

BANGKOK IS BURNING:
QUEER CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS OF THAINESS IN DIASPORA

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DEDICATION:

For everyday Thais who maintained the delicate balance.

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ABSTRACT

My project looks at how contemporary Thai popular culture and performance, as produced and consumed in Thailand and the diaspora, queers notions of Thainess informed by Western economies of desire and Thai state practices. Thailand has come to be stereotyped as “the playground of the Western world”, promoting fantasies of Thai bodily excess, availability, as well as “the benevolent creation of employment” by predominantly Western and “First World” countries.¹ Hyper-eroticized depictions of Thainess have circulated through popular media—from films such as *The King & I* (1956) or *The Hangover Part II* (2011), in addition to songs such as “One Night In Bangkok” (1984) by Murray Head—orientalizing Thais as sexually willing and readily available. Even nationally-sanctioned projects, such as those by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), have marketed Thainess as an accommodating culture suited to its international campaign of the nation as the “land of smiles”.² Yet even amongst these depictions of Thainess, contemporary communities have used modern forms of technology and alternative modes of storytelling and performance to offer different scripts of Thainess. Against and alongside to these popularized images of Thailand and of the Thai people, I have chosen to position cultural pieces and moments that do not necessarily attempt to correct narratives of Thai hypersexuality, but, rather, gravitate towards excess, the perverse, the anonymous, and, at times, the monstrous and grotesque as fantastic sites of recuperation of Thai identity that do not discard sexuality as a means for expression and for reframing notions of belonging.

¹ Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson, *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 16, 10.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

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INTRODUCTION

Bangkok Is Burning:

Queer Cultural Productions of Thainess in Diaspora

Don't think I cannot survive. I don't like anyone to think I need their help. If you want to help me, that's up to you. But don't expect anything from me; there are some things I cannot do. Don't help me if you want something in return. I don't need that.

—Yaowalak “Aoi” Chonchanakun, *The Good Woman of Bangkok*

Australian filmmaker Dennis O'Rourke's “acclaimed” documentary, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991), has had lasting impact on how Thainess has been represented in popular media.¹ With guaranteed prize money awarded from the Australian Film Commission, O'Rourke set out to interrogate the complexities of love through prostitution, trying to understand how love could be both “so banal and also profound” after the dissolution of his marriage.² He ends up in Bangkok because, for him and many affluent men and women around the world, Thailand is the “mecca for western men with fantasies of erotic sex and love without pain.”³ After soliciting many Thai sex workers, he eventually hires Yaowalak “Aoi” Chonchanakun—a woman hailing from a village in Northeastern Thailand—as the subject of his film, documenting her daily interactions with johns, other prostitutes, and O'Rourke himself.⁴

¹ Paul Pottinger, “Prurient client with a camera,” in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's 'The Good Woman of Bangkok,'* eds. Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), 194.

² *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, directed by Dennis O'Rourke (1991; Santa Monica, CA: Direct Cinema Limited, 1995), DVD.

³ Ibid.

⁴ O'Rourke required that the woman he chose come from the countryside and were forced to work in the capital's bar scene due to financial hardship. (Sandra Hall, “O'Rourke's Good Woman,” in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's 'The Good Woman of Bangkok,'* eds. Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), 191).

The film saturates the screen with sexualized images of Thai women, reducing them to exploitable objects for American and Australian consumption. For instance, though she is the central character in O'Rourke's "documentary fiction," Chonchanakun is portrayed flatly, depicted as a victim because of her poverty and forced into prostitution.⁵ Furthermore, she is made the subject of both desire and pity by *farangs*, or foreigners, who attempt to save her even as they participate in the industry that traps her. The problematic framework of "the poetics of prostitution"—or the struggle between morality and fleshly desires—enables O'Rourke to sleep with his subject. A voyeuristic post-coital shot of a barely clothed Aoi shuffling around in bedsheets depicts these "poetics" through his gaze. Getting sex "*out of the way*," Dennis O'Rourke's decision to indulge his sexual fantasies with Aoi illuminate how sex is central to how Thailand, its people, and its cultures are represented.⁶ O'Rourke's almost obligatory sexual encounter with Aoi affirms how Thai women are instrumental to the orientalized sexualization of Thailand and Thainess. In another scene, an inebriated American man drunkenly says, "American women are fucking bitches and idiots compared to these women. ... You can't beat the attitude of these [Thai] girls! There's no girl in the world

⁵ According to Dennis O'Rourke, "documentary fiction," as he contends, is a form of cinema and filmmaking which relies on established techniques of traditional documentary, but dismisses them in order to find the "authenticity of the film – its 'truth' [as] entirely subjective" (Dennis O'Rourke, "Afterword: The Filmmaker and the Prostitute – the Controversy over *The Good Woman of Bangkok*," in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's 'The Good Woman of Bangkok*," eds. Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), 212). In other words, "documentary fiction" is the process that chronologically reorganizes the material recorded to create a dramatic effect as well as be self-reflexive, "[examining] the voyeuristic nature of filmmaking" (Lisa Hinrichsen, "Good Woman of Bangkok, The," in *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film*, ed. Ian Aitken (London: Routledge, 2013), 311).

⁶ Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 191, (italicized emphasis in original); and Fenella Souter, "'The Bad Man of Bangkok?,'" in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's 'Good Woman of Bangkok*,' eds. Chris Berry, Laleen Jayamanne, and Annette Hamilton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), 121.

that will give you a shower, give you a blow-job, fuck your brains out, and fold your clothes with a smile on her face. Dammit, nowhere!”⁷ The moment is violent, underlining how Thais—particularly Thai women—are understood as faceless figures of fantasy of sex and servitude for the predominantly Western world.⁸ O’Rourke’s dehumanizing view of Thai people is further affirmed through his unprotected sex with Chonchanakun. Claiming that he wanted to experience the same “risks” as the woman he hires because he was both “in love and reckless,” O’Rourke positions her as a kind of anthropological object whose conditions he can temporarily mimic.⁹ The filmmaker’s rationalization of this hazardous act through “love” reorients the viewer’s sympathy to him (and other Western men who participate in Thailand’s sex industries), rather than problematizing how the conditions of Thais as sexually expendable is not escapable.

The militarized, touristic, and imperial histories between Thailand and the Western world have naturalized sexual availability and exploitability as constitutive of Thainess. Many personal stories, mine included, demonstrate how Thai women and queer men are frequently read as “hooker[s].”¹⁰ Complex subjectivity is denied in this reductive patron-client relationship, dictating the place of Thais and Thainess in the world.¹¹

⁷ *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, directed by Dennis O’Rourke (1991; Santa Monica, CA: Direct Cinema Limited, 1995), DVD.

⁸ Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, 16.

⁹ Laleen Jayamanne, “Reception, Genre and the Knowing Critic: Dennis O’Rourke’s *The Good Woman of Bangkok*,” in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O’Rourke’s ‘Good Woman of Bangkok’*, eds. Chris Berry, Laleen Jayamanne, and Annette Hamilton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), 30; and Fenella Souter, “The Bad Man of Bangkok?,” in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O’Rourke’s ‘Good Woman of Bangkok’*, eds. Chris Berry, Laleen Jayamanne, and Annette Hamilton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), 120.

¹⁰ Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, 1.

¹¹ William J. Klausner, *Thai Culture in Transition: Collected Writings of William J. Klausner*, 3rd ed. (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2000), 6.

Though much of the explicit sexualization of Thai people is constructed by an imperial West, the Thai state and nationalist culture have also had a key role in the objectification of its citizens. Development and modernization projects, as well as national narratives of sovereignty, rely heavily on the labor and exploitation of Thai women in particular. In *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, for instance, Yaowalak Chonchanakun migrated from her village in Northeastern Thailand to Bangkok in order to support her family as well as pay off gambling debts incurred by her deceased father. Her migration to the capital is a common narrative. Since the 1970s, disadvantaged Thai families sent their children, mainly daughters, to Bangkok in the hopes that they would find work in the capital's bar scene.¹² Farming communities and families residing outside of the capital city began depending on younger generations of sons and daughters to support the family through this urban migration.¹³ Tourism, emerging as one of Thailand's most profitable industries, has learned to count on the labor of working-class Thais from the countryside to sell and serve the "spectacle and fantasy" of Thailand as "sexual Disneyland to the world."¹⁴ The costs of this economic strategy are borne most heavily by impoverished Thai women. Individuals like Yaowalak Chonchanakun, who find some semblance of "success" and are able to send money

¹² Sandra Hall, "O'Rourke's Good Woman," in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's 'Good Woman of Bangkok'*, eds. Chris Berry, Laleen Jayamanne, and Annette Hamilton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), 191.

¹³ Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 76.

¹⁴ Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok*, 78-79; and Elizabeth Rho-Ng, "The Conscripted of Asian Sex Slaves: Causes and Effects of U.S. Military Sex Colonialism in Thailand and the Call to Expand U.S. Asylum Law," *Asian Law Journal, Inc.*: 7 (2000): 103.

back home, are considered “damaged” by their time in the city upon their return to village society: “no man ... would marry her,” her aunt says.¹⁵

I open with *The Good Woman of Bangkok* because of the representational power that the film has had in producing and further circulating global fantasies of Thainess. In its depiction of Chonchanakun and O’Rourke’s relationship, the film also provides an intimate look into how Thai life has been impacted by projects of development and modernization implemented by Thailand’s bourgeois, royalist, and patriarchal elite collaborations with external interests.¹⁶ In his review of the film, Vincent Canby writes that O’Rourke’s documentary “is less about Aoi” but “about the way[s] in which the rich countries of the world treat those a lot worse off.”¹⁷ I would extend Canby’s assessment by arguing that it is not only “First World” nations and people who disenfranchise and exploit Thais, but also Thais in power.¹⁸

My dissertation wades into the morass of globalized representations of Thainess exemplified by *The Good Woman of Bangkok* to examine how contemporary Thai popular culture and performance might provide a space for alternative representations and definitions of Thainess. “Bangkok is Burning” looks specifically at Thai popular

¹⁵ Chris Berry, “Dennis O’Rourke’s Original Sin: *The Good Woman of Bangkok* or ‘Is this what they mean by ‘Australia in Asia’?,” in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O’Rourke’s ‘Good Woman of Bangkok,’* eds. Chris Berry, Laleen Jayamanne, and Annette Hamilton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), 50.

¹⁶ See Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994); and Thongchai Winichakul, “The Quest for ‘Siwilai’: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 3 (2000): 528-549.

¹⁷ Vincent Canby, “In Thailand, a prostitute with a heart that’s cold,” in *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O’Rourke’s ‘The Good Woman of Bangkok,’* eds. Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton, and Laleen Jayamanne (Sydney: Power Publications, 1997), 179.

¹⁸ Saichol Sattayanurak, “The Construction of Mainstream Thought on ‘Thainess’ and the ‘Truth’ Constructed by ‘Thainess,’” trans. Sarinee Achavanuntakul, *Chiang Mai University*, N.D., <http://thaimissions.info/gsd/collect/thaimiss/index/assoc/HASH0182/3bba5980.dir/doc.pdf> (accessed April 23, 2018)

cultural forms produced and consumed in Thailand and the diaspora to explore their potential for queering notions of Thainess that have overwhelmingly been informed by Western economies of desire and Thai state practices. Signified as a hedonistic playground, Thailand and Thainess have been defined by hyper-eroticized depictions circulated through popular media—from films such as *The King & I* (1956) or *The Hangover Part II* (2011), as well as songs such as “One Night in Bangkok” (1984) by Murray Head or Lou Deprijck’s “Pattaya Pattaya Song” (N.D.)—orientalizing Thais as mysterious and shameless, as well as sexually and readily available. Even nationally-sanctioned projects, such as those by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, have marketed Thainess as an accommodating culture suited to its international campaign of the nation as the “land of smiles.”¹⁹ Yet even amongst these depictions of Thainess, contemporary communities have used modern forms of technology and alternative modes of storytelling to offer different scripts of Thai identity.

Against and alongside to these popularized images of Thailand and of the Thai people, “Bangkok is Burning” assembles an archive of cultural acts that do not necessarily attempt to correct or elude narratives of Thai hypersexuality but rather allow spaces for sexuality as a means of expression and reframing notions of belonging. In many instances, these cultural productions gravitate toward excess, the perverse, and the monstrous as potential sites of remaking Thai identity. From a filmic adaptation of a celebrated folkloric ghost legend; the digital shorts of a queer performance troupe located in Bangkok; queer sites of diasporic commemoration of a beloved Thai country singer; and the drag performances of a diasporic Thai American, my dissertation draws

¹⁹ Tourism Authority of Thailand, “About Thailand,” *Tourism Authority of Thailand*, N.D., <https://sg.tourismthailand.org/About-Thailand> (accessed April 29, 2018).

from an array of post-2000s representations and performances of Thai identity in popular culture. These acts open up a way to think about Thainess through a “transnational paradigm” that maps Thai diasporic subjectivity across space and time, allowing for a nuanced look at how Thai identities circulate nationally, transnationally, and through the imaginary.²⁰ These sites are in turn spaces for survival and strategic platforms of creativity for present-day Thais. In other words, I see Thai people as finding pleasure and inspiration in the vocabulary of sexuality, reworking the frameworks that have come to deem Thainess as hypersexual, exotic, subservient and dehumanized.

The concept of “queer” is crucial to my project. Here, I deploy it as a framework and analytic that allows a critique of the ways that Thainess has been historically constructed and oppressively organized around heteronormative ideas of sexuality. Shaped by the desires of global capitalism, militourism, and cultural nationalism, Thais are rendered as docile and exotic; a feminized shell to a hyper-masculine West or a patriarchal/national power. For my work, a queer analytic not only sheds light on the ways that heteronormative interests and desires shape the popular imagination and material life, it is also useful for thinking through how global capitalism and national projects for modernity are structured through them, making Thainess essential to the politics of home and nation-state. My project deploys cultural, feminist, and queer analyses to draw meaning from these cultural forms. I utilize a queer of color critique that “compels identifications with and antagonisms to the normative ideals promoted by state and capital.”²¹ In other words, a queer of color critique studies culture as a site

²⁰ Lan P. Duong, “Transnationalism,” in *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, eds. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and K. Scott Wong. (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 233.

²¹ Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 3.

where queer pleasures and non-normative desires stand against and critically alongside heteronormativity and cultural nationalisms.

The work that contemporary Thai subjectivities offer through their performances defines and deploys a queer positioning that troubles the naturalized meanings about Thai sexuality and malleability in both the Western and nation-state imaginary. I draw from the work of scholar Ramón H. Rivera-Servera to examine how contemporary forms of Thai popular expression engage gender and sexuality through the “lived experiences, identities, desires, and affects [of] subjects who practice or entertain the possibility of practicing sexual or gender behaviors outside heteronormative constructs.”²² Queer as a position is a non-normative approach that privileges daily practices of everyday people that both disrupts and operate outside of the logics of normative heterosexuality as well as heteronationalism. Representations of queerness thus usefully expand the normalized scripts of race and sexuality placed upon Thainess examining what it means to be “Thai” through a queer perspective; it delinks Thai identities from a pathologized sexuality needing to be contained or exploited. Following scholars like Rivera-Servera, my project sees the queer practices of diasporic Thais as a way for Thai forms of popular expression to subsume and reach beyond the constraints set by the West and the Thai nation-state, embracing the strange, grotesque, comical, and supernatural, as well as the hypersexual, queer, and excessive.

This project is shaped by an array of literature that has influenced the analysis contemporary diasporic cultures and performances. “Bangkok is Burning” pulls from the fields of Asian American Cultural Studies, Queer and Diaspora Studies, as well as

²² Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012), 27.

research on Thai and Thai America. The intersections of these various fields of study allows me to articulate and conceptualize the significance and potential of present-day Thai cultural practices that exists in the world.

The field of Asian American Cultural Studies has established the importance that culture has had in shaping and politicizing the Asian/American experience.²³ In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe writes that “the consideration of Asian American cultural forms ... interrupt[s] the demands for identity and identification, that voice antagonisms to the universalizing narratives of both pluralism and development, and that open Asian American culture as an alternative site to the American economic, political, and national cultural spheres.”²⁴ Culture is thus a vital way for Asian/Americans to reimagine and critique sociocultural formations and histories of empire, as well as their marginalization from the political body of the nation. Producing alternative modes of affiliation as well as redefining meaning and authority, culture, then, as argued by Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, is “radical ... in its ability to produce [new] meanings, alternative understandings about the nature of power.”²⁵ Queer scholars of queer studies within Asian American Studies have further argued for the role of culture in the

²³ My work has been inspired by the use of the intervening slash from scholars such as Asian American scholars David Palumbo-Liu and Laura Hyun Yi Kang, in addition to African Americanist Jafari S. Allen. Particularly to my work, I use the intervening slash (/) to separate the terms of “Asian” and “America” because of different and, at times, tense relationships that the objects of my study have with the economic, geopolitical, nationalist, and cultural burdens created by the “homeland” (Asia or Thailand); the national or diasporic state (America/n); and the racially-ethnic identity created in the U.S. (Asian American or Thai American). The slash gestures towards the ways that both identities seemingly reflect and lay claim to and upon one another in terms of production, value, and critique. In this sense, I wield the slash as an intermediary site of contradiction, damage, and even promise in naming; but, furthermore, to sharpen the lenses of what each side of the slash enacts as an identity on its own or conjoined.

²⁴ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 29.

²⁵ Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, “Introduction,” in *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*, eds. Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 15.

survival and expression of queer Asians in the diaspora. Martin F. Manalansan's pioneering ethnography of gay Filipino/American men shows how they perform hybridized identities and cultures to negotiate and bring about "the aesthetics ... for [their] survival."²⁶ Following Manalansan, my aim is to showcase the ways that Thais utilize hybridized expressions of Thainess as approaches to think about identity and survival. Such sites and practices of identification are intricate and messy: they are iterations of an Asian/American identity that defies and destabilizes heteronormative and imperialist notions of Asian/America.

The work of Asian Americanists Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Nguyen Tan Hoang is instrumental to my thinking on representation, race, and sexuality, particularly in the ways they push back against stereotypes of feminine hypersexuality and the gay Asian "bottom" to make room for theorizations of pleasure and agency. In *The Hypersexuality of Race*, Parreñas Shimizu examines the hauntingly hypersexualized representations of Asian/American women invoked and produced through American orientalism and "yellow peril" constructions. She reads such sexualized and racially-charged scripts as not necessarily demeaning, instead positing that "race-positive sexuality" creates room for empowerment through racialized hypersexuality.²⁷ Similarly, Nguyen's *A View from the Bottom* reconfigures Asian American subjectivity and its complex relationship with the "bottom position"—a sexual designation of receptivity in gay anal sex—and sexual passivity by privileging films and videos that easily dismiss

²⁶ Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 16.

²⁷ Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 5.

gay Asian American masculinity “as too stereotypical, damaging, and offensive.”²⁸ By actively engaging with gay Asian sexual receptivity and indifference, the author sees “bottomhood [as it] might be resignified from powerlessness to ‘active passivity,’ ‘strength in submission,’ and ‘passive agency.’”²⁹ In both cases, Parreñas Shimizu and Nguyen theorize how Asian/Americans have been feminized and emasculated through cultural representation, resulting in a narrowed and foreclosed view of Asian/American sexual agency and participation. Their work seeks to open the possibilities of intervention, critique, and pleasure in regards to understanding Asian/American sexual politics by way of visual culture.

My project reflects upon the significance of the Thai diaspora and how Thainess has been informed, positioned, and displaced by macroeconomic forces, militourism, state practices, global capitalism and processes of modernity. My dissertation thus additionally intervenes in and draws from scholarship on diaspora. In its earlier articulations, the term “diaspora” has referred to those dispersed from their homeland who held a collective memory of their original “center,” and who maintain a nostalgic view of their place of origin and have a shared commitment of returning “home.” However, modern technologies and phenomena have contributed to the reconceptualization of the term to ultimately encompass new aspects of displacement and the hybridization of identity. The seminal work of Stuart Hall has been useful as he writes that cultural and diasporic identities are not stable; but, are “matter[s] of

²⁸ Nguyen Tan Hoang, *A View from the Bottom: Asian American Masculinity and Sexual Representations*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

'becoming' as well as of 'being'."³⁰ He writes that "Cultural identities are ... the unstable points of identification or suture ... within the discourse of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning."³¹ Hall theorizes identity as a process and positioning, embracing hybridity, and distancing diaspora from a nationalist logic that is typically read as heteronormative, pure, and absolutist. In thinking about queer South Asian diaspora, Gayatri Gopinath reconceptualizes diaspora away from its loyalties to nationalist ideologies, its dependence on a heteronormative and reproductive logic, as well as transnational capitalism.³² Gopinath's concept of a *queer diaspora* recuperates narratives deemed "impossible" under the totalizing logic of global capitalism, emphasizing instead, local sites, culture, affect, kinship, and community.³³ The potential of diaspora for critical cultural production is further highlighted by Jafari S. Allen, who has argued for "provocative entry points for much-needed new formulations" where diasporic culture and identities act as sites of "survival ... [in] finding ways to connect some of what is disconnected, to embody and remember."³⁴ Cathy J. Schlund-Vials further turns to diaspora as a modality that allows for new creative articulations: those "refracted positionalities—wherein ... cultural producers *transnationally* reimagine and critique the past via ... cultural practices", allowing for contradictory orientations.³⁵ This body of work thus theorizes how diasporic communities use their dislocation from the

³⁰ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: community, culture, difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

³² Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 10-12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁴ Jafari S. Allen, "Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjecture," *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18:2-3 (2012), 217.

