ou's elbow, or even moreso with the scrambled clash and leveraging of slickened limbs, chins, necks, shoulderblades and ribs in the exhaustive clinch of Thai boxing, it is that in action, while technique becomes continuous with a relative 'body', the very designation of a 'bodily technique' is predicated on an

interruptive disturbance or concentration therein—a drawing into relations of exchangeability and expansion of sensory volition engendered pedagogically.

As with the technical questions of Mauss and Heidegger, articulated from out of the machinations of war, any relative ‘technique of the body’ is composed in parallel with the (political) management of the operations of sacrifice during collective exchange/relationality. In the play of ritual, being at the limits of violence and memory, are those propensities for destruction/construction which circumscribe the limits of a cultural order.²⁴ To ask how a Thai boxer brings forth technical expertise in the ring and to ask how learning comes about then, is to consider the concrete interpolations of political violence in the sovereign apparatus that give each limb purchase in space. Refinement of technique proceeds through a collective investment of human, living currency into the technologies concretizing the present.²⁵ Winners raised in the collaborative space of ritual are raised at cost to the lost, injured or failed masses frayed away, fractured bones which produce the unifying spectacle of hardened competition in the metropolis. And the ghosts of each technical collaboration invoke a particular mode of synesthesia within ritual-cultural architecture—the ‘subject’ thus demarcated in a propensity to overlap some senses

²⁴This requires reconceptualizing the ‘gift’ exchange upon which many notions of cultural value rest as exchange including sacrificial dynamics—that dynamic continuing the grounds of exchange. Balanced and generalized reciprocity in this light imply stasis or mythic status and exchange ushers in an inevitable loss or giving out; a binding of each party in time, upon contact which delivers the inequivalences of history. (see Godelier (1999) and Derrida (1992), who each make an argument for the subsuming of sacrifice within the gift through Mauss; also Wyschogrod, Goux & Boynton (Eds.) 2002; Pyyhtinen 2014).

²⁵ “Concrete” may be considered doubly here, as both the literal substance preferred for urbanization’s paving over nature, particularly in contemporary China (see David Harvey, below), and as the ‘concrete’, in a dialectical sense – that realized interpersonal space which must be exculpated from the sacrificial exchanges of the masses. http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/520-the-crisis-of-planetary-urbanization, accessed August 8, 2017.

with others, to dullen or discard certain avenues for desire or feedback within the immanence of collective urban(e) life.²⁶

The “New” Lumpinee Stadium as a Theatre of Technology

By the night of Ou’s match, Lumpinee stadium had only two weeks prior been relocated to the side of an expressway in northern Bangkok, the new stadium being built alongside the sporting grounds of a military training complex, “Armed Forces Security Center, Ram-intra, division 4”. The relocation, away from Lumpinee’s previous location on the doorstep of Bangkok’s Khlong Toei slum, is consistent with other efforts across the globe to construct an ideal national athletic body apart from untimely economic undesirables. The stadium’s new address, alongside the center of military-industrial production, as well as the resale of the old stadium’s land to junta-friendly commercial developers, indicates a movement not entirely dissimilar to patterns of expropriation accompanying the construction of stadiums the world over.²⁷ Where these stadiums are not designed to support life indefinitely, but instead, often

²⁶ To repeatedly question the forms of sovereign revolution, to form address from the occasion of ‘bodies’ occupying space, implies a shift from the isolationist propensities of spectacular, representative politics to a larger, active world. In the words of a critical collective formed to reconceive the catastrophe of modern (French) sovereignty: “There is no empty space, everything is inhabited, each one of us is the gathering and crossing point of quantities of affects, lineages, histories, and significations, of material flows that exceed us. The world doesn’t environ us, it passes through us. What we inhabit inhabits us. What surrounds us constitutes us. We don’t belong to ourselves. We are always–already spread through whatever we attach ourselves to. It’s not a question of forming a void from which we could finally manage to catch hold of all that escapes us, but of learning to better inhabit what is there, which implies perceiving it ... [p]erceiving a world peopled not with things but with forces, not with subjects but with powers, not with bodies but with bonds.” (The Invisible Committee 2015: 79).

²⁷ —The now nearly abandoned Olympic and FIFA World-Cup mega-stadiums in Beijing and South-Africa, their wind-swept scaffolding like post-humanist architectural birds’ nests fixed in economic stasis-time, athletes’ villages turned to ghost-towns for the failed habitation of a universally competitive species-being. These constructions sweep family workers and generations of displaced children, forgotten domestic hearths, under concrete and steel scaffolding, dragging a slew of migrant labor into their carcass, unremitted paycheques bonding parents to rarely return home.

distribute spectacle at a human cost. Bangkok's latest stadium provides yet another competitive center for concrete-technology and flesh to merge, sorting skillful combatants and sponsor-worthy champions from a mass of those defeated participants fallen away to the vestiges of seasonal wage labour.²⁸ This entire arrangement underscores the single articulation of an extensive limb, sustained only for a flash.

The immense human cost of this arrangement, not simply in hours spent training, but in the restructuring of the cityscape, the falling away of construction workers, boxing families and unsuccessful boxers, is of a weight appropriate to the mass-distraction required to sustain the political present in Thailand. The monumental metal of the new Lumpinee stadium is made not only from the spent synovial fluid of its construction crews, but also from out of the classed scaffolding of a nation of hopeful youths and military-men intended toward its financing. An argument that such a stadium contributes to the local economy is correct, but not in the limited definition of economy—economy considered solely as a collective market of monetary exchange

—In Brazil, Pan-American games' stadiums required walls built around them, keeping slums out of the eyesight of tourists (Curi, Knijnik & Mascarenhas 2011), while FIFA World Cup and Olympic stadiums offered another pretense for bulldozing slum dwellers aside (see Robb Larkins 2015; 2018).

—'Renovations' of the 2010 Shivaji Commonwealth stadium in New Delhi which transfer the common-wealth to private contractors (Mishra 2016).

—The New Orleans superdome, destination for evacuees of Hurricane Katrina: helicoptered news footage on day one showing yellow-school buses shuttling any Swede with a passport out of the flood, followed by news reports of interminable crowding, philanthropic shortages, fencing-in, flooded restrooms, while youth and aged are raped or killed in the stadium darkness, an increasingly stringent, pared vision of who may stand as human comes out of the 'natural' disaster. As another evening's darkness descends on the home of the "Saints", on the abandoned artificial turf, children still inside rip up foam padding from the end-zone (cf. Delillo 1972) equipment, running impact-drills and pick-up games at play until dark.

²⁸ In Isan again, I am shown a photo taken eight years previously, of my boxing friend Nog, gathering in front of his backyard ring with a dozen friends, young boxers roughly ten to thirteen years old standing around the wooden ring his father had built behind the house. Except for Nog and our friend Tum, none of those pictured still box. As Nog shows me the photos, two of his contemporaries shout to us from a distance as their truck turns onto the highway, waving from their elevated perch atop a truckload of sugarcane stems.

for goods and services, and the growth of ‘gross’ domestic product.). For purposes here, the *grossness*, *domesticity* and *production* of classical ‘economics’, indicate in respective turn, the excessive monstrous/spectral, the contradictory violent political impulses requiring a harnessing of domestic labour/anxiety, and the consumed/wasted remainder of political life cut away in sacrifice.

Bringing a boxer like Ou through the competitive rural circuit, testing him repeatedly during bouts in Bangkok and Isan, is travel exemplifying the local rate of return (in revolutionary history) *corporeal capital*²⁹ holds. In a present-day Thai economy of motion which Thai boxers operate upon/within, there is always a human and spirited cost to constructing the architectures of modernity. As Andrew Johnson notes of gated communities in Chiang Mai, with Thai progress and modernity, there is often a sense of the ‘uncanny’ and of ruin. For Johnson’s informants, this takes the form of discourse associating ghosts and foreign others (Burmese migrants) with the unsettling of place (2013). The prevalence of abandoned construction projects throughout Thailand, or the juxtaposition of ‘new’ purchasable real-estates directly alongside crumbling or abandoned building projects—i.e. the very ‘temporary’ low-level housing Ou’s family makes home in Bangkok—attests to a myriad of differential temporal obligations and attentions a skillful Thai person must gain awareness of when moving through public space. It is not unusual to point out the presence of Southeast Asian ghosts among the living—and debts the living must pay (e.g. Langford 2009; Mills 1995)—but perhaps the ‘living’ are also, if not

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu designates terms such as symbolic or cultural capital to be repositories for agentive transformation, accumulations of each form of capital being leveraged, over time, in obligatory exchange (see 1986 especially). I propose that Thai boxers develop something closer to ‘*corporeal capital*’, however. Corporeal capital would indicate, in addition to the giving over of objectively considered muscle, youthful, chronological lifetime or superficial beauty through an ideology of self-sacrifice, more pertinently, an acute receptivity to playing across matters living and dead in repetition, and hence, a unique access to historical depth in the readiness to take on of exhaustive actions. Investments of corporeal capital involves a negative dilation, an accruable shadow cast between (athletic) movement and historicity.

animated by ghosts, moving in nonsynchronous fashion, such that they themselves become ghosts among modern citizens.

Similarly, revitalizing the grounds of Lumpinee Boxing stadium by erecting an architecturally modernist-bubble next to a military base constructs an imposition for both living and dead. Officially, only two stadiums in greater Bangkok, Rajdamnern and Lumpinee, are allowed to schedule Thai boxing matches. During February 2014, anti-government protestors had closed part of Rajdamnern street off with tires, sandbags, lumber stanchions and netting, erecting a barricade only a block from the stadium entrance. As competitions continued there regardless, interest among boxing audiences shifted to final tournaments held in the ‘old’ Lumpinee Stadium, and then to bouts like Ou’s organized in the ‘new’ stadium on Ram-Intra highway.

Instead of sight lines in the older stadium, where a drooping and sometimes leaky corrugated tin-ceiling on wooden support beams obstructed some views, where dilapidated wooden bleachers and mesh netting had been used to divide upper and lower seats, the new stadium everywhere allowed an unobstructed view of the ring, with bright lights exposing the boxers far beneath a cavernous ceiling.³⁰ Above pastel green concrete bleachers with seating for

³⁰ The dispatching of boxers beneath Lumpinee’s clear phosphorescent lights, and the clear lines of sight for gambling spectators in the stadium are an inversion, for example, of the architectures of disciplinary subjectivity Michel Foucault derives from Jeremy Bentham (Foucault 1977). The omnipresent panopticon prison watchtower Foucault describes to exemplify this disciplinary subjectivity might easily fit in the negative-space above the ring. Where the panopticon’s watchtower supports an always-possibly present overseer which pinions a type of self-monitoring, isolated and demoralized subjectivity, in the open stadium, our gaze, though free to roam, is, with lights, video-reproduction and shadow, tacitly directed to action in the center ring. Minus the internalized morality of a panopticon’s overseeing eye, responsibility for a viewpoint, for the proceedings within the ring, is projected back onto the housed spectator. Where we rush into enclosure—indeed paying to enter the stadium—the vacuum of authority and the jurisdiction of corporeal selves is as yet to be determined. As Alan Feldman’s study of urban violence in Northern Ireland shows, in many metropolitan areas, the violence which informs subjectivity falls outside practices of knowledge-power and its visionary display. Violence which forms a ‘subjectivity’ can be far more immediate in its punitive dimensions (2001:49). Feldman

5000, massive color videoscreens hung on opposite corners of the amphitheatre to magnify boxers' efforts below. A large digital clock was in clear view, counting down every second of each 3 minute round or 2 minute break.

From outside, the new stadium resembles a metallic, rectangular bubble; a silver-mirrored outgrowth; a reflective glass corpuscle of the city-state highway sprouting cameras inside. The shining height of this new stadium briefly references the vertical distribution of mod-apartment blocks being built around the capsule-trains and elevated embassy-walkways in Bangkok's core. From outside though, the stadium walls appear to buckle under the sun, curving at each edge, its refractive exoskeleton of wrap-around mirrors doubled by the multi-level parking lot directly behind the stadium.

The sale of the land upon which the previous stadium was located, on Rama 4 road, near embassies, banks and Lumpinee park, continues contractual obligations between the military and commercial-industrial construction firms in Bangkok. Lumpinee stadium's previous grounds are already fenced off for a commercial-housing development: lives numbered inside skyrise apartments with shopping space at ground level. In Khon Kaen months earlier, several hours north/northeast by bus from Bangkok, I had found older boxing camps now relocated onto local military bases, the sites of other muay Thai clubs now repurposed as after-school community

([1997]2001) notes that in northern Ireland the omnipresence of cameras where photographs can precipitate assassination has established a continuity between 'Violence and Vision', where an 'eye' or organ is highly politically appropriable, while the 'gaze' is assumed power. To be recluse and still have life, under these conditions, involves familiarizing different senses to the possibility of their doing violence. Feldman's insight in highly policed urban space is that violence extends politics differentially unto the organs and sensory preferences of subjects.

Likewise, the very 'state' of knowledge, or of being made sure of one-self among others during performances such as Thai boxing, involves receptivity to the particular intimacies of violence in the ring. The anesthetization and synesthesias required of boxers in each clash, in turn must be internalized by the crowd, at cost. In other words, the boxers' hardened corpus on display—its indifference to destructive contact or direct opposition—must be echoed and borne posturally by the crowd, insofar as the crowd too must understand this resilient carriage to be responsible and accountable for the present political conditions permitting collective life.

centers. Similarly, by May 2014, a little over three months after Bangkok's Lumpinee stadium changes locations, the military junta takes official control of Thai political life. The junta— self-titled as The National Council of Peace and Order, avowing to bring 'happiness' back to the people (see Campbell 2014), evidences an opportunism surrounding the evacuation, commodification and capture of meaning from ritual spaces. Amidst the absurdist suspension of truth or verbal dissension through generations of censorship, the junta's stronghold was already foreshadowed in the evacuation of meaning from corporeal play; as much as in the increasingly short cycles of resistance and re-establishment through street-protest. Affect has effectively been surrendered in Bangkok's psychogeography, leading muay Thai rings to be increasingly viable centers in which to hone and demonstrate the limits of subjectivity.

The precarious purchase on space in Bangkok is intensified when walking or running in public: eating, arranging meetings or waiting for transportation often first requires reference to commercial or privatized space. Reaching public infrastructure in Bangkok—overpass walkways, strangled parks or bus stops—first requires walking through shopping malls. The vehicles used by members of our camp to travel from place to place are either rented or parked with cost at a neighbouring garage. Some boxers in Bangkok rent small rooms blocks from camp, sleeping above oscillating, rumbling looms spinning cotton-polyester fabric a block over. Vendors on walkways we tip-toe through when jogging sell clothing, kitchen supplies, snacks and other trinkets, but snatch these wares up in rolled blankets at the approach of a police officer of municipal patrol. Dinner vendors' tables are moved onto their reliable sidewalk spots at dusk each night. The frequent expropriation of urban space for private interests through 'development', a local phenomenon Eli Elionoff, echoing patterns unveiled in Chaloeentiarnak's classic study of Thai political "despotic paternalism", terms 'despotic

urbanism'³¹, has ontological implications in the Bangkok metropolis as well. A literal foothold for unindentured life is increasingly precarious. Those without contemporary purchase on the concrete steps overlaying Bangkok's jungle risk an unnatural abandonment in the now fetid-polluted aquatic underworld of the city's formerly placid network of river-tributaries.³²

Boxers, their families, managers, their supporters, gamblers and the entire audience: Lumpinee Stadium—hence the Thai military—draws in that density of humanity circulating for purchase between the Thai populous-periphery and city-state core. This is a population however, circulating in strategic knowledge of these relations, “variably” (see Lefferts 2017),³³ or with their own ‘voice’ (Keyes 2014). For Thai boxers, this means seasonal competitions in the periphery are opportunities to renew support from investors, as well as to revisit old friends. Even for managers such as Sebu, rural festival-tournaments offered important opportunities to garner a groundswell of support and political connections when resources in the city center had, through migratory involution, become noxiously ensnarled or unduly taxed.

Similarly, returning to an Isan village eight years after my first visit, I spoke with an ex-boxer who worked through daily or weekly contracts in Bangkok factories and sewing shops,

³¹ <http://www.newmandala.org/despotic-urbanism-thailand/>, accessed October 23, 2018.

³² see Noparatnaraporn & King (2007), on Bangkok's noncontemporaneous aquatic tributaries.

³³ Lefferts, longtime ethnographer of northeastern Thai festivals and textile production, writes “While studying “peripheral” art and performance in Northeast Thailand and Laos, I have been continually impressed with the people's involvement in this story and its meanings. These are not rubes ritually acting out something of which they have little knowledge; they know and exercise agency to make intelligible places for themselves in the world. In other words, they have and continue to construct for themselves a variety of Theravada Buddhism ... We must treat peripheries as centers—with actors having their own agency. We must be concerned with the “varieties of religious experience,” not with what we might think are “centers of excellence.”” (2017: 245). His comments connote a turn in studies of Thai religion to pragmatist, practical evaluation (i.e. William James; Jack Goody), and away from Weberian considerations of charismatic power (also see Kitiarsa 2009).

‘for a while, until I am tired, and then return [here, to the Northeast] having money, having free time’ to spare’ for their families. Men and women are often well aware of the pace rural and urban life demands of them, and just how much time—money they may stand to trade in each place.

For some like Ou and his family nonetheless, their commitment to continue boxing at the highest level keeps them among a conglomerate of northeastern supporters planted in the urban metropole. After ninety-plus minutes driving through Bangkok to Lumpinee, the large metallic surface of the stadium announces a destination greater than the mass of dust-encrusted concrete family-business-sweatshop-factory units more familiar to us. This Lumpinee, shining, effectively communicates cancels time in reflection, metastasizing the urban migrant project—for Ou’s family, a project that has extended into a decade of residency in Bangkok. For limbs enmeshed, snapped up in post-Fordist gears and makeshift city work, the punch, kick, knee or elbow is effectively always all-ready continuous, inhabiting this architecture of urban assemblage—or are these movements, exhaustions and ecstatic violences inside the stadium bringing the industrial-military structure low, over time?

Marc Perelman, critically appraising the globe-wide construction of modern sporting stadiums, writes, “a stadium is a perimeter raised against the outside, a structure with its back turned to the city” (Perelman 2012: 49), and also that, “The entire individual is absorbed in the sporting spectacle by transformation of the free enjoyment of the senses into their alienation, through a denial of the individual body to the profit of a unified bodily bloc — the spectator mass — which is desensitized and de-eroticized; a stadium body is mobilized, a vast coercive battery of serially wired bodies” (Perelman 2012: 48). The alienating aspects of the stadium experience Perelman describes assumes the residence of competitive-sporting ideology in construction—therein, the homogenizing gymnasias inters a culture of competition, heroism and a

subjectivity resolved to hyper-specialization. Perelman's critique is directed specifically at the multi-nationalist barbarism of Olympic ideals, where 'sport' remains a category co-opted for the valorizing of a nationalistic individualism harnessed to free-market politics. The 'serial battery' of bodies Perelman refers to describe an ahistorical charge of athletic humanity sculpted in fascist gymnasia at the ready.

By Perelman's estimation, the measure of all spectator attentions merge with architecture to instantiate the uniform potential of capital, an analytic position providing a baseline for analysis. To cite another clear example, Walter Benjamin's assessment of Berlin's 1936 Olympic stadiums as centers facilitating mechanization, rational measure and representation stated simply, that the "Olympics are reactionary" (Benjamin in Buck-Morss 1991:326). Stadiums, in this light, vertically redirect an otherwise revolutionarily productive—repressive pairing of violence and desire. Hence, with Thai boxing stadiums, we must question the rate of negation/debt involved in redirecting and 'charging' bodies. Perelman and Benjamin's critiques, which I raise here to exemplify the critical equation of sport with competitive motion or proletariat false consciousness in general, provides a point from which to launch the phenomenological investigation of the actor/victim/executioner, living-dead flesh as yet articulate within of the human-architectural vestiges of the modern stadium.

For now that all Thailand's material inequalities have been concentrated in the involutions of urban construction to bring boxers to the canvas, to put flesh upon the alter in palatable order, what do those brought to the ring give out, if they are charged with the intensities of collective trauma, with the weight of ghosts, with intentional motion that is to be wholly other? An evening in Lumpinee is arguably many things for many people, though 'enjoyment' does not ever wholly settle, and 'attention', like consciousness-unconsciousness, sleep-wakefulness, is never completely focused. Within the crowd, the senses are never wholly

disassociated, and subjectivity never wholly resigned. Beneath ‘spectacular’ Thai political life, there is a flow, intensities between active states of living and dead in all Thai matters. It is this sensory flow across living and dead that Thai boxers like Ou expertly accrue for all assembled around the ring, and this sensory flow which informs upon a series of still viable debts to be paid in strikingly realigning a present.

Taking someone apart in the ring is a political sacrifice, not simply a sporting gesture. It is an affront to the locally established Thai order of life/violence.

Thai Politics, Spectacle and Exchange

In a commentary questioning how to write about histories of Thai violence as they are continually revisited in the present, Tyrell Haberkorn, an anthropologist who has catalogued northern Thai social resistances, from excised communist revolutionaries to disgruntled farmers at present (see Haberkorn 2011), summarizes a continuity in Thai violence, a human cost integral to the continual propping up of Thai state order:

“Since the transformation from absolute to constitutional monarchy on June 24, 1932, state violence has been a recurrent constant, rather than an aberration, within the Thai polity. Over the last 80 years, there have been ten successful coups, seven failed coup attempts, 27 prime ministers, and 18 constitutions. Modern Thai history is frequently periodized by these frequent coups and changes in government. Yet across this apparent political instability, state violence has remained relatively unchallenged. Across regimes, both dictatorial and democratic (sometimes only in name), those cast as enemies of the state have faced arbitrary detention, torture, disappearance, and assassination at the hands of state actors.” (2013: 110).

