
Travel Broadens the Mind or Making the Strange Familiar

The Story of a Visiting Academic

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This article tells an autoethnographic story of the ways in which a specific tourist experience—visiting a “girlie” bar in Bangkok—led me to reflect afresh on themes, issues, and concerns that have always been central to my work as a researcher and academic, namely, storying lives, autobiography and/or biography, identities and careers, giving voice, Othering, representation, social justice, and making the familiar strange. Most of all, however, the experience strengthened my commitment to the need to recognize the way in which the strange is familiar and to “acknowledge how much ‘out there’ is like, ‘in here’” (Neumann, 1996, p. 182).

Keywords: *narrative; autoethnography; othering; identity; sex tourism*

Tourism is a place for critiquing daily life.

—Neumann (1992, p. 177)

As people assign meaning and significance to their travel experiences, they reveal how culture and identity become incorporated through travel, the kinds of selves people find and lose when away from home, how identities are made as people confront others, and the peculiar and paradoxical ways that everyday life reappears as people seek to escape in their journeys.

—Neumann (1992, p. 178)

Author's Note: We visited Bangkok in November 2004. The tsunami that struck Thailand on December 26, 2004, may well lead to more women entering the sex trade as there will be a greater number of orphans and vulnerable girls at risk of trafficking. Loss of homes and incomes is also likely to cause more people turning to such work in the absence of other sources of income (see Brown, 2000, on the impact of disasters on the sex trade).

Findings from research should be based on “concrete human history or experience, not on donnish abstractions or on obscure laws or arbitrary systems.”

—Said (1995, pp. 238-239)

Out of the air-conditioned frigidity, calm, and cleanliness of the hotel and straight into the sensuous heat, humidity, and dark of the night. We breathe in the gorgeous heavy scent of the flowers and trees in the hotel gardens then, abruptly, are overwhelmed by the fumes from the cars, motorcycles, *tuk tuks*¹ and lorries nose to tail on the road outside. Horns honk, engines roar, bikes backfire, and there’s noise of welding and hammering from the construction work seemingly going on everywhere. It’s midnight and our plane got in three quarters of an hour ago. We left New Zealand 15 hours ago, and the time difference means we’ve lost 6 of those, but at least Martyn, my friend who had worked in Bangkok, was right when he said the hotel was luxurious and close to the night life. Five minutes walk and we’d be there.

Bangkok’s nightlife grabbed the world’s attention in the 70s with the rise to fame of . . . the infamous Patpong . . . There is no point in denying that the world famous Patpong has toned down its raunchy image quite a bit over the years. The daily night market held in front of the many a-go-go bars has turned the naughty street into a tourist attraction with mass appeal. (Teleinfo Media Co., 2004, pp. 84-88)

Stalls on stalls selling silk garments, watches, batik, bags. The smell of sweat and deodorant and of frying spicy and sweet foods. A crush of people making it impossible to walk more than a couple of steps at a time. Bodies pressed so close you can feel their warmth, keeping you upright when you stumble over the cracks and pits in the sidewalk. Skinny, mangy looking, panting dogs lying under trestles heaped with merchandise: brushing past your legs as they go to scavenge in the gutters. Men sidle alongside and whisper to HT “Want sex DVD, video?” “What did he want? What did he say?” I shout, trying to be heard above the general clatter. It’s different, exciting, like nowhere else I’ve ever been. Although we’re tempted to stop, take in the atmosphere, linger and look at the goods, we’re going shopping tomorrow with a Thai friend of Martyn’s whom, we’ve been told, will be able to get us a good deal and, for now, we want some live action. But where to go? Martyn said not to pay to go in anywhere and not to go upstairs: that you could get the atmosphere and the sights for free. So we say no thank you to the men who are constantly accosting us as we walk down the street, with the invitation to “come upstairs, come upstairs, see good live fuckie, fuckie show.”