³⁵ Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 19. (italicized emphasis in original).

nation-state, geographical location of origin, adopted territory, or feelings of non-belonging to generate new imaginations and possibilities of being in the world.

As gestured to previously, transnationalism, alongside issues of diaspora, is a significant component to “Bangkok is Burning” as it deals with ways that diasporic Thais have exerted contemporary tactics, technologies, modes of community and a variety of cultures to redefine how they participate in an evolving and sometimes-hostile world. Aihwa Ong argues that transnationalism refers to “the cultural specificities of global processes,” and that, “in Asia, transnational flows and networks have been the key dynamics in shaping cultural practices, the formation of identity, and shifts in state strategies.”³⁶ Additionally, unlike diasporic practices, transnationalism and its effects are more abstract, referring to how people as well as goods, capital, and information circulate across borders and national territories.³⁷ In lieu of this movement, this project examines how diasporic Thais deterritorialize citizenship and identity, creating new forms of self, kinship and community across domestic, transnational and global lines through culture, digital technology—such as YouTube and other social media platforms, and performance.

The cultural productions I explore here offer articulations of Thainess that align with and yet unsettle dominant constructions of Thai hypersexuality, doing so while considering the tensions between nation and diaspora. My work is chiefly influenced by Gopinath’s work on queer diasporas and desire as activating reading strategies and practices that map queer female diasporic subjectivity. Gopinath writes that “The

³⁶ Ibid., 4, 17.

³⁷ See Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, eds., *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); and Duong, “Transnationalism,” 232-234.

concept of a queer diaspora enables a simultaneous critique of heterosexuality and the national form while exploding the binary between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, origin and copy.”³⁸ Gopinath’s framework situates the formation and expression of sexual subjectivities within global flows of culture, capital, and labor, challenging dominant nationalist ideologies through its privileging of queer, inauthentic, and non-reproductive forms of the nation. The forms and acts of Thainess foregrounded in this work by queer diasporic desire offer “an alternative hermeneutic”—varied “interpretive strategies” for those outside or peripheral to the nexuses of hegemonic nationalist, diasporic, and Western discourses.³⁹

As a differing hermeneutic produced under the weight of heteronationalism, globalization, and other power structures, the forms of Thai queer cultural production spoken of in this project are unique as they develop from “material site[s] of struggle,” the languages of capitalism, and are prompted by a queer diasporic reorganization of ethnicity, gender and sexuality, as well as national and transnational affiliation.⁴⁰ Queer and diasporic Thai culture become the medium to which marginalized and disenfranchised individuals and communities legitimize their view of Thainess, voicing the contradictions of mainstream Thai identities as well as the conditions to which they belong. In another way, cultural production is an intervention where normative meanings are displaced, producing nuanced and differing definitions of Thainess within the social landscape.

³⁸ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁰ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 156; and David L. Eng, “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas,” in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, eds. Donald E. Hall, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 303.

Thai queer cultural production, performance, and culture, in this sense, are projections of a Thainess that pivots on “localized” representations of a queer Thai identity. This localization of Thainess is both an identity and culture that is not necessarily informed by “Euro-American theoretical paradigms,” a cosmopolitanism or metropolitan queer identification structured by the West, or a “global queering” that, as Ara Wilson contends, is assumed by “the ... legible queer sexualities derive[d] from US-inflected Western modes of sexuality or from Western-based systems of modernity, such as capitalism.”⁴¹ Queer Thai cultural productions thus come about through “local processes” and the agency of individuals, prompted and altered by the hegemonic and diasporic influences of capitalism, modernization and development, and globalization.⁴² The Thai forms of culture and performance discussed in this project are projections of an identity sprouting from global processes, yet, are still, first and foremost, Thai; they abandon traditional views of queerness that state the West as a site of origin, evaluating and critiquing the idea that modern queer identities stem from and are solely learnt by the West.⁴³

At the core of my project are the fields of Thai and Thai American Studies, which contend with the evolving ways that Thainess has come to be defined as a postcolonial condition. Thongchai Winichakul writes that “the definition of Thainess has never been

⁴¹ Wei-cheng R. Chu and Fran Martin, “Editorial introduction: global queer, local theories,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 4 (2007): 483-483, 483; Peter A. Jackson, “Global Queering and Global Queer Theory: Thai [Trans]genders and [Homo]sexualities in World History,” *Autrepart* 49, no. 1 (2009): 15-30, 17; and Ara Wilson, “Queering Asia,” *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, November 2006, <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue14/wilson.html> (accessed June 5, 2018).

⁴² Peter A. Jackson, “Bangkok’s Early Twenty-First-Century Queer Boom,” in *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, ed. Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 37; and Peter A. Jackson, “Capitalism and Global Queering: National Markets, Parallels Among Sexual Cultures, and Multiple Queer Modernities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 3 (2009): 357-395, 359.

⁴³ Jackson, “Capitalism and Global Queering,” 365-366.

(and never will be) clear, therefore, the domain of what is Thainess and the power relations arising from it constitute an arena over which different interpretations from various positions of struggle to gain hegemony.”⁴⁴ He articulates that Thainess has constantly been a site of contention as its interpretation as always been linked to struggle. This struggle has been caused by “a widespread assumption” that there is a common and unifying Thai nature or identity informed by a nationalist discourse; such a nationalized character was premised on the axiom that Siam was never formally colonized and that the domain of Thainess is one that is highly emotional and virtuous, and, more importantly, free from outside influences.⁴⁵ Winichakul later writes that this paradigm of Thai identity should be contested, and can be found in what he calls “un-Thainess,” or the existence of otherness.⁴⁶

Untangling Thainess from nationalist discourses has led scholars, like Winichakul, to suggest and offer contemporary ways of approaching Thai identity. Rachel V. Harrison writes that Thainess is actually a hybrid entity formed of a “multiplicity of cultural and racial identities, features which pervade the construction of Thainess (*khvam-pen-thai*) in the face of its encounters with and absorption of Westernness (*khvam-pen-farang*), and the ensuing *farang*-ization ... of Thai identities.”⁴⁷ Harrison’s contention speaks directly to Hall’s notion of a hybridized diasporic persona as well as the adjustments that Siam/Thailand made to maintain its sovereignty and project a sense of modernity. Other scholars (Van Esterik 2000, Wilson

⁴⁴ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁷ Rachel Harrison, “The Allure of Ambiguity: The ‘West’ and the Making of Thai Identities,” in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*, eds. Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 2.

2004, Mills 2006, Jackson 2011, and others) have continued to build on this work in terms of the shifting notions of Thainess in a contemporary world.⁴⁸

Thainess is not isolated to the “home country,” but rather a continually created and contested identity around the world. Bringing attention to the Thai diaspora in the United States, Sirida Srisombati, Jiemin Bao, Kanjana Thepboriruk, and Mark Padoongpatt have further developed the field by articulating the ways that Thai Americans “maintain critical ethnic differences between themselves and other Asian groups in an attempt to undermine their racialization” as well as negotiate the boundaries of race and ethnicity in the United States.⁴⁹ Srisombati writes that diasporic Thais use culture and modern technologies to “recognize the materiality that gets erased in dominant accounts of globalization and, more importantly, to criticize the ideological work done by this erasure.”⁵⁰ She further contends that Thai Americanness has been and continues to be impacted by the transnational dimensions of how Thainess is packaged and repackaged in popular media and the imaginary. Srisombati argues, “Contrary to popular belief, what happens in Thailand does not in fact stay in Thailand. Packages move.”⁵¹ Winichakul further extends how Thainess has been theorized by noting the *struggles for interpretation* that constantly contest these

⁴⁸ See Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson, *The Ambiguous Allure of the West* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Mary Beth Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999); and Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ Mark Padoongpatt, “Too Hot to Handle: Food, Empire, and Race in Thai Los Angeles,” *Radical History Review* 110 (2011): 83-108, 86.

⁵⁰ Sirida Srisombati, “BKK-LAX: Transurban Mules and Low-Rent Globalization,” (doctoral dissertation, University of California at Santa Cruz, 2005), 11.

⁵¹ Srisombati, “BKK-LAX,” 101.

definitions; much akin to Stuart Hall's argument that diasporic identity and culture are "unstable".⁵²

My central research questions ask: how do contemporary and marginalized Thais speak back to or alongside images of Thainess that have come to define them? How do they convey modes of Thainess that both critique and separate themselves from the projects of transnational capitalism and national modernity? If hypersexuality and excess define an overdetermined and limited Thai identity and life, how, then, might hypersexualization, the perverse, monstrous, and grotesque also hold potential for empowerment, critique and redefinitions of Thainess? In attempts to answer these questions, my dissertation thus draws heavily on José Esteban Muñoz's work on the disruptive act of "disidentification," a survival strategy of marginalized subjects who operate simultaneously within and outside of the dominant public sphere.⁵³ He writes, "To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject."⁵⁴ Disidentification is a queer process of identification that does not necessarily align with hegemonic notions of self, but, rather, performs it in a skewed manner. Those who participate in disidentificatory politics use dominant vocabularies and cultures as canvases to remake raw materials for the disempowered to enter into a new world rendered unthinkable by dominant culture.⁵⁵ My project does not necessarily shy away from Western projections of Thai hypersexuality or Thailand's governmental politics of

⁵² Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 9-12; and Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 226.

⁵³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

respectability, but rather, understands flamboyant and playful representations of Thai sexuality as subversive acts that queer state and foreign fantasies. In other words, contemporary Thai popular forms operate within certain structures of resistance, recycling and reconfiguring stereotypes as to remake them in ways that allow for disenfranchised Thais to present themselves in and alongside the mainstream.

In doing so, such acts of queering, of disidentification, also leave room for the crucial role of pleasure, and not merely survival. In her work on the operative powers of emotion, Sara Ahmed writes that “Pleasures open bodies to worlds through an opening up of the body to others. As such, pleasures can allow bodies to take up more space. ... [These] Spaces are claimed though enjoyment, an enjoyment that is returned by being witnessed by others.”⁵⁶ The “opening” that Ahmed writes about is not merely a point where bodies and desires intersect, but, also a moment where they come to gather through their mutual longings to survive as marginalized figures.

Thailand’s Reputation: “the playground of the Western world”⁵⁷

To understand the proliferation and power of images of Thai availability and exploitability, we must consider Thailand’s geopolitical strategy to maintain a sense of national sovereignty through uneven international alliances and projects of modernization. Economic policies produced during the Cold War shaped the nation’s development plans, which materially relied on a framing of its people as submissive and malleable.

What constitutes Thailand’s induction into “modernization” and the global market initially started with the country’s attempts to cultivate national development as early as

⁵⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 164-165.

⁵⁷ Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, 16.

the 1930s, peaking in the 1950s and 1960s and continuing on to today.⁵⁸ Historically, Thai agriculture—mainly rice and rubber production—was central to the nation’s modernizing efforts and its attempts to develop a sustainable economy. However, the second half of the twentieth century saw the agriculture-based economy falter as the nation shifted to industry and service. The World Bank encouraged the Thai government to invest in the private sector as well as in foreign investment and overseas trade with liberal incentives in 1957.⁵⁹ Because the World Bank stressed that Thailand embark on a path of rapid industrialization, the nation cultivated an openness and minimally regulated posture towards outside investment in its attempt to economically align with outside interests after the Second World War.⁶⁰ Looking “East” to stimulate its economic practices, Thailand attempted to mirror America’s neoliberal principles by mixing capitalist practices with an activist government to cultivate economic growth, becoming one of Southeast Asia’s “tigers” of the 1980s.⁶¹ Attempts to align the Thai economy with Western ideals of modernity and global capitalism led to Thailand being marked as “one of the great development success stories” of the world due to its strategic economic practices and the nation’s integration into the global economy.⁶² However, emulating Western principles led Thailand to follow “a laissez-faire capitalist path to economic growth that encouraged foreign investment, industrialization, and tourism, with relatively few regulations (including little protection for peasants, workers, or the environment).”⁶³

⁵⁸ David Burch and Jasper Goss, “From agricultural modernisation to agri-food globalisation: The waning of national development in Thailand,” *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 6 (2001): 969-986, 970.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 973.

⁶⁰ Craig A. Lockard, *Southeast Asia in World History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 186.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶² The World Bank, “Countries: Thailand,” <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand> (accessed April 23, 2018).

⁶³ Wilson, *Intimate Economies of Bangkok*, 19.

These infrastructural changes ultimately led to growing rifts between classes that still exist today.

The “modern” Thai nation was thus constructed to ensure its national autonomy and participation in the global sphere. However, this modernization project played out in gendered and sexualized ways, and had consequences for the most vulnerable Thais. As the labor market began to expand in the more industrialized capital of Bangkok, many rural Thais, particularly women, migrated to the city to find both cultural and economic opportunities not afforded to them in the provinces. Since many of these women were young, poor, and uneducated, they were vulnerable to poor working conditions and subject to different kinds of gendered exploitation. From Bangkok retail, urban nightlife, tourist service, to the go-go bars in the red-light district, Thai (female) sexuality became fundamental to the ways that the global market operated on the ground in Thailand. Attempts to modernize in the global economy thus drastically drew upon the “intimate realms of daily life,” and the labor of sexualized Thai women and feminized gay men.⁶⁴

Such sexualized and gendered views of Thainess and Thailand were exacerbated in 1967 when the Thai government struck a deal with the United States to provide rest and recreation (R&R) services to American servicemen during the Viet Nam War. The “R&R Treaty” codified an alliance between Thailand and the U.S. ensuring American servicemen sexual access to Thai people during the Viet Nam War.⁶⁵ The treaty deployed many Thai women to give soldiers temporary “breaks” from the daily psychological and physical struggles of war, centering sex work as part of the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁵ Rho-Ng, “The Conscripted of Asian Sex Slaves,” 109.

diplomatic relationship between the two countries.⁶⁶ When the Viet Nam War ended, civilian sex tourists replaced American soldiers, cementing sex work as a key part of Thai livelihood. With encouragement from the World Bank, 1970s tourism in Thailand capitalized on the already existing “entertainment” and service sectors, and sex tourism was its most visible aspects.⁶⁷ Today sex and prostitution are seen as part of the cultural fabric—the “brand”—of Thailand.⁶⁸

Thai Diaspora to the United States

The Thai diaspora was initiated by the effects of global capitalism and militourism. Traditionally, Thailand is romanticized as *the* one Southeast Asian nation to never be formally colonized by the West. This idealistic history of Thailand is mythological as U.S. foreign policy, economic investment, and militarization have exerted strong external influences upon Thailand and its people.⁶⁹ As a “postcolony,” Thailand continues to be influenced by the patriarchal involvement of the West (particularly the United States)—through such means as the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization headquarters in Bangkok, educational and cultural programs, organizations such as the Fulbright Foundation and Peace Corps, its dependence on

⁶⁶ See Katharine H.S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

⁶⁷ Scot Barmé notes that the “sex show”—a kind of erotic entertainment often assumed to have developed in relation to the Viet Nam War and R&R—emerged as a staple in Bangkok nightlife in the early 1920s. (Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 83). Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, “Sex Tourism and Inequalities,” in *Tourism and Inequality: Problems and Prospects*, eds. Stroma Cole and Nigel Morgan (Wallingford: CABI, 2010), 49.

⁶⁸ Kritinee Nuttavuthisit, “Branding Thailand: Correcting the negative image of sex tourism,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 3, no. 1 (2007): 21-30, 24.

⁶⁹ Thongchai Winichakul, “A Short History of the Long Memory of the Thai Nation,” *Asian Nationalisms Project*, September 13, 2003, <http://web.uvic.ca/~anp/Public/abstrcts01/Winichakul.html> (accessed February 2, 2016).

foreign tourism, and U.S. militarization and colonization in the region.⁷⁰ The interactions facilitated by the United States' presence in Thailand further allowed Thais to learn about U.S. society and culture, encouraging Thais to migrate to the United States for educational and personal opportunities.

This intimate relationship between Thailand and the U.S. prompted shifts in Thai migration to the United States. Whereas between 1945 to 1965, migration was made up of male government officials, elites, and an educated middle-class from the capital, Bangkok, the second wave, arriving between 1965 to 1975, and facilitated by the Hart-Celler Act (also known as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965) which significantly altered the class and gender dynamics of early Thai migration as a direct result of U.S. militarization in Thailand—especially the Isan region. During the Viet Nam War, many U.S. servicemen, who were in Thailand for rest and recreation services, became engaged to and married Thai women because they perceived Thai females as “honorable” and “pretty darn faithful”, stressing Oriental fantasies of a “sweet[] feminine Oriental subordination.”⁷¹ As U.S. servicemen sought out Thai wives, almost half of the Thai immigrant women who came to the U.S. between 1965 and 1975 were most likely “‘war-bride’ phenomenon.”⁷² The last wave, from the mid-1970s to the present constitutes the era of Thai mass migration, characterized by unskilled laborers and individuals without a formal education from the rural areas of Thailand.⁷³

⁷⁰ Mark Padoongpatt, “Thai Americans,” in *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Mary Yu Danico (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2014), 894.

⁷¹ Lloyd Shearer, “Thailand is a Man’s World—and the G.I.’s Like It,” *Parade Magazine*, March 24, 1968, 10; qtd. in Mark Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire: Food and the Making of Thai America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 35.

⁷² Jacqueline Desbarats, “Thai Migration to Los Angeles,” *Geographical Review* 69, no. 3 (1979): 302-318, 306.

⁷³ Padoongpatt, “Thai Americans,” 893.

Thainess should be conceptualized under a diasporic framework that accounts for ethnic, class, gender and sexual differences.⁷⁴ Since diaspora is key to my analysis, the sections above have hopefully shed light on how Thais in the diaspora are undergoing “an ongoing and contested process of subject formation embedded in a set of cultural and social relations that are sustained simultaneously with the ‘homeland’ (real or imagined), place of residence, and compatriots or coethics dispersed elsewhere.”⁷⁵ Due to U.S. militarization and Thailand’s push to modernize and develop its own economy at the expense of its poorest and most vulnerable citizens, the quote above relates to contemporary Thais’ alienation, displacement, and dispersal (for instance, rural-to-urban or U.S. migration), stressing that the Thai diaspora is an experience and a place of ongoing contestation between nations and their agendas.

Methodology and Archive

Culture is a site where marginalized communities reclaim and recast identities and histories in the shadow of empire and nation-state politics. In search of underdeveloped and marginal pieces of counterculture, my work employs a “queer methodology” that, following Judith Halberstam, “uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior.”⁷⁶ Such a methodology brings together an array of approaches and sites that refuse “the academic compulsion toward disciplinary

⁷⁴ Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “Diaspora,” in *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, eds. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and K. Scott Wong. (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 53; and Kanjana Thepboriruk, “Thais in Diaspora: Language and Identity in Los Angeles, California,” (doctoral dissertation, University of Hawai’i at Mānoa, 2015), 8.

⁷⁵ Rhacel S. Parreñas and Lok C.D. Siu, “Introduction: Asian diasporas - new concepts, new frameworks,” in *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions*, eds. Rhacel S. Parreñas and Lok C.D. Siu (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1; qtd. in Kanjana Thepboriruk, “Thais in Diaspora: Language and Identity in Los Angeles, California,” (doctoral dissertation, University of Hawai’i at Mānoa, 2015), 8.

⁷⁶ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 13.

coherence.”⁷⁷ “Bangkok is Burning” seeks out the existence of playful, excessive and sometimes ephemeral cultural representations of Thai gender and sexuality in sites such as social media, film, recordings, pageants, sites of commemoration, other performances in addition to ethnographic work. These everyday and personal productions of culture reveal the ways that Thais perform and reproduce new representations and forms of self. Where relevant, I have supplemented this archive through site visits, informal conversations, and interviews.

“Bangkok is Burning” pulls together various pieces of Thai counterculture that critique U.S. militarism, labor exploitation and the consequences of economic development—creating identity and collectivity out of subjugation. In this sense, José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “brown feelings” is useful as many of the objects and people discussed within this project wield “a certain ethics of the self” in their oppositional positioning to the mainstream, relating to a Thainess that does not “feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment.”⁷⁸ The forms of Thainess represented within this project thus correspond to an antinormative consciousness that speaks to a marginal becoming and being. Much of my archival material therefore plays with and against the normative practices and productions of Thainess that have come to inform Thai representation and subjugation.

The archive of this dissertation reflects how Thai identities are conceived, performed, and positioned transnationally. My primary sources center around two specific sites that have informed a Thai diasporic identity: Bangkok, Thailand and New

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 675-688, 676.

York City. Bangkok is a city overlaid by multiple and highly complex images and fantasies, ranging from Hollywood orientalism to state modernist projects that have attracts young laborers to the city.⁷⁹ Similarly, New York City has become a key destination for many Thai immigrants outside of the Thai nation-state where Thai New Yorkers are the tenth largest group of Asian Americans in the city.⁸⁰ In the Big Apple, as in Bangkok, Thai Americans forge alternative definitions of Thainess using American popular culture.