Thailand during my ‘doctoral’ year of fieldwork, 2013/2014, as with many other locations the world over, featured a series of highly public, politicized, demonstrative bodies in the street. For those protestors, this was generally a ‘royalist’ Thai uprising against their presently corrupted, media-mogul, elite-Chinese business, technocratic driven democracy (exemplified by former prime ministers Thaksin & then Yingluck Shinawatra). From the

opposing political perspective, those of the ‘Red-Shirt’ representational government installed at that time, these new protestors were elites bent on rescinding democratic power from the populous north-northeastern masses. Either way, the presencing of bodies in Thai streets signaled, in news-worthy terms, another political crisis. Building on the revolutionary semiotics of north American Occupy (wall-street) movements, the Arab spring, and overlapping in time with the Hong-Kong umbrella movement, this biomassive questioning of representational politics crested with a Thai regularized cycle of protest precluding change-overs between the last two populously re-elected and then junta-replaced governments.³⁴ Southeast Asianist political scientist Nicholas Farrelly explains this holding pattern of ‘Thai coup culture’ is permitted by elites impartial to democracy (see Farrelly 2013). At the same time, historian/geographer Thongchai Winichakul has drawn attention to the white elephant in Thai politics: the apparently apolitical, and unimpeachable moral authority of the Thai monarchy, the equating of royalism with Thainess through years of nationalist public propaganda education has served to install a contradictory absurdity in Thai political consciousness, providing fertile ground for the despotic application of state sponsored violence (see Winichakul 2014). Military elites jockeying for power within royalist circles, as well as class antagonisms between Bangkok and the rural mass

³⁴ A number of now well-established Thailand-based scholars have launched their careers doing important work from within the epicenter of these recurrent Thai political street protests (e.g. Winichakul 1994, 2002; Klima 2002; Sopranzetti 2012, 2017; Sriwanichpoom 2006; Tausig 2013). Others have studied the recruitment of violence within institutional arms of the Thai state (see Bowie (1997) among nationalist scouts, her student Haanstad (2008) among police, and Ruth (2010) among Thai soldiers). I examine historical inequalities and the possibility of change not in spaces identified a priori as political or viable for state-sanctioned force, but in actions once removed from official masculine institutions. In this respect, I also work at arm’s length from the soteriological impulses of scholars who examine Thai power relations within the religious order. I see the structuring effects of a multiplicity of religious practices in Thailand corroborated in daily routines, perceptions, unseeings and socially acceptable distances. Thus, religious doctrine is not determinant of action, but is of a best ideological fit within a sacrificial-kinetic mode resonating through Thai society.

(see Baker 2016; and for an ethnographic example, Funahashi 2016) are separations structured upon the silent tension carried by an indisputable state of sovereign immobility.

The Thai coup of May 22, 2014 however, which followed that latest round of street protests, was unusual among previous Thai coups. This time, military heads blatantly did *not* install a civilian interim prime minister or cabinet members, instead keeping martial law in place for months, banning political expression, and employing techniques of violent interrogation and torture (Baker 2016: 389-390). Crack-downs on public readings of George Orwell’s 1984 by college students, or arrests of those who in public made a three-fingered salute in the style of the then-popular Hollywood film ‘The Hunger Games’, and even the junta’s summoning of the “Rappers against Dictatorship” as criminals³⁵, have dramatically demonstrated the extent to which the revitalized military regime stands at the ready to quell any vaguely revolutionary gesture. These forms of dissent and their policed reprisals though, largely traffic upon genres of dramatic and/or spectacular foreign associations. The dialectic of resistance and authoritarianism, now assuaged beneath the junta’s nationwide enforcement of ‘happiness’, have displaced its terms of confrontation onto a media-prominent, virtual plane of ‘soft’ cultural capital, the policing of which contrasts sharply with the actual threat of absolute corporeal immobilization and/or annihilation for offenders, but also effectively distracts from the hard truths of continued unequal access to material resources—grounds upon which the choosing of livelihoods are made. The military junta’s claim to have graciously rescinded democracy, easing the burdens of Thai people amidst a period of possible instability and mourning preceding, following and evidently continuing long after King Bhumibol’s death on October 13th, 2016, is, as propagandized, consistent with a dispensation of voice and agency in Theravada cultural modes of authority,

³⁵ http://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2018/10/26/police-to-summon-rappers-who-criticized-military-govt/?fbclid=IwAR2bRIBqWINy37u8wJrO5eYFFQIPNOpawUd22ZCG-qZqbr1kxEOe_HpEn8A, accessed October 28, 2018.

where meaning, discourse and ritual sequences are provided to those of lesser merit/riches on a need-to-know basis, and where for *all* suffering subjects who are occupied in approaching nirvana, ‘need’, like desire, may be inherently suspended.

The networks of secrecy maintained through personnel surrounding the Thai king for example (see Grey 1991, 1992), are thus not ideals to be mimicked by lower tiers of society—as with, for example, the status-binding Hegelian synthesis of ritual sacrifices aspiring to royal power anthropologist Valerio Valeri identifies as performed through different levels of Hawaiian social structure (1985; on Valeri’s Hegelianism see Jay (1992: 142-143))—but are structures of silence made responsive and responsible to class divisions and traumas borne throughout the greater historical-material and cosmological structure of Thai collective life. Therein, where silence, censorship, and secrecy are exercised, the frequent gamble of thrownness toward inarticulate but visible stranger, foreign material-networks of altern power provoke a volatile spectrality from those in authority. This is to say that ‘things’ are never as they superficially seem, but that ‘object’ Thai relations inhabit an arc of slippage away from the Cartesian/Kantian Kingly antipodes of passive materiality—slippages which characterize locally significant assassinations, class-based movements, ascensions or depressions of hierarchy. In the jungles of the Ayutthaya period, assassinations of young royals, often by family members, ensured a frequent overturning of royal figureheads (see Wyatt 2003: 56-85). In these circumstances, the young king to be, as disposed by his assassins, loses not a drop of blood into the ground. He is hidden from view, bludgeoned to death according to a 1456 legal code which “stipulated that errant royals should be put inside a velvet sack, beaten to death with fragrant sandalwood clubs, and then flung into a river” (Marshall 2015:43), completing the appropriation of a sovereign corpus immobilized, separated, then placed forever in flux, away from solid grounds.

In the Thai present, seizing sovereign mobility likewise involves co-opting ideological or signatory superstructures back into a materiality laden with contradictory, even absurdist fecundity, within veiled, muted, performative grounds. So goes the Thai knack for rapid-reappropriation of foreign revolutionary semiotics: the faces of Che-Guevera or Jimi Hendrix prominently painted onto transport van windshields or tire mudflaps on northeastern roads, or actor Al Pacino's countenance as *Serpico* painted on vehicles to warn corrupt cops away (on Thai police corruption see Lintner & Black 2009). Fashionable t-shirts reappropriating the Nazi Swastika as an inverted Sanskrit symbol for well-being, or t-shirts featuring Adolf Hitler's mustachioed face superimposed somberly on the red-clown-head of Ronald-McDonald, are, in their time, popularly repossessed by Thai youth. British graffiti artist Banksy's picture, featuring Ronald McDonald and Mickey Mouse each holding the hand of an unclothed nine year old Vietnamese girl, originally photographed in 1972 running from an American napalm blast (see Boudana, Frosh & Cohen 2017; Lesme 2015), a visual metaphor of the callous influx of capital following proxy cold wars in Asia, I have seen worn by foreign tourists and Thai teenagers alike. Perhaps Theravada Buddhist monastic contemplation of the skin-peeled corpse (e.g. Klima 2002:172-230) adds to this image's cultural cache in Thailand.

Similarly, addressing the affective intensity with which the current military-industrial oligarchy maintains its hold in Thailand requires a look at the material conditions of everyday life, where inequalities which continue despite newsworthy political ruptures. To make good on the intransigent losses suffered in street and political protests, especially those dead which return (especially see Klima 2002, Winichakul 2002, for an account of the recurrent ghosts of Thai political massacres), a full account of the Thai sovereign assemblage must include those daily actions which go on, even those synchronous with the public dealings of death, which continue, unabated by 'political' schema.

For the family members hunched over sewing machines in the alleyways I carried my fieldwork in, for the part-time traffic officers that trained their sons in the ring at night, for the cab-drivers whose side-bets offered support to Ou and his sparring partners, street-protests did not drastically change their days or influence aspirations they held for their children to exceed lives of labour. When once after a late-night tournament several boxers, trainers and supporters corralled into the back of Wai's truck rolled down an intersection which was being stacked with sandbags by gun-toting protest organizers, Wai simply rerouted us down a parallel alleyway—we rolled along into the night.

When I go downtown to listen to a BJ Terweil lecture at the Siam Society³⁶ and to print an album of wedding photos for Daeng, I walk freely past the barricades—metal guard-rails, chicken-wire, sandbags, performance-stages and camouflage-draped supply tents the anti-government occupation maintains. The debris surrounding each major intersection narrows to a small pedestrian entrance-aisle policed by anti-government revolutionaries, young men wearing black t-shirts, jeans and army-fatigue vests or camouflage knap-sacks. Inside the intersection, I walk by table after table set up by sellers hawking the rapidly commodified revolution: slogan-bearing t-shirts, plastic whistles pressed in the shape of the Thai map, red-blue-white bows and national flags to buy into the protest are wedged between the food and drink vendors.

On the ground, there is little to signal who was or was not authoritative in the space intended to redact government control from the prior iteration of protestors who similarly took to the streets in 2010 for an equally fervent overthrow of the establishment (see Claudio Sopranzetti

³⁶ Terweil's Siam-Society sponsored lecture, in the midst of the political unrest outside, describes possibly circulating copies of a royal manuscript stolen by German diplomats in the 18th century (see Terweil 2014, for the published version). This Thai academic processing of mimicry and membership again seems either a spurious historiography out of touch with the streets, or, if I read Terweil generously, a topic uncannily allowing indirect commentary on the imitative powers of political life, copy and repetition unto indiscernible authenticity, and thus, the smuggling in of revolutionary documentation/action.

(2012) and Ben Tausig (2013) on the previous Thai ‘Red-Shirt’ street-protests).

When I return to camp that evening with a freshly printed photo album of Daeng’s wedding, Ming’s father waves a hand absently toward the ring and his son practicing there, unhearing me when I try to discuss the protests. Wai looks quickly away, speaking not at me, but into the laundry line of old boxing shorts, soccer jerseys and men’s underwear hanging in the outdoor corridor between ring and (ware)house. “But...[it’s] not good. Danger. Don’t go [there].” is as much as he says... “Not good. Not good...” Jogging later on, even the public courthouse security guard, usually squinting through the milk of cataract-stained eyes and shuffling out to practice his English with me, breaks off conversation abruptly when I mention protests downtown. While censorship further clouds the probability of vocalizing political concerns, during the height of the 2013/14 street-protests, my informants, like many Thais, remained clear of those clogged intersections, continuing to focus attention elsewhere. During these apparently highly-political times, our routines and substantive exchanges around training must continue. Eating sticky rice, clearing dishes, buying gasoline, a haul of fish from the coast to be untangled from wire-thin netting, checking the filter ensuring a source of running drinking water, a mother’s retrieval of meat and eggs from the neighbourhood marketplace at the crack of dawn, the distribution of caffeine and sugar for boxers and children, alcohol and amphetamines for drivers, consistent attendance at school, bowed moments in front of the in-camp shrine, plans for shaving heads and eyebrows if Wai’s son should win his match: all these efforts continue without interruption.

In his languid bearing around camp and in the ring, among us, Ou, like the other grown boxers a couple years older than him, now offers the hint of some other perceptible schedule for the harboring and outpouring of strength. Whether remembered in moments half-awake or half-conscious, this timely growth and strength is what all the audience, all of his supporters, all of his

opponents must become attuned to. Between the askance glances and avoidances of Thai men that repeatedly meet my ventures into political discussion until I wise up and drop it, it is Ou's bearing that becomes of a special import at the edge of political address—his corporeality being an enfolding of power, strength and influence. By requiring the tacit support of so many institutions—his family, village, Sebu's textile-producing network, off-duty laborers—Ou will occupy a vital plane of motion in the ring. His keying of contact and conflict will make interest and value beyond one singular individual lifetime, beyond the conjuncture of the next crisis in global-neoliberal capital.

Movement into the stadium will instantiate another order of historical-materiality among us, a cosmological axis the boxer's routine knocks a-kilter, little by little each day.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONSECRATION

The previous chapter posited the recurrent Thai political crisis as a construct complimentary to a cosmology delegating sovereign motion across hierarchical tiers of influence characterized by secrecy, silence and stillness. Chapter four will now describe how the Thai boxer, as both potential victim/executioner of sacrificial movements, is set apart from the rest of Thai society preceding each match, ultimately distributing time anew for those gathered around the ring.

This ‘consecration’ of the boxer coincides with the redistribution of responsibility (i.e. the political awareness of having powers of animate life over death), investing each actor, through their variegated engagement with the animating forces of the dead, with a relative degree of responsivity (i.e. receptivity to otherness and difference). Acts surrounding Thai boxing such as pouring whiskey onto the ground below the ring, lighting joss sticks and visiting shrines constitute playful material substitutions where associations are made with the powerful dead and damage boxers will meet personally. These associative corporeal investments—in attention, posture and exertion—comprise a space of play, allowing Thai men to traverse an inevitable sacrificial order between generations. Consecrations not only prepares the boxer for the ring, but also distributes the burden of immanent contact.

I suggest that the vertical, transcendental hierarchy exemplified in an absolute functional equivalence between executioner/victim, is in Thai boxing practice, while also an irrevocable breaking of limits, an equivalence through violence which is differentially distributed, laterally, in the shared responsibilities of consecration, seeing a boxer through to the ring; in a shared denial of the immanent contact/destruction to come. The Thai boxer thus becomes of primary

importance in transmitting value which might otherwise be siphoned off into the silent karmic-meritocracies that buttress Thai censorships, silences and structural inequalities.

The Force of God

Ou, Jack and I are wrapping our knuckles at ringside. They wind thin strips of sweat stained white medical cotton through their fingers while I cinch a thicker, longer, laundered, bright yellow Twins-brand wrap through my fingers, extending fingers, then making a fist after each loop around—not so tight as to cut off circulation after punching begins, but not so loose as to come apart.

Jack continues his story for Ou. “But it’s cold.” he says, “Too cold. There is no time to rest, to make strength.” The week before, Jack, travelling with Daeng on the back of one motorcycle, had departed before dawn for a weigh-in at the old-Lumpinee stadium. Halfway there, they had encountered a cavalcade of anti-government protestors blocking traffic, and so Daeng had parked their motorcycle and both had taken the ‘skytrain’ on towards the old Lumpinee stadium. And so, ‘it’s cold’ Jack described the air-conditioned subway cars cutting above the gridlock traffic and pedestrians between skyscrapers. Concrete ballast support beams, T’s to elevate future expansions of the ‘green’ line have recently been built on this western side of the Chao-Phraya river, piling scaffolding on exposed orange dust in the center of intersections, narrowing traffic lanes further. The construction contract for the skytrain extension has been given to a Thai-Italian firm, as with major subway construction projects, which have been dispensed to multinational companies with a long-standing history of tourist and industrial mega-construction projects.¹

¹Thailand’s largest construction company, the Italian-Thai Development Co., along with being contracted to build Bangkok railways, has also begun to oversee construction of a seaport within a ‘special economic zone’ on the Myanmar/Thai coastline, a port which will be subsequently connected via rail-link. The project entails land-grabs as well as the bulldozing and displacement of the local indigenous population, an endeavor supported by *both* major Thai political parties,

Months into my training, a new skytrain stop opens so that motorcycle-taxis congregating at the top of our alleyway cut through traffic to the skytrain in twenty minutes. For boxers in our camp though, the need to use such transportation is rare. Fathers and mothers spend full days indoors, inside the three or four floor warehouses, working under fans or next to windows opening out onto the alleys, some shoulders hunched over sowing machines, some fingers stitching and tacking Italian leather sandal soles in place, some arms pressing clamps to mold repossessed copper in machinery-assembly shops, crafting engine cylinder parts for the Chinese owned machinery firm in the center of the street. The ground-floor of every third or fourth warehouse entrance breaks from the line of sowing machines and dangling lightbulbs, instead fronting family-run convenience stores, carts on wheels dispensing grilled chicken, or northeastern sticky-rice. Our camp covers the backlot of one of these long concrete warehouses which, split into vertical units, double as family residences and sewing-shop operations. The only way to enter the back-lot for training is to pass through the first floor of this family (ware)house, walking past a vending grill-cart and the large plastic cooler Wai's wife Duan puts out each morning to hold the rice, chicken, eggs and *som-tam*—spicy cucumber and peanut salads—she prepares for the alleyway's workers on break. Each evening the motorcycles, carts and family truck must be pulled inside again. During daytime though, the ground floor is for their daughter in middle-school, her friends playing games, or Dom's children next door. Only by first greeting to Duan with a *wai*, if she is at all, as usual, within sight, do we cross the family-parking-room to

Pheu Thai and Democrat (see Thabchumpon, Middleton & Aung 2012), regardless of which figurehead superficially runs public office at the moment. The rail-links nearest Ou's boxing camp will at first connect western Bangkok to the rest of downtown, but in the distantly speculated future, will extend lines all the way to China and Japan: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/naazneenkarmali/2015/06/03/thai-infrastructure-tycoons-are-high-on-hopes-of-mega-projects/>, accessed December 10, 2017.

arrive for jumping rope, sparring, watching tv, wrapping hands, sleeping—for living Thai boxing.

“But—” Jack continues telling his version of the skytrain to Ou, picking up his red-mildewed-maroon 12oz glove “—so many girls—to offices, to schools, high-society [*hi-so*] clothes, all with tablets,” Jack gestures to the green canvas satchel which holds the cracked, refurbished Samsung tablet Ou constantly uses to scroll through his 1000+ Facebook contacts. Ou reaches one sinewy arm down to retrieve his second glove from the ring’s ledge under the ropes, where it has been drying.

“Beautiful, beautiful...” as Jack’s description hits this un-assured dead-end, he clamps his mouth down on the red strings of the second glove, pulling the strings tight across his wrist with his teeth. Sitting on the edge of the ring a few paces off, I am careful to note which set of gloves Jack wears, as I remain determined to avoid sharing sweat-space with the warts that surface occasionally on the peaks of his knuckles or the knobby edge of his wrists. Almost finished with my own wrap, I remain an invisible part of our daily routine until this turn in the conversation brings my (rarefied) presence forth for them. Both Ou and Jack look up to notice me.

“Have you been—” Jack gestures with a glove in a skytrain-zipping motion.

“Yes, yes,” I recall the icy air-conditioned cars with mounted televisions. “It is cold. And there’s the TV’s with commercials—” I cut myself short to wait for more impressions from Jack, though as even this much of my worldliness relegates the skytrain to the commonplace, both Jack and Ou fall silent again, hands now clamped closed in their gloves.

Over the next forty to fifty minutes Daeng will hold pads for both Jack and Ou in the ring, receiving rapid punch combinations, knees and kicks upon kicks. Lately, after this segment of training, Ou and Jack might spar a little—snapping jabs and knees thrown hard enough to

warn in surprise, but not quite hard enough to damage ribs. It is an arrangement between the two of them that evidently will not hold much longer. Now a head taller than both Ou and Daeng, in each clash of late, Jack quickly threatens to overpower Ou. Still, as Ou arrives back in camp from the run first, he is usually able to find a new training limit to exhaust sufficiently, working with Daeng holding pads while they are both still fresh. As the months go on, I approach Daeng less often for this padwork. Stout and a decade past his own fighting muscle (a photo of him decorated with garlands over shoulders in Lumpinee is mounted behind glass on the far side of the ring), Daeng's barrel-chest is now a collection of slighting rib-fractures, an ulcer (for which he must occasionally quit drinking and eat bland rice soup), and the beginnings of a heavysset gut. This new body gives Daeng enough weight to put behind the pads these days, meeting each strike with the forearm pads a fraction of an instant before it would otherwise send him backwards. My height complicates padwork for Daeng, the weight of every kick I drop absorbed too high to leverage much of his own weight. With Ou, however, Daeng's pads are balanced and practiced, offered mutely. When they turn together through the ring, Daeng rotating slightly back at each kick, the air in the back lot reverberates, rushing in to fill the vacuum between Ou's shin and the pads. In the early moments of each series of kicks exchanged, Daeng appears to count the strikes, "1...-2...-3-4...", exhaling each time until the thudding percussion washes over his breath, and the vocalization of any number gives way to only the reverberation of his breathing, grunting exhalations matching the strikes of his boxer. The non-sensing limb, given over to its instrumentation (given over to death?), abdicated to the fall of gravity, becomes easier to throw or let lie momentarily. As I am usually on the punching bag hanging next to the ring, I have had plenty of opportunity to count the consecutive kicks Ou sends into Daeng's pads. Ten, then fourteen; thirty-three; forty-two. Sixteen. Fifty-six. Thirteen. The numbers adhere to no apparent pattern, yet in the process of sending and receiving these kicks, sometimes with a barely

perceptible adjustment of the pads' position, sometimes with a slightly longer exhalation, both trainer and boxer know when to cease kicking, switch legs or transition immediately for a combination of punches. Whereas when working through a new partnership with any trainer, any slight alteration in pad position might indicate an appropriate moment to switch tactics, over the course of months and years of indeterminately timed rounds shared between Ou and Daeng, signals once comprised of sharp exhalations or expectant commands has proceeded through any certain, predetermined quantity though, through exhaustion of the physical, unto a quality of mutually agreed upon interchange.

