DANCING THE NATION:
THE POLITICS OF EXILE, MOBILITY AND DISPLACEMENT
ALONG THE THAI-BURMA BORDER

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By

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To my teachers, at home and in the field.
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My understanding of the nation as kinesthetic, as embodied, unfolds from my own experiences as a transnational migrant and of belonging neither here nor there – but always being betwixt and between. For instilling in me early on the gift of thinking nomadically, I am grateful to my Norwegian mother, Torill and my American father, Robert. Your unwavering kindness has allowed this girl to blossom and you will be happy to know that I did in fact finally finish that big paper. To my sister, who shared my upbringing in the midst of migrants and refugees in inner-city Oslo, Norway, and, who has devoted her life to their cause. You inspire me endlessly.

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Although I owe my teachers a great debt for encouraging me to think in ways critical, and move in ways evocative, all faults herein are mine and mine alone.
ABSTRACT

Dance, song and movement aesthetics are often overlooked in studies of war and diaspora. Yet synchronized rhythmic movement promotes group coherence within all cultures, religions and nations, and holds potential for expressing political resistance. Based upon long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Thailand amongst a displaced group of Burmese refugees called the Tai, this dissertation attends to how dance, song and theatre reinvigorate displaced minority groups’ aspirations for sovereignty outside the current global nation-state paradigm. For Burmese exiles, expressive forms of ethnic nationalism are reproduced upon the bodies of cultural practitioners through the work of dance training and through shared rhythmic and aesthetic structures of sentiment towards ‘the nation’ – which produce powerful political affects and effects. The author argues that nations are not maintained primarily through capital and reading publics, but rather through the complex transmission of what can be called “aesthetic nationalisms,” which involve embodied performances and cultural practices that constitute the body-politic. This trans-disciplinary research project summons Postcolonial Studies, Affect Theory and Critical Political Theory to elucidate the contestability of the production and maintenance of states, democracies and diasporas. The dissertation offers a corrective to disembodied research modalities in international relations that have become commonplace, and instead advances a trans-disciplinary and embodied approach to the study of exile.
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I first discovered that I wanted to be an ethnographer after reading Annette Weiner’s *Trobianders of Papua New Guinea* (1988). It was not Weiner’s erudite observations of Trobriand life that most captivated me, but rather, that she intervened in a master narrative that had dominated ethnography for nearly half a century. That master narrative, belonged to the father of social anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski famously asserted in *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* that men controlled trade in the Trobriand Islands ([1922]1978). In one short ethnographic account however, Weiner decimated Malinowski’s claim by doing the simplest thing: she retraced Malinowski’s fieldwork, but instead of fixating on the activities of men, she attended to women’s work. And indeed, she discovered that women trade too, in vast and highly complex ways. It was as a young high-school student, reading Weiner and others, that I realized that ethnography is a mode of inquiry that could reveal the complexity of life, performance and the political. Following woman ethnographers like Weiner, I wanted to examine spaces of human interface that had been ignored or discounted. For this reason, I became drawn to the study of exilic subjects, and later to how peoples who live their lives on the margins use art, discourse and the body as sites of resistance.

But the road to the elusive “field” was wrought with difficulties and failures. Now, when looking back upon my time in Thailand, I can’t help but see all the things I wished I had done differently. Instead of emerging from the field victoriously armed with all the data and information needed to write a stellar dissertation, I had more questions. But of course, this is the nature of ethnographic work – you gather more data than you possibly know what to do with. My goal in travelling to Thailand and doing field-research amongst exiles was to learn the traditional
dances of the Tai peoples. But I now realize that this dream was elusive. I did learn dances, but
never well enough, never deeply enough, nor focused enough to become or perform it in a way
that would do the dance justice. But this partly because my teachers often went back and forth
between the Thai-Burma border and, understandably, were busy making a living and therefore
could not devote the kind of time I required to become truly skilled in the dance, but also
because I had fundamentally mis-recognized the function of the dance itself.

Tai dance is not a classicalized art form like Bharatnatyam or Odissi. It is not like ballet or
even classical Thai dance, in that it is not codified and performed for the sake of the dance itself.
The dance is always performed in the context of a religious festival and in conjunction with Tai
song, theatre and live music – what is called Jaad Tai. Moreover, the Jaad Tai is an ephemeral
performance – changing each time it is performed to adjust to the contexts of ritual, place and
audience. For instance, a Jaad Tai for a funeral will be created by a writer and a group of dancers
as a story to retell in the form of a lamentation, bringing to life the deceased. A Jaad Tai for the
novice ordination ceremony, Poy Sang Long will be created using letters from the audience and
participating festival goers. Through the letters, stories are told about their struggles, longings
and desires – their lives come to life on stage. With soft gestures that bring attention to the
embellishments of the performer’s hands, she sings lamentations inspired by her people’s stories;
each gentle rotation of the wrist revealing her strong, lithe hands and each word sung intently
with a smile that belies sadness in the dancer’s eyes. Watching the Tai performance is an
experience of delight in the aesthetic vision, yet also an experience imbued with the performer’s
melancholy.
Coming from a background of years as company dancer, I was expecting to be carefully groomed and prepared for the dance. Instead, my lessons were always varied, even haphazard, as a dance was rarely repeated and choreographies constantly changed. Several times I would be asked to dance a choreography, only to show up on the night of the festival, to be told with a shrug and a laugh, “Why don’t you dance this other dance instead?” And experiencing the terror of having to dance a choreography that I’ve never danced before in front of throngs of curious onlookers. My time doing fieldwork taught me that it is in those spaces of discomfort and during times that seem chaotic, that great insights are made. Doing research with my body taught me that if you are going to do something interesting, provocative or innovative, you have to place yourself in a space where you feel unsafe. As it is during those times of uncertainty and self-doubt that something truly creative emerges. More than anything, this project has taught me that you must be prepared to fail in order to salvage what is worthwhile.
OVERTURE: A COSMOGRAPHY OF DIASPORA, DISORDER AND DANCE

Produce a deterritorialized refrain as the final end of music, release it into the Cosmos - that is more important than building a new system (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 350).

Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines (Scott 1987, xvii)

If we don’t have our language, if we don’t have our arts, then we don’t have a people.
-Tao (Personal Interview)

The space of the border-zone is at once a scene of serenity and seeming stillness as you move about the picturesque mountains of the Thai-Burma border, but it is also the stage for the longest-running civil war- and displacement situation in the world (Campbell 2016). It is estimated that approximately 2.3 million migrants and another 130,000 official refugees from Burma live in Thailand, most of whom settle or work in the permeable border-zones of Central and Northern Thailand (Labovitz and Chantavanich 2016; Naing 2016). In many ways, the hill peoples of Upland Southeast Asia – a territory sometimes referred to as “Zomia” (Scott 2009), are defined by their refusal to be incorporated and subsumed by a superior political identity. This refusal has been ongoing since successive Chinese, Burman and Thai empires have attempted, though unsuccessfully, to fold these peoples into their tributary structures. The hill peoples of Upland Southeast Asia also refused subjugation by the British Raj, which, within a few decades of occupying Burma, instituted a divide-and-rule method of governance, while also depleting

1 Following the student uprisings of 8/8/88 and subsequent elections, an unelected junta illegitimately sized power in Burma. The military junta calling itself The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) changed the nation’s name from Burma to Myanmar. Most nations and organizations, including the United Nations, now use Myanmar. I however, continue to use Burma as that is how the vast majority of the Tai research community in Thailand refers to the nation. I provide a discussion of the politics of exonyms in Chapter 2.
Burma’s vast natural resources (Aye 2010). The current refusal to not be incorporated into the modern nation-state system, be it Thai, Burmese or Chinese, is a part of what James C. Scott (2009) calls “the art of not being governed” – an art perfected by the hill peoples of Zomia for millennia.²

My contribution to the literature on Upland Southeast Asia engages with the possibility of an embodied methodological approach to the study of migration, exile and war. I argue that performatic, aesthetic and affective forms of nationalism make possible a life outside the modern nation-state system for exilic peoples. This is an application of the turn towards the micro-politics of “everyday life” in critical international relations theory,³ brought about by increased attention to the under-theorized politics of the “everyday” in Henri Lefebvre, wherein the everyday rhythms of the body takes prescience to, and are revelatory of the political (Lefebvre 2014). My work locates the practice of the everyday within the bodies of my research collaborators,⁴ who through the production of aesthetic and affective forms of nationalism, enact a slow and imperceptible politics of resistance. I am also attuned to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1987) rhetorical conception of territories and assemblages that move in “refrains” so

² James C. Scott in The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia (2009) counted the disparate peoples of ‘Zomia’ as those ‘hill peoples’ residing in the highest altitudes, while avoiding the sedentary rice-paddy wetland cultivation of the lowland valleys. The Tai, are not counted as hill peoples by Scott as they traditionally resided in valleys and aspired to state-level forms of governance through their systems of princedoms. I would argue that with the dismantling of the princedom system of Jaopha (Lords of the Sky) by the Burmese military, and with millions of Tai peoples currently displaced, they can now be better characterized as non-state peoples.
⁴ I use of the term “research collaborator” in reference to Luke Eric Lassiter’s (2005)The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. The term refers to any research participant whom I interviewed, conducted ethnographic work with or who assisted in this project. I prefer using research collaborator to terms such as “informant,” “interlocutor,” or “subject,” as I view the ethnographic encounter as a collaborative endeavor in which the participant is involved by not just providing information, but also in shaping the project itself.
as to continuously birth the nation through performance, rhythm and repetition. I argue that rather than understanding the nation as constituted through the interaction between capital and print (Anderson 2006), the nation, for countless peoples in exile, is often carried through the body and continuously forged via the rhythmic work of performance and theatre, in addition to discourse, language and signification.

Following Walter Benjamin’s concept of montage, this document is intended to be read as “the relation to what-has-been to the now” by offering to the reader a textual choreography that is emergent, trans-disciplinary, temporally nonlinear and visceral (Benjamin 2002, N2a, 3). But unlike Benjamin, the place where we encounter emergence is, in addition to language and image, also in the body. I am herein offering a kinesthetic methodology which is decolonial and attempts to break with convention, as I have come to understand that doing critical international relations research with the body as both object and recordation device alters the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In the same way that Benjamin and Deleuze have changed the way we write, I see ethnochoreography as a way to decolonize one’s writing through dance, whereby embodied ethnochoreological research allows us to reframe the narratives of exile and provides key insights into the question of what holds nations together during times of dislocation. This offers a corrective to disembodied research modalities in international relations that have become commonplace, and instead advances a trans-disciplinary and embodied approach to the study of exile.

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5 See for example Benedict Anderson’s uptake of “montage” and “homogenous, empty time” from Walter Benjamin’s writings (Anderson 2006, ix, 24, 37, 161). Kimberley Hutchings (2008), as well as Brian Massumi (2005) both show how Deleuze impacts the way they write about time, aesthetics, affect and the political.
EXILE NATION: THE TAI – THEIR PREDICAMENT AND THEIR PRECARITY

In Burma, we have no time to pay attention to culture and the arts as we do in Thailand. In Burma there is constant political unrest. It is not safe - even for the villager. That is why when the people have trouble - they sing and dance in order to release something. Like black Americans use song and dance - Tai people are also like this. We release our pain by singing and dancing. -Khru Daeng (Personal Interview)

Khru Daeng, a Tai in exile and teacher at a school for migrant children in Northern Thailand, provides during our conversation in 2015, a comparative politics of affect and subalterity that up until our meeting, I had yet to conjoin. To his own experience it was clear that national trauma, as experienced by African American slaves, and exile, as experienced by Burmese refugees, are hinged experiences. To Khru Daeng, the experience of war, violence and subjugation palpably necessitates the ‘release of pain’ through the affective work of song and dance. He also points to a capacious cultural renaissance underway amongst Tai peoples in exile, suggesting that life under the rule of colonialism, and later under autocracy in Burma, did not allow for an expressive politics. However, life in Thailand as an exile does. This dissertation attends to the question of how exilic life intensifies the velocity of affects produced by the work of performance art and resistance discourse.

Historically, Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians), Cambodians, Sri Lankans, Rwandans and countless others, whose lives have been marred by the horrors of colonialism, war or exile, have resisted their traumatization through the formation and maintenance of a strong physical and aesthetic culture, based upon a common practice and carefully cultivated aesthetic (Silva 2004; Hamera 2002; Hamera 1996; Reed 2010a; Daniel 1996; Malkki 1995). National and cultural trauma amongst African American enslaved peoples in the Unites States has been shown to manifest itself epigenetically in their descendants, which, some argue may form the basis for
an aesthetic identity based around genres such as blues, gospel, rap and even breakdancing (Eyerman 2002; Leary and Robinson 2005). The genres that explore the wounds of oppression are manifold, but at the same time often imperceptible to the gaze of those outside of its experience. Khru Daeng taught me to see their struggle as having kinship resemblance to the struggle of African American slaves, and their descendants, in the United States. The use of song, hymn and performance arts to recover a sense of dignity, to express one’s anger, and to organize one’s people around a common refrain is what binds their experiences in the cauldron of subalternity and enslavement. Arthur Neal defines trauma as capable of “restructuring a self-identity,” whereby “reestablishing one’s place in the broader scheme of human affairs becomes necessary” (Neal 1998, 4). Cultural trauma is not the event, but rather the structures of history bearing down on the body in the present, becoming ingrained in collective identity.

The Tai, a heterogeneous group of peoples also known as the Shan, are currently experiencing an intense fracturing of their sense of sovereignty as a nation in lieu of ongoing hostilities between the Tatmadaw (Burmese Military) and Shan State army groups. They identify as being a part of an imagined Tai nation and reject subjugation by the Burmese military and Burman authorities (Jirattikorn 2008, Aye 2009). Many have fled to neighboring Thailand, where they enjoy no official protections as political or economic refugees. Tai refugees are not

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7 Scholars referring to the Tai peoples of Upland Southeast Asia most commonly use the word Shan. Shan however, is an exonym that the Tai peoples themselves largely reject. The Burman ethnic group used the word Shan, a cognate of Siam, to refer to the Siamese (Thai) people, with which the Tai are linguistically and culturally similar, but historically distinct. The term Tai refers to the heterogeneous group of peoples who are descendants or speakers of the proto-Tai language and include the Tai Yai, Tai Lue, Tai Dam and many other Tai/Dai ethnic groups. I use Tai in order to honor the wishes of my research collaborators from the Shan State in Burma, a vast majority of whom responded that they prefer foreigners to use the endonym Tai, rather than Shan when referring to the peoples of Shan State and its diaspora.
counted in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) statistical databases. Despite representing the largest ethnic minority group in Burma, and possibly the largest displaced group of clandestine refugees from Burma who have fled to neighboring Thailand, the Tai have been systematically ignored by humanitarian- and governmental organizations. Their experiences in the border-zone vastly differ – some finding ease and economic security in Thailand – while others lead lives that can only be described as ‘precarious’ (Butler 2006). The Tai, like most exilic groups, are governed by the politics of clandestinity, and far too many face deportations from Thailand and political persecution in Burma. But for others, life as a migrant offers the possibility of novel opportunities and mobilities.

My first encounter with Tai dance came in 2012, when, upon entering a Theravada Buddhist temple in Chiang Mai I found there, next to the ruins of what once was a grand temple complex, a group of dancers moving together in time beneath a shade structure. The calm presence and lightness of the dancers as they diligently rehearsed complex foot patterns and arm postures belied the precarity of their lives as refugees from the Shan State in Burma. The afternoon I spent in the temple during the sweltering heat of Thailand’s monsoon season, was also a moment of interruption, or “disarticulation” (Panagia 2009, 2), whereby my everyday thinking about politics came to engender also a politics of sense, movement and aesthetics. The dancer’s bodies were revelatory of how politics and performance are intimately knotted in the repeated rhythms of songs, instruments, gestures and the desire to belong.

I began frequenting the temple to observe the dancer’s practice – an event customarily consisting of monks playing the long drum, cymbals and gong; teen-aged youths dancing the traditional Tai group dance, practicing Tai martial arts, and, in the periphery of the floor, mothers, fathers, young children and grandparents look on and occasionally join in to assist in
the assemblage. In the front stands a teacher who transmits the dance silently through
demonstration and repetition. All practitioners in the space dance simultaneously to the rhythmic
repeating beat of the gong and the cymbals that resound throughout the temple complex – a
sound that would steadily reverberate during the dozens of Tai gatherings and festivals I attended
during my fieldwork, as the refrain which territorializes the space they occupy as unequivocally Tai, despite their status as a displaced people.

It was on one such afternoon, I sat in the shade of the temple watching, and taking notes,
when a monk and avid musician named Sai Pa gestured for me to join the students in dancing.
Hesitantly, I joined in the dance, and, via the rhythmic, pulsing repetition of choreographic
participation, heat and movement, I felt at once what Panagia (2009) refers to as “the politics of
sensation” or what Jacques Rancière calls “the partition of the sensible” (2004). As I watched the
Tai dancers move gracefully across the floor of the temple that day, my devotion to dance and
my desire to understand the political were suddenly and unapologetically wed. It was the
moment when I understood that the ability to observe pales to the possibility of practice. I
recognized that as an ethnographer, my insights about Tai culture, and the politics of exile would
be experienced at an entirely different scale – at the scale of the body, of rhythm, of repetition –
at the scale of Deleuze and Guattari’s refrain (1987).

THEORETICAL LINES OF FLIGHT: THE PROBLEM OF CONSISTENCY

Philosophically, my research hinges on the question posed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix
Guattari as “the question of what holds things together?”, or what they call "the problem of
consistency" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 327). As a political ethnographer, I am interested in what constitutes the political for the migrant subject (Bammer 2005), and in how nations use culture and the arts to re-produce themselves. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “The problem of consistency concerns the manner in which the components of a territorial assemblage hold together” (1987:327). In other words, how assemblages of practice, materiality and cosmology forge nations out of peoples across territories. That force, which drives us to sacrifice our lives, to beat our drums, to wave our flags, to build walls and, even to kill each other, we know as nationalism. Deleuze and Guattari understand this force as “the refrain” or, that which “assures the consistency of the territory” (Ibid). My research, broadly speaks to the question of what holds things, but more specifically what holds peoples, nations and identities together during times of great upheaval, exodus and displacement. I read nationalism as something akin to Deleuze and Guattari’s refrain; as an understanding of culture as a chaos, from which “Milieus and Rhythms are born” (1987, 313). It is an understanding of how culture is territorialized by the state in order to birth the nation, to legitimize it and make it sovereign. I ask, how does a nation move as a refrain and how does a nation reproduce itself? In order to answer this question, I examine how dance becomes a key refrain that the refugee draws upon in order to forge a nation in exile, as well as make sense of a world that has otherwise fractured her sense of being.

Following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1996), what holds assemblages together are the "thresholds of indiscernibility" or "zones of neighborhoods" that are produced by concepts, things and, I might add, movement. Dance, in this way, lies precisely at this nexus of concepts, things and movement. Since dance is a part of the way I engage with the world, it has also become a part of my understanding of what constitutes the political. Dance is one mode, method or approach that I chose in to engage my project, but it is not the only one. I do not suggest that
we ought to privilege dance as the only, or even the main thing that holds things together politically in my dissertation or in the "field", but it is a practice that produces important affects within the bodies-movement-politics nexus that ought not be overlooked. Therefore, in Chapter One, I attend also to how exilic peoples instantiate fierce resistance discourses via media – social, poetic, digital and otherwise.

In order to get to the question of what is politics and what constitutes the political, I want to look more closely at Deleuze and Guattari's question of "what holds things together?" Deleuze and Guattari's "refrain" and "abstract machines" certainly influence my thinking about dance in a political way, but also their discussions about "what is a concept?" or rather "what do concepts do?" are central to my analysis (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 1996). In Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) essay, 1837: Of The Refrain, we are introduced to the "territorial assemblage" and "the problem of consistency":

The problem of consistency concerns the manner in which the components of a territorial assemblage hold together. But it also concerns the manner in which different assemblages hold together, with component of passage and relay. It may even be the case that consistency finds the totality of its conditions only on a properly cosmic plane, where all the disparate and heterogeneous elements are convoked (1987:327).

The refrain is the consistency in the assemblage that allows an artist to territorialize a space, a movement, a gesture, an affect or a sound. The refrain is a space creator - providing the possibility of living in a world where things may be repeated without strict felicity to an essence, origin or "tradition." Deleuze and Guattari's "cosmic plane" also holds fidelity to a rhizomatic, rather than an arborescent model of the world. There is no central node from whence the production of power and creativity emanates upwards, or hierarchically extends outwards like
the branches of a tree, it is "rather an articulation from within, as if oscillating molecules, oscillators, passed from one heterogeneous center to another" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:328).

The plane of consistency is not unlike Jaques Ranciere's (2004) "aesthetic regime of art," where forms of artistic expression co-exist upon an egalitarian plane that is made possible by what Ranciere calls the "distribution of the sensible." There is an ethical paradigm here that does away with the ordered distribution of judgment in the aesthetic realm, in a favor of a plane of pure immanence upon which art is ever emergent. But that does not mean that art and politics emerge from the same plane, but rather that art emerges within the constraints and possibilities of politics: "an aesthetics politics always defines itself by a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms (2004:63).

The aesthetic regime of art allows for aesthetic expression to emerge upon a plane of consistency, and it is politics that molds, or territorializes bodies, materials and semiotics into forms of judgment. In this way, the political for Ranciere, works in much the same way as the refrain does for Deleuze and Guattari. Dance moves in refrains, in that it is not an anthem or a closed system; dance changes through processes of territorialization and deterritorializations in ways that make possible new assemblages of practice and aesthetics. I find that the concept of the 'territorial refrain' allows for a broader understanding of the politics of dance, one that is not limited by constructivist critiques, but makes possible the worlds, ontologies, and kinds of ethos that are opened by the movement practice. The aesthetic practitioner does not strive to build walls; she builds spaces that do not close in on themselves, she builds blocks of sensation. But how to describe consistency without falling back onto essences? In politics we tend to think of difference as a problem, something that is constitutive of order. This dissertation affirms the
possibility of a dance assemblage that moves in refrains - not devoid of politics - but performatively constitutive of political affects.

In a brief conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, Deleuze offers the following phrase about the relationship between theory and practice:

Practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another. No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall. (Foucault and Bouchard 1980:206)

This is significant because it offers a plain understanding of how Deleuze envisions concepts such as "lines of flight," "becoming," "nomadology," "assemblage" and "refrains" as being connected to one another through practice. This is precisely where I think dance has a powerful role in the assemblage of politics. Dance is a movement-practice that sets into motion concepts, while also being moved by concepts. For Deleuze, and Foucault also agrees, politics exists in a nexus of "desire, power and interests," whereby "investments of desire" direct the course of the political (Foucault and Bouchard 1980:209). So, we have come to an understanding of politics as mediating the aesthetic regime of art by an assemblage-nexus of power, desire and interests, but how does it work? How does dance work politically?

The Politics of Kinesthetic Empathy

Choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy function together to construct corporeality in a given historical moment. By looking at them alongside over time it is possible to argue for the existence of corporeal epistemes that participate in the production of knowledge and the structuring of power (Susan Leigh Foster 2010:218).
One of the answers emerging when we attempt to think of dance or movement practice as political is the concept of *kinesthetic empathy*, understood here as the somatic understandings of repetition and difference through observation and experience. It is the desire to invest energy into the refrain, it is the act of placing oneself within the assemblage, and it is the relay between practice and theory that attract bodies in the bodies-movement-politics nexus. It is the process that allows for bodies and concepts to be associated within zones of neighborhoods known as culture, tradition or even habits. Here I turn to Susan Leigh Foster (2010), who has made significant contributions to an understanding of the politics of dance, and in particular, the politics of kinesthetic empathy and kinesthesia during her investigation of how concepts like empathy and sympathy gain traction within dance and performance studies. Kinesthesia, is the way in which the body observes and responds to movement, placements and affects, and kinesthetic empathy reveals to us "the many ways in which the dancing body in its kinesthetic specificity formulates an appeal to viewers to be apprehended and felt, encouraging them to participate collectively in discovering the communal basis of their experience" (Leigh Foster 218).

The *communal basis for experience* is what William McNeill (2009:2) refers to as "muscular bonding," or "the euphoric fellow feeling that prolonged and rhythmic muscular movement arouses among nearly all participants." This is the communal participation in the sensorium of percepts and affects that have profound implications of the body politic. For McNeill, the drills and dances of nations and armies serve, as the repeated making of an *esprit de corps*, whereby the resonance created by rhythmic movement becomes the habitus of the collective. Kinesthetic bonding is a process of embodied belonging made possible by synchronous movement. McNeill, in his broad stoke generalization of the phenomena, claims
this it is something that can be seen across cultures and throughout much of human history: particularly in the military, where it was learned early that moving in tact made for a more resilient and effective fighting machine.\textsuperscript{8} Militaries, congealed weapon-body assemblages moving in tact, formed the backbone of many nationalist movements seen in the past two centuries. McNeill writes that on the scale of human history, moving together in time, "may perhaps count as a political expression of the emotional force of muscular bonding" (2009:4-5). So, for McNeill, marching, moving, singing and dancing becomes a kinesthetic means to a political end.

For Erin Manning, movement is not simply displacement of matter through space, movement signals new becomings. In \textit{Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy}, Manning (2012) moves towards a gestural politics within which ontogenesis takes precedence over ontologies, she admonishes that we ought not get caught in the search for a theory of being, rather we ought to look for the becoming:

\begin{quote}
Ontologies must remain thresholds - from being to becoming, from form to force. Identities do take form, but these are always brief individuations. To still becoming into lingering individuations is to try to stop movement. What must be sought is neither a total becoming nor a fixed identity: the dynamic equilibrium between identity and individuation is metastable (Manning 2012:10).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{8} McNeill’s arguments reach far beyond simply positing that marching in time directs collective experience and therefore also the political. He goes on to claim that dance and drill in human history is self-evidently an ancient ritual with evolutionary underpinnings: "selection in favor of groups that kept together in time had led to genetic transmission of this capability" and it allowed "human groups to increase their size, increase cohesion and assure survival" (McNeill 2009:3-4). He also claims that the Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt could never have been built without rhythmic coordination (\textit{Ibid}). This is quite obviously a functionalist and reductionist logic. Despite offering unsavory statements like, "War dances were almost universal among simple and barbarian societies" (2009:102), McNeill does point to a paucity in the literature about the historiography of synchronous movement.
Here there is a perceptual call for balance between a theory of becoming and emergence on one hand, and consistency and identity on the other. This is useful for a theory of how we can have such seemingly stable categories as ethnos, culture or tradition, and how these categories shape-shift along the becoming-consistency continuum. The metastable state is more stable than the most volatile state - that of expressive and creative becoming, but it also cannot persist infinitely. The metastable equilibrium has a lifespan - the hands of the political can apprehend it for a while, but its nature is not stasis and it will eventually be freed or free itself.

It is at the point of the body-becoming where novelty is made potential, when stasis is no longer desirable or possible. Manning writes (2012:24), "[o]ntogenic bodies as pure plastic rhythm are always recomposing, proposing relations between series. Movement is a technology of the becoming-body." The becoming-body is a displacer; it displaces matter, while creating consistency in its rhythms and significations. The repeating tracings of a body-becoming, signals both identity and becoming, repetition and difference.

Tracings made with the body are like lines of flight, or genealogies, rhizomes, networks, and meshworks. Tracings are not closed units, they persist with momentum, sometimes they stop, and sometimes they are cyclical. Dance is tracing lines through three-dimensional space using your body as a vehicle through which becoming is made possible within the sea of political forces that seek to use it as a node through which to conduit power and desire. Dancing is not re-tracing the past, but it is "improvising with the already-felt" (Manning 2006, 108). Dance and movement belongs to the realm of the extra-textual, a space where we may "imagine a politics that exceeds a state-centered governmentality [which] necessitates a vocabulary that resists and subverts the language of the state" (Manning 2006:7).
conditions of possibility for new becomings, dance is the resounding silence that gestures on in the shadows. I would like to suggest that dance represents a form of non-textual nationalism, what we might call an "expressive nationalism" - one that does not attempt to capture, or exclude, but that simply expresses.

*COSMOGRAPHIES OF BECOMING*

My dissertation grows out of my engagement with the question of clandestinity and refugeedom in the modern era of nation-states and particularly an engagement with the issues that are facing Tai refugees and migrants living in Thailand. This is, in part, an ethnographic exploration of the meaning of exile - or how meanings are made in exiled groups. But it departs from classical notions of ethnography, in the sense that I do not privilege any notion of a fixed place, culture or people. Rather, I attend to questions that arise when we see 'places' or 'groups' as things that can only exist through processes of territorialization and deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; 2009); culture as performative practice (Bourdieu 1977; Bharucha 2000); and a people as bodies moving in the political, or moving the political. The body is the central pivot of my dissertation, yet the body is not understood as something with more or less potential historical force than language, ecology, spirituality or geography. In order to understand how a place or an identity is made, or is becoming, we must depart from notions of pure categories or fixed trajectories. The problem with classical ethnography is that it has often relied on notions of fixed "cultural spaces" and monolithic, describable "cultures" to make up its objects of
knowledge. My approach seeks to widen the scope - from fixed identities and territories - to what may be called *cosmographies of becoming*.

I am interested developing ontologies that are inclusive of a broad range of phenomena, not limited to the *anthropos*, but that also extend to ecologies of objects, materials, sensory perceptions, spiritualisms, semiotics and beyond. In *The Study of Geography*, Franz Boas (1887) writes at a moment when the qualitative sciences were under attack from physicists and positivists who regard interpretivist approaches as having less value than scientistic ones, and in response, Boas provides an alternative mode of inquiry, what is called *cosmography*:

> Cosmography, as we may call this science, considers every phenomenon as worthy of being studied for its own sake. Its mere existence entitles it to a full share of our attention; and the knowledge of its existence and evolution in space and time fully satisfies the student, without regard for the laws which it corroborates or which may be deduced from it (Boas 1887: 138).

In an attempt to trouble classical notions of ethnography, that presuppose an *ethnos* that can be described or mapped upon a landscape, I prefer to use cosmography as a conceptual apparatus that opens up my study to new realms of inquiry. Though, I see categories of ethnos and ethnicity as overly relying on notions of stable biological and territorial origin points, and seemingly stable markers such as language, race and geographic belongings, I also recognize that in order to be able to talk about an assemblage of peoples, we need to allow them to name themselves, their relations and processes of meaning-making. Evoking an ethnos is not always an activity of boundary making, or worse, representational violence, it can also be an effective tool

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9 The problem of "culture" and "place" in ethnography is perhaps one of the most discussed issues in anthropology during the past 30 years. For a critique of the "boundedness" of ethnography as well as a challenge to the notion of "culture", see Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's edited volume, *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (1997). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
to create relationships of practice and validate claims to self-determination. By reifying the notion of 'Tai peoples', I am not attempting to capture any essence of them as a cultural idea, but rather, I am engaging in a system of meaning-making that privileges Tai cosmologies. My main motivation for using cosmography as a theoretical and methodological mesh in my work, is that it allows me to reconceptualize the notion of "culture" in a way that is inclusive of a wider spectrum of phenomena, that are not exclusive to human activity, but that also involves the mapping of a cosmos made up of material assemblages, phenomena and processes.

**Research Questions**

How do nations congeal? How do our identities become lodged in the repeated throbbing rhythms of drums, in our feet pounding against the soil, in the sweaty palms of a sharp-shooter or in the stitches of the fabrics of our costumed selves? What is the purpose of nationalization? My work lures out, and lingers with these questions of why nations, identities and belonging matter, but it does so by taking as its main analytic frame – the body. Specifically, the body in movement. Dance is the primary pivot of my analysis, as I am interested in studying process, rather than form; I look at the body in motion, the body as mobility – the body as that which contains knowledge, memory and resilience. The proliferation of texts surrounding the nation and its subjects is vast and often uncritical in its assumption that the nation is an inevitable mode of organizing human life (Anderson 2006; Gellner and Breuilly 2009). The lavish attention in International Relations paid to the state indicates that the question of what holds people together may be one of the most pressing matters of our time. Concomitantly with capitalism, the modern

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10 For a more thorough discussion about the problem of ethnicity, as well as nationalism in ethnography, see Thomas Hylland-Eriksen's (2002) *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, especially pages 173-178.
nation-state commands and demands of global politics, yet few studies are devoted to understanding the nation as a visceral, rhythmic and pulsing being.\textsuperscript{11} Does performance art, with its ephemerality and economy of force, craft a politics in which resistance to the nation-state paradigm may be slowly inscribed upon the body of practitioners?