My archive gathers together what Diana Taylor conceptualizes as the “repertoire”: “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”⁸¹ Taylor’s concept of the repertoire is particularly salient here, because she thinks of it as a way to “an alternative perspective on historical processes of transnational contact”.⁸² Thus, the performative and cultural aspects of this archive accumulate power as forms of “spatial practice”—the ways in which space is reproduced in everyday life.⁸³ My archive consists of practices and performances of Thainess where subjects “fail” at being Thai in the most traditional and conservative of senses. Through awkwardness, excessive sexuality, the grotesque and usage of comedy, these failed and subversive renderings

⁷⁹ Mary Beth Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 29.

⁸⁰ Asian American Federation, “Profile of New York City’s Thai Americans: 2012 Edition,” *Asian American Federation*, N.D., <http://www.aafny.org/cic/briefs/thai2012.pdf> (accessed April 23, 2018).

⁸¹ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 20.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸³ Deborah Paredez, *Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 33.

of Thai identity in pop culture “lead[s] to a different set of knowledge practices” that have critical potential.⁸⁴

The four chapters of “Bangkok is Burning” meditate on articulations of Thainess that find power in their strangeness, their fragility, their campiness, and their refusal of the normative. They are cultural forms that merge as reactions to the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, U.S. militarization from the 1970s and the 1997 Asian financial crisis; moments that were particularly informed by global capitalism and Thai nationalism.

In 2013, Thai director Banjong Pisanthanaku released the film *Pee Mak Phrakanong* as the latest adaptation of the famed Thai ghost legend, “Mae Nak Phrakanong.”⁸⁵ Chapter One analyzes *Pee Mak Phrakanong* as a piece of contemporary counterculture that generates new forms of Thai knowledge that subverts previous renditions of the ghostlore and Thai femininity, producing a parodic yet utopic alternative. I argue that Pisanthanaku’s reenvisioning of Mak and Nak redefines nationalist power, memory, and traditional gendered roles. The 2013 film is playful, humorous, and, above all, utopic, taking a film that has previously been written to reflect a “[hetero]nationalist sentiment” and the desires of Thai bourgeois (Ingawanij 2007) into an entirely different direction.⁸⁶ The shifts in this iconic story was influenced by differing Thai opinions regarding politics, the monarchy, gender roles, and LGBT rights in a

⁸⁴ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 12.

⁸⁵ The nineteenth century Siamese ghost legend of Mae Nak, of ‘Mother Nak,’ has been filmic remade numerous times and adapted into different forms of culture. For instance, the story has emerged cinematically over twenty times; has been made into an opera, a musical, an animated feature, as well as the subject of numerous comic books.

⁸⁶ Arnika Fuhrmann, “*Nang Nak*—Ghost Wife: Desire, Embodiment, and Buddhist Melancholia in a Contemporary Thai Ghost Film,” *Discourse* 31, 3 (2009): 240.

contemporary Thailand.⁸⁷ The film queers gender roles and ideas of Thainess through acts of appropriation and the disentanglement from bourgeois consumption and utilization of the ghost legend.

Chapter Two looks at Trasher, Bangkok, a queer performance troupe based out of Bangkok, known for throwing lavish parties celebrating "taboo" Thai desires and their numerous digital videos hosted on YouTube.⁸⁸ Fronted by their lead *kathoey* actress Watchara "Jenny" Sukchum, Trasher's ensemble consists a diverse cast of Thais in their twenties and thirties, residing predominantly in Thailand's capital.⁸⁹ Like their parties, the digital videos that the group makes celebrate their love of American pop culture and kitsch, flaunting their queer Thai sexualities publicly. For Trasher, these YouTube shorts are ways to articulate an unrecognizable world of queer Thai sexuality, possibility, and performance, masked by dominant misinterpretations of queer Thai identities through sex work, the AIDS/HIV epidemic, Hollywood and America's skewed perceptions, and a highly-marketed image of the "gay paradise."⁹⁰ Examining pieces of their digital archive, this chapter centers on three of the YouTube videos that Trasher has created in order to theorize the group's campiness and sexually excessive

⁸⁷ Pravit_Rojanaphruk, "An old ghost story that makes a new point," *The Nation*, April 17, 2013, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/An-old-ghost-story-that-makes-a-new-point-30204128.html> (accessed May 5, 2018).

⁸⁸ Trasher, Bangkok, "Trasher , Bangkok: Community," *Facebook*, N.D., https://www.facebook.com/trasherbangkok/info/?tab=page_info (accessed February 12, 2016).

⁸⁹ In Thai, *kathoey* denotes an individual, male or female, who is transgender, exhibiting behaviors deemed to be inappropriate or non-normative to their gender. The *kathoey* figure has also been associated categorically as a 'third gender/sex,' and has been mythicized within popularized Thai imaginings of gender and eroticism (Pavadee Saisuwan, "Kathoey and the Linguistic Construction of Gender Identity in Thailand," in *Language, Sexuality, and Power: Studies in Intersectional Sociolinguistics*, eds. Erez Levon and Ronald Beline Mendes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 189-214.

⁹⁰ Peter A. Jackson, ed., *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011).

performances as rebellious sites of queer performativity, signaling a challenge to Thai bourgeois notions of self, nation, and respectability.

My third chapter deals with the after/life of famed Thai country singer Pumpuang Duangjan (1961-1992) and how thousands of Thais commemorate her in a way that speaks back against dominant, patriarchal, and heteronormative conceptualizations of Thainess. Fans of Duangjan—mainly peasants, farmers, women, and queers—draw upon the musical and cultural legacy left in the wake of her death as to reestablish belonging and identity in a conservative and homogenizing Thailand.⁹¹ Focusing on diva worship as “reparative cultural labor,” I examine how marginalized and disenfranchised Thais make competing claims to Thainess and Thailand by way of queer and diasporic sites of commemoration.⁹² Focused on a shrine created in her honor, I argue that the commemoration of Duangjan develops as a “generative force” that “creates room” for others to simply exist under the harsh realities faced by many Thais under the weight of development, modernization, and global capitalism.⁹³

In my fourth and final chapter, I shift to New York City, where Pattaya Hart, a Thai American drag performer, performs a hybrid, grotesque, and queer drag that draws on a self-orientalizing to simultaneously subvert socially constructed norms informed by homo- and heteronormativity.⁹⁴ Drawing upon the queer grotesque, I contend that Pattaya Hart’s strategies of self-representation generate a queer Thai American identity that pushes back against normative understandings of gay Thainess, Thai American

⁹¹ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 3-5.

⁹² Brett Farmer, “The Fabulous Sublimity of Gay Diva Worship,” *Camera Obscura* 2005, Issue 59 (2005): 164-195, 169.

⁹³ Paredez, *Selenidad*, 190.

⁹⁴ Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (London: Routledge, 2013), 118.

migration and community formation, and the mainstream gay New York scene. This chapter privileges Hart's moments in drag as her attempt to define and embody the queer Thai diasporic figure to account for a different narrative of Thai kinship, community, and legibility.

Conclusion

"Bangkok is Burning" is an immensely personal project for me. As a queer Thai American, stereotypes of Thainess as hypersexual, licentious, subservient, and accommodating have haunted me throughout my life. I opened with Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok* because as an undergraduate, it was *the* film that provoked feelings of disgust and unease as a Thai in the diaspora. The documentary and its subject matter have followed me throughout my academic career as it provocatively emphasized how disenfranchised and working-class Thais were always seen as "open for business" for the Western world as well as nation-state agendas.

I return to Sirida Srisombati's argument that "what happens in Thailand does not in fact stay in Thailand" and that portrayals move, conditioning how Thais are seen globally.⁹⁵ Even as a Thai American, I have been confronted with these popularized images as strangers have inquired about the relationship between Thainess, sex and sexuality. My work is thus an analysis of everyday Thais, including myself, and how they renegotiate the representations placed on their identities, strategically reworking scripts of difference with self-definition and agency. "Bangkok is Burning" is a project that asks: how do Thais in the diaspora reimagine the conditions of their identity and belonging?

⁹⁵ Srisombati, "BKK-LAX," 101.

CHAPTER 1

The Queer Poetics of Nang Nak:

Pee Mak, Ghost Wife, and the Promises of Queer Futurity

[She] Wants a simple life again. / To set down Buddha's yellow candles / For just a minute. / But she has a lot of karma to pay off / For trying to keep her family together / Spooking mischievous children at night / Who thinks she's looking for playmates / For her beautiful baby / Toddling between Wat Mahabut / And the Prakanong River.

—Bryan Thao Worra, “The Ghost Nang Nak”¹

In the introductory scene from *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, director Banjong Pisanthanaku's titular character, Pee Mak, returns to his hometown of Phrakanong after serving in the Thai military. During his absence, Mak's pregnant wife, Nak, died due to complications with her pregnancy, losing her child as well. As the film is based on a famed nineteenth century ghost legend and is one of many popularized adaptations of the story of Mae Nak, or “Mother Nak,” and her undying love for her husband, the scene in *Pee Mak* is formulaic: it shows Mak returning home, unaware of his wife's demise. In Pisanthanaku's version, he disembarks the boat and alights onto the dock that leads up to his home. He is accompanied by his friends—Ter, Puak, Shin, and Aey, fellow soldiers who are new additions to the canonical story. The scene is dark and still: the only sound that the audiences hears are the crickets that accompany Mak's dialogue. In the stillness of night, Mak longingly and excitedly, calls out to his wife, “Nak! Nak! Nak, honey ... I'm back!” He calls out to his wife again to an empty response while one of his comrades, Puak, comically interjects, “Is Nak taking a shit?” The group of friends, whom

¹ Bryan Thao Worra, “The Ghost of Nang Nak,” in *On the Other Side of the Eye*, edited by Bryan Thao Worra (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Sam's Dot Publishing, 2007), 38.

are all focused on Mak being reunited with his wife, recenter their attentions towards Puak who, in his response, has seemingly disrupted a long-awaited reunion by being so crass. This comedic line upsets the visual and aural tensions of the scene in this traditional ghost tale. It is this use of comedy in a film that has continually been interpreted seriously is what sets Banjong Pisanthanaku's vision of the story of Mae Nak Prakanong apart from its predecessors.

After his friend's inane comment, Pisanthanaku's Mak continues onto his wooden and stilted Thai home, hearing the sounds of his baby son in the distance. Wandering in the darkness, Mak stumbles onto a cradle, slowly rocking to the flicker of candlelight. He enters the room as the music intensifies, accompanied by the lonely sounds of wooden cradle rocking in the wind. As Mak approaches the cradle, he bends over to behold his son. However, he comes face to face with an empty crib. The music stops. A perplexed Mak backs away in silence until two hands come from behind to forcefully grab him. Frightened, Mak hastily turns around to see his emotional wife. He whimpers like a child, "Nak! Where were you? I was really worried." Pulling his wife close to him, Mak, on the verge of tears, says, "I thought I'd never see you again." The lovers embrace emotionally as an orchestral score swells. Nak clasps her husband's face and jokingly laments, "Don't cry, baby. You won't look handsome."

Jocular moments and conversations such as the ones laid out above are laced throughout Pisanthanaku's filmic interpretation, retelling the Nak lore through a lens of camp and humor. The comedic decision to retell a classically dark story, once described as "heteronationalist," offers distinct approaches to the ghost legend that has been historically used to amplify nationalist sentiments (Ingawanij 2007, Fuhrmann 2016).

Pee Mak Phrakanong breaks away from the high aesthetics and conventional approaches to telling the story of Mae Nak, a folklore heavily involving dramatized tragedy and violent retribution, as well as the spiritual power of ghosts and the afterlife. Pisanthanaku's iteration offers audiences and those versed in the famed lore a playful substitute from the storyline's rigid and fixed plot, using clever humor and an adolescent-inspired romance to bring the ghostlore to a new generation of Thais around the world. The film thus repackages Nak's legend by repurposing it with the aesthetics of camp in addition to queer promise and desire, challenging dominant and hierarchal notions of taste and conventionality.² This chapter is interested in the ways that Pisanthanaku's retelling of an anachronistic tale allows for alternative possibilities and formations of Thainess for thriving in a highly alienating, globalized world.

This chapter analyzes the ways that *Pee Mak Phrakanong* engenders a reinterpretation of a highly-celebrated Thai ghost legend, Mae Nak Phrakanong, through queer utopias, futurities, and love, denaturalizing the nation's reliance on the lore as a bourgeois allegory of Thai identity. The ghostlore, sometimes characterized as a horror story and even a romance, much akin to a Shakespearean tragedy, has been remade into numerous television soap operas, cinematic interpretations, as well as an opera and a musical. There is even a heavily visited shrine dedicated to Nak in a suburb of Bangkok. Due to Nak's significance in Thai culture, she has been referred to as "Thailand's national ghost" (Songyote qtd. in Ingawanij, 2007), emphasizing that her story stands in for an allegory for sociocultural and political hopes and dreams of Thailand and its citizens. As emblematic of Thainess, the story continually reemerges to

² Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, *Cult cinema: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2011), 86.

impart ways in which Thais are expected to perform particular ideals of gender, sexuality, and citizenship.³ Scholars have noted how Thainess as a gendered and sexualized identity is used to directly construct the national identity—particularly through the state’s anxious depictions of Thai women.⁴ The patriotic sentiment associated with the ghost legend of Mae Nak represents “a baseline cultural good onto which national economic and cultural hopes could be mapped.”⁵ Drawing upon previous work that frame the story of Nak and her love for her husband, Mak, as a project that promotes a Thai cultural imaginary and “heteronationalist” sentiment, my goal here emphasizes the ways in which Banjong Pisanthanaku’s *Pee Mak Phrakanong* offers a nuanced, queer critique of heteronormative notions of Thainess.⁶ Its comical narrative operates as a political cultural form that destabilizes dominant ideas of race, gender, and Thai sexuality, primarily promoted by the Thai nation-state. I argue that Pisanthanaku’s version offers his audiences a vision of Nak that is detached from heteronormative interests and national desires, making room for queer modes of reading, particularly of the main characters Mak and Nak. *Pee Mak Phrakanong*’s disruption of celebrated notions of Thainess peels away the ways that these archetypal characters have been historically used to police Thai gender and sexuality.

To make sense of the promising power of *Pee Mak*’s queer modes of reading, I wield a queer analytic to approach Pisanthanaku’s film. In doing so, I draw from Gayatri Gopinath’s theorization of queer diasporic culture as sites through which normative

³ May Adadol Ingwanij, “Nang Nak: Thai bourgeois heritage cinema,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2, (2007): 180-193, 181.

⁴ Penny Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 44.

⁵ Arnika Fuhrmann, “Nang Nak--ghost wife: desire, embodiment, and Buddhist melancholia in a contemporary Thai ghost film,” *Discourse* 31, no. 3 (2009): 220-247, 221.

⁶ Andrew Hock Soon Ng, “Between subjugation and subversion: Ideological ambiguity in the cinematic Mae Nak of Thailand,” *Horror Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 171-182; and Fuhrmann 241.

ideals of reproductive domesticity, nationhood, and transnational capitalism are potentially troubled. By reframing the legend of Mae Nak through a queer diasporic framework, the story becomes something other than a product to invoke nationalist agendas and interests, or reproductions of Thai heteronationalism. Using a queer analytic to read *Pee Mak* is not about dislocating the legend from the cultural memory of Thailand and from Thais, but rather about the possibilities opened up by rejecting the structures of heteronormativity as seen within the film.

This chapter seeks to examine the ways that Pisanthanaku reimagines recognizable Thai characters, ultimately offering viewers a modernized and queered view of the Mae Nak folklore in a present-day setting. I linger on the significance of the director's departure from the original and well-established storyline, arguing that the 2013 version's exceptional characterizations and comic interpretation are filled with queer potential and promise. I seek to analyze the director's filmic approach to a narrative that has been celebrated as "national cinema," a celebration of "Thainess as a visual attraction," and "emblematic of national history."⁷ By focusing on the comical, the extravagant, and the queered ways that Pisanthanaku presents his characters in *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, this chapter pays attention how a seemingly cliché narrative about love conjures a highly political imaginative space beyond the heteronational. Soon Ng contends that each cinematic interpretation of the Mae Nak saga has come to signify particular moods and feelings at the time of the release, representing the sociocultural and political shifts in Thailand and Thai personhood.⁸ What does reorienting such

⁷ Ingawanij, "Nang Nak," 180, 185.

⁸ Andrew Hock Soon Ng, "Between subjugation and subversion: Ideological ambiguity in the cinematic Mae Nak of Thailand," *Horror Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 171-182.

canonical characters do to the storyline and the film's pedagogical force regarding what constitutes a Thai identity? If the characters from the Mae Nak legend are so intimately woven into the cultural fabric of Thainess and Thai memory, what happens to understandings of Thainess when they are represented through a radically different idiom in Pisanthanaku's film? If comedy and romance are used to re-envision the ghost legend, what are the promises and stakes in narrating the characters through these registers? What does Pisanthanaku's film and his characters say about the current sociocultural climate in Thailand and who do these characters speak for or represent?

Set in the late nineteenth century, the story of Mae Nak Phrakanong follows the lives of a country wife, Nak, and her husband, Mak. While Nak is with child, her husband is called to serve *corvée* military service, leaving his young wife behind. Nak goes into labor and dies from complications, losing her child in the process. However, due to the love that she has for her husband, Nak returns as a ghost, waiting for Mak every night by Phrakanong's canal, singing a lullaby to soothe both her and her child. When Mak returns home, he finds both his wife and child healthy and alive waiting for him at the river's edge. Though they initially live an apparently "normal" life, villagers attempt to warn Mak of his wife's demise, incurring Nak's wrath and ending with their grisly demises. In almost all the interpretations of the legend, the villagers demand that Mae Nak's violent spirit to be laid to rest, calling upon the power of Buddhism to expel Nak from the community and into afterlife. Her banishment thus restores the balance that both the community and the nation desire.

The importance of Mae Nak Phrakanong's story cannot be underemphasized. It has been woven into the sociocultural fabric of what represents Thainess from the

nineteenth century and onward. Andrew Hock Soon Ng observes that iterations of Nak and her ghostlore represent “a depository of cultural memory, [whereas] the Mae Nak films reflect the different ideological stances enacting upon the nation at various periods throughout the twentieth century.”⁹ In this sense, the legend of a ghost from Phrakanong and all of its iterations is foundational to what constitutes Thai cultural identity and cultural nationalism.

Nang Nak (1999) and The Ghost of Mae Nak (2005): Affirming Heteronationalism

The lore of Mae Nak Phrakanong has had much staying power with Thais since the nineteenth century. The story is said to “apocryphal,” but, nonetheless, its fiction has become a part of the cultural fabric and reality of what constitutes Thainess.¹⁰ A new movie or televised soap opera/miniseries emerges every few years to retell the legend of Mae Nak, passing on her memory to successive generations as well as recaptivating older audience members. Her story has been remade into at least twenty films—the earliest one in the 1930s, the 1959 version that is the oldest existing copy, and, most recently, Banjong Pisanthanaku’s 2013 adaptation.¹¹ For many, Nonzee Nimibutr’s 1999 filmic rendition is the “definitive” Mae Nak film, celebrated by the Thai people, the country, as well as audiences worldwide.¹² Additionally, there is a 2008 animated movie, a 3-D version which was Thailand’s very first three-dimensional film, a pornographic version, a musical, and an opera, as well as internationalized variations of the legend. In

⁹ Ibid., 180.

¹⁰ Kong Rithdee, “Mae Nak Through The Years,” *Bangkok Post: Lifestyle*, March 27, 2013, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/342541/> (accessed on March 10, 2017).

¹¹ Richard Kuipers, “Review: Ghost of Mae Nak,” *Variety*, March 5, 2006, <https://variety.com/2006/film/reviews/ghost-of-mae-nak-1200517874/> (accessed July 2, 2018).

¹² Beth Accomando, “SDAFF Interview: Director Mark Duffield of The Ghost of Mae Nak,” *KPBS Public Broadcasting*, October 14, 2006, <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2006/oct/14/sdaff-interview-director-mark-duffield-of-the/> (accessed March 10, 2017).

short, Mae Nak Phrakanong has come to represent Thainess as it shifts and evolves to meet the expectations of newer generations, and responds to new technologies and marketing possibilities within the global economy.

The depiction of Nak as a Thai woman, however, has remained fixed across these various interpretations. Her female and spectral sexuality are depicted as “fearful” and “tenacious,” challenging Thai power structures while simultaneously reifying the paradigm of wifehood and motherly devotion within idealizations of a celebrated Thai identity.¹³ The fearful aspects of Nak’s spectral presence, as a prized view of Thai femininity and propriety, reified notions of female devotion, idealizing Thai women’s roles as a “good housewife.”¹⁴ Since much of the canonical lore relies heavily on Nak’s unwavering love for her husband, her terrifying spectral presence epitomizes a wifely devotion premised on nationalized views of Thai gender roles. For instance, Scot Barmé writes that Thailand once “likened a wife to fertilizer that provided nourishment [for] her husband” and that woman’s place was in the “home.”¹⁵ This sexist and domesticating view of Thai women would appear once more as U.S. servicemen and tourists pursued Thai women as wives because they saw them as “subordinates without consequence.”¹⁶ Such understandings of Nak’s ghostly image popularized her as a national emblem of Thai female loyalty, servitude, and accommodation. They illuminate the ways that Nak and Thai women are manifested as what Rachel V. Harrison calls “the paradigm of Thai national femininity.”¹⁷

¹³ Rithdee, “Mae Nak Through The Years.”