By the time dark settles in, once we have removed gloves for the clinchwork grappling, pulling upwards on each other's necks and shoulders while placing measured knee strikes, or after that, while we are doing the rapid bag-kicking, pullups and pushups that close each evening's training, a number of the boxers' fathers have usually appeared at ringside. This evening, Aek's father has arrived earlier, balancing his grey crew-cut and low-heavy center of gravity on the edge of a plastic stool, leaning back against the wood-slat wall of an anteroom built off of the concrete warehouse, empty during the daytime, but with cots for those migrants just off the sewing floor who have worked late to complete an order, giving them a place to sleep through the early morning. Aek's father stands up, stepping out from behind our round ringside table—a yard-wide wooden spool emptied of its thick electrical cable and laid flat, white paint flecking away. Humming and shifting his girth out from behind the table, Aek's father crosses the matted flooring, approaching the northeast corner of the ring. Twisting open his bottle of Hong Thong whiskey, he pours the first sip onto ripple-cracked concrete ground around the ring's cornerpost, underneath the camp's shrine²: a framed picture of *yantra*, drawn in maroon

² The northeast corner is the preferred location for spirit-houses found in both rural homes as readily as in front of Bangkok mega-malls (e.g. Wilson 2008), where offerings of food or drink, organic or otherwise, are left for ancestors, ghosts or gods. These ancestral shrines, particularly

ink on manila paper. Between rounds in the ring during practice, I have leaned out against the ropes to catch my breath and found myself at eye level with the shrine, ceramic bowls for burnt joss sticks on either side of the framed sheet of geometrically balanced sacred symbols. These include a set of nine protective *unalome*³, minute, vertically winding symbols echoing the crowns of *arahants*—enlightened Buddhist saints. The full set of yantra framed behind our ringside shrine are arranged above a loop of ink comprising a fertility figure, drawn in balanced formation on the faded manila page sealed beneath plastic, secured away from humidity.

The bottom of each *unalome* comprises a curled spiral ink-stroke, a motion dipping and turning across an undrawn center-line to ultimately point skyward. This coil-winding turned upright is very much like the spine of a boxer successfully slipping just out of his opponent's downward pulling grasp in clinchwork, a slippage tucked just in-then-off-center. The framed yantra calligraphy is flanked by vases of flowers Ou's father usually refreshes on Thursdays, all of which are mounted on a gold-bordered platform covered in the soft-fine grey ash of long spent joss-sticks, their ashes at times drifting out of the ceramic bowls, dusting on side of the ring.

Before departing for a major tournament, either the boxer competing or his father would light an offering of sixteen joss sticks in front of this shrine, bowing and asking for further protection. While Thai Theravada practitioners leave a burning joss stick in temples for each

at households, exhibit a great degree of variation and hybridity; they incorporate small statues of animals, photos of ancestors, scrolls of Theravada Buddhist scripture, amulets, candles and sometimes pictures or statues of Hindu deities. Incidentally, by this directional logic, it seems only fitting that most Thai forest monks (see Tambiah 1984), migrants, prostitutes, boxers or drug dealers fueling central Thai markets hail, geographically, from the northeastern region, Isan.

³ The nine yantra here recall those nine gates often tattooed, always against the back of the neck, a nine-spired-temple rendered to make its wearers invulnerable (see May 2014: 36, 40-41). This seemed to work for Ming's father, whose two sons both proved to be formidable boxers. Nine is also the auspicious number of tiers stacked pyramid-style, ascending upon the King's umbrella, phalanx or crown (see Byrne 1995; Tambiah 1976), representing the cosmic order, appearing again as the number of sovereign-renewing throne pavilions used at Bhumibol's funeral (Ramsey 2017).

deceased relative, different denominations of joss sticks are also used to call on different deities: 3 for Buddha, his teachings and monks, 5 for king Rama the fifth, 8 for Hindu deities and 9 for animist tree or forest spirits. 16 though, is especially significant in that it is said to be the number required to invite an overarching god to proceedings.⁴ “Always 16, always; If you fight—16.” Wai had repeated to me, Ou’s father nodding nearby.

Amulets forged in regional or central temples, Buddhist prayers, Hindu deities, the auspicious luck of characters of the *Ramakien* (Thai Ramayana), fertility fetishes and also forest/Khmer spirit cults (see Tambiah 1970) weave a duplicitous field of many competing possible religious and superstitious allies for Thai people, particularly northeasterners.⁵ Indeed, Ou, like many boxers in camp outside the ring, wore an amulet blessed by monks at the temples nearest his parents’ northeastern home away from home. By burning 16 joss sticks when departing for competitions, boxers made an offering which capped the routine production of corporeal force they played with in training, consistently aligning the exhalations and expenditures of their training with an overarching ‘god’⁶, placing their efforts to merge within a plane which cuts through the anxiety and abeyances required of other institutions, those soteriological entities corralling causality on the everyday Thai playing-field. As an ultimate ‘god’ corralling contingency, mediating the innervations of life and death, this force of god

⁴ <http://www.amuletlove.com/?p=553>, accessed July 6, 2017;
<http://thesiammagazine.com/2014-edition/incense.html>, accessed July 6, 2017.

⁵ Among local Thai scholars, there does not seem to be a consensus regarding a possible hierarchy of religious practices and icons in Thailand. Srichampa, for example, summarizes Thai religious hybridity in working parlance, simply as “local beliefs are mixed with Brahmanism and Buddhism” (2014:49).

⁶ The force of ‘god’ also implies an absolute interpretive ‘depth’ powering each strike in the ring. That is, where the traumatic force of the blow in the ring remains uncapturable, it is also the negative event which redistributes a facticity through not just the recollecting and retelling of violence between men gathered around the ring (e.g. Van Vleet 2010), but in equal parts, the disavowal of this violence.

becomes the distributor of focus and time—that which cuts through other forms of sensible life and redistributes proprioception, as well as the capacity for making difference. Bringing this force through Thai domains where religious iconicity is manifold and contested, Thai boxers, through the violence they distribute and the contradictory states they occupy—living/dead, human/animal—will in turn implicate the sacrifice of human strength and life in the political landscape, regifting those in the match’s vicinity with a receptivity to the responsibility for admitting difference in time.

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I watch as Aek’s rotund father carries the whiskey back to the table. As I have stubbornly continued training over the months, especially after revealing only my age and lack of real skill in competitions, I have found Aek’s father an ally in recent months. Though hardly five feet tall, he weighs easily over two hundred pounds, and I fear he will collapse during afternoons when he borrows a vinyl suit from camp to do waddling-run-walking around the parking lot of the local courthouse. He does collapse. With whiskey in hand this evening, Aek’s father returns to his stool behind the table, grinning at me. I turn back to gauge the rotation of the red-vinyl-leather bag’s swinging, looking for that sweet spot in the turn upon which to deliver my next kick. Ou is leaning nearby on the ropes, resting while Jack works with Daeng. A few more kicks, then I pause, waving my oversized glove, calling over the ropes to Ou, “Do you know why he does that?”

“What?” Ou looks down to me.

“The whiskey, dropping...” I mime pouring the bottle, gesturing to the northeast corner a few paces behind us.

Jack, stepping back from Daeng, is quicker to respond though. “When?—Why?—why? No, no.” His holds one gloved hand perpendicularly across the center of his sternum, flashing a

momentary half-wai against his rail-thin chest, his seventeen year-old voice taking on a mock, deep sternness. “You must do and do, many times... and then, you will know.” And then, he repeats, insisting: “Make merit, make merit, and know, under-stand?”

Over several months, I have *felt* Jack transform from an overly-polite youth into a long-limbed man well aware of his reach, this new confidence fueling an endless supply of cracks at my expense. In clinchwork, if pushed, Jack will now throw either Ou or me with ease, pressing the breath out of our sternum with the suddenly-thrown ball of his knee, or quick-slapping the instep of a foot against the outside of my ribcage. From Jack, I have learned to bear, if only briefly, the sharp, distracting pain of an opponent’s chin wedged into nerves above my collarbone. Like these persistently challenging disassociations of sense he forces into sparring, the jokes are Jack’s to dispense now. In the inactive daytime hours though, Jack is almost listless in camp, carving the end of a skipping rope with his name, whittling figurines from a piece of foam matting, building a pseudo-shrine diorama from chopsticks and plastic spoons, eagerly awaiting Wai’s son to go and fix a motorcycle tire together. Jack’s father, working in the South now, supports a second family, has a new wife far closer to Jack’s age than his own, and has withdrawn Jack from school, though encouraged him to stay on, training here in Bangkok.

Cracking a half-smile and nodding at Jack’s admonishments to ‘make merit’, I stepped a few paces back from the ring, snapping a jab off the bag’s vinyl-leather surface. Between the ricochet rattling echo off rusted metal beams and brick in the backlot training ground, between the backswings of the bag that tuck our conversations in and out of earshot, I hear Jack mutter over the ropes ring to Ou.

“Do you know when he should do that—Why?”

“Don’t know, don’t know.” Ou replies, recapping the thick plastic Meiji-brand milk bottle he reuses for water, dropping it back in the corner beneath the ropes.

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Weeks later, in the evening just prior to his son's match at a tournament in the northeast region of Isan, I see Aek's father again pouring whiskey onto the ground, this time into the grass beneath a corner section of outdoor bleachers our camp's boxers have gathered beneath, laying on bamboo mats to receive C-brand citrus liniment massages, then remaining huddled in sweaters to keep the northeast chill at bay while the matches just prior to their own play out. Watching Aek's father right the neck of the bottle yet again, I lean in to ask him "When do you do that, normally?"

"When?" he grins widely at me, "When?... With ghosts", he lets the tone "phiii", implying ghost, falter ever so slightly towards 'Pi', elder brothers, the syllable sitting between us, and then steps out from beneath the bleachers, traipsing with the bottle towards Wai. The two of them stumble across the darkened soccer field towards the edge of the crowd, shadowy profiles which thicken, more numerous approaching the edge of the ring erected in the flood-lit center of the school-yard. Wai had been drinking heavily that evening, wearing an old, workman-esque, dark blue collared jacket with the name of his camp, *'Pet-Bo-Kao'*, his diamonds, silk screened in white lettering across his back. This white lettering is all that remains visible as I watch Wai slip through the shadows of the crowd.

Managing Movement and Animate Life

I sometimes spat laughter abruptly when hit while sparring—often only for a moment between strikes, but the outbursts given forth reminds me of the Thai practice of blurting out an 'oi', when surprised. The near-habitual, soft 'oi', in Bangkok often occurred alongside an unexpected bump in pedestrian traffic, a dropped dish or the firing of a nearby automobile engine. Months after returning from fieldwork, I found myself uttering the explication—'oi'—at

volumes only audible to myself. Reflecting on the Thai men I had picked this practice of bursting expletives up from, for them, this blurting out, I would take as less *a reaction*—be that to an unexpected bump in pedestrian traffic, a darting cat, a dropped dish or the abrupt firing of a nearby automobile engine—and more of a vocalization extending out of the silence of reprehensible grounds (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1973b), a stabilizing utterance joining in with the occasional intrusion. This small shout was the asserting of a synchronicity, a joining with and then re-appropriation of an eventuality with a renewed sign of surprise. The small ‘oi’ is the auditory equivalent of moving into an opponent’s kick or knee, directing an additional strike of one’s own within the earlier circumference of now unrealized destruction.

It is with a similar practical logic that the constancy of Thai, hierarchical animist material-historicity—that manifold purchase upon time permeating every immanent contact—is entered and made bearable in the lightness of ritual repetition.

In my encounters with fathers and sons regularly organizing around Thai boxing, I was reticent to outright challenge or outwardly question the efficacy of their sacrificial-material offerings to ghosts, ancestors and spirits. I take anthropologist Tim Ingold’s assertion that we need to take the animist perspectives of our informants seriously and viable (see, for example, Ingold 2013: 72, regarding Willerslev), as a relativist starting point in my investigations. Bringing further nuance to such a position, anthropologist Rane Willerslev, through his fieldwork with Siberian Yukaghir Hunters, proposes that “underlying animistic cosmologies is a force of laughter, an ironic distance, a making fun of the spirits, which suggests that indigenous animism is not to be taken very seriously at all.” (2013: 42). Contra the Heideggerian phenomenological approach of Ingold (Willerslev 2013:48), Willerslev finds Yukaghir hunters attribute animist power to animals with a certain humor, practically and situationally. Willerslev takes a page from philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Like Žižek, who considers consumers who continue

pleasurable acts within a regime of capitalist destruction/consumption so as to uphold the stability of their daily lives, Willerslev insists that for the Yukaghir, ‘They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’ (Zizek 1989: 29, in Willerslev 2013: 52). Hence, Willerslev, through an account of the laughter, joking and seductions that surround the animistic practice of his informants, shows that “animism as ideology is effectively absorbed into the technical cosmological apparatus of getting ritualistic practices right” (2013: 54). Joking, ridiculing and seduction maintain a dialogic opening, a space of contradiction; an informal place in which life in motion proceeds, and cosmology is upheld.⁷

The crucial inference here, in my consideration of Thai boxing practice, has been that while animists may acknowledge their practices as being incompatible from object-subjective antipodal viewpoints, they may, through bearable lightness, humor, and in dedicated moments of attentiveness, simultaneously continue to execute these very practices which realign a relation to the local scope of immanence, historicity and the eternal-return of ancestral forces their actions resonate with. The knowledgeable and tactic humor, inebriation and corporeal desensitization employed by Thai boxers and their fathers around training stress an additional facet of actions upholding a cosmological apparatus: their intergenerational ‘sharing’ of the burden of immanence. Bringing to mind Raymond Williams’ class-sensitive definition of culture—culture being that place between generations where change and continuity are up for grabs (see Williams 1985)—among Thai boxing families, the burden of immanent contact, and its denial thereof, must be carefully managed through joking, through non-familial relations such as trainers and

⁷ It is by a similar logic that Gilles Deleuze describes the cruelty at the core of law, a description which might apply as ably to sacrificial or less-serious ‘animist’ ritual: “Irony and humor are the essential forms through which we apprehend the law. It is in this essential relation to the law that they acquire their function and their significance. Irony is the process of thought whereby the law is made to depend on an infinitely superior Good, just as humor is the attempt to sanction the law by recourse to an infinitely more righteous Best.” (1991:82).

sparring partners, neighbours and managers. A space of humor and lightness, keeping what must be done at arm's length, reserving the carrying-out of many official consecratory rites for Monks even, allows for a distribution of immanence, a sharing of the responsibility for hermeneutic openness and sovereign life, all the while allowing boxers to focus primarily on making new associations and finding greater influence in their movements executed beyond exhaustion. This responsibility for a fullness of life is that which no single person might fix for long, and which only Ou and other boxers like him need concentrate for up to twenty-three minutes in the ring.

If this immensity, violence or abundance of the movement may not be contained within any one generation, the not-knowing of young boxers like Jack and Ou, the persistence of their active movement in youthful innocence, a life going through the motions, is an innocence reciprocal with the reserved countenances of their fathers, men who know more surely what pathways and occupations await their sons' efforts. Responsibility for this becoming is *distributed*, as it must be, sometimes in unspoken silences or disavowal after injury, in other moments of aloof laughter, or in other times, with the imbibing of spirits. Where Ou and Jack in the moment do not have an answer for the particulars of ritual procedures, given time, growing into the place of their fathers and elders, the practice of making merit, of doing offerings will have instantiated the presence of elders, gods, ghosts and cosmocratic actors within their midst—memory comes through in the motion. The elder men drinking around the ring, 'know' very well what world the exchanges their children reincarnate, and the cost of carrying on in unequal circumstances—the generation of dissatisfied ghosts, of hungry demons, of angry ancestors and benevolent deities. Furthermore, not only do they 'very well' continue 'doing' ritual sacrifice, but each maintains a relative space of play in their substitutional consecrations, managing a share of destruction and/or the immensity of immanent historicity—responsibility for corporeal damage.

A position among others in life, a hierarchy which realizes its structure through motions engaged in during youth, is a certain life which playfully, with age, attains the full bearing of limitations and choices encumbered by the spending of hours in training—it is a trainer like Kout, especially, who feels the financial weight of his position exponentially reflected in the rafters of the city. Established boxers like Ming, fathers like Wai and trainers like Daeng would at times assert that ‘muay Thai is life’, and perhaps this was not a figure of speech. Boxing’s taking of time—with always just one more tournament on the horizon to prepare for—had come to define the trajectories of men’s careers and roles within their families, as well as the fortitudes and responsibilities of their sons and daughters, or lack thereof.

From the position of Žižek’s subject affirming revolution within enjoyment, a dialectic for ideology borrowed by Willerslev, ideological production or undoing of the established (cosmological) order resides in the processes of enjoyment in action. Revolutionary awareness—active subjectivity—resides in a space of play—a pleasurable repetition in ritual—kept at arm’s length. In such a space (for while there is joking, exhaustion and inebriation allowed around Thai boxing, there is a marked solemnity in the routines of Thai monks and animists), an impasse in a philosophical debate between philosophers Simon Critchley and Žižek points toward another domain of everyday life for ethnographic praxis to explore.⁸

⁸ For Critchley, the ideologically productive pleasures of Žižek’s subjects leave insufficient grounds for historical change. The active political person, for Critchley, is one whose motions are, as with Levinas, always constructed within the demand to resist, ethically, the homogenizing forces of a non-othering status quo. While Žižek insists this position is tantamount to holding a moral-high ground complimenting systemic inequalities, and Critchley equally questions whether Žižek’s position encourages a passivity towards the establishment (a position supported, in reply, by David Graeber), and then Žižek in turn insists that demands placed on governmentality be more tactically specific (Žižek), and Critchley in turn inquires as to whether the pleasures of enjoyment have elicited violence beyond humanity. Rather than giving one philosopher a final word, where each diverges, remains a question for ethnographic data, about tactics in managing violence capable of destruction with repercussions beyond the human tier of sovereign assemblage.

The disagreement between Critchley and Žižek⁹, ostensibly over how and where to resist or affirm capital, underlines a question about how recurrent ‘violence’ operates through people, and at what point persons become active/responsible for resisting or intervening in naturalized processes. In Nietzschean terms, wherein lies the ‘active’ as opposed to ‘reactive’ and resentment-ful ‘cultural’ life? My purpose here is not to either assert or disprove an ethical *a priori* within the certain humanist anthropology this phenomenological description of Thai boxing offers, but through Critchley’s impasse with Žižek, to raise the possibility of another area of investigation for the praxis of participant-observation or ethnography: that is, the depth and *dimensions* (verticality and horizons) instantiated through the practices of establishing grounds in ritual—those meditations on violence Critchley surmises within Žižek’s rhetoric.

The ethical resistance, the negative being of Critchley’s phenomenological subject, has a measured place in the ensconcing of pleasure—pleasure as a being in excess and a fallenness in repetition. To take the working ethnographic example, the ideological reproductions of the Siberian hunters Willerslev works with, as repeatedly enacted, also contain within their seriation, a playful space for revolutionary political change (e.g. Willerslev 2012).

In Thai boxing as well, disassociations of sense become necessary precursors to affecting change, making the difference of a winning match. With Ou, a shortness of breath, a sparseness of humor and a reserve of strength—the bare intentionality of an ethical-grounded, cosmocratically substituted subject—comes to the fore in his most empirically depleted days and hours prior to weighing in, leaving him receptive to handlers and the technologies of consecration. During his most corporeally plastic moments, in the scant few hours where Ou was

⁹ For two of the more concise pieces in the back and forth of the philosopher/anarchist/ethicist positions, see <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/slavoj-zizek/resistance-is-surrender> for Žižek’s reply, accessed September 16, 2017. and Critchley’s: <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/39>, accessed September 16, 2017.

empirically at his lightest/heaviest, dropping weight and then rehydrating for strength just prior to competition, others carry him on through.

I echo anthropologist Sara Mahmoud's thoughts on humanism in the presence of mass-catastrophe (i.e. in Thailand, ongoing enslavement within labor contracts of indeterminate duration {fishing vessels}, gendered violence and inequality), when, with Levinas, she questions the limits of an [Heideggerian] ontological turn based in the being for one's own death, to address human life given the cross-culturally documented social dimensions of death.¹⁰ When faced with the imminent arrival of contact, destruction and the superimposition of opponents in the muay-Thai ring, a similar social aspect, of being borne among others, is relevant when Ou is chaperoned in the final hours of weight loss and training; when Ou's empirically measured body-weight reaches its most depleted measure, and subsequently undergoes rest and rehydration. In these hours of great corporeal plasticity, the men assembled around Ou bear a measure of shared silence, denial and certitude—a calm-before-the-storm of competition—a waiting, in which we come to terms with the horizons and vertical inequalities of our lives—the deathworld we inhabit together.

Executionary Forces

¹⁰ Mahmood's essay positioning the relevance of a humanism without conceit points also to the political as an arena for change. The humanism she advocates I see as being discontinuous with the Kantian-judging sovereign of a dualistically delimited body, a humanism not separate from ecological and social destruction, not transcendentally separate from the nonhuman, though a humanism which is nonetheless, vitally, particularly responsible. Mahmood concludes: "If there is one thing that the efforts of twentieth-century philosophy have taught us, it is that the question of death cannot be contained within the problematic of ontology. We live and die socially, and the meaning of death cannot be fixed a priori, without regard for the relationships that give it shape. Death unfolds within the distinct social context wherein it occurs. So my invitation here, to ourselves as anthropologists, is to think through the emergent meanings death is now acquiring in the context of the mass catastrophic death that surrounds us." (Mahmood 2018: 3).

When Ou, Jack or other boxers in my camp burns 16 joss-sticks, drawing the force of god, an ultimate law of judgement, into play and association, they are indicating that subsequent actions in the ring will be cosmo-ontologically formative. Though there is a multiplicitous religiosity, a cast of saints-deities-spirits, animist-Brahmin-Buddhist to draw upon, with Thai boxing, among these so many other activities, the direct association with the force of god brings a mattering to the overarching proceedings. As the associations made before every match with 16 joss sticks indicates, though there is a multiplicitous realm of deities, spirits and ghosts, each Thai boxer is being brought into association with the overarching force of a god, an overseer of life, decay and regeneration which, in requiring a maximally effective destructive force to produce difference in the ring, must carry, or be swung diagonally, through all these levels of meaning.