This is a story of how a fractured nation has sought to maintain itself slowly and imperceptibly – by attending to the one area of life where territorial assemblages could remain intact, or even undergo renaissance, despite half a century of civil war and displacement – the arts. As Michael Shapiro notes in \textit{Methods and Nations} (2004), the goal of the nation-as-state is to reproduce itself. This is what Shapiro calls “cultural governance,” or the ways in which nations legitimize themselves by governing the arts, the realm of performance and aesthetic expression. But, what are the conditions of possibility that allow for its reproduction, and at what point does a nation cease to reproduce, and thereby cease to exist? How does the displaced individual – the refugee in exile – reproduce a nation? To answer this question, I decided to conduct research amongst the exiled Tai whom I met in the temple grounds of Northern Thailand. What I discovered were a people who silently persist in exile, while using their bodies in order stake claim to an imagined nation, which they call Merng Tai.

\textbf{RE-EMBODIED COMMUNITIES}

\textit{Second, in former colonies, states were created retained colonial borders as they were, so that ethnicities, languages and religions were mixed. This phenomenon creates serious tensions. In}

those countries, antagonisms within the population are likely to explode and bring about massive
displacement and the collapse of state apparatuses (Foucault [1979] 2015).

This is a story of how fractured nations seek to maintain themselves slowly and
nonviolently, by enmeshing acts of resistance in their bodies and in their art. Broadly, the
modern nation-state has been understood as unfolding within two major tracts. The first being
that nations are an extension of Western civilization’s drive towards progress, namely through
print-press media and industrialization, or capitalism (Anderson 2006; Gellner and Breuilly
2009). Secondly, the nation-state is thought to maintain itself through the work of culture,
tradition and common aesthetics (Redfield 2003; Shapiro 2004). Little research however, attends
to the ways in which nations – and in particular nations in exile – maintain themselves
kinesthetically through movement, through the body, through affect and the work of aesthetics.
Scholars of the Tai peoples, have so far mainly focused their attention to how print media and
literature have served as an integral part of Tai nationalism (Jirattikorn 2008; Ferguson 2015;
Ferguson and Woodier 2009; Brooten 2016), which I consider as also an essential part of the
structuring of sentiments towards the nation. However, it does not account for the embodiment of
it. A privileging of text and print pervades scholarship on Burma and its diaspora, and, this
dissertation, is in part, a corrective to the over-emphasis on text and print-capitalism.

Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread
of Nationalism*, famously, shows that the nation “is an imagined political community – and
imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (2006:6). Undoubtedly, Anderson’s
argument has spurred a wide debate on the question of how nations are formed and maintained.
Scholars have rightfully turned their attention towards the conception that nations are not only
imagined, but historically determined by material forces. Anderson shows that in addition to the production of shared cultural practices, it was the advent of print-press media that allowed for the formation of nation-states. The nation-state is a fairly recent phenomenon which arose thanks to the interaction between capitalism (the productive and material basis of society) and the print press media (dissemination of literature across vast swaths of social groups). Previously the world’s people were ruled through imperialism, feudalism, tribalism or colonialism, and the emergence of nation-states, marked a distinct break with such political forms of organization.

There have been multiple critiques launched at Anderson’s argument about the nation and its imaginaries (Chatterjee 1993; Chatterjee and Gopal Balakrishnan (Ed) 2012; Wogan 2001), which, I think speaks to the productive capacity of his work to create openings and spaces for thinking about the nation as perhaps the most contentious, yet still taken for granted idea of our time. However, I will argue that Imagined Communities is fundamentally predicated upon an opposition between text and orality, and it fails to see the capacities of the body to carry forth claims to a nation, and it fails to see how certain bodies seek to evade the capturing forces of the nation. And this leads us to the major problem which persists in the ideology that today produces nationalism, and that is clearly the figure of the refugee, asylum seeker, or the displaced person for whom exile is the only possible option.

The major challenge of our century is how to create systems of governance that account for the millions of peoples who are actively excluded by the current nation-state system, or who endure oppression from the state. In 2015 we saw the highest increase in global migrations due to war and violence in recorded history and there is little evidence that global mass-migrations are slowing. At the same time, migration routes are becoming deadlier as migrants fleeing war and violence imperil their lives to reach other shores. We know that as temperatures continue to
rise, droughts are prolonged and dangerous weather patterns become more dramatic, and the future refugees of our century will be climate refugees. So, we must ask ourselves, will it be viable in the coming century for the human race to organize itself into tightly knit nations, that often serve to exclude, rather than include others?

The nation-as-state articulates upon the world as a totalizing force majeure – sopping up peoples into congeries of super-level identities, while militarizing borders, standardizing languages and classicalizing arts. If the nation-as-state is forged through the repeated pressing of ink upon paper and the formation of reading publics, what might be the key to undue nationalism? How might peoples who exist on the margins of states and who desire not incorporation, but self-determination, make themselves less visible to the state that wishes to capture them? They can, for instance, dance. Dance as a way of maintaining consistency – as all peoples need a refrain – but performance is often a less intelligible mode of maintaining a nation. It is not without some preponderance that both the Thai and Burmese governments actively encourage the production of cultural ethnic nationalism – read as benign entertainment, as relics of a previous people or as profitable tourist curiosity. In reading performance as apolitical they fail to see the revolutionary potential of the body.

Ultimately, in order for the nation-state paradigm to erode, we must find alternative ways of ordering the body politic and I argue that we ought to begin this search at spaces which are non-textual, non-capitalist, and instead expressive, affective and aesthetic. My contribution is to challenge the textually based paradigm in politics for what constitutes a nation. I argue that rather than understanding nationalism as the interaction between capital and print, we may come closer to apprehending how people forge a sense of common belonging through research on kinesthetic and aesthetic structures of meaning towards the ‘nation’. Finally, I want to posit that
if we are to find alternative modes of governmentality, that exist outside the current nation-state paradigm, then we ought to look to the practices of the peoples who currently do exist outside this system – refugees and migrants like the Tai who seek out an existence that is not anarchist, but rather autonomously sovereign.

Gestalt and Methods of the Dissertation

After riding around the moat that encloses central Chiang Mai city, passing wats and enticing cafes, songteaws and fresh fruit stands, I turn the corner and enter into the temple grounds. A quiet hangs over the temple and adjoining school in the late afternoon sun. Children, dressed in blue and white school uniforms play on the playground next to the 500 year old chedi structure. The contrast stands stark between the rusted swings-sets and plastic seesaws with the commanding ancient architecture. I walk the grounds, take it all in. I see things I didn’t notice when I was here before, over two years ago. This time perhaps, I am more attuned to nuance and detail. I see the novice monks looking shyly at the other children laughing boldly, playing rough-house. I see the intricate detail and inlay work done in the chedi mount. I imagine what this place looked like when encircled only by trees and forest animals, instead of low-rise condominiums and coffee shops.

Figure 1 Novice monks play in the shadow of the temple grounds.
I go inside the viharn structure – the heart of the temple – and prostrate in front of the Buddha images that feature in the center of an elaborate golden altar. I sit for a long while and meditate. I am not very good at meditating, so I usually just take the opportunity to think some things through. This time I ask for guidance and I ask for good fortune as I intend to begin my fieldwork within these temple walls today. I don’t know who I am asking, but it feels good to just ask who or whatever is receptive – the land, the Buddha, the temple structure, a spirit – I doesn’t really matter to whom you pray, but praying always seems to force your mind to articulate your desires.

Outside the viharn structure, I am happy to find the same auntie making her famous Khao Soi Luang – rice noodles with a thick tofu sauce, herbs and spices. I wai to the old auntie, and she greets me with a familiar smile. I praise her noodle dish as my favorite in Chiang Mai and I am not feigning enthusiasm. As I am chatting with the auntie and some other noodle patrons when a familiar face appears to my side. It is Sai Pa! My old friend, a refugee from the Shan State in Burma and an arts enthusiast. Last I saw him he was clad in a saffron robe, shaved head and a dense network of Buddhist tattoos on his body. Now he stands before me wearing a hoodie, skinny jeans, designer shoes and a new leather jacket. He tells me he finished his time as a monk after Khao Pansaa (the monk’s rainy season retreat) in 2012 and has now been living in the temple assisting the monks. He looks happy and healthy. He shows me a You Tube video he
uploaded of me dancing at the Khao Pansaa festival two years ago. We laugh as if no time has passed since we last spoke.

Soon, Sai Pa gestures for me to follow him into the temple, we go through a side door within the worship room. He is taking me to see the Pra Adjarn – the temple abbot and teacher. I sit down and wait for him to appear. The large saffron clad monk appears behind the curtain and takes a seat on the couch. We sit on the floor and prostrate before him. He greets me with a warm smile and says he remembers me. I tell him about my research project and how happy I am to be back. I tell the abbot that I am here to learn the Tai dances, learn about their culture, music, arts and their struggles as refugees in Thailand. He smiles and says:

“You are welcome here. We are happy you have returned and you are free to join in our activities – dancing, language classes and festivals. You can feel free to speak to anyone and ask them questions.” He then gestures towards my friend Sai Pa, and says, “You are in luck because Sai Pa here is a master Tai dancer and musician. He will teach you our arts.”

I am relieved. I have been granted permission and I have found my kru fon tai, my Tai dance teacher.

The above excerpt from my early fieldnotes lays bare the everyday rhythm of life for Tai migrants, as well as the delicate nature of conducting research, in ‘vulnerable zones’ such as along the Thai-Burma border. This dissertation is not a spectacle detailing all the horrors of exile, but rather, will primarily detail the small everyday expressions, aesthetics and lived experiences of exile. From the fields of anthropologies of violence, security studies, war studies and migration studies, we have a proliferation of texts attending to the repulsions of war, violence and exile. My contribution will hopefully be more nuanced, albeit perhaps more pedestrian to a reader who may expect a book on Burma to detail the grotesque violence that besets the lives of many migrants. Here again, I return to Henri Lefebvre’s (2014) “critique of everyday life” as an understudied and underutilized subject of knowledge. Everyday life is boring, but it also contains within it a slow politics – a politics we may not readily be prepared to
read as political. That is, until you enter the fray and engage in the slow everyday rhythms of that world.

The gestalt of this dissertation, or rather its assemblage, is based upon a slow, everyday engagement with Tai life. Gestalt, normally associated with 20th century German psychoanalysis and phenomenology, is a useful concept-method for this kind of project as it implies that the whole is always greater than its parts and it rejects atomism:

This method, with a tradition going back to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, involves nothing more than the description of direct psychological experience, with no restrictions on what is permissible in the description. Gestalt psychology was in part an attempt to add a humanistic dimension to what was considered a sterile approach to the scientific study of mental life. Gestalt psychology further sought to encompass the qualities of form, meaning, and value that prevailing psychologists had either ignored or presumed to fall outside the boundaries of science (Encyclopædia Britannica Online 2016).

My method of entering into this space of social rhythm, direct description and meaning is manifold. First, I engage in the kind of silent observation that I detail in Chapter Three, where I find loud significations in the quiet gesturings Tai peoples make towards their desire to be a nation. Before re-entering the field and conducting intensive fieldwork from 2014-2015, I spent six months of piloting a ‘virtual ethnography’ project that surveyed social media, blogospheres and other virtual ‘spaces’ where discourses were produced by Tai interlocutors. Chapter One, which looks at the formation of affective counter-publics in the Tai digital world, is based on this foray into virtual space. Tom Boellstorff describes this as a kind of immersion of “our embodied selves within the cultures of interest, even when that embodiment is in the form of an avatar” (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 1). When my avatar took the shape of a dancer, I entered into new kinds and sets of relations with research collaborators through training in the traditional performance

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modality called *Jaad Tai*. The decision to eventually do research through dancing came from my own desire to embody the dancer’s path, but the result was different than I expected. I learned that for Tai, technique was not of essence, but rather, approaching the dance with heart, sincerity and an understanding of the cosmology that the dance inheres, was paramount to being considered a capable dancer.

Formally, the dissertation comprises the collection of over eighty interviews, oral narratives and life histories, conducted primarily in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son provinces, but also amongst the Tai diaspora in Europe and the United States. This ethnochoreography summons a vast and, at times, unwieldy cacophony of voices and movements – primarily those belonging to Tai peoples, who have fled from the Shan State in Northern Burma and resettled in Thailand. I conducted intensive dissertation fieldwork from the fall of 2014 to spring of 2015 along the Thai-Burma border. Most of the fieldwork was conducted in Chiang Mai province in Northern Thailand, but as a ‘mobile ethnographer’ (Marcus 1995), I also travelled frequently to surrounding provinces for interviews and “events.” During this time, I also documented how the Tai use martial arts, modern dance, and Buddhist festivals as active sites of national cultural production. Previously to conducting dissertation fieldwork, I spent the summers of 2009, 2010 and 2012, doing language study and also conducting pre-dissertation fieldwork in Thailand.

Altogether, I have spent over two years living, studying Thai language and conducting research in Thailand. Language study is an indispensable part of doing good fieldwork and my fluency in Thai helped me navigate the dense bureaucracy of applications and permission to conduct dissertation research by the National Research Council of Thailand. However, I lament

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not having enough time to engage in immersive language study in the Tai language, although I am grateful to have received basic training from volunteer Tai language teachers at a temple in Chiang Mai. Finally, I base segments of this research, especially Chapter One, on the eighteen months I spent conducting interviews with Burmese refugees living in the Hawaii and California from 2008-2010 as a part of a research project documenting the life histories of Burmese exiles and expats in the United States (Sebro 2014).  

**CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITHIN ‘ZONES OF VULNERABILITY’**

Much of what is written about the ethics of doing ethnographic fieldwork comes to us as a result of the ethical and methodological failures we historically see in both the social and natural sciences. The historiography of ethics in ethnography does, however, offer a productive discursive field, within which important questions emerge. How to conduct fieldwork ethically? To what extent is engagement and activism purposeful or necessary in the field? And how to approach the problem of a liberal human rights doctrine within a field based on the notion of cultural relativity? Anthropologists, in particular, seem unusually preoccupied with the ethics of doing ethnographic research, as compared to their sister disciplines, and this is because of the very personal nature of fieldwork, which requires the ethnographer to identify much more closely with her research collaborators. As Robin Wright (1988:365) points out, the notion that social science research ought to become engaged with their research communities is actually a fairly new phenomenon, as "[i]n the past, it was highly unusual for anthropologists to express a

political stance in regards to the societies they studied." But as social scientists, and ethnographers in particular, began the work of unshackling the chains of imperialism and colonialism that had wreaked havoc on many of the communities they studied, a new and "engaged" research ethos emerged. Ethnographers are now more involved in undoing much of the violence and oppression wrought upon the world by colonial domination, while having to come to terms with the fact that the discipline itself was founded on the backs of imperial powers.

Yet despite calls for higher ethical standards and anti-imperialism in the discipline, the principle of "do no harm" during, or following the fieldwork process is not always heeded, and unfortunately, we have seen appalling cases of unethical practices. This dissertation however, takes to task emerging debates about the ethical implications of conducting fieldwork amongst vulnerable groups and in "war-zones." I seek council from ‘engaged’, ‘activist’ and indigenous scholars in order to inform my own research design, and provide a survey of how I think I ought to proceed when conducting my own dissertation fieldwork amongst Tai in the Thai-Burma border-zone. But becoming an "engaged" or "activist" researcher presents its own set of assumptions - namely, that the researcher, by virtue of education, authority and positions of privilege, knows what is best for the research community. This is a highly colonial positionality to take in the research encounter and speaks to a legacy of Western imperialism where white researchers have to "save brown people from themselves," or from those who enslave them as they are somehow incapable of saving themselves (Tuhiwai-Smith 2005).

15 Here, the "Darkness in ElDorado controversy," where the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon was accused of unethical practices and maligning the Yanomami people, still looms large on the conscience of the anthropological discipline (Sponsel 2006).
The dubious roots of ethnography and its nefarious offshoot, unilineal evolutionism, reveal that the method often served as a corollary to the project of colonial domination and the perpetuation of racist science. Colonial mastery-projects also inhered the idea that by knowing something, or someone, you can also control or manipulate that entity, as "[a]ccording to the cultural theorists, the "problem" of indigenous people is that their "backwardness" is due to their traditional cultures, which impeded their development as well as the progress of Western society" (Wright 1988:368). Anthropologists, using the method of ethnographic fieldwork were the perfect tools to make indigenous peoples known and intelligible to European colonists. As a consequence of this legacy, engaged or activist researchers must attend to vast discrepancies in the perceived "usefulness" of their research to the communities studied.

Tuhiwai-Smith notes that,

At a common sense level research was talked about both in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the indigenous world, and absolute usefulness to those who wield it as an instrument. It told us things already known, suggested things that would already work, and made careers for those who already had jobs (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999:3).

As ethnographers acting with conscience, we may not always know the right course of action to take, but I believe we have an ethical obligation to write about injustices, as Philippe Bourgois points out: "Ethnographers cannot presume to speak on behalf of the world's socially excluded, but writing against inequality is imperative" (2006:x). Thus, our ethical commitment, as privileged interpreters, ought to primarily be to the research collaborators with whom we reside, work and collect stories. Some ethnographers question whether there is even a choice in becoming engaged or not, as Monique Skidmore finds, there is "no ethical alternative to becoming engaged" (2006:54). Becoming engaged with is different than becoming engaged on
behalf of our research collaborators. And we must recognize that many indigenous and marginalized peoples have developed viable strategies for managing their condition and forms of resistance on their own terms. Yet academic silence, or reluctance to take political risks with the communities we become involved with, seems like acts of complicity in cases of human suffering and social injustice.

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF VIOLENCE, WAR AND EXILE

"How does an anthropologist write an ethnography (...) without its becoming a pornography of violence?" (Valentine Daniel 1996:8).

When Valentine Daniel returned to Sri Lanka in 1983, he came to record the songs, poems and lullabies of Sri Lankan women who worked on the island's tea estates. Yet, at the time of his arrival, the women were in no mood to sing for the anthropologist, as "the worst anti-Tamil riots known in that paradise" were already unfolding, claiming countless lives, spreading fear and violence across the once peaceful island (Daniel 1996:3). In Charred Lullabies (1996), Daniel asks the uncomfortable but necessary question of how to theorize violence? Where theory can allow us to understand aspects of reality, post facto, but theory never surmounts to reality. As his research drew on it became impossible to ignore the violence spreading, billowing and burning all around him. How does the ethnographer do ethnography when the world he sets out to describe is literally burning in front of him? Indeed, how does the ethnographic capturing of suffering not surmount to a kind of exploitation of it? Many ethnographers have made their careers from seeking out war-torn places and zones of violence for their research and have been labeled "rogue anthropologists" because of it (Bourgois 2003 and Malkki 1995).
Daniel proposes that we adopt the term "anthropography" of violence, instead of the ethnography of violence (1996:19). This shift in signification signals an uncomfortable relationship with the term ethnography - a term that denotes a delimited "ethnos" that can be mapped geographically. But, Daniel contends that there is no geographical and ethnic boundary to violence:

Violence is not peculiar to a given people or culture; violence is far more ubiquitous and universally human, a dark wellspring of signs with which, to be true to ourselves, we must communicate, and also as a force we must hold at bay (Daniel 1996:20).

Yet, in his description of the Tamil (Hindu) and Sinhala (Buddhist) clashes, Daniel does not contend that violence and tension did not emerge from the enhanced importance placed in differences in religion, ethnicity, race and language - these were all tremendously important factors, and it would be inaccurate to describe the conflict without considering the weight that perceived difference carries in conflict. But reifying such categories is a dangerous and futile errand, as "[q]uestions of identity and difference have a way of neither coming to a close nor always taking a predictable path" (Daniel 1996: 16).

Before Monique Skidmore commenced her fieldwork in Burma, she would not yet have characterized herself as an "engaged" anthropologist, but with time, she says she became "an activist-by-proxy" (2006:46). As the Burmese military turned their gaze on her, her work as an ethnographer and her research collaborators, she became captured by the same web of fear that the entire populace feels whilst living under military rule in Burma. Gaining access to doing research in Burma is a daunting task in and of itself as the Burmese military wishes to cast you in the role of either activist or scholar. When I applied for a one-week tourist visa in 2009, my
application was denied on the grounds that I had listed in my resume that I had been a volunteer curator at a local museum. The term "volunteer" sounded the alarm, as it signaled the specter of human rights activism that the military fears, whilst immediately placing me in a category of "academic with activist intensions." I was later given a visa after reassuring the officers that all my previous job entailed was measuring old stone adzes in the back room of the museum, and I had no intentions of doing "volunteer-like" activities during my stay.

It is not at all uncommon for visitors, tourists and scholars alike to feel uneasy while staying in Burma. A brief survey of Burma's history and the atrocities committed by the hands of the military regime there is enough to keep most foreigners away. The vulnerability the Burmese people feel on a daily basis arises from both material and psychological fears of deprivation and persecution. Your position as powerless within a system of oppression determines your apprehension of the world and its affects. Yet very few scholars speak out politically on the subject of Burma, as "[t]o be an engaged anthropologist within the orbit of Burma studies is to be labeled a kind of fringe lunatic, the kind that would hang out with Burmese activists in Thailand and succumb to their emotional pleas for an end to the regime rule" (Skidmore 2006:47). Both Skidmore's work and my own research amongst the Burmese exiles in the United States find that the Burmese expatriate communities condemn "pro-military scholarship" about Burma, and this includes those who simply fail to take the military to task in their writing (Sebro 2014).

Some scholars are certainly anxious of no longer gaining access to the precious archives or field sites upon which they have built their illustrious "area-studies" careers. And indeed it appears that most scholars would rather be "Burma experts" than accept the subjective and value-laden scholarship of ethnographers of the activist variety. These are the most common critiques I
hear from "Burma scholars" of my work at conferences - 1) that ethnographic research is subjective and can never lend itself to true scientific scrutiny, and 2) that I am speaking of a place of emotion, rather than reason when I advocate in favor of my research collaborators. It must be convenient for these deactivated and disengaged scholars to chart about the Burmese map, utterly oblivious to the suffering and injustices going on around them, while collecting heaps of "data" upon which they will build their careers back at the University.

Liisa Mallki (1995, 2007) takes an ethnohistorical approach to the study of exiled Hutu refugees in Tanzania, and her findings demonstrate how life narratives of past violence, trauma and social memory reveal concepts of identity construction, nationalist sentiment and socio-historical consciousness. Her ethnographic study is an attempt to uncover how the "interiorization of history and politics into individual trauma is an oddly universalizing process" for the uprooted refugee subject (Malkki 2007:342). In the case of Burma, we see large-scale migrations of refugee populations over time fleeing the clutches of a belligerent regime, which uses the logic of the autonomous sovereign State System to justify its brutal means towards an end that spells isolationism (Skidmore 2005). Mallkki sees the exiled person as a victim, who is helpless in the face of the massive disruptions of life and eruptions of violence in Rwanda. I will also be faced with the trauma of exile, violence and oppression during my fieldwork, but I intend to also look at the productive capacities of exile - what forms of expression - art, dance, music - are made possible by exile?

Skidmore (2006:49) concludes from her decades long work in Burma, studying the subversive discourses of karaoke and oral performance art, that "the affective milieu [in Burma] is one of heightened suspicious and sometimes paranoia, and gathering information in order to
pass it on to political masters is a familiar norm". But this hostile information gathering milieu does not signal the need to abandon the task of fieldwork altogether. Quite the opposite, as my research collaborators along the Thai-Burma border implore me to tell the world about the Tai peoples, their suffering, their strengths and their plight. There is no option for me to "prefer not to" as the Bartleby formula goes. But there are valuable lessons, ethical codes and technical maneuvers that make possible the task of research in politically dangerous places.

**Can the Subaltern Dance?**

The problem of who has the right to speak, and speak on behalf of, looms large for my project. Here, Gyatri Spivak's (1988:80) evocation of the "problem of the 'permission to narrate'" attends to her penultimate question of "with what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak?" At times, it seems, that in Foucault, the subject is not allowed agency - lest she possesses a European-styled knowledge of the self. This is precisely the problem Spivak so famously refers to when she asks: "On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak?" (1988:37). So the task becomes; how does one describe subaltern lives while using a postmodern/structuralist methodology that has an aversion to 'essentializing' the subject?

When systemic representational violence demarcates the research encounter with subalterity, we can instead form a notion of the body politic as bodies in movement, bodies that are not simply extensions of the subject-mind, but the habitus of history presenced in the flesh. So, in lieu of the present project, I ask, if the subaltern cannot speak, can she dance? Where
words fail, perhaps movement begins. Words attempt to re-present, whereas movement expresses. This is where I hope to make a small entrance to answer Spivak's question, by asking: can we use our bodies, along with our voices, to express resistance? Can an embodied approach to fieldwork decolonize the encounter? Can the researcher dance with, rather than re-present subaltern peoples? Might dance be an entry-point towards a decolonized academy? I argue that it is. In Chapter Six, as well as in the conclusion, I explore this proposition further by attending to the notion that intellectuals and subalterns, can indeed meet and dance.\footnote{In Osage dance societies this proposition is also considered possible, whereby the researcher finds a decolonial space within dance where he may engage more meaningfully with subalterity (Warrior 2011).}

**CHAPTER SUMMARIES**

This dissertation is meant to be read as a rhythmic exercise, whereby both tempo and temporality changes between and within each chapter. Throughout, Deleuze and Guattari’s question of what holds things together underpins the dissertation and becomes the pivot around which I talk about Tai aesthetic life and nationalism. *The Overture* presents this philosophical departure and situates my research within the context of the Tai refugee and migration situation along the Thai-Burma border. *Chapter One: The Affect of Exile: Digital Counterpublics in the Burmese Diaspora* is undoubtedly the outlier in that it does not take dance as its central object of knowledge, rather it looks at resistance discourse. In order to understand the history of resistances in Burma it is essential to also grapple with the rich affective and activist discourse being produced by Burmese in exile, so *Chapter One* maps the development and current state of Burmese exile and expatriate online discourses about politics in Burma. I argue that the role of expats and exiles in affective discourse production
about Burma has been a major contributor to the policies, legislations and attitudes of host-nations as well as the emergent changes we see in Burma today. This research is based on my own virtual ethnographic work as an observer and participant in Burmese online forums and spaces since 2009.

Chapter Two: Dancing the Nation: The Re-casting of Identity and Becomings of Tai Peoples is a narrative historiography of Tai peoples. I argue that there is an intensified focus on the performing arts for Tai while in exile – an emergent cultural renaissance that can be seen amongst many indigenous groups I begin by mapping who the Tai are as a people – their linguistic, geographic, historical and cosmological becomings, and ground this history within the life histories as told to me by research collaborators. This not a comprehensive genealogy of Tai culture, but rather an introduction for the reader to place the narratives and subjects of this dissertation in a diachronic framework.

Chapter Three: Dancing in the Shadows: Gesture, Movement and Silence attends to the ways in which Tai peoples discursively and performatively articulate resistance to colonial and state enterprises. By looking at three forms of practice – gesture, movement and silence – I argue that Tai discursive networks and forms of aesthetic expression are highly innovative and effective modes of embodied resistance praxis in the border-zone.

Chapter Four: Interlude: Tai Movement Aesthetics, is an intermezzo stage wherein the reader may engage with narrative, image, dance notation and the author’s fieldnotes. I look at four forms of Tai movement aesthetics: Fon Tai (Tai dance), Fon Jerng (Tai martial arts), Jaad Tai (Tai dramatic opera), and Poy Sang Long (the novice ordination ceremony).

Chapter Five: Necromobility/Chronomobility looks at forms of mobility that come to bare on the nation-state, including what I call necromobility and choreomobility, which are
migrations occasioned by the politics of death and dance. This chapter is only slightly altered and based upon the essay “Necromobility/Choreomobility: Dance, Death and Displacement in the Thai-Burma border-zone” (Sebro 2016), which was published in Event Mobilities: Politics, Place and Performance.¹⁷

Chapter Six: “‘Woman, Animal, Other’”: Gendered Assemblages and Staged Authenticity, attends to the micro-politics and staged authenticities of performance. I delineate the ways in which dance is a staged aesthetic, always mediated by the politics of practice, geopolitical space and the grammars of modernity. I critique notions of traditional, versus modern dance and examine how Tai performance art are at once performed as a exoticized touristic display in capitalist spaces and also as a way to evoke the Tai nation while in exile. I argue that forms of dance that may be deemed ‘traditional,’ are in fact being used in innovative ways to express resistance.

The Postlude: Towards Performatic Mobilities expands on the implications of embodied research through dance for political theory. I conclude that performance art constitutes what I call “aesthetic nationalism,” which holds the potential for maintaining forms of sovereignty for exiled peoples.

DISSERTATION LACUNA

This dissertation is only a minor opening and there is much work that needs developing. In future research, I hope to gather more concrete data on the Tai population in the Shan State in Burma, to which I had no access during my field research, as this part of the world remained, at

the time, closed off to foreigners. I expect with political changes in governance underway in Burma, that the Shan States will become open to tourists and researchers within the next few years. Still unclear to me is how the dance functions within Burma, as opposed to in the diaspora. Due to constraints of time and resources I was unable to immerse myself in the Tai dance known as kinnaree, or the peacock dance, which is considered the highest achievement within the Tai regime of arts. I also only observed, but did not train in the Tai martial arts and hope to return to Merng Tai in order to receive such training, which would greatly benefit my understanding of the Tai arts. I seek also to foray into the vast holdings of the British Library, and the libraries at SOAS and Oxford, which hold dossiers pertaining to Upper Burma and the Shan State from the colonial era, as well as scriptures written in Tai, which may hold the key to understanding how the dance is described as being insignificant at the turn of the 19th century (Milne 1910), to gaining the kinds of rich meanings it does at the present time.

Of interest also, is finding new methodologies by which we can understand the political economy of temporal mobility. A sub-ethnographic project to the present one, would look towards the micro-politics of migrant labor phenomenologically. In future research, I hope to explore the possibilities of temporary work as a migrant laborer in Thailand – as a maid, construction worker or as someone who applies pesticides in agricultural fields. Further this project does not deal in-depth with the militarized resistance movement in the Shan State, and if this kind of research becomes feasible in the future, I will travel to Doi Tai Leng, where the Shan State Army-South has its rebel military encampment to collect data on the armed ethnic struggle.

[...] As I sit here I dream of my homeland
The land that I will never see again.
It is safer in this foreign land,
I dream of the past and how things were
Before the soldiers came...
The misty mountains and the cool clear air,
The sound of wind chimes from faraway temples,
The smell of a wood smoke in the neighbouring field,
The stream nearby where we bathed and swam,
The cocks crowing just before dawn,
The evening butterflies that flew around me
As I helped to round up my father’s buffaloes.
And then, home was somewhere we had to run from
Just to survive
When the soldiers came...
- Excerpt from “In Exile” by Feraya

Figure 3 "Goodbye Homeland" by Feraya

The above poem and painting were created by Feraya, an exiled blogger, artist and social media activist from the Shan State in Northern Burma who regularly publishes art, poems, stories and political analyses on her blog Taigress, on her Facebook profile, and in various online forums in order to promote awareness around the injustices experienced by ethnic minority groups in Burma. Feraya, along with approximately 2 million refugees fleeing the harrowing violence and uncertainty that has ravaged Burma for decades, is a part of an increasingly interconnected and influential group of exiled Burmese minorities who actively use social media to discuss political issues pertaining to their home states in Burma.

In Burma, the vicissitudes of war, violence and economic uncertainty, have, in the past half-century, deterritorialized its people and set in motion a politically potent body of critical online narratives. In an age when scholars are attempting to theorize the implications of media on globalization, migration and the maintenance of ethnic identities (Bernal 2005, Pidduck 2012 and Chowdhury 2008), the Burmese diaspora offers insight into the process of producing political discourse while in exile. Affective images and texts represent a digital counter-public (Warner 2002), within which exiled and expatriate Burmese connect with other socially engaged social media practitioners to voice dissent, resistance and solidarity. This chapter attends to the growing body of affective discourse produced by exiled minority Burmese and argues that this body of affective texts and imagery influences political shifts and public perceptions about Burma, as well as how diasporic Burmese understand themselves.

Charting the development of diasporic Burmese becoming activated through the creation of digital publics has implications for our understanding of the events leading up to the 2007
Saffron Revolution and the subsequent years leading towards political reform in Napiyadaw.

After nearly five decades of military rule, Burma began in 2010 to transition towards a civilian regime with normalized economic and political relations with its neighbors and the international community (Pidduck 2012). However, Burma now faces the difficult process of national reunification, reconciliation and the return of refugees – a process that will likely take decades. The government has lost credibility and is still looked upon with suspicion by a Burmese populace that will forever remember the kinds of crimes committed against them by the Tatmadaw, an autocratic military regime that reigned supreme from 1962 until the 2010 elections. The horrors of that era are still ongoing for ethnic minority groups, like the Tai, who resist incorporation into an imagined pan-Burman nation-state.