The clubs with girls gyrating in bikinis are generally quite harmless, but one has to be a little more careful with the venues offering “special shows.” These are generally located on the upper floor and stories abound with outrageous bills and doors blocked by muscled bouncers. As a rule, one should avoid bars touting “free” sex shows as there are bound to be hidden charges of an unpleasant nature. (Teleinfo Media Co., 2004, pp. 84-88)

The street is crowded, and it feels a bit scary. Girls in skimpy tops and tiny miniskirts lounge around doorways. “Come in, come in. I loved you long time mister.” We hold hands tightly. How do you choose which bar to go into? How do you know where’s safe? I am uncertain now that I want to be here. I’m apprehensive and excited at the same time and very conscious that I’m doing something that I really shouldn’t be doing. I’m a Catholic, a campaigner for social justice, a woman and a sister; and the beliefs and values that I hold and that are rooted in these identities make me feel uncomfortable, ashamed, and hypocritical for being in this place. Our quest in itself makes me guilty as accused and in my feelings. But I’m not returning to the hotel now: My sociological and sexual curiosities have tipped the balance of ambivalence. My justification is that ignorance is not necessarily bliss and that because I’ve got so far and am already experiencing the guilt, I might as well proceed.

Men thrust pieces of paper at HT. These all seem to be the same and consist of numbered lists headed “*Pussy Pussy*” and go on to detail, “1. Banana, 2. Ping Pong, 3. Coca Cola, 4. Flowers, 5. Candles, 6. Balloons, 7. Hoopla, 8. Cigarette . . . 17. Razor Blades, 18. Goldfish, 19. Girl on Girl, 20. Girl on Man.” We keep saying “no thank you,” which sometimes elicits something along the lines of, “You don’t want girl? You want boy? I take you to boy show now?”

We carry on walking, not knowing where we’re going but anticipating arriving some place where we’ll find whatever it is we’re seeking. I’m not entirely sure what that is but then a guy starts walking alongside us. “You want to see live sex show? You come with me. Good place I know. Not expensive.” “Oh what the hell” says HT, “we might as well, don’t you think? We don’t know where to go on our own. Let’s get it over with.” “I s’pose so, but don’t forget what Martyn said, that we shouldn’t pay to go in anywhere.”

We follow the man who takes us down the street, round a corner, past food vendors tending vast pots of boiling oil and of water perched precariously on miniature burners. Delicious smells. Maybe we’ll eat later? Our man’s walking quickly, and we trot along behind, keeping firm hold on each other. In the dirt, beneath a drinks stall, I catch sight of a scraggy cat, suckling 5 blind newborn kittens. I think of my children and how they would go “Ahhh” at the

sight. Suddenly the guy turns in toward the buildings, weaves between two stalls, leads us up some steps—not quite upstairs but not on the level either—and in a side door to a dark, enclosed landing where we can just discern three or four men standing around a table with a cash box on it, talking to each other. It's like something out of a film. What am I doing here? "Hello. Welcome. Three Thousand Baht each to go in and a free drink." "No" I say to HT, "that's far too much. We shouldn't pay anything, and we shouldn't have come upstairs." I turn to go. "She says it's too much" says HT, using my excuse. "One Thousand Baht then." "For two?" "Yes." "What do you think? We're here now, we might as well" I acquiesce, and we hand over the cash. "I want tip" pipes up our guide. "I'm sorry I haven't got any small money" says HT, as one of the men opens a door behind the table and shepherds us in.

Before I left England, Amy, one of my Australian doctoral students had talked about visiting girlie bars in Bangkok and had said you have to go once to see what it's all about. I thought about her words as we stepped over the threshold. Why? For some sort of permission? Validation? Proof that others have lived to tell the tale? Evidence that "ordinary" people go to such places? I'm nervous because I have little idea of what I'm going to find, of how I will feel about it, or of how I will respond. I suppose I'm worried because of what my reactions might tell me about myself. Will there be "truths" that I don't want to hear? I think I'm reluctant to be faced with evidence of prudishness or prurience, let alone of complicity in exploitation.

The first impression is of darkness and loud music. The small room is dominated by a stage area on which there are a number of poles, running from floor to ceiling, clutched by around half a dozen women who are wearing bikinis, desultorily giving their hips an occasional wiggle and looking as bored, distracted, and some place else as a class of teenagers in the last lesson on a wet Friday.

When I find myself in a situation where I feel uncomfortable, it is occurring because of the meanings I attach to events. When I start to become startled or alarmed, I switch off all data input. I stop interpreting the meanings for events. This insulates my "self" from the outside world of meaning. I use this strategy on stage, during the sale of table dances and during table dances themselves. (Ronai, quoted in Ellis, 1991, p. 136)

As we're led to a table close to the stage by a middle-aged woman in a smart, navy business suit, I notice that the audience is largely made up of couples seated at the 10 or so tables and on the banquettes around the walls. People like us? Here for a bit of naughtiness?