The Thai boxer is thus also unique among other Thai sacrificial offerings. As a human offering, the boxer's divisible, conscious 'flesh' includes a relative degree of historicity or memory both in and of his grounds; a giving out of the basis for choice and *responsibility* through movement. Every time he re-enters the ring, he potentially occupies the role of both victim and executioner.¹¹ In the personal style and bearing he brings to technical proceedings, he

¹¹ The social time of the Thai boxer may be analogous to what Roger Caillois, in the meetings of the College of Sociology preceding the German occupation of France during World War Two, describes as 'the Sociology of the Executioner': an asociality outside of the community—i.e. "Since childhood he has lived apart from his fellow man" ([1937]1988: 237).—appropriate to the anonymity required to carry out state-permitted violence. He becomes the double-of the sovereign; in a role which increasingly eats at and socially castigates him. Just as the fathers of boxers where I worked either continued with muay-Thai, factory-work, or as minor police officers (traffic cops), the years Thai boxers put into training eventually cut into the possibility of their coming into other social roles that did not already involve expertly imparting physical force. Bearing this style in the ring, the Thai boxer offers a contemporary version of the royal guards required to carry out the executions interred upon royal bodies in elite coups of the throne. A filmic representation of the rhythmic drumming and staggered dance-steps animating the Thai executioner, strikingly similar to Thai boxers' pre-bout, honorific wai-khru dance, is depicted in the 2001 Thai film, "*The Legend of Suriyothai*", performed by the executioner who ceremonially kills a child-king to finalize the transubstantiation of regimes in 16th century

is both an itinerant hand of the authoritative forces and cosmopolitical order, as well as the potential over-under-writer of immanent meaning; of time shared beyond the jurisdiction of those states of life and death. The spectacle in the boxing-ring is affective especially insofar as it substantively communicates the ever-breaking orders of local violence forging a community—violence therein especially means the breaking of sense and the demanding of a new rate of responsivity to that which is other. The preparation, or consecration of the executioner/victim dyad (for the boxer may become both),¹² proceeds in distributed fashion, between those Thai entities which otherwise command motion. Indeed, before he entered Lumpinee in the evening, Ou again stepped aside from our trainers and crossed the parking lot to bow in front of the shrine erected on the grounds there. Immediately following his victory, Ou would also follow Wai's advice and climb into the first few cordoned-off, elevated rows of the stadium to bow at the feet of two elderly tournament promoters seated apart, in the stands.

These actors offer guideposts for Ou. For his steps in and out of the ring, each provides signposts marking the social assemblage holding up Ou's world, inasmuch as this world

Thailand. The film, financed by the Thai crown and directed by a minor royal, Prince Chatri Chalerm Yukol, subsequently edited by internationally acclaimed director Francis Ford Coppola is, prior to the period of political instability precluded by Bhumibol's aging, perhaps a timely cinematic history lesson from funding oligarchs to the masses, conveying royalist sacrifice and precarity to populists and central elitists alike.

¹² In Hubert and Mauss's typology of sacrifice, 'the victim of sacrifice' is carried through consecration, purification, bonding of victim-executioner/priest, and then immolation. At that point the rising/falling into a sacred realm is described in an arc—symmetrical between sacrificer and sacrificed—of which "of course the curve described by the victim reaches the highest point" ([1898]1964: 49) Bracketing the depth of this incursion into the 'sacred' realm as indicating a dualist ontological or effervescent social basis (i.e. as with Durkheim's analysis), the extent of incursion through material order, the downswing or expulsion of the sacrificed, in action, punctuates an arc which describes the rate of life/death; the particular animism; the holding of the address of being human. Where this exhaustion of the equivalence (of each to his own singularity, of each one debt of a single life owed to nature) becomes thrown across a zero-point of sense and signification, the social hierarchy—the responsibility and role, the categorization and differentiation of life and class, is transmitted in this very movement.

contracts greatly just prior to each match. In the blue trunks' dressing room, about twenty minutes before Ou's match in Lumpinee, after Daeng has added another fresh layer of oil across Ou's torso, legs and arms, this unavoidable reality must set in for Ou—he is moving ever further apart from the collectives and obligations that have carried him up to this point.

At the back of the dressing room, while Ou finalizes his preparations, I recognize a short, smooth-browed and straight-nosed boxer—a role-part actor in a 2009 Thai boxing-basketball action film, *Fireball [Tar Chon]*, dressing today with his acrobatic opponent, helping tuck and cinch tight a 'traditional' Isan elder's plaid skirt overtop of the Cambodian-genocidal-proletarian-navy-blue undershorts wrapped between their legs, repositioning the archaically knotted thick ropes wrapped overtop of their knuckles. These two will pantomime an acrobatic, overly aestheticized, choreographed sequence of strikes in the ring following Ou's bout—allowing most spectators a restful reprieve from the intense gambling which accompanies the other more competitive matches. I recognize this smooth-browed boxer also as one of the boxer-trainers from 'Jitti Gym', a couple blocks off a major subway stop in downtown Bangkok, where foreigners pay well for focused training and padwork with former boxers—on the two afternoons I stopped in, all these trainers were from north and northeast Thailand. Months before I watch Ou's match in the New Lumpinee Stadium, an Australian, also from 'Jitti Gym', very quickly dispatches me onto the canvas of a ring set in a major commercial intersection in front of MBK shopping center, in plain view of skytrain pedestrian traffic, street-shopping flaneurs and tourists alike. All of these nostalgic, internationalizing and commercial variations also comprise the changing field of muay-Thai practice. But not at all for Ou. I have been hanging off his side constantly for the past week—sauntering through the heat in vinyl jogging suits, at rest yesterday, and now slouched on the change table in Lumpinee across from him. But there is

almost nothing of my otherworldly, western experience he can carry into the ring. His mother remains absent until after the bout. He is set aside from us, from nurture, from nature.

Alone Ou stands, leaning against the dressing room table. I lean back on the opposite dressing room table to take a picture of him as he rolls his jaw, tucking his chin down on each side, rigidifying the musculature his neck, pressing the gloves together in front of his ribs. A group shuffling-talking in the passageway outside the dressing room; a muffled roar following a thudding impact from the stadium—all sound fades to the silence Ou impresses upon himself. ‘Click’—the picture is all too easy to take. Ou remains motionless, but for a fist-sized button of flesh on one side of his sternum: his heart, beating beneath his chest.

CHAPTER FIVE: WEIGHTEDNESS

Now that the Thai boxer has been described as a node which generates change and continuity in everyday Thai society, this next chapter builds on a notion of value as instilled through substitution to explore the type of timing that boxers make in their actions. More specifically, when the boxer is at his most diminished empirical state, attempting to make weight on the scale, I explore what routines and others assist in his passage across that limit, and how doubt, causality and speech are managed when the boxer is almost, but not quite completely out of motility.

The plasticity of the boxer's mobility at his most dehydrated point parallels the management of the contemporary order of silence and censorship in Thai society under patriarchal sovereignty. For the specific boxer this dissertation follows, instances where he must cut—slicing his opponent's flesh, "cutting" weight for the scale in the days preceding his bout, and in this chapter, 'cutting' raci thread off of his wrists, are instances managed with degrees of inattention, maximizing his receptivity to motion. Each cut makes an intensive relationship with what must, in the final instance, be done.

Weight, under the condition of extreme hydration, is not simply empirically measured, but is weight managing innervation through repetition, where excess weight shed, and weight is kept which will keep open associations from which to recompose strength in the time of competition.

The Passageway

Where the quantitative, calculable measure of the force of law in each temporal register, or Buddhist tier of being becomes frayed unto quality, the Thai boxer allows for a register which cuts through the balance of a political order based on death and stillness.

Conscious or not, we smuggle the balance of this potential for resetting the order of life—for resetting the order of those that weigh upon our time—into each stadium, gathering credit in the form of the boxer in our midst. When we bring Ou to Lumpinee at dawn, the morning of his match, he is all but depleted by the week of gradual fasting and dehydration required to make weight. There were four of us with him then: Daeng, Wai, myself and Ou's father Thoun, a slight, leather-skinned, aged version of Ou, older but smiling, a crick in his neck after years of sewing and construction work.

Ou does not make weight on his first attempt. Staving off the indeterminacy of the upcoming match, we shuffle out of the stadium anteroom which houses the scale and into the dim, sunken concrete passageway which runs between the stadium's street-side entrance and the stadium's inner amphitheater, turning that way, towards the ring. The swept quiet concrete offers a temporary respite from the heat and clamor of the driveway outside the stadium, where always more hot sunlight collects on the white concrete and brick Ou has already plodded in his black vinyl suit for the better part of an hour this morning, keeping a casual pace in full view of other boxers doing the same. Ou has twice been in and out of the sauna and bathroom at the back of the change-room. Wai and his father ask again if he has urinated—yes, yes, he has. Ou, who walks around camp at about 112 pounds, has weighed in at 103, then 102, and now 101.4, four tenths of a pound above the measure promoters and managers have agreed upon. After this latest attempt on the scale fails, Ou seems to settle into shadows, dragging his feet down the passageway. Our eyes adjust as we emerge in the semi-darkness of the cavernous amphitheater.

Tiers of grey and pastel green painted steps—the concrete bleachers are now empty, but for dust floating through shafts of light cast by dim lights in the uppermost rafters. The ring sits empty, save for the small placard reading “Ladies, please do not touch the stage.” It is nearly ten o’clock now—four hours after the stadium side door first opened to us. All nineteen other boxers on the evening’s card have long since departed for an afternoon of rest and rehydration. Ou’s opponent’s weight, 101, has been listed on the whiteboard in the hallway for almost an hour and half now. Ou still wears the jacket of his heavy, black, Twins-brand vinyl jogging suit, unzipped to reveal his sweat-soaked beige t-shirt, only the words “Thai-person” printed on front. Like the black soccer shorts he wears, the shirt has been drenched, absorbing sweat all morning. Long socks slipping off his thin ankles have been, all morning, stuffed into the elasticized pant-legs of Ou’s vinyl suit to seal heat there, dripping into his refurbished Mizuno runners . I think of these sneakers as new—for months after I had first arrived, on our daily run through Bangkok streets, I had chased Ou, his rapid strides cushioned only by thin tennis flats, the heels of those shoes hardly holding. All equipment aside now though, in Lumpinee, Ou sits emaciated, slumped with one arm over the back of a plastic seat, a dozen rows back from the ring.

Only I have misunderstood the comfort of silence’s accompanying duration at this point. Shuffling down the concrete passageway¹ into the auditorium,² I am still muttering my support

¹ The quiet in stadium that morning, a counterpoint to the clamor and bustle of regular Thai streets, expresses our relative human condition in more intimate terms. The space is less an authentic ‘passageway’, and more of a passage of interminable silence between both the street and the stadium stage. Despite the empirical measure Ou is restrictively called to—the weight of reason he approaches via scarcity—we retain a casualness and play around his routines for weight loss. That tension of action—making and simultaneously being made by history—maintains a relative openness through procedures and programs for staging distance from immanent contact; from each other; from the voices of Thai relative merit/reason.

² In an essay recalling a circus-like festival attended during his childhood, ‘Monkey Theatre’, Walter Benjamin insisted that there was ‘no escape from the theatre’ (2006[1938]), suggesting that the performative and uncanny, or ‘other’ dimension of our action remains always present, at cost, wherein entertainments relinquish a degree of conscious (political) control in life. Finally

for Ou: “Just a bit more. A little bit...” I walk past Wai and Thoun, asking, “How, how?” Neither responds. I glance back to the ground, mumbling “How...how.” Standing in front of Ou, I pinch thumb and forefingers against my belly, trying to make light of his cadaverous condition: “just a little—[niit-noy].” The phrase, as a reply to the question of whether we are tired, has always been a humorous refrain between us during training. Now though, Ou hardly looks up. His eyes sink vacantly into the floor, willing-passing time to find another bead of sweat expended, excreted.

The rolling-falling corporeal permutations of plodding-jogging held in Ou’s muscles, the ripples begun three hours ago, have passed. Dehydration now lends Ou a volatile sparseness of motion. His task remains: to shed excess pounds for the scale, but reserve innervation and decisive action for the match that will transpire around six or seven this evening, seven fights in on the card. Ou’s lips purse tightly, calibrating each breath, insulated in the imperative to bring an unexceptional and routine bearing to the rational measure of the scale. The morning’s routines have been exhausted: Ou jogging outdoors or through the stadium upper levels, visiting the hot sauna, then Daeng’s massages, pushing every beads of sweat away from Ou’s core, out of the vinyl suit, then toweling off—the cycle can not continue indefinitely. The afternoon of planned rest and rehydration is being further compromised with each passing second.

On an early morning before a tournament in Isan the month before, I remembered watching over Ou sitting inside the cab of a black pick-up truck parked in the center of a sunlit soccer field, a towel draped over his head to seal the heat in further. At some point, dehydration

admitted in this exclusive access to Lumpinee stadium, there is a relative folding; both hermeneutic and corporeal, in history, where we are never wholly caught, in the moment. Despite the technologies of training and weight-loss around the ring, the absenteeism of disciplinary measure, in the retention of play and casual passage of time between men with Ou, actions permit a haunting by the animalian, the childish, the exotic and esoteric. This chapter considers that temporal tension of human experience—as action making and being made by history—as attaining a relative openness through procedures and programs for staging a sacrifice.

will effect his performance tonight—the 101 pound body, will be too measured to return from, strong again with excess motion for the evening. But just as the sun beats down, bringing heat, there is routine to draw reassurance from.

“No more...” I hear Daeng muttering behind me, though not at Ou. “Did enough already.” He shuffles away, into an aisle further back from the ring, tucking the towel damp with Ou’s sweat against his shorts, pulling his small handphone³ from his pocket.

“Enough. Enough.” Wai repeats from behind us, pulling the word from Daeng. He has walked even further back from the ring with Ou’s father, coming up against the guard-rail which separates floor-seating from the first level of raised concrete bleachers. From my outsider’s perspective, there have been two obvious options for the past hour though, neither of which my Thai companions have raised.

The first is inspired by a boxer at a rural tournament who, having recently returned from time in the monastery, competed with his head and eyebrows still shaved. I look to Daeng and nod towards Ou, making scissor-fingers through my hair. Daeng waves my suggestion off. Though he will visit a barber in the afternoon, even then Ou will avoid the close-cut shave other boxers in camp favor, instead having the barber leave a distinct cropping of feathered hair on top to fall, as usual, halfway down his forehead. On his Facebook page, Ou stages photos with friends wearing hippie-era wigs or cinching oversized jeans far up his thin waist. Next to his peers who often dress in neon polyester football kits, Ou settles into this nostalgic personage, wearing country-nationalist rock-band t-shirts. The cotton shorts he brings to training, much like the ornate leather bejeweled western shoulder-purse his father carries into gambling crowds at tournaments, effects a comfort and comic nostalgia for a sparkling rural past.

³ The Thai term for cell-phone, *mu-thu*, translates directly as ‘hand-phone’, the thing as spoken being adjoined with, continuous with being found in the hand.

While Ou had jogged around the parking lot that morning, I had waited with the others in the back of Wai's golden Isuzu truck, sitting in the stadium's shade. Between cigarettes, Wai had plucked his facial hair with tweezers, working around a tiny cropping of long white hairs extending from a dime-sized mole beneath his chin—these he let hang halfway down his neck. On one side of the ropes in camp, a comb hangs from a string, and a full-length mirror is mounted against the brick wall. In Isan towns I have counted dozens of barber-shops in single blocks, an inordinate number for the population. In Theravada teachings, laymen are encouraged to care for hair as 'dead' tissue, that entangled with the movements of the living (cf. Leach 1958), though without sensation, given over to slower decay.

Midway through Ou's laps around the stadium parking lot, while channel 3's cameramen set up across the road, it is decided Ou must look more '*rip-roy-sukapap*'—tidy, right and neat. Ou's father leaves the stadium driveway on foot and returns from the nearby petro-station carrying a package of three disposable orange plastic Bic razors. One of these Daeng uses to dry-shave the peach-fuzz hairs around Ou's upper lip and chin. Ou remains motionless next to him on the stadium curbside—absolutely still, as I imagine any small nick which would compromise the elasticity of his skin split open under a punch later that evening. After Ou's haircut later that afternoon, everyone showers and applies talcum powder before returning for the match.

In Ou's time of greatest dehydration though, during the weigh-in, cutting hair is not an option.

It is the second option I had silently considered which comes to pass. Wai looks again at Ou, finally throwing a hand up, effectively making the decision and disavowing its importance all at once. "Cut; cut them." He points to Ou's wrists, where a collection of thin '*raci*' threads, the remnants of frequent visits to temples in Ou's northeastern 'hometown' Surin, have accumulated, uncut. I should feel some sense of relief—these bracelets will no longer leave

abrasions on the back of my neck on the rare times Ou and I pair together during clinchwork. I am instead concerned to have to cut the associations Ou maintains with this collection of thin threads—the *raci* on both wrists twisted together, two on the left closed with tiny wooden beads.

Daeng turns to me “—have a knife?” I shake my head.

As Wai and Ou’s father Thoun compare empty pockets, I scissor-step over the railing onto the elevated bleachers, crossing the aisle to an empty cage-metal waste-bin, bending over to reach into the bottom of the fogged-opaque bag for a serrated wire—wire which turns out to be just a strip of discarded cardboard.

Pulling my head out of the bin, I see a grounds’ attendant in uniformed blue emerge several aisles above me, shuffling with broom in hand. I wave inquiringly towards him, “a knife? a knife..?—Do you have a knife?” The groundskeeper slow-leans into one step against his broom handle, considering me—the pale, scatter-eyed foreigner below. He says nothing, dismissing me with a brief, upwards nod–twitch of the eyebrows, fallen to an askance look-away. The gesture I recognize now as a deferral of interest, an indefinite postponing of further entanglement—a carrying on for both of us. This disengagement transpires upon a local continuum of gesture—being constantly redirected or bumped by elderly men—where the grounds for articulate speech have long been traded upon, given over to the magnitude of silence.

Empty handed, I look back over the railing, where Ou’s father Thoun has already snapped the handle off one of the Bic razors purchased this morning, placing the plastic-encased blade sidelong against a bolt which anchors a seat into the concrete floor. He stomps side-down-ways past the seat-edge with the ball of his foot, the rubber of his flip-flop sandal slamming against the razor’s orange plastic casing. He pauses, checks for fractures in the casing along the blade, then repositions his target once more, again, again and again submitting this thing to the weight of his instep...

A Sacrificial Economy, Stillness and Public Silence

In the silent passage of each morning, where denial of immanence and allegiance to routine becomes necessary, the power to signify migrates. I have never met a Thai person who would express outright displeasure with the monarchy—asking them to state as much on Thai soil would be tantamount to requesting they commit suicide. Seemingly draconian accusations of lese-majeste laws have been exercised especially during Thai political crises to imprison or disappear those with undesirable viewpoints. This threat of lese-majeste, frequently exhumed by the recent Junta⁴, opens an order in Thai things for silence, a tempo for the unspoken which admits a propensity for violence into the greater Thai polis.

The very threat of enforcement, a trace of the memories of those disposed in the name of kingship or opportunistic cronyism, as with the narratives of torture and suffering populating Buddhist scripture, inscribes a public secret with corporeal urgency. The wound of silence across the greater Thai populous requires other arenas (herein, Thai boxing) to expedite the memory of who pays for—and loses under—these political structures. Such silences are carried in gesture—they reside in minute ‘traditional’ cultural norms for interaction, and for processes of limited affirmation which turn away from the generative negative memory. The ‘law’ as such, creates a negative-space in all speech, an additive to the public secret—a sovereign fallibility which may not be visited, or even suggested without invoking incarceration, disappearance, or invisibility.

It is as Deleuze and Guattari say of the experience of subject-expanding drugs,⁵ the imbibing of which by a few members of society, change the topography of desire for all.

⁴ See Streckfuss (2010) for a discussion of the modern deployment of the Thai lese-majeste law.

⁵ On this notion of drugs as altering desire for all, see (2004:248). Commenting on Edmund Leach’s record of Burmese Kachin sorcery, sorcery by contagion over borders and alliance, Deleuze and Guattari write, “There is an entire politics of becomings-animal, as well as a politics

Likewise, with an order of silence (*lese-majeste*), or a wielding of the body unto the production of traumatic violence (i.e. *muay-Thai*), the sense of what is possible, the layering of sensate order within the inordinate qualities of a cultural sensorium available to all, alters. The silence of anti-monarchical, anti-political-religious speech transpires on a continuum of bodily composites, trading signification unto corporeality absorbed in the dull-thudding-silence of fists, knees, shins and pointedly thrown elbows. To come of age in Thai public space is to understand the injunction of this vast public-secret, to understand the contours of the unspoken in public memory to be to not just always close at hand, but to be so close as to have taken up residence within one's own corpus: in every action, a movement folding in concentration of what must be forgotten to go on living.

For the executioner, silence is implied in wielding the force of law. There is no sensible expression or articulable order in the interruptive task of taking a person apart, as the distribution of the bodily form instantiates a forum for political meaning and expression which itself rests upon the pain—the loss—the negative intensity of the grounds of sacrifice. In the irrevocable 'moment' of sacrificial action, be this beheading a sovereign, cutting a bracelet or elbowing a forehead, reasonable culpability must be excused from procedures. As Bataille writes:

“The principle of sacrifice is destruction, but though it sometimes goes so far as to destroy completely (as in the holocaust), the destruction that sacrifice is intended to bring about is not annihilation. The thing – only the thing – is what sacrifice intends to destroy in the victim. Sacrifice destroys an object's real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice.” ([1973]1989: 43).