¹⁴ Pikunsot na Thonburi qtd. in Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex, and Popular Culture in Thailand* (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2002), 147.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

¹⁶ Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 35.

¹⁷ Harrison, “The Allure of Ambiguity,” 28-29.

In her book, *Ghostly Desires*, Arnika Fuhrmann argues that previous adaptations of Nak and Mak have served heteronationalist sentiments, orienting Thainess through “a global aesthetic.”¹⁸ For example, Nonzee Nimibutr’s adaptation, *Nang Nak*, premiered two years after the 1997 financial crisis, politicizing the ghostlore in a way that dually promoted the nation through a Buddhist narrative and linked it to contemporary sexual politics and the policing of the contemporary Thai female body. Similarly, May Adadol Ingawanij describes Nimibutr’s *Nang Nak* as exemplifying a Thai “heritage film,” crafted in response to the schizophrenia of Thailand’s hegemonic bourgeois elite who sought to draw upon the film and its aesthetics to promote Thainess at a global level while claiming a sense of prestige under the influences of globalization.¹⁹

The emergence of Nonzee Nimibutr’s Mae Nak film was highly significant, culturally and politically, as it came in the aftermath of the financial crash. Due to the economic instability of the nation, Thailand was forced to depend on the financial assistance—a US\$17.2 billion loan package—of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), accepting IMF-funded programming and assistance which restructured how the central Thai bank worked and affected the transparency of the Kingdom and all of its dealings.²⁰ Because of the outside control of Thailand’s economy, a “mood of resentment” developed in the nation which called for a renewed sense of Thai independence and sovereignty in the shadow of neocolonial and Western

¹⁸ Arnika Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires: Queer Sexuality and Vernacular Buddhism in Contemporary Thai Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 55.

¹⁹ Ingawanij, “Nang Nak,” 181.

²⁰ Suchitra Punyaratabandhu, “Thailand in 1997: Financial Crisis and Constitutional Reform” *Asian Survey* 38, no. 2 (1998): 161-167, 162.

interventions.²¹ The National Economic and Social Development Board of Thailand (NESDB), which provides the government with recommendations on economic issues regarding the nation, became a key actor in developing strategies to make Thailand and Thai sovereignty legitimately sustainable through cultural development and public participation. NESDB promoted overarching ideas of Thainess through culture and patriotism.²² Formations of Thainess in cultural spheres were thus seen as the vital representations of national identity even as Thailand had to increasingly rely on economic assistance from foreign powers. Producing heritage films like *Nang Nak* was a way in which the Thai government, official bodies, and the nation's citizens could affirm the "national integrity and identity that 'incorporates local wisdom and retains Thailand's cultural identity.'"²³ In celebrating Thailand's national identity beyond neocolonialist interventions, *Nang Nak* thus affirmed Thai exceptionalism, further reassuring "the projection of the dream of Thai advancement in that very same model of global economic domination" alongside nationalist, patriarchal and bourgeois sensibilities.²⁴

²¹ Rachel V. Harrison, "Romancing the Nation, Reasserting Order: Post (Economic) Crisis Thai Cinema," (lecture, New Haven, Connecticut, April 4, 2012) Southeast Asia Studies Seminar Program: The MacMillan Center at Yale University, http://artscalendar.yale.edu/month/2012-04-01?event=CAL-2c9cb3cc-35f45e0f-0136-11a0104f-00001006bedework%40yale.edu_&tag_id=32 (accessed January 21, 2018).

²² Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, "History and Role of NESDB: NESDB...National Planning Agency," *NESDB*, January 1, 2008, <http://eng.nesdb.go.th/Default.aspx?tabid=72> (accessed December 6, 2012).

²³ Michael Kelly Connors, "Goodbye to the security state: Thailand and ideological change," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 33 no. 4 (2003): 431-448, 442.

²⁴ This notion of a "Thai exceptionalism" stems from ideas that emerge from the nation's unique history in relation to other Southeast Asian nations as well as its standing in the world today, as stated by foreign institutions like the World Bank. I am drawn to the ways that Thailand's history has continuously been informed by an upper-class and royalist citizenry that pushes for the romanticized axiom that the nation was never formally colonized by the West or other global powers. Scholar Thongchai Winichakul has written that such a history is a phenomenon that the Thai people are proud of. He writes that "Siam has been regarded as a traditional state which transformed itself into a modern nation" (1988, 13). Additionally, and in a contemporary sense, groups, like the World Bank, have constantly affirmed and proselytized Thailand's induction into global capitalism and the ways in which the nation has easily

Nonzee Nimibutr's remake demonstrates a patriotic notion of Thainess, drawing on the director's "personal nostalgic sensibility."²⁵ The film's paternalism and nationalism emphasizes a Buddhist narrative as key to the film's overall conception of Thainess in a modern era. The fulcrum of Nimibutr's reclamation of the Thai nation is the Thai female body, which bears the burdens of Thainess and state politics as they are written onto Nak's performance and the demands that are asked of her.²⁶ The film advocates for what May Adadol Ingawanij calls a "collective memory of the nation's past, or the idea conventionally held about what this episode signifies in the master narrative of the nation," emphasizing bourgeois nationalist hopes for financial recovery and global acknowledgement after the 1997 economic crisis.²⁷ In other words, *Nang Nak*, as a heritage film that emerges out of the economic crash, solidifies a particular history of Thailand, a historiography that is based on a romanticized ideal that the nation was never formally colonized. The film invokes a certain brand of Thainess that celebrates the state and its supposed sovereign identity throughout time.²⁸ Arnika Fuhrmann suggests that Nonzee Nimibutr's *Nak* is the first adaptation "to reference elite, royally sponsored Buddhism," aligning itself with particular visions of female embodiment and sexuality grounded on Thai Buddhist beliefs.²⁹ This reference to the paternal and monarchical religious order is played out within Nimibutr's film as the overall shape of *Nang Nak* emphasizes "a Buddhist quest" to which Mak is transcends into

aligned itself with Western projects of and for modernity. For example, on its official website, the World Bank has even touted the Kingdom to be "one of the world's greatest development success stories." (Ingawanij, "Nang Nak," 189).

²⁵ Ibid., 187.

²⁶ Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 51-53.

²⁷ Ingawanij, "Nang Nak," 183; and Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 55.

²⁸ Soon Ng, "Between subjugation and subversion," 172.

²⁹ Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 56.

monkhood and Nak's spirit is "enlightened by a [head monk] whose narrative power comes from his connotative association with the aura of the national past."³⁰ The political and visual vernacular played out within Nimibutr's *Nang Nak* thus uses the canonical ghostlore as a way to represent traditional femininity through the racial and sexual rules and parameters of an upper-class, patriarchal, and heteronormative nation-state.

British director and writer Mark Duffield debuted his take on Thailand's prized ghost legend, *The Ghost of Mae Nak* (2005), six years after Nonzee Nimibutr's critically acclaimed movie premiered. Seeing the "potential" for telling ghost stories through film, Duffield began writing his interpretation of Nak's seminal legacy after being inspired by the 1999 adaptation.³¹ Unlike Nimibutr's nationalistic adaptation, Duffield's film was stylized in a Western fashion, creating a highly violent, graphic, and dark envisioning of the nineteenth century tale, emerging amidst the 2005 and 2006 political crises in Thailand.³² Instead of promoting a nostalgic patriotism through Nak's body, Duffield's retelling marked her as a scorned brown woman who returns to the human realm for selfish reasons. He equates Nak, a revered and almost saint-like woman in Thai history, as synonymous to Dracula or Jack the Ripper, Western characters who signify violence, horror, and crime.³³ As such, Duffield's interpretation divorces Nak from her nationalistic sensibilities to create his horror film, interpreting the story of Mae Nak as a shocking

³⁰ Ingawanij, "Nang Nak," 185.

³¹ Ty Power, "Duffield, Mark (Director) - Ghost of Mae Nak," *sci-fi online*, N.D., http://www.sci-fi-online.com/2006_Interviews/07-01-09_markduffield.htm (accessed March 10, 2017).

³² Duffield's reimagining of Nak coincided with the 2005 Songkhla bombings in the southern provinces of Thailand, as well as the ongoing political crises in Thailand when Thaksin Shinawatra won the title of Prime Minister in the 2005 reelection, creating a nationwide backlash between royalists and those who supported Shinawatra.

³³ Power, "Duffield, Mark (Director) - Ghost of Mae Nak."

spectacle, “a bit like being a witness to a sudden road accident” with “freak death scenes” that are jarring.³⁴ Though he states that he respects the history associated with Nak’s storyline and that he wanted to restate the legend in an “authentic” way, Duffield’s work trivializes such memory associated with the plot by reimagining Nak as a conniving and hypersexualized Thai woman, situating her within an orientalist perspective.³⁵ Duffield’s version reinforces a complex and tense history of brown women in Southeast Asian being racially sexualized in a way that “eroticizes [their] poverty within national underdevelopment but also naturalizes for [them] a torrid tropical constitution.”³⁶

Though both films are vastly different in the way that they handle the subject matter, Nimibutr and Duffield’s movies share a similar thread as they project national projects and fantasies, reproducing heteronormative desires and interpretations through Nak’s characterization. Additionally, as both emerge out of a post-1997 Asian financial crisis, culturally reinforcing the ways that women, particularly Thai women, have continually been sacrificed in the name of that crisis. Thai scholars have noted that major impacts of the crisis were directly transmitted through the labor market, negatively impacting women through high rates of unemployment in the precious textile and garment industries, compounding how Thai women have taken on the burden of their family’s welfare and well-being.³⁷ Nimibutr and Duffield’s interpretations relegate Nak and Mak to Thai gender roles and racialized sexualities bounded by both patriarchal and nation-state visions of Thai womanhood, manhood, and respectability *and* foreign

³⁴ Power, “Duffield, Mark (Director) - Ghost of Mae Nak.”; and Accomando, “SDAFF Interview.”

³⁵ Accomando, “SDAFF Interview.”

³⁶ Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 186.

³⁷ Srawooth Paitoonpong and Nipanan Akkarakul, “The Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on Women Workers in Thailand,” *TDR Quarterly Review*, December 1, 2009, <http://tdri.or.th/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/t5d2009001.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2017).

fantasies of Thai sexual excess. The films are both serious in nature and attempt to appease a cinematic universe and audiences conversant in bourgeois and orientalist discourse.

In contrast, *Pee Mak Phra Kanong* is campy, playful, and irreverent in its tone, while simultaneously generating a different hope and vision for Thainess. In its vision of the roles of women, the importance of love, and the formation of community it extends an imagination beyond the normative policies of the state for gender, sexuality, desire and belonging that currently shape the lives of everyday Thais.

***Pee Mak Phra Kanong* (2013)**

Banjong Pisanthanaku's *Pee Mak Phra Kanong* premiered in Thailand on March 28, 2013, to much anticipation and fanfare. It was an instant hit with moviegoers, because the director's reinterpretation of the iconic nineteenth century lore was narrated through the viewpoint of Nak's husband, Mak, and primarily through the use of lowbrow slapstick humor, horror elements, and melodrama. Explaining the difference in the direction of storytelling, Pisanthanaku stated that he was "bored of doing horror movies ... [and that] it was time to do something different."³⁸ This change was evidently the right choice as the film was so well-received that *The Bangkok Post* reported that many people were unable to secure a seat in the theater without booking hours ahead of time.³⁹ The film's widespread popularity allowed for the movie to hit an unprecedented ฿283 million (a little under USD\$8.5 million), naming it the second highest grossing Thai

³⁸ Yip Wai Yee, "Thai film-maker Banjong Pisanthanakun is known for making hit horror flicks such as 'Shutter' (2004), 'Alone' (2007) and '4Bia' (2008). So why would he want to turn his latest work 'Pee Mak Phra Khanong' (2013), based on the well-known ghost story, into a comedy?," *The Nation (Thailand)*, June 9, 2013, Web (accessed 23 February 2017).

³⁹ Teddy Fredrickson, "New 'Mae Nak' Packs Cinemas," *Bangkok Post*, April 10, 2013, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/learning-news/344788/pee-mak-phra-kanong-a-huge-success> (accessed February 23, 2017).

film of all time, only behind the 2001 period piece *The Legend of Suriyothai* which grossed ฿550 million.⁴⁰

Produced by GMM Thai Hub (GTH), *Pee Mak Phrakanong* follows the original Thai ghost legend but does so from the viewpoint of Mak, played by Thai-German model and actor Mario Maurer, who leaves his wife, Nak, played by Thai-Belgian actress Davika “Mai” Horne. It is important to note here that although *Pee Mak* is a film that promises discussions of change through marginal narratives, the fact that the film employs two mixed-race, or *luk-khreung*, actors to embody two iconic characters in Siamese and Thai memory presents and rationalizes the allure of *farang*-ization—a term that speaks to the ways the country is globalizing but, simultaneously, the “uncertainty and anxiety among the Thai about the legitimacy and authenticity of their modernizing project.”⁴¹ The employment of these two Thai actors affirms the ways in which mixed-race identities are seen as much more appealing as the aesthetic face of Thailand; a promotion that values lighter skin and whiteness to personify national traditions and culture at the expense of brown bodies and indigeneity.

The film, though set during the reign of King Mongkut and nineteenth century Siam, is fashioned in a way that speaks to contemporary Thai audiences, nodding to different and updated cultural references and images, aimed at GTH's “usual audience of middle-class urban Thai teens.”⁴² Such updated material in an iconic and renowned folk legend speaks to the ways that the director and the film company attempted to

⁴⁰ Ibid. The “฿,” or baht, is the symbol denoting Thailand’s currency.

⁴¹ Pattana Kitiarsa, “An Ambiguous Intimacy: *Farang* as Siamese Occidentalism,” in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*, ed. Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 60.

⁴² Wise Kwai, “Terror for teenyboppers in Pee Mak Phra Khanong,” *Wise Kwai’s Thai Film Journal*, March 26, 2013, <http://thaifilmjournal.blogspot.com/2013/03/terror-for-teenyboppers-in-pee-mak-phra.html> (accessed February 23, 2017).

bridge generational ties. It is also important to note that as the film and its director reimagine the lore of Mae Nak, issues of possible alternative readings by audiences positioned differently in the world may and could emerge. For instance, the film was the first Thai movie to officially premiere in every Southeast Asian country, including Cambodia, Brunei, and Myanmar.⁴³ And though the film thematically centers itself on Thai sensibilities and folklore, Banjong Pisanthanaku notes that “since this film sticks mostly to the universal language of comedy, [he] found that more than 80 per cent of the gags get everyone laughing, no matter where they live.”⁴⁴ The comical approach to this classic ghostlore thus enables a transnational accessibility by way of humor and a common language facilitated by the film.

Pee Mak's cinematic release in different Asian countries allowed for the classic wronged-woman ghost trope to be read according to local traditions and beliefs. Phil Hoad writes that *Pee Mak* “draws on the vein of wronged-woman folklore that recurs throughout Asia ... and there seems to be a strong appetite for horror in that part of the world.”⁴⁵ Speaking to this common thematic trope, audiences from around the world may view Nak differently, homing in on the similarities between female figures and ghosts in their folkloric repertoire as well as how women are portrayed and handled on screen or in popular media.

However, I contend that the appeal of *Pee Mak*'s Nak lies in giving audiences a story of a woman who acts outside of the boundaries of propriety and who defiantly

⁴³ “‘Pee Mak’ leaps language barriers around the world,” *The Nation* (Thailand), November 25, 2013, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/life/Pee-Mak-leaps-language-barriers-around-the-world-30220361.html> (accessed May 1, 2018).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Phil Hoad, “Thai horror film-makers sink teeth into south-east Asian market,” *The Guardian*, April 16, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/apr/16/thai-horror-film-pee-mak> (accessed May 1, 2018).

reimagines her position in a patriarchal world. *The Nation's* journalist Pravit Rojanaphruk remarked that this adapted ghostlore makes a “new point,” speaking to the ways that the film’s nuanced and contemporized point-of-view opens the traditional and standard lore of Mae Nak to unsettle conservative state politics; views about the monarchy, LGBT rights and marriage, and evolving notions of Thainess.⁴⁶

In making a “new point,” *Pee Mak Phrakanong* offers a complex assessment of the sociopolitical, sexual, and class divisions in Thailand. For instance, beginning with the election of Thaksin Shinawatra, a telecom billionaire, as Prime Minister in 2001, the class dynamics in Thailand began to shift as power was decentered from Bangkok and the south to the nation’s north and northeast regions. This move was caused by Shinawatra instituting a range of economic policies in rural Thailand—such as microfinance schemes and fuel subsidies, making him quite popular and venerated by much of the nation’s rural poor.⁴⁷ However, those opposed to Thaksin and his party, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), argued that the Prime Minister’s tenure was marked with corruption, violence, nepotism, and the creation of an unprecedented fissure within the country.⁴⁸ This opposition in addition to mass protests in the streets led to Shinawatra being overthrown in 2006 by a military coup, producing a nearly decade-long power struggle that was oftentimes violent and bloody. Five years after the removal of Thaksin, Yingluck Shinawatra, the sister of Thaksin Shinawatra, won the national election, campaigning on the platform of eradicating poverty, corporate income tax reduction,

⁴⁶ Rojanaphruk, “An old ghost story.”

⁴⁷ Christopher Shay, “Explainer: In Thailand, why yellow and red clash,” *Al Jazeera*, January 24, 2012, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/24/explainer-in-thailandwhyyellowandredclash.html> (accessed May 3, 2017).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

and, most importantly, a call for national reconciliation. However, though Yingluck aimed to reunite the nation, she was accused of abusing power. The utter failure of her party's rice pledge scheme led to yet another Thai political crisis, leading to a coup d'état and her removal. This ousting was further followed by a military junta.⁴⁹

In the context of these tumultuous political shifts, *Pee Mak Phrakanong's* "new point" can be seen as an approach to cultural reconciliation, drawing upon nostalgic images and narratives of Thainess. Banjong Pisanthanaku's film can be articulated as promising one approach to thinking about compromise through an adapted view of the revered ghostlore. The film's comical and queer interpretation opens up alternative representations and the promise of a queer futurity as a way through Thailand's economic and sociopolitical morass. Pisanthanaku's film offers a bridge over the social chasms generated by these political upheavals, emphasizing the ghostlore's relevance in a highly modernized, globalized, and socially strained Thailand. In this sense, the reconciliatory work that *Pee Mak* shores up makes for a broader definition of Thainess, incorporating those seen to be excluded from earlier renditions of the tale. The 2013 film expands previous characterizations of both Mae Nak and Pee Mak in relation to the community and nation-state. Both are opened up to allow these characters to breathe and simply exist beyond the desires of the nation and those who would otherwise use

⁴⁹ Yingluck Shinawatra's bungled rice pledging scheme was a government sponsored program where Shinawatra pledged to buy farmers' rice at above market prices. The plan was simple enough: purchase rice from farmers at inflated prices; stockpile the crop (17-18 million tons) to reduce global supply, driving up global prices; and finally resell it at higher prices to salvage the initial investment. As the plan unfolded, June 2011 saw rice prices soar at record highs, leading Thailand to become the world's leading exporter as it controlled 30 percent of the market. However, India soon lifted its ban on rice exports as Viet Nam began lowering its prices on rice, leading global prices to plummet. These factors, on top of others, led much of the stockpiled crop to deteriorate and rot, leaving many farmers unpaid and in debt. In 2014, the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) found Yingluck partially responsible for the scheme's failure and, in June 2014, the military government finally put an end to the price-support program.

these archetypes to shore up a conservatively rigid view of Thainess. I am employing a queer analytic to read Pisanthanaku's film as a reconciliatory process that widens the possibilities of reading and seeing within the Nak lore. Using a queer analytic radically disassociates the legend of Nak from governing structures of Thainess, making room for sites of queer desire and sexuality beyond the heteronormative logics of the state and the community.

Even though Thailand has regularly been promoted as inclusive to all LGBT communities, recent research has in fact unmasked the contradictory nature of Thailand as the "gay capital of Asia" or a "pink" tourist destination.⁵⁰ For example, in an article written for the *Huffington Post*, journalist Dominique Mosbergen found that this purported queer-friendly image is only skin deep, complicated by reports from the United States Agency for International Development and the United Nations Development Programme citing mass discrimination and physical violence in the workplace and schools, in addition to limited access to health care for queer Thais.⁵¹ This inequality is further revealed in reports by the Khon Thai Foundation, a non-profit organization observing that among "Thais between 15 and 24 years old, 56 per cent think homosexuality is wrong."⁵² The apparent lack of LGBT rights in Thailand directly relates to the political crises following the Shinawatra family and cabinet as many

⁵⁰ Dominique Mosbergen, "Two-Faced Thailand: The Ugly Side Of 'Asia's Gay Capital,'" *The Huffington Post*, October 20, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/lgbt-thailand_us_5616472ee4b0dbb8000d30a6 (accessed April 24, 2017).