We order our “free” drinks and, with HT now resting his arm over my thighs, turn our attention to the women. All of them are Asian and most are very slightly built.

I am not bothered when a story borders on the pornographic because, as Laurie Stone says “perhaps every story worth telling . . . is a dare, a kind of pornography, composed of whatever we think we’re not supposed to say, for fear of being drummed out, found out, pointed out (1997, p. xvii). To a certain extent, we have to work to overcome our conditioned fears of erotic knowledge. (Bochner, 2002, p. 263)

Tiny little waists, flat stomachs, slim hips and neat, rounded “pert” breasts. Some have pierced navels, and one beautiful young girl with a wonderful lithe body and a lovely face, has a magnificent dragon tattoo that starts at her knee, snakes up her leg and sprawls over her belly. She’s exceptionally fine looking, at least I think she is, and I’m enjoying the sight. The others, while definitely attractive, are more representative of the general range of appearance, and there’s one young woman who is positively plump and lacking the firm muscle tone of her colleagues. “Look at her! She’s a big girl!” says HT, and I snap back with a “Good. I’m pleased to see her. That’s as it should be.” My response is a daft mixture of “fat is a feminist issue,” “not everybody is perfect,” “sisterly solidarity” and “I’m surprised too.” HT is taken aback by my vehemence, and so am I. I’m discombobulated in this setting. I don’t know what to say, how to react, what to think, how to present. I don’t want to seem to be buying into the Westernized, capitalistic, commodified, hegemonic, patriarchal, and idealized notions of beauty that I know do color and shape my own perceptions. I think my reply was meant as a challenge and to demonstrate that “I may be here but I’m not like the rest of the audience. My interest is in the woman, not the body. I don’t see these women as sex objects.” But I’m not sure if that is indeed the case, else why am I here?

I turn my attention to the stage. The girls aren’t really doing anything much more than standing round, occasionally toying with the top of their pants, flicking their hair back and shifting their weight from one leg to the other. Some are wearing stilettos, but most have on pastel colored ankle socks that look as if they belong at a preteen pajama party rather than a sex show. One woman moves center stage and undoes the ribbon at the side of her pants, retying it around her leg, like a garter. She lies down on the floor, raises her knees, puts her hands between her legs, then starts to burst balloons tied to the ceiling with something (tiny darts?) propelled by a pea-shooter from her vagina. Another girl brings a balloon to HT and gets him to hold it up.

Poof. She gets it in one. We laugh. The audience applauds. They seem to be congratulating HT for his bravado and complicity rather than the skill of the act. He whispers, "Thank God I got that right!" The marksman stands up, replaces her garment, and climbs down from the stage. This is the pattern of the entertainment. Girls stand around for a while, someone comes forward, removes her pants and does what can best be described as a "trick" with her vaginal muscles. Although these tricks are undoubtedly impressive displays of pelvic floor control that would gladden any incontinence advisor's heart, we don't find them in any way erotic. Judging from other people's expressions, neither do they. I imagine that quite a few of the women in the audience are speculating, as I am, on whether they "could do that," but again, I suspect, the emphasis is on the physical accomplishment of a particular skill rather than anything to do with sex and sexuality.

The bar and the staff room are just behind us, and the girls come in and out, chatting and giggling together, while they're between sets. As soon as they leave the stage, they get into animated conversation with each other and their faces light up. It's as if there's a cross-over point somewhere on the steps where the women slip into a distant and distanced mode, although, there are times when, out on stage they do occasionally share a joke, smiles break out, and everything shifts up a gear. Sometimes too, they appear to be taking a professional interest in one of their colleagues' turns and clap and pat her on the back when she's finished. The lass who took in clear fluid from one container then appeared to fill a Coca Cola bottle with brown liquid came in for particular praise. When she exited the stage, she tripped and bumped into me, her sequin clad breasts pressing against my shoulder. She apologizes, and we smile and laugh. Nice girl! "Lucky you" says HT, "I can see you're doing your sociologist thing, taking everything in." I am: partly because that's what I always do but I'm also using it as a coping strategy, as a way of detaching me my "self" from this situation. Being here in a professional sense seems to give legitimacy to my presence. I'm a "scientific," "objective" observer, here for a proper purpose with the task of documenting and analyzing what I'm seeing. I'm not just a sad and sordid voyeur after titillation. How odd that I should be taking refuge in identities I usually repudiate! But they give me no more comfort and I don't know how to respond to HT who is clearly as anxious as I am with the added "responsibility" of being a man in a place like this set-up, primarily, for male entertainment. He casts me sideways glances, checking out my disapproval. He makes comments to let me know he isn't being turned on: "I haven't seen anything here that is anywhere as good as what I get at home." We both fear my potential jealousy and its consequences for our relationship. Also, if I'm honest, I am, irrationally, angry with him for being a man. But