As utility is locally ascribed, such utility must necessarily be excused amidst the imperative of sacrificial procedure. What Bataille's theoretical treatment of sacrifice seizes upon

of sorcery, which is elaborated in assemblages that are neither those of the family nor of religion nor of the State. Instead, they express minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions, groups all the more secret for being extrinsic, in other words, anomic” (2004: 247).

here is not only the primacy of an intractable noncompliance with the inertia of material order—elsewhere he writes of a disinterestedness in economy (e.g. Bataille 1993)—but also an insubordinacy which, played on, sustains any dialectic of living motion. The efficacy of sacrifice, in this reading, is coterminous with a degree of alien(ation); with a degree of uncanny otherness in life. Phenomenologically, this infers that a sacrificial act *becomes* that distance between figure and ground—running through all phenomenal worlds are the intensive movements of sacrifice. With immanent sacrificial procedures—cutting threads—being improvised the morning of Ou’s bout, there is thus no time for proselytizing on the humors of weight-loss, the sanctity of thread, the importance of ‘face’ or social tie. Only action ultimately cutting a decadence—an acceleration of decay—through the material order becomes crucial to see unto completion. The same eluding of absolute calculation unto usefulness characterizes the temporary, and thus finitely valuable context of threads such as *raci* themselves, threads which retain an aspect of disinterest, which re-member relation only to the extent that they are worn unto disintegration, incorporated into the corpus, carried as forgotten over the wrists of the living.

The decision to cut some of the *raci* off of Ou’s wrists was carried out quickly. Once Wai came forward with the proffered razor, Ou gave a quick bow and apologetic prayer before some, but not all of the threads—re-memberings of Surin—were severed. These were then given to Ou’s father to be kept in a pocket of the briefcase which would hold the *mongkon* [ceremonial headdress] and the amulet Ou wore around his neck when not boxing.

In the liminal moment of association opened through destruction or confrontation with these materials, where the depth of interruption, hermeneutic or corporeal, drives beyond empirical necessity, our attentions must be always owed elsewhere. A confrontation with the utterly absurd and all-reasonable presence of the force of a deity sustains mitigated attention. In

the Thai karmic field of reciprocal relations, each valued entity requires a particular engagement for the paying of its debts—each invokes a potential series of causalities—historical-mythic bonds, associations and reasons if followed anxiously, which might undo the outcome of the ritual match. Each ritual item incurs a particular wait, as much as a material weight. The empirical measure of the scale is just one measure which requires our stillness. When Ou finally alights, tip-toe upon the scale to cross briefly over the limit of the digital measure of 101 pounds, it could be said, as within the ‘radical empiricism’ of Deleuzian philosophy (cf. Deleuze 1991), that the corpus gathers a series of vital flows and asymmetries—rest, deathliness, dryness, motility, shadows—through particular, temporarily sustaining orders of reason—managers, lights, corridors, clock-time—where an active ‘body’ is never completely settled, Cartesian meat upon the scale.

A Thai boxer’s resolution towards planar motion during competition instigates *the depth of substitution* for those material associations gathered around the ring. To the extent that the boxer’s waiting expires across tiers of being, extending conscious planes once more removed from the human (i.e. collusions with animal or demonic forms), the archaeology of an other corporeal plasticity, an other sensibility, is transversely distributed back to all, through the knowing violence of each contractual strike.

This substitution affects an accrual of karmic merit through the economy of motion-stillness,

through a landscape always already in decay:

CHAPTER SIX: DECAY

Whereas the previous chapter examined the boxer's relationship to historical materials, and the depth of meaningful relationships maintained through his corporeal plasticity the day of the bout, this next chapter explores how historical materials in Thailand often inhabit nonsynchronous, spectral or unused states, conspiring in the very shadows of those constructs used on a day to day basis.

This logic of proximal association unto a decay in time, merging with all things, is signaled in the makeup of the Thai skyline and lower urban city-scape, a frenetic space where frequently abandoned or dilapidated construction projects exist alongside relatively new ventures. This spectral or abandoned quality in architecture, and the interruptive force of ghosts in peoples' intentions, are discussed as they surface in parents' relationships to children near urban industrial 'dangers'. Multiple forms, left waiting in time unto de-composition, mixed to taste, are also alluded to in the consumption of drugs, spices and foods, particularly meat.

The sacrificial imperative to create credit/association in a deathworld, by dropping things into impermanent shared time, extends through concrete architectural projects, historical materials and indeterminate labour contracts, through equally concrete social (kin) relationships—parents' will to let go—on through to the very shared perceptual grounds Thai senses and distinctive tastes dwell upon—in the perceptual outlines of proprioception (movement-positional awareness), kinesthesia (awareness via organs' relations) and relatively borne synesthesia.

Alleyways for Decay and Growth

The evening before the weigh-in, I joined Ou in the back of Wai's carefully cleaned, gleaming golden Isuzu truck, cinching a thin bamboo mat between my sit-bones and the runnels of the truckbed, settling in for the hour and a half ride across Bangkok to the clinic. Ou rests at first against the back of the tailgate as the truck pulls out from Wai's family-household-warehouse-unit, fluttering his fingers above the roadway at the alleyway's semi-domestic dogs, two rangy brown mutts stretching lazily between the blue plastic trash barrels and wooden packing skids at alleyfront, skids which will overflow with designer-sown denim as day turns to night.¹

Our truck carriage rolls down the center of the alleyway, still in the shadow of the long-warehouses, monolithic stamps superimposed over the ever-encroaching aquatic jungle. Minor balconies on the third and fourth floors of these buildings, Portuguese-colonialist inspired balustrades now given over to caged rust and soot stains, hem the skyline in between our long concrete manufacturing-dwellings. These balconies are draped with repurposed polyester tarps. The bright colors, once announcing roadside advertisements for ice-cream, dishsoap or Hollywood films, have now faded to sun-bleached pastels, the tarps punctured with nylons ties, strapped over balconies to create extra shade. Echoing the architecture of mid-twentieth century Bangkok's European governmental buildings, the high ceilings and concrete support beams, well out of reach of daily use, here harbor crops of fallen dust, mildew and oil stains.

On the ground floor of Wai's family's unit, is a large portrait of a younger King Bhumibol, one finger raised sagely in parallel with his gaze. Faded calendar portraits of others

¹ Goto & Endo's assessment of the Thai textiles industry in the context of global value chains shows a general stagnation in the upgrade of manufacturing equipment post 1990's, meaning Thai garment suppliers have increasingly turned to rural and/or migrant labor, as well as informal production networks, to remain competitive globally (2014).

royals and plastic-framed photos of northeastern monks hang even higher on the walls, profound personages set above the more familiar faces depicted on nylon canvas posters hung at eye level. Two of these posters feature photos of Wai's son Sen at about half-life size, decorated and smiling after matches several years back. In these photos, two grown men and their boys standing alongside Sen in the photo—a whole family of former investors—have had their eye-sockets, as photographed, clinically burnt out with the ends of a cigarette butt, leaving hollow white discs of crimpling polyurethane-nylon in their place, zombified orbs looking out over the family-parking room.

Dom's warehouse unit next door, a residence for both his family and on upper levels, stacks of fabric and t-shirts, by virtue of sharing backlot space with Wai's ring, also frequently compels Dom to invest in the youngest boxers on hand. Dom's family-business, the northeastern women and a handful of young men who cut, sew and restack cotton-polyester in various stages of assembly, produce upwards of 3000 shirts a day—hardly a pittance, though not an output on par with the clientele Sebu's family draws upon. In a second-floor anteroom off of the stairwell at the back of Dom's building, a young Cambodian man stacks most of the shirts for shipping to Europe, piling shirts bearing logos for Scandinavian summer camps or clubs. On one occasion, Dom, a large man by Thai standards, emerges from the warehouse to show us an extra-extra-extra-large shirt—who could imagine human beings this size! Dom shares drinks and plays pool with the alleyway immigration officer; when I lose at billiards, I buy them the bottle.

As our truck starts away for the clinic, we leave behind these two familiar warehouse-homes. When the truck begins to pick up speed, Ou and I jostle in the elevated truckbed. The alleyway's vendors, dogs and the unattended children of sewing parents move without acknowledgement, parting just enough for the truck to slip through. It is late afternoon and the night-market at the end of the alley is assembling: fruits and vegetables, raw or cooked chicken

alongside novelties such as tennis-racquet shaped electric flyswatters, DVDs of b-grade horror films, polyester shorts and rubber flip-flop sandals, vegetables, chicken bones and broth ladeled into plastic bags sealed by thin-wound elastic bands will all be for sale, displayed on fold-out tables, their prices marked on torn pieces of cardboard. With the gravel-lot of the market receding behind us, we pass 'our' 7-eleven, and then the neon-green of a mini 'Big-C' grocery mart, as our truck turns out onto the main road. In the next intersection, three men stand inside a trench of broken concrete, immersed to their waists in grey mud, dredging around a pipe to be excavated. Minutes later on the highway, we pass an island between the lanes where last week, a *takraw* net had stood, tied on posts in the high-green grass, a dividing line for the popular foot-volleying game of balance and dexterity I had seen overpass-construction workers use. The dark grass where the net had stood days before is overturned now though—under the upended mounds of wet orange clay are pinioned half-loads of gravel, the yellowing foam of jaggedly-sliced couch cushions, stripped car tires, twisted metal rebar, a fridge-like appliance door and innumerable plastic bags. Staircases, the intended entrance to a pedestrian overpass now abandoned in mid-construction, rise out of the sidewalk on either side of the roadway, terminating ten feet above ground.

On the expressway driving north we pass bronze statues of larger than life horses galloping across a fountain to announce the gilded gates of another private apartment block set back from roadway, personal security in defiance of the garbage-dust deconstruction, the crowding and pollution of the roadway. At the gates of each apartment complex, a private security man will drowse through his days. Further down the highway in the urban sprawl, we pass versions of these apartment complexes twenty years on, their siding crackling, peeling into block-wide, smog-pocked fractures on the skyline. Intermittently, highway-side restaurants, bakeries or weekend clothing vendors spread their timely goods at the limit of the encroaching

jungle-grasses. On another highway overpass miles south of here, I recall a decommissioned multi-storied tower half submerged, left to slip under the river's waterline: a thin, windowless concrete spire, open floors of graffiti overgrown with thick green moss. Or another time, returning from Isan to Bangkok on an overnight bus, my head lulling against the windowpane, I realized that for the better part of an hour I had been watching the same sequence of massive concrete T-shaped support beams jutting at regular intervals from the high-grass, many still sprouting rebar from out of their masonry, a contract ultimately abandoned only meters from where another set of beams supported the actively used highway at present.

Anthropologist Daniela Gandolfo notes that within Lima, the informal market involves a “freedom of form and its subordination of profit to the preservation of this freedom through webs of reciprocal obligations and forms of consumption that limit the accumulation of wealth” (2013: 280). Analogously, it is useful to contrast the Thai ‘economic miracle’ among ASEAN nations, a ‘miracle’ with a definite human cost straining family structure—on prostitution in Thailand and the attracting of transnational business interests, for example, see Bishop & Robinson (1998)²—with a growth in the matrix of informal monetary practices such as gambling, fortune telling and spirit mediumship, all with the potential to revalue life and meaning vis-a-vis cycles of collapse on the global marketplace (e.g. see Klima 2006). Among these I would include the gambling surrounding Thai boxing, which through informal requisitions of cash investments, solidifies a community, but does not necessarily automatically limit wealth or inequality in terms directly

² Cook (2002), Odzer (1994) and Muecke (1992) provide different, pragmatically detailed accounts of prostitution among the other gender roles accorded Thai women, suggesting Buddhist gender roles and the possibility of sending remittances to families in the northeast provide a context for women from Isan engaged in prostitution to find value and establish continuity for ‘traditional’ Thai family structure. While these studies comprise a footnote complicating the position I have placed within the main body of the text, such studies further demonstrate how these ‘traditional’ Thai structures, soteriology and local, religiously sanctioned gender roles dovetail neatly with global capital expropriations of life and desire.

transgressive to authority. In addition to demonstrating investment in a Buddhist-economic intransigence of corporeal form, backing a boxer involves a denial of gravity, often right up through the moment of collapse—as when Ou could hardly stand in the Channel 7 warehouse-stadium and our eyes were cast downward. Even when gambling involves losing money, it also instantiates a sense of uncanny injustice in the present, a debt owed or wrong to be righted in future tense. This residency of the uncanny and otherness, human-sacrificially accessed in the pool of incomplete standings or unknown matches to be, accords boxing additional power among other Thai gambling practices. The architectures of abandonment and unsettlingly dropped scaffolding that dominate urban Thai horizons (cf. Johnson 2013) suggest an additional aspect of the city state extended beyond livable limits, indicating a political subject long-gone over to the inactivity of death/deathworld, a kinesiology overextended, committed unto the abrupt collapse and cessation of its efforts to associate influence—to just complete construction contracts. At dusk the night before Ou's match in Lumpinee, rolling towards the clinic in the back of Wai's truck on the highway, all around us, with the city descending into the unconscious black on neon night, are these evidences of otherworldliness.

While I lean uncomfortably against the wheelwell, clutching one thigh against the truckbed, Ou sits with comfort across from me, his thin shin bones thrown directly out in front of him, torso curled as though paused, at rest in one hic-cup of the rolling-snap-slouch employed during a Thai boxer's countless sit-ups. Ou's eyes fix on the luminescent screen of his partly cracked, refurbished Samsung tablet, scrolling through messages. As the highway-wind fills our ears, Ou returns this tablet to his satchel, his chin eventually coming to rest on his sternum, face cast in a distant, sluggish conversation with dehydration.

When our truck drives onto a bridge, with the glimmering-murk of the Chao-Phrya river rippling far below us, I lean over to ask Ou which bridge we are on, and then gesture across the

river, asking where we are going. He stares blankly through me, then shrugs—“Clin-ic.” in English. Once over the river, we file for a while through traffic, sending a *wai* in greeting towards the laughing workers we have surprised—men sitting among gates and boxes in the back of smaller transport trucks zipping alongside us. These same workers then shift to look away from Ou and I, silent when our vehicle slows up next to theirs in an intersection.

It is almost seven when our truck turns finally into another alleyway, parking beneath a dark green neon sign announcing the clinic at street-level. With the alleyway behind us crowded by pedestrians, three-wheel *tuk-tuk* taxis, motorcycles and food vendors, we wait on long wooden benches in the clinic lobby, facing a money-tree behind the empty arrivals kiosk, until one of the clinic-attendants, a woman dressed in a clean white smock, directs Ou to a cubicle at the back of the clinic. I follow but then leave Ou alone there, waiting for the private discomforts of the glucagon injection they will jab into one of his gluteus muscles. This last insulin-spike will allow Ou to sleep without jitters before weighing in tomorrow morning.

When I leave Ou, walking out of the clinic to Wai’s truck across the alleyway, I turn to witness a motorcycle careen into place between the *tuk-tuks* parked out front. Before the young woman driving the bike can shut it off, the young man on back has already leapt off the backseat, holding his infant in one arm, a finger and thumb jammed directly down the boy’s mouth, grasping a swollen tongue. The man rushes into the clinic, bypassing the politely flustered attendants in their white smocks, sprinting down the corridor of the thin-walled cubicles, shouting ‘help’, ‘help’, ‘help’, opening a door to exchange hushed tones with the doctor on call, the three white-smocked attendants trailing in after them.

Maybe thirty seconds later, the father, one hand still holding his child’s breath open, sprints from the back of the clinic. The trio leaps back onto their motorcycle—the engine guns, spits exhaust and headlights split away into the night.

I stand next to our parked truck with the passenger who rode shotgun, Nop, one of the men employed in sewing authentic-knock-off leather handbags on contract—an operation run entirely behind curtains on the third floor of the warehouse where Wai’s family sleeps. Nop, face flushed, glances up after the bike, then resumes counting amphetamine pills through the clear bag he has just purchased. Wai comes out from the clinic anteroom where I passed him. He has paid the collecting attendant for Ou’s shot simply by giving Sebu’s name as credit.

Wai looks to me, then up the alleyway where the motorbike has just sped away. “Chemicals; the child swallowed chemicals.” He stirs a wood-skewer into the clear plastic bag in his hand, stabbing at a pork-meat-ball and dipping this into a chili-powder sweet sauce congealed in one corner of the bag. “Do you want one?” Wai nods towards the grill in the alleyway behind us.

When I shake my head no, “No. No problem...” he insists:

“No problem!” shaking the bag towards me. This reply of his, “*mo-bhen-yeung*”, is the Isanite version of ‘No problem.’ I have shared with him before, instead of the more formal, central Thai *mai-bhen-rai* I had just used to excuse myself from eating.

But Wai insists still, “Eat...–Eat.” holding the bag out to me, indicating an extra skewer. “Relax...” (“*Sabaii...*”) he says as I finally reach out for the skewer.

The ground meat—if-it-is-meat—its rubberish texture gives and folds behind my teeth, the sticky-sweet-familiar Thai chili sauce a concentration of textures and flavors playing havoc,³ overwhelming my living tastebuds until the concentrated sauce zips—washes over me—gifting a synesthesia, ringing ears and opening eyes. I am suddenly awake in the night.

“Good? Delicious?” Wai asks rhetorically.

³ See O’Neill (2008: 210-213) on the juxtaposition of contradictory flavors and heat that comprises Thai cooking.

“Good, thanks...” The taste is...the taste of what is the good here.

Debt, Interest and Thai Sense

But what is this local good, vivisected through a hierarchy of corporeal beings, what are values extracted through the local arrangement of materiality, through a mashing of cartilage, a crushing of bone, scarred skin, through shining gold statues and cataract-stained, milky eyes?

After the alleyway outside the clinic grew quiet once more following the sputtering departure of the family motorcycle, returning to camp in the dark, I reconstruct a series of non-interactions I had seen parents take with children in Thai boxing camps: toddlers wandering near traffic, toddlers with knives near ditches, toddlers drinking Pepsi, tripping through urban dust, seemingly ignored, lying next to semi-feral cats or dogs. At night in Isan, when an ink-black scorpion finds a frog in the high grasses or rice paddies next to houses, the frog emits a high-pitched buzz as it dies, as though night had collapsed a thicket of crickets into the space where one amphibian had just been. The sound is a reminder of that concentrated dose of venom that smaller human children would not survive. Again, I visualize my first boxing trainer’s nephew’s forearm, ripped away by a cobra—the gauze wrapping I hurriedly explained to his mother that there was no need to remove on my account when I visited the hospital. And this time in Bangkok, the toddler in question, perhaps not yet even walking, picks up a can of paint-thinner, bleach, or an industrial emulsifier intended for machinery. The offending concentration of chemicals in question, an inorganic component of the city, sneaks right up, down the infant’s throat. His parents, at sewing machines, or moving debris away from grates in the alleyway, trading coins for a day’s services, are but an absent arms’ length away. Even the metropolitan, private apartment with limited green-space my family stayed in down the highway from camp, a provincialized world away from the repetitive pace of commodity production in our boxing

back-alley, incorporated these lapses of attentive livelihood in its architecture. Even that high-end apartment complex which seemed to offer a monetized defense from the lurking mechanizations of urbanity, retained in its layout, what I had nicknamed the ‘chasms of death’: unfilled seven-foot deep concrete pools sunk onto either side of a narrow entranceway which was unavoidable when toddling-walking my daughter outside. These depressions, and the precipice-drops into the *klongs*, canals of brown-sludge spotted by occasional lotus-flower lilies which cut gully-chasms through the property, went always unremarked by Thai parents. Likewise, all around the ring, fathers retain the assurances to keep their children in boxing practice, sustaining an accumulation of strikes, season after season.

At what point, I wondered, were we bound to intercede with our children, when there were others (ghosts, spirits, ancestors) watching over them? How far would we let our children wander, and how fervently would we celebrate their being thrown into violent collisions? As a first time parent, I was arguably high-strung, but the vast distances between local parents and children, in the face of ‘dangers’, for me, was constantly unexpected. Sometimes this was Ming’s one year old son teetering, walking, sipping a plastic cup of Pepsi between low-swinging punching bags. On another occasion, a Thai mother of two grown children abruptly stopped to answer a phone call and placed my daughter, who had barely learned to sit up at twelve months of age, alone on a two-foot-wide, five-foot high bar-table in the center of her restaurant, walking away, leaving my spouse to hold her breath while retrieving our daughter. What ghosts wander into these distances between parents and children? What are the tenuous relations between letting-be, letting-go, detachment and impermanence? At what point do we feel a sense of the uncanny in the living, a pull away from inevitable gravity or stupor; an awaking to an interruption in the course of the day, something worth resisting. How do we find our hands

reaching back generations to hold open a breath for the living, having given out enough into the accounts of the dead?

Our day to day sensorium, this matrix of perceptual compartments, tastings, smells, breaths, are senses then of overlapping intensities, haunted by an accumulation of lifetimes and possibilities—by the expiring, the going-off, the perfume of a fleeting instance, a temperature, a tastebud's synesthesia mingling with touch, obfuscated in memory.

The tenuous transmission of sense, the letting-go of generations of affective association, walking onto local Thai grounds complicated by the pull of historical materials—amulets, monies, shrines, injections—the presencing of Ou's hunger-artistry paraded past waxen animate-figures in shrines, past soteriological corpses and learned 'teachers', paraded in statue's processions through temple grounds instantiating mandalic patriarchy, paraded over the tiers of perception and enlightenment promised around every stupa, carried into the heart of the military-industrial monastic-monarchial stadium, reserving strength in a hesitation within a hesitation within a hesitation ad infinitum. Ou's corporeal plasticity—his corporeal capital—emaciated, then hours later hydrated and strong, exemplifies a Thai style of transversally leap-frogging across the limits of sensuality and taste.

The slaughtered mash of also-cartilage parts passing as meat we consume is of a character as meat, as a substitution for the executioner's political victim, for the passing of lifetime, a meaty taste appropriate to the veiled, contested Thai sovereign order. The open profusion of senses encouraged by Thai cooking summons a uniquely contradictory Thai flavor palette, with flavors such as spicy-sweet, sour-spicy or salty-sweet imperceptibly counter-intuitive to uninitiated tongues (cf. Boas 1889). These tastes adhere to a local logic in production/consumption in which the overwhelming, overflowing synesthesia of an event is an opportunity for encountering new and powerfully other associations. As with the complimentary

sensory crowding unto exhaustion in the imbibing of substances, chilis, caffeine or methamphetamines which open and extend the day to day schedules of Thai migrants. Taste, as such, adheres to a sacrificial logic in which one Thai person gives out into the given, meeting and expanding order through a capacity for relation in the encountering of new qualia.