The release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in 2010, followed by the provision of amnesty for two hundred political prisoners, permitting workers to collectively bargain, and the establishment of a Human Rights Commission, heralds a new era in Burmese politics – one not defined solely by the military’s abuse of power, but also by a widening of politics and the gradual loosening of restrictions on the public sphere (Simpson 2010). Though, only a small percentage of Burma has access to the Internet, pressing on-line communication is flourishing in the diaspora, and it is these new social media – blogs, Facebook, Twitter and others – that are, arguably, responsible for generating the changes we are witnessing in Burma today (Cadell 2014, Chowdhury 2008).

What were the events, movements and conditions of possibility that led up to this change in the Burmese political landscape? This chapter seeks to answer this question by exploring the historiography of affective texts produced by exiled Burmese and charts the development of digital activism in the Burmese diaspora.
DIGITAL COUNTERPUBLICS

Some have claimed that it was the increased use of social media, coupled with international sanctions, and finally, the 2007 Saffron Revolution that caused the current shift towards democratization in Burma (Pidduck 2012, Chowdhury 2008). Therefore, attending to the everyday digital activism of Burma’s many minority peoples who live abroad, but are actively invested in Burmese political discourse production, helps us understand how this shift became possible. The Burmese government officially recognizes 135 “ethnic races” and 118 languages in Burma (Gamanii 2012, Ethnologue 2014). This diversity is represented in the diaspora where minority groups are involved in the production of dense networks of discourse through social media, blogs and websites. Minority counternarratives, or narratives that disrupt official state-sanctioned accounts, serve to effectively pluralize discourses about Burma and often undermine how the state and the majority ethnic Burman population frame events and politics. How do Burmese ethnic minority groups in the diaspora use new media and social networks to discuss politics and issues affecting their homeland and to what effect? How might social media use by ethnic minority groups change our current perceptions of what constitutes public discourse and its sphere of political influence?

My research traces various tracts of resistance discourse, staged through various media by Burmese diasporic groups, to uncover motivations for creating counter-publics both amongst Burmese abroad and within Burma (Warner 2002). This is an ethnography of the new kinds of

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21 The Burmese government officially recognizes 135 ethnic “races” in Burma. However, this number is vehemently contested by ethnic minority groups, like the Shan (Tai), who argue that the actual number is closer to 70 (Gamanii). They point out that the military regime has attempted to unnecessarily divide groups or have even counted some groups twice, and this is “evidence of its lack of credibility and incompetence in counting the ethnic groups of the country it is governing” (Gamanii 2012).
digital communities that are both seen as emergent and continually produced by actor-network relations through social media. It is a response to Michael Warner’s concept of “publics and counterpublics,” understood in relation to Jürgen Habermas’ notion of the “public sphere” (Warner 2002, Habermas 1991). Habermas’ promise of a public sphere – an arena of discourse where agreement and common judgements could be found within the public authority of the state – are expanded upon by Warner and others, to include marginalized peoples who do not wish to organize themselves around the centrality of the state (Habermas 1991, Warner 2002, Fraser 1990). As Warner notes, publics are self-creating networks that are organized through discourse:

[… ] a public is never just a congeries of people, never just a sum of persons who happen to exist. It must first have some way of organizing itself as a body, and of being addressed in discourse. And not just any way of defining the totality will do. It must be organized by something other than the state. (Warner 2002, 414)

At the time of Warner’s writing, the Internet had yet to reach its current status as a “new public sphere” (Lynch 2012), and Warner (2002) left open the possibility of a digital counterpublic emerging in the age of new media and the Internet. This chapter seeks to explore this opening by extending the notion of the counterpublic to the discourses produced in the Burmese diaspora through online social networks.

As Burmese scholar Zaw Oo notes, the dawn of the digital age has put into motion groups that before lacked a basis on which to act and provides a voice for groups in need of a medium to express dissent: “The role that modern information technology plays through the various mass-communication channels of satellite television, free radio, and other media, in helping pro-democracy movements around the world – the “CNN effect” – is widely recognized (2006: 241). The Internet, with its vociferous capacity for mass dissemination has now become
the medium of choice for many diasporic movements (Schein 2002, McLagan 2002, Ginsburg 1991, Messieh 2014 and Bernal 2008). Social movements that are in need of organizing forces to convey urgent messages find an easily accessible and relatively anonymous medium through social media, blogs, list-serves and news outlets.

In Egypt, following the uprisings of 2011, the Swedish based web service Bambuser was favored by protesters as a potent means of broadcasting the ongoing struggles at Tahrir Square (Messieh 2014). The rise of the citizen journalist, who records and disseminates events and injustices on the ground, may not have an immediate or even measurable effect on public policy, but the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings and the Saffron Revolution, or even the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, teach us that these accounts matter, they are noticed in public discourse and feared by the state (Chowdhury 2008, Messieh 2014 and Bernal 2005). New and digital media, and in particular local or indigenous forms of new media, offer a possible means “for reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption” (Ginsburg 1991, 92). The production of discourse through new media outlets among exiled diasporic groups fleeing from those massive forms of disruption provides a potent platform from which to advocate policy change, maintain group coherence and voice dissent (Oo 2006). These discourses of resistance have a productive capacity for challenging the ideas and practices of host-nations, which leads politicians to make policy changes and individuals to take a stance on the “Burma question”.

The term “resistance discourse” is understood here in response to Foucault’s (1979) discussion of “regulative discourses” in Discipline and Punish. Foucault discusses the inherently productive qualities of power, whereby resistance in discourse and action springs forth from the position of subjugation within the power structure (Ibid). There is a “plurality of resistances”
(Foucault 1979, 96) that carries a creative capacity for framing new discourses that speak against the hegemonic forces of the nation, economy, and society. The disciplinary regimes that pervade and regulate the social order in Burma have created a mass impetus for the ‘exit option’ in the Burmese populace and those who have left the country commonly engage in forms of counter-discourse articulation while abroad. Resistance discourse is voicing dissent as a means of exercising individual agency and articulating counter-responses to the regulative discourses of the nation-state. In an attempt to understand the forces through which resistance discourse are created and maintained, I further discuss Foucault’s notion of power as something with emancipatory potential as it accompanies resistance, which is a particularly productive discursive modus operandi (Ibid).

Resistance discourses are the self-generating and productive capacities of discourse that surface when individuals begin “voicing” or expressing dissentience against an oppressive power polity. The new and creative distinction that online mediums have afforded Burmese groups in exile is a relatively visible place from which they can exert agency and establish audibility in foreign semiotic arenas. It is important to avoid the fixing of power as a system of binary opposition; however, where we only speak in terms of the dominated or the oppressed, rather than seeing the continuum of complex levels and spaces of interaction. The matrix from which power springs gives as it takes away and in divestment springs new strategies for resistance.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The Burmese diasporic “community” is not viewed here as a fixed or coherent group “from which to safely circumscribe potentially infinite webs of connections” (Amit and Rappport
where diasporic Burmese share an interest in knowledge production mediated by online sites of interaction. The boundary is necessarily blurred here between on and offline communities and communication in order to reinforce the idea that they both exist in a continuum of exchanges and knowledge production, while recognizing that “[m]ultiple participatory frames and identities are available and are used by a wide variety of Internet users in a wide variety of contexts” (Wilson & Peterson 2002, 457-8). I refer to the people who have participated in this project as my “research collaborators,” rather than interlocutors or informants. I do this in order to emphasize the collaborative nature of this project, where I position myself as a student of my collaborators, rather than as a “researcher,” which carries with it connotations of colonial relationships of subjectivity (Lassiter 2005).

Ethnographers have lamented the lack of attention paid to social media in social science research, while also pointing to the methodological difficulties with doing virtual ethnographies (Arno 2009; Spitulnik 1993 and Wilson and Peterson 2002:450). This study puts forth an analysis of online media outlets by evaluating content from blogs and social media, while situating this content in the context of greater historical currents of the Burmese diaspora and grounding it in ethnographic data gathered while conducting fieldwork with the Burmese community in the United States and in Thailand. As Wilson and Peterson point out, “the Web has created a new arena for group and individual self-representation, changing the power dynamics of representation for traditionally marginalized groups…” (2002:462). Which, in turn, makes the repositioning of the ethnographic gaze onto new media fields or “technoscapes” within which communities use mass media as sites of practice, an essential part of doing ethnography in the current age (Appadurai 1996).
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BURMESE DIASPORA

The first waves of migrants to leave Burma came after the 1962 military takeover by General Ne Win, who implemented a socialist programme that was discriminatory to nearly all ethnic groups other than the ethnic Burmans (Fink 2001, 29). In this first wave, Burmese migrants were understood as economic refugees; often of Chinese descent; merchants and well-educated people who no longer saw a future for themselves in Burma. Though many were considered elites in Burma, the road out was often wrought with difficulty, as the expatriates were not allowed to bring with them any wealth and frequently had to travel to another Asian nation before coming to the United States or to Europe. These upwardly mobile groups were in many instances able to gain economic and social stability in their respective host-nations. Mg Lu Lay, a pseudonym, is a Sino-Burman student at the time, left Burma for Hong Kong some years after the Ne Win regime came to power and eventually settled in Hawai‘i, where he has been able to achieve success in his career and raise a family. He tells me the story of why so many young Burmese left the country during the Ne Win-era:

So, we voted with our feet and we left Burma. At that time we were young and aggressive, and there was no future for us because the education, medical facilities, everything was deteriorating. The time clock was stopped since 1962. Whereas the neighboring countries are slowly progressing, Burma is not making progress anymore (2009).

Mg Lu Lay is a part of a generation of expatriates who left Burma due to the deterioration of the education, health and economic systems, but also due to the discriminatory policies that he says “were very oppressive and there was no freedom of speech.”
Those early migrants, many of whom were from well-educated and elite families in Yangon and Mandalay, had the resources to afford to travel and subsequently were often able to make a life for themselves outside Burma. Many of my research participants in United States who left during the Ne Win-era have become successful business owners, doctors and educators (Sebro 2014). However, this was not the fortune of the famous ’88 generation – the students who, after the devaluation of the Kyat in 1988, took to the streets in protest (Zaw Oo 2006, 235). This citizen’s uprising resulted in Gen Ne Win stepping down from power and elections to be called. But substantive change in government never materialized as the military led to a brutal crackdown on protesters that resulted in thousands dead and many more imprisoned (Fink 2001, 55). During this time, protesting students and activists fled towards the Thai border to escape further persecution by the military and many still remain in refugee camps or have sought asylum in Western nations (Oo 2006, 236).

Despite the unrest of the late 1980s and early 1990s there seemed at last to be a glimpse of hope in Burma. A young Oxford educated woman had returned from her teaching position abroad to tend to her ailing mother. Upon seeing the political turmoil in the streets of Yangon, she was compelled to enter the political scene. As the daughter of Burma’s national hero Aung San, the martyr who negotiated sovereignty for Burma from the British in 1947, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as a natural leader and is well-loved by the people of Burma. She ran for office in the election of 1990 and her party the National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide victory. However, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) did not recognize NLD’s victory and quickly usurped power and the nation received a new dictator, General Than Shwe, who soon took the helm of the new military regime (Fink 2001, 69). The pro-democracy groups never recovered from the blow and were subsequently persecuted by the military, leading
many into exile abroad. Internal problems persisted in the NLD and other pro-democracy parties, as the organized opposition groups “remained weak, harassed, divided and suffering from lack of effective leadership and experience, including how to approach negotiations and build consensus” (Bauman 2007, 11).

Today, the steady stream of refugees and economic migrants continues. Many students from well-off families in Yangon seek higher education in the United States. There is a divide in the level of engagement for expatriate (economic migrants and students) and exiled refugees in their participation in political organizations and in online forums. In Hawai‘i, nearly all research collaborators I have spoken with are from Yangon, are of ethnic Burman or Sino-Burmese descent and come from relatively well-off families. They do not engage with online communities that espouse resistance discourse as frequently and with the same level of participation as exiled Burmese living in the mainland United States, in Europe and in Thailand. As a community of practice, expatriate Burmese have less of an impetus towards political organization and many cite fear of repercussions for their families in Burma or for themselves should they ever return.

THE EMERGENCE OF BURMA’S DIASPORIC DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

Ethnic minority peoples in Southeast Asia are currently engaged in fierce negotiations over territorial boundaries that were drawn upon formerly fluid geopolitical terrains. This remapping of the political space leads to re-inscriptions and reconceptualizations of ethnic identity categories due to successive eras of colonialism and now an era of aggressive nation building. As a consequence of this newly rigidified space, we see mass migrations stirring
throughout the region. From Burma especially, an exit outward is occurring, leading to enclaves of Burmese migrant settlements in neighboring Southeast Asian nations, in Europe and in North America. These exiled and expatriate Burmese have in the past 30 years actively used online media platforms to garner support for, and drawn attention to, the plight of displaced Burmese peoples.

Below, I outline specific moments of Burmese diasporic online discourse production, which illustrate how diasporic Burmese use new international and virtual arenas to contest the Burmese state. The first was the exiled Burmese responses to the 1988 student uprising in Burma, which ushered in a period of online independent media activity aimed at changing United States trade policies with Burma. The second case study examines the aftermath of the 2007 “Saffron Revolution,” when thousands of Burmese monks and civilians took to the streets in protest of the military government’s decision to halt fuel subsidies, a decision that led to a dramatic increase in the nation’s fuel prices. The peaceful protests were acts of defiance against the oppressive military junta and therefore met with a brutal crackdown. Despite the totalitarian control of the media in Burma, several rogue journalists, known as ‘VJs’ (video-journalists), working for the Democratic Voice of Burma, recorded the protests and subsequent violent opposition from the military and released their footage on the Internet – leading to a mass movement of global support for the protesters. Lastly, I examine the use of social media by Shan (Tai) exiles and expatriates, focusing on the documentation and affects of disruptive violent events in relation to the possibility of a digital counter-public sphere (Warner 2002). This discussion allows us to more easily understand the interactions exiled and expatriate Burmese have had with digital media in the past, interactions that today make possible counter-public discourse production through social media.
THE BOYCOTT PEPSI CAMPAIGN

During the period from 1988-1990, Burmese research collaborators recollect that there was a near total media black-out in Burma: schools were shut down, only government newspapers ran, but without government oversight, people barricaded their neighborhoods and research participants recall men taking turns guarding their homes from thieves; Marshall law unfolded and Burma became isolated from the outside world. Ma Kyin Mi, a Sino-Burmese student in Hawai’i, recalls her experiences during those years:

In 1988 there was big political changes, […] I had to remain home from school for one year. We suffered for one year. Throughout high school and middle school we were afraid – there would be a problem and the school had to close (2009).

Finally, in 1990 the military called for elections, which resulted in the landslide victory by Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD party. However, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) annulled the election outcome and placed Daw Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest (Fink 2001, 69-71). The world heard little about the events happening in Burma before early 90s, but with the revolution in Internet technology, smaller Burmese news outlets such as BurmaNet began to emerge and soon larger news networks, such as the BBC and Bangkok Post picked up their stories. By 1994, BurmaNet was the first online news source to document human rights abuses in Burma - it was to become the first of many such “outside” news agencies based in Thailand (Chowdhury 2008, 7). Upon seeing images from Burma and hearing frequent newscasts, the ’88 generation of exiles who had fled Burma to Western nations or to the Thai border began to mobilize.
One such mobilization was lead by Maung Zarni, a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin at Madison at the time. He created the group Free Burma Coalition (FBC) and began disseminating information about Burma through interest list-serves, websites and blogs (Zaw Oo 2006, 244). The student groups launched several online campaigns as their constituents grew. Their most successful and visible campaign was the Boycott Pepsi Campaign.

The Pepsi Boycott came about as cyber activists in the United States and along the Thai-Burma border began to actively voice concern over foreign investment firms operating in Burma. The All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF), a group of exiled Burmese students based in Thailand, was the first to call for a boycott wanting “to discourage foreign investment in Burma until civilian, democratic rule was restored” (Cooper 1997). Later in 1995, Maung Zarni, along with a host of other exiled Burmese students and concerned Americans, organized a National Day of Action, which grew to later become an International Day of Action for a Free Burma (Chowdhury 2008, 10). Most of the participants had never met before, but joined on this day to voice their common concerns about the political situation in Burma and to call for a nationwide boycott against companies making a profit from their dealings with the Military.

By the late 1990’s, twelve states, Massachusetts being the first, and several universities across the United States, including Harvard, University of Wisconsin, Northwestern and more, had passed selective purchasing agreements that precluded any companies with investments in Burma (Chowdhury 2008, 10, Zaw Oo 2006, 245). Their campaigns also caused the US Congress to take a stand on ‘the Burma issue’ – passing selective purchasing laws, and strict import-export laws on products moving to and from Burma (Zaw Oo 2006, 245). With the exception of Unocal and some other foreign oil and natural gas companies, American companies
made no new contacts with Burma until recently with the 2010 elections and the current move to liberalize the Burmese economy.

In the 2000s, however, Maug Zarni began to question the previous exuberance of the boycotting campaigns that had led to international economic sanctions against Burma, citing the impossibility of true reform when neighboring countries such as China and India “categorically refuse to jump on the sanctions bandwagon” (Zarni 2006). He states that “[o]ver the past two decades, the West's threats have merely hardened the regime's resistance to reforms,” and it is with some irony that the website of the Free Burma Coalition, the same group that only a decade earlier ardently fought for foreign economic boycotts, now states: "Economic sanctions—a form of protest against the government's human-rights abuses—have made the country even poorer" (Ibid).  

**The Democratic Voice of Burma**

*A multidimensional media is essential; at least freedom of expression is essential for democracy in its truest form.*

(Joseph Allchin, journalist for the Democratic Voice of Burma)

Beginning in 1992, with the advent of the Boycott Pepsi campaign, diasporic Burmese became accustomed to organizing effective counter-publics through online-forums.

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22 Free Burma Coalition ([http://www.freeburmacoalition.org/](http://www.freeburmacoalition.org/)) now supports foreign economic investment in Burma and are even endorsing the return of tourism to the country, something that was condemned by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and others as something that would only serve to line the pockets of the Military. Now the Free Burma Coalition site states: "Free Burma Coalition supports fully tourism and travel to Myanmar (Burma) as part of its support for the emergence of an open society.”

23 Personal Interview, August 2012.
The Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), a non-profit media organization that publishes news and resources on affairs relating to Burma through their online publication, satellite radio and television stations, was established by the Norwegian Parliament to, “provide accurate and unbiased news to the people of Burma” and “impart the ideals of democracy and human rights to the people of Burma” (Democratic Voice of Burma 2014). DVB is a major source of news for Burmese expatriates and exiles living abroad. In addition to their online news site, DVB transmits satellite TV broadcasts into Burma that reaches thousands of Burmese with satellite TV access. As the Chiang Mai based DVB journalist Joseph Allchin explains in an interview, DVB is “quite a successful model of how communities and small underrepresented voices can get their voice heard and get their message out to a whole movement.” DVB as an organization has an impressive web of interconnected journalists, political supporters and news consumers. In 2010 the DVB was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Peace and it was rumored they were one of the top three contenders for the award (Allchin 2010).

Research collaborators cited DVB as one of their main sources of news and information while in Burma and also while living abroad. When asked about their thoughts on DVB some research collaborators in Hawai‘i used such terms as this is news from “the other side”, and some admitted using DVB as a news source, but did not want to be quoted as doing so because DVB was at the time illegal in Burma. DVB presents a window into the news that is unfettered by the Burmese military censors, and so for young students like Min Lee who says, “For news about Burma – I got the news primarily from DVB. I go there whenever I have a chance. Every time something is going on,” DVB becomes a way of seeing the Burma from the outside-in and provides a stark contrast to the censored media in Burma.
There is a concern in the Burmese expat community about polarizing discourses and a preference for neutrality in political matters – “keeping one’s emotions out of it” and “knowing both sides of the story” are common tropes encountered in interviews. Ko Htin Aung, a Burmese student in Hawai’i feels that too much of the exile media is caught up in the emotion of dealing with the often-painful Burmese past:

If he wants his work to be effective, then he has to put aside his emotions. Those who are critical of the government without logical sense, but with emotion – they get emotional satisfaction – but this is not effective, not for the good of the country.

Many expatriate Burmese seem to have this reaction to the discourses produced by exiled Burmese media groups – who are often more outspoken and appeal to sentiment. They also express that they used several other news-sources such as BBC news, Voice of America, The Working People’s Daily and the New Light of Myanmar while in Burma – but as Ma Kyin Mi notes, people most commonly relied on word of mouth news reports: “Most information just comes from the community – most is hearsay. Information about the political situation – have to get from outside sources.”

Due to self-censorship and the fear of being noticed by Burmese intelligence officials, most research collaborators did not want any mention of their thoughts, opinions or even knowledge of “outside” news sources in the final version of interview transcripts. This is the common conundrum in conducting fieldwork with the Burmese community – sometimes the most interesting information provided about politics, history and the media cannot be conveyed in publications, because if identities are inadvertently revealed, the penalty for using forbidden online media such as the DVB could be punishable by seven to fifteen years of prison in Burma (Chowdhury 2008, 8). This self-erasure of opinions and ideas about the media highlights the
extent to which news of/in Burma has become an extremely sensitive arena for discourse production.

THE SAFFRON REVOLUTION AND THE IMPACT OF BURMA VJ

In 2007, the price of fuel increased and people began assembling small protests in Yangon and Mandalay. Buddhist monks organized peaceful protests while refusing to accept alms from the military. Suddenly, images of monks clad in saffron robes peacefully walking through the streets of urban Burma were circulated worldwide on YouTube, Facebook, BBC News and in the Burmese exile media blogosphere (Chowdhury 2008). The image of the monks protesting brought a message of hope and defiance. Monks in Burma are the most revered and respected figures in public life and they are the only social group in Burma that the military hesitates to use violence against – as harming a monk is considered a great demerit in Theravada Buddhism (Fink 2001:55).

When images of military violence against the monks and the peaceful protesters emerged, Burmese peoples along with the international community expressed outrage – whilst others paused to question how these images and videos had been recorded and disseminated so widely. The images were recorded by DVB’s “undercover” reporters or ‘video journalists’ (VJs) – armed with handheld video cameras, they infiltrated protests and skillfully documented the military using violent force against monks and civilians. Film director, Anders Østergaard, was visiting the DVB office in Thailand when reports of the 2007 Saffron Revolution began ticking in and began working with the DVB in order to create a documentary movie about the movement
Burma VJ created enormous interest at various international film festivals and received an Academy Award nomination for best documentary film in 2009.

Burma VJ is a powerful documentary text because it depicts discursive instances in which the visual medium of the handheld video camera is able to capture the sheer brutality and bodily violence that occurs in Burma on a regular basis. Research collaborators note that certain forms of reporting seem to portray events as they really are. These are usually from reporters using street-level video recordings of political events, rather than reporting the news with the polemic rhetoric of human rights and democracy promotion. As in John Fiske’s discussion of the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles, the low-quality undercover video tape made each video into a “media event” – an event ascribed with a “different social reality from an event that is confined to the immediate conditions of its occurrence” (1996, 126). We become engaged in the “realness” of the event through the medium of the handheld camera or “videolow” – where the “lowness” of the technology carries with it “a sense of authenticity” in relation to the disempowered masses of protesters facing armed military personnel with tanks on the streets of Yangon.

VJs captured images of drowned monk’s bodies laying face down and bloated in a dirty river; a Japanese photographer being shot at point blank; masses running from the military police and Burmese citizens shouting at the camera man “Film them! Film them!” In an age when media technology has become so advanced that we watch news reporters in space-ship like news-rooms with touch screens, special effects crews and high-definition cameras – the “videolow” medium causes a sense of unmediated rawness in the news-event. Where we can question the edited, high-tech or “videohigh” broadcasts as being “spun” or distorted by technology and the biases of media producers, there is no questioning the motives of the
Burmese VJ whose hand quivers as he risks his life to capture a fleeting moment of military brutality against his fellow countrymen.

**BURMA ON/OFFLINE**

A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, and awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public but a dominant one. And the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public, or to the hierarchy among the media (Warner 2002, 423-424).

Over a decade after most of the world was already well equipped with fiber optic cables and telephone circuits servicing Internet access, Burma finally became introduced to the Internet in 2000, albeit under stark government regulation (Thiha 2010). The Internet penetration rate remained exceedingly low for another decade, with only “300,000 Internet users in Burma in 2010 (roughly 5 percent of the population), while “Burma’s fixed-line, cell phone, and internet penetration rates remain[ed] below 1 percent” (Open Net Initiative, 2010, 433, cited in Pidduck 2012). A research collaborator recollects having the Internet installed in his Yangon home:

“… in the year 2003, I think, I had the internet installed at home […]. Because you see, in Burma having Internet at home is something special. Because in Burma, the installation fee is 2000 dollars for Internet […] and the annual payment is 40 dollars and monthly is 35 US dollars. And our GDP per capita is 270 US dollars!” (Personal Interview 2009)

My research collaborator endured this expense, he says, in order to facilitate his children’s education, by allowing them the opportunity to research for schools abroad and to do academic research online. The Internet, was then, and still is not used as an effective means of political
activism inside Burma. Although some activists, like the Burma VJs, have effectively been able to upload content to the web in order to reach foreign news media. Just as in Egypt during the 2011 uprisings, at times of political unrest the Burmese military would block internet access: “the country’s two ISPs mysteriously failed at the height of the Saffron Revolution in 2007, and the 2010 election period saw significant internet slowdowns and interruptions” (Thiha 2010, Pidduck 2012). Due to high connection costs, censorships and unstable connections, the Internet in Burma has yet to become accessible enough to the general populace to create a digital public.

S O C I A L  M E D I A  A N D  T H E  B U R M E S E  D I A S P O R A

Online communication technologies are a major contributing factor to the creation and maintenance of Burmese communities of practice. Burmese exiles and expatriates employ multiple overlapping strategies such as maintaining list-serves, creating websites, blogging and as is especially favorable among university students, using Facebook. During my time at the University of Hawaii, I befriended many of the Burmese students living in Honolulu, and also become Facebook “friends” with them. Burmese students use Facebook to stay in touch with one another, share photos and also, on occasion, as a free medium through which they can express their political dissent online. With the research collaborator’s permission, I have been allowed to quote one of her Facebook “status updates” which came in the wake of the Saffron Revolution:

“the name was changed, the capital was changed, now the flag was even about to be changed .. the only thing Burma needs as a change is the stupid retarded brainless mathaf--kin military government!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
These are the heated and condemning words of a twenty-year-old girl, who, during our first meeting, declared herself apolitical and did not want to become involved or make statements on the politically charged affairs of Burma. However, in the relatively guarded and discursively unfettered sphere of her private Facebook account, her dissentions are released with forceful semantics. Facebook becomes the actant, or the node of mediation between the technological (or immaterial) and the individual that sets into motion complex discursive interactions between online news reports and the Burmese exile/expat community of practice (Law and Hassard 1999). In this instance, the research collaborator is lamenting the announcement from Burma that the military officials have changed the Burmese flag from the original socialist flag introduced in the Ne Win era to a new design. Her frustration is compounded by the military’s change of the nation’s name from Burma to the Union of Myanmar in 1990, a move seen by most Burmese as illegitimate in lieu of the botched election where Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD part clearly won the popular vote. Additionally, the military, along with General Than Shwe’s astrologer, decided in 2008 to move the nation’s capital from Yangon to Naypyidaw, a rural outpost in the central part of the country to keep it safe from foreign invasion by sea and strategically close to the troubled minority states in the unstable north (Varadarajan 2007).

**AFFECT AND FACEBOOK: MURDERS IN SHAN STATE**

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24 I chose not to attribute a name or pseudonym to quote out of concern for the research collaborator. The research collaborator provided permission for me to use the quote, though anonymously.
One main characteristic of a counterpublic is that it is self-organizing (Warner 2002). Facebook, being a platform upon which users willingly self-impute their biographies, is a virtual space where publics are made rather spontaneously and beyond the control of the state. Facebook, in itself, as a social media platform is not constitutive of counterpublic discourse, but it can become a conduit of crowd activation. Meaning, that there are moments of punctuation, when users become “activated” by events, ideas or movements and use the medium as a discursive political tool, rather than as a place of recreation and entertainment. One such moment of punctuation occurred when a story about two murders in the Shan State began to emerge on social media.

The Shan State murder story began with a posting found on a Facebook group called Shan and other Burma Ethnics Human Rights, a group dedicated to “spread global awareness and support and promote the human rights of the Shan and other ethnic groups of Burma.” The group has 19,313 members as of December 2014 and receives an average of 5-8 posts from its active members daily. Posts range from the celebratory – congratulating each other on the Tai New Year – to offering links to news stories pertaining to human rights abuses in Burma, especially in the Shan State. On November 15th, 2014 three alarming photos appear at the top of the group page – immediately recognizable as the dead bodies of two young men. One lays at the foot of tree, bound and blindfolded, his shirt soaked in crimson blood. The other lays face down in a ditch, deep in the woods, in a pool of his own blood. Both men had their throats slit, both were wearing civilian clothes, neither could have been a day over 25. Outrage over the images follows in the comments section below. The Facebook group members are confused about the

details of the murders, but no one seems surprised. A member writes, “Fuck !! Burmese Military.. Cut All Their Neck,” and another “They are brotheren to isis,” referring to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, a known Middle East based terrorist group. I ask for more details about the murder, and another person replies:

“[… ] this image is the person who dead is Shan citizen and don't have mistake was killed by Burmese soldiers in the forest, his name is ' Par Gi ' in Shan native language, thank for that you want to know this case, I also be a Shan native person, thak you very much that you would want to know, if you understand that I describe above this case so please share to international community about Burmese militaries are misarable on Shan native, if you share to international communities I will be please, thank you very much” (Facebook 2014).

My own sense of outrage about the murders prevents me from staying disconnected from the story. I now feel obligated to share with the “international community,” whatever that means, this tragic story. I download the images, take screenshots ask for permissions from posters and send the story off to journalists I know who work in the Thai-Burma border area. The next day the story appears in the Shan Herald Agency for News (S.H.A.N) under the heading “Nong Khio-based government troops slit throats of 2 Shan villagers.” I doubt it was my email that tipped them off as their story had a great deal more background information than I gave them. But it was clear that “the story” only became newsworthy after these images were circulated on social media and garnered palpable outrage. Ironically, the images were actually taken by Burmese soldiers themselves who were later captured by the Shan rebel army:

We get these photos from some of the electronic devices and computers that we seized from the Burma Army troops. These photos were taken by the Burmese soldiers themselves. One of the civilians who was killed, Sai Tun Kin, was a porter for the Burma Army troops. During the fighting he fled from the Burma Army and came to our troops. That was when we were being attacked and retreating from a position, so we were in a rush and asked him to flee to a safer place and return to the village he came from. Since he was not a soldier, it was not appropriate to take him with our troops, and at that time there was shooting going on. But we found out that he was amongst the two
civilians killed, when we went to the funeral in the village, and I felt really bad,” said Major Sai Tip from SSPP/SSA (S.H.A.N. 2014).

Extrajudicial killings in Burma are common and ongoing, despite a new outward image of Burma as a peaceful Buddhist tourist destination. The murders in the Shan State make incomplete the reasoning of Warner (2002) when he speaks of a counterpublic made up of textually based discourse production, and also Benedict Anderson (1983) when he speaks of an “imagined community” forged within the cauldron of the print-press produced nation state. Such text-centric analyses are forgetting the kind of harrowing violence that so often characterize the struggle for sovereignty and the right to self-determination for marginalized peoples (Bernal 2005). The textually centric way of understanding how publics are formed also forget the visceral affects of the image and of shared senses of communal outrage.

We ought to understand the Shan State murder cases and their surrounding discourse, not just as the development of a Warneresque textually based counterpublic, but also as something closer to Achilles Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, where “vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe 2003, 40). The violence wrought in the struggle over sovereignty, cannot adequately be expressed through discourse alone. The affective dimension of the struggle for a life during autocratic rule in Burma must not be forgotten as for many Burmese involved in the ongoing struggle, “Death in the present is the mediator of redemption. Far from being an encounter with a limit, boundary, or barrier, it is experienced as “a release from terror and bondage”” (Mbembe 2003). Reports of murders and injustices that once would have been forgotten – fated to forever remain in the shadows of Burma’s communications impasse – have since the 2007 Saffron Revolution steadily become salient through the use of new technology and social media.
Following the current boom in communications infrastructure development and economic liberalization projects in Burma, it will not be long before much larger segments of the Burmese population gains access to the Internet. Only time will tell how Burmese will embrace and direct this media access. With the disbandment of government private media censorship laws in 2012, Burma now stands poised to generate new and more radical digital publics (Fuller 2012). Though, with 48 years of press censorship in place and still lingering repressive censorship laws such as the Electronic Transactions Law, a law carrying a jail sentence of 15 years for distributing digital information that “lowers the dignity of any organization or any person,” Burma’s media future is painted with cautious optimism (Ibid). As reporters have been, and continue to be jailed under the current media laws, journalists are understandably still guarded and weary of these recent promises of “free speech.”