then I'm just as culpable because I was as keen to come as he was. I'm angry with myself, for being here, for how I'm feeling.

For a moment I hate him for being what he is, for facilitating the existence of this place. I next turn the hate in on myself, the hypocrite. How easily I judge these characters when I'm here too. (Ronai, 1992, p. 105)

"I'm going to have another beer. Do you want one?" "No thanks, I'm fine." Having been warned that the prices of drinks in these bars could be extortionate and that you needed to watch your tab carefully, we'd been pleasantly surprised when we saw the tariff card on the table. HT looks round and raises his hand. The lady who'd originally taken us to our table comes over and takes the order. She's the bar's *Mama-san*, the person in charge of the girls, coordinating their activities, teaching them their acts, choreographing the show, and collecting the "bar-fines" if they go off and spend time with a punter. When she returns with the beer she sits down beside me, touches my hair and caresses my cheek. Amy had warned me that the women are "all over you" so I wasn't entirely surprised. She asks me where we're from and which hotel we're staying in. When I tell her she says, "very nice hotel. I was there last night." She sees HT's hand on my thigh, points to it and nods approval, "very good. He likes that. He do good." From the way in which she says this, from her body language and demeanor and because of the setting we're in, I take the comment to refer to my lover's sexual prowess, and I smile and nod to denote agreement. Despite a confusing desire to have the *Mama-san* recognize me as sexually experienced and confident, I'm feeling quite uneasy. HT picks up on this and moves his chair closer to me. "What's she saying? Is she asking to come back?" "I don't think so." My new friend continues to stroke my face and hair but I can see that, at the same time, she is observing the room, watching the girls who are interacting with customers and keeping an eye on what's going on on the stage. She points to a serene-faced, lithe, leggy girl in a sequined bikini who is languidly draped around a pole. "She's my step sister. Same father, different mother. I look after her. She does Thai massage, no do bang bang." "She's very pretty," "Yes, but she no do bang bang. Not at all. Do you have kids?" I tell her yes, and she compliments HT on his virility. It's too complicated to explain our children are with previous partners. I ask her whether she's a mother. "I have a daughter. She's 9. She lives in the village. Not here in Bangkok." "Will she come and work here one day?" "No, no, no. She go to university. Clever girl. Not like her mamma." I demur, as we do when another woman puts herself down.

At the table next to ours is a party comprising a couple, the man with his arm round the woman's shoulder, and another man who appears to have

bought a drink for the cuddly girl we had commented on earlier. She's sitting on his knee and is playing up to him, laughing, smiling and talking, giving him all her attention. On the stage, a girl is just finishing a trick with three ping-pong balls. Her closing shot is to stand up, come to the edge of the stage and give the guy holding the girl one of the balls that she clearly intends him to insert. He does this, slowly, stroking his fingers over her in what is possibly the only halfway sensuous movement of the evening. The *Mama-san* watches this gesture with a little frown. I find out later that direct display of genitals is illegal—and that the police conduct covert surveillance. All accounts suggest that the past 10 years have seen a serious tightening up of the laws relating to the bars in Bangkok and that the sex trade is policed far more vigorously than was previously the case. Obviously, no one wants a fine or, more seriously, to be closed down.

"You want me come back with you? I can come back to hotel. Nice place. It will be ok if you want." "No thank you. It's been nice talking to you." "Ok, no problem. Nice to talk to you too. Look after mister. I can tell he like bang bang and you are a sexy lady. Give him good time. Here's a free pass to my bar. Come again tomorrow." My friend got up from the table, stroked my cheek one last time, ruffled HT's hair as she passed by him and went behind the bar where she began tidying up. And so went my first experience of being solicited. "She asked to come back" I tell HT. "I thought she would."