A (Thai) person in these circumstances evokes memory and continuity—sustained qualia—more powerfully where quality repeated unto assured sense deliberately cultivates the expansive edge of synaesthesia, the melting-in-time of all things.

Similarly, where sense of continuity and awareness involves such a measured outgrowth, for Nietzsche, the modern foundation of a consistent person—humanity, that ‘animal which makes promises’—requires a reliable, repetitive apparatus of destruction in memory. The sense of relative self and dimensions of historical causality accepted in a person are premised on the distribution of a particular luxury in forgetting, where ‘robust’ health and movement are premised on an incursion of the negative—even an enjoyment of the other’s trauma in sacrifice (see Nietzsche [1887]1967)—the responsiveness of which invokes a rate of memory, assembling an indebted construct, interrupting any closed hermeneutic. Taking Nietzsche to be both phenomenological and materially economic in his consideration of a moral genealogy, this luxury of forgetting indicates the generativity of the negative, incommensurable contradictions engendered in absolute loss (i.e. sacrifice). The affirmative character of life is only that fleetingly composed from out of a series of negations and losses. For Nietzsche, the tensile, temporal modern person is composed across a series of commitments their repetitions and forgettings engender.

Opening the second essay of his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes:

“[f]orgetting is no mere *is inertia* as the superficial imagine; it is rather an active and in strictest sense positive faculty of repression,” ([1887]1967:57) ... “[I]t will be immediately obvious how there could be no happiness, no pride, no *present*, without forgetfulness. The man in whom this apparatus of repression is damaged and ceases to function properly may be compared (and more

than merely compared) with a dyspeptic—he cannot ‘have done’ with anything. ... Now this animal which needs to be forgetful, in which forgetting represents a force, a form of *robust* health, has bred in itself an opposing faculty, a memory, with the aid of which forgetfulness is abrogated in certain cases—namely in those cases where promises are made. ... Man must first of all have become *calculable, regular, necessary*, even in his own image of himself, if he is to be able to stand security for *his own future*, which is what one promises to do!” ([1887]1967:58).

From this critical position, the modern person with a ‘future’ is the person who has employed markers of traumatic contact, ritual repetitions—i.e. sacrificial logics—as pace setters of historicity and personal memory. *The memory lost, regularized corporeal destruction in repetition, is a generativity from the negative residing within the affirmative process of becoming accountable, countable and valued.*

For Thai boxing’s particular logic of sacrifice, that everyday repose and rest in the consistency of practice, the shared denials of immanent destruction and the years of carefully distributed laughter amidst necessary cruelties in our days of growth/decay, *all* position the spectacular arrangement of a boxer’s limbs under the spotlights. While among the living there is an order of mobility, an aesthetics which aims to take great merit, the extent to which soteriological death encompasses life is constantly appraised in the Thai juxtaposition of decay and growth—the dead within life within death, that exchange which ripples through each limb in action and waiting. Indiscreet ‘experience’ is not at all individual experience, but rather, an uncanny holding haunted by otherness. What Nietzsche indicates as a pretense to the social installation of creditors-debtors, the ‘faculty of repression’ in ritual repetition makes possible; hence, Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* is as much a commentary on the modern intransigence of ritual sacrifice. The luxury of forgetting, differentially distributed among sacrificers/the powerful, ushers in a hierarchical apparatus, where each one among the many owes their place to those who might forget them.

For Thai boxers and their supporters approaching immanent contact, each instance where an inclusive future opens momentarily—the promise of another bout, another investor, another royal or military matchmakers’ promised relation—*this* time potentially arraigns our life—our time. All contact harbors the unstable possibility of balancing karmic accounts, to come to terms with the debts owed others, to become credible, though the futility of these attempts accede constantly to the asymmetries of eventful consciousness and movement.

Drawing also on this Nietzschean/Deleuzian framing of territorialized debt, sociologist-philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato proposes debt as the underlying feature of modern (market-based) relations, a temporalizing force delineating the terms of desirous life. For Lazzarato, this novel form of credit-debt delineates freedom and mobility, characterizing the precarity of life across the globe. Lazzarato writes that

“the paradigm of the social lies not in exchange (economic and/or symbolic) but in credit. There is no equality (of exchange) underlying social relations, but rather an asymmetry of debt/credit, which precedes, historically and theoretically, that of production and wage labor.” (2011: 11).

Accordingly, the Thai subjectivity expressed by boxing is an ‘asymmetry of debt/credit’ re-composed from out of an acute attention to hesitations and active forces. Holding fast to the Nietzschean notion of credit-debt as temporalizing rights of forgetting, with Lazzarato, we may consider a sovereign-assemblage as being maintained through a distribution of asymmetrical violence that accompanies the attempted balancing of relatively ‘archaic’ status relations—as being maintained through ritual. The mythology of balanced or ideally generalized reciprocity, the myth of a historically benign marketplace, gives way to those who distribute the composition of the negative within memory. For as Lazzarato reminds us, the debtor-creditor relation

expresses an unsettled state, a relationship which continues through the sublimating and subjugating of a certain temporality.⁴

There are particular, historical features of the Thai patronage system perduring today which mark the constitution of lifetime and mobility, and which impose an infinite debt—a debt for existing under the monarch/the Buddha/the other—upon finite subjects. In its historical permutations, among Thai patrons, credit—and thus, the right, via sacrificial wastage, to forget, i.e. to become regularly accountable—was always a status of self-in-time, of self and spare(d) time—encountered within an already unequal, multi-tiered social relation. This Thai system of credit-status-merit I see closely allied with the local system of accounting for patronage, the *sakdina* system.⁵

⁴ In a subsequent assessment, Lazzarato writes “[t]he creditor-debtor relation as the relation between active and reactive forces, as mastery over time, is preserved and extended by capital in the form of infinite debt ... If one makes credit out of money ... reimbursement can never be achieved without destroying the capitalist relation. The creditor-debtor relation can never be settled because it assures both political domination and economic exploitation. To honor one’s debts means escaping the creditor-debtor relation and this would mean exiting capitalism altogether. One can honor one’s debts, but if one honors all of one’s debts there is no longer any asymmetry, any power differential, no stronger or weaker forces—no more capital. Definitive repayment is, logically, the death of capitalism, for credit/debt embodies the class differential” (2013:88). In thinking of the debts paid by Thai boxing, I substitute Lazzarato’s use of the term ‘capital’ here for ‘the Thai sovereign assemblage’.

⁵ Craig Reynolds writes, “In academic discourse today *saktina* refers to a social formation, the *saktina* system: the political, economic, social, and cultural order that characterized Thai society for some five hundred years. By no means do all historians and social scientists use “the *saktina* system” to signify past Thai society. Some emphasize patron-client relations, the corvee system, and monarchy, and reserve *saktina* for its ancient, technical meaning: rank quantified in terms of land or labor. But for historians who do use *saktina* it is part of a discourse about Thai society, past and present, a discourse that stands in critical relation to the present order and may even aim to displace it, particularly such *saktina* remnants as the monarchy and the Buddhist monkhood. The modern meanings for *saktina*, as outlined above, arise out of an Old Thai term, *sakdina*, found in the Thai civil and administrative code of the fifteenth century. There the term refers to positions in a socio-political hierarchy underpinned by economic relations. The positions were differentiated by amounts of land allocated, e.g., from 100,000 units for the highest-ranking prince, to 10,000 units for a noble, and down to 25 units for a commoner and 5 for a slave. The Old Thai term is a Sanskrit-Thai hybrid: Skt. *sakti* (power, the power of the god) bound to Thai *na* (ricefield)” (1985: 141).

In 1863, ethnologist/traveller Adolf Bastian makes record of this *sakdina* system at work in a Siam where status as patron-clients equals the classed degree of merit all individuals possess, including the king's corvee laborers, who are branded on the wrist (Bastian 2005[1863]: 242-243). The number of men any given noble may be held responsible for, even the weight given to one's testimony in court, depends on the accrual of merit-points any individual had earned, from king, on down to slave (Bastian (2005[1863])). Considering slavery in nineteenth century Siam, "the system is a hierarchy based on patron-client relationships with rewards in status and wealth from the control of people. Within this hierarchy, everyone is property in a theoretical sense, from the household up" (Cruickshank 1975: 329). The status of property, being indentured to a person of higher power, extended to all people in the political assemblage, on up through to the king, who stands as 'slave of the Buddha' (see Turton 1980: 289).

This status, attached to persons, changes the terms by which they might be valued, dismembered or remembered. Bryce Beemer's history of slave taking within Southeast Asia indicates that the capture and retention of entire populations during warfare, rather than their outright annihilation, was the regular goal of Southeast Asian territorializations:

"People, not territories, were the key to power in precolonial Southeast Asia. Inscriptional and textual materials throughout the region describe kingdoms rising and consolidating when their armies succeed in capturing and enslaving neighboring population and transferring them back to the conqueror's political center. ... War captives were typically transferred to the center of their captor's country and were sorted out for work according to their skills. Highly skilled persons such as artisans, dancers, soldiers, veterinarians, or iron workers were kept near the royal palace to work within the state service system of their new home. Unskilled labor gangs were mustered from captive populations to dig canals, lay roads, and build structures, or engage in similar large-scale public works. Farmers were settled on unexploited land and commanded to cede surplus production to their new masters" (2009: 486-487).

Where intraregional conflict or guerilla warfare in the jungles was frequent, many would choose slavery, serving under the protection of nobles, to be exempt from corvee labour (see Baker & Phongchaipit 2010: 927-929), as those disposed to nobles-kings would be required to

regularly perform corvee labor or pay compulsory tax (see Cruikshank 1975: 329-330; Turton 1980; cf. Patterson 1982: 174). Conscription into the kings' military or contingency of servants, and the permanent branding-tattooing-blackening of the wrist which accompanied this (Marshall 2015; Bastian 1863: 243; Feeny 1989:291)—was an often undesirable, permanent arrangement. On the other unbranded hand, being held as skilled labour under the accounts of a noble allowed one to be protected as transferable property in case of a regime change during warfare, while still retaining one's *sakdina*—the designated status/merit-accrued terms one could conceivably work out from under over the course of a lifetime (cf. Baker & Phongpaichit 2009:16; Patterson 1982: 125), or multiple lifetimes in the case of having debt transferred to one's children.

The practice of keeping alive and handily incorporating the captured into a new state, which would seem to offer relative stability for biological life, simultaneously introduced a degree of biopolitical, sovereign uncertainty—an uncanniness in freedom. For a person living in the absolute center⁶, or upon the fringe tributaries of such an arrangement, at any one moment, in the series of populations (life) transferred, determining *who is in charge*, or where one's surplus production is ultimately being appropriated, becomes difficult. Under these conditions, it is always possible to contest authority or accrue more merit, particularly by waiting out present conditions of asserted authority, and coming into a time where one's skills and interests dovetail with the broader field of sovereign powers. Producing for a distant capital, there is an indeterminate nature to the outcome of one's actions, and always, a possibility of finding oneself

⁶ Marshall (2015) indicates that many coups in the 1900's were accomplished in symbolic fashion: the aura of a change of material power had to be effected within the palace, in order for a new king to be installed, acceding control and expropriation of wealth to a new series of elites, while outside the palace, conditions of obligation for laypeople remained relatively stable. This arrangement seems somewhat familiarly repeated given the contemporary series of Thai political movements, protests and coups, democracy which nevertheless, with each turn of the mandalic wheel, retains wealth and resources for a select few.

operating on behalf of distant forces, or of abruptly having been co-opted into a silent regime change—having one’s surplus production, or surplus lifetime, evidently snatched away.

At the same time, for ‘masters’ or owners of those indebted, owners of the conditions reproducing life, there is the constant realization that one’s own livelihood (in a variation on the dependency for recognition and work in Kojève’s Hegelian master-slave dialectic) and well-being relies on permitting a certain degree of alterity or aesthetics of the other in the artisanal practices in one’s very midst (see Beeman 2009; cf. Pellegi 2002). For the slave, for the laborer, for anyone simply engaged in action, these possibilities alter the directionality and apparent (ir)reversibility of patronage-client relations.

The official abolishment of slavery in Siam then, begun in 1874, though not carried into provinces until as late as 1915 (see Turton 1980:284), might be considered more of a formality for ruling classes. Modernizing laws ultimately transferred a greater degree of human capital into central coffers, when the transfer of individuals from slave status to those of indentured labor and servitude followed. The social structures, mannerisms, hesitations and merit-ocracy, the causal and karmic logic afforded interpersonal relations in such a system of mass-slavery, remains now embedded in social interactions, a history of violence retained in intersubjectivity. A population subjected to centuries of slavery and warfare offers perfectly destabilized collective social conditions for the subsequent installation of both extractive transnational capital-factory work, or tourism’s superficial hospitality.

This distribution of uncertain freedoms has its compliment in the spatial and material practices of Thai institutions, where holding movement in balance or hesitation is both aesthetically pleasing and skillfully cultivated. Under present conditions, as among those patron-clients in 19th century Thai jungles, it is always ‘possible’ to earn freedom, or a greater relative degree of mobility. Greater freedom is accomplished by cultivating conditions where one’s skills

and allegiances—should the clock or regime change—may be abruptly revealed as being valuable again. Where the masses must live by nesting their skill sets within a composed corpus, the Thai king also operates this way, retaining a powerful hidden alterity in otherwise diminutive gestures—the sovereign’s given strength is reflected in his dealing out life or death with an otherworldly compassion, across all tiers of society. Whether in the role of world-conqueror, world-renouncer (1976), or under the demand to demonstrate a countenance of perfect and instantaneous selfless giving, *barami*, the mythic, alluring power of generosity (see Jory 2002; 2016), the sovereign’s bloody actions at their most powerful remain ultimately foreign to himself—appropriate selflessness for a Theravada Buddhist non-self. Accordingly, at either vertical antipode of the sovereign apparatus, with the king or the slave/victim/foreign barbarian/prisoner, a barrier of secrecy is maintained which allows for action and misrecognition simultaneously, for the upholding of authoritative symbolic sacrifice in the midst of social and economic upheaval.⁷ Both meditating monks-kings and de-merited slaves are effectively protected, sealed within a timescape where their influence or skill-set is shown to be consistently dependable, beyond the machinations, expropriations, violences and decay of temporary conflicts. Stranger kin(g)ships,⁸ are simply the necessary incorporation of foreign powers to retake meaning under these conditions (cf. Frazer [1922] 1998).

⁷ The propensity to gain power by incorporating a foreign element is reflected in contemporary Thailand where “elites have competed for state power and business resources in unrestrained ways, often ruthlessly undermining one another’s statuses while secretly mobilizing outsiders” (William 2002: 147).

⁸ Sahlins, drawing on the term ‘galactic polities’ which Stanley Tambiah (1976) coins to describe the Thai case, indicating political centers without absolute territorial jurisdiction, writes: “the galactic polities generate regional ecumenes of power that are at the same time hierarchies of cultural order. The combined action of cosmocratic ambitions at the centre and upward mobility at the peripheries amounts to a politics of acculturation in which the circulation of concepts, objects, persons and even religions is effected through the tactical pursuit of the potency of alterity. [np]... In the event, the hinterlands of the galactic systems are breeding grounds of stranger- kingships ... from Southeast Asia. The outlying island and inland peoples of the region

James Scott's work appraising a history of peoples avoiding conscription and governmentality in Southeast Asia—by his naming, a region called 'Zomia'(2010)—frames an elusive subject complimentary to accounts of Thai laypeople avoiding corvee (see Baker&Phongpaichit 2010: 928), holding hidden skill-sets, cultivating foreign political associations to gamble into power. Scott suggests that the people of upland Southeast Asia were not simply avoiding capture by a state, but were engaged in strategies of cultural specialization, cultivating different habits inassimilable (i.e. barbaric) to state logics, thereby choosing not to fall under the auspices of state rule (2010).

Scholarly investigations of the dynamics between resistance, governance and the structurations imposed on communities through ritual, in the Thai setting, have often focused on uses of religico-political charisma at the expense of the everyday (see particularly Tambiah 1976; cf. Kitiarsa 2009, who echoes Tambiah's critique of Weber⁹), or the power dynamics generated by religious virtuosos (see Gray (1991); cf. Spiro 1982: 238; Tambiah 1970: 81-91; Obeyesekere 1963: 150-152).¹⁰ A priori identified autocosmic religious ritual has been explored as a powerful generator of social/historical difference in Thai society, noted, in different accompanying terms,

present an interesting array of political variations on the common dualistic theme of foreign-derived rulers and indigenous 'owners'." (Sahlins 2008: 192; also see Graeber & Sahlins 2017: 233-234).

⁹ Weber's particularly Christian-ascetic influenced reading of Nietzsche stressed the ideal-individual as a value-free generator of charisma, an ideal which Tambiah finds at odds with the "Buddhist meditation master's personal qualifications [which] are achieved by relating his effort to an institutionalized and formalized vocation" (Tambiah 1984: 332).

¹⁰ Julia Cassaniti makes a salient point, explaining that in northern Thailand, rather than being separate from this virtuosity, people negotiate notions of power through a relation to impermanence (2006:84). Within the context of my research on Thai boxing, this layperson's attention to opening impermanence as a particular temporality indicates a contrast, particularly, to Obeyesekere's assertion of a transnational Sinhalese Buddhism above regular citizens (1963)—underscoring also, that the individual, while not simply being duped or barred access from ritual organization and incantation, negotiates tiers of religious/social/economic structure through well-timed hesitations, slippages and planar motions.

by generations of ethnographers, sometimes as evidence of a ‘loosely structured social system’ (Embree 1950), an order organized via merit (Hanks 1960), a galactic polity held in tension by conqueror-renouncer aesthetics (Tambiah 1976, 1977; also on Tambiah, see also Keyes 1973, 1978 and Fischer 2013), a syncretically complex system (Kirsch 1977), a military post-colony using Buddhism to legitimize amassed forces (see Anderson ([1978]2014:44), turned internally, on ‘refugees’, migrants and political alterns corralled at its own borders, or other versions of structural order expressed in radiant power from polity to village and back again. Where the current ethnographic perspective stresses the agentic capacities of rural Thais, northeastern (e.g. Keyes 2014; Tsuji & Kirsch 2010; Lefferts 2017; Lefferts & Cate 2012) and northern (e.g. Cassaniti 2015), where the dynamic of inequality are concerned, the consideration of political power often assumes a performative idiom (perhaps echoing Geertz in Bali (1980); or Keane (1997) in Indonesia), or inadvertently, takes a backseat altogether to considerations of the splintering of religious orders (e.g. see Taylor 2008; Swearer 2004; McDaniel 2011 for in-depth treatments of Thai plural religious practice at present).

My suspicion, however, is that the ongoing anthropological study of the relation between ritual’s structuring violence and subjectivity (i.e. the study of how social-structural inequalities perdure and change) in Thailand has of late been pulled off course via both the soteriological affirmative impulse, reiterating the plurality of religious supplicants’ praxis, and also, the seductive-spectacular whirlpool of political-scientific scholarly discourse commandeering much of Thai studies at present. I reiterate though, that a study of Thai ritual efficacy/inequality, especially at present, must be anchored firmly in the Thai quotidian; the everyday.

Claudio Sopranzetti, an anthropologist whose work among Bangkok motorcycle taxi drivers (2017) moves firmly in this quotidian direction, while appraising the resilience of

political and social inequalities in Thailand at present, cites the work of Edmund Leach (1954) as a Southeast Asianist touchstone reiterating the importance of structure. He writes:

“Focusing on structural change, instead, we recognize not only individuals’ positions in the social system but also, as Leach argues, “changes in the ideal system itself: changes, that is, in the power structure” (Leach 1954, 10). Such changes, I suggest, are the engine that drives the Thai wheel of crisis, an engine that runs in an oscillating fashion, not in a linear progression.” (2014).

Taking the Thai boxing I have described as an asymmetrical, corporeal compliment to the oscillations in Thai political crisis Soprzanetti reiterates, I find some differences, however.

Whereas the particular structuralist inclinations Leach employs conveys an individual struggling with aspirations which often inevitably reproduce larger social constructs, this position strictly misses much about the ongoing perceptual and interpersonal distribution of debt/time vis a vis corporeal, ritual violence in Thailand. While Leach’s longstanding critical structuralism among Southeast Asianist scholars¹¹ offers a starting point for pondering the generation of inequalities, the deterritorializations Soprzanetti alludes to with those Bangkok motorcycle drivers making *maps* (i.e.—not territories) (2017), perhaps comes somewhat closer to describing some lines of flight composing strong peripheral subjectivities in the present Thai political conjuncture.

Thai boxers like Ou traffic and exchange in growth, decay and strength. Their viability is composed amidst mute silences, hesitations, jabs that interrupt thoughts, non-linguistic signings, dead matter and animal-formed techniques. Considering the practice’s *corporeal costs*, this form of pugilistic exchange as life implies conditions a strictly Leach-inspired version of structure in practice (see Tambiah 2002 on Leach’s differences with L.S.), as well as a Levi-Straussian political turn to myth and imaginary (e.g. Anderson 2006) tend to race past, either structural

¹¹ See Fischer (2013: 234-235 especially) on the interchanges between Edmund Leach and Stanley Tambiah, particularly their similarities in assessing dialectical political oscillations.

approach favoring a scope which documents relations upheld between those who are already, visibly politically powerful *and* articulate.