AFFECTIVE COUNTERPUBLICS

*Affects transpierce the body like arrows; they are weapons of war. The deterritorialization velocity of affects* (Deleuze and Guattari 2010:9).

The affective dimensions of war, violence and displacement are often ignored in traditional political discourse, especially in discourses surrounding policy and security studies. Burma studies have been marked by an obsession with future oriented scholarship, where the question that clamors loudest is “what will Burma’s future hold” (Aung Thwin 2008)? However, inquiries into the political, economic and democratic future in Burma must also account for the
affective worlds of Burmese peoples, especially those who must live with the presence of, or
memory of rape, violence, displacement, persecution and death.

In the aftermath of the 2007 Saffron Revolution, and before the 2010 regime “shift,”
fighting flared up between Tatmadaw (the Burmese military) and various ethnic rebel armies in
Northeastern Burma. The rebel armies from Shan, Kachin and Wa states had refused an offer
from the military junta to become incorporated into their ranks (McCartan 2009). Tatmadaw
answered this refusal by intensifying attacks on ethnic minority groups in the region, causing an
estimated 37,000 refugees to stream into the Burma-China border (Ibid). Around the same time
of this flare up in fighting, Feraya, an exiled Tai living abroad, posts this poem to her Facebook
account:

I could still hear the gunshots
And my mother’s terrified screams
They tortured my brothers and my dad
They raped my mother and my sisters
And left them all to die.

Eight years had gone by since that day
The soldiers came into our village
There were twelve of them
Not much older than I
They were shouting and boasting
As though they were drunk
“Come on, lads, let’s do it”
Two of them held back
But the oldest one said
“That’s what we’ve been ordered.”
They did not see me as I hid
I tried to shut out my mother’s pleading
And cries of terror from my sisters
As they murdered my brothers and my father
As though they were dogs.

My grandma said that I should leave
To be safe and to start a new life
She sent me across the border in a cart
And that is how I can tell my story.

I want the world to know I am not alone
In having an experience of this kind
Every night and every day
My countrymen, women and children
Are suffering the same way
Having to endure
Brutality
Persecution
Rape
Torture
Execution
At the hands of Burma’s Military Regime.
(Excerpt from Feraya’s poem “A Girl’s Story”)

Events have impact because of sudden shifts in perspectives, ruptures and punctuations – these shifts are charged with affect, force and potentialities – what Lauren Berlant calls the “becoming-event of the situation” (Berlant and Greenwald 2012). The production of affective online discourse on social media creates temporary affective counterpublics, which produce shifts in the becomings of an event (Warner 2002). However, we must be cautious not to equate affect with action, though the affective also is the political, these changes are marked by subtleties of thought and action that may not be easily registered as change. As Berlant cautions, “shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world,” but they do the work of changing the world of perceptions (2012, 116).

CONCLUSION

This chapter brings to the fore the affective dimensions of public discourse on Burmese politics and I have done so through an examination of historical, ethnographic and virtual
discourse production through virtual media. The political changes we see in Burma today, namely gesturings towards civilian and democratic leadership, owe much to the activist work done by exiled Burmese. Through active and ongoing discourse production online, host nations have gained a keen awareness about the injustices wrought by the military junta, and their work has garnered widespread support from the international community.

The era of the late information age is creating a discursive arena within which diasporic, exiled and expatriate groups begin to espouse ideas about emancipation, justice and resistance through social media, and in effect, they are forming affective counterpublics. The changes we see happening in Burma are of course emergent – based on decades of activist work both from within and outside Burma. By tracing the political activism of Burmese abroad, we are able to see how these exiled and expatriate communities are actively participating in and organizing through social media and networks. The affective potentialities of a social media network emerging in Burma in the coming decade are immense. As Joseph Allchinn notes,

A majority of the Burmese population is born under the military dictatorship. Very few know democracy and that applies particularly to the exile population. I think for there to be democracy there needs to be some kind of reconciliation for it to be a safe place to come back to and that hopefully and that can only come about through an open media where discussion is possible (Personal Interview 2009).

In 2014, the social media company MySquar announced its entrance in Burma as the first Burmese language social media platform tailored specifically to Burma’s youth (Cadell 2014). Ooredoo and Telenor have signed agreements with the Burmese government to provide 3G telecommunication infrastructures in the coming year. Change will happen quickly in Burma and as Internet access increases, we can expect to encounter more narratives and affective discourses via social media in the future. Following this rapid urbanization and technological development in Yangon and Mandalay, ethnic minority groups outside the metropoles will likely be the last to
receive Internet access in Burma, but in a sense they were the first. It was the ethnic minority groups who migrated to the borders who began using the Internet as a tool for public discourse in the diaspora. It is this heterogeneity in discourse production on Burma that has created forceful affective counterpublics through online and social media.

This chapter has challenged the notion that the public sphere is organized by discourse alone – by pointing to the violence and upheaval that so often mark the struggle for sovereignty – we must also attend to the corporal and affective realm of how publics are produced and maintained. There is a violence-affect-discourse assemblage that currently effectuates Burmese counterpublics. As Mbembe points out, “What connects terror, death, and freedom is an ecstatic notion of temporality and politics. The future, here, can be authentically anticipated, but not in the present. The present itself is but a moment of vision—vision of the freedom not yet come” (Mbembe 2003, 40).
Politics in Burma are changing, but only symbolically. There is not real change in Burma. Things have changed by a few percentage points, but only in Yangon and Mandalay. In the Shan State the struggle remains the same.  
– The Venerable Abbott of Wat Dong (Personal Interview).

**MUAY SAI’S STORY: FROM CAMP TO STAGE**

On the night of my first performance as a part of the Jaad Tai theatre ensemble at the temple where I had been studying the dance, I meet Muay Sai backstage. She is a beaming woman in her late 40s and she wears small white flowers neatly tucked into her perfectly coiffed bun atop her head. She carries a bag filled with colorful Tai costumes – bright pink, yellow and green pastels that spill out around her space behind the stage. That night, in the hustle backstage, Muay Sai sits me down in a corner and begins to tell me about herself while she tries to fix my unruly hair: “You know, I have been an artist since I was ten years old and when I perform in the theatre, I don’t think about if I am rich or poor. It is what I love.” She goes on to describe with a lowered voice, “It is very difficult to speak about this. Often we don’t have enough to eat,” she pauses and a sadness comes over her otherwise joyous face. I listen as she opens up about her life, something we would go on to do many times throughout my stay in Northern Thailand. Then, the stage manager calls her name from the curtain and she rises from her seated position on the floor. “It is time for me to dance,” she says and we agree to continue our conversation another time. Tonight is for dancing and singing. She dons a bright pink costume with embroidered yellow flowers and heads for the stage where she dances and sings with calm stately poise. Muay Sai seems to me the epitome of grace, kindness and skill as she effortlessly
moves about the stage – singing, dancing and dramatizing her people’s stories. She eventually agrees to take me on as a student – a journey that brings me further into the wonder of this art form, but also brings me to the place where Muay Sai spent seventeen years as a refugee – in the Koung Jor refugee camp along the Thai-Burma border.

In the dark of night on May 20th, 2002, the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) advanced on Burmese Tatmadaw military troops in Southern Shan State in Burma. What followed was thirty-two days of civil war and local people had to abandon their homes and possessions to avoid the fighting. Many fled to neighboring Thailand, bringing only the possessions they could carry on their backs. Muay Sai, who lived in a village where the fighting broke out, tells me that, “We fled to Thailand in the night – and went to live in a refugee camp.” She was alone with her three-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son – her husband had been captured by the Burmese military. She says, “They gave us 20 minutes to pack up everything and flee. I pushed my daughter up the mountain as she cried.” Six hundred people fled to Wiang Heng District in Thailand that night. The groups took shelter in monasteries and those who did not flee were reportedly killed, tortured, imprisoned, or forcibly relocated.26 Although Thai authorities gave them permission to stay in a temporary shelter area on the Thai side of the border, they did not give them permission to stay long-term in Thailand and the authorities plan to repatriate the refugees if the armies reach a ceasefire agreement.

The SSA-S opened fire with the intent to end the Burmese Army’s, which calls itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), harassment of villagers and their troops. The area in southern Shan State, along the Thai-Burma border, was designated in the post-1988 era as

a “liberated zone” for internally displaced Tai, but the Burmese army was intent on controlling it. According to research collaborators, the Burmese Army wanted to reclaim this part of Shan State, which housed sympathizers of the rebel armies, as well as victims of the Burmese government’s draconian discriminatory policies against the civilian ethnic minority and dissident population. The Shan State Armies are the strongest rebel military groups left in Burma and they protect the vast area of upland North-East Burma that encompasses the territories of the Tai, Kachin, Kayah, Pa-O and several more ethnic minority groups. In the preceding years the Burmese government had attempted to sign ceasefire agreement with the ethnic rebel armies, but General Yawt Serk, leader of the Shan State Armies refused to surrender.

The six hundred refugees eventually moved to Koung Jor, a piece of land owned by a monastery that was converted to house the refugees, and many continue to reside there. Koung Jor means “happy hill,” but many of the residents there struggle daily to subsist. The camp exists unofficially, and it is not registered by the UNHCR or any other refugee-granting agency. When I visited the camp in spring of 2015, one camp elder stood outside his small thatched roof house pointing to the two mountains looming over Koung Jor. He tells me that on one mountain the SSA-S has its military encampment and on the other the SPDC has theirs. The looming presence of war on the horizon is a constant reminder of what awaits the refugees should they attempt to return to their homeland. Thailand allows the refugees to stay in the camp, but does not confer them “refugee status,” choosing instead to designate the area as a “temporary shelter.”

Muay Sai lived for seventeen years in the Koung Jor refugee camp – subsisting from donations from strangers and the help of a few grassroots non-profits such as Shan Women’s Action Network (SWAN). During this time, she sought solace in theatre and art. Muay Say began teaching traditional Tai dance in the refugee camp, and she would later be hired to
perform at Tai festivals and Buddhist holidays. Muay Sai tells me that the former General of SSA-S, Khun Sa himself summoned her to take part in a traveling group of Jaad Tai performers. Jaad Tai is the traditional Tai dramatic opera and it was an art form that was quickly dying out in the Shan State due to rampant displacements, war and constant oppression by the military. Even teaching the Tai language in schools had become forbidden in the Shan State, which had forced both language- and performing arts to be taught underground. As the leader of the resistance movement, Khun Sa recognized the importance of a strong arts regime in keeping the exile community in Thailand together and therefore commissioned the troupe.

In 2012, Muay Sai and her daughter were able to move out of the refugee camp and she now takes on odd jobs for hire in Chiang Mai – as a cook, or as a Tai Opera performer. She lives in a small cramped room in the city that she shares with her 19-year-old daughter. Life outside the refugee camp is not easy for Muay Sai – often she complains that she only has enough money for one meal a day, and she says, “The police watch us and make sure we don’t go anywhere.” Yet, in dance she finds a sense of purpose, as she explains: “I don’t do it to become rich, it is what my heart loves. Sometimes, I think I don’t want to do it anymore. I get scared easily. Whenever I hear gunshots my heart hurts. Then I hear a song and I want to go sing and dance.”

Despite her fractured sense of identity, up-rootedness from her homeland and the sadness she carries with her, Muay Sai’s narrative provides a platform from which she can construct a sense of self in relation to her world. She brings meaning into the lives of others though her teachings and in her stage performances. She also understands how profoundly important it is for her to carry on as an artist – not despite her precarity as a refugee – but because of it. This chapter is meant to provide a narrative voice to the movements and historiographies of the people I encountered while conducting fieldwork in Northern Thailand amongst Tai exiles. Their
narratives tell a layered, more complex history. The narrative genre promises to tell this multilayered, composite history, that, as Ochs and Capps note, “bring multiple, actual selves to life” (Ochs and Capps 1996, 19). Through the narrative of Muay Sai, we learn not only of the conditions that underpin life as a Tai refugee, but also the conditions that make a life replete with significance. This is what Judith Hamera calls “wordless stories” (Hamera 1996, 64), or the stories that women tell through the sublime movements of their bodies, that re-describe and re-inscribe memory as visceral, rather than textual. Muay Sai embodies not just the pain and suffering of her people, but also the beauty of an art form that otherwise may not carry on without her. When asked if she ever plans to return to Shan State, she tells me: “I don’t want to go back to Shan State. I need to stay here and raksaa – take care of – the arts,” which demonstrates the particular weight of responsibility Tai performing artists carry forth in their everyday lives and practice.

This chapter brings to the fore a narrative historiography of Tai peoples, and situates their lives within the context of the Burmese post-colony and subsequent migrant life in Northern Thailand. I argue that there is an intensified focus on the performing arts for Tai while in exile – an emergent cultural renaissance that can be seen amongst many indigenous groups – that have been uprooted from their ancestral lands or forbidden from practicing their arts (Silva 2004; Hamera 1996; Davis 2005). I begin by mapping who the Tai are as a people – their linguistic, geographic, historical and cosmological becomings, and then ground these contested histories within the life stories and oral narratives as told to me by Muay Sai above, Tao, Waan and other research collaborators. This not a comprehensive genealogy of Tai culture, but rather an introduction for the reader to place the narratives and subjects of this dissertation in a diachronic framework. Throughout, I attempt to allow my research collaborators to guide the way their
histories are being re-presented, by looking at how the individual’s life history informs how we understand the past. Here I draw upon Ty Tengan’s conceptualization of critical ethnography, which “‘entails taking both process and product into realms beyond the purely descriptive’ by engaging in analysis of injustice and inequality” (Tengan 2005, 248), as well as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), who asserts that in order to write in ways that are ‘decolonial’ we must re-position the native as an active contributor and collaborator in the research process. In what follows I map the fragments of Tai history from the colonial era until the present, while seeking to locate my research collaborator’s lives within the telling.

WHO ARE THE TAI?

_We must know ourselves – Tao (Personal Interview)._ 

The peoples who now inhabit the vast and mountainous Shan State in Upland Burma, are believed to have migrated from Yunnan province in Southern China around two thousand years ago and settled in Burma’s fertile low-lands and inland valleys (Scott 1983, 194). The Tai peoples’ traditional territory overlaps Southern China’s Yunnan province, Northeastern Burma’s Shan State, Thailand’s three northernmost provinces Mae Horng Son, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, as well as some areas of Laos, Cambodia and even Assam State in Northeastern India. Several groups are encompassed by the ethnonym Tai, including the Dai in China, Ahom people in Assam, India and Tai Lü, Tai Dam, Tai Khün, Tai Nü, Tai Yai in the Shan State in Burma.

27 In James G. Scott’s _Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States, Part I_, he notes that “migrations of the Tai into Burma probably began two thousand years ago, although Shan and Burman tradition place the irruption several centuries earlier” ([1900]1983, 194).
You can also find large enclaves of Tai peoples in Northern Thailand where they are mostly called Tai Yai and Laos where they are called Lao. These are speakers in the Tai-Kadai language family, and Tai is considered the proto-language of Thai. The word ‘Tai’ is believed to mean human, pointing to the possibility that for some time, being Tai in this part of the world simply meant, *being*. It is estimated that the Shan State has a population of over eight million people, a majority of whom identify as Tai, which makes them the largest ethnic minority group in Burma besides the Burmans (Kam 2011).

Sir Edmund Leach, in his seminal ethnography on the Kachin and Shan peoples of Highland Burma, writes that "I would claim that it is largely an academic fiction to suppose that in a ‘normal’ ethnographic situation one ordinarily finds distinct ‘tribes’ distributed about the map in orderly fashion with clear-cut boundaries between them"(Leach 1954:290). The Kachin of Burma are concurrently bounded by their ethnic status as Kachins, but no less by their ethnic status in relation to neighboring tribes (or nations) such as the Shan or the Wa. Their cosmological construction of belonging are permeated by crosscutting hierarchies which are simultaneously continuous and changing, enabling many Kachins to at once be Shan, Burmese, clan-members, members of various speech communities and have a multifarity of religious and political affiliations (Leach 1954). Leach’s argument for widening the scope of identity interpretation is not new, but given the ways in which nation-states increasingly demand identarian uniformity and assimilation, it behooves us to give renewed emphasis to the concept of membership as being an inclusive category of overlapping ideas and interests rather than an exclusive grouping denoting static relationships and affiliations.

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28 Linguists have posited that according to the glottochronology of Tai-Kadai speakers, their language can be traced to the Austronesian expansion, whereby Tai peoples are linguistically connected with the proto-language of Asian and Oceanic speakers via Taiwan (Sagart 2004).
**Figure 4 Map of Upland South East Asia**

**Colonial era**

> O'er these vast regions see a varied throng
> Of thousand unknown nations crowd the coast;
> The Laos both in lands and numbers strong,
> Avas and Birmahs in their mountains lost,
> And savage Gneos, scarcely seen among
> The deep recesses, where the barbarous host
> On human flesh with brutal hunger feed,
> And with hot iron stamp their own-rude deed!
> Camoens, Lusiada, Cant. I., cxxxvi
The uplands of Southeast Asia have long been considered a dark, mysterious and dangerous frontier (J. C. Scott 2009). Colonial literature, built upon anecdotal and orientalist conceptions of “the native” (Said 1985), as well as the careful attempt to measure and surveil unruly subjects (Appadurai 1996), presents a strange historiography of Upper Burma during the colonial era. It is an account of colonial magistrates lamenting the “rude” and “savage” (Elias 1876); “defiant,” “uncivilized and ignorant” (Scott and Hardiman 1899, 361) natives of the Shan State and its environs. Up until and well into the colonial era, the Shan State was ruled by a series of princes called Jaopha (Lords of the Sky). The Jaopha system of feudal princedoms, at times, paid tribute to the Burmese monarchy, but was not ruled by the Burmans. During this time the princes administered large agrarian regions in the fertile valleys and lowlands of the Shan States. The Jaopha have historically resisted attempts to incorporate them into larger empires such as the Han Chinese, Ayutthaya in Thailand or the Burmese kingdom, yet they often build alliances to prevent their own overthrow. When the British Raj took hold of Burma in 1858, the Shan States remained nominally sovereign, but the princedoms of the Jaopha would eventually fall to the encroaching British who waged constant warfare in order to subsume larger and larger territories into their mercantile empire. Upper Burma and the “Frontier Areas,” which included the Shan States, were eventually added to the British Raj’ administrative gaze in 1886.

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29 As quoted in Elias, Nay. Of The History of the Shans in Upper Burma and Western Yunnan. Calcutta: Foreign Department Press, 1876.
30 For a more comprehensive discussion of the historiography and political origins of the Tai peoples and Shan States, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation, see Yos Santasombat, Lak Chang: A Reconstruction of Tai Identity in Daikong. ANU E Press, 2008.
As I began reading the colonial narratives from the Shan States that emerged during the period from 1886, when “Upper Burma” was considered to have been “conquered” by Britain, I discovered at first rather disappointingly, that there was little congruence with the religious fervor and cultural production of theatre, song, and dance that I was witnessing along the Thai-Burma border in the descriptions. There was certainly scant mention of dance. At first, I thought this might be simply because arts and performance were not considered interesting topics to the colonial administrators, who otherwise kept busy documenting every minutiae and activity concerning their British subjects. That is, until I came across the following line from the ethnologist Leslie Milne’s *Shans at Home*,

*In the Shan States women never dance, and men only do so in connection with some religious ceremony* (Milne 1910, 125).

I had to read it again and return to the short section entitled “Dancing at Festivals,” to which Milne devoted just one page out of her two hundred and eighty-two page ethnography. She describes how during festivals in Shan State, “women go at once to the temple to pray” whilst “the men form a large circle in front of the monastery and all day long and far into the night they dance” (Milne 1910, 125). The men, according to Milne, dance furiously and curiously throughout the night; “They wave their arms and give curious steps, hops, and kicks, in a slow, and sometimes ludicrous manner” (Ibid). She is very likely describing the form of Tai performance art called the *Lai*, or *Lai Jerng*, which is a complex martial arts indigenous to the

31 Towards the end of the 19th Century, British administrators in Burma compiled gazetteers which contained voluminous reports on topics ranging from geography, history and the arts, to economic, taxation and even, local rebellions. In particular, the work of Sir James George Scott, who compiled five volumes of the *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States* (1899) is comparatively impressive in its scope, with over three thousand pages of astounding detail devoted to the inner workings of life in the Shan States.
Tai, which I detail in Chapter Four.\textsuperscript{32} I further found that this account was highly puzzling since what I was witnessing amongst Tai peoples today was a systematic and intensive emphasis on the arts, and a festival culture within which dance, song and movement aesthetics were embraced by both women and men, perhaps even more so amongst women. This meant that in the space of one hundred years, physical culture amongst the Tai had changed dramatically, especially concerning gender.

When ethnologist Leslie Milne visited Shan State in 1906, in order to write the extensive travelogue \textit{Shans at Home}, she further notes that,

Shan have a refine of their own, and their standards are high, for they place religion, the study of their scriptures, and a temperate life on a higher level than money or the comforts and luxuries that money brings. Their lives are very happy. […] Starving people do not exist, and there are few “unemployed,” because any man or woman may easily learn a livelihood by asking for jungle land, by clearing and cultivating, and by selling the produce that is grown upon it (Milne 1910, 140).

These mid-colonial descriptions point to how life in Shan State was, possibly for a time – between the Burmese Wars and up until independence – relatively stable. Yet the author wholly overlooks, or chooses to ignore the violence that lead to the establishment of the semi-autonomous Shan States, and she finds no indignity in the Jaopha being forced to cede their powers to British Superintendents, “who check any tendency to extravagance on the part of the Sawbas [Jaopha]” (Milne 1910, 1987). This speaks to the imagined sense of “homogenous empty time” the colonial mentality seeds, whereby as Dipesh Chakrabarty, following Benjamin,

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\textsuperscript{32} Sangkham Yangyhod (2013) in \textit{Shan Martial Arts (Laay Jerng, Laay Tai)}, mentions that his guru and Lai Jerng teacher came from Tangyan township in Northern Shan State, which is not far from Hsipaw and Namkham where Milne conducted her research. Yangyhod (2013, 153) describes how his teacher of ninety years old can trace the art form back three generations, meanings that at the time of Milne’s stay in this region, Lai Jerng was being taught here.
reminds us “...time is empty because it acts as a bottomless sack: any number of events can be put inside it; and it is homogeneous because it is not affected by any particular events; its existence is independent of such events and in a sense it exists prior to them. Events happen in time but time is not affected by them (Chakrabarty 2009, 73). So, naturally the colonial disposition of the visiting ethnologist scoffs at the prospect of the Tai mounting a resistance movement against the British:

Natives desirous of freedom from British rule should seriously study the past history of their States; they would then realise the uncertainty, the unstable and perilous conditions of life under the old regime. [...] The Shans are at present content to be ruled by Great Britain, though here and there a Chief may long for a more despotic power (Milne 1910, 187–188).

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to launch into a full treatise of the various resistance movement that can be traced back to the turn of the 19th century in Upper Burma, but there certainly are lengthy documented reports of both peasant (Thawnghmung 2012) and sangha (monk) (Scott and Hardiman 1899) rebellions in the Shan State. One particularly thorny monk caused enough distress for the British administrators that Sir James George Scott, writes in the Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States (1899):

Another monk, who was conspicuous in several plots and risings against the British Government after annexation and who is still at large, was U Parama. He was a Danu (Burmese-Shan métis) by race, and native of Mong Yai, the capital of the Shan State South Hsen Wi (Theinni). [...] U Parama affords an example of affection for the State rather than for the Church, for a letter was sent to him from the Thathanbaing in Mandalay advising him to be reconciled with the British Government

James C. Scott (2009) understands the hill peoples of upland Southeast Asia as being non-state actors; they are those who resist incorporation and prefer not to be subjects of nations. Contrary to Milne’s colonial assertion, the Tai do not long for “despotic power,” rather they long
for as little power as possible – as escaping the desirous gaze of Burman, British or Chinese suzerainty has kept them from being subsumed by these powers during the last two thousand years (Milne 1910, 187). The Tai have historically inhabited the lowlands of Upland Burma, where they for centuries were ruled by Jaopha and therefore were considered state actors by Scott, who distinguishes them from the “hill peoples” such as the Akha, Kachins and Pa-O. Indeed, Tai peoples practiced low-land intensive rice cultivation, rather that slash and burn and the Jaopha system was one of monarchical hierarchy and organized rule. Yet, it is now well recorded that the Tai have undergone a series of mass displacements over the past five decades (Santasombat 2008). Much of the traditional land of the Tai peoples has been claimed by the Burmans, or the Shan State Army groups in order to cultivate opium as a cash crop (Derks 2012). Other displacements have occurred due to mining and damming actives in the Shan State. There are also several reports, and my research collaborators have confirmed this, of the Tatmadaw forcibly relocating villages to urban centers like Taungyi, Laishio, Panglong or Kengtung in order to 1. disrupt village support for local rebel groups, 2. to take their land and resettile Burmans instead, and 3. to use Tai farm land to cultivate cash crops such as opium-poppies. This points to an important shift in how we ought to characterize the Tai peoples in the post-Jaopha era – as non-state actors, rather than state actors.

The mass migration of Tai peoples over the past decades points to their refusal to be incorporated into the Burman-controlled state, and while many have been internally displaced in the Shan State, approximately 200, 000 have fled to Thailand. Yet, few of my research collaborators expressed any desire to be incorporated into the Thai state – even those who have been living there for several decades. Many expressed the desire to return to Shan State now that fighting in certain areas of the Shan State has ended. I argue that Tai peoples, at this time, may
best be described as non-state actors. They do not seek the government protections of any one state, though they do aspire to a future time unto which they will be sovereign to themselves. They are, like most of the hill peoples of upland Southeast Asia intensely weary of attempts for state control. That being said, there are continuous attempts by elite Tai in exile, often descendants of the Jaopha rulers, who have attempted to stake claim to the right to autonomy from Burma based upon the Panglong agreement.

**Military Era**

After the Japanese occupation of Burma receded and the British, exhausted by war in Europe, finally transitioned power to the Burmese nationalists, there was at last a moment of reprieve from the perpetual occupation and war civilians had endured over the past century. In February of 1947, a conference that would forever alter the relations between the Tai and the Burmese was held in the township of Panglong, in the Shan States of Upper Burma. Here the head of the Burmese interim government, General Aung San, signed the *Panglong Agreement, 1947*, with the Shan, Kachin and Chin ethnic minority groups that would allow the frontier areas “full autonomy in internal administration” and would pave the way for a peaceful, unified and democratic Burma.\(^{33}\) Yet the sense of calm would not last long as the various ethnic groups, who showed little allegiance to the Burman majority rule, quickly began to stake claim to their own territories through armed rebellions. Only six months after the agreement was signed, General Aung San was assassinated along with other cabinet members and agreement signatories. The

Shan State also faced an invasion by the US-backed Chinese Nationalist KMT in 1950 which was brutally suppressed by Burmese forces.

In 1962, after Jaopha of the Shan States expressed their desire to assert rightful autonomy of the Shan State territories, as per the Panglong Agreement in 1947, General Ne Win of the Burmese Army instituted a draconian and homicidal military coup d'état (M. Smith 1999). The coup proceeded by the systematic capturing and presumed execution of several Jaopha and their families. The detailing of this is well documented in the memoir of Inge Sargent, former Mahadevi of Hsipaw, whose husband Sao Kya Seng was the Jaophalong (Great Prince) of Shan State (Sargent 1994), as well as in the memoir of Henri-Andre Aye, son of parliamentarian Namkham U (Aye 2010). A dark period of authoritarian military rule was ushered in from 1962 until the elections in Burma in 2010. Oppressive military totalitarianism was punctuated only by a brief glimmer of hope in 1988 when elections were held and Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the nation’s hero General Aung San, became the Burma’s elected leader. In Chapter One, I detail how the election was usurped by General Than Shwe in another military coup d'état that would send the Shan State into further civil war that is still ongoing.

Burma has been a slow killing field, not swift and totalizing like in Pol Pot’s Cambodia or as between the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. It is very difficult to ascertain the exact numbers of civilians killed or displaced as a result of the ongoing violence, as there had been no reliable census in Burma before 2014. The Shan State Army-North and the Shan State Army-South, founded by Sao Nang Hearn Kham, the Mahadevi of Yawghwe and wife of Burma’s first president, continue their offensive against the Burmese Military forces (O’Shannassy 2000). A kind of perpetual war has reigned in the Shan State, which, now can claim that it is home to the
longest running civil war in the world (Campbell 2016). My research collaborators would often carry photocopies of the Panglong Agreement in their purses and share the document with me during conversations, as indisputable proof of their claim to a nation unto which they will someday be sovereign unto themselves.

THE POLITICS OF EXONYMS

We want to be called Tai. Some people say we are Burmese, we don’t accept this.

-Num Tho (Personal Interview)

To outside observers, it is difficult to ascertain the “correct” toponyms and ethnonyms to use when referring to geographies and ethnicities in Burma. Burma, of course, refers to the Burman people, the ethnic majority groups that make up a majority of Burma today. The British titled the territory as Burma, which is actually a cognate of Myanma – in Burmese Bama(r)/Myanma(r) are used interchangeably. In the past decades there has reigned great controversy in whether scholars or officials ought to adopt Myanmar or keep Burma. I believe neither term is correct, as each attempt to erase the many ethnic groups who stake claim to sovereignty within these territories, but are denied this right by the Burman elites, militaries and authorities. After having lost the elections to Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD), following the student uprisings of 8/8/88, an unelected junta illegitimately sized power in Burma. The military junta calling itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), changed the nation’s name from Burma to The Union of Myanmar. Most nations and organizations, including the United Nations, now use Myanmar. I, however, continue
to use Burma as that is how the vast majority of the Tai research community in Thailand refers to the nation-state.

Scholars referring to the Tai peoples of Upland Southeast Asia most commonly use the word Shan. Shan, however, is an exonym that the Tai peoples themselves largely reject. The Burman ethnic group uses the word Shan, which may be a cognate of Siam, and refers to the Siamese (Thai) people, with whom the Tai are linguistically and culturally similar, but historically distinct.34 Others have argued that Shan is more likely a cognate of Han – referring to the Han Chinese whom, centuries ago, the Burmans conflated with the Tai living in Upper Burma and Yunnan (Scott [1900]1983, 205). The term Tai however, is a self-referential name that encompasses a heterogeneous group of peoples who are descendants or speakers of the proto-Tai language and include the Tai Yai, Tai Lue, Tai Dam and many other Tai/Dai ethnic groups. When speaking colloquially, Tai peoples in Northern Thailand tend to use the self-referential Tai, and the usually only use Tai Yai (Great Thai) to distinguish themselves from Thai citizens, with whom they share linguistic markers.

I use Tai in order to honor the wishes of my research collaborators from the Shan State in Burma, a vast majority of whom responded that they prefer foreigners to use the endonym Tai, rather than Shan, when referring to the peoples of Shan State and its diaspora. I choose to use self-referential categories, or ethnonyms, that the Tai peoples themselves use, although it is important to note that these are by no means fixed categories. When speaking about a pan-ethnic identity, the category of Tai inclusively refers to all Tai language speakers throughout Upland Southeast Asia, including Southern China, Burma, Thailand and Laos. The struggle over naming

34 Here it may also be noted that the word Siam is also an exonym: “a barbarous Anglicism derived from the Portuguese or Italian word Sciam” (Scott 1983, 205).
in Burma is compounded by the fact that the Burmese military government has so far recognized 135 ethnic minority groups, many of whom vehemently challenge the authority of Burmans to stake claim to suzerainty in Burma. It is important that scholars recognize these challenges and by all means necessary adapt the usage of ethnonyms in order to allow any ethnic groups to self-determine their identity.