People are starting to leave, and the activity on the stage is now minimal. The girls are looking at their watches and yawning. "Shall we go?" "I think so." We get up and walk to the door. "Bye bye" chorus a couple of women from the stage. Out on the landing the men are still sitting round, talking. "Good night. Come again. See you tomorrow."

Out of the air conditioning, the heat is overpowering. The streets are just as crowded as earlier in the evening, and music continues to blast out from the open bar doorways. Most of the stall holders are packing up their stock, but men still thrust their bills of pussy fayre in front of our eyes. "You want to see late show?"

"Well?" asks HT? "What did you make of that?" And we begin to talk in a conversation that lasts for hours and to which we will constantly return. Trying to articulate, or rather attempting to make sense of our feelings about, the experience is not easy. We are agreed that we have not had an evening of eroticism. What we saw just wasn't sexy, and I realize that, even if it had been, for me at least, the sense of implication in the existence of these places and the exploitation of the people involved would have been as strong and painful. Maybe, on reflection, it would have been even more disturbing because it would have meant that I was "getting off" on other folk's misfortune. If people like us didn't patronize the bars there wouldn't be any demand, and lives

would not be blighted or lost through degradation and disease, would they? “Relief agencies estimate that 40% of Thai prostitutes are HIV+, many of them girls who customers believe are less likely than more sexually experienced women to carry the virus” (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 115). And then, is it not the case that Thai people, Buddhist people are shy and modest? How can the sex trade be compatible with that?

Despite the reputation of the country for a thriving sex industry, the majority of the population is actually fairly conservative when it comes to body consciousness. A modest way of dressing will gain you more friends than baring your flesh. (Teleinfo Media Co., 2004, p. 29)

But there was a little shrine with lighted votive candles and fresh lotus flower offerings on a shelf behind the bar. What does the Buddha say about all this? Well, some Buddhist interpreters of sacred texts say that women have been incarnated as women because of bad karma. Caring for parents accrues religious merit and makes it more likely that a woman will be reborn as a man. Earning money for sex to help the family has been identified as a powerful incentive precipitating Thai women into prostitution (see Muecke, 1992).

My view is that most women would not do sex work if they could do anything else that would bring in the same money. I know that there are exceptions and that there is an elite group of prostitutes, usually well-educated, middle-class, capable, and astute women who have chosen their profession because they can make substantial sums, and they find the work, at the least, congenial (see Anonymous, 2005; Hickman, 2004; Millet, 2003). But I suspect that, particularly in a third-world country, prostitution is simply the best, if not the only, way for a lot of women to make a living, if not a relatively large amount of money. It’s a career option. But is it a “choice”? Even if pimps and gangsters, kidnap and coercion are not involved? Enjoying your work doesn’t come in to it for the majority of girls. Does it?

A number of customers honestly believe that prostitutes enjoy their work. Perhaps a few do and for some it is a nightmare. But from what I can gather, most seasoned women just find it rather repetitious. Those clients who have been impressed by the responsiveness of their purchased sex partners are forgetting the economic foundations of the sex business. Simply: men who make return visits are those whose egos have been massaged along with their penises. For women who are in need of money it is very bad business to remain unmoved by the man who pays the cash . . . The sex workers who survive and prosper are the most highly accomplished actresses. (Brown, 2000, p. 140)

I get angry with HT for a story he'd told earlier about an acquaintance who had visited Bangkok and paid two prostitutes for a night of sex. The young man's account had made it sound as if a good fun time had been enjoyed by all, and HT had asked him if the women had had orgasms. The reply had been that the lad had no idea. It was possible. They'd moaned and groaned. HT said he'd been shocked by this answer because, to him, it displayed a lack of concern and an unattractive take on sexual activity. My view was how could he be so naïve as to think that anything other than a commercial exchange had taken place or that it was likely that the women would come? Was this male delusional fantasy? Or an example of exploitation of the punters who are being sold those fantasies?:

STARS LIGHT

Variety of amazing fantasy shows.

Full service of traditional Thai oil and body
massage with smart guy and cool beautiful lady.

Please call me any time. "Be my guest."
If you are happy we also happy.

ORIENTAL ELITE: A Class of its own

We have the pleasure to feature a fine selection of
entertainment of high quality and superior service.

With us: you will feel comfortable and
confident you will certainly find your desire
you can make your dream come true.