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Siraphob Thanthong-Knight, "The bitter truth behind Thailand's gay-friendly image," *The Nation (Thailand)*, January 23, 2015, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/news/opinion/aec/30252466> (accessed May 8, 2017).

activists continue to say that “they’re skeptical about the future of LGBT rights in the country” due to the nation’s volatile political environment.⁵³

Contextualized within the political unrest and the apparent homophobia within the country, Pisanthanaku’s *Pee Mak* can be located as one articulation of contemporary Thai popular culture that offers an alternative imagination out of the current sociocultural and political conditions within the Thai nation. Though I am not arguing that *Pee Mak* is a liberating solution to issues within the Kingdom, I contend that the film, its storyline, and the unique characterizations of its archetypal actors provides marginal communities a way to reimagine and refashion Thainess through a different, more capacious lens. The work that *Pee Mak* offers is thus is an expansion of the ways that the Mae Nak lore has been used in the past, unsettling heteronationalist discourses and gender violence while opening up possibilities for queer Thai worldmaking.

Drawing upon the nuanced and reinterpreted imaginings of the canonic characterizations, Pisanthanaku’s film reframes the Mae Nak legend to contest hegemonic understandings of race, gender, and Thai sexuality. I am interested in Pisanthanaku’s explicit characterizations of both Nak and Mak in his modernized film, particularly in the ways that gender and sexuality are mobilized or contested in regards to the dominant grand narrative of Thainess and nation. I contend that *Pee Mak*’s characters embody “queer” characteristics in the sense that is not just about rendering of homosexuality in a positive light, but, rather, “unraveling” heteronormativity and its adherence to biological constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality.⁵⁴ I trace the

⁵³ Mosbergen, “Two-Faced Thailand.”

⁵⁴ Martin Joseph Ponce, *Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Filipino Literature and Queer Reading* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 26.

potential ways that Pisanthanaku's Nak and Mak perform the promise of queer futurities beyond the nation-state's heteronormativity. I see the work that these characters summon as sites of possibility that undo the normative bonds and identities created by the state, policed and sanctioned by its abiding citizens and government. Pisanthanaku's film thus speaks to, against, and alongside the ways that previous films have utilized Nak and Mak's relationship and the lore to engage particular heteronationalisms in the face of socioeconomic instability and crises, drawing upon a queerness that Muñoz declares, is "visible on the horizon."⁵⁵ Thus, the potential force behind *Pee Mak* is its non-fatalistic view of the story's main characters, recreating sites of kinship, intimacy, and futurity for these individuals.

Pee Mak Phrakanong relies heavily on propping up Mak, the husband, as the film's central narrator, taking over Nak and the female's primacy in the lore. In this shift, it is useful to discuss the ways in which Mak's manhood has been constructed by previous cinematic renditions then deconstructed in the 2013 film. The opening scene of Mak is returning from his military service for the nation of Siam is a key to establishing the new point of view. The scene is set in the traditional, wooden Thai home of the lovers, framed by the intimate notes of a piano and the sounds of lowly crickets in the distance. The camera shoots from the rooftop at night, slowly descending from the straw gable and the palms trees that frame the scene and gradually into the living quarters of our two protagonists. The scene is highly intimate: we are shown Mak lying down in his wife's lap, holding tightly onto her arms as she affectionately looks down at him and caresses his head (figure 1.1).

⁵⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 11.



FIGURE 1.1 Mak is reunited with his wife, Nak.
Film still, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, 2013.

As the frame focuses on Nak, Mak breaks the silence by saying, “Did you know that I’m a bad soldier? When I was at war, I never thought about Siam. I never thought about my country.” Turning up to face his wife, Mak smiles and says in a very childish voice, “I only thought about you. This soldier should be executed by a firing squad.” To this sentiment, Nak smiles and teasingly agrees with him as she playfully slaps him on the shoulder.

This intimate scene decenters the masculine pressures shouldered by Mak’s character, emphasizing instead an alternative approach to manhood. Here, we are shown a very different side of the legendary character. In past interpretations, Mak was portrayed as headstrong and virile; the epitome of Siamese martial masculinity. His masculinity is scripted by the ways in which he bears the burden of nationalist interests and desires, leaving his wife behind twice: once for war and second for the monastic order, underscored in the lore’s ending. As such, past popularized interpretations Mak represented a hegemonic form of Siamese masculinity that exalts a culturally idealized

form of Thainess, “encouraged in an emphasis of unity, militarism and loyalty to the dynastic state” across time.⁵⁶ For instance, in an early 1959 version, *Mae Nak Phrakanong* (dir. Rangsee Tassanapayak), Mak is shown as patriotic and responsibly loyal to his country. As Atit Pongpanit notes, “When the state needs him to serve in the army, despite him possessing concerns as to his pregnant wife, [Mak] nonetheless leaves Nak, explaining to her that it his responsibility to serve the country”.⁵⁷ Mak’s manhood and his notions of Thainess are informed by his allegiances to the nation-state, choosing to perform a brand of Thainess that mobilizes his masculinity in relation to its sovereignty and the protection of its borders. Similarly, Nimibutr’s *Nang Nak* physically characterizes Mak throughout the film as dark in complexion, with a chiseled and highly masculinized physique. Nimibutr’s ending shows Mak in saffron robes as he enters the monkhood, forgoing bodily and worldly desires after his wife’s spirit is laid to rest. Ending this politically charged translation of the Nak lore in this way gestures to the director’s view of Mak’s masculinity as conflated with Buddhism and “the next stage of [nationalized] manhood”.⁵⁸ In contrast, Pisanthanaku’s Mak offers a version of our hero that is drastically different.

In Pisanthanaku’s *Pee Mak*, Mak is physically trim yet somewhat effeminate. While he serves in the Siamese military, Mario Maurer’s Mak is childish, emotional, cowardly, coquettish, and, for the most part, characterized as clueless and dimwitted. The character’s flamboyance and foolishness make him approachable and endearing as a character who constantly fawns for his wife’s affections, not fully comprehending

⁵⁶ Atit Pongpanit, “‘Queering’ Thai Masculinities and Sexualities in *Phi Mak Phra Khanong*,” *Journal of Social Sciences*, Naresuan University: JSSNU 12, no. 1 (2016): 102-123, 106.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁸ Ingawanij, “Nang Nak,” 185.

his lover's spectral state. In contrast to previous filmic depictions of Mak, Pisanthanaku's titular character is notably campy. Throughout the film, his perceptions of the world, of Nak, and his duties to the nation-state, are purely naïve. Camp, according to Susan Sontag, relies heavily on the unintentional, on naiveté, and innocence.⁵⁹ The humor of Maurer's portrayal of Mak relies on his innocence and the power of this camp lies in how humor makes palatable his refusal to prescribe to heteronationalist and normative visions of Mak's character and its genealogy. Such a characterization drifts far from previous actors' interpretations of the Mak character which, in turn, emboldens Pisanthanaku's Mak to be reimagined beyond hegemonic masculine scripts for Thai manhood. In this sense, Maurer's Mak invokes the impossible through his innocence and his apparent refusal; an act that Barbara Mennel refers to as "the formation of a queer aesthetic that was associated with subtexts, subversion and subcultures."⁶⁰ Mak in *Pee Mak Phrakanong* is a refusal that reinterprets the ways that Thainess interlocks with heteromale performance.

Other queer masculinities in Pisanthanaku's film can also be seen through the introduction of Mak's friends—four characters who had never once appeared in the story or any previous adaptation, marking a highly queer turn in a legend that has uniformly exploited the heterosexual bond between Mak and Nak. When Ter, Puak, Shin and Aey are first presented they, with Mak, are shown on the battlefield, bleeding out while humorously discussing each other's hairstyles in a trench.

⁵⁹ Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 282-283.

⁶⁰ Barbara Mennel, *Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires and Gay Cowboys* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 26.



FIGURE 1.2 Puak asking Shin about his “ugly topknot hairdo.”
Film still, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, 2013.



FIGURE 1.3 Shin and his Siamese topknot bun, or “muan.”
Film still, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, 2013.

Puak, played by Pongsatorn Jongwilas, turns to Shin and says, “Since we’re all going to die anyways, can I ask you something? What’s with the hair” (figure 1.2)? Shin, played by Wiwat Kongrasri, is stylized with a traditional Siamese topknot bun (sometimes referred to as a “Muan” or “Mud Chook”) that is encircled by a ring of jasmine flowers and was traditionally worn by preadolescent children to deter bad spirits and ill health

(figure 1.3). He replies that when he was young, there was a bubonic plague outbreak that almost killed him. Hoping to save her child, Shin's mother swore to the Buddha and celestial beings that if Shin survived, he would keep the topknot for the rest of his life, even into adulthood. Puak then interjects by telling his friend that he would rather die than have such an "ugly topknot hairdo. It looks like a dog's ankle." Visibly insulted, Shin counters by questioning Puak's hairdo which is done in the "Song Mahad-Thai"—a style stemming from the Ayutthaya period that resembles the contemporary undercut in which the sides are clipped very short while the hair on top remains long. Puak simply replies to Shin, "I'm a trendsetter."

This discussion of hair is significant as scholars (Rongmuang, et al., 2011) have noted that hair, particularly for Thai women, is an important marker of physical appearance and identity, noting especially that long black hair was most "desirable."⁶¹ Historically, Siamese hairstyles represented ideals found in Buddhism, monarchical mandates. Short hair was important during the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767): it was easy to maintain and allowed both men and women to serve in the Siamese military, the androgynous look tactically aiding in fooling enemy forces into thinking that more men were fighting in the name of Siam.⁶² The fact that Puak insists that his hairstyle is trendy erases histories of militarism and nationhood structured upon short hair and its symbolism. Instead, he draws upon the aesthetics of glamour, rejecting identification (even as he is one) with Siamese masculine soldiering. Puak's insistence that his haircut reflects his own agency and his relationship to society gestures to an intimacy

⁶¹ Daravan Rongmuang et al., "Salience of physical appearance characteristics among young women in Thailand," *Body Image* 8, no. 4 (2011): 396-403, 401.

⁶² Bonnie Davis, *Postcards of old Siam* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1987), 52.

that Puak holds onto which detaches the Siamese male body and its presentation away from national use, enforcing intimate and private desires over war, community, and duty.

Following Puak and Shin's brief and brotherly quarrel, the comrades talk about last rites until Mak declares that "No matter what I'll make it back to see my wife and baby!" He asserts, "I'm not allowing myself to die here for sure," forcefully declaring to his friends that all of them will make it out alive. The scene then turns to a heavily injured Mak carrying each of his friends across the battlefield as they are shot at. The scene is dramatized with explosions depicting a Siamese manhood that is predicated upon service to the nation and martial fraternity.⁶³ In this moment the director juxtaposes the battlefield scene of Mak and his comrades with reflections of an already-dead Nak waiting for her husband on a dock by the riverbank (figures 1.4 and 1.5). The latter image of Nak on the pier is significant as it is an iconic rendering of how Thais have viewed Mae Nak and the loyalty she holds, even when dead, to her husband. Nak, after her death, continues to wait nightly for her husband's return by the riverbank. In this version, we also see Mak's devotion to his wife, risking death to return to her.

⁶³ Pongpanit, "'Queering' Thai Masculinities," 106.



FIGURE 1.4 Mak carrying his friends across the battlefield.
Film still, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, 2013.



FIGURE 1.5 Mae Nak's solitary, iconic walk at the riverbank.
Film still, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, 2013.

The fact that Pisanthanaku creates a cinematic montage of the characters by fading the scenes together juxtaposes the various, but prominent, figures in Mak's life; they intimately exchange and share roles, traits, and forms of yearning that were once exclusively dedicated to the ghost in past iterations. Such a blending of images

reframes the allegiances and erotic encounters shared between Nak and Mak as well as the codes of gender performance between all the characters.

The elements of queerness written onto these highly emotional scenes queer the Siamese nation and its paternal interests by elevating marginalized and non-conforming sexualities, further creating alternative kinships and bonds that are distanced from the governmentality of the Siamese state. By contrasting the intimate images of Mak and his comrades with the more widely recognizable image of Nak's ghost at the riverbank, Pisanthanaku engages an "approach for telling a different story about the contemporary politics of nation-building and race under globalization, along with its accompanying material and psychic processes of social belonging and exclusion."⁶⁴ By pairing these two scenes together, *Pee Mak* refuses to subsume gender and sexuality within the dominant and overdetermined discourses of national identity, racial belonging, citizenship and dutiful patriotism. As the main characters in Pisanthanaku's film are separated from one another due to war and further displaced by mortality, the scenes reimagine differing kinships and shared intimacies disarticulated from nation-state politics, war, and national culture. In this moment, Pisanthanaku merges seemingly dissonant desires—Mak saving his friends and wanting to return home, as well as Nak, as a phantom, wanting to love, be loved, and remain with her husband—to collectively reform kinships, affiliations, and desires outside of the boundaries of territorial and national sovereignty and oppressive social structures. The blending of the two scenes speaks to the ways that intimacy is crucial and inseparable from the violence of the state, in particular how Thai bodies and subjectivities have been continuously used to

⁶⁴ David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kingship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 14.

develop the nation as well as maintain its sovereign status. Such intimate moments draw our attentions to the ways that the nation has violently displaced its own citizens in its name. From the militarization of the Thai male body to the ways Nak exemplifies the patient and “good wife,” these scenes ultimately separate the characters from their adherences and loyalties to nationalist ideologies, unearthing the sometimes brutal nature of citizenship and belonging. Furthermore, the intimacy shown by intercutting both scenes together drives home how “the nation” is reframed through the sacrifice of personal desire. By interlacing the image of Nak patiently waiting at the dock for her husband alongside Mak fleeing the war, Pisanthanaku’s film reclaims the desires of the individuals in tension with the ostensible stoic nature of Thai loyalty to the nation.

These queer, diasporic and dissonant desires can be further discussed by examining two specific themes in this juxtaposition: homosociality and the spectrally queer nature of Nak’s ghostly diasporic form. In his article on homosocial relationships in modern Thai political culture, Craig Reynolds argues that homosociality can be applied to comprehend “male-only social settings in Thailand”—such as the army, the police force, boxing camps, boarding schools, prisons, monasteries, and others.⁶⁵ Mak and his friends, as they are all trying to survive the battlefield and make it home, enact an intimacy that exceeds the national interests of soldierly discipline and sacrifice in the name of Siam. The homosocial intimacy shown here can be articulated as “a way of talking and thinking about male friendships that helps produce specific ways of feeling and experiencing homosocial intimacy and masculinity” that remaps Siamese

⁶⁵ Craig Reynolds, “Homosociality in modern Thai political culture,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2014): 258–277, 274.

masculinity.⁶⁶ The images of the close bonds between Mak and company that Pisanthanaku shows us call into question heteromascularity and martial homosocialism of the Siamese nation and its military. In other words, the fact that Mak and his friends do not stay and fight like “good soldiers” divorces these men from state politics and the call for Siamese manhood to perform its dutiful service to the nation-state. The men protect each other by helping one another escape, drawing our attention to the brutality of war and the characters’ abandonment of the state and its enforcement of manhood through service.

Secondly, Nak’s spectral presence is positioned as both queer and diasporic. Her phantom form is constantly in opposition to her relatability to the nation-state, at odds with traditional Thai femininity, reproductive domesticity, and the community that she and her husband are a part of. Since she is dead, the ghost is situated at a distance, embodying a movement and placement that refers to her dislocation and exile from the human realm. Her ghostly otherness thus describes the conditions of belonging within the Thai state, defining the circumstances that construct Siamese and Thai citizenship and, in the case of Nak, its direct opposite. Mae Nak’s displacement from society and the living highlight “the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential” that queerness poses to nationalist ideologies.⁶⁷ Nak’s ghostly station in life imparts both a refusal and a recovery that reimagines her Siamese identity, womanhood, and intimacy, providing an alternative approach to telling the story of Mae Nak as it relates to the politics of

⁶⁶ Ron Becker, “Becoming Bromosexual: Straight Men, Gay Men, and Male Bonding on U.S. TV,” in *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television*, ed. Michael DeAngelis (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 235.

⁶⁷ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 10-11.

nation-building. Pisanthanaku's Mae Nak consequently reframes what it means for the ghost to be excluded, but, more importantly, to also belong.

Positioning the images of Mak carrying his badly injured friends across the battlefield in relation to Nak's archetypal walk across the dock rewrites the intimacy shared between Mak and Nak; an intimacy that evolves to include all the characters as this highly dramatized moment. The image of Nak at the riverbank is quite famous as it is constantly restaged in many to all the iterations of the Mae Nak lore. The power behind this depiction rests upon a dead Nak standing at the dock alone with her child as they wait for Mak to return from war. The act affirms nationally prized, heteronormative, and bureaucratic demands of Thai womanhood, affirming "good women" who are both chaste and faithful to their partners.⁶⁸ The continually produced image of Nak waiting at the shoreline invokes a gendered nationalist rhetoric premised on the visible labor and utility of the Thai female body. Noting the ways that women were and continue to be utilized by state politics and imperial desires, Anne McClintock notes that "Female figures were planted like fetishes at the ambiguous points of contact, at the borders and orifices of the contest zone."⁶⁹ Though McClintock's argument is in reference to imperial tactics to fetishize and feminize spaces in order make claims about territorial boundaries, her observation is useful in thinking about the importance of Nak's iconic shoreline image. Such a repetition enforces how the boundaries of Siam are held at the expense and labor of Mae Nak's dead and gendered body: she is a phantom presence that is continuously waiting to be reunited with her husband, configured as

⁶⁸ Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok*, 77.

⁶⁹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 24.

representative of the state and government. Her body and spirit are thus called upon over and over again to fulfill heteronationalist interests and desires, deployed through the cherished folklore as it affirms and polices of gender roles in Thai consciousness. However, by realigning Nak's scene with that of Mak trying to return to her with his comrades, Pisanthanaku rebuilds a politicized kinship that disrupts Nak's solitary ghost walk. Mae Nak is not isolated to uphold national politics or sustain anachronistic gender roles; she, along with her husband and the soldiers, affirm an alternative kinship that disrupts a fetishization of Siamese and Thai female loyalty to the nation-state.

Repositioning these characters together, especially with Mak and his comrades against such an iconic moment within the Nak ghostlore, registers an affective intervention which acts as an "appropriation of memory's affective valences ultimately work[ing] to expand the signifying capacities of language and to endow forgotten creatures and things with new historical significance and meaning."⁷⁰ Explained differently, Pisanthanaku's scene constructs a kinship that pivots on the refusal to let go, bonded by the affective valences that redefine identity along a different system of value.⁷¹ Mak and his friends refuse to die as "good soldiers" for the nation and abandon their soldierly duty, instead pledging allegiance to each other's survival. Mak's declaration that he refuses to be separated from his wife and Nak's fidelity to the living across the border of death, practices a refusal against Siam and Buddhism to transcend into the spirit realm. Put together, these moments ultimately remap the politics of kinship in modern-day Thai consciousness.

⁷⁰ Eng, *The Feeling of Kingship*, 172.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

Like Mario Maurer's Mak, Davika Horne's Nak departs from past interpretations of the character. Nak's ghostly presence is more muted within the movie, challenging a lore that has rested on Nak's spectral figure by recoding the significance of her ghostly presence. By having Mae Nak's perspective replaced with her husband's, the film opens the possibility having the hopes and desires of the nation-state not solely resting on the ghost wife, her haunting, and forced exorcism. This muting of sorts re-characterizes past articulations of Nak's dead body and spirit by removing her human self from the patriarchal and nationalized uses of her image as "the object of loss and the object that generates nostalgic desire."⁷² There is thus a womanist value to *Pee Mak's* adaptation of Nak, but one which acknowledges the importance of women and women's desires the trivialized and dangerous labor that Thai women perform in the service of nationalism, development, and citizenship.

Past interpretations of Mae Nak's dead figure posit female death as the condition to free men and audience members from worldly possessions and illusions, instilling one of Buddhism's tenets of ephemerality and impermanence. Nak's body and, generally, Thai womanhood, are seen as ephemerally fleeting, possible obstacles to enlightenment, and only useful insofar as they can serve Siamese patriarchy and the state. For example, Penny Van Esterik argued that Thai female bodies are historically regulated to maintaining their beauty regimens; enforced more viciously in the sexual and gendered socialization of Thai sex workers.⁷³ Moreover, the various scripts and social limitations placed on female identities, roles, and relationships in Thailand are

⁷² Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 71.

⁷³ Penny Van Esterik, "Repositioning Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Thai Studies," in *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 281.

predicated upon “Thai women’s silence [that inhibits] their sexual needs and preferences.”⁷⁴ Past filmic iterations have reinforced these understandings of Thai womanhood through Mae Nak’s portrayal. She has been portrayed as a violent ghost, doing anything that she can do to maintain the fantasy she’s created to illegitimately hold on to her husband: she kills anyone who attempts to come between her and her family. The fact that Nak is traditionally exorcised emphasizes that Thai womanhood, in any form, must ultimately be contained and controlled for social order to be restored. Buddhism’s repeated quelling of Nak’s disorderly, violent phantom speaks to the ways that Nak’s womanhood is marked as dangerous, needing to be forcefully banished to uphold the balance of the Thai nation and its institutions of power.