**THE TAI NOW: ARTS REVITALIZATION MOVEMENTS**

The Tai are predominantly Theravada Buddhists, but practice this branch of Buddhism slightly differently than their Burmese or Thai neighbors. Tai incorporate elaborate animist beliefs, as well as ancestor worship, into their daily religious practice. Tai are also infamously superstitious, with an extensive numerological belief system that is sometimes physically inscribed on the bodies of practitioners through tattoos (Conway 2014). Elder Tai are highly invested in the preservation of the Tai arts and the continuation of the culture through the next generation. They worry about what they perceive as a loss of values, denigration of tradition and collective forgetting due to successive wars, displacement and the adjustments to life as a migrant in urban centers. Tao, a research collaborator in exile, laments that in Shan State the people are not permitted by the Burman authorities to overtly practice their arts, or learn their language:

We don’t know about our own history. We only know our culture and our language, but they don’t want us to know ourselves. They don’t want us to be smart (Tao, Personal Interview).
Tao, as well as other cultural practitioners, are a part of a movement of young Tai migrants living in Northern Thailand who are actively working to revitalize the ancient Tai arts, but in a decidedly modern manner. He goes on to explain how the desire for a cultural revitalization movement, is also a desire to emulate ‘the nation’ as he understands it in other countries like China:

Other countries have arts. Chinese have kung foo and karate. We want to be like this. We want them [the students] to see the benefits. Tai people have to look for food. Life as a refugee is very hard. You can’t always study the arts. Not many people have time. I find this very sad. We want them to know the importance of the arts. If foreigners come to see our arts, we need a school to teach our arts. We want to have a place where we can show our arts and teach (Tao, Personal Interview).

This speaks to an effort and desire to classicalize Tai arts in order for, as Sao Khun-Hti Laikha terms it “finer forms of cultural expressions […] be developed” and “the Tai/Shan culture […] be modernized further (Laikha 2007). As this cultural revitalization movement is underway, it is also entangled in the often veiled and complex histories of the migrant individual. Below I impart one such individual trajectory – that of Waan – a woman born in a bomb-shelter, but who now is at the forefront of the Tai arts and dance scene.

**WAAN’S STORY: BORN UNDERGROUND**

On the night Waan was born, Burmese soldiers were advancing on the small township in central Shan State where Waan’s parents lived as subsistence farmers – growing rice and soybeans. The Shan State Army – the rebel fighters – were trying to protect the village from being bombed by advancing a counter-offensive. The Tatmadaw – Burmese Army – would often destroy villages they believed were harboring Shan State Army troops or sympathizers. Waan’s
parents, accustomed to the ongoing fighting in the region, did not wish to take any chances and as Waan’s mother went into labor, Waan’s father carried her into the hole in the ground they had dug out – a makeshift bombshelter that most villagers caught in the civil war would make. The fighting went on for three days, and Waan’s mother would need to give birth underground. They called on villagers close by to come assist with the birth. Waan explains:

When I was born, my mom was in so much pain. I had to come out, but [the solders] are fighting. I was born in the ground because they were fighting in my village. My dad had to pick up my mom and go stay in the [bombshelter]. The people in my village come stay with my mom and tham khlot – they take me out.

I first met Waan when she was working in the kitchen for a local non-profit organization in Northern Thailand. She was a bright, astute girl, a masterful chef, and although only in her early 20s, she was a sought after traditional Tai performer of the Jaad Tai – the Tai traditional opera, a kind of musical drama that includes song, dance, storytelling and theatre. Waan had escaped civil war in her village in Shan State – and now lived as a clandestine migrant in Thailand. When Waan was four years old her family had to flee to Thailand:

I remember when we had to run away from the Burmese army because when we lived in Shan State, the Burma and Shan army they fight each other and we cannot stay, we had to run away – because at that time they send bombs and they kill the people in that village. We have to move from there to live in the city with my grandparents. […] some people, their families died and my mom’s family also died. Like three or four people.

When asked who in her family died, Waan told me that, “Three uncles were killed and my cousin also is killed.” When asked why they were killed, she responds, “Because they are men and they were forced to be in the army and they don’t want to go, so they are killed.” Waan’s
family members were executed, presumably shot, after refusing to serve as soldiers or porters for the Burmese military.

After violence and war beset their lives and homeland, Waan’s parents decide to make the harrowing journey across the Thai border. They had to pay a smuggler, who hid the family within a truckload of vegetables headed for the Thai border town of Vieng Heng. Here the family settles, squatting in houses of kind strangers who take in the family of five. Waan’s father toils in the agricultural fields where he makes a meager $1 per day, on which the family is unable to survive. Due to the family’s poverty, Waan is sent to spend her teenage years (from 14-19) working in Bangkok’s garment factories. As a young girl, hundreds of miles from her family, she would work from 9am to 7:30pm every day in the garment factory – often having to carry heavy loads of cloth that weighed more than she did. She took an additional job as a busser in an Indian restaurant at nights – working from 7:30pm to 1am. From the age of 14, until she was 19, Waan worked 17 hours a day, 7 days per week with no holidays. At the most she made 5000THB per month, or roughly $160, of which she sent $130 to her parents, saving only $30 for herself to rent a shared room, and pay for the ramen noodles she ate.

Waan’s life is not unusual for the Tai migrant living in Thailand, and she recounts, “I feel very lucky, because I went to live in these places by myself, but no bad people do anything to me. Not everyone has a story like this. I am lucky.” During my fieldwork, I found that on average, Burmese migrant workers were paid significantly less than Thai workers for the same labor. Thailand recently passed a minimum wage law that requires workers to be paid at least $10/day. My research collaborators cited being paid far less than this, sometimes only $1/day for
doing dangerous and difficult work, like harvesting in the fruit fields, or working in construction camps.

Yet Waan and her family, despite their status as paperless refugees and life of poverty, are also avid artists and performers. They are a part of a troupe of Tai Opera performers, who now travel throughout Northern Thailand – where they are hired to perform at various temple festivals associated with Buddhist holy days, or the Tai national day. Today, Waan has a family of her own and has returned to Shan state – where she continues to dance, sing and cook food. She tells me that, “In my life I want to stay in the place where I was born. I want to stay with my family and not have to work as hard as my parents.” When asked why she dances, Waan replies that, “I want to show younger Tai people how to do their culture. I want new people to learn. […] It is important because our culture and our art is very old. We don’t want it to disappear. We want our young people to know our culture.”

**CONCLUSION: LOOKING FORWARD**

*Welcome to the beautiful land of golden pagodas,*  
*Sunny smiles and friendly people greet you*  
*As you embark on your journey through dusty plains*  
*And sail on the sparkling Irrawaddy.*  
*There’s no more killing;*  
*No more persecution*  
*As peace and calm prevail*  
*Wishful dreams and things of unreality!*  
*Near the borders there are people injured by*  
*Shells and landmines*  
*Young girls and children raped by*  
*Burmese soldiers*  
*Villages torched and burnt to the ground*  
*Desperate cries of agony and suffering*  
*Orphans of massacred parents*  
*Running lost and bewildered*  
*Hiding in jungles and caves*
Homeless people, displaced in
A land of hellish torment.
Oh you people of the islands of indifference,
With your self-interests, enjoyments and goals,
Forgetting, sleeping, ignoring,
And blissfully unaware
Of what is being hidden from your view!
Please spare a thought for all the peoples of Burma,
Who are helpless, hopeless, forgotten,
Out of sight and out of mind to the rest of the world.
The peoples of Burma, who are helpless, hopeless, forgotten, By Feraya Ullathorne35

For the first time in over fifty years seen the emergence of what appears to be a democratic government. On March 30th, 2016 the National League for Democracy (NLD) took their elected seats in parliament, led by the new President Htin Kyaw, and with Aung San Suu Kyi as top minister in the Cabinet who will purportedly have de facto control of the government (Holmes 2016). When I met Aung San Suu Kyi in Honolulu in 2013, she had recently been freed after over nineteen years of house arrest. It was a moment of thrilling hopefulness, where I, along with the Burmese exile community who had come to meet her, now thought that she would finally reclaim what was rightfully hers and theirs – a free and peaceful Burma. But these lofty hopes for “the Lady” soon faded and turned bitter as we learned that she would be constitutionally barred from ever being President by virtue of her previous marriage to an Englishman – a part of the constitution that the military generals added before handing over power. Further disenchantment was also compounded by the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi seemed to lack the desire to generate real change in Burma. She repeatedly is cited as having little empathy for the plight of the Muslim Rohingya in the Rakhine State, against whom Human

Rights activists have thoroughly documented rampant abuse, disenfranchisement and even violent religious persecution (Rigby 2015).

On this issue, as well as the plight of many other ethnic minority groups, Suu Kyi remains silent, or reluctant to cause a stir. Many observers lamented that her “Mandela moment” had been lost (Traywick 2013). Personally, I think The Lady knows well the powers she is dealing with – and I would add, we know little of the psychological effects that nineteen years of house arrest and isolation has on a mind. Perhaps it is unfair to ask that she demand the radical reform that Burma so desperately needs? I think in the coming months and years, as Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD rise to a secure place of power, we will hopefully see the kind of radical action she described in her prison-memoirs, where she tells us: “You should never let your fears prevent you from doing what you know is right.”36

As Burma is opening up, what kinds of changes do the Tai have to look forward to? How can the exile community shape policies from afar and will they return? Reports show that in 2015 the number of Indigenous Displaced Persons (IDPs) has risen to approximately 662,000 in Burma, and increase of 70,000 due to the flaring up of hostilities predominantly in Shan State (Mizzima 2016). Yet, at the same time, research collaborators have expressed to me that they strongly desire to return to Shan State should they have the chance. Some, like Waan, have already done so, but find there a fractured society within which access to health care and basic education is scarce. It will be up to the newly elected government, with Aung San Suu Kyi at their helm, to ensure safe return of migrants from Thailand and the Tai peoples must decide if

they wish to participate in a process of national reconciliation, or if they wish to continue staking claim to Merng Tai as a sovereign nation.
Chapter 3: Dancing in the Shadows: Gesture, Movement and Silence

We bathe together after dancing in the brilliant sunlight of the open temple courtyard. Bathing is an essential ritual to be performed at least twice a day during the torrid heat of the monsoon season in Upland Southeast Asia. After bathing with the dancers, I lay down on the cool tiles of the schoolhouse floor. The girls giggle and laugh in expectation of the looming festival activities and the evening’s performances. We finally rest our heads to sojourn for an hour, while the sweltering sun sets over the Chiang Mai mountains. When we awake, the room is abuzz with activity. Costumes are laid out and tried on, girls and boys are applying make-up and combing their hair neatly. It is the eve of Khao Pansaa37 at a Tai wat (temple) in the Chiang Mai province of Northern Thailand. Khao Pansaa marks the beginning of the Theravada Buddhist lent or the monk's rainy season monastic retreat. Tomorrow, the monks will withdraw for 90 days to a temple monastery for deep meditation, and will not be making the morning walk for alms as is usually done throughout the rest of the year. The Tai temple in Chiang Mai celebrates the eve with music, dance, theater, food, tattooing and the selling of Tai goods. Monks now use this time to deepen their studies of dham (the Dharma, or the teachings) and refrain from too much outdoor activity, but tonight we are in the liminal stage of the rite before the passage and anything is possible.

This chapter attends to the various ways in which Tais expressively and performatively

37 Khao Pansaa came about as peasants in ancient India grew impatient with wandering monks and ascetics, who would trample their freshly sowed rice fields during their morning alms rounds and meditation walks. Walking, being a destructive activity, was replaced with sitting meditation in silent monastic retreat during the rainy months.
articulate resistance to the capturing forces of colonial and state enterprises. Often seen as passive victims or receivers of violence by a number of international relief organizations and non-profit complexes, Tai peoples are nevertheless exceedingly politically and socially active in the Thai-Burma border-zone. Tai who are living clandestinely in Northern Thailand organize effective assemblages that work to uncover rape, violence, coercion, forced relocation and discrimination in the Shan State in Burma. This chapter attends to my work as an ethnographer and as a dancer with Tai performance groups, political resistance movements and non-profit organizations in Northern Thailand. I argue that Tai discursive networks and forms of aesthetic expression are highly innovative and effective modes of embodied resistance praxis in the Thai-Burma border-zone.

Discourse is not just language, but expression - just as resistance is not just resentment, but a space of cultural production. I outline three forms of possible resistance expressivity among the Tai: gesture, movement and silence. I look at gesture as a way of becoming political in the body - a way of moving toward and performing the body politic. Movement is the acting out of political consciousness through the body - where the ambivalent performativity of roles upsets the ordering of governmentality. Silence is the language of the dispossessed, the muzzled rabble whose ideas and language challenge hegemony. Silence is the space where movement takes primacy in politics, where political gesturing becomes possible in the shadows of the deafening discourses of the state. Silence is not consent; it is the smooth space from whence new worlds are made possible through bodies in synchronous movement.

What William McNeill (2009) calls "muscular bonding," describes the process of embodying the nation through synchronous movement. For McNeill, the drills and dances of nations and armies serve, as the repeated making of an esprit de corps, whereby the resonance
created by rhythmic movement becomes the habitus of the collective. We see this phenomenon across cultures and throughout much of human history: particularly in the military, where it is learned early that moving in tact made for a more resilient and effective fighting machine. Where language falls short due to its boundedness, its finite significations, movement is the expressivity of the body politic. The body inhabits smooth space, whereas language is striation, the body is expansive and lighty, whereas language creates edges and parameters. For McNeill, though language is a medium of creativity and meaning making, language is also a destructive vehicle: "Words, in a sense, destroy what they purport to describe because they limit and define (...)" (McNeill 2009:2). Marching, moving, singing and dancing, produce alternate affects, what Deleuze and Guattari call "a block of sensations," or "a compound of percepts and affects" (1996:164). For clandestine and exiled bodies, language and discourse belongs to the realm of exclusion in defining identity and in determining geographic belonging.

The Tai peoples are a nation in exile, living in the interstitial borderlands of the Thai-Burma border zone. In the shadow of a belligerent Burmese state that has occupied the traditional Shan State in Northeastern Burma, and in Thailand, where many Tai peoples have fled in order to seek reprieve from violence and poverty. Few peoples have experienced the kinds of suffering the peoples residing in the territory that makes up what the British Raj designated as "Burma" after the violent invasion of their lands in the wake of the Anglo-Burmese War of 1824. A kingdom overthrown at the hands of avaricious teak traders, eager to make masters of themselves in this backwater of the world. What followed was nearly two centuries of oppressive colonial rule, successive military dictatorships, ethnic rebellions, and deadly wars. The suffering persists now in Burma's many "shadow economies," amongst laborers in mines and factories, military porters, child soldiers, and amongst the millions of migrant laborers who have fled to
neighboring Thailand.

In *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Partha Chatterjee (2006), echoing Benedict Anderson (1983), reflects on the making and maintenance of nations as temporal zones within which the nation exists in "homogenous empty time." A discussion of the nation and its becomings may also be understood as the will of the nation to accumulate capital in what it deems "modern time":

It is the same simultaneity experienced in homogeneous empty time that allows us to speak of the reality of such categories of political economy as prices, wages, markets, and so on. Empty homogeneous time is the time of capital. Within its domain, capital allows for no resistance to its free movement. When it encounters an impediment, it thinks it has encountered another time—something out of pre-capital, something that belongs to the pre-modern (Chatterjee 2006:5).

The enactment of Tai dance, song, and culture, as it is practiced by illegal immigrants in sacred temple spaces, presents a nonviolent alterity to the homogenizing forces of temporal governmentality. The clandestine body, deemed illegal by the state, and superfluous by capital, can create space for aesthetic expression only by maintaining heterogeneous time. The state machines of capture deem this anachronism as being out of time and out of place, but the Tai peoples dance on while in waiting for their opportunity to claim a time during which they are sovereign unto themselves.

**GESTURE**

In Erin Manning's (2007) *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*, she attends to
the political worlds made possible through dance, movement and gesture. The world of
choreological politics may be understood through what she calls 'the politics of touch' - "a notion
of politics that is produced as a means without an end, a potentiality rather than an actuality,
[through which] we can begin to defy the constriction of time and space straightjacketed by the
nation-state" (Manning 2007:6). Dance is gestural politics reaching toward new becomings -
becomings beyond the extensions of national time. Tai dance is a dance of repeating gestures
echoing the history of their becoming as a people. Their continued gesturing is not the practice of
a people out of time hoping to cling to their traditions in the face of modernity - it is the
gesturing towards a future becoming made possible through the body.

Where language falls short in creating the conditions of possibility for new becomings, dance is the resounding silence that gestures on in the shadows. Dance and movement belongs to
the realm of the extra-textual, a space where we may "imagine a politics that exceeds a state-
centered governmentality [which] necessitates a vocabulary that resists and subverts the
language of the state" (Manning 2007:7). For Manning, Tango is the transnational dance of
passions and affect, it "is the politics of the unwritten, yet the palimpsest on which everything
political aspires already to have been written. It is the voice of the immigrant displaced through
movement. It is the movement of the stranger, echoing in the distant resonance of a music that
has any times crossed the world" (Manning 2007:3).

As Benedict Anderson (1983) so famously has made us aware, it is the advent of the print-
press, the textual dimension of public life that enables the becomings of a public, and in turn
various manifestations of nationalisms. Dance represents a form of non-textual nationalism,
what I would like to call expressive nationalism - one that does not attempt to capture, or
exclude, but that simply expresses. Tango may become a form of Argentinian nationalism, but it
does not capture or exclude bodies from its performance the way language does. Its extra-
textuality leaves it open to abstraction, reinterpretation and play. This allows for a rigid, more
formalized Finnish Tango, versus an improvisational and passionate Argentine Tango (Manning
2007).

Tai dance in the border-zone represents an ephemeral organic nationalism that makes
possible group cohesion without ethnocentric aspirations. Dance is the nonviolent language of
the subaltern - a language of joy and pure expression beyond the textcentric formulations of the
nation-state. Gyatri Spivak (1988) so famously challenges Deleuzian, Foucauldian and Subaltern
Studies intellectuals with the question of "can the Subaltern speak?" No, she cautions, not within
the current paradigm of state-centric theory, where power and desires are the engines of actors
and the means through which we re-present the subaltern body. But can she dance? Where words
fail, perhaps movement begins. Words attempt to re-present, whereas movement expresses. Can
we form a notion of the body politic as bodies in movement, a body that is not simply an
extension of the mind, but the habitus of history presenced in the flesh?

Gesturings that escape state-level capture belong more closely to dance than language,
marching or even song. Dance finds its becoming in the "body without organs" - the non-linear
and non-hierarchically structured corporality of an expressive form:

I then examine the counterpart to the organism, the anorganic or nonorganismically
ordered body, the "Body without Organs" (BwO). A body whose organs have escaped the
constraints of the organism that previously integrated their functions and are now free to
experiment with novel orderings. These experiments will be perhaps "reterritorialized" to
produce another organism-one that functions properly in a hierarchical politics or they may
produce an immanently ordered body that functions in a new, self-organized, and
democratic social system. But such experimentation is not guaranteed success: fascism is
an ever-present danger to capitalist bodies politic on all three compositional scales:
personal, group, and civic (Protevi 2009:89).
The body without organs is the relationship one has to one's own body as well as other bodies, in which there is no longer a 'self', but rather what Deleuze calls "a life," where "there are no longer any forms or developments of forms; nor are there subjects or the formation of subjects. There is no structure, any more than there is genesis" (2005:27). To escape the rigidity of social ordering, role experimentation with one's body, its movements, its relationality to the world makes possible new becomings - or lines of flight. For Protevi (2009), these orderings may occur in personal, group or civic scales, yet their compositional and temporal whole across scales make up the bodies politic.

Dance across temporal and compositional scales sets as its goal affective becomings. For Foucault there is power in becoming, and where there is power there is resistance. Resistance is understood, in one sense, as the critical objection to ways of being governed and controlled, but it also evokes the ability to persevere and overcome. Resistance is intimately linked to power - we are moved by the intensities of power and we resist power relations that attempt to make us docile. I prefer to see resistance as not that oppositional force to power relations, nor a place where agency simply becomes possible, but more closely to what Deleuze calls a "line of flight." In dance, lines of flight are historical becomings made corporal in the temporal space of the body. The body affects and is the affector of lines flight. Dance, movement and silence are the gesturings made visible during the continuous makings of historical lines of flight.

**MOVEMENT**

While visiting a Tai wat (temple) in Chiang Mai, I met the Venerable Sai Pa, a monk in his
late twenties, whose life has been marred by the trials of forced migration and injustice.\textsuperscript{38} At the age of sixteen, his parents and siblings were all killed by the Burmese military. Sai Pa was living in the Shan State of Burma - a disputed territory that the Shan rebel armies have fought to protect from the control of the Burmese military. The military routinely invades the state, taking land away from farmers for opium cultivation or burning villages where they think anti-government dissent is brewing. Sai Pa's family was involved in anti-government activities and they were shown no mercy.

Without family and fearful for his fate if he chose to remain in Burma, the sixteen-year-old Sai Pa decided to take the long journey to the Thai border. He walked for two months, eating leaves and forest creatures in the mountainous jungles upland Southeast Asia. The first time he arrived in Thailand he was caught by the Thai police and sent back to the border. But Sai Pa persisted and tried again. The second time he entered Thailand, he was able to cross the border unnoticed. But life "on the other side" proved difficult as well. Sai Pa tried his luck at finding any job he could get in Thailand, but could find nothing consistent enough to make sure he had shelter and enough food to eat. Finally, exhausted, demoralized and hungry, Sai Pa turned to the monkhood for solace and most of all, to regain a sense of dignity. As a monk the Venerable Sai Pa receives alms of food from laypeople, he is able to play traditional Shan music for dancers and martial artists, and he is learning to read and write. But he does not feel that the path of asceticism was meant for him - he readily admits that his dream was always to have a family and a job - any job.

When frequenting the Tai \textit{wat} The Venerable Sai Pa is always clad in his traditional

\textsuperscript{38} This research is based on two months of pre-dissertation ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand with a Foreign Languages and Area Studies Fellowship.
saffron robe, which covers his trunk and right shoulder revealing a dense network of sak yant on his arms and back - traditional Theravada Buddhist tattoos designed to ward off evil spirits and remind the ascetic of the dham he is meant to embody on his journey toward nibanna (enlightenment). But on the eve of Khao Pansaa, The Venerable Sai Pa is not clad in his traditional saffron robe, rather, I find him dressed in fine pink and yellow silks, with elaborate makeup and headdress. The monk, being an avid lover of theatre and dance, is a main feature in the night's performances. He dances, sings and plays Tai percussion instruments, much to the delight of onlookers.

As puzzled as I was in the witnessing of a monk, whose precepts require him to live a life of non-attachment and pleasure-renunciation, I was also inspired by his role adventurism. The night of aesthetic play and performance created a space for the Venerable Sai Pa to embody his love for the arts. There was no mention of this being inappropriate or even strange. It was as if all in attendance understood that in the liminal space this monk exists, aesthetic performativity seemed the most natural gesture of becoming.

As William Connolly (2011) posits, effective uses of ‘role adventurism' are indispensable tools in the becomings of those who live their lives on the margins of hegemonic resonance machines:

The trick today is to infuse a bit of the warrior ethic into the performance of several of these roles, not in the spirit of Napoleon, Putin, and Bush, of Gandhi, Thoreau, Nietzsche, and Martin Luther King Jr., with the inspiration and strategic sense of each adjusted to the new circumstances of being. The task is to inhabit several roles in more militant, visible, creative, and inspirational ways, as we come to terms with their cumulative effects on the world (2011:144).
To unsettle lines of flight that attempt to pass the subaltern and marginalized by, there must be a shift in responses to the roles set forth by established governmental institutions. Further, through individual role adventurism, group orientations may be re-directed and new ways of engaging with the world may become possible. Finally, Connolly hopes that this will "inspire initiatives that draw energy from activity on these first two fronts to escalate both internal and external pressures upon corporations, states, universities, churches and temples, investment firms, the media, the Internet, and international organizations" (Ibid).

But we must also be reminded that identity, play and role experimentation are filled with risks and the stakes are often high. Role experimentation risks violence and the deterritorialization of identity, as happened during the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma. Due to sharp increases in the price of oil and the sudden downturn in the economy, the Burmese sangha (monkhood) organized nonviolent protests in the streets of Yangon and Mandalay. The monks took it upon themselves to be at the helm of the protests as their bodies are considered sacred and any violence done to them would mean a great demerit to the aggressor. Yet the saffron-clad monks were eventually brutally persecuted, some tortured, jailed and even killed. The Burmese military justified their actions by claiming that these protesting monks were not "real" practitioners, but had broken their precepts by becoming politicized and defying the state.

Plasticity is as much a possibility as it is a limit. Role experimentation takes on entirely new meanings in spaces where violence, depravation and injustice imminentlyloom. Connolly sees it as a possible alternative for Westerners to challenge a neo-conservative capitalist resonance machine, but the Tai clandestine immigrant or the protesting Burmese monk has considerably more at stake than a shift to a liberal non-capitalist alternative - rather, he is creating lines of flight to preserve his human dignity. This speaks to what Lyotard calls a
"differend" "a dispute in which the complaint of one side cannot be made sense of, cannot be recognized, by the other" (2009:44) When the differend is too large and the demands of one side are rendered unintelligible, the result can be, as in the case of the Saffron revolution, harrowing violence.

Tai migrants in Thailand, have moved to escape the differend that conditions their reality in the Shan State of Burma. In The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, Turner borrows Arnold van Gennep’s (1909) expression the “liminal phase” to mark the transitional stage of being in-between the stages of “state” and “transition” – a social space occupied during rites de passage (Turner 1969:94). The refugee state, that state of being displaced without belonging, likens the stages of rites of passage, in that “all rites of passage or “transition” are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen, signifying “threshold” in Latin), and aggregation.” (Turner 1969:94-95). Refugees are marked by this initial separation from their state, village and family-life, their “cultureality” is thrust into a state of legal limen where their status is wholly ambiguous and constantly changing depending on their movement and external pressures. Most Burmese refugees are held at this stage “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner 1969:95). The fewest reach the stage of reaggregation – the passage rarely returns you to where you want to be, but instead delivers you into new and unknown spaces.

It is within the liminal phase that many revolutions, revolts and dissent is voiced. But not all counter-movements are violent or very loud at all. We often forget that there is affect in the shadows. Upon my return to the temple two years after first meeting Sai Pa, we had the following conversation:

T: What about your parents?
S: They died (he gets visibly teary/upset). I miss them, but I have my instruments (touches the mong). When life is difficult, I have my instruments. My heart feels better (pen kamlang jai – encouraging, strengthening your heart).

T: What did you do when you first came to Thailand?
S: When I first came to Thailand. I worked by spraying pesticides on plants. I made 30THB per day ($1). I worked for 5 years in the field. I was in Fang and made 900 THB per month ($30). While I was working in the fields, I missed my instruments. When I am working in the field cannot play instruments. I miss it a lot! I missed my instruments, so I became a monk (pay bhoot phra). When I became a monk I could go anywhere and learn/play instruments (touches heart). I was a monk for 5 years. Life as a monk was fun. Life was not difficult anymore.

Tai peoples gather in the safe space of the Buddhist wat to learn their language, practice their traditional dance, song, music and martial arts. Beyond this, they also gather to discuss politics and develop strategies for surviving beyond a capitalist economy through subsistence farming and craft-making. Beyond the habitus of non-capitalist modes of being are strategies of resistance discourse that now open up new possibilities for voicing dissent.

The exit option speaks to the nomadism that has become the marker of Tai identity. Holland (2011) sees the possibilities of nomad citizenship as that line of flight that breaks with the boundedness of state mechanisms of capture:

By most definitions, citizenship applies to an exclusive group of people identified by their belonging to a clearly demarcated, well-defined, and well-defended state territory. Nomad citizenship is designed to break with that definition and its territorialization of the concept of citizenship: nomadism, by most definitions, broadly applies to groups that are precisely not identified with state territory; Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of nomadism, as we will see, is broader still. But the point of combining nomadism with citizenship in this way is to smash the State’s territorializing monopoly on belonging and redistribute it globally, in alternative or minor forms of sociality both within and beyond the boundaries of the State (2011:xv).

But nomadism as role adventurism is a very different reality than forced nomadism. Though nomadism presents a viable alternative to being captured by state-level homogenizing forces, for the Tai clandestine migrant, sedentarism is a luxury they too often cannot afford. So, perhaps we
must still hold on to some sense of belonging - which is why Holland does not give up his notion of citizenship - and it is within this space of belonging we find possibilities for virtue and performance. The task set fort for the nomad citizen is to not allow the state, or capital, to lay claim to the space, but to leave it as an open field, upon which positive expression becomes possible.

In Ranajit Guha's (1999) *Elementary Aspect of Peasant Insurgencies*, he takes up the dialectic between subalterant insurgency and colonial domination. It is important for Guha to show that the Subcontinent was not passively subsumed under empire, but that within the colonial process there was also resistance, insurrection, mimickry (read: mockery) and insubordination. His treatise relies on colonial documents to understand the consciousness of the subaltern, as the colonial administrators stand in dialectical opposition to the insurgents and therefore the colonial discourse is wholly preoccupied with the "rebel and his activities" (1999:15). The focus on the subaltern person is an intellectual move to "provincialize Europe," to use Chakrabarty's term, in order to bring to light what Guha calls "the small voices of history."

Guha presents a definitively Anti-Hegelian notion of history, where he shows that the historical potential of the Indian peasant, was erased by nation-state concern for security, administration and the general governance of bodies for the pursuit of material exploitation of the land and maintaining the docility of subalternt bodies in relation to colonial administrators. By using the word insurgence, Guha gives back a state of consciousness to the Indian peasant revolutionary - as a rational people, critical of their own exploitation, and willing to fight in a tactical - not merely reactionary way against their own oppression. He rejects the idea that the uprisings were spontaneous. Though the peasant movements were rendered almost invisible to the colonial administrators, it was not until nationalist uprisings of Ghandi and others that
resistance movements were rendered intelligible.

In the same sense, Tai who gather in the temple space are also organizing politically. During my time there, many meetings were held after dance practice where the insurgency movement along the Thai-Burma border was discussed. The leap from cultural practitioner to border rebel, was no leap at, but rather always in the consciousness of the Tai. Yet their gathering in the temple space is not understood as political by the ever-vigilant Thai state that seeks to deport foreign bodies. This has to do with what Gramsci has identified as the conflation of organization on one hand, and politics on the other, as being one and the same. For a movement to be understood as political, it must be organized within the normative frame of European enlightenment notions of the nation-state programme: 1. conscious leadership, 2. a well-defined aim, and a 3. programme or means of achieving this aim. Without these elements, your efforts will be seen as pre-political.

Interestingly, Guha (1999) finds that sacred days in Colonial India also corresponded with insurgent movements, where in Hinduism the coming of Kali Yuga calls for the inversion of all social roles, certain temple rituals called for an inversion of social statuses. From this position the slave may find himself a master - it is within this liminal space that he may truly see the extent to which he is oppressed and choose to rise up against his over-ordinates. Whereas rituals traditionally were used to empty rebellion of their contents, during colonial times they were used to reinforce anti-hegemonic sentiment. Guha argues that "groups held in a position of subordination develop small strategies of resistance that grow" (1999:12). From the position of a group in the process of becoming, crowds may come into being because of "redundancy" - the repetition of movement and expression of sentiment. From our discussion of gesturing towards, and becoming a movement, we may now turn to silence as a particular mode of expressive
dissent.

**SILENCE**

In 2007, Theravada Buddhist monks from all over Myanmar, clad in saffron robes, silently walked through the streets of Yangon and Mandalay. They made no public demands. They only repeated the uttering: "Our Cause, Our Cause." The need to articulate or signify the cause was unnecessary. Silence, that most cherished virtue amongst Theravada Buddhists, who often spend days, months or even years in silent meditation, can also be leveled as a potent mode of resistance discourse. Some monks walked barefoot upon the streets of Yangon with their alms bowl turned down – silently signifying to the military generals that their crimes against the people have barred them from accumulating merit. A monk knows he cannot publicly speak out against atrocity, but he certainly can bar the fascistic officers from the pleasure of donating alms to make up for their crimes. Their silence spoke volumes and sparked a violent crackdown of all protests in Burma. It so shook the core of the military establishment that within a matter of years, Burma saw democratic elections, the freeing of political prisoners and an opening up of the Burmese economy to foreign investment. Silence is never consent - negative space is space filled with possibilities.