(TeleinfoMedia Co., 2004, adverts in the Yellow Pages)

How can these women be content with what they do? But on what grounds can I make a judgment? Maybe some of them do "enjoy" their work: They might even have orgasms. Perhaps there are those for whom it is more than the means to make a living.

The fleshy young woman with her unnaturally white, soft skin and mica glinting eyes reminded Siegl of prostitutes he'd seen in Prague a few years before.

Very young, often slightly plump, glamorously made up, sulky, perhaps tired, yet childlike in a kind of stubborn innocence. He'd seen such girls off duty, so to speak, sitting in bistros with their lovers or pimps, and had wondered at their lives. He hadn't known whether to pity them, or feel outrage or even uneasiness on their account. Did they resent their lives? Were other lives available to them? What right has an American observer to feel pity, even sympathy, for them, if they don't feel this way about themselves? (Oates, 2004, p. 196)

It is very difficult for an outsider, living the comfortable life of a middle-class academic in a developing country, to criticise the decisions of a family living in destitution *to sell or allow their daughter to go into prostitution*. (Brown, 2000, p. 169)

We had come to Thailand on our way back from New Zealand where I had spent a fortnight as visiting scholar at a university. The stopover in Bangkok was scheduled as the final treat of what had turned out to be a wonderful, and professionally successful, trip.

When the invitation to visit the Antipodes had been issued I'd been anxious and apprehensive lest I not prove to be "value for money." Having worked with students from overseas and in ex-colonial countries before, I also had some concerns about the applicability and appropriateness of my (Anglocentric) experience and perspectives to and in other settings. Of course, I did my homework and found out as much as I could about the contexts I was going into and about the traditions and customs, beliefs, and values of the various groups of people I would be working with. I did not want to cause offense of any kind. Nor did I want to do anything that could be seen to denote any assumption of cultural superiority.

The work that I was asked to do primarily focused on my current research on developing a research culture, academic identities, and encouraging neophyte researchers (see Sikes, 2005b). In addition, I also presented a number of papers based on projects I'd previously been involved in. One of these papers was about how female teachers of religious education working in English secondary schools used clothes and hairstyles to challenge stereotypical assumptions about them as women as sexual beings and as women with an interest in religion because they felt these stereotypes had negative implications for how their students engaged with the subject (see Sikes & Everington, 2003). Another paper concerned issues of representation and "Othering" encountered when writing about a school for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties (see Sikes, 2005a).

Like Laurel Richardson (2000) I found that writing about experiences often helps me to make sense of them. After the evening in the Side Line Bar, I felt compelled to write: to explore what had happened through words on

paper. The compulsion was overwhelming, I didn't feel that I had any choice but to write, even though there were other things I was committed to and which had deadlines attached. I had to write: not out of any desire to say "look where I've been," commit "vanity ethnography" (Maynard, 1993, p. 329) and indulge in what Michael Apple (1996) suggested is a danger of personal narrative writing, namely, "privileging the white middle-class woman or man's need for self-display above all else" (p. xiv). I felt like Melanie Walker and Elaine Unterhalter (2004) that "in excavating (*my*) own subjectivity, the point (*was*) not to produce research as therapy or stories for their own sake, but a disciplined and reflexive understanding of the known and the knower" (p. 290).

To my mind, there was an immediate and intimate connection between my experience of being a visiting scholar overseas in an unfamiliar setting and my concerns that I should be seen to be worth the expense of bringing me there; the specific work I'd been doing and talking about as it related to women, sex, and Othering; being an academic and doing research in a more general sense; and the thoughts and feelings that had been prompted by my trip to the sex bar. In some way, it also seemed to me that, what I began to think of as "the Bangkok paper" would bring together the themes, issues, and concerns that were, and that had always been, central to my academic work. Namely

- storying lives
- autobiography and/or biography
- identities and careers
- giving voice
- Othering
- representation
- social justice
- making the familiar strange
- recognizing the way in which the strange is familiar and "acknowledging how much 'out there' is like, 'in here'" (Neumann, 1996, p. 182).

I saw all of the above to be embedded within my Side Line Bar experience and felt that researching that experience and reflecting, reflexively on it, could help me to informed understandings that might profit my work in the future.