By forcefully expelling Nak back into the afterworld, Nak’s body and her subjectivity are erased from the landscape of the community within the ghostlore. Her absence forms the conditions to which the nation-state and the order of the village are ultimately restored. This positioning gestures to how Thai women have relegated to specific spaces within the domestic and international representation and construction of the Thai Kingdom. Popular media has produced static images of Thai women limited to the home, the marketplace, or even sexual work. These representations are premised on the ways that Thailand and Thainess have been constructed in relation to global economies and in relation to discourses of modernity and cosmopolitanism. Contemporary feminist scholars (Mills 1999, Wilson 2004) have emphasized and accounted for the ways that rapid development in Thailand profoundly altered the public

⁷⁴ Nerida M. Cook and Peter A. Jackson, “Introduction: Desiring Constructs: Transforming Sex/Gender Orders in Twentieth-Century Thailand,” in *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 17.

and private lives of Thais, reshaping spaces of identification and intimacy in the shadow of globalization. In Thailand, Thai women are a gendered cultural marker of national economic transformation: Thai women's labor is prominently figured within cultural discourses of production, representation, as well as participation in Thai and global modernity.⁷⁵ These figurations have power: Mary Beth Mills has stated that "discourses of modernity and gender identity have important hegemonic effects; that is, they work to harness the energies of a subordinate social group (i.e., migrant workers) to act in ways that help to reproduce existing structures of power."⁷⁶ While Thai women have been relegated to backdrop of the story of Thai development they have always been its vanguard.

Dead, but Not Gone: The Queer Futurities of *Pee Mak* (2013)

Pisanthanaku's insistence that Nak remains with Mak normalizes her presence as she becomes a very visible part of the community, showing a side of her humanity that has typically been exploited as horror—the refusal of the feminine to dutifully die. Instead of this specter of horror that is only resolvable through death or banishment (and thus feminine sacrifice), Pisanthanaku's Nak emphasizes a queer substitute to Thai womanhood and embodiment.⁷⁷ In emphasizing *Pee Mak's* insistence Mae Nak as a part of the community the director posits a radical departure—expelling instead the rigid heterosexualities of the nation in favor of a queer futurity and alternative modes of kinship.

⁷⁵ Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force*, 167.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁷ Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 73.

One of the defining moments in the ghostlore of Mae Nak Phrakanong and iterated in the many cinematic versions that have been made—especially Nimibutr’s *Nang Nak* and Duffield’s *The Ghost of Mae Nak*—is the elegiac ending where Nak atones for her crimes and is exorcised into the afterworld by the powers of Buddhism and the monk(s) that maintain the balance between the living and the dead. Soon Ng says that

Mae Nak’s tale is not one of good and evil but of Buddhism’s promotion of order: within the religion’s cosmogony every being has a place but must subscribe to the parameters of its allotted identity. Accordingly, a ghost and a human cannot assume a relationship and live as a married couple because this clearly upsets the *rightness*, or balance, of this order. In the story, Mae Nak is ‘defeated’ in the end for her transgression of cosmological boundaries and for deception; this, in turn, reifies *the supremacy of Buddhism and, less directly, of patriarchy*.⁷⁸

Nak’s story characteristically ends with her being reprimanded by the social and cosmic order of Theravada Buddhism—a sect of Buddhism that is followed by over ninety percent of the Thai population.⁷⁹ The story culminates with Nak being separated from Mak as Buddhist monks attempt to satisfy her ghostly spirit, exorcising her to the next life. In Nimibutr’s *Nak*, this scene is dominated by the monk Somdej Phra Buddhajarn (Toe), a high-ranking monk during the reign of Rama IV (1851-68). It is important to note that the introduction of Toe within *Nang Nak* would be the first time that the ghost legend referenced an elite and royally sponsored form of Buddhism. Such an introduction, according to Fuhrmann, enables “the articulation of elite, royally sponsored Buddhism with vernacular, popular Buddhist strains,” positioning Nak’s traditional femininity as specifically historic but also underwritten by patriarchal Buddhism’s

⁷⁸ Soon Ng, “Between subjugation and subversion,” 172. (italicized emphasis mine).

⁷⁹ Jiemen Bao, “Merit-Making Capitalism: Re-territorializing Thai Buddhism in Silicon Valley, California,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005): 115-142.

“nationally unifying role.”⁸⁰ Nak’s ghostly desire to remain in the realm of the flesh with her husband thus depicts undisciplined Thai female sexuality as dangerous and potentially lethal. In this case, the role of state-sponsored, patriarchal Buddhism is to enforce the codes between the living and the dead, domesticating Nak’s uncontrollable spectral sexuality, and suggesting that the nation’s paternalism triumphs over Nak’s desires. She is, in this moment, “the ideal of sacrificial femininity” upon which the coherence and authority of Thai Buddhist nationhood relies.⁸¹

Pisanthanaku’s ending in *Pee Mak* offers an alternative that questions the paternalism depicted in previous films as well as the fragility of heteronormative time as represented by the apparent “rightness, or balance” of Buddhism’s patriarchal boundaries. The final scene in *Pee Mak* climaxes with a dead Nak confronting Mak and his friends at Wat Mahabut temple (figure 1.6).⁸² At first, Mak and his comrades seek shelter in the sanctified space, asking for help from a local monk who arms the group with holy rice and water and who creates an enchanted circle to protect all of them from Nak’s angered spirit. When the men enter the monk’s circle of holy thread, Nak appears in her spectral and rotting form, attempting to reach out to her lover as his friends and the monk mock Nak and her “unnatural” state. As Nak inches closer to the group, Mak’s friends, holding back a screaming Mak, encourage the monk to throw holy water at the ghost. Mak passionately yells out, “Don’t hurt my wife!” (figure 1.7).

⁸⁰ Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 56.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸² Wat Mahabut temple is located in Bangkok, Thailand and is often said to be the site where Mae Nak’s spirit was formally exorcised and laid to rest. Today, the temple is the home of a popular shrine that is dedicated to the legacy and cultural memory of Mae Nak Phrakanong. The shrine lies adjacent to the main temple and was built amidst the trunk of a Bo tree. Inside the shrine is a statue of Mae Nak and her infant son as the building centerpiece. Many women and men come to the revered place to make offerings, requesting for help in terms of childbirth or for devotees seeking help from military conscription.



FIGURE 1.6 Mae Nak's ghost confronts Mak and his friends at Wat Mahabut.
Film still, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, 2013.



FIGURE 1.7 Mak pleads to his friends and the monk not to hurt his wife.
Film still, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, 2013.

Initially, the religious devices used to keep Nak at bay are successful. However, in a panic, exacerbated by Mak's struggle to get back to his wife, the rice and water are dropped, and the monk is accidentally kicked out of the enchanted ring, fleeing the temple by jumping out the window in fear. Mak and his friends are left to fend for themselves with Nak's ghostly body standing between them and the exit.

Pisanthanaku's depiction of the monk as he flees the temple is a radically critical perspective of Buddhism's authority and, in particular, its historic relationship to Mae Nak Phrakanong (and women like her). Fuhrmann writes that "we are supposed to attach to the truth of Buddhist principles and to identify with the community that functions so beautifully under these principles."⁸³ Pisanthanaku's comedic version of the exorcism scene positions the monkhood as the butt of the joke, and divests power from Buddhism's state-sanctioned, masculinist order. Buddhism is returned back to the people, divorcing the religion and order from its ability to discipline and define the social order. Thai feminists have argued that commercialized forms of Buddhism provide a framework for Thai women's subordination: "Buddhists believe that birth as a woman indicates bad *karma* or demerit (*baap*) from past lives."⁸⁴ I read this confrontation that Pisanthanaku stages between the monk and Nak, ending with the monk's undignified escape, as a critique of the ways that Thai women are positioned by a religious and nationalist patriarchy. For Pisanthanaku's Nak to challenge the monk and come out as the victor due to the monk's fear of ghosts offers us a way to rethink gender and order as it relates to Buddhism, troubling the ways that women's sacrifice underpins the religion's teachings about social order and value. In this sense, the ability for Nak's spirit to remain within the grounds of the temple and survive the monk's rituals begs us to think about how gendered roles might be reconceptualized within or even apart from modern constructions of Buddhism.

The end of the sequence closes with Mak's friends creating distance between them, with Nak's ghost and her lover in the center of the frame. Mak is framed with a

⁸³ Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 72.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 67. (italicized emphasis in original).

huge statue of Buddha hovering over him as a fire burns brightly from the candles that fell during the earlier commotion. As Mak begins to cry, Mae Nak elongates her arm, reaching out her hand to her husband to console him and to question the fear that he has towards his once-living lover. The image of Nak stretching out her arm is not solely unique to Pisanthanaku's film, but is a reoccurring element in many of the adaptations. In other iterations, Nak lengthens her arm from inside their home to retrieve a kaffir lime that she drops while making dinner revealing Nak's true nature to her husband.

However, Pisanthanaku's Nak spreads her arm in an intimate act of embracing her husband as to relieve his grief. To a soundtrack played in a minor key, Nak wipes the tears from Mak's eyes. She withdraws her hand in defeat, asking her husband in a quivering voice, "Are you that scared of me? I'm sorry. If I ever did hurt you, I don't think that I would be able to live with myself. Don't cry, my love. You won't be handsome." As longing glances are exchanged between the two, Nak continues by saying, "I'm sorry ... for lying to you all this time. I just wanted to be with you as long as I could. Even if it is just for one more day. ... I'm sorry that you can't die before me like you promised." She ends saying, "Please promise me that when I'm gone, you'll carry on." The camera switches its frames between the lovers when our titular protagonist says, "Nak, you don't have to go anywhere. You said that you lied to me. You didn't lie to me at all." A confused and tearful Nak looks up to her husband when he declares to everyone, "Even though I am a fool, I'm not so stupid that I wouldn't know that my own wife was dead" (figure 1.8). The announcement triggers shock amongst Mak's comrades; even Nak looks up in disbelief of what her husband discloses (figure 1.9).

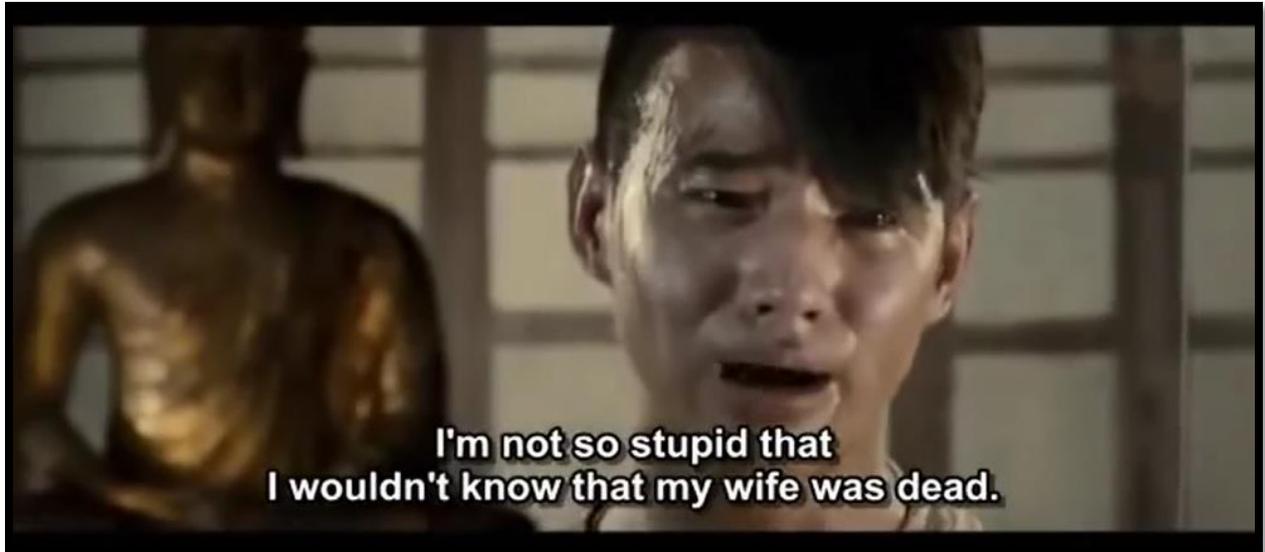


FIGURE 1.8 Mak reveals to everyone that he knew his wife was already dead.

Film still, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, 2013.



FIGURE 1.9 Nak shocked by her husband's revelation.

Film still, *Pee Mak Phrakanong*, 2013.

The way Nak's hand retreats in defeat and Mak's knowledge of his wife's demise throughout much of the film are new twists in Pisanthanaku's interpretation of the legendary ghostlore. As the scene goes on, audience members are shown moments when Mak initially discovers the fact that his wife is dead. After discovering that Nak is a ghost, Mak, in an act of love and defiance, takes off his protective Buddhist amulet, a

spiritual relic that is believed to ward off ghosts and bad spirits, and throws it into the river, allowing him to protect his dead wife from the amulet's divine powers. Mak goes on to tell his wife that "Even if all the villagers avoid me, no one wants to visit or be my friend, or even if I have to eat dried leaves every day, I would still want to be with you." To the tearful protests of Nak, she begins to question whether or not this union is even possible or logical as he is alive and she is dead. However, her husband reminds her that they have already been living this way since his return from war and that there is nothing unnatural about their love or yearning to be together. Nak inquires, "But aren't you afraid of ghosts?" Mak replies, "You know that I'm scared of ghosts, but I'm scared more of living without you." The conversation concludes with Mak walking to his wife, kissing and affirming to her his love for her.

As the initial credits begin to roll, Pisanthanaku concludes his film with a supplementary scene that narrates the exact moment when Mak first sees Nak in the village marketplace. As a contemporary Thai pop song plays in the background with poetically pointed lyrics, the audience bears witness to the origins of our protagonists' love story, situating their admiration and affection for one another as inevitable and timeless, even beyond death.

Pee Mak Phra Kanong is a celebration of a complex love between two main characters who defy the constraints that once held them back from each other. In his article, "'Queering' Thai masculinities and Sexualities in *Phi Mak Phra Kanong*," Atit Pongpanit says that the ending of *Pee Mak* was seen as "controversial" and that "[some] might say that it is cliché of *Phi Mak* to uses [sic] love to overcome this

conflict.”⁸⁵ Though the love that is celebrated and portrayed in the 2013 film may be interpreted as banal or commonplace, I question the ways Pongpanit dismisses love as predictable, or even a non-politicized deus ex machina. Perhaps what makes the ending of Pisanthanaku’s film so “controversial” is the fact that his Mak and Nak do not live up to the standards of heteronormativity, a gendered category informed and policed by the state. The fact that Nak is able to exist in the mortal realm with Mak, while creating a relationship that opposes normative standards of reproductive domesticity, draws my attention to the way that Nak’s death, in all previous adaptations, is deemed necessary for balance to be restored to the community—a community that stands in for the Siamese and Thai Kingdom. In this sense, Pisanthanaku’s adaptation makes his audiences aware of the necropolitical nature of the story of Mae Nak PhraKANONG in all its manifestations. Achille Mbembé contends that “To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment of power.”⁸⁶ In other words, for a nation to enact, maintain, and protect its sovereign status as well as its (hetero)national interests, the nation must also have the will and capacity to kill or to let die. In Thailand, necropolitics are at play in how notions of national sacrifice are gendered feminine, which encompass not only Thailand but also how its people have been imagined across the globe. As Thailand draws upon gendered labor to partake in development and industrialization at the global level, Thai women and their “service” make up much of the labor force that helps industrialize the country articulated through

⁸⁵ Ibid., 104 and 119.

⁸⁶ Achille Mbembé, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40, 12.

the sexual economies which shovels billions of dollars through the “millions of individual encounters” that happen yearly.⁸⁷

I argue that the work that *Pee Mak* imparts queers the necropolitical impulses of the Thai state and the sacrificial demands it makes of its women. By staying together, Pisanthanaku’s Mak and Nak radically reconfigure their marriage, politicizing their love above and beyond state politics. The characters embrace a sense of sociopolitical disarray that rejects the model of national and political unity envisioned through Nak’s historic silencing and exorcism. Her staying thus invokes a continued haunting that is layered, complex, and highly intricate, recasting her role as a Thai woman—dead or alive—as central to a new future. *Pee Mak* allowing Nak to stay with her husband in the mortal realm is monumental, because it repositions Thai womanhood and participation in society. Nak, through her ghostly and unruly figure, opens a queer futurity with her husband that recognizes the role and labor of Thai women in building radical communities. Love, in this sense, is a political act against necropolitical designs of the state.

Pee Mak’s interpretation of the celebrated lore is premised on the love between the two main characters. Having the ghost remain in the mortal realm, unexorcised, clearly outside the authority of Buddhist patriarchy, promotes a happy ending that drastically departs from previous adaptations, and insists on the viability of the love between this “unnatural” couple. This love is radical, demanding a recognition of humanity and kinship across social difference. “Radical love,” according to Patrick S. Cheng, “is a love so extreme that it dissolves our existing boundaries”, including those

⁸⁷ Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson, “In the Night Market: Tourism, Sex, and Commerce in Contemporary Thailand,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 1/2 (1999): 32-46, 36.

related to gender and sexuality.⁸⁸ Love's radical potential breaks the limitations of religious and social governance, the rules of the heteronormative state, and even strictures on life and death. The attachment between Mak and Nak cannot be simplified as just "cliché" or "controversial" as it comprises a defiant act against state, society, and nature.⁸⁹

As a social and political project, love's radical potential is in its queerness, bringing about utopic futurities that would have otherwise been denounced by heteronationalist politics. Pisanthanaku's adaptation of the ghostlore so Nak can stay in the physical world with her husband offers his audience a way to rethink citizenship and belonging within a heteropatriarchal Thailand. Mak's insistence that Nak remains with him queers the normative logics of heterosexuality and its insistence on reproducing and upholding family, community, and nation. Mak and Nak, as a queer pairing, address reclamation and reparation of the deep social divisions in Thailand, and particularly how othered groups, such as queer Thai men and women, are ostracized as an internal "Other" while paying the steepest price for their vulnerability. *Pee Mak* offers its audience a radical idea of love that emphasizes the ways in which citizens and individuals have the right to love and to be loved no matter their difference.

As the concluding flashback image of Mak and Nak first meeting in marketplace ends, a set of mid-credit scenes begin, gesturing to the kind of livable future that the couple embarks upon—even if he is alive and she remains dead. Following the clip in the marketplace, Pisanthanaku follows with what life in Phrakanong looks like as Nak is

⁸⁸ Rev. Patrick S. Cheng, "Radical Love: Why Christianity Is a Queer Religion," *The Huffington Post*, December 6, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-patrick-s-cheng-phd/radical-love-why-christia_b_841547.html (accessed May 1, 2018). (italicized emphasis in original).

⁸⁹ Pongpanit, "'Queering' Thai Masculinities," 104.

once again fully enmeshed into the community. One scene shows Nak hanging upside down from the ceiling of Wat Mahabut, patching up a hole in the roof. Standing on the ground, Mak and the Buddhist monk stare at Nak as Mak tells the monk that if there are any repairs needed to be done the couple can take care of them with ease. Mak then joyfully cheers on his wife by saying, "Fight on! Fight on, my love! Mind your hands of the hammer!" while the monk looks perplexed and horrified. In another scene, the villagers of Phrakanong, holding anti-ghost and anti-Nak signs, have banded together as a mob to oust Nak out of the town, chanting that "Mak has gone too far now!" The leader of the group then yells out for volunteers and, in the distance, an elongated hand rises from the back of the crowd. In a slow and spine-chilling voice, Nak says, "I would like to come too," scaring the villagers and dispersing the mob immediately. The end scene is of the couple and Mak's friends laughing together as the movie fades into black. Ultimately, Pisanthanaku's supplementary footage further queers the story of Mae Nak by narrating that the woman is *dead but not gone*, upsetting the hegemonic balance enforced by Buddhist cosmology. Further, her presence is reinforced through her labor and her humorous insistence on being counted among the community (i.e., the mob), both of which are made visible as central to life modern state. Such a collective reimagining centers Nak's spirit as a queer, utopic figure in the community.

Pisanthanaku's final scenes are important as they are more than just fulfillments of a cinematic happy ending; they are also about the promise of reconfiguring Mak and Nak's relationship beyond the state's necessity to normalize state-sanctioned heterosexuality and reproductive domesticity. In other words, the act of Mak and Nak continuing their love, even as Nak is a ghost, emboldens the romance as politicized act

against the strictures of the Thai nation-state and patriarchal Buddhism. Pisanthanaku's ending allows for the politics of possibility (what can be imagined or conceived beyond the now) that queers paternalistic and state visions of ideal heteronormativity, femininity, and its affective bonds. To make sense of the political power shown in Pisanthanaku's characterization of Nak and Mak's enduring relationship, I draw upon the work of queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz and his argument for queer utopias, stating that "Queerness's form is utopian. Ultimately, we must insist on a queer futurity because the present is so poisonous and insolvent. A resource that cannot be discounted to know the future is indeed the no-longer-conscious, that thing or place that may be extinguished but not yet discharged in its utopian potentiality."⁹⁰ Building on Muñoz, I argue that Pisanthanaku's characterization of Mak and Nak's love as queer understands its intimate power to decenter the nation power to define family and nation. The ways that the couple comes to terms with their contrasting states of being allows us to rethink the state-sanctioned urgency of having Nak's spirit expelled from the mortal realm. Allowing for the ghost to remain with her living husband rethinks what constitutes normalized familial or romantic bonds, promoting a queer politics of possibility beyond an investment of separation and state-affirmed injury to the characters or those deemed different from normalized views of Thai citizenry. Muñoz's contention that the present is "poisonous and insolvent" as it is predicated on heteronormative time points out how Thai bodies and relations are under surveillance by the nation-state and coerced to adhere to values of reproduction and domesticity.