As Slavoj Zizek points out in *Tarrying with the Negative*, "It is difficult to imagine a more salient index of the "open" character of a historical situation "in its becoming" [...], of that intermediate phase when the former Master-Signifier, although it has already lost the hegemonical power, has not yet been replaced with a new one" (1993:1). "Our Cause, Our Cause" is the becoming of an abstract machine - effective precisely because of its vagueness. Ernesto Laclau (2007:18) reminds us that in some situations, vagueness is a precondition to
constructing relevant political meanings. He posits:

(1) that vagueness and indeterminacy are not shortcomings of a discourse about social reality, but, in some circumstances, inscribed in social reality as such; (2) that rhetoric is not epiphenomenal vis-a-vis a self contained conceptual structure, for no conceptual structure finds its internal cohesion without appealing to rhetorical devices (Laclau 2007:67)

For Laclau one does not need to eliminate difference to create vague "chains of equivalence" or totalities, which are formed when a particular demand transcends its particularity. Laclau wants a politics that thrives on difference without seeing difference as an obstacle to politics. A theory of silence is the creation of a methodology of emancipation without having to resort to violence. Emancipation is possible without liquidations if we replace solidarity and totality with chains of equivalence. As Zizek also notes, "Theory involves the power to abstract from our starting point in order to reconstruct it subsequently on the basis of its presuppositions, its transcendental "conditions of possibility" - theory as such, by definition, requires the suspension of the Master-Signifier" (Zizek 1993:2). However, the silence of the monks is not really a tarrying with the negative, as silence is signification, expressivity and has profound politico-affective resonances. The saffron-clad silent monks are rather moving signifiers - expressing dissent through their bodies rather than through language - which allows for blocks of sensations that tarry with the affirmative.

Protevi (2009) theorizes the subjective and affective dimensions of the body politic to understand how historical currents can in some instances culminate into events, or phenomena he refers to as 'triggers and thresholds': "Triggering is not mechanical, but dynamic - that is, intensive and context-dependent: in different contexts, the "same" trigger may or may not push a
body to the threshold of behavior activation, depending on the recent dynamic history of the body (2009:36-37). As such, bodies politics can be studied as affective and psychological responses to internal and external forces, flows and networks.

Protevi (2009) effectively sheds light upon the affective dimensions of group coherence - both negatively and positively - to find how in the manipulation of the ideological superstructure, individual ethics and judgment may be suspended in favor of a larger political affect:

Intensive processes are triggered by differences between a system and its environment such that the resultant matter/energy now moves systems toward thresholds where their behavior patterns might change. Such a change of behavior patterns - not merely a change to a different behavior within an established pattern - is what Deleuze calls a "determinationalization" a "line or flight" or a "becoming" (2009:11).

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis contained the conditions of possibility to organize the flows of bodies, objects and minds, which are the sites of activity from whence capitalism gains its strength. Capitalism works because it is abstract - by its very diffuse abstract nature it gains the conditions of possibility needed to overcode preexisting flows. So, capitalism gains its potentiality because it contains decoded flows and can be taken up by a variety of social systems. Marx, however does not see capitalism as an abstraction. For Marx, capitalism has a clear material base from whence the abstract machines of the superstructure flow. Using the case of what has been framed as the "Global Financial Crisis" and its effects in Burma, we see the ability of capitalism to deterritorialize capital flows and labor in the Thai-Burma border-zone. I wish to posit the possibility of conceptualizing Capitalism as an abstract machine, rather than a structure, to get beyond the dialectical modeling of the world in order to find points of resonance with non-
Capitalist modes of production (Connolly, 2008).

William Connolly (2008) takes up Hegel's (1995) prescriptive study *The Philosophy of Right*, where the demand for a civil society within a capitalist system becomes "a modern civilizational advance that promotes and demands a high degree of self-reliance, creative enterprise, and self-responsibility among its (male) participants. Its impersonal capacities of self-regulation, exemplifying one version of what will later (...) be called an abstract machine, lift it above every previous mode of being in human history" (2008:124). And it is by this logic that the "The impoverished are now the product of a system that blames them for their impoverishment rather than treating it as the curse of fate" (*Ibid*). Burma has now been taken into this fold of capitalist modes of capturing, whereby their destitution can be seen as self-inflicted because they have resisted capture by capitalist flows. The 'rabble' that Hegel understood within the context of 19th century Europe " has become angry minorities distributed within and between world regions" (Connolly 2008:128).

It is from the position of anger and dispossession that resistance practices to capitalism emerge. It is important to note that while capitalism is a totalizing institution, it is not a total system. As Connolly points out:

To insist that every practice, once capitalism expands its reach, is entirely absorbed into its orbit is to translate the idea of a world-capitalist system into that of a totality. Such an image exaggerates the absorptive power of one system, and discourages exploration of ways to stretch and challenge global capitalism in creative ways. (...) That is, to translate a worldcapitalist system into a world totality is to misread what is outside it, to miss those things imperfectly incorporated into it, and to present an apolitical orientation to it (2008:130)
As production becomes decentralized and deterritorialized, it is the liminal spaces where the new proletariat now exists where we must foster class-consciousness. For the Burmese peoples who now live in the liminal space of non-belonging during a time of liminal crisis, there are voices of resistance clamoring to be heard. These are the voices of peoples displaced from their land, dispossessed and demoralized, who like the Venerable Sai Pa are seeking out non-capitalist, non-state centric alternatives to live life with dignity.

**CONCLUSION: A POLITICS OF EXPRESSION**

I have so far delineated multiple strategies of becoming, or lines of flight, for the Tai migrant and Burmese nomad citizen. The metaphor of dance is used to show that through gesture, movement and silence volumes are signified. Dance is a potent practice because often it is relegated to the sidelines as belonging to the realm of culture and not politics. But dance contains within it potent bodies politics, as gesturing, movement and silence, are the habitus of bodies seeking to restructure the orderings of hegemony. New thresholds and patterns of behavior are the historical becomings of what Deleuze calls the "event," or the counteractualizations that repattern systems (Protevi 2009:13). I have outlined a micropolitics of dance and movement - within which, the hard work you do to organize blocks of becoming - make new kinds of sovereigns possible. Politics is not language, discourse or even power. It is expression all the way down.
CHAPTER 4: INTERLUDE: TAI MOVEMENT AESTHETICS

KAA TAI: THE ART OF DANCING

Sweat soaks the imitation silk shirt that gracelessly clings to my frame. A swell of nervousness flushes my skin and my pulse begins a rapid-fire, irregular frantic rhythm I have come to both fear and welcome before a performance. Behind the stage constructed of plywood, rope and bamboo, draped with colorful fabrics that frame the performers on stage, sits a company of two-dozen dancers awaiting their turn under the blinding lights. A band of six musicians sit on the floor to the right of the stage, and deliver a steady rhythm of percussion – drum, melody – stringed violin/harp, and tune – cymbals. A crowd of three-hundred merry onlookers are gathered in the temple courtyard amidst booths selling noodles, CDs and T-shirts, and looming pagodas.

In the darkness of the backstage, I rehearse the steps taught to me by my teacher, knowing well that my body has yet to internalize the choreography. My muscles still stutter and mispronounce the phrases uttered my limbs. The older women smile knowingly and strain to fix my hair, which, no matter how hard they try, refuses to coil elegantly in a bun atop my head like all the other Tai women’s hair. When Sai Khoe finds me, she is as calm as ever, no hint of the nervousness which fills my cells before a performance.

“We’re going to do a different dance,” Sai Khoe tells me.

I stare at her with wide eyes. The way a student stares a teacher who has just given her an impossible task.

“Yes, a little different,” she smiles. “Just follow along. You’ll be fine.”

“I can’t perform a different dance. I haven’t practiced!” I try to protest, knowing it won’t work.
Sai Khoe sees my apprehension and thankfully empathizes by hurriedly teaching me the basic steps to the new choreography. Ten minutes later the curtain opens and we enter the stage. Four women, three in perfect unison and stately calm. One towering pale woman, with a dance impediment. The crowd roars with laughter and applause. It takes a few long, embarrassing minutes, but I finally find the steady rhythm of the drum and cymbal. It was often like this. I would prepare and then everything would change – a dancer from another town wanted to do our choreography, so we had to do a different one, or someone didn’t show up, or sometimes, I suspected, they just wanted to see how I would do if asked to improvise. The crowd is greatly amused by this stuttering and stumbling body on stage. Then, a woman gestures for me to come to edge of the stage and slips a paper garland over my head. I press my palms together to ‘wai’ while bowing my head in gratitude. I keep dancing and stuttering. Then more come with garlands, they line up until my neck and face are covered in colorful paper loops. The gift the audience gives a dancer who brings them joy.

That was the night I realized that it is better to be a clown than an expert. As I walk backstage, my friend Hom stops me to say how much he enjoyed the performance. I lamented that I hadn’t rehearsed the steps. But Hom countered, “You dance from the heart. You dance as if you “rak merng Tai” – you love Tai-land. No-one has even been interested in learning our dance. Many come to interview us about politics, but you are interested in the things we care about – our culture, our arts.”

What does dancing do? It structures our sentiment towards sense-perception, towards communal responses to worlds of meaning and towards the aesthetics the body makes possible. Or as Kant says of sensibility, it is “[t]he capacity (receptivity) to acquire representations through the way in which we are affected” (155). Dance allows us to proceed from the visceral – from
instinct, as well as intellect. Dance allows for the body to be seen – in all its vulnerability – and to be recognized as something capable of moving in time. Dance does not erase difference, but it creates resemblances.

*TAI DANCE MODALITIES*

During the course of my research, I identified six main Tai dance forms currently practiced during religious festivals and cultural events in Northern Thailand by the exile Tai community. The context of these dances are significant as each occurs within a milieu where Theravada Buddhism and the temple festival are constitutive of cultural life. The temple organizes monthly festivals based around a range of themes, but predominantly festivals such as *khao phansaa* and *awk phansaa* (beginning and end of Buddhist lent), Tai New Year, the water festival, monk or novice ordinations and rice harvest festivals draw large crowds to the temple grounds. The festivals are also intense assemblages of commerce, as Tai vendors bring goods such as Tai CDs and DVDs, Tai foods, Tai costumes, books in the Tai language, as well other "everyday" and luxury goods such as children’s toys, clothing, cooking equipment, blankets and jewelry. Dance is performed on stage as a part of the festival.

At larger festivals two stages are generally established – one larger “modern” stage where Tai rock bands and contemporary Tai dancers perform to amplified music – and, a smaller “traditional” stage where Jaad Tai is performed as opera. There is tension between the traditional and modern forms of performance, whereby those trained in traditional dance song and theatre

39 This list is not exhaustive, but rather what I observed and was told during interviews with current cultural practitioners. I also base this list on Sangkham Yangyhod’s *Shan Ginnara & Ginnaree Dance*. Chiang Mai: Hoong Hien Suup Saan Phumbanyaa Lanna, 2005.
lament that the younger generation does not know this style. The modern stage is an intense site for innovation, where younger Tai can experiment with a variety of performance styles, often borrowing from popular Southeast Asian music or dance. The traditional stage is smaller, but often elaborately decorated with painted backdrops, fabrics and an altar where performers must place paraphernalia pertaining to the dance and collectively bow while a chant is sung by a monk. Before any performance, dancers, singers and musicians perform the “wai khru” ceremony – they take a seat on stage with their backs turned towards the audience and face turned towards the stage-altar. With palms pressed together in the traditional wai gesture, and eyes closed a chant is sung. After the chant, students bow to the altar which contains flowers, costumes, masks, long-drums etc., and then to their teachers as a sign of respect. Only after such ceremonial observances, can the performance begin.

**Six Forms of Tai Dance:**

1. *Kinaree/kinaraa*: the peacock or bird dance

2. *Yak*: sacred animal or deer dance.


5. *Kaa yeng*: traditional or modern style choreographed group dance.

**Figure 5** “Wai Khru” ceremony.

**Figure 6** *Kinnaree/Kinnara (Bird or Peacock) Dance.*
**Figure 7** Naang Samii (female solo dancer).

**Figure 8** Yak: sacred animal or deer dance

**Figure 9** Ceremonial Masks on Jaad Tai Altar
LAI JERNG: THE ART OF FIGHTING

Shan Martial Arts has been with us since our ancestor’s time. We did not steal from any nation. We are not using other people’s way. From the old times till today, Shan is in fact a warrior nation by its nature. We have been fighting with other nations most of the time.

– Ajarn Gangkham Saangsam

“I would rather be a fighter than a dancer,” says Sai Khoe. “Why is that?” I ask. “Because I want to be strong. I want to know how to fight.” I ask her, “Do many Tai girls do Lai Jerng?” “Many of us do. I don’t have beautiful hands and I don’t dance well, so, I practice fighting instead.”

From Fieldnotes

Lai jerng, or fon jerng translates to Tai martial arts. Fon means to dance, lai means “the way of” and jerng means the art of fighting. Lai jerng is akin to some Chinese forms of martial arts and has three components which encompasses the practice. These are: performance, fighting and mediation. Fon jerng is performed during Tai festivals and events, sometimes choreographed, but more often improvised to live music. Lai jerng has a specific and ancient purpose, which is to prepare the body for elegant battle with an opponent. Therefore, lai jerng is often performed with swords, spears or poles. It is thought that since Tai peoples have been under near constant threat from invaders, the lai jerng practice was over time created as a communal physical culture, which trained its peoples for defense in case of battle. Finally, lai jerng is today meant to be a meditative exercise that practitioners can engage in on a regular basis to achieve physical wellness and mental clarity. Although it is predominantly a male performance art, women, like Sai Khoe above, commonly engage in lai jerng practice. The Tai

peoples have a long history of female fighters and leaders who participate in a variety of armed resistance movements and rebellions (O’Shannassy 2000).

Saankham Yangyhod, who is recognized as a master of Tai performing arts, identifies five main forms of lai jerng in his book *Shan Martial Arts (Laay Jerng, Laay Tai)*:41

1. The Empty-Handed Martial Art
2. The Pole Martial Art
3. The Sword Martial Art
4. The Spear Martial Art
5. The Knife Martial Art

![Image of Tai performers](image)

**Figure 10 The Empty-Handed Martial Art**

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Figure 11 The Sword Martial Art

Figure 12 The Pole Martial Art

Figure 13 Martial Arts Teacher Tattooing Student
Figure 14 Band Accompanying Lai Jerng

Figure 15 Tableau of the Kinnaree and Yak Dance from a Chiang Mai Temple
JAAD TAI: OPERA COSMOLOGY

The dance is the performance of the Tai people. In the past, we did not know how to write and some of us still cannot write. So, instead the dances tell our stories as a people.

–Duang (Personal Interview)

The traditional Tai Opera performance is called Jaad Tai or Jaad Saeng Tai and is a ceremonial invocation of Theravada Buddhist cosmology, specific animist and ancestral spiritualism amongst the Tai and is an expression of the lamentations and joy experienced by the Tai peoples. The Jaad Tai is a major stage performance of song, dance, instrumentation, theatre and religious ceremony. For instance, at a Tai festival celebrating the full moon, we are serenaded by a mang saa, or a man who sings in order to provide good fortune to those who attend the festival. This is followed by a dramatic play whereby a story is enacted about various tropes, for instance, a love-affair, a betrayal or a difficult harvest season. Often a man and a woman will sing a duet together, taking turns between verses and while dancing beside each other. Jaad Tai costumes are often bright pastel colored. Pink, yellow, red and green are favorite colors and one’s costume represents the region you are from in Shan State. Other costumes include the spectacular bird dance costume that is made to represent a peacock’s feather plume – whereby Tai skillfully sew colorful fabrics onto a plume of sticks that are attached to the dancer’s back. Masks, crowns and ornate jewelry is worn with the spectacular costuming.

My research collaborator, Waan, was once asked to perform at a festival in Mae Hong Son province as a kwaam suu, or someone who sings to offer gifts. This is a singer who before the festival receives letters from attendees about their hopes, aspirations, fears and longings for the future. The letters from the audience usually includes a 40 or 50 baht note ($1-$3) as payment to the singer. The kwaam suu singer then composes a song around the theme of the letter, which
is performed during the festival. The letters often talk of lost love, about hopes for their child to be ordained as a novice, or if it is from a Tai soldier, about his or her desire to go home to their parents. Waan shares a letter she once made a song from. It reads:

*I am from Shan State. I have worked for so long, yet I still have no money. I would like to ask for a song about my homeland and I ask for your encouragement. Let my tears become your song.*

The Jaad Tai performance usually encompasses a company of 30-40 dancers and musicians who are hired by a *wat* (temple) to perform during a festival or major event, such as the funeral of a monk or the novice ordination ceremony. There are many parallels to the Thai *like* (musical folk drama), whereby an assemblage of musicians, dancers, actors, emcees, a stage and costuming comprise an entire evening of dramatic revelry. The Jaad Tai usually begins after sun-down at 8pm and can last well into the early hours of the night, allowing the audience members to casually observe parts of the play and then move on to other activities such as shopping, making merit or socializing at the temple faire. The dance is the central feature of the theatre performance, by which all drama is accompanied. Below is a notation of the general aesthetics and patterns of the body during a Jaad Tai performance.
Table 1: Tai Dancer’s Patterned Body Movements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hands</th>
<th>The hand pivots on the wrist, whilst fingers bend far backwards towards the forearm. With each down beat on the gong, a flick of the wrist can be detected with an accompanying flourish of the hand – forming a distinct mudra, or symbolic hand gesture.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head</td>
<td>The face is relaxed with a slight smile, whilst the head is kept mostly still, with gentle tilting from side to side as the dancer gazes softly at her hands and above the audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feet</td>
<td>The feet shift from flat foot to the ball of the foot, although nearly imperceptibly. Small strides are made with the patterned footwork, never wider than the breadth of the dancer’s skirt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td>Eyes are soft and open, never looking directly at the audience, but slightly above. The eyes commonly follow certain hand and arm patterns so as to guide the onlooker towards the hand movements. The eyes never stare directly at anyone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hips and Legs</td>
<td>Hips remain still and centered above the feet, while the knees are always bent slightly to allow or foot patterns to seamlessly emerge. Certain foot patterns end with a flick of the foot upwards to demarcate the upbeat, in which case the foot is always at a ninety-degree angle and never pointed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arms</td>
<td>The arms and hands are the central focal feature of the Tai dancer. She keeps her arms in front of her body while making complex arm patterns that usually move in sets of four, and are repeated on each side. When the right arm is elevated towards the level of the head, the left arm will be at the level of the waist, and the arms will alternate in this juxtaposition up to four times until a new arm pattern is engaged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Body</td>
<td>The general posture is straight and low to the ground (flat feet and bent knees).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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42 Based upon Christine Yano’s notation style from “Patterned Body Movements” of the Japanese female Enka singer (Yano 2003).
Figure 16 Jaad Tai women dance and sing

Figure 17 Jaad Tai Foot Patterns
Figure 18 Jaad Tai Arm Posture

Figure 19 Jaad Tai Male Singer

Figure 20 Jaad Tai Hand Movements
POY SANG LONG: THE TAI NOVICE ORDINATION CEREMONY

*Poy Sang Long is a Tai tradition from ancient times. If you have a boy and you don’t sang long, he will not be a man. You must do three things to become a man: 1. Sang long (novice ordination), 2. Jang long (ordain as a monk) and 3. Marry.*

— Muay Sai (Personal Interview).

*Poy Sang Long*, or the novice ordination ceremony, is the most visually spectacular and symbolically rich festival in the Tai lunar calendar. I attended four Poy Sang Long festivals held in Northern Thailand from March until April 2015. Each three-day fete was a feast for the eyes as well as the soul, for the novice ordination is an occasion to amass a great field of merit within the system of Theravada Buddhism. It is also an occasion for participants to undergo important rites of passage and the three days between when the boys are stolen away to the temple in the dark of night to when they take their vows as novice monks, are marked by what Victor Turner
calls *liminality* – a space that is betwixt and between, where all things become temporally possible – the ritual space that make all social relations visible (Turner, Abrahams, and Harris 1995). The festival is a symbolic reenactment of prince Siddhattha, who before becoming Buddha lived a life of lavish wealth as a prince. Poy Sang Long reenacts the story of the young prince as he steals away from the temple in the middle of night in order to become a wandering mendicant. The young boys usually aged anywhere from five to twenty years old, but normally around the ages from nine to fourteen are taken to the wat (temple) and treated there as royalty for three days until they take their vows as novice monks.

**Figure 22 Poy Sang Long at Wat Ku Tao, Chiang Mai**
The ritual of Poy Sang Long is a rite of passage that is perhaps more significant for the sponsors, than it is for the novice himself (Eberhardt 2009). Sponsors are usually relatives of the novice, but they can also be acquaintances who send large sums of money to be donated to the family of the novice boy. The funds are spent on buying elaborate colorful costumes and makeup for the boy, renting a booth at the temple, providing food for guests and hiring a band to play while your sang long is being paraded atop an uncle’s shoulders.

**Figure 23 Poy Sang Long, Novice Merit Booth**
A JAILED FATHER’S SONG

When your child comes of age for his Poy Sang Long, it is considered a pivotal moment in a parent’s life – it is a time when great merit may be achieved by all parties involved in making the boy’s ordination successful. When it came time for Daeng to sang long, his father Sai Pang tells me it was during the most trying time of his life. Sai Pang, a father of three and avid Jaad Tai performer, had the preceding year been traveling in Northern Thailand when he was stopped by Thai police at one of the many checkpoints that migrants are subjected to in the Thai-Burma border-zone. Sai Pang’s migrant visa was in order, but the police became suspicious that Sai Pang had a relatively large sum of money on his person ($300). Sai Pang explained that the funds were for his cousin to buy materials for a house, but the police suspected it was drug money from the Shan State’s vast opium sales network. He was jailed for three years, even with no proof that he had any ties to drug networks of any kind. Sai Pang provided the lyrics of a song he wrote for his son while in jail and longing to be present on the occasion of his sang long:

When a son will sang long (ordain);
But his father is not in his house.
Others will say: “why does your father not come see his son sang long?”
You have your mother, aunt and sister, but you don’t have your father.
Your aunt and mother will have to go find a phoo tham bun and meet ham bun (paternal and maternal sponsors).
When you are sang long;
While your hair is cut and face is made up;
you do not see your father.
But whenever we are sang long, we must be happy.
But if you sang long and your father is not here, you will be sad.
When you sang long you must ride on the shoulders of someone else’s father.
Your father is not here, so you must find another “phoo bun tham” (paternal sponsor).
On the first day you wear you costume, your mother and father should be the ones to prepare the feast and feed you.
When you go around the temple, you must miss your father.
When phi-nong (brothers and sisters) come to make an offering, they will ask, “where is your father?”
This will make your heart tired.
Son, you must persevere.
You have a mee and phoo bun tham (maternal and a paternal sponsor).
You must meditate and then you can ordain.
When you put your robe on, your father should help you.
When you are finished you will go thaway phra (pay respect to the monk).
And you will be joyous and improved.

Figure 24 The Northern Thai version of Poy Sang Long called Luuk Keaw at Wat Roi Jaan, Hang Dong
Figure 25 A novice looks up from his cellphone

Figure 26 Sang Long danced on the shoulders of uncles
Figure 27 Thai Police Surveil the Temple Festival

Figure 28 Tai Ethno-Nationalist T-Shirt Iconography
Figure 29 Content Sang Long
CHAPTER 5: NECROMOBILITY/CHOREOMOBILITY

The event is that no one ever dies, but has always just died or is always going to die, in the empty present of the Aion, that is, in eternity (Deleuze 1990:63).

When normal people die they just put the body in a coffin and don’t burn them. Only the monk is burned [...]. No, there is no music and dance for laypeople (Sai Awn, personal interview, Chiang Mai, March 2015).

The death of a monk ushers in a liminal period which differs from that following the death of an ordinary layman. The corpse of an ordinary person is "dangerous" in that the spirit which adheres to the body until cremation may become a malevolent ghost. The continued presence of the corpse of a highly-respected monk poses no such threat. By virtue of the merit which such a man has accumulated through rejection of the 'pleasures of the world', his spirit is immune from such a fate after death (Keyes 1975, 47).

Deep in the emerald green mountains of upland Southeast Asia, in a quaint, small town hugging the Thai-Burma border, the air dances and the ground palpitates with movement. The township, consisting of about 100 households and 300 people, has in the course of three months transformed itself into a vast festival space to accommodate the roughly 4000 pilgrims who are descending upon the tranquil valley today. Rice paddies have been drained and turned into open dirt fields, dozens of temporary bamboo and tin shade buildings constructed – minivans, trucks and motorbikes keep arriving – all brimming with people. Some have driven for hours; many have traveled for days from as far away as Chiang Mai, Bangkok and the Shan State in Burma, traversing perilous roads and dozens of military checkpoints. The steady beat of the mong (bossed gong) resounds throughout the valley, the market is teeming with activity, and revelers dance as they pass through the open spaces, clad in their finest traditional attire. Contrary to the festal atmosphere in the valley today, the worshippers have not come to celebrate, but rather to sense, witness and participate in the final ritual journey and cremation of a much-loved Tai monk.
who has passed way. The death-event, a culmination of lives past and present, will be demarcated through an elaborate series of funerary rituals and ceremonies. The deceased monk, most commonly referred to as Luang Pho Taa Sreng (The Venerable Bright Eyed Father), is remembered throughout the Tai nation for his ability to see “more than ordinary people,” despite being completely blind since the age of three.

In what follows, I theorize this funerary-event, as well as other eventual becomings that I encountered during my fieldwork in Northern Thailand amongst Tai exiles from the Shan State in Burma, in terms of both the necromobility and choreomobility of death in the Thai-Burma border-zone. I call upon conceptualizations of the event as a “knotting of politics” (Badiou 2013), as well as the event as “chaotic multiplicity” (Deleuze 2006:86) or even rupture (Zizek 2014), while also attending to the kinds of necropolitics (Membe 2003) that have set into motion the assemblage of bodies (both living and dead), performance (dance, music and theatre), and meaning (merit-making and the belief in spirits) surrounding the funerary processions for Luang Pho Taa Sreng, the deceased monk who was blind, yet could see.

THE MOBILITY TURN

I wish to make three modest interfusions into what has been called the mobility turn or the new mobilities paradigm in lieu of the death-event. The first being an expansion of necromobility as a concept, to include not only the mobilities arising in the context of death, decay and burial (Jassal 2014), but also the mobilities of after-lives, future-lives and of lives considered precarious. Drawing upon Michel Foucault’s (1998) concept of biopower, necromobility is understood here in relation to necropower, which is the sovereign’s ability to
decide who may to live and who must die (Mbembe 2003). Necromobilities, however, refers to the dispositifs, or apparatuses of control, that govern the movement of bodies after death and in relation to death-events. The second interfusion I am seeking allocates the choreomobility of the political, meaning the choreographed – patterned, calculated and directed – movements of bodies (both dead and living) through spaces and through times. By inviting the possibility of choreomobilities, this research attends to the ways dance and performances become constitutive of events by forging cultural consistency out of political disorder. The last interfusion is less conceptual and deals rather with the manner and methods by which we study mobilities and events. I argue that through an ethnochoreological, meaning embodied, yet materially grounded and historically situated analysis of movement (Buckland 1999, Foster 2008, 2009, 2010), we may be able to inch closer to mapping the criticality of death and performance in mobilities research.

New lines of flight, or directions of thought, have been made possible by the proliferation of research attending to homo mobilus (mobile human), rather than homo stasis (motionless human) after the mobilities turn. Pivotal moments within the turn include a critique of the “a-mobility” of conventional social science research, that fails to see the central role that automobility, technological mobilities and the materiality of urban mobilities plays in the intensification of how bodies and things move spatially and chronologically in relation to one another (Sheller and Urry 2006, Simmel 1997), and the unpacking of the notion of “potential mobilities,” to be used instead of biological terminologies such as motilities (Kellerman 2006). Cresswell and Merriman (2001) draw our attention to the geographies of everyday bodily rhythms, which is based upon Henri Lefebvre’s premise that “(E)verywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm” (Lefebvre
2004:15, quoted in Cresswell and Merriman 2001:3). Thus, the mobilities turn provides us with important embodied and critical methodologies for scoping movement, such as rhythm analysis (Edensor 2010, Cresswell and Merriman 2001) and mobile, or even “itinerant ethnographies” that are adaptive to the migrations in place, media and judgment of diasporic peoples (Schein 2002:231).

In order to place the concepts of necromobility and choreomobility in the context of fieldwork, I draw upon my experiences as an ethnochoreologist (an ethnographer of dance, movement and choreomobility) in Upland Southeast Asia. The ethnographic work I present here is primarily based on my time spent in Mae Hong Son Province in a small township, which will remain unnamed, where the burial rituals of Luang Pho Taa Srang were held in January of 2015. I, along with thousands of pilgrims traveled there, through dozens of military checkpoints and across perilous roads in order to bear witness, but more importantly for Tai religious practitioners, to make merit within the context of a Theravada Buddhist death-event. Tai migrants are governed by the politics of clandestinity and exile, and far too many “are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe 2003:39-40), as rampant deportation from Thailand remains a constant threat and political persecution in Burma prevents them from returning home.

**Necromobility: The Death-Event**

“In fact, funeral rites can be seen as essentially a kind of communal merit making for the deceased; it is, one might argue, what Shan funerals are archetypically about” (Eberhardt 2006:52).
Mobilities and events are seemingly antagonistically knotted. Mobility entails processes of flow, movement and becoming, whereas the event, as it is normatively thought, is a thing of stagnation, framing and rupture. The “death-event” – which refers here to the disassemblage of things, lives or ideas – presents an ontological problem for normative framings of the event. There is a notion of finality and of “being no more” after death, thus movement and mobility is no longer possible in death. Through a discussion of the kinds of necromobilities that arise through and after Luang Pho Taa Sreng’s death-event, I argue here that the event is multiplicitous (Deleuze 2006) and that in the context of migrancy, war and violence, as well as within the cosmology of Theravada Buddhism, the death-event becomes revelatory of complex beliefs in the after-life, which are intertwined with the Tai peoples’ aspirations for obtaining sovereignty for the Tai nation – freed from the bonds of belligerent empires, colonies and states. When Gilles Deleuze asks, “[w]hat are the conditions that make an event possible?” he solutions that “[e]vents are produced in a chaos, in a chaotic multiplicity, but only under the condition that a sort of screen intervenes” (Deleuze 2006:86). For Deleuze, the screen is a kind of membrane – or a plane of consistency upon which chaos unfolds. This notion of the event is close to Badiou’s (2013) idea of something seemingly unified appearing out of a multiplicity. However, for Badiou (2013), the multiplicity appears as a knotting. Within this multiplicitous knotting, a political consistency emerges:

In fact, we could argue that there is politics when three things form a knot: the masses who all of a sudden are gathered in an unexpected consistency (events); the points of view incarnated in organic and enumerable actors (subject-effects); a reference in thought that authorizes the elaboration of discourse based upon the mode in which the specific actors in question are held together, even at a distance, by the popular consistency to which chance summons them (Badiou 2013:51).

Badiou’s (2013) conception of politics as knotting, and events as masses gathered in
“unexpected consistency,” is grounded in Jacques Lacan’s (1978, 1993, 1998) notion of the event as a puncturing of the seemingly stable forces that underpin one’s existence. What emerges is an instability of relational forces between people, things, time and I might add, movement. The psychological trauma of the event reveals society as an "appearance" of a layer of reality with endless layers preceding and succeeding it in an unbroken lineage of being and becoming. Jane Bennett (2004) sees the Lacanian notion of the political as an event that disrupts the prevailing social order and by so doing uncovers the social and political system that underpins its "order". For Bennett, "the "political" here refers to those irruptive events that reveal politics to be a masking of the restless and stubbornly diverse quality of "the real" or that which always exceeds actuality and eludes symbolic expression" (2004:48). The death-event becomes a refraction of orderly life – a refractive prism through which subjects are now able to see their lives, and the appearance of reality, in new light.

**THE VESSEL OF DEATH**

“There is, by definition, something ‘miraculous’ in an event, from the miracles of our daily lives to those of the most sublime spheres, including that of the divine” (Zizek 2014:1).

Death is often referred to as a journey – a journey where divine vessels usher the deceased into the afterlife. For Tai Theravada Buddhists, the death of a monk sets into motion elaborate funerary rituals and ample opportunity for laypeople to make merit, or to do good deeds that will improve their kam (karma). This was the case for Luang Pho Taa Sreng, the blind monk whose body was laid to rest in an ornate vessel called a lerm – a kind of coffin chariot. Placed within a silver casket and enclosed within the lerm, the body of Luang Pho Taa Sreng
would undergo its final rite before incineration – a three-day literal “tug-of-war” that ended in the body of the deceased monk finally being brought to the pagoda where it would be burned. The ritual called *poy lerl lerm* is reserved only for great monks who are highly regarded for both their teachings and extraordinary abilities. Sometimes called *khru*b*aba* (holy man), Luang Pho Taa Sr*eng* could purportedly see objects in a room and sense the presence of a certain persons despite being blind. He was also loved for his engaging *dham* (darma teachings) talks. An abbot from Shan State told me, that; “He can create great stories in his *dham* talks. He would tell stories about Shan religion. He could make up to seven people come alive – he could create their voices. He became famous in Shan State. Usually only old men come to listen to the *dham* talks, but with this monk everyone would come to hear him tell the stories.”