Approaching conflict at scale in the perceptual and sacrificial intimacies of Thai boxing, the significantly different, version of structure and event I would draw on more readily is signaled in the work of anthropologist Max Gluckman. Gluckman's situational/event based approach to practice accommodates an arraignment of power through the affront of human finitude, a continuity of animate life running through finitely determined individuals into the cultural order, and a quality of life made in the imponderabilia of everyday routine, less so the reification of local Thai political scientific signs of the powerful as being culturally distinct. Whereas Leach's brand of structuralist position ultimately relativized each cultural structure with an absolute boundary, dovetailing discourse with a South African apartheid government naturalizing segregation, the situational analysis Gluckman advocated from Manchester stressed the psychological states of individuals vis a vis their differential status in dynamically challenged societies, subjects being located within historically structuring processes, finding their roles converging, post-festum, around events (see Cocks 2001; Gluckman 1975; Gordon 1987; Kapferer 2000). Similarly, with the events of Thai boxing, each actor—boxers, fathers, trainers, patrons, sponsors, kings and statues—are familiars upon a tier of mobility in Thai animate-cosmology, but this is a mobility realized in reference to others—upwardly mobile soldiers, generals, doctors—whose other temporal horizons underscore the cost of generating difference. The differences between my informants and myself, for example, like our life circumstances, are comparatively vast, separated by world-historical processes which nevertheless situate us all; and which all have responsibilities for undoing; some (myself) moreso than others.

My approach, similar, but different from that of Leach's ideologic attention to power, locates the generation of time in the otherwise than structurally linguistic, in sacrificial action, where people make time with repeatedly attentive movements.

Describing Ou's plasticity and repetition of violence in the ring, in a fashion after Gluckman¹², the elbow strike raised in opening this dissertation presents at scale, a crisis of contact (see Kapferer 2005; cf. Sahlins 1981), and event (see Kapferer 2010), a radically volatile historicity instantiated in dynamic movement. The Thai world of impermanent things, the hierarchy of animate Thai matters, is a deathworld undercut by the urgency of appraising contact and change through such corporeal sacrifices in the ring.

With Sopranzetti, I agree we must place our investigations of 'oscillating' cultural dynamics in a productive tension between individuals and groups, though given the methodological-ethical divisions between Leach and Gluckman's situational analysis (cf. Situationists, if such a situation in the now, moves firmly beyond street-protest alone), viewpoints drawing strictly on Leach's attention to structures reproduced in practice may not necessarily appraise the temporal structure of indebtedness paid in Thai corporeal—i.e. sacrificial—practice, a memorable motion that Ou and other boxers compose in Thailand at present.

The rhythms of Thai boxing Ou and others undertake provide a node for their audience to affect change in political life, doing so by instilling a quality of corporeal composure

¹² The methodologies of practice-based ethnographers Nick Crossley, Greg Downey or Jaida Samudra all differently stress the importance of ethnographic notes in attempts to learn skills which become, after a time, unnotable, of a habitual, second-nature to their executors. This experiential fieldnote as a method for recapturing dissonance and noting cultural difference has a particular resonance with Gluckmann's approach to understanding communities' crisis and situational analysis in general, in that with situational analysis, the terms of power, difference and change in a community are usually visible post-event, as a nexus of disagreements and shared concerns emerging after contingency.

unspectacularly, in an unabashed shadow-boxing routine, taking a slide-step back from the floodlit arenas of political pomp and circumstance. Contrary to approaches which might attend to religious and kingly matters detached from the sacrificial grounds which uphold them, I have tried to show the relevance of a sacrificial corporeality, an otherness residing in a profane and populous everyday; the exhaustions, rhythms and patterns of repeated Thai boxing practice being the affective ethical grounds upon which spectacular kingly ritual or oligarchic military industrialism is maintained.

At a perceptual level, Thai boxers like Ou and his peers exhaust themselves across a local logic through which sensation, the managing of wakefulness and unconscious rest, the managing of decay and growth, admits a particular degree of the foreign and alien. Drawing value and quality from boxing depends on a reliability in repetition which holds causality at arm's length through routine, extending association of the sacrificed corpus. By managing memory at a rate of return, incorporating delays and hesitations in the corporeal composure of boxers like Ou, trainers, fathers, managers and family friends cultivate a strength which cuts through the Thai hierarchy of established historical-materials and substances.

Debts owed to patrons, to kings, to each other for living; debts that we incur by moving wildly, without restraint, are debts paid in the giving of one's kinetic sons to the ring, but also debts whose accounts are underwritten as every exhaustive motion of the Thai boxer demonstrates a new continuity and possibility for life, an intensity returning ancestors for the living.

CHAPTER SEVEN: HORIZONS

In the previous chapter, I explored how Thai expectations for sacrificial action and the manifold temporal obligations Thai men negotiate are held in the hesitations, contradictions and denials of absolute otherness or death—value and the good being communicated in the interstices of sense-perception. Chapter seven examines how these intensities are also constitutive of extensions of possibility and futuricity—inclusion in community. This chapter explores how a lifetime marked by the time of Thai boxing—a lifetime marked by that sacrificial moment (a continuity in time pronounced and made valuable during the leisurely waiting of Thai boxing)—experiences its horizons not only as possibilities, but as an exponentially open duration of waiting. The expansive finitude of such a lifeworld’s horizon, or ‘deathworld’, is settled into. The duration of waiting, of living expectantly and marking time with muay-Thai, suspends and questions hierarchical requisitions of Thai men’s time. With the passing of time comes a growing awareness of pathways not taken—each grows more determined with every passing moment.

Reflecting on the different paths and experiences of the men involved in supporting Thai boxers, I describe this verticality in our horizons—i.e. the dimensions of a deathworld—in the setting of a military-issued seventh-floor apartment on the base next to Lumpinee stadium, where we wait as our boxer rehydrates.

“As its Greek name suggests, a horizon is both the opening and the limit that defines either an infinite progress or a waiting and awaiting. [np]... Yet justice, however unrepresentable it remains, does not wait. It is that which must not wait. To be direct, simple and brief, let us say this: a just decision is always required *immediately*, right away, as quickly as possible. It cannot provide itself with the infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of condition, rules or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it. And even if it did have all that at its disposal, even if it did give itself the time, all the time and all the necessary knowledge about the matter, well then, the moment of *decision as such*, what must be just, *must [il faut]* always remains a finite moment of urgency and precipitation; it must [*doit*] not be the consequence or the effect of this theoretical or historical knowledge, this reflection of deliberation, since the decision always marks the interruption of the juridico-, ethico-, or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that *must [doit]* precede it.” (Derrida 1990: 255)

Waiting and the Verticality in our Horizons

The cost of producing Ou’s accurately timed motions are already built into the nexus of distractions his Thai supporters require to go on with their working lives, to go on every day. The cost is paid in those small admissions, those lookings-away that allow the violence of the cultural order to settle in, unquestioned and unnoted. And yet, the duration of the movement, an opening and waiting—that horizon—is an interruption of vertical inevitabilities. The promise of a fully employable future in construction or temporary work—the reassurance of joining the world of one’s fathers—is laid low, if only for a time, if only to be relegated and moved over.

What Ou sustains though, was not just a period of intensive corporeal force in the ring, but an understanding—a flesh-dulled record—of how that force could, at one time, be summoned up from between us; from amidst the aloof moments of relaxation, of sequestered distraction and veiled, strained pre-occupations which composed a Thai boxer’s countenance from out of a matrices of social orders. The posture Ou held, his moment for recounting technique was, much like the indentured laborers in Thai ‘ancient’ history, nesting skill away from the prying claws of a new village or military head, not to copy/reproduce the cultural order one resides in, but to be capable of composing an output that, perhaps to the relief of all, interrupted it. This is an interruption which signals future, thrown back over the political order.

The same plan for movement could call the animate from out of an off-beat or missed rhythm among the living: a *mor-lam*, rhythmic Northeastern Thai folk tune carried out in off-meter time¹, the dropping of an intentional or gravitational arc in standing resistance, reducing dancers, in a flash, to sets of clattering bones, then spun again, alive and recomposed within the crash of a cymbal, one more uncanny step among the living.

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Immediately after Ou makes weight at Lumpinee, he takes water, and then more sips from a bottle of *nam-daeng*, the red-glucose water his father has carried all morning. We return to the truck still parked in the stadium driveway, where Daeng and Wai dump bottles of ice cooled water over Ou, who lays prostrate on the tailgate. Sitting up eventually, he pours the contents of another bottle over his head. Daeng's friend Apha meets us shortly in the stadium driveway, jumping into the passenger-seat of the truck to escort us next door, onto the military base. Inside the compound, the brunch we stop for at a vendor in the shadow of the soldiers' apartments tastes fresher—eggs, *som-tam* (spicy cucumber salad), pork, sticky-rice and miso-soup—and less expensive than outside. We spend the rest of the afternoon in Apha's apartment, seven floors up. Ou naps through most of the afternoon on a mattress on the floor in the backroom as an I.V. glucose solution, hung from a wire hanger on a portable clothes-rack, drains into his right arm. Wai pays the on-site physician 300baht, confirming the same arrangement for Tum's match in Lumpinee the following week. While Ou sleeps, Apha departs, returning to his

¹ Moore (1969) notes that in traditional Thai dance performances of the Ramakien (Thai Ramayana), where such a 'ching', chime cymbal is used in a unique 7/4ths meter, the 6th beat is dampened into the 7th, such that "an abrupt hiatus of melodic and rhythmic movement frequently occurs on the circled beat" (1969:309). Recalling the off-time, syncopated motion which might accompany public dance performances and equally the entanglements of Thai boxers, Moore's description of such a musical aesthetic is interpersonally and politically suggestive. It might equally describe a 'classic' Thai interruption employed in the otherwise seamless, encircling repetition of historical revolutions (or for continuous power, the disavowal of eventful history).

post tending a firing range on base. He leaves us among his things—little luxuries and future-stuffs afforded by the military life: a television and video-game console, uniforms and ironing boards, plastic bins filled with standardized law testing guides and computer programming guidebooks. The dell laptop on a table outside the kitchen displays a desktop background of Apha, grimacing while doing bicep curls in a gym. He is pudgy and a head taller than most Thai men. Daeng recoils from the picture in mock disgust. Within the bright, clean walls of Apha’s apartment though, we are a world away from mildewed concrete, and the slow, certain, carnal pay-cycle under which Daeng has transmitted expertise to Ou over the years. This attrition of bruises, microfractures, strains and teeth-chattering percussions Daeng has taken on through the pads, and then converted to monies, accumulating the necessary bridewealth for his recent wedding. While Ou has been made prepared for Lumpinee, it is at the cost of narrowing pathways, producing a time for Daeng again as well.

I stretch out on the thin poly-plastic mats spread over linoleum, browsing *Muay-Siam*, the daily boxing paper Ou’s father has hastily discarded in the corner. The paper’s expert columnist has recommended betting on Ou’s opponent, “who is best in kicking, while Banlangngoen [Ou], has superior shape.”

When Ou finally removes his IV-drip and emerges from the apartment’s backroom, Daeng is planted on a folding chair in front of the laptop, watching a Youtube video of a performance-art piece. Caucasian bodies—a nude man and woman—run repeatedly at each other on an otherwise empty, black-curtained theatre stage. The performers’ collisions are neither erotic nor pornographic—just limbs folding, falling, colliding repeatedly, falling together, retreating paces and regathering upon each other. Ou watches over Daeng’s shoulder a moment, shakes his head in consternation, then retreats to the bathroom to piss away the excess glucose—it is like that for him every time.

Everyone showers before departing for the stadium—Wai insists I do as well. The standing shower with warm water, the bar of soap and the drain in the floor are luxuries unlike our usual arrangement at camp, where we ladle cold water from plastic barrels over our heads, washing quickly beneath hastily readjusted polyester shorts in the semi-public back-aisle between Wai's family's den and our training grounds. After warm showers at the military apartment, everyone uses talcum powder, then dons collared shirts and blue-jeans, formal wear for attending the match.

Besides eating extra meals Wai brings in and venturing out briefly to have Ou's haircut, much of the afternoon is spent resting, or on the apartment's balcony overlooking Ram-Intra neighbourhood. In the empty lots below us, birds circle piles of scaffolding and garbage, construction and waste projects alike abandoned to the encroaching foliage. Further back, across a parking lot fractured by cropping of overgrown grass sits a small temple, and then further still, where roads split unseen, a row of pastel light-green-white-blue Lumpini brand apartments rise onto the skyline. In a lot just below the edge of the balcony, tucked in front of the main road, half a dozen people congregate on the narrow band of shade beneath a corrugated tin-roof longhouse, its room numbers spray-painted across the siding. This housing for construction crews now left semi-permanent is much like that Ou's family resides in back in western Bangkok, a ground-level fixture tucked forgotten among the rows of four-floor productive concrete units. I stand against the railing, a few feet off from Wai and Daeng. We do not look directly at each other as we speak, but gaze instead over the balcony, across Bangkok.

"It's hot." Wai points down at the tin-roofed residence below us, "during the day."

"Yes." I agree quickly. I'd stayed under a similar roof for two weeks years back, in Khon Kaen—the boxers in that camp slept on slats under netting, the rooms sweating any of our excess

weight off in daylight hours. “I—”, I cut myself off. In two days time I will fly back to North America, and the distances and differences between our lives seem suddenly vast.

Contemplating these distances on the balcony, we have time to consider plans, looking out on a horizon. The horizon of a ‘life-world’, phenomenologist Husserl insisted, which

“is always already there, existing in advance for us, the “ground” of all praxis ... The world is pregiven to us, the waking, always somehow practically interested subjects, not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon.” (Husserl [1938] 1970:142.)

Such a universal pregiven Derrida questions, in his essay considering *The Force of Law: the mystical foundations of authority*. For Derrida, ‘mystical’ indicates a moment of terror and indescribable violence in the constitution of authority. And in such a disjunctive given/gift/exchange/relation, “a horizon is both the opening and the limit that defines either an infinite progress or a waiting and awaiting.” (1990: 255).² In waiting with Ou as he rehydrates, regenerating in the face of the unknown result of the evening—and in the leisurely times of boxing more generally, I am suggesting—our horizons have opened to revisit the terms of our limitations; becoming a dilation in memory. In waiting, suspending other obligations, the measured verticality of our horizons opens.

It is with the bout approaching this evening that the languidity of heavy afternoon heat marks our collective memorably. The abruptness of the irrevocable strikes Ou will delegate later must permit a release from this waiting, providing an expectant tempo to truncate historical causality for us, moving us into a present. In the time of waiting, with Thai boxing as a leisure space, as Ou rehydrates and regenerates, we already arrange the accumulation of weighted decisions in our everyday lives at arms length, seven stories above ground.

² On responsibility, reason and violence, also see Derrida ([1968]2001:130).

“Oh-hoi”, Ou’s father has come up next to us, waving one arm out over the balcony to indicate the far-side of the long-house construction forgot, muttering softly, “Look, look—look...”

In the narrow aisle of brick and corrugated tin visible to us behind the longhouse, a woman has disrobed in an open air shower. Only glimpses of her hair fallen over bare shoulders beneath the stream of water are visible from this height. The toddler who has followed her though is directly within our line of sight, standing naked in the grass, pushing against the shower-stall’s closed door. He wobbles from foot to small foot, listening for, but not seeing... his mother. She is his mother, then. The figure of the woman behind the needfulness of the child present us with contradictory imperatives. Wai and Daeng, “oh—” fall quickly silent. Another bronze-sunlit flash of the woman’s arm and shoulders: she disappears behind the grey concrete, picks the child up, then appears again on the far side of the building, now wrapped in a sheet of deep ruby-maroon and gold-yellow thread. These bright colors, embosomed, dart beneath the tin roofing yet again, finally out of view. A short minute later the wrap appears unfurled far below us, billowing from a clothes-line. All of us on the balcony, save Ou, are married men. Only weeks previously we had driven into the countryside north of Khon Kaen to celebrate Daeng’s wedding, forming a parade of regalers, taking Daeng down the pathway behind his family’s country home to the home of his childhood sweetheart, carrying gifts of money, new bedding, food and drink.

In family-run rural camps I had stayed in years earlier, northeastern Thai female boxers, *muay-ying*, participated increasingly, especially as they stood to be lucratively matched within a relatively smaller pool of foreign female boxers who came to Thailand. In competition, women still climb beneath the top rope before entering the ring, while male boxers of any age jump, or are passed, over the top rope. In Ou’s camp there are no *muay-ying*. We spend so many hours

upon hours raised up in the ring, inhabiting a homosocial world, among men without women, sequestered in camps, in towers, in trucks and in stadiums.

If Thai boxing is the leisurely compliment to the productive politics of a militarized society bent on containment via the internal, periodic destruction of healthy men, then upon what great heights, futures and alternate pasts are our gendered desires carried? Waiting in the military base or shuffling silently through the stadium, we enter a time of disconnection and boredom with status-occupations and roles, a time, beneath the immanence of contact with other men, for the very suspension of desire. This is a familiar and fraternal temporal closure, but a fraternity which may not necessarily be complicit in the gendered hierarchy of Thai political life as expressed in the Theravada Buddhist and Brahmin idiom—where women are by birth and bleeding, further from enlightenment. With its concentration of men in transitional states, the Thai boxing camp is by necessity a homosocial space, and yet, as with the absence or lack of women in these camps as well, this arrangement alone does not preclude a hierarchical, gendered violence—i.e. the ‘despotic paternalism’ Chaloeontiarana finds exercised in military coups ([1979]2007). Thai boxing camps admit the full investments and integration of so many family members—though for mothers, this is often providing food, monies or just the space for letting one’s son go. Between the men I stand with on the balcony and the toddler learning to stand, listening outside the shower below, there are commonalities. Women may be frequently absent in our worlds, though this alone does not produce a state of gendered inequality. Our viewpoint from the balcony may not necessarily reflect the gaze of the powerful—i.e the makeup of political cronies or the soteriological bent of the local Theravada cosmological hierarchy. Like the toddler listening at the door, in the space of lack, our senses give out for the grasping of new associations, desire restructuring a relative distance from each other, from grounds gendered or generalized. Often drawing on matriarchally controlled funds (cf. Bowie 2008) and representing

the households, regions and districts of their mothers, sisters, wives and friends, Thai boxers may inhabit a homosocial world, but as with our open camp, this is one which does not necessarily hold an order of gender as conditional to its existence.

After another meal, when Ou has absorbed yet another layer of C-brand boxing oil, he begins to run through his paces on the balcony, shadow boxing, raising knees, tucking his chin, throwing combinations. Through the apartment's front door, left ajar, I see Daeng interrupt Ou's routine of jabs and forward *'teep'*-kicks on the narrow balcony. Daeng holds one hand up at Ou's eye-level, at first holding his thumb and pointer-finger's tips tucked together—the Buddha's gesture for teaching (see Matics 1998).

When Ou seizes up, Daeng then points one finger directly at Ou's forehead to drive home his point, "When you move forward, forward, backward. Especially backward..." Daeng waits to see he still has Ou's attention, "then, step-step, elbow" Daeng flicks his own elbow up quick while mock-registering backwards steps. "Ok, understand?"

Ou nods, "Ok." and then turns, repeating the sequece on the balcony's straightaway.

"step-step-elbow" Daeng counts the strikes out for him, until satisfied that Ou has repeated the movement, the precise motion he will execute later that evening.

I know Ou and Daeng have drilled each combination for hours every evening in the ring, and yet, this becomes the most direct—and verbally reinforced—instance of the successful transmission of technique I will witness in Thailand. And yet, the afternoon's context in which this instance of technique was transmitted shows the cost, and efficacy of (cultural/practical) expertise is not predicated on mastery or mimicry: our management of the tension of Ou's rest and wakefulness when making weight shows that the awareness of an opportunity for technical innovation (an articulation of *techne*) involves more than simply assembling skill-sets or making representative copies of an 'earlier' original. Though Daeng had a great place to play in Ou's

success, our lives, the decrepitude of our bodies, the closures of our social horizons, the determinate bonds cemented in our hours together, allow for technical transmission where our reason (the causal relation for continually doing boxing) unravels. While the afternoon prior to Ou's match in Lumpini was unremarkable among a series of bouts Ou would have, the demands of care and rest in preparation allowed us to keep other obligations in our lives at bay. Little by little, as the repetitive time of boxing sets us in place, the telos of our lives confers through their indeterminacies, avenues and escapes: the possibility for ever-more precise movements given to the boxer we carry between us.

In the military apartment that afternoon, reminders of a life of things set in place take on a rigidity. The social differences between Daeng and Apha, friends since middle-school, now with a world of different opportunities, become pronounced. The allocation in time, the narrowness of each life given up to hours of practice, is the underside of the transmission of *techne*, both between Daeng and Ou, as well as in the broader political-aesthetic distribution the crowd will enjoy that evening. In framing Ou's learning this way, technique, or technology *is* sacrificial *by nature*. Our movements therein thus already invest an ethical ground with traumatic imperatives, striking a balance between self-other, a position of one among the many.

As we are leaving Apha's apartment, Wai and Ou's father stop at the end of the hallway to discuss Ou's upcoming match with two generals who have left their door open to the breeze. Though both men appear younger than him, Wai ends each sentence with the polite and affirmative adjunctive, '*krap*'.

For *techne* to pass, all the base, absent, (ine)qualities of our day to day lives—the opportunities in front of us we have not reached—must be collected and put aside. To truncate memory in a present that is given over to the concentration of corporeal action, is to concentrate

on delimiting the horizon of a lifeworld, a world of finite choices and limits. Ou, in a sense, is the concretization of the gestalt form of that life we do not take—he is held out among us.

It is this immanence, this promise of eventual destruction or intractable material equivalence (the days of working in construction or textiles, for example), against which all of us must differentially invest our lives; our attention; our receptivity. And where institutional structures would seem to rigidify or close over us, where our cards have been played, Ou allows for this anxiety-immanence to be held in an open state of play, where transactions (between living and dead, mobile and immobile), those exchanges required to experience innervation and life, continue. We attain and hold credit, as Ou's sacrifice in the ring pays debts into the generalized institutions we can not otherwise continue to pay ourselves.