⁹⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 30.

The relationship between Mak and Nak is at odds with other characters, the community, and with Buddhism as their union is informed by a queer pairing; she is dead while her husband is not. In past filmic interpretations, this unnatural relationship falters under the heteronormative weight of the nation and the community, emphasizing the need for Nak to be cast away in the end. *Pee Mak* offers an alternative that asks its audience to think of the potentials of their relationship enduring beyond the here and now. Through a framework of a queer utopia, we are asked to see the possibilities of the characters' relationship as not yet fully imagined, promising future and unexpected potentials through their nontraditional love. Nak's continued presence as a ghost in the mortal realm engages a queer futurity that does not rest on the sacrifice or exclusion of Thai femininity and lives. Though uneasy and traveling upon an unknown road, Pisanthanaku's characters embark upon a path that is full of hope and life beyond the constraints of mortality, much less society. The couple's disregard of normative unions makes their presence illegible in relation to state and society—as represented by the villagers and Buddhism's cosmic order—making them not just dangerous, generative of new formations of family and nation. Their embrace of failing at societal and patriarchal constructions of Thai citizenship and nationhood and instead creating their own—is a mode of critique of an “investment in normativity or life or respectability or wholeness or legitimacy.”⁹¹ Such an investment in social failure makes space for reimagining the “impossible.” Pisanthanaku's nuanced film recasts a ghostlore that had been interpreted and premised on gendered sacrifice, breathing instead new life into an old story and

⁹¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 110-11.

making it anew. His Mak and Nak are full of potential; a potential for a Thai community and nation that has not yet manifested, but beckons just beyond the horizon.

CHAPTER 2

“Fucking Bangkok”:

Trasher, Bangkok’s Queer Worldmaking, on YouTube

What's we do at Trasher ? We party , We dress up , We dance , We sing ,
We drink , We get drunk and if we get laid that's a plus [all *sic*].

—Trasher, Bangkok, “Our Story”¹

In 2015, Trasher, Bangkok—a queer performance troupe from Bangkok, Thailand—released a YouTube short titled “I’m A Slave For You (นางทาส) - Britney Spears เวอร์ชันละครไทย (Thai Soap Opera Version).” The digital short reimagines one of Thailand’s prized *lakorns*, or “soap operas,” called *Nang Tard*, or “The Slave Girl,” through a queer and comedic perspective that also references the performance of a global pop star. The original story is set in the nineteenth century and follows the turbulent life of Yen—a young girl who is sold into slavery and develops a complicated relationship with her owner, Praya Sihayotin. However, Trasher’s adaptation is queered through its retelling by the group’s main performer, Watchara “Jenny” Sukchum—a *kathoe*y, or “trans,” actress.² Trasher further alters *Nang Tard* by incorporating Britney Spears’ global hit, “I’m a Slave 4 You,” as the digital short’s soundtrack, referencing an anachronistic world of transnational pop cultural and queer aural pleasures.

Slowly panning across a stylized Thai veranda, Trasher’s adaptation opens with Jenny’s Yen being pulled up a staircase as her mother gleefully says, “Hurry up, E’ Yen!

¹ Trasher, Bangkok, “About: Our Story,” *Facebook*, N.D., https://www.facebook.com/pg/trasherbangkok/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed June 4, 2018).

² Saisuwan, “Kathoe’y.”

You go up there and make the master of the house your husband!” As Yen cries, her mother continues, “Everything is so fucking expensive nowadays! If you had already made him your husband, I could have been eating in a fancy restaurant, dining on lots of seafood.”³ In the courtyard, Yen’s mother politely says, “Sir, this is my daughter. Look! You just need to give her a shower and she will be very clean for you.” Yen’s mother aggressively gestures her daughter to *wai* (a formal Thai greeting) and boasts, “My daughter is still young and quite beautiful.”⁴ As his other wives look on with jealousy and sneer, Sihayotin states, “You are quite beautiful. What are some of the things that you can do?” The scene then goes silent, then the first measures of Spears’ “I’m A Slave 4 You” dramatically being. Still lying prostrate in the *wai* pose, Jenny, cued by Spears’ song, seductively flips her hair back and awkwardly mouths, “I know I may be young, but I’ve got feelings too and I need to do what I feel like doing. So just let me go, and just listen” (figure 2.1).

³ trashtele, “I’m A Slave For You (นางทาส) - Britney Spears เวอร์ชันละครไทย (Thai Soap Opera Version),” YouTube video, 6:15, June 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhPdE5rTmh0> (accessed August 7, 2017).

⁴ Translations by author.



FIGURE 2.1 Jenny's Yen prepares to lip sync "I'm A Slave 4 You."

Film still, "I'm A Slave For You (นางทาส) - Britney Spears เวอร์ชันละครไทย (Thai Soap Opera Version)," 2015.

This comic and unexpected turn in Trasher's *Nang Tard* draws upon queer diasporic public cultures and desires of contemporary LGBT communities in Bangkok to reinterpret Thainess, belonging, and representation through transgressive forms of identification. Gopinath argues that queer diasporic public cultures are sites where new bonds of collectivity and kinship are forged with the aim of rejecting heteronationalist homonormative ideologies.⁵ The unanticipated turn in *Nang Tard* queers how audiences remember and encounter the classic tale. I argue that the group's use and refashioning of globalized, Western popular culture operates alongside their incorporation of queer forms of Thainess to create a queer and transgressive world.⁶ Trasher, Bangkok thus

⁵ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 20-21.

⁶ Many of the digital videos that *Trasher, Bangkok* create draw from well-known American and Western popstars—such as Adele, Katy Perry, Rihanna, Mariah Carey, Madonna, Lana Del Rey, Britney Spears, and others. Such idolizations of U.S. and Western pop stars as well as popularized celebrities in Thailand

plays with the original storyline, “fucking” with established views of Thainess and Thai culture by imbuing Thai identity with playfulness, queer forms of yearning, vernacular cultural forms of the West, and radical forms of popular and global culture to generate a critical and emergent language of being.

At the same time, while the group queers the heteronormativity of the original storyline of *Nang Tard*, Trasher’s repackaging of Spears’ “I’m A Slave 4 You” and its lyrical content and symbolism, also lays out a critique of U.S.-Thai relations. Queered, “I’m A Slave 4 You” becomes an ironically apropos soundtrack for U.S. patriarchal, militaristic, and capitalist in the Thai nation—in particular, the gendered and sexualized economy Thai sex tourism that positions Thai women and men as global sex slaves. Writing about modern-day slavery in the global economy, Kevin Bales notes that women and children of both sexes are regularly trafficked in both directions across Thailand’s borders as “enslaved” people.⁷ Furthermore, Bales argues that Thais have been frequently imported to North America to work as factory workers as well as commercial

by a queer troupe are of significance because, as Brett Farmer argues, “dissident practices like diva worship function importantly to provide queer subjects with emotional sustenance and tactical knowledges that are quite literally lifesaving, according a safe harbor from which to embark on, and a galaxy of reassuringly brilliant stars by which to navigate, the exciting, indispensable, but ever difficult journey to queer actualization” (Brett Farmer, “Julie Andrews Made Me Gay,” *Camera Obscura* 65, 22, no. 2 (2007): 144-152, 148). In other words, queer communities, like *Trasher*, idolize and mimic the diva and the pop star as to facilitate bonds of homoeroticism, constructing a channel that allows queers to perform pleasure and desire within the frameworks of mainstream society. The work of creating a relationship between an idol and the queer subject is ultimately to play within the rubrics of heteronormativity, but, simultaneously, a transgression of boundaries that queer mainstream tastes and popular logic. Similarly, Edward R. O’Neill argues that the relationship between the gay or queer figure along with the diva is a bond that disobeys the limits of society while staying within them. His work conveys that “gay taste” is highly symbolic as it draws upon the everyday and the mainstream while, simultaneously, disobeying the majority by queering the landscape in which they mimic and draw from. What is thus created by this fabulous relationship is what O’Neill contends is the basis of a reciprocal pleasure within one another; a pleasure that explodes the boundaries of belonging, renaming the ways that minoritarian communities interact within the mainstream while creating counterpublics and counter forms of identification, cultures, and sites of belonging (Edward R. O’Neill, “The M-m-mama of Us All: Divas and the Cultural Logic of Late Ca(m)pitalism,” *Camera Obscura* 65, 22, no. 2 (2007): 10-37, 19).

⁷ Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 69.

sex workers.⁸ For example, in August of 1995, 72 enslaved Thai laborers were discovered to be imprisoned behind barbed-wire and a compound policed by armed guards in El Monte, California, propelling “the experiences [and enslavement] of Thai migrant workers into the international spotlight.”⁹ Trasher’s version of Spears’ classic is more than just visually queer, but queer in the sense that it sheds light on the tacitly accepted power relations and geopolitical accommodations that enable and demand the practice of sex tourism and forced labors to continue.

Trasher, Bangkok: “if u haven’t seen this, u haven’t lived ...”

Long before *Nang Tard*, I stumbled onto the YouTube videos of Trasher, Bangkok while surfing Facebook back in 2012. Referencing the group’s digital adaptation of the singer’s hit, “The One That Got Away,” American pop icon Katy Perry’s tweet appeared on my feed: “This is a bold statement... But if u haven't seen this, u haven't lived.”¹⁰ Inspired by her elegiac ballad, the group’s adaptation of Perry’s song was featured with queer forms of Thainess, rewriting the storyline through the vernacular of Thai customs, cultures, and visual cues.

As Trasher recreates popularized videos—which mainly focus on U.S. popular culture—one of the more notable aspects of the group’s work is the way that they reconceive stories and popular forms of culture by insisting on and inserting queer and Thai elements. For instance, many of the videos, like “The One That Got Away,” are tagged as “Bangkok Versions” and set within the cosmopolitanism of Thailand’s capital city. This labeling essentially reimagines the group and, by extension, their fans, and

⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁹ Padoongpatt, “Thai Americans,” 895.

¹⁰ Katy Perry, Twitter post, February 24, 2012, 7:52 a.m., <https://twitter.com/katyperry/status/173072853481168896> (accessed May 5, 2018).

other queer and marginal groups as a part of or in relation to Thai mainstream, urban space and culture. In an article on Trasher's popularity, journalist Ziri Sutprasert suggests that the group's appeal and message are rooted in "the differences and diversity in [Thai] society. We, the 'different people', can't be denied. The majority must accept us because we are who we are, not who we're expected to be."¹¹ The "different people" that Sutprasert particularly references are the members of the LGBT community and others who do not adhere to normative desires and sexualities. That is, although Thailand is marketed as "gay friendly" and ostensibly liberal, moderate to high levels of homophobia and conservative perspectives remain widespread throughout the nation.¹² Trasher's work, I contend, creates a queer diasporic archive that unsettles normative diasporic and nationalistic identities and cultures.¹³

In examining innovative work of Trasher, Bangkok, my research asks how the cultural labor of the group rethinks normative ideas of Thainess and belonging through the queer and *kathoey* subjectivities and imaginations featured in these visual landscapes. What transpires through their performances and projects are attempts at queer worldmaking that reimagine Thainess and what it means to be "Thai" through the creation of spaces that make room for queer feelings, ephemerality, and innovation.¹⁴ Queer worldmaking, in this sense, is a powerful and creative act, drawing on various forms of performance, such as theatrical and everyday rituals or ceremonies, to

¹¹ Ziri Sutprasert, "Break the cage with Trasher," *The Nation*, December 14, 2012, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/homeBreak-the-cage-with-Trasher-30196051.html> (accessed March 29, 2017).

¹² Eric Julian Manalastas et al., "Homonegativity in Southeast Asia: Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam," *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 17, no. 1 (2017): 25-33, 30-31.

¹³ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 21.

¹⁴ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547-566, 558-561.

establish alternative views of the world. In other words, the groups fucks with established views of Thai identity, illuminating in particular its roots in Thai bourgeois values and its attachments to the West.

I open with two of Trasher's digital shorts—"I'm A Slave For You (นางทาส) - Britney Spears เวอร์ชันละครไทย (Thai Soap Opera Version)" (2015) and "TOXIC - Britney Spears (BANGKOK VERSION) จำได้ยังไง ก็ร้องแบบนี้" (2012)—in order to outline the potential of the group's queer worldmaking through their uses of global popular culture and digital media. I chose these two YouTube clips because of the specific ways that they draw on globalized U.S. popular culture to reimagine what it means to be both queer and Thai in a heteronationalist Asian state that is influenced by America's hegemonic influence in the world. As both clips are inspired by Spears, the videos emphasize Trasher, Bangkok's adoration for the American pop star, emphasizing how the singer is the group's "idol".¹⁵ Furthermore, her music is a staple in gay clubs ever since she debuted her sexualized, post-Mousketeer persona. Gay men identify with Spears because they identify with how the global diva, once on top of the world, became one of its most downtrodden icons.¹⁶ From having her life scrutinized to a highly publicized mental breakdown, the American pop icon is seen by the gay community as "someone who's walked through adversity."¹⁷ Spears is also seen an ally, honored by GLAAD, or the "Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation," for her

¹⁵ Yanapon Musiket, "Trashing the party," *Bangkok Post*, November 29, 2012, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/print/323640/> (accessed February 13, 2018).

¹⁶ Nancy Goldstein, "Why is Britney Spears so appealing to gay fans?," *The Guardian*, December 12, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/12/britney-jean-spears-new-album-gay-fans> (accessed February 13, 2018).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

support of the queer community.¹⁸ Trasher's Spears-inspired work, empathizes with a famous figure who found herself broken and discarded by society. The group thus pulls from queer and "affective experience[s]" in hopes to "provide the basis for new cultures."¹⁹

Trasher's appropriation of Spears draws on the idiom of camp, which operates through "the production of queer social visibility."²⁰ In his definition of camp, Moe Meyer iterates that the genre describes strategies of queer parody that feature social agency and postmodern satire.²¹ Queer parody allows marginalized individuals to formulate emergent identities within existing structures of power through the playful "refusal of sexually defined" identities.²² In effect, Trasher, Bangkok uses Britney Spears and the material and vernacular of Western popular culture to forge new forms of queer Thainess that counter heteronormative definitions. Drawing on Spears and her musical archive, Trasher enacts queer modes of camp through the political and utopic power of "diva worship" which is a transgressive and fantastical reorganization and transformation of life.²³

I examine in detail Trasher, Bangkok's versions of "I'm A Slave For You" and "TOXIC" alongside the group's video, "Trashtime by Jenny" (2012)—a comical short that is reminiscent of a talk show or videotaped gossip column—which draws on popular

¹⁸ Patrick Crowley, "7 Times Britney Spears Earned Her Gay Icon Status," *Billboard*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/pride/8099507/britney-spears-gay-icon-best-moments> (accessed February 27, 2018).

¹⁹ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 17.

²⁰ Moe Meyer, "Introduction: Reclaiming the discourse of Camp," in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Farmer, "The Fabulous Sublimity," 171.

culture and coded languages of queer and diasporic Thai communities in its attempt at Thai queer worldmaking. Using “Trashtime” as the central focus of my study, the clip moves the conversation from “diva worship” and the appropriation of mainstream media to how the group creates their own language to reconceptualize Thainess with queerness at its center. What the group’s work in “Trashtime” ultimately accomplishes is a reclaiming of *sanuk* (or “fun”), recycling, as José Esteban Muñoz puts it, what was once used to negate queerness into something invested with powerful energy.²⁴ By examining these three digital shorts, I argue that the group unsettles normative conceptions of Thainess by reimagining Thai identities in a queerer and more playful world.

Siam Re/Mapped: Thainess and the struggles for its interpretation

Much of this project is a response to Thongchai Winichakul’s seminal work, *Siam Mapped* (1994).²⁵ In his book, Winichakul explored the ways that Siam adopted the logics and modern technologies of mapmaking to discursively draw the nation’s territorial boundaries, its practices—what the author terms as its “geo-body,” and its values and notions of self: *khwampenthai*.²⁶ These different formulations of nationhood are what helped define Siam and its people as *siwilai*, or “civilized,” to the Western world, as a nation bent on progress and modernity.²⁷ *Khwampenthai*, or Thainess,

²⁴ Serhat Ünalı, “Back in the Spotlight: Thai Cinematic Regime of Representation of *Kathoey*s and Gay Men in Thailand,” in *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, ed. Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 70; and Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 39.

²⁵ Thongchai Winichakul’s *Siam Mapped* (1994) has been a foundational text in Asian studies, specifically Thai studies. The book is both original and innovative as it studies the conditions that made possible the creation of a Siam and Thai nationhood, tracing the cultural, political, and military aspects the nation took to create a national identity.

²⁶ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

²⁷ Mark Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire: Food and the Making of Thai America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 25.

defines what is intrinsically deemed as Thai nature: it is an identity constructed as a totalizing agent to both unite as well as enforce a unilateral history of Thai sovereignty.²⁸ In this sense, the identity's discourse regulated citizenship and belonging, labeling normative understandings of Thai processes of identification as well as what constitutes "un-Thainess" or "Other."²⁹ Such a hegemonic form of nationalism both policed and disciplined the Thai collective, constituting ideas of "We-self" to both unite as well as differentiate Thai citizens from outsiders and from one another.³⁰

Thai identity and citizenship were thus based on "Siamese subjects'" ability to align with dominant, patriarchal, and monarchical understandings of Thainess.³¹ It was a citizenship that promoted heteronationalist ideologies, established through a reproductive domesticity that further controlled and erased non-normative identities. Such conceptions of heteronationalism, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have contended, are grounded on images of the citizen and collective as sanitized, pure, and imbued with affective notions of belonging and uniformity.³² Those who do not fit within *khwampenthai* are thus relegated to the arena of *Otherness* which, as Winichakul points out, constitutes everything "non-Thai" or "un-Thai."³³ The idea of marginality is thus central to Winichakul's work: the specific concerns of gender and sexuality have no place in *khwampenthai*. Furthermore, the "geo-body" is understood as having no gender because masculinity is unmarked.³⁴ Winichakul's notion of *khwampenthai* as a

²⁸ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

³² Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 549.

³³ Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 5.

³⁴ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 97.

nationalized and unifying identity prompted me to ask: what are the spaces for those who are “Othered” by their “un-Thainess”?

As Thailand has had a complex history of foreign interference, development, and modernization, the nation has produced subjects on the margin who are defined by their gender and sexuality. These marginalized identities are what I argue as the “Others” who inhabit Winichakul’s idea of the “non-Thai” figure. Furthermore, as economic growth of the present-day Thai nation has been underwritten by female and queer labor, Winichakul glosses over these communities who are written off as expendable.³⁵ Winichakul, in other words, has made coherent a “geo-body” through the exclusion of the non-normative.

This chapter looks at those Thais who are made illegible—especially queer communities and those with non-normative desires—and how these subjects interrupt mainstream and hegemonic notions of Thai identification. I draw upon the digital performances of Trasher, Bangkok to interrogate how queer Thai communities rewrite the landscapes of Thainess with their desires, love of popular culture, and subjectivities. I argue that the group emboldens a new vision of Thainess that draws upon fantasy and comedy to challenge the boundaries of *khwampenthai*, paying close attention to gender and sexuality. Trasher’s campy view of Thainess playfully and irreverently posits the centrality of women and queers to Thailand, taking issue with the heteronormative ways that *khwampenthai* defines the national body.

³⁵ Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok*, 21.

A “gay paradise”: Thailand and contemporary homophobia

Marketed through a porno-tropical lens, Thailand has been imagined as a tourist’s “gay paradise” accepting of and accommodating to gay or queer desires and lifestyles.³⁶ Guidebooks, like the *Spartacus International Gay Guide*, have advertised Thailand as “a Mecca for gays.”³⁷ However, Thai LGBT and queer communities have been continually ostracized by the public, belying the nation’s reputation as a “land of smiles” welcoming to all sexualities. For example, though touted as “gay capital of Asia,” the Kingdom still lacks basic human rights for its LGBT citizens, with a majority of the population of Thais, between 15 and 24 years old, believing that “homosexuality is wrong” and that “gay or transgender people suffer from bad karma for committing adultery in their past lives.”³⁸ Though homosexuality is not condemned per se by Theravada Buddhism, many believe that gay and lesbian desires are a direct consequence of karma and that those who identify as queer are expected to behave in normative modes of hetero-masculinity or -femininity to escape sanctions.³⁹ Homosexuality, like other sexual vices, is further said to be “a private affair,” tolerated only if kept discrete, isolated, or profitable through gay capitalism.⁴⁰

³⁶ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 22; and Peter A. Jackson, “Tolerant but Unaccepting: The Myth of a Thai ‘Gay Paradise,’” in *Genders & Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, eds. Peter A. Jackson & Nerida M. Cook (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999).