The spectacle of *poy lerl lerm* involves sometimes up to a thousand merit-makers. The *lerm*, or palanquin, containing the deceased monk is placed atop two large tree-trunks, and once attached, thick rope, made by merit-makers, is fastened to each end of the *lerm*. The rope, measuring about 200 meters, is then pulled in opposite directions by the funeral attendees across the open dirt field of the festival space. This tug-of-war continues for three days and Dee, a Tai teacher and former monk, explains, “Poy lerl lerm is an ancient Tai ceremony that is only used when a monk dies. When we do this ritual it means that this person was worshipped and revered. Each part wants to help him, every part wants him, and so they pull in opposite directions.” The descriptions of the ritual varied slightly and some also claimed that half the participants want the monk to stay in this realm, and the other half want to help usher the monk to the next realm where he will be reborn, or become again (*punabbhava*). But all agreed that participating in the *poy lerk lerm* ritual is a way of making *kuso* (merit). Some merit-makers, after having joined in on a pulling session, even cut off small pieces of the pulling rope as a token, or religious
souvenir, to remember the ceremony by. As Charles Keyes finds in his study of monastic
funerals in Northern Thailand, the senior monk’s funeral acts as way to evoke viscerally the life
(and in this case, death) of the Buddha, as well as providing ample opportunity for practitioners
to make merit:

Serving as a channel of merit was not the only religious function served by the corpse. More importantly, the corpse served as a constant reminder of a fundamental message of Buddhism—the impermanence of self and the transitoriness of life. [...] The corpse of a former monk, whose cremation can be long delayed, is perhaps the best of all symbols in bringing to consciousness reflection about the decay and disintegration of man's physical form (Keyes 1975, 47).

Figure 30 The Poy Lerkrerm Palanquin
As Nancy Eberhardt explains in her study about the life-cycle in Tai culture and cosmology, “In their stories, sermons and everyday talk, Shan [Tai] depict a universe in which every purposeful action you perform registers on the cosmos and eventually returns to you” (2006: 48). Thus, a person’s demise is never the final event, but rather a continuation of the karmic cycle of *samsara* – an endless cycle of death and rebirth whereby one’s reincarnation depends on the accumulated acts throughout time – this is also referred to as *kam* (karma, meaning action). For Tai peoples there is mobility in death. The spiritual conception of rebirth and afterlife in Tai culture speaks to a cosmological plane where the realm of beings also includes the entities of the deceased. Especially important is the Tai conception of *khwan* (soul) and *phi* (spirit), which illustrate the mobility of the afterlife in Tai cosmology. Each living being, human or otherwise, contains within its body a *kwhan*. Upon the death of the physical body, the
khwan is transformed into a phi, a process that can take up to a year (Eberhardt 2006:52). Proper preparations and ceremonial rites ensure the safe passage of the soul into a spirit, so that the spirit does not linger and haunt the living, but may instead find a new body within which to dwell. However, there are many cases where the spirits of the deceased refuse to leave.

Waan, a Tai dancer who is often hired to perform at festivals, events and funerals, explains that there are various signs that the deceased have yet to reincarnate. She performed for the funeral of one monk in particular, whose spirit had yet to reincarnate:

In Vieng Heng, when a monk died, there was suddenly an unusual amount of water flowing from a tree by the temple. The water was flowing from the branches of the tree and no one knew why or where it was coming from. So some villagers went to see a sa-le (holy man, fortuneteller). He told them it was the dead monk. His phi does not want to go and he is crying.43

In contrast to the elaborate rites evoked at the death-event of monks, when Sai Awn’s father passed away in Shan State, it was a somewhat uneventful affair. The family kept the body for one day and then quickly buried it. Seven days later they had a small funeral. The family gathered, ate food and read the “dham,” or Buddhist scripture. When asked if they had any commemorative ceremonies for his father, he lamented, “No, there is no music and dance for laypeople.” Sai Awn’s father died when he was just a young boy, in 5th grade. He said of this father, “He was not a very hard working person, he liked to travel and drink. The most important person in my life was my mother.” Sai Awn was not sure why his father passed away, but that it was likely because he drank too much. His alcoholism and subsequent death devastated the family: “After he passed away, our family was not strong. There was no one to take care of us, so we had to move” (Sai Awn, personal communication). But Sai Awn did go to the temple three

43 Personal Interview, Chiang Mai, March 2015.
months after his father’s passing, and after Kao Pansaa (Theravada Buddhist lent), in order to sleep there and follow the Buddhist precepts. This was a way for Sai Awn to make merit – to accumulate good deeds in the karmic cyclical system samsara (birth and rebirth) - on behalf of his father, himself and his family. Thus with the presence of death, though being a time of dissolution and end, new avenues also arise for religious practitioners to improve upon their own karma, a word translated by one Buddhist research collaborator as “action.” By committing to doing good deeds, making merit and following scripture, practitioners significantly improve their chances of being reborn into a new and better life, after death.

There is no equality in death. Those who lead spiritually devoted lives or lives of prominence, wealth or fame, can achieve relative immortality in death. Those who lead ordinary lives receive little funerary fanfare. Sai Awn explains, “When normal people die they just put the body in a coffin and don’t burn them. Only the monk is burned.” In Zygmunt Bauman’s (2013) book Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies, he considers immortality as being “the great de-equalizer”:

The amount of public mourning and the intensity of public manifestations of memory became symbolic expressions of relative social placement at the same time as they were major stakes at the game of domination. Thanks to social rituals, all members were immortal, yet some were clearly more immortal than others. Society promised immortality as an interest on mortal life properly lived.” (Bauman 2013:52-3)

The spectacle of Luang Pho Taa Sreng’s funeral contrasts sharply with the Sai Awn’s father’s funeral. Yet both offer opportunities for the living to engage in acts that I argue are necromobile – acts designed to improve upon the merit of the deceased as well as the merit-maker upon his or her own demise. For many Tai peoples who have fled from the violence and war that ravaged the Shan State during the past five decades, becoming upwardly mobile in the course of one’s present life-cycle is difficult, therefore religious piousness and frequent acts of
merit-making becomes a salient way of ensuring a better rebirth. Acts such as making a religious offering (bucha) in order to receive an amulet with Luang Phoo Taa Srengs image or participating in the tug-of-war ritual Poy Lerm are all deeds that register upon the cosmos, they are acts that serve you in the next life. The collective merit making rites seen at Luang Pho Taa Sreng’s funeral reveals the ways in which Buddhism “police” both crowds and individuals towards performing communal religious goals (Ranciere 2004:29). The ritual performance of death and burial are also a part of a larger political project whereby Tai nationalism is reified through collective investments in merit-making, dance, song and drama.

**CHOREOMOBILITY: THE DANCE-EVENT**

“When all is said and done, theatre thinks, in the space opened between life and death, the knot that binds together desire and politics. It thinks this knot in the form of an event, that is, in the form of the intrigue or the catastrophe” (Badiou 2013:73).

Although, the funerary processions and preparations have been going on for three months, today is the culmination of the proceedings and the villagers’ labor. Today, the steady beat of the mong (bossed gong) sounds throughout the valley, greeting pilgrims as they arrive. The pulsing pace of the mong is overlaid by the irregular striking of the glong (long drum), the ubiquitous sound that accompanies every Tai festival and sets the rhythm for the performances and dances that follow. Men, and sometimes women, take turns beating the glong, while passersby stop to dance, and onlookers approvingly clap or beat their thighs as they watch. There is excitement in each person’s step, everyone in their finest wares and smiling eagerly, despite the sweltering heat and dust-filled grounds. There is a bouncy castle for the kids, men selling balloons, merit-making stations where you can bucha (make an offering), about 50 temporary
shops self-organize around the festival grounds, selling traditional costumes, CDs, DVDs, amulets, books, T-shirts, hats and noodles. The Tai monastic funeral, known as *Poy Sang Kyo Murn Jao*, is akin to what Badiou calls a ‘perishable spectacle’: “a spectacle is itself perishable by nature. It can certainly be repeated a good number of times. However, everything in it, or almost everything, is mortal” (2013:58-59).

On the eve of the first day of the festival, a group of women, all dressed in coordinative Tai traditional attire, take command of the area of the festival grounds where musicians are playing. One woman walks up to the man who is playing the *glong* and asks to have a turn. What ensues will be two hours of a female-led impromptu dance and music fête. The women begin by overtaking a small corner of the festival ground, drawing a few dozen onlookers. Soon their enthusiasm, and skill, draws over 300 onlookers. More musicians arrive with their instruments having been summoned by the rhythm, energy and commotion of the scene. The dancers move to a wider space within the festival and a large circle of bodies ensnares the performance. The inner ring of the circle becomes a moving wheel of dancers and its nucleolus a groups of musicians steadily maintaining the rhythmic pulse of the crowd. The multitude moves from being a “chaotic multiplicity” to being in unison, to finding their corporal rhythm – what Deleuze and Guattari (2001) call the *refrain* – that which holds things together.
Waan, a 25-year-old mother, performer and Tai cultural practitioner tells me that before her performance for Tai National Day, she receives dozens of letters from military officers telling her about their lives, lamentations and hopes for the future. She uses these letters to write dramatic operas to be danced and acted out on stage during the festival. This way, the desires, intrigues and concerns of the audience are presented in an ephemeral stage-show, uniquely formed by the dancers, singers and actors themselves to produce maximal affects. Dance is evoked in nearly all contexts of Tai religious, cultural and even political life. Theravada Buddhist holidays and temple festivals produce spaces for drama, dance and performance. But dance is especially significant as a nationalist enterprise during Tai National Day, commonly celebrated
in February of each year in the Shan State Army’s (SSA) military encampment at Doi Tai Leng, located on the Thai-Burma border in Mae Hong Son Province. Groups of performers are hired by festival organizers to perform customized dramas, dances and songs. Thus the Tai festival performance varies depending on the setting, preference of the organizer and socio-political milieu of the event. Sai Awn explains that, “At the funeral you will have a ta sai (band) – a group that will come to sing and cry about the monk. They will tell the story about khun phi – the spirit that comes to take away the body. They will play traditional music and cry.” Dramatic performances at Tai events produce dramatic affects – kinesthetically linking a fractured nation through rhythms and refrains.

One of the answers emerging when we attempt to think of dance or movement practice as political is the concept of kinesthetic empathy, understood here as the somatic understandings of repetition and difference through observation and experience. It is the desire to invest energy into the refrain, it is the act of placing oneself within the assemblage, and it is the relay between practice and theory that attract bodies in the bodies-movement-politics nexus. It is the process that allows bodies and concepts signification as culture, tradition or habit. Here I turn to Susan Leigh Foster (2010), who has made significant contributions to an understanding of the politics of dance, and in particular, the politics of kinesthetic empathy and kinesthesia during her investigation of how concepts like empathy and sympathy gain traction within dance and performance studies. Kinesthesia is the way in which the body observes and responds to movement, placements and affects, and kinesthetic empathy reveals to us "the many ways in which the dancing body in its kinesthetic specificity formulates an appeal to viewers to be apprehended and felt, encouraging them to participate collectively in discovering the communal basis of their experience” (Leigh Foster 2010:218).
The politics of kinesthetic empathy harken a new mode of thinking about biopolitics, one that is not just bound to the apparatuses of the State, but that see the political as a somatic conditioning of the body through movement and practice; we can call this the politics of *choreomobility*. Considering the affects of the death-event as choreomobility provides us with pause to ponder the *dispositifs*, or mechanisms of control, that regulates the social body (Foucault 1980), in relation to displacements. Andre Lepecki (2013) distinguishes between choreopolicing and choreopolitics, where choreopolicing is understood in terms of Jaques Ranciere’s concept of “police,” which defines life as a policed construction, or a controlled and governed mobilizations of bodies through time and space:

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees those bodies are assigned by the name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another noise (Ranciere 2004:29).

Choreopolitics however, attends to the body’s will to freedom in range, purpose and form of movement. Dance mobilities have been understood in terms of the policing of bodies within the context of choreography and performance. However, the metaphor may be extended beyond the realm of the stage to comprise how life is choreographed much in the same way a performance is – through the careful staging of bodies through space and time (Cresswell and Merriman 2011).
CONCLUSIONS: AN EPIGRAPH

Instead of considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death (Mbembe 14).

Mobility is not a phenomenon exclusive to the living, vibrant mobilities also arise after the death of the body. In fact, the life of the body as an assemblage of vital parts lingers in perpetuity after the death of the living being. Death continuously occurs throughout our seemingly alive bodies. Our cells, once alive and filled with vibrancy, are in a constant process of death, disassemblage and reassemblage. As our cells die and pass through or flake off our bodies, we generate new cells that are fed by our consumption of external organisms and inorganic materials; decayed plant fibers, meat, oxygen and hydrogen dioxide. We die and become reborn at every instant. This cycle has no beginning and no end; there is no rupture, only accelerations and decelerations in decay and multiplication. Our senescence – the process of aging – is the constant threat to our fleeting lives. As our cells cease to divide by mitosis and we disassemble. But we do not disappear, we shift into new form: energy is never lost, it only moves. The rule of kam, or karma, captures this transversal flow of life force, whereby nothing is ever lost, but always cyclical, mobile, caught in the wheels of samsara (death and rebirth). In this way we must be careful not to privilege the assemblage, without also attending to the always-accompanying disassemblage. There is no final death, only reincarnation.

The object of this journeying into the world of festival, performance and death amongst displaced Tai peoples, is to explore and critique the idea of the death-event, which is the event that becomes framed posthumously as the end of a life, as having finality, fixity or boundedness. Rather than as a closed circuit or a thing of finality, I see the death-event, and indeed any event,
as a practice through which one’s becomings – as an individual, as a group or as a people – are rendered visible. By looking at the event, in this case, a funerary event, both as process and performance, an ontology of the necropolitics of being, both in this life and in lives beyond, may arise. In addition to examining death-as-event, I wish also to call attention to the many preventable and unreported deaths – due to violence, illness or displacement – that imperceptibly haunt Tai exiles in the border-zone. The precarity of life and death is sensed by the researcher through my engagement with Tai migrants, as a dancer, ethnochoreologist and mobile ethnographer. Dance, I argue, like Deleuze and Guattari’s (2001) refrain, is a space creator – providing the possibility of living in a world where things may be repeated without strict felicity to an essence, origin or territory. By attending to the expressive and performatic mobilities arising in the midst of violence, war and displacement in the Thai-Burma border-zone, we come closer to an ontology of exile.
Chapter 6: “Woman, Animal, Other”: Gendered Assemblages and Staged Authenticity

*Ethnic dances - envisioned as local rather than transcendent, traditional rather than innovative, simple rather than sophisticated, a product of the people rather than a genius - are resuscitated and transformed into product of various cultures from all around the world (...) Yet through this relabeling the colonial history that produced the ethnic continues to operate.*

(Susan Leigh-Foster 2009:2)

*In the context of state institutions, recontextualization of dance usually entails the domestication of dance, the taming of its potentially disorderly elements.*

(Susan Reed 1998:512)

On November 19th, 2012, President Barack Obama deplaned Air Force One in Yangon, Burma – he would be the first sitting U.S. President to set foot in Burma ever in history – signaling an extraordinary shift in US-Burma relations over the past decade (Beech 2012). His visit would be followed by a host of executive branch sojourns from states that for the last fifty years would not even communicate with Burmese officials, much less meet with them. What struck me however, was not the foreign dignitaries lining up to shake hands with the former generals and have their photographs taken with Aung San Suu Kyi, but rather the spectacle of ethnic performances that the visit entailed. For the occasion of welcoming the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for the East Asia Summit in 2014, young students were outfitted in various ethnic garb and paraded around while performing ethnic dances, purportedly representing distinctive ethnic minority groups in Burma. However, none of the students appearing before the world leaders gathered for the summit were actually of the ethnic groups they were supposed to represent. They were all ethnic Burman students – the majority group in
Burma – who, it later became clear, were hired to act out exotic ethnic fantasy of national unification in Burma. When one young lady was asked by a reporter why she so quickly took her “long-neck” brass necklace off backstage, she replied, “Oh that’s fake!” Did you think I was really ethnic Kayan Padaung?” seemingly offended that the reporter had assumed she was anything but ethnic Burman (Associated Press 2014).

This episode lays bare the performative nature of national identity. With staged performances that fetishize the ethnic minorities in Burma – the state is effectively erasing sixty years of civil war and tension between the Burmans and ethnic groups. By re-presenting them as

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peaceable, docile and cooperative subjects of the Union of Myanmar, their plight, their continued struggles in the border-zones and upland areas is rubbed from of our awareness. It also points to the ways nations stage performances and aesthetics in order to maintain themselves, or, at the very least, maintain the illusion of national coherence when in fact deep historical disputes remain unresolved between the ethnic groups in Burma, as it does in most postcolonial spaces. In subtle ways, and in service to the nation-as-state, ‘folk’ and ‘ethnic’ aesthetics are mobilized, to as Michael Shapiro frames it, as “create the unitary and coherent national cultures that are implied in the nation-state conjunction” (2004, ix).

This chapter attends to the micro-politics and staged authenticities of aesthetics and performativity in Burma and its surrounding territories during a time of intensified ‘nation-building’ and revival of the arts through ethno-nationalist performance. I delineate the ways in which performance is a staged aesthetic, always mediated by the politics of practice, geopolitical space and the grammars of modernity. In particular, I examine performance art in the daily lives of Tai peoples – as it is in the assemblage of song, dance and discourse, that subtle, and perhaps more enduring political governmentalities and assemblages are made. I attend to and critique notions of traditional, versus modern performance, which, I argue, harken a politics of practice that ‘others’ and excludes certain performers as “non-modern.” Tai nationalism, as it is situated in Upland Southeast Asia, is performed at once as an exoticized touristic encounter in capitalist spaces and also as a way to evoke the Tai nation while in exile. I attend to these subtle and important differences, which often go undetected by politics literature and are often read by state actors as apolitical because performance is seen as that which belongs to the realm of culture, rather than politics. I argue that there is a slow, enduring politics at play here, whereby
performances that may be deemed ‘traditional’ by the state, are in fact being used in innovative ways to express resistance.

THE WORLDING OF DANCE AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTICITY

Emerging from the outmoded folk-art studies movement, the notion of "world dance" currently amasses contested meanings, exclusions and inclusions within the realm of performance arts, in dance departments and particularly in nationalist discourses over claims to authenticity. World dance, much like folk dance, had to be parsed out by academicians and scholars as something separate from, and, certainly not equal to "high art," as it was understood in the academy. As Susan Leigh Foster shows us, "[w]hereas departments of Music, Art, and, eventually, Dance established classically oriented cannons of study, faculty felt the need also to recognize the populist and quotidian practices of the folk that were otherwise excluded from these arts curricula" (Foster 2009, 1). Therefore, we now see a proliferation of courses at major universities with labels like 'History of World Dance' or titles like 'Professor of World Dance.' This "worlding" of dance, art and music was originally intended to include arts that were not represented within the context of Western performance repertoires, but in no way to hold them equal to the already established Euro-American arts (Foster 2009; Savigliano 2009).

The ethnocentrism in dance scholarship has been critiqued by a number of anthropologists (Reed 1998, 505; Sklar 1991; Williams 2004; Davida 2011; Buckland 2007). One of the earliest such critiques came from Joann Kealiinohomoku's (1970) article An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance, where the author takes to task the way in which ‘dance studies’ scholars see ballet as an extra-ethnic aesthetic practice belonging solely
to modernity. Kealiinohomoku argues that ballet should not be treated any differently than "ethnic" or "folk" dances by dance scholars, a notion that took the modern dance world by storm and spurred innovations in dance scholarship that valued reflexivity and did not privilege the Western performance modalities as being the standard (Davida 2011, 1). These scholars interrogated the popular labels attached to dancers and dances, such as “traditional,” “authentic,” “folkloric,” “contemporary,” “classical,” or “fusion,” as forms of heteroglossia; words that purport to express neutrality, but that are in fact refractive and authorial in their use (Bakhtin 1982). In what follows I trace how some of these categories are used and critiqued in dance and performance studies. I then discuss how the politics of place shapes the production of meaning in the dance encounter, I look at instances where Tai dance performers have used the body as a site for resistance practice, and finally, I mediate on the possibilities of performatic methodologies for a decolonized academy.

As Theresa Buckland (2006) observes, the debate raged in Europe over the usefulness and appropriateness of the research associated with "folk studies," a field containing within it a number of unilineal evolutionist ideas of progress, and demarcated a sharp distinction between non-urban folk culture and (European) civilization: "The concept of the folk has been revealed as an ideological construct whereby rural communities and their older practices were perceived by the intelligentsia as survivals from an ancient, pure culture" (Buckland 2006:7). The assumption here is that the forceful concept known as 'modernity,' allowed a dichotomous relationship between "high" European enlightenment culture, and the lower cultural "remnants" or curious
"artifacts" of the rural peasantry. As a consequence, in a number of European cultures, their dances were now considered "folk dances", their music "folk music" and their dress, "folk costumes." These art forms were in clear opposition to more developed notions of "high art," like ballet or modern dance, and were never afforded the same status as the European enlightenment era art forms such as classical music or renaissance painting.

Perhaps one of the more menacing legacies of folk studies, is that it not only perpetuates colonial juxtapositions of "higher" versus "lower" peoples, or cultured arts versus forms of expression, but that its method of standardizing traditional dance is used as a tool for nationalist enterprises (Buckland 2006:8). Thai, Cambodian, Korean and Indian "traditional" dances, as they are performed today, have all been standardized to fit an ideal aesthetic that serves the protocols of a unified national "culture" (Ban Ram Thai 2013, Srinivasan 2009, Janet O'Shea 2006 and Judy van Zile 2006). World dance becomes the floating signifier for all the movement practices and aesthetics that cannot be recognized as modern. And by modern we mean of European origin, of the enlightenment era, and innovative, all opposing signifiers from what traditional of folk arts signaled.

In Worlding Dance and Dancing Out There in the World, Marta Savigliano (2009) explores the significance of world dance as a concept, a catch phrase and as a floating signifier that denotes a whole host of assumptions. Significantly, we can understand the notion of "worlding", or "to world" in terms of what it explicitly is not. The world, in this context, does not include "modern" Euro-Americans and their art. As Savigliano points out, "World dance is a representation, a relatively new way of putting together, conceptualizing and validating 'other"

45 In We Have Never Been Modern, Bruno Latour (1993) declares that "The adjective 'modern' designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word 'modern', 'modernization', or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past."
dances', rather than a plain discovery of their existence in the world" (164). Worlding, then, is another form of 'othering' within the context of a globalized capital-driven economy that needs to label and categorize art forms into containers that can in this way be made intelligible, reproducible and even sellable. Saviglioano contends that World Dance ought to be approached not as something that reflects a greater acceptance or tolerance, or even appreciation for difference in a globalizing world, but as a concept emerging from a particular move towards disciplining and categorizing bodies, and "an aestheticized biopolitics" within the frameworks of global capitalism (166).

Additionally, World Dance does the work of forgetting colonial and imperialist legacies by assuming the possibility of a multicultural and harmonious global culture (Savigliano 2009:166). But we must also think about what kinds of possibilities are created with the emergence of the concept of world dance. New jobs, dance collaborations, and movements are found in the academy and in dance studios. New bodies are encountering 'other' forms of movement that they might otherwise not be exposed to. There are dancers who are attempting to revise, explore and innovate with categories such as modern or traditional. These forms of aesthetic expression are often called "fusion" dance and fusion dancers tend to see artistic expression as existing within what Jaques Ranciere's (2006) calls the "aesthetic regime of art," which is the plane upon which all art and forms of aesthetic expression co-exist equally. The aesthetic regime of art allows for innovation to occur within traditional forms and it does not privilege one form of expression over another. For instance, Tribal Fusion Belly Dance is an innovative form of North African and Middle Eastern "danses du ventre" or "belly dance." Tribal Fusion Belly Dance interacts with multiple movement and performance forms, while being mediated by space, politics and discourses. It defies neat categorization as it fold into its
repertoire influences from flamenco, cabaret style belly dance, classical Indian dance and even hip-hop - creating a smooth plane upon which "borrowing" is allowed within an egalitarian regime of aesthetics.

Yet, there are politics involved with which bodies can express which art forms and where. The movement art of belly dance, in its various manifestations, is repeatedly critiqued for belonging to an orientalist aesthetic sensibility, and its practitioners in the West have been chided for eroticizing the Arab female body, using belly dance as an avenue for female sexual liberation and even committing forms of representational violence. Sunaina Maira (2008: 327) writes that, "At best, the interest in belly dancing allows liberal American women to claim that they are not the “bad” Americans who are racist or anti-Muslim and simultaneously to distinguish between “free” and “unfree” women." Her charge that belly dance is "a site for staging a New Age feminism and liberal Orientalist perspective on Arab and Muslim women" (2008:319), denies the productive capacities of the movement arts and it moves to create a hierarchy within which dance exists beyond the plane of equality that Ranciere (2006) imagines for the "aesthetic regime of arts." Yet we cannot deny that the appropriations of non-Western movement art forms in Europe and North America do not preclude an imperial positionality, within which, "taking" art from former colonies is a continuation of colonial power dynamics.

The problem with clinging to a notion of "traditional," "folk," or "world dance," lies in the continual process of othering, as well as the emphasis on difference and purity within the dance that such a move involves. Whereas Dance, which, in the West means modern or ballet, is allowed to experiment widely with the genre, world dance is seen as far more formulaic. There is something called World Dance, but there are not individual dancers like in modern or ballet, just bodies flowing through the prescribed motions of "authentic" movement. Once the "world
dancer" begins to experiment with the formula, then, the dance ceases to be authentic. For the colonized subject, innovation means a loss of purity. By changing the formula the dancer is polluting the purity of "authentic" expression. Often, the body is seen as vehicle for tradition and this is reinforced by Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) notion of *habitus*, which presumes a body that contains 'habits' and then reacts, predictably, based on the habits within its container. Foster (2009) points out that this kind of understanding "casts the body in the role of a vehicle for tradition," one that simply receives and reacts, but does not innovate. So, an understanding of the body as a vehicle for culture does not leave openings for the possibility for the body as an expressant entity unto itself, independent of culture.

**MINORITY THEME PARKS AND THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE SPACE**

*For the past five years the Chinese state has promoted minority Sipsongbanna as a hot tourist destination for majority Han visitors—a kind of internal, landlocked Hawaii. In Chinese mass media, Sipsongbanna is portrayed as an exotic fantasyland, a mythical home of the “Other,” with dancing minority temptresses, lush forests, and colorful peacocks. The rural capital has a blossoming skyline of high-rise hotels and several “minority theme parks” (mingzufengqing yuan), each staging a proliferation of song and dance claiming to represent “authentic Tai folk culture” (Sara Davis 2001:27).*

The Tai peoples living in Northern Thailand share many aesthetic, spiritual and linguistic expressive assemblages with the neighboring Tai peoples, who live in the Sipsongbanna Autonomous Province (Xishuangbanna Dai) in Southern China, and the groups are often characterized as belonging to a single "race" or "ethnos" called Tai. For the purposes of my research, I am less interested in whether this kind of group cohesion exists, and more interested in how various forms of expression are made possible within certain political spaces. As Tai
dance is situated in Upland Southeast Asia, also known as "Zomia," their peoples and former territory now overlap multiple national boundaries such as Burma, China, Thailand and Laos. However, the un-navigable mountains of Upland Southeast Asia and the fracturing of Tai territories due to systems of imperial (China), colonial (England, Thailand), and now State domination, do make possible radical heterogeneity in Tai dance.

The Tai living in Sipsongpanna, are currently experiencing a kind of "cultural renaissance" that has very little to do with their own understandings of what their culture constitutes. Han Chinese officials and the tourism industry in Yunnan orchestrate the Tai cultural revival in a way that reflects how "traditional" culture is staged globally for "modern" audiences:

Here, the popular end of the field of cultural production is represented by the “staged authenticity” of minority song and dance revues for tourists. Typical performances take place on an hourly basis at the Xishuangbanna Minority Theme Park, which alternates Tai “peacock dances,” “water-splashing festivals,” and elephant trick shows every hour. In the theme park, groups of tourists wander stone paths past open-air dance arenas, miniature minority villages, and small zoos in which several of the otters, snakes, and alligators appear near death. Ethnic women and exotic animals are placed side by side (....) (Davis 2001:27-28).

The prostitution of cultural identity meets full culmination in Xishuangbanna Minority Theme Park. Not only is authenticity and exoticism staged here in an orgy of human, animal and artistic appearance, but it has become a cottage industry for the tourism business where busloads of Han Chinese travel to this remote outpost in order to eat, drink and literally consume the exotic other. As Theresa Buckland (2006:14) notes, "[p]erformances of traditional dances in international festivals and in tourist displays owe much to a twin embracing of the powers of nostalgia and exoticism."

Ethnic women and exotic animals, corralled together in a capitalist circus of nostalgia and
curiosity. This speaks to the need for institutions to discipline and tame the dangerous elements of an unruly indigenous population, as Susan Reed says, "In the context of state institutions, recontextualization of dance usually entails the domestication of dance, the taming of its potentially disorderly elements" (Susan Reed 1998:512). Women, being the locust of the eroticized/exoticised body, lend themselves most easily to taming through the careful stagings of sexuality and ethnicity by the Chinese authorities. Davis (2010:28) goes on to say that "The dancers are often majority Hans clad in halter tops and tight “ethnic” skirts, winking and shimmying in local “folk dances” for rooms of male tourists." Their dances are most often choreographed by Han Chinese officials who, in one instance changed the "slow and stately" peacock dance known as the kinnaree, which tells the legend of a supremely beautiful peacock which once danced for the Buddha and is normally performed by men, to being performed "by a woman twirling in a white tutu decorated to look like peacock feathers" (Ibid). Davis points to this distasteful appropriation of Tai culture as a kind of "Hawaiification," which is akin to the way hula is appropriated as a symbol of an exotic and sexualized Hawaiian tourist destination. The Xishuangbanna Minority Theme Park is not exceptional, as a very similar scene can be observed at a tourist lu'au in Hawai'i, where dark-skinned Polynesians clad in grass skirts entertain white tourists in tantalizing displays of exoticism.

The place where cultural and aesthetic production is located has the ability to transform a dance usually performed in temples on religious occasions to an exotic capitalist spectacle while performed in the various Tai "cultural museums" found in Upland Southeast Asia. Buckland (2006:14) comments that these kinds of encounters entail a setting where "the modern, gaze at dance, the tradition." Dance becomes a time capsule of exoticism and nostalgia for a past in which such "pure" forms of un-modernity could take place. The modern feels satisfied after
gazing onto the traditional, feeling as if he has learned something valuable about an ancient aesthetic practice, something out of time and of another place. The modern mis-recognizes the practice - not as something that was always in the process of transformation, becoming and transiency, but as a moment frozen in time - like an artifact at a museum put on display for the moderns to understand how things used to be.

During my fieldwork in Chiang Mai in 2012, I was struck by the relative ease with which these, primarily undocumented, immigrants from the Shan State in Burma could move about freely inside the temple complex, engage in song, dance, martial arts, making and consuming meals, attending language classes, consulting with monks and holding political meetings. During my time there, many meetings were held where the Tai-Yai insurgency movement along the Thai-Burma border was discussed. The leap from cultural practitioner to border rebel, was no leap at all, but rather always an embedded habitus for the Tai peoples. Fortunately, their gathering in the temple space was not understood as political by the ever-vigilant Thai state that seeks to deport foreign bodies from their borders. Rather, their meetings within the temple walls are "read" as cultural and spiritual in the context of a shared system of Theravada Buddhism.

This experience prompted my interest in the politics of space in the context Tai performances. The temple space, as a walled compound, is constructed as a kind of safe haven for clandestine immigrants. Many of the migrants, newly arrived from the Thai-Burma border, seek refuge in the temple, as they know it is a relatively safe space where the Thai police are unlikely to make arrests. They volunteer, work and meditate here in exchange for shelter and food. The temple compound holds a primary school where the children are taught the Tai language. And in the afternoons, under the shade of the temple viharn structure, musicians, children, elderly, parents and monks gather to practice, perform and commune. For hours they
dance, sing, practice martial arts and play instruments and when the sun sets the participants eat a warm bowl of khao soi noodles together, while they discuss their affairs at home and along the border. This is the space that I am most interested in understanding for my dissertation, as I see aesthetic and political forms of expression made possible within those temple walls as productive forces of creativity, expression and sentiments of belonging while in exile.