Returning to England, I did some research on the Internet. I wanted to find out what I could about sex tourism in Thailand, generally, and the girlie bars of Bangkok, in particular, and I was astounded by the quantity and the nature of the material that my searches generated. As well as relatively straightforward information about accommodation; transport; where to go for various types of bars, entertainment. and prostitutes; what you might expect to pay

for particular services; laws relating to sex; the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases; etc., there were also lots of sites containing what could best be described as anthropological and ethnographic writing. While the specific content and quality of these varied, it was usual to find histories and cultural accounts of sexual mores, values, and behaviors in Thailand, with explanations of the role and place of Buddhism in influencing and regulating attitudes. A common theme was the way in which *farangs* (foreigners) are (stereotypically?) viewed by Thai and the misunderstandings that can arise because of different cultural conceptualizations of “love,” and there were many accounts written (or which purported to be written) by, Thai women or European men telling sad stories of disappointment (e.g., the frequently appearing *Story of Noi*, n.d.). Yet, on the other hand, there were tales of true requited love and happy marriages. There were also quite a lot of references to, and excerpts from, serious journalism and academic studies dealing with Thai bar girls and sex tourism (e.g., Bishop & Robinson, 1998; Brown, 2000; Seabrook, 1997; Truong, 1990). Most frequently cited and quoted was Richard Ehrlich and Dave Walker’s (2002) *“Hello My Big, Big Honey”*: *Letters to Bangkok Bar Girls and Their Revealing Interviews* with a forward by Dr. Yos Santasombat, associate professor of sociology and anthropology at Thammasat University and research director of the Local Development Institute of Bangkok’s Department of Medical Science, in which he explains that,

there is a marked difference between the Western conception of prostitution, and the open-ended prostitution in Patpong or Pattaya. Because in the West, you see prostitution as an occupation. You go to them directly and then you strike a deal, and then you go straight to business.

But in Thailand, the girls don’t usually talk about the price at first. They would try to establish rapport first. We’re not talking about a piecemeal type of relationship that describes other forms of prostitution in the West. In the cases here, the Thai girls themselves are prepared to extend their relationship for a number of days or weeks or even years. Sometimes the farang (foreigner usually from West) himself ends up spending the entire vacation with one girl and sometimes he comes back. Sometimes she becomes his mistress or even a wife.

I think in most cases, the girls enter into the relationship from a strictly pecuniary motivation. The girl will attach herself to a client or a farang more permanently if she finds the relationship enjoyable. Those are the cases I find most interesting in open-ended prostitution in Thailand.

Once the relationship is extended, the girls’ involvement with the farang often gradually changes. Her stay with the man is usually conditioned upon his readiness to support her or to take care of her financially. The line between money and love becomes very fuzzy, because the money itself cannot be distin-

guished between signs of affection, tender caring and love itself. Mutual or material dependence frequently engenders some sort of an emotional attachment on the part of the girl herself.

So, what starts out as a money-orientated transactional arrangement becomes a mixed involvement, a more complicated relationship. In extreme cases it becomes even possible that the attachment comes from pure emotion. It somehow gradually detaches itself from the material aspects or the money. And in prolonged cases, open-ended prostitution can be characterized as an ambiguous compliment of love and money.

In the West, we talk about love and money as mutually exclusive. I don't think the same is true in open-ended prostitution here. The two cannot be separated or distinguished. It is much more complex in this regard. (n.p.)

Similar explanations were given on many of the other sites I came across, and I started to wonder what these sites were about? Who were they for? Who had produced them? There was nothing obviously pornographic about them, and they required serious reading. First thoughts were of surprise. What on earth would the "average" male interested in sex and/or relationships with Thai women make of them? But then, I began to think about the notion of the "average" or, more accurately, stereotypical, "dirty old" man I had in mind. As someone who now had an experience and an identity as a sex tourist myself, I should have known better, especially as it was me who was hitting these sites and seeking out the information they carried. I was doing this in my identities as a researcher and academic planning to write a story about a visit to a girlie bar. I should not have assumed or presumed I knew who the sites were for. I had my reasons for visiting them. Others clearly had theirs, as did the people who had originally written and/or posted them.