In the quiet of the afternoon before Ou's bout, there is little to do but wait³, suspending the weight of time's passing, making us strangers to our familiar selves. There are losses, decisions, journeys and days which we can not undo. For Wai, his family's 'temporary' place in the concrete warehouse, in sewing, in muay-Thai has now comprised the bulk of his life. In the foreground of the pictures I had taken from the balcony that day, I notice now the cartilage-torn, 'cauliflower ears' both Wai and Daeng have; in other photos, I see the crosshatching of faint scars around Daeng's brows when he mock-poses for my camera between snapshots of Ou's shadowboxing. Each undoing of this sensible flesh evidences a volatile thrownness into nature, a commitment to the merits of the unknown, in the habits, twitches and traces of dead which enable us, cartilage foreclosed in rigor.

The tenor of our collective distractions from the immanence of the debts we have taken on—indentured relations of time in practice. Our actions precede 'us', continually outrunning

³ It is this waiting in time, like for those West African migrants planning journeys across the Sahara, which ushers in a space of reflection in which desire for another way of life worth living may extend interminably (see Luchte 2015).

any full knowledge of historicity or place. Just so, the training from youth onward colors our lifetime within an expectant doing. The demands of full attention muay-Thai practice places upon its practitioners lands young men a place in society often before any premeditation is possible—where we are without rice, on the last fighting-cock, without women, within the shadows and dust, under bare-bulb wattage of the concrete sowing floor. In hours jogging between the traffic, scampering with rural chickens, laughing with children we are for active moments enthralled. We are perhaps as languid as the pregnant cat Wai moves out of his family room-parking lot; like these other domestic-feral strays on our street, our desires run out through so many Thai things already wild with otherness—we attain our purchase in the time of each day. Where moreso than many other Thai men, boxers have been given out to corporeal exhaustion, they have been exposed to contact, contracted towards an exchange, given out among so many creditors of time—the king; the Buddha; the monk; the ghost—those that make history around us. Ou is to be so credit-able, to stand in balance such that those great institutions will, for a moment, be responsive to the prominence of his motion again, and even *also* to the carriers, handlers and hangers-on who have crossed the limits of these institutional jurisdictions by overseeing Ou's sacrificial transformation.

CHAPTER EIGHT: RETURN

While chapter seven explored Thai boxing in a duration of waiting, lack and wanting, the final, eighth chapter shifts gears, to consider the transmission of violent destruction and skill over time, but as time becomes concentrated in the corporeally excessive context of a countryside tournament. Describing an earlier tournament in the northeast as another instance of repetitive, ritualized executions, many of the secondary characters who have inhabited scenes of this dissertation reappear, attempting to help boxers channel their excess energies and manage corporeal damages—damages only the boxer alone can eventually handle.

For the same boxer who successfully threw his elbow in chapter one, in the rural home next to the tournament grounds, the boxers' gathering of non-contemporaneous actors and forces across class strata becomes more clearly pronounced. Ancestors, elders, spirit houses, former kings, politicians, police, parents, trainers and managers all have a hand in capturing association with, and ascribing meaning to, the excessive life and death generated in the ring. The boxer in this context more clearly plays a role in carrying the investments in these alternate times and interests to be tested in the ring.

The tournament's fetivities unfold amidst an abundance of obligations; action unfolding against the backdrop of structural-economic inequalities and the enduring patronage-relationships that mark the northeast. The repetition and return of destructive force, in this rural setting—violence which echoes the 'eventful', successful elbow strike that opened this dissertation—is foreshadowed, such that there need not be a vicious, closed, nihilistic hermeneutic circularity to proceedings, but there is a specific Thai-Theravada corporeal return on history to be.

“Coal laughs at ashes not knowing that the same fate which has befallen them will befall it. / The firewood which has been cut ready for burning, laughs at that which is being consumed. / It is the same when a man is once there, whether he has been called or whether he has come of his own free will.” (Masai Proverbs, as transcribed by A.C. Hollis in Radin [1927]2017:157.)

“It could happen to someone looking back over his life that he realized that almost all the deeper obligations he had endured in its course originated in people on whose “destructive character” everyone was agreed. He would stumble on this fact one day, perhaps by chance, and the heavier the blow it deals him, the better are his chances of picturing the destructive character.” (Benjamin [1955] 2007:301).

How does history return, with force? How do some things, events, relations come to the fore, to stay a while, while others remain buried? Amidst an order of impermanence and dilapidation in temporary constructions, by what motions do things, events, persons come to matter, inhabiting place in resonant and memorable ways? The eternal return Nietzsche composed, that “*greatest weight*” (Nietzsche 1974:273, aphorism 341)¹, among differentially considered historical matters, infinitely affirms the conditions determining life unto their inclusion in the present; an affirmation of all prior gambles—all rolled dice, all cockfights and every hand raised, moment to moment, to alter the odds of a Thai boxing match. In all of history’s chances, welcomed again, reside the terms of their alternation. As with Nietzsche’s Zarathustra dancing steps up a mountaintop, only these steps provide this determined viewpoint, a mobility in balance.

Whereas Nietzsche wrote: “live in such a way that you must desire to live again, this is your duty—you will live again in any case” (1887, quoted in Klossowski 1985:110), Thai

¹ The third book of Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* begins with Aphorism 108: “*New struggles*.- After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. -And we-we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.” (1974:167)

Buddhist teachings, on the other hand, expect a reincarnation, but with the goal of transcending life's suffering and pains (cf. Anderson 1999), "rising into a supraworldly sphere that discerns the absence of ego ... the void liberation path ... rising into the supraworldly sphere that discerns impermanence gives rise to the path that is called the signless liberation path" (Ruang/Reynolds [1345]1982:344). This cessation in *nibbana*, with no perception, no futuricity, no historicizing time or self, no material body or sign system, supports an axiom which, to alter Nietzsche's terms, seems closer to: "live in such a way that you must desire to *not* live again. This is your duty—you will *probably* live again in any case."

Where for Nietzsche, 'choice' expands through the affirmative character of the eternal return, where does the Thai Buddhist doctrine locate the grounds for choice? And how do Thai actors choose their footing on grounds made susceptible, pliable through reincarnations? As with Buddhist/Vedic ritual practices², the returning of common ethical grounds—the returning of the given—is a return sensitive to repetition. The local organization of ritual repetition, then, is crucial in composing the rate of return, for history and memory. The differences Thai boxers generate through their contact operate upon a perceptual and corporeal plane, a plane of action which is nevertheless withdrawn from the record of material-debts, from out of a history of captures and cruelties—'mutilations' upon the body, Robert Hertz (1907[1960]) would say—upon human corporeal capital writ large. Delivered into the ring, these boxers are, as Deleuze

² "Buddhist masters generally teach that our suffering comes about as a result of our undisciplined minds, and these untamed minds are the result of ignorance, craving and negative emotions. Using prostrations, Ajan Butda came up with a method to train his mind so that negative emotions, such as anger, could be dispelled or eliminated altogether. As he told his disciples, whenever he became angry, he would get up and prostrate three times. If he was angry twice, he would prostrate six times. If he was angry a hundred times, he would prostrate three hundred times, and so on until the anger was gone. This practice served to bend the mind to the Dhamma. Ajan Butda advised his disciples, "Whenever anger arises, bow to the Buddha at that very spot. Anger is afraid of the one who bows; it won't stay with you.'" (Tiyavich 2003: 77-78).

writes of ‘modern thought’, “born of the failure of representation, of the loss of identities, and of the discovery of all the forces that act under the representation of the identical” (1968: xix).

Welling up from within each step, each hesitation, each sequence of strikes, is a mode of growth in decay; a mode of unconsciously revolutionary history.

With Ou, his father; with the men and families I lived and trained with in Isan and Bangkok, a ‘return’ on the conditions of their constant bending to authority briefly surfaces. The commitment of every boxing limb thus swung is a rising, lightness—a thrownness over the massive, captured accounts of history. These motions are exhumed with an accumulation of interest in a double sense. Firstly, the interest men arrange around Ou in allowing him the conditions to train and compete across the limits of exhaustion, but more affectively, interest, on the credit Ou establishes in his repetitive continuities, transfers a surplus of value onto the debts incurred in lives lived in indebted motion. Through Thai boxing, incarnate lives move qualitatively out from under conditions of indebtedness, refiguring a continuity of life-time taken back from inert stillness. The sum uncanny nature of this movement—the sacrifices which pool value in a deathworld—finds its finite exhalation in corporeal memory intended for the delegation of damage and destruction.

Echoes in the din of the match are the tip-toe-steps of combatants from villages called to determine (political) consciousness upon the death of a king, the collapse of a market; upon the drought or flood which rolls through a village. To live Thai boxing is to live upon this distribution of the immanence of death and life. Kicking through the capturing apparatus of naturalized causality under Buddhism-animist rationale, the whiplashing edge of each boxer’s limb is a taking back of animate lifetime.

Sacrifice and Return

On *Magha Puja Day*, a public holiday said to commemorate the transmission of the Buddha's teachings to 1000 meditating disciples (e.g. Swearer 2004: 43), I travel, legs folded, in the back of a rented van with seven other men. Our driver, Wai's younger brother, taking a break from the jersey-sowing business which allows him to keep several young 'wives' working on his property, stays awake for the road with an amphetamine, only taking one sip from the whiskey bottle, the others pass around around the truck, depleting over the course of our journey. Tucked over my knees in the back seat, peering forward through the windshield, I see our driver's hands, each small finger's nail kept long, decorated today with green nailpolish, these two of ten digits, flashes of color sliding expertly against the driver's wheel. From within the rearview mirror, his gold-tinted, broad, single-lense sunglasses appear always fixed on the horizon. Guided through this interchange of gold and glass reflections, our truck dashes repeatedly over the median, racing directly towards oncoming traffic, only to briefly break the plane of symmetry and tuck back onto course. In an uncharacteristic description conveying a frustration generally absent from his measured ethnographic work, Stanley Tambiah describes Bangkok drivers as exhibiting "street machismo", an aggressiveness³ in anonymous space at odds with the etiquette bound relations in a highly stratified society (see Tambiah 1984: 228). In my limited role as passenger, it is not a game of 'chicken', testing fearlessness however, that we engage in on the road. Our driver's rapid swerving is a necessary suspension, compression and refutation of that immobility imposed by the familiar migratory route—out to Isan, then once a contract becomes available days or short weeks later, back to Bangkok again. Our driver's precise skills in turning, like those amulets Tambiah catalogues so well, steal us some time back upon the road.

³ Interrupting his study of northeast Thai forest-monk cults, Tambiah writes, "The Thai can be aggressive as hell on the roads, and they combine this with a preoccupation from danger and physical safety. ... The show of power by laymen is accompanied by a cannibalizing search for the men of piety and charisma who can confer blessings and immunities upon them" (1984: 228).

We reach our destination in seven hours instead of nine. The truck turns down a side-street off the highway and into a large gravel-and-grass front yard, rolling to a stop. We will stay here, within walking distance of the schoolyard where the tournament is to be held. Flipping side to side in the dust just in front of our truck's wheelwells is a white and grey speckled hog, snorting softly as night sets in, eyes wide, its four legs bound together. The following day, Daeng will help walk around the property gathering large red ants on the end of a stick, scraping these into the oil marinade, preparing the hog's carcass for a slow-cook basting with this extra layer of protein.

The property has three generations of Thai family dwellings. The oldest, forgotten behind the second house, is a ten-foot square room on stilts five feet off the ground, with wooden slats and thatch roof open on one side. This is now used as a granary, storing chicken feed and bags of rice. Most of the family at present has moved into the larger, newest linoleum and concrete-reinforced dwelling at the back of the property. This house features a western-style bathroom, kitchen sinks with running water and a wide-screen television set low on a shelf. With two large electrical fans sitting there, family-friends and children nap on pillows between daytime meals.

It is in the older house alongside the granary, however, that us boxers will stay for the better part of three days. I will sleep on the upper level of this wood-slat dwelling, under wooden shutters letting in wind, moonlight and sunlight, sharing a large boxspring in one corner of the room with Daeng, the younger boxers spread out below on the floor below us, holiday-weekend residents in the usually nearly vacant old house. During afternoons, the sleeping loft's air dries; the dust smells faintly of roasting cherry or cedar wood. Two upper-bedrooms, anterooms just off from the main room we all sleep in, remain empty now—their brittle flooring crackles under my footsteps in the sun's heat. I find a poster on the back of one door featuring a Euro-American couple wearing acid-washed jeans and 1980's style permed-hair, both straddling the seat of a

Harleyesque motorcycle, the caption reading ‘Stay a While’. Behind the room’s dusty mattress, beneath cabinetry sealing plastic-wrapped triangular pillows away from humidity. A beam of sunlight cutting through the shutters illuminates a large cardboard box shoved up against the shelf, its cover torn open to expose rows of canned Nestle baby-formula.⁴ Yes, on second look, it is a boxed crate of sweetened Nestle coffee creamer cannisters, left partially used and half unpacked, each of the remaining cannisters wrapped in ivory paper, an icon for any non-literate Thai-Laotians displaying a mother and baby teddybear in breastfeeding position. Abandoned here, these are the exact same cannisters Srour & Barennes (2009), among others (Barennes et al. 2016), have tried to raise in public consciousness, as cans misleadingly labelled like infant-formula, a design further responsible for misleading young Laotian/Thai mothers into forgoing breastfeeding, in some cases leading to infant-death.

Beneath this sleeping loft, the bottom floor of the abandoned house, behind is a kitchen wooden fishing-traps are mounted against the wall above wide, dried sinks. On the main floor of this house, entering through a metal gate, Ou and other boxers occupy deck furniture and dilapidated, torn and taped couches spread out on the solid, oil-flecked concrete floor. Boxers and trainers alike watch through the fuzzing lines of a box-screen television topped with an aluminum wrapped clothes’ hangar. After dusk Ou’s father lights two thick, green mosquito-coils and places them on empty cans in corners behind the television. The air fills thickly with their ash-chemical scent.

On the far side of a support beam irreparably indicating a field of privacy in shadows flipped across this main room, is a small collection of things alongside a bed for the family’s

⁴ For context on Nestle’s murderous track-record of distributing formula in South and Southeast Asia and beyond, see Campbell (1984); Van Esterik (2012) and Brady (2012), who notes, as recently as 1998, international codes preventing breastmilk substitution have been ignored in Bangkok (Brady 2012: 530).

great-great-grandfather. He disrobes silently, folding an ivory shirt to lay within a bookshelf upon which a collection of monochrome family photos, Northeastern Monks' iconic faces and a mustachioed portrait of former King Chulalongkorn, whose reign between 1868 and 1910, continued his father King Mongkut's efforts to modernize in a colonial world—a modernizing without colonization.⁵ As the television fuzzes light mutely, great-great-grandfather moves quietly on the far side of the room, slipping wraith-like beneath the veils of fine pink and beige mosquito-netting which form a canopy above his bed.

In the daytime, tracing steps like countless days before, steps regardless of the growing festivities, great-great-grandfather moves methodically around the yard, sweeping in front of the three dwellings. Children chasing each other, carrying ice-creams, then kicking a ball, run around him as he sweeps a wide worn dirt pathway in front of the yard's fourth house: the family shrine for dead ancestors. Before departing for their matches across the highway, all of us—us boxers; Nog, older among them, calls me over to include in the ceremonies—will pause in front of this shrine to either make an offering, be this an opened bottle of soda or snack, or at the very least, bow attentively.

Across the highway that evening, after watching Aek's father pouring whiskey into the corner of the bleachers, I carry the water cooler through the ringside crowd to the corner behind Aek, the best our camp's 12-year old cohort. Covered in the boxing oil we have massaged into him, and dressed in the camp robe, Aek climbs into the ring and waits for minutes leaning

⁵ “When [King] Chulalongkorn took the first step towards the gradual abolition of slavery by restricting the buying and selling of slaves in 1874, some people among the poorer sections of Thai society complained that they were no longer able to sell their children in order to pay off gambling debts and wondered when gambling might be prohibited” (Warren 2013:71). The reigning image of progressive modern Thai kingship does not erase life-debts, but transfers debt into other forms of patronage, moving the apparently archaic life-debts which resonate through familial generations into rural, spectral ancestral movements.

against the ropes, then finally slouch-sitting on the corner-stool, peering through the ropes, expecting the gathered crowd to part, looking for an opponent who ultimately never arrives.

A few bouts later, Aek's slightly smaller sparring partner, an easy-smiling eleven year old less consistently prodded through our camp's clinchwork routines, is finally matched here in Sisaket, much to the pleasure of his paternal grandmother, she who spits an endless steam of dark red betel-nut phlegm and dirty jokes around our backlot ring in Bangkok, collecting weekly monies from the men, organizing betting on English premiership soccer. In the ring in Sisaket, her grandson finds himself quickly outmaneuvered, backing into his corner under a pepper of jabs, slouching away from knees, then simply cowering against the lower ropes until the referee intervenes, hands waving the match off. The entire sequence, from the opening bell to the referee's rescue, lasts about fifteen seconds. I had been concerned when I had noticed his sinew-muscled opponent preparing under spotlights in the ring, *that* ten year old, already whip-snapping his ankles one after the other, rotating his hips-to-kick while waiting, stretching his shoulders across the top ropes, then bouncing back like an old pro, finding all degrees of torque coiled through his anatomy. The mismatch was complete, the match decided long before any bell rang.

Before Ou's turn to fight in Sisaket, Sebu walks across the ringside stage, climbing into the ring with a microphone, joining other local sponsors, men twice his age, a number with hands clasped against their belts, propping belly-fat up. Sebu addresses the crowd on behalf of his co-sponsors, representatives, many of whom will recline during bouts on plush chairs on the elevated platform built along one side of the ring. Sebu thanks "the BAAC {Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives} in Wanghin district, Sisaket province. Member of Provincial Parliament, Wootidech Thongpoon and [himself,] Sebu P-Napat. The tournament's other major sponsors include the well-known promoter Soon Kiatpetch, the Wanghin District Police Chief,

Nakhon Wanghin Watsadu Co. [a concrete and cement-mixing manufacturer], and Nok Pak Hang Fertilizer Company.” Sebu’s speech momentarily affixes the production of concrete to Ou’s thin, gleaming limbs under the lights. All of Ou’s elusive slippages in training, the qualities of our being exhausted daily, have for the moment been converted to symbolic capital for Agricultral investments, and a multinational blanket of heat-absorbent concrete being poured over the surface of the earth.

Following Sebu’s announcements, Ou is decorated briefly, with those golden garlands reserved for corpses or sacrilized statues hung over his shoulders. He poses for cameras wearing these garlands before and after the hard-fought five rounds he wins by decision. Wai’s brother, his fingernails clicking over a wad of bills, prompts me for cash prior to Ou’s match. He is pooling bets from supporters of our boxers to be levied against an equal pool of cash organized in the opponents’ corner. This is the first and last time I bet—500 baht—on muay Thai. Nog finds me in the crowd just after the winnings have been distributed. I have already given half of my doubled investment to Ou’s father, and then bought two beers for our acquaintances with the rest of the money. In the din of the crowd, I trail off trying to tell Nog it does not feel right that I... I have money I have not won—money Ou had worked to win.

Nog pauses, and then says plainly, directly into my ear, ‘Yes, it is not good. Not good. ... I never gamble. Boxers don’t gamble.’” Nog, like the others I trained with, executes competition outside of the hierarchies and monetary distributions, outside those great pools of credible merit collected by those gambling. Nog instead resets the entire field of karmic mobility by throwing kicks, punches, knees. I remember him leaping, knees flying during the fourth of fifth rounds of his matches, a burst of energy which surprised opponents and crowds alike.

It is a little after 2am when we cross over the strip of highway next to the tournament grounds, the roadway illuminated beneath rows of long fluorescent bulbs hung vertically, a

luminescence which has announced the tournament's festivities to drivers miles in advance.

Back at the family property, Wai, Dom and most of the other men take the rented van and trucks out to drink, feast and karaoke until morning while I stay behind, waiting to catch a ride with Nog's father further on into Isan. After tournaments lasting into the middle of the night, it has not been unusual for the whole camp to stop directly at late-night diners for noodles, alcohol and pork or chicken—a meal consumed by all, when our boxers have not fallen completely asleep.

Waiting on Nog's father to arrive, I remain on the property with Ou, his father and our trainer Daeng. With Aek and the cohort of younger boxers already asleep in the nonsynchronous garage-home behind us, we crouch around a fire set in dirt and trampled dry grass a few steps from the house's front entrance, a sliding metal-lattice gate, the padlock unlocked for tonight. Holding hands out to the fire for heat to insulate against the northeast's cool season, Daeng and Ou's father take turns feeding scrap lumber and the dry ends of long, dropped branches into the low-burning coals between us. Their efforts are not so deliberate so as to generate a large bonfire, but with the miscellany of kindling—snapped crates, cardboard and half-burnt branches found readily discarded in the yard—with minimal effort, they maintain a low-lying heat which laps at the air between us.

At first I squat, armpits over knees, hunching over the flames, but I eventually collapse to sit, folding my rude feet under me, settling in the damp, cold grass next to Ou. Though he did not cross the highway to wander among the crowd gathered at the tournament, great-great-grandfather is, in the dead of night, now awake and outside with us, sitting back in the dirt across the fire from Ou and I, one countenance among a circle of shadows. Watching Ou, eyes glinting, his grin is all exposed gums, but for the elongated roots of two remaining lower teeth stained maroon-brown with betel-nut.

I point to the swelling on Ou's shins. "Does it hurt?" is rhetorical; I am checking if he is responsive.

"No." Ou shrugs next to me, "I don't think. Not thinking." With the pads of his thumb and forefingers, he gingerly traces a bruise welling up between his eyebrows, stretching his neck side to side and loosening his jaw, gently rocking the front of his face upon the welt forming under his fingertips.

It would be better had the skin been opened up, except that this time, the bruising strike holds, exerting a pressure crushing tissue dead, encroaching, re-mem-bering for a return.

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