The use of dance to establish identity is nothing new and may prove as a potent platform from whence to stage a claim to rights, or to speak out against oppression. We see that dance is an oft-used source of "folk practice" summoned in situations when identity becomes important markers of belonging, power or exchange. Through the work of dance ethnographers, we now also see that forms of dance that may be deemed 'traditional' by some moderns, are in fact being used in new and innovative ways. The Tai children who spend their afternoons in the temple grounds adjacent to their school, practicing what some on lookers may call "traditional Shan dance" have no reservation about 'busting' a 'traditional' dance move to any new pop song they hear on the radio. Dance is perhaps an indicator of some transient form of identity or sense of belonging, but unlike language, material culture or national identity, dance is more fluid.

GENDERED ASSEMBLAGES

The nature of expressive resistances varies widely based on the place and the setting where the resistance is put into practice. In my writing, I use the term "border-zone" quite frequently and I do so with the intention of drawing attention to the fact that the Tai are peoples living in a state of in-between-ness, they are neither here nor there, but betwixt and between. The border-zone does not simply imply the geopolitical border area found along the lines drawn up
by colonial powers - lines that separate as much as they contain. I am far more attuned to the way Susan Reed (2010:206) uses the concept "border-zone sites," which, in the context of the politics of performance, "are those that have the potential to be morally suspect; many are also identified as low class." Simply by being a clandestine, or undocumented migrant places you in the border zone. But border-zones are found in many more spaces and women often find themselves inhabiting the border-zone. Women who perform in "border-zone sites," which could include, public spaces, tourist sites and also Buddhist temples, could run the risk of becoming eroticized, sexualized, deemed a prostitute, immoral or unrespectable. As in Davis' (2010) discussion of the Xishuangbanna Minority Theme Park, performance space is always gendered and mediated by political and economic interests. As Reed notes, "[r]espectable dance takes place in respectable places, and performing in spaces that are deemed to be disreputable tarnishes the reputation of a dancer, who may be labeled as shameless or immoral for her performances" (206).

Despite facing harrowing conditions in the Thai-Burma border-zone, which include homelessness, destitution, threat of imprisonment and deportation, as well as the psychological trauma of war and displacement, the Tai Yai peoples are nevertheless exceedingly politically and expressively active. In particular, Tai Yai women organize a number of highly effective activist assemblages that work to uncover rape, violence, coercion, forced relocation and discrimination. The Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), a Tai Yai feminist action group based in Northern Thailand, has since 1998 published a series of reports and articles where they detail the prevalence of rape, abuse, and violence against women in the border-zone. Their accounts find rape to be a widespread disciplinary technique in the psychological warfare used by the Burmese Military against the ethnic minority groups (The Shan Human Rights Foundation & The Shan Women's Action Network 2002). Recent reports show that incidences of sexual assault on
women, and dislocation due to violence, are still commonplace, despite widespread belief in the international community that such violence has ceased now that Burma is "opening up" to trade and foreign diplomacy. Just last year - three years after Burma's so-called transition to democracy - SWAN reports that the Burmese military broke its cease-fire agreements with the Shan and Kachin rebel armies:

During these new offensives, there has been flagrant use of rape as a weapon of war by Burma Army troops. Within the space of only four days at the start of the offensive against SSA-N in March 2011, SWAN received reports of the gang-rape of six women, in three different villages, by troops from four different battalions. One of the women had just delivered a one-month old baby. Another was detained and raped for three nights by a group of eight soldiers. She died five days later of her injuries (SWAN 2012).

In the same report however, SWAN also tells the story of a group of Tai Yai female comedians who successfully produced a comedy in the Burmese than gyat style of rhyming speak, filled with alliterations and metaphors mostly aimed at critiquing or poking fun at governmental officials and military rulers. In Burma, it is only men who perform comedy in public, so the women were taking on a great deal of personal risk by exposing their political views in public sphere. The women knew that by entering into the male-space of comedy and politics, they would likely be arrested should they ever return to Burma, but this is a risk they were willing to take (SWAN 2012). As one of the women says, "Most people in Burma think that comedians should be men. I thought it was a great chance to show audiences that women could be good comedians too. I also liked the fact that it was a new way to raise women’s voices" (SWAN 2012).
These women are not the passive receivers of violence and oppression that many international relief agencies characterize them as being. They are organizing highly effective affective assemblages in the border-zone, ranging from staged performances, to writing condemning reports about the violence and abuses committed against them. They are assembling and organizing what Michael Warner (2002) calls a "counterpublic":

A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce and the like... [T]his subordinate status does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed (Warner 2002:56-57, as quoted in Ferguson 2010).

The counterpublic sphere formed by Tai action networks in the border-zone call upon a range of strategies, these include art installations, dance performances, staging critical theater presentations, publishing reports and the creation of online social and news media outlets. This counterpublic is not unlike the early 20th century counterpublic formed by anarchist movements in the United States, where Kathy Ferguson (2010:193) finds "an energetic triangle of political ideologies, symbolic communities, and embodied practices out of which anarchist counterpublics took shape." Yet, as SWAN reminds us, their lives are complicated by a political field within which their plight is largely ignored; they have no recognized rights or claims to land, refuge, nor to citizenship. The Thai government does not recognize Tai Yai peoples as refugees, and therefore they are unable to seek asylum once they reach the border, a relative "privilege" afforded to all other ethnic minority peoples. As the SWAN (2012) activists lament, "The absence of refuge and services particularly impacts on the more vulnerable Shan asylum seekers such as pregnant women, children, elderly and disabled persons who are unable to fend for
themselves in the jungle or on work sites. The Shan asylum seekers in Thailand live in precarious situations as they live in constant fear of being arrested and deported to Burma, where they face ongoing persecution in the forms of torture, rape and death on their return to Burma.

Resistance practices, such as the formation of a counterpublic assemblage in the border-zone, are gendered practices. I chose to emphasize the practices of women as I am drawn to the kind or counterpublic assemblages they are organizing in the Thai-Burma border-zone. And as Carole Nagengast (2004:109) reminds us, "[h]istorically, no large groups has suffered greater physical, psychological, and symbolic violence in the name of culture and tradition than women have." Doing fieldwork is to engage intimately with fellow human beings, creating relationships, bonds and expectations.

Margaret Cho is an indigenous Karen scholar/journalist who grew up in one of the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. She writes from a feminist-indigenous positionality and outlines specifically Karen ways of conducting anti-imperialist research (Cho 2011). In her research she emphasizes what the Karen peoples call "tapotaethakot," meaning "informal conversation with people who are close" (2011:196). This closeness is intrinsic to Karen culture, where the social norms are to treat others as relatives" (Ibid). Cho also looks at how overseas Burmese refugees' use of online resistance discourses as ways of maintaining the group identity and articulating resistance while in exile. As she shows, "simply reading news in Karen is a political act of resistance against threats to the language, both in Burma and in the diaspora" (Cho 2011:200). Be it via the act of consuming media, or as a performance practice, subtle subversive acts in the border-zone or outside of borders are common amongst peoples who find themselves in exile.
N O D E S  O F  R E S I S T A N C E

Tao, a skilled dancer and Tai cultural practitioner explains to me that he had to practice dance, martial arts and music in hiding from the Burmese authorities. He became a novice monk at the age of 6, and stayed a monk until he was 20, citing concerns that as a young male in the Shan State today you are almost guaranteed to be conscripted into either the government or the rebel army. One way to avoid conscription is to enter into the monkhood. As a young monk, Tao accumulated as much knowledge about Tai arts as possible, spending his forest meditation retreats practicing his skills. He says: “You can’t practice the arts in public. The Burmese government does not want to let us to practice our art, so we go in the woods. The Burmese don’t want us to be smart and knowledgeable, or capable. If they don’t let us practice the arts, we won’t be skillful and we have to go practice in the forest.” Tao is acutely aware of the potential power his body contains as a vessel to store cultural information, and in this case he is honing subversive and counter-public modes of resisting being “read” as a practitioner.

Bodies are nodes of resistance through which currents of power flows. For Michel Foucault, power is not just an oppressive force that causes dislocation and upheaval; rather, power is also generative, innovative and productive:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that is traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (Foucault 1980:61).
This, I take to be one of the more central passages is Foucault's work as it describes the productive capacity of power. Power is not just something negative, or prohibitive. That is the understanding brought about within a recent turn towards a juridico-political understanding of power and its effects. Power is not simply the ability to punish or control, but it is the life force that drives production, creativity, change, resistance and mobility. Power moves through the cosmos using bodies, things and concepts as its nodes – and in this way, Foucault's notion of the productive capacity of power is perhaps that force which drives a Deleuzian notion of becoming, or even the network-nodes that make possible actor-network-theory.

For Foucault, there is power in becoming and where there is power there is resistance. Resistance is understood, in one sense, as the critical objection to ways of being governed and controlled, but it also evokes the ability to persevere and overcome. Resistance is intimately linked to power, but I prefer to see resistance as not that oppositional force to power relations, or a place where agency simply becomes possible, but more closely to what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call "lines of flight." In dance, historical becomings are made corporal in the temporal space of the body. The body affects and is the affector of lines flight.

_The Body-Power Nexus: Panties for Peace_

Over the last 12 months Than Shwe and his Generals have been hit with a barrage of panty power from all over the globe. We have seen his health fail, cracks in the military, we have seen SPDC stumble bumble and fumble...taking many wrong turns following their silly road map to hell. Their grip is loosening daily and they are too obsessed with their addictions and greed to notice.

Than Shwe and the SPDC, we are here to tell you that not one of your tricks nor a single one of your lies has fooled us for a second. You're not dealing with the UN now...you are dealing with us...the angry women of Burma and the rest of the world. We regret to tell you that your reckless stupidity and ongoing cruelty has led us to decide to escalate our attack on what is left of your tiny tiny tiny little pong!
The Panties for Peace activist movement began in 2007 when a group of Burmese women in exile calling themselves the Lanna Action for Burma Party (LAB) began a strategic campaign that entailed the delivering of symbolic objects to members of the Burmese military junta. LAB sought to gain awareness of how women were especially vulnerable to the Burmese military’s incursions into civilian life and that rape, sexual violence and intimidation were rampantly used as weapons of war by the Tatmadaw (SWAN 2002). The aims were to weaken the junta where they are most vulnerable; their pride in masculinity and their superstitiousness. Throughout Burma, women’s undergarments are considered especially taboo and it is believed that should a man come into contact with a garment that has touched a woman’s sexual organs, this will lead the man to be emasculated. The campaign called for women to send their panties to the addresses of known generals and military sympathizers in an effort to undermine their power and send their rule into a state of emergency. The movement quickly gained traction amongst Burmese women activists and feminist sympathizers the world over. The campaign expanded to other symbolic acts designed to weaken the Burmese military politic:

Not only did these women send their panties in to military leaders, they also engaged in other nonviolent actions involving symbolic objects. These included hanging photos of Than Shwe around the necks of stray dogs with the knowledge that being associated with a stray dog is a highly offensive symbol in Burmese culture. In a striking act of escalation these women even went so far as to bake several birthday cakes for Than Shwe with his photo on it. These cakes were in the shape of female underwear and were publicly fed to stray dogs in an effective shaming and diminishing act (Global Nonviolent Action Database 2007).

Burmeses men believe that if they come into contact with women’s undergarments they lose their virility, so a group of women began a campaign called Panties for Peace, which sent hundreds of packages containing their personal underwear directly to the generals. Harn Lay is a cartoonist for the Burmese exile publication Irrawaddy and a famed dissident who has been living for over two decades in exile in Canada. Originally from the Shan State, Harn Lay says he does not hate the military generals, rather he says, “I just irritate them with my thorns by showing them what they have done” (Lay 2009, 3).

The Panties for Peace movement can be read as a strategic form of performance art, feminist action networking and as a way for women to disrupt the political with their bodies. In Judith Butler's discussion of Foucault's conception of power and how it effects bodies, she points
out that in his analysis, Foucault uses the term "body" interchangeably to refer both to the person's body and also to institutions of power (Butler 2004, 186). So, she understands Foucault's reading of the body as a "nodal point," or a "nexus" of power relations presented in the body:

For the body is not a substance, a surface, an inert or inherently docile object; nor is it a set of internal drives that qualify it as the locus of rebellion and resistance. Understood as the nodal point, the nexus, this site of the application of power undergoes a redirection and, in this sense, is a certain kind of undergoing (Butler 2004:186).

This way, the body is not a material substance that can be understood as a subject, but rather, "the site of transfer for power" (Butler 2004:187). Yet, the body is also the site of passion, desire and drives - the productive forces behind the body politic. The women behind LAB and Panties for Peace did not end their strategy of political engagement with their Panties for Peace campaign. They were the first party to register in order to contest the election results after the 2010 elections in Burma. Reportedly, their campaign slogan read: “Clean Panties: Clean Politics.”

Power works through nodal attachments, the attachments are instructed by the desires, drives and passions of people. We are not free within the power structure, however, but bound by our needs and desires, and the passions of the peoples and institutions that mediate our daily lives:

The conditions for revolt were also occasioned by submission, by the fact that human passion for self-persistence makes us vulnerable to those who promise us our bread. If we had no appetite, we would be free from coercion, but because we are from the start given over to what is outside us, submitting to the terms that give form to our

existence, we are in this respect - and irreversibly - vulnerable to exploitation (Butler 2004:193).

So, how might we construct, perform or narrate a life, a "life of passion," "that lives and thrives at the borders of recognizability" (2004:193)? How do we recognize the stubborn will to self-persistence and who gets to speak against exploitation? We can begin by locating power in the body. If we understand power as emanating from the body and we can begin to affectuate the world in ways that are engaged, non-violent and subversive.

**THINK WITH YOUR BODY**

*Although the dancing body is often viewed only in aesthetic terms, it is also a laboring body and works in multiple ways to create art. The dancer labors in training her hands to form mudras. She labors in learning to slap her feet on the ground. She labors to turn and travel effortlessly. Her labor is revealed in sweat and even blood spilled onstage. The sculpted bodily form moving in space is her labor made visible* (Srinivasan 2011, 11).

It is not at all uncommon for the dance researcher to find herself inside her body and outside her mind for long periods of time during fieldwork. For instance, Barbara Browning, a dance scholar who studies samba in Brazil writes,

For a time, while I lived in Brazil, I stopped writing. I learned to dance. I also learned to pray and to fight - two things I had never felt called upon to do. I did them with my body. I began to think with my body. That is possible and, in the case of Brazilian dance, necessary (Brown 1995: xxii, cited in Ness 2004:123).

What does it mean to think with your body? As I was attending dance rehearsals at the Tai temple in Chiang Mai, I was initially obsessed with recordation - I would sit for hours and take meticulous notes while my video camera "captured" each dance sequence. I first sat on the steps
as far away from the dancers and the drummers as possible so as to not make my presence too well known. I had received permission from the monks and dancers to record, but I felt like my presence might alter their regular practice in some way. Which, of course, it did whether I was sitting in the middle of the performances or on the sidelines. I felt “safe” behind the recordation device – as if it gave me a purpose to be filming and photographing – and it allowed the performers to “read” me as a researcher. It was not until one of the monks gestured for me to come and sit in their midst that the dance became more a practice than a performance. But still, I was busy recording, watching the dance through my camera lens.

One day, the temple dance teacher had finally had it with my passive role as spectator. He knew I was a dancer in America and he admonished my lack of participation, demanding that I join them. Reluctantly, I did. I knew what a spectacle my body was - this tall, pale figure, who would clumsily attempt this dance that seemed to flow so naturally from the Tai dancers. It took several attempts, but after a few days of doing, I remembered that indeed I am a dancer! Once my mind was freed of its fear of not being able to keep up with the other dancers, my body took over. The rhythms, the clapping of hands, footwork and arm embellishments all melted together to become an embodied movement that was bigger than the sum of its parts. And I discovered once more that to dance is to surrender to the body, to trust its frame, its intelligence, its musculature and range.

In Health and the Holy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomble, Thomas Csordis (2004), explores the phenomenology of the body as it lies at the juncture of "the medical" and "the holy." Discourses of the holy and discourses of the medical often find themselves at odds with each other over competing conceptions about the body. The former, sees the body as an object of knowledge for which medical procedures can produce measurable results such as healing of
illness, and the latter, seeing the body as a site for spiritual practice. Yet as Csordis (2004) points out, this disciplinary distinction does not necessarily exist in praxis, especially amongst Brazilians who seek to cure illnesses cast from spirit mediums. Csordis shows that it is possible for the body to think at multipole scales simultaneously - both in terms of the medical and the holy. The two need not be mutually exclusive categories for the treatment of illness. In the same way, the body can often serve as a dual site for contested histories. As in the case of Tai peoples, the devotion to an aesthetic practice is also a devotion to the idea of a Tai nation. The will to dance is also the will to be a moving part of the body-politic.

The body is also the site upon which claims to Truth are inscribed. In contemporary performances of Korean dance, dancers rely on past images and historical descriptions of the dance (Zile 2001). Claims to authenticity were correlated with a veracity found in an imagined aesthetic past. This speaks to the desire of contemporary cultures to see the past as a static time, particularly when it comes to art. There is a commonly held notion that the aesthetic past is monolithic, non-changing and stationary. As we see in the temples of India and Angkor Wat - the images carved in stone of the devi dasis or apsaras represent the idealized image of the dance. The modern dancer, who holds the highest fidelity to this material image, can lay claims to having the most fidelity to the original practices of the dance.

In the case of Bharata Natyam, or classical Indian dance, we know that despite the discipline and rigor attached to it, the dance continues to be fundamentally mis-recognized. In the wake of colonialism, devi dasis practicing Bharata Natyam were no longer understood as being the devoted slaves to Lord Juggernaut, the deity for whom the dance is dedicated. Rather, their status as beautiful, and sexually free women mis-recognized them as being in the same category as prostitutes or a harem dancer in the eyes of colonial administrators. In her materialist
reading of Bharata Natyam, Priya Srinivasan (2011:53) laments that the Bharata Natyam dancing body is seen primarily as an object of the exotic gaze of the Euro-American, and accounts of the dance focus heavily on the aesthetic of the dancer, her costume, jewelry and make-up, rather than her technique: "The Bharata Natyam dancing body is thus overdetermined by its heavy layers of eye-catching and exotic paraphernalia that distract the dance critic or researcher from focusing on a 'technique' that forever remains inaccessible." A re-recognition of the Bharata Natyam dancer ought to instead account for the extraordinary extent of labor that went into the creation of the dancing body and the aesthetic we see before us as spectators. Any student of Bharata Natyam can attest to the physical and mental labor and devotion needed to sustain the practice. This labor also extends to the aesthetics of the dance - the jewelry, costuming and other paraphernalia constitute tremendous effort on the part of the dancer and the dance community to create. Srinivasan asks the question that dance critics and spectators rarely do. As they enjoy gazing upon the dancer’s body they do not stop to ask: how many performances did it take to make this appear exactly the way it did? How many hours of labor, sweating and bleeding did it take to mold her body into the form before you?

The body of the researcher is not often a subject of interest to IR theory. This leads to a disembodied mode of scholarship; within which we fail to see the potential of the corporal to sense the political. My argument is not that all IR and politics research ought to dance or engage in phenomenological fieldwork in order to embody the other, but rather, embodiment is also an act of learning to see viscerally. When we learn to think with our bodies, we also allow ourselves to be affected. Is it possible to experience on a visceral level exile, displacement or violence? In my own experience, it is possible empathize more deeply with the horrors of exile through an engagement with practice. It was after a day of exhaustive dance that I could sit down in the cool
evening air, with blistered feet and soaked shirt, and feel for a moment how dance brings light to a place that otherwise feels dark.

**CONCLUSION: DANCE AS DECOLONIAL MOVE**

I have so far delineated the ways in which dance is a staged aesthetic, always mediated by the politics of practice, geopolitical space and the grammars of modernity. Conceptualizations of modern versus traditional dance are reified by categories referring to the dance as ‘world’ or ‘folk’ and I outline how we might seek to pluralize the way we understand performance arts. In particular, I advocate a re-embodiment of the researcher in order to more fully apprehend how bodies move politically. I have outlined how women’s action networks strategize highly effective ways of using the body as a political weapon in the war against authoritarianism. Ranging from publishing reports on the rampant use of sexual violence, to inhabiting decidedly male performance spaces, to upsetting structures of masculinity by evoking the symbolic power of the female sex organ as a call for peace.

What is of interest is to understand the micro-political milieu that deems certain forms of expression as political, while excluding others. This is where a micro-politics of performance becomes a potent and viable methodology. By becoming a dancer in the text, I become a part of the political structure that arbitrates the forms of expression, as it is in the assemblage of song, dance and discourse political affiliations are made. By positioning myself as a dancer, I gesture towards the possibility that embodiment decolonizes the research encounter. My central argument holds that if bodies that act in ways violent are automatically read as political, then bodies that act in ways artistic ought not be
misrecognized as apolitical. We do the performing body a violence when we misrecognize her and by offering recognition we may inch closer to understanding the communal basis for politics.
POSTLUDE: TOWARDS PERFORMATIC MOBILITIES

By shifting the focus from written to embodied culture, from the discursive to the performatic, we need to shift our methodologies. Instead of focusing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might think about them as 'scenarios' that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description. This shift necessarily alters what academic disciplines regard as appropriate canons, and might extend the traditional disciplinary boundaries to include practices previously outside their purview (Taylor 2003).

The above quote, from Diana Taylor's (2003) *Acts of Transfer*, signals a move towards performatic methodologies. Within this transfer, bodies and movement expressivity are privileged over textcentric approaches to rendering. I use as my primary pivot the metaphor and sensorium of dance. Bodies can be seen as sites for narration, and in this way much of the "recording" and documentation I do as cosmographer is in relation to my body as a reflexive recordation machine - one that does not attempt to capture, but one that responds to knowledge and movement practices. The ethnochoreological moment, or the point at which embodied knowledge is transferred from one practitioner to another, is the space I wish to inhabit as a researcher. I position myself as a student of my research collaborators, both as an decolonial move and because it is from this positionality that I believe I will gain a fuller understanding of the performatic politics of dance.

Dance is an encounter; between the performer, the audience, and the identarian nodes through which power flows - the direction of the flow is always an oscillation between bodies and things in space. But when our task is to write and to speak, rather than to move and express, how do we choose our referents without stemming the flow? To write is to build a damn. To dance is to flow with the river. Rather than as a proxy for culture, indicator of ethnic identity, or
a category of modern versus primitive, Susan Leigh Foster sees dance as *culture*; a "cultivation of the corporeal [that] takes place within and as a part of the power relations that operate throughout the body politic" (Foster 2009:7). Dances emanate from the same forces that condition and structure the body politic, rhizomatically, dance moves as the geopolitical body moves, always adaptive and innovative, despite efforts to control and constrain its transmission.

This dissertation attends to the expressive and performatic mobilities arising in the midst of violence, war and displacement in the Thai-Burma border-zone. My aim is to uncover the role performance plays in the experience of exile by using my own body as recording device, both as a decolonial move and as a way to re-embody international relations research. By looking at the body as mobility, new understandings of identity and ethnos vis-à-vis geopolitical stagings can be made. And by recognizing performing bodies as political, we also come closer to understanding the role that art plays during times of war. Or as Muay Sai, my dance teacher who lived for seventeen years in the Koung Jor refugee camp teaches us – dance, song and performance art are vehicles to overcome the insurmountable.

**EXTRA-TEXTUAL POLITICS**

*The dance is the performance of the Tai people. We cannot write in the past and some still cannot write. The dances tell our stories as a people.* -Tao

The will to dance, in my research, is in part, a refusal to write. Not because writing is not an enjoyable or creative realm of affective politics, but because I see texts, and particularly academic texts, as artifacts of colonialism and patriarchy. To engage an affective becoming, to have true expression, I want to partly free myself of the burden of texts. That is the point at
which my affective becomings can take place. The act of writing and intellectualizing serves to imbue dance with an other-ness. In the process of intellectualizing dance we are also colonizing the dancer. My turn towards the body is an effort to "to resist intellectual colonialism" (Savigliano 1995, 5). But can dance free us from the shackles of colonial domination? Dance, can, at the very least offer a displacement of power relations in the research encounter, whilst also offering a way to enmesh theory in method.

**BECOMING A KIN-AESTHETIC SUBJECT**

What is the aesthetic experience? It is the opposite of the anesthetic experience, in which you recluse your senses from stimuli - towards a state of sensation depravation. Kin-aesthetics, is the method of placing sensations into movement and of being moved. The process of senses put into motion is closely connected with the idea of a movement contagion (Foster 2008), whereby the effect of moving bodies compels you to move in synchronicity with other bodies. The kin-aesthetic experience is the sensation of observing a dancing body and becoming enraptured in the affective dimensions of the movement to the point of feeling a connection with the performing body.

I want more from the aesthetic turn than the emergence of aesthetic subjects and attention to the appearance of things. I want to become an aesthetic subject. I want to graph my body onto the aesthetic regime of art; I want to become a part of what produces percepts and affects. So, I would like to propose, as a basis for an embodied methodology, a politics that is co-emergent with the method of *kin-aesthetics*. What I term *kin-aesthetics* is a displacement of normative
research methodologies in the social sciences, and it is also a move towards embracing the kinesthetic within discourses about the politics of aesthetics. The politics of kin-aesthesis harkens a research modality that is decolonial and attempts to break with convention. It is an expressive assemblage of kinetic and aesthetic subjects that is creative, innovative and non-conformist. As a researcher of dance and politics, I find kin-aesthetic expression to be the most useful methodology within which to produce my work.

For Ranciere (2004) aesthetic expression exists within an ethics of artistic and creative production, whereby an "aesthetic regime of art" is made possible through the "distribution of the sensible." For Deleuze and Guattari this ethico-aesthetic paradigm is what drives expressive politics. The political here arises in the struggle over recognition, when one form of expression is recognized or mis-recognized over another. The aesthetic regime of art demands that there be no hierarchy within which aesthetic expression can be judged and classified, but this is nature of the political - to find difference and to privilege forms with discrimination. It is possible to discern a politics of exile within which becoming displaced, and expressing from the thresholds of genres is a potent platform from whence to explore the ethics of writing and research. By narrating stories and engaging in praxis, rather than conforming to genre conventions, we can make aesthetic subjects out of ourselves, and thus become a part of the process of producing percepts and affects. In my research, I pursue the politics of kin-aesthesis, which involves dancing and becoming and aesthetic subject, as a way towards finding an expressive politics.
EXPRESSIVE POLITICS

*It is independent of the creator through the self-positing of the created, which is preserved in itself. What is preserved - the thing or the work of art - is a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects* (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 164)

What does art do? One thing art does is to produce alternative systems that are based on sense perception and subjectivity. I have come to agree with Brian Massumi (2002) that the politics of art and aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari's writings is a politics of expression. Where Ranciere attends to the distribution of the sensible, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1996) are preoccupied with what they call "blocs of sensation," which are the assemblages of percepts and affects that make up the realm of perception. As noted by Massumi (2002:xxii) expressive politics is at once an "aesthetic endeavor, " "an ethical endeavor, " and "an ethics for emergence." Expressive politics is imbued with an ethics of creativity, innovation and nonconformity. Expression does not allow itself to be controlled by the forces of morality, it exists within the aesthetic regime of arts, where it is always preoccupied with emergence.

Expression is also freed of a subject, form or matter to which is it bound, as "[s]ensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived" (Deleuze and Guattari 1996:164, author’s emphasis). Art is the thing that preserves, the thing-ness that allows for consistency within a place of discord. It is released from its creator in order to continue expressing. First comes the ability to perceive, then comes the affect - art is the intermediary between percept and affect:

By means of the material, the aim of art is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as
the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations (Deleuze and Guattari 1996:167).

Yet, expression does not emerge independently of the world. Its creative flow and innovative energies did not simply appear upon the plane of pure imminence. Massumi (2002:xxix) clears the path for an expressive politics when he says, "[i]ts field of emergence is strewn with the after-effects of events past, already formed subjects and objects and the two-pronged systems of capture (of content and expression, bodies and words) regulating their interaction: nets aplenty." Expression is a line of becoming, made up of congeries of assembled, bodies, events, symbols and matter. Dancing is the most eventual becoming - as its affects are only momentarily apprehended in the ephemeral movements of decaying bodies floating through space. Dance is an ephemeral assemblage of emergent bodies, wading through the political matter and place where they emerge: "The affect is not the passage from one lived state to another but man's nonhuman becoming" (Deleuze and Guattari 1996:173).

Artists enact the political in their craft. Honing a craft means structuring a habitus of diligent repetition in one’s praxis as a way of re-territorializing the body over time. I see artists and activists as alike beings. Activists are interested in investing in the political – its practice and its alternatives. Artists are interested in investing in aesthetics – its practice and its possibilities. Both are ultimately political projects as they engage in the practice of producing alternatives. A problem in Western conceptualizations of art is that it compartmentalizes art from spiritual practice. For Tai, and for much of humanity we find no such clear distinction between cultural, religious or political practice on the one hand and artistic production on the other. For Tai peoples, art is sacred and has always been associated with religion. Dance is seen as a way to
communicate with the divine, to structure one’s ethos as a maker of merit and to register one’s aesthetic practice upon the cosmos. But it is also a way of evoking the Tai nation at the one site where the Tai migrant remains sovereign – at the site of her body. We would be mistaken if we do not also see this as a concomitantly political practice.

**DISPLACEMENT**

When we speak of displacement within a liberal human rights framework, we are speaking of it as a violent and unnecessary uprooting, but as Mike Shapiro notes, there is also a productive, disruptive and creative force behind displacement:

> To be displaced is to be invited into an aesthetic experience, into a reorientation and reframing of one’s sensible world. From the point of view of a radical politics, a displacement-engendered aesthetic experience disturbs authoritative distributions of social identity (Shapiro 2013:316).

Displacement allows for migrations in judgment about the nature of war and about the nature of method (Dauphinee 2013). In order for me to write effectively, I had to make a migration away from my office confines, and into my body. It is the moment you find yourself in exile, or when you are met with other exilic subjects, that your perceptions of the actual are challenged. Exile is fertile ground for exchange and becoming. It is the liminal stage where new ways of apprehending the world become possible. I suggest a similar displacement in IR research. One of migration from academic to aesthetic subject whereby my research involves a process of becoming through dance and embodied practice.
The liminal space of the Thai-Burma border-zone sets the stage for the becomings of exilic subjects and migrations in judgment. In the midst of a sea of academic, governmental, and non-governmental reports about war, violence and displacement along the border, I suggest that aesthetic and embodied representations of war and violence in constitute deterritorialized notions of events and reframe the narratives of war to allow for multivocal interpretations of the struggle over contested spaces. Embodied cosmographic research, inquiry and fieldwork, however problematic, offers ways to become embedded directly in people's daily lived experiences and apprehensions - they become a part of what produces percepts and affects.

**MY REFRAIN: TO RELEASE A COSMOGRAPHY**

This dissertation looks at how concepts and practice work together as an assemblage and how this assemblage makes up the body-politic. This attunement comes from the concept of the "territorial refrain" that is introduced by Deleuze and Guattari as that mode or rhythm that makes the appearance consistency possible: "it always carries earth with it; it has a land (sometimes a spiritual land) as its concomitant; it has an essential relation to a Natal, a Native" (1987:312). For the Tai peoples, dance and aesthetic practice are lived expressions that articulate a common tradition, an embodied culture and the micro-politics of resistance amongst a displaced people. Dance is the body-becoming that allows them to assert a kind of refrain, a remembering of the cultural values to which they hold affinity. It is the embrace of a certain refrain over another; it is what makes possible a choreography, a staged production, or a nation.
The question of how dance is political for the Tai peoples is precisely forged within and upon the aforementioned political plane, they are a people that resist the charge to be incorporated, while making demands for a life in the present. And it is an expressive life that they lead, not of silence or of passivity, but as bodies-becoming. Deleuze and Guattari (1987:312) prompt us, that "a bird sings to mark its territory." A person dances to territorialize a space, as an act of reclamation. The act of singing, dancing and becoming in the body is the point at which dance is political and emergent. Ultimately, in order to critique the nation-state system, we must find alternative ways of ordering the body politic and begin to recognize expressive, affective and aesthetic ways of being in the world as also being political.

My central argument is that if we are to take seriously the possibility of research methodologies that are incorporative, rather than exclusionary, an open system, rather than a closed one, then we have to re-embodi ourselves in our work. If we are to take a method like cosmography seriously, then we need to greatly sharpen our senses, widen our scope of knowledge collection and become susceptible to ways of being in the world that are attuned to the body and its senses. For my project, that means learning how to dance, learning how to feel political in my body - allowing myself to become a block of sensations - to produce percepts and affects. There is a richness and texture out there; full of heat, moisture, blood, pain, tears, movement, sweat, rhythms and chants. By accessing that mode of being with the world - I make a method out of me. My body moves in a particular way through the cosmos and I have chosen for it to move as a dancer for that is when I feel closer to the actual.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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