Trivial though it sounds, coming to this awareness was salutary in that it made me reflect anew on the process of doing research. Although it is not an original conceptualization (see, for instance, Rabinow, 1977), I had come to see *travel* as a thought-provoking metaphor for research. Thus, I had come to the topic of girlie bars through personal experience. In more ways than one, it bore "an intimate relationship to (*my*) life" (Oakley, 1959/1979, p. 4), and in pursuing it I was following C. Wright Mills's (1959/1970) injunction to use the sociological imagination in such a way that "the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues" (pp. 11-12). In other words, I was looking at my experience (the personal) of the social "ill" of sex tourism (the public). When it came to researching "the literature," I was reminded afresh of the excitement that comes with finding out about an area that previously I knew little or nothing about. In addition the business of seeking out and finding information via the Web highlighted issues on inter-

rogating material I was going to treat as “data”: in particular, in questioning the nature and origins of its production, and in examining and analyzing the discourses it used. Then there were the decisions around how to write and represent work that is presented as social research. I chose a narrative, messy, multilayered style. I wanted to convey my feelings and emotions, to evoke a sense of feel and place (Sikes, 2005a) and to locate my experiences within the broader social context provided by what other people had to say about the topic. Personal narrative interspersed with extracts from various types of text seemed to be an appropriate way of doing this.

“To use life stories could be considered risky, embarrassing and tasteless” (Berger, 1990, p. 192). Well maybe, but they are used for a reason. As Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2002, p. 54) commented, quoting Michel Foucault (1984/1985), what motivates us (as researchers) to do the kind of work that unequivocally involves us and our lives is an obstinate curiosity that is “not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself” (p. 8). This is the sort of curiosity that enables us to do the deconstructive work that helps us to see ourselves, our identities, the contexts we experience, and research in such a way that we are able to match Edward Said’s (1995) request, quoted at the start of this article, that “findings from research should be based on concrete human history or experience, not on donnish abstractions or on obscure laws or arbitrary systems” (pp. 238-239).

Research that is grounded in life as lived is research that stands a chance of making a difference. Returning to an earlier point, investigations that proceed from Mills’s (1959/1970) recommended basis are explicitly and potentially, if not actually, transformative. They are concerned to change the world, not just to interpret it. Indeed, when Mills goes on to say that “much private uneasiness goes unformulated; much public malaise and many decisions of enormous structural relevance never become public issues . . . it is the uneasiness itself that is the trouble; it is the indifference itself that is the issue” (pp. 18-19), I read him to be making a plea for sociologists to “get off the fence” (see Griffiths, 1998), articulate their concerns, and put them into the public domain with a view to provoking some sort of change. Writing about my experience of Bangkok and linking it with the research process in the way that I have may be a small gesture in this direction, but that is, nevertheless what it is.

For me, as a researcher, the “key finding” from, or perhaps more appropriately, the key message of, my research into my experience of visiting the Side Line Bar was how incredibly important it is for those of us who seek to understand aspects of the social world to really know what it is to be a stranger in a different land and in an unfamiliar place where we don’t know the rules or

understand the culture. Of course, the exhortation to make the familiar strange has almost the status of a mantra among ethnographers and making the strange familiar is fundamental to the “pervasive concern in contemporary research” (MacLure, 2003, p. 3) to avoid Othering the people we write about. This last is particularly important when the researcher-writer is a Westerner researching and/or writing about the experiences of people who live in the third and developing worlds. However, there is a difference in academic knowing and personally experiencing, and I was glad of the chance to be so intimately reminded of this.

There are numerous differences between Bangkok and Thailand and Sheffield and England. The sex trade is different from academia, and in many respects, the lives and careers of the bar girls are not like mine. Personal identity is “never gained and maintained once and for all” (Sikes, Measor, & Woods, 1985, p. 155). Rather, it is formed and informed through discursive practices and social interactions “established in the response” as James Rolling (2004, p. 876) puts it. I returned home from being a visiting academic and having visited the Side Line Bar with altered and new knowledges, understandings, and identities that make a difference and that make me (as academic, woman, mother, traveller, lover) different. Once again, and as a closing note, it seems appropriate to return to a quote from the beginning of this article:

As people assign meaning and significance to their travel experiences, they reveal how culture and identity become incorporated through travel, the kinds of selves people find and lose when away from home, how identities are made as people confront others, and the peculiar and paradoxical ways that everyday life reappears as people seek to escape in their journeys. (Neumann, 1992, p. 178)

Note

1. *Tuk tuks* are motorized tricycle taxis. Passengers sit on a double seat behind the driver.

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