³⁷ John Stamford, ed., *The Spartacus 1980 International Gay Guide for Gay Men* (Amsterdam: Spartacus, 1980), 502.

³⁸ Thanthong-Knight, “The bitter truth,” (accessed January 30, 2018).

³⁹ Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan, “A Panoply of Roles: Sexual and Gender Diversity in Contemporary Thailand,” in *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*, eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (Binghampton: Harrington Park Press, 1999), 11.

⁴⁰ Megan Sinnott, “Masculinity and Tom Identity in Thailand,” in *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*, eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (Binghampton: Harrington Park Press, 1999), 102.

One of the more significant aspects of queer Thai sexuality mocked by heteronationalist society is the *kathoey*, male-to-female trans persons who are stigmatized as “queer clowns who are noisy, rude, and inferior to ‘ordinary people.’”⁴¹ Historically, *kathoey* was a cultural category in Thai society where, according to traditional Thai Buddhist belief systems, it was a part of a tripartite arrangement identifying gender constructions of *phuchai* (male), *phuying* (female), and *kathoey* (transvestite/transsexual/hermaphrodite).⁴² However, today, the *kathoey* has a narrower role in Thai society, occupying “a marginal but recognized position” that is typically relegated to the realms of entertainment and the beauty industry.⁴³ Contending that *kathoeyes* are held to areas of comic relief and inferiority, Kath Khangpiboon, a transgender lecturer at Thammasat University, states that “Society seems to [only] have space for transgenders specific to the entertainment and tourism industry”.⁴⁴ This sentiment is shared by scholar Serhat Ünalı who believes that *kathoey* and queer Thais are only accepted in popular media in order to fulfill the role of props and sidekicks to the main story, validating Thai notions of *kathoey* as *sanuk*, strictly for play, comic relief, and definitely unserious.⁴⁵

By maintaining that gay, queer, and *kathoey* figures remain within spaces affirmed by the commodifying logics of global capitalism or societal notions of *sanuk*, *kathoeyes* are left to inhabit a space outside Thainess. Such a space, however, holds possibilities for how queer and Thai individuals and communities challenge public

⁴¹ Santi Leksakun, “Chiang Mai: The Gay and the City,” *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 249-253, 251.

⁴² Saisuwan, “*Kathoey*,” 191.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 191-192.

⁴⁴ Thanthong-Knight, “The bitter truth,” (accessed May 18, 2017)

⁴⁵ Ünalı, “Back in the Spotlight,” 70.

constructions of *khwampenthai* that strip gay, queer, and *kathoey* Thais of claims to Thainess.

Defying these limitations, Trasher, Bangkok's array of videos emerge as a diasporic cultural practice that redefines the limitations of *sanuk* to trouble *khwampenthai* and articulate queer desire. Their cultural forms develop out of the nation's past, pointing to what Gopinath calls the "submerged histories of racist and colonialist violence that continue to resonate in the present and that make themselves felt through bodily desire[s]."⁴⁶ Similarly, Martin F. Manalansan IV contends that racial and sexual performances for diasporic subjects are more than just a matter of *acting*, but, more importantly, an aesthetics generated for surviving within the constraints of a hetero- and homonormative world.⁴⁷ Through popular culture and digital media, Trasher draws upon a history of gay, queer, and *kathoey* exclusion, turning the "unserious" and *sanuk* into a mode of critique. The group positions their carefree irreverence to mainstream Thai identity as oppositional and radical assessment to normativity. The group's performances thus stage a reaction to and recreation of Thainess as a spectacle, playfully fucking with ideologies that underpin *khwampenthai*. In other words, Trasher fucks with overarching notions of Thainess that impinges on their freedom to exist: their work explicitly deploys fucking to braid its associations with the sexualized stereotypes that define their lives with the idea of sexualized play aimed at toppling structures of power.

⁴⁶ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 4.

⁴⁷ Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 16.

“Fucking shit up”: Queer power in everyday colloquialisms

I have been wielding the colloquial phrase of “fucking” as an adjective and a verb, thus far in this chapter for strategic reasons. Historically, the idea of “fucking,” “to fuck,” or “get fucked” describes the West’s violent relationship with Thailand and its citizens, invoking the embodied histories of power and desire and Orientalism manifested through economies of the flesh. In the histories of U.S. militarism and global tourism in Southeast Asia, the term resonates with structures of power and violence that define Southeast Asian women and queer men as “little brown fucking machines powered by rice.”⁴⁸ Indeed, the first part of this chapter’s title comes from Warner Bros. Pictures’ 2011 dark comedy, *The Hangover Part II*. While “lost” in Bangkok, Thailand, Ed Helms’s character, Stu, says “fucking Bangkok” as a response to the misadventures that he and his American friends have in capital.⁴⁹ Though the quip was meant to be humorous, the expression plays into racial and sexual logics that conjure Asian countries, such as Thailand, as uncivilized, licentious, and exotically dangerous. The nonchalant deployment of such a crass colloquialism points to how Thailand has always been associated as a place of sexual excess for the insatiable thirsts of predominantly white male tourists.

Yet beyond touristic and popularized approaches, “fucking” can also be capacious enough to accommodate queer desire. For instance, performance scholar Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson argues that “fucking,” for everyday people, can invoke alternate possibilities, “trying to make something happen that seems

⁴⁸ Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 185; and Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 34-35.

⁴⁹ *The Hangover Part II*, directed by Todd Phillips (2011; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2011), DVD.

'impossible.'"⁵⁰ Chambers-Letson further contends that the linguistic power of "fucking" is in its promise of organizing, performing, and surviving against national security or the state itself; it demands accountability against the violence directed at marginalized subjects. In similar fashion, Judith Halberstam contends that the idea of "fucking" is an act of queer failure that challenges our "comfort zone[s] of polite exchange" to embrace mess, disorder and chaos, "fuck[ing] shit up" in the process.⁵¹ In this sense, "fucking," while not an intuitive concept to think beyond Western fantasies of Asia, may point to the sexual as the potential site to challenge state-sanctioned and anti-queer violence. Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu's study of the cultural politics of race and sexuality in cyberspace, is illustrative of this fine line: similarly Trasher, Bangkok's creative performances can be read as "politically tricky" as they uncomfortably rely on the languages of hypersexuality and the exploitation of Thai men and women to do their work.⁵² However, while such works play with orientalist stereotypes of race and desire, they, by fucking with meaning, "challenge the representational order that dictates their position."⁵³ In other words, Trasher, Bangkok's digital videos operate as rebellious sites of queer performativity, "fucking" with bourgeois notions of self, the nation, and Thai respectability, asserting their right to live and engage alternative forms of *khwampenthai*, even as they do so in politically tricky ways.

Lastly, though I use "fucking" as a theoretical concept to talk about queer potential and agency in Thailand, as a queer Thai American man living in the United

⁵⁰ Association for Theatre in Higher Education, "Joshua Chambers Letson YT," YouTube video, 4:01, November 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQIVVsl0wsE> (accessed April 20, 2017).

⁵¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 110.

⁵² Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, "Good Politics, Great Porn: Untangling Race, Sex, and Technology in Asian American Cultural Productions," in *Asian America.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*, eds. Rachel C. Lee and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (New York: Routledge, 2003), 277.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 277.

States, I acknowledge my privilege as one attempting to reuse and deploy this term. I am aware of the historic violence situated in “fucking,” particularly in relation to Thailand. I take my cues also from the subject of this chapter: Trasher wields “fucking” in their videos as well as promotional material. It is a part of their vocabulary that signals both a traumatic history and a perverse kind of power. Yet Trasher itself also wields privilege vis-à-vis other Thais. In Thailand’s sex trade, disenfranchised women and men have had to carry the weight and violence of being “fucked” by capitalist exploitation. For many, sexual economies are a life or death situation, problematizing “fuck,” “to fuck,” “get fucked,” and “fucking” as dangerous, highly consequential, and not at all playful. Here, I wield it for its potential use to simultaneously mark racial-sexual trauma and a determination to dismantle it and the structures that perpetuate it. That it is a common term for Trasher to use in their forms of representation and play is deliberate and not insignificant. I follow the lead of Trasher, Bangkok and employ the term as a mode of critique and promise that unsettles the violent and sexualized histories and legacies of empire and the nation-state.

“A Dream Party”: The rise of Thailand’s “gay-friendly” party scene⁵⁴

Though the world took notice of Trasher, Bangkok when Katy Perry tweeted about them, the group had already begun garnering fame in Bangkok through their parties. Trasher started off in 2007 as a group of college kids hopping from bar to bar in search of their “dream party” that celebrated everything that they loved: mainstream American culture from the 90’s and other Top-40 hits (figure 2.2).⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Musiket, “Trashing the party.”

⁵⁵ Ibid.



FIGURE 2.2 A group of friends: Trasher, Bangkok.⁵⁶

Tichakorn “Jojo” Phukhaotong, one of the group’s founders, said that “Everywhere we go they play Brit pop or indie music, but we want something more pop, a singalong that we can enjoy with our friends to bring back memories. To give you an example, our idol

⁵⁶ Giraffe Magazine, “เม้าท์มอยกับ Trasher, Bangkok กลุ่มปาร์ตี้ตัวแม่ที่ ‘ป๊อป’ ไม่ยอมเปลี่ยนแปลง,” *Giraffe Magazine*, 915 x 915 pixels, November 11, 2015, <https://minimore.com/f/partytrasher-interview-248> (accessed June 20, 2018).

is Britney Spears.”⁵⁷ Trying to fill this void, the group began hosting social events that resulted in being the premiere place to “to get shitfaced, dress like you don’t care and dance to the terrible songs you’d never confess to liking” in Bangkok.⁵⁸

The parties began as relatively small gatherings of about fifty people, but eventually grew to more than a thousand a night through social media. Saroj “Ark” Kunatanad, a cofounder, mentioned that the group had initially promoted their parties “the old-school way,” designing and handing out flyers and handbills to people at other parties (figure 2.3).⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Musiket, “Trashing the party.”

⁵⁸ Edward Edo, “BKK Gay: 10 of Bangkok’s most fabulously queer bars and clubs,” *Coconuts Bangkok*, October 18, 2013, <https://coconuts.co/bangkok/lifestyle/bkk-gay-10-bangkoks-most-fabulously-queer-bars-and-clubs/> (accessed July 2, 2018).

⁵⁹ Musiket, “Trashing the party.”

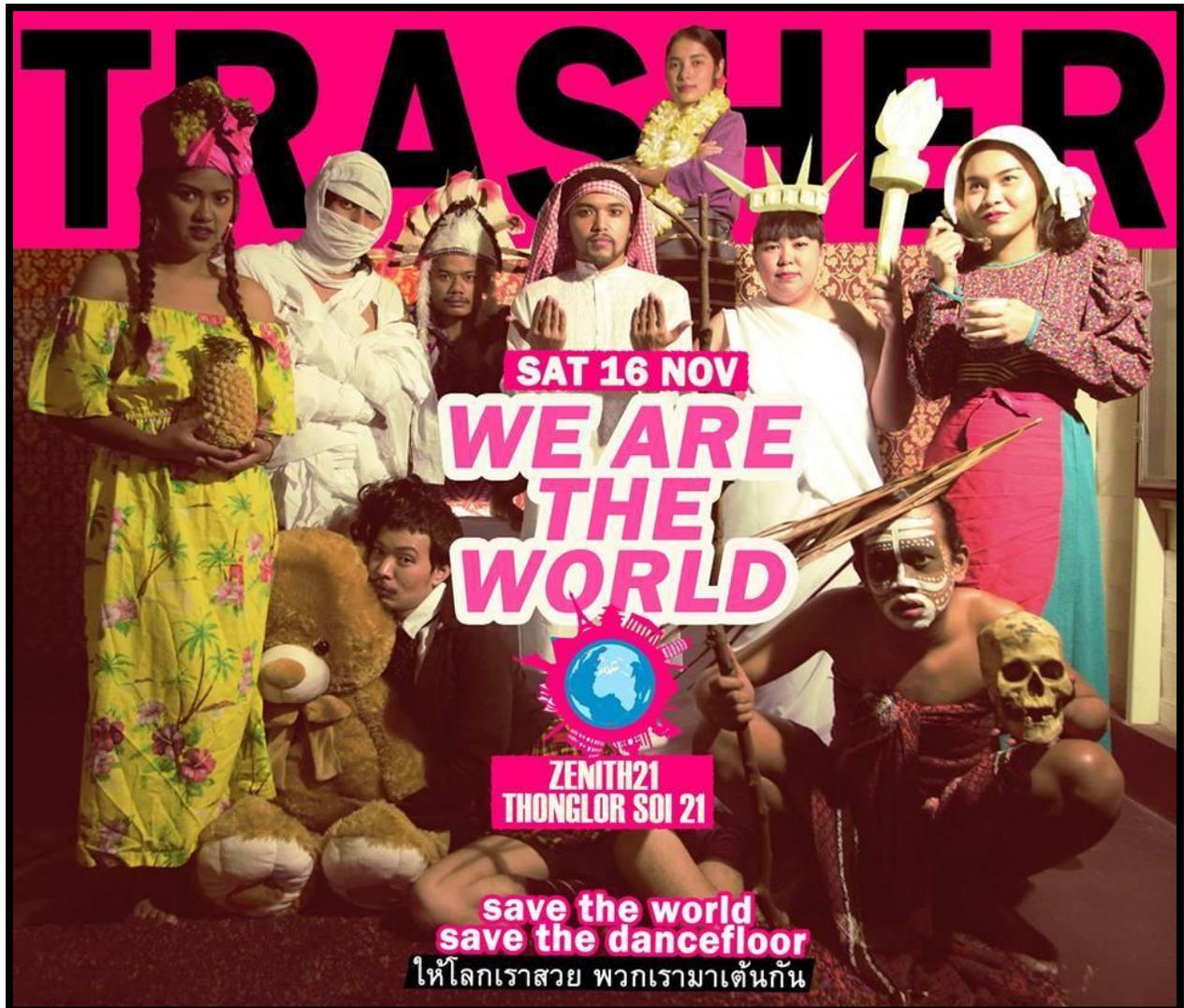


FIGURE 2.3 One of Trasher’s party flyers.⁶⁰

Trasher’s parties are comparable to the U.S. urban “rave scene” where individual autonomous space gives way to communal space, allowing for the convergence of different kinds of people who would not normally interact with one another.⁶¹ Trasher’s parties thus emerged as gathering spaces where different Thais could come together,

⁶⁰ Trasher, Bangkok, “Trasher : We Are The World Photoshoot,” *Facebook*, 960 × 822 pixels, November 11, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/trasherbangkok/photos/a.668892323130892.1073741832.209127439107385/668896069797184/?type=3&theater> (accessed June 20, 2018).

⁶¹ Bryan Rill, “Rave, Communitas, and Embodied Idealism,” *Music Therapy Today* VII, no. 3 (2006): 648-661, 651.

participating in a celebration of popular culture in the presence of individuals and communities who may or may not adhere to mainstream conceptualizations of *khwampenthai*. Journalist Yanapon Musiket noted that the group's parties were "the most gay-friendly parties in town" and that different people—such as top fashion designers, male models, drag queens, and other partygoers—of different sexual orientations and from all over Bangkok—gathered together at these events without attitude, but with fierceness and confidence.⁶²

Though Thailand exhibits homophobia, the rapid expansions of contemporary queer culture in the early 2000s allowed Trasher to emerge with the help of modern technologies, paralleling a general "mainstreaming and massification" of sexual diversity.⁶³ Social media—such as Facebook and YouTube—allowed for the group to safely create community in the digital realm, which eventually spilled out into physical public spaces. During this time, "Creative Thailand," a nationwide project aimed at making Thailand a hub of creative industries within Southeast Asia, was launched in 2009.⁶⁴ The goals of the campaign were to increase the contribution of the creative industries from 12 to 20 per cent of GDP by 2012 while developing Thailand into a creative and innovative economy, modeled by neighboring Asian countries—like Japan and Korean—as well as cultivating the Kingdom's own unique ideas.⁶⁵ The campaign was an attempt to evolve the nation from an export-led economy to one that was based

⁶² Musiket, "Trashing the Party."

⁶³ Peter A. Jackson, "Queer Bangkok after the Millennium: Beyond Twentieth-Century Paradigms," in *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, ed. Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 9.

⁶⁴ Association of Southeast Asian Nations, "Opening Address by the Prime Minister of Thailand, H.E. Abhisit Vejjajiva, at the Thailand International Creative Economy Forum," *Association for Southeast Asian Nations*, July 26, 2012, http://asean.org/?static_post=opening-address-by-the-prime-minister-of-thailand-he-abhisit-vejjajiva-at-the-thailand-international-creative-economy-forum (accessed on June 12, 2017).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

on creativity and development, boosting its national economic contributions by capitalizing on Thailand's "rich culture and national heritage" in its creative industries.⁶⁶ Trasher, Bangkok, though fitting the broad criteria of creativity, was likely *not* what the initiative had intended.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, the group's digital works and performances were a response to this call for creativity and innovation as an approach for Thainess to succeed in the global market.⁶⁸ Heeding the call, Trasher took up this mandate as well.

Although their parties were and continue to be a staple of what they do, Trasher has also become known for their YouTube videos.⁶⁹ The group's videos are campy and unserious, queering *sanuk* as a radical mode for naming alternative forms of Thainess. Though the digital shorts were initially created "out of boredom" and group members' joblessness due to the severe flooding of Bangkok in 2011, they eventually became something fun to do as many of the group's members also worked in the Thai entertainment industry.⁷⁰ It is important to note that the group can make videos and have a sustainable living due to the fact their privilege as middle to upper-class citizens residing in the capital. Many of the founding members of Trasher were students at Silpakorn University, one of Thailand's notable universities which was originally established as the School of Fine Arts under the Ministry of Culture in 1933.⁷¹ Being a part of such an institution illustrates that the players in Trasher, Bangkok had some clout, and were familiar figures in certain social circles in Bangkok. Furthermore, the

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ The first digital video that the group released was a remake of Adele's global hit, "Someone Like You." The experimental short was published on November 14, 2011 and has amassed a little over 250,000 views worldwide.

⁷⁰ Musiket, "Trashing the party."

⁷¹ Silpakorn University, "About Silpakorn," <http://www.su.ac.th/en/about.php> (accessed February 14, 2018).

group's increasing success and popularity through YouTube, points to their savviness and ability to use and access digital technologies. Since their first digital video, "Someone Like You - Adele (Bangkok Version)," was released in 2011, the group has created over ninety videos, chronicling their various projects and the different parties that they have hosted since 2010. Through the internet, the group enabled a global branding that uses the digital as "an extension of the human body."⁷² YouTube is a highly public transnational domain, allowing for the group to tell their own stories while operating beyond the logics of homo- and heteronormativity. Yet this modern form of contact heavily relies on the fact that the user and his/her viewer must have access to the hardware and the knowhow to navigate cyberspace and its evolving platforms. It is also important to note that Trasher's privilege does not require them to embark upon sexual labor in their business model. The group has adopted a contemporary business model that utilizes modern technology, social media, and free streaming services—like YouTube—to expand their reach throughout Thailand and draw in audiences from across the globe. Trasher's uniqueness comes from their utilization of social platforms and media to broadcast personalized views of Thainess, creating dialogue and community by reimagining the terms and means of participation. This model redefines the ways that marginal, queer communities contribute to both a national and global politics of representation.

"You're toxic I'm slippin' under": *Trasher's* fuckery

Many of the digital videos that Trasher, Bangkok creates showcase a playful kind of fuckery—a phrase that, as gleaned from demotic languages, relates to nonsense and

⁷² Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 108.

carefree foolishness—invoking utter nonsense that is also powerful, flamboyant, and entirely fantastic. For example, in 2017, the group released “TOXIC - Britney Spears (BANGKOK VERSION) จำได้ยังไง ก็ร้องแบบนั้น (2017),” celebrating the troupe’s love and idolization for the international sensation.⁷³ In her original video, Spears is sexualized as a secret agent, dancing across different settings and scenes, singing with nothing but diamonds and shiny bits of glitter strategically placed all over her body (figure 2.4). Trasher’s “TOXIC,” however, shows Jenny, who is given the moniker of “Jenny Spears,” adorned with a platinum blonde wig and bodysuit, clumsily singing a fucked up and messy version of the song. Jenny’s performance of the dance track is sometimes unintelligible and out of sync. She screams much of the song and some of the words are not fully formed or deliberately mispronounced. With the lyrics written at the bottom of the screen, Jenny passionately yells, “With the taste of your Lips [*sic*] I’m mama ride / You’re toxic I’m slippin’ under / With a taste of a poison paradise / I’m addicted to you / Don’t you know that you’re toxic?”⁷⁴ (figure 2.5).

⁷³ Musiket, “Trashing the party.”

⁷⁴ trashtele, “TOXIC - Britney Spears (BANGKOK VERSION) จำได้ยังไง ก็ร้องแบบนั้น,” YouTube video, 3:13, May 31, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_GolwubH4hM (accessed August 7, 2017).



FIGURE 2.4 Britney Spears unclothed and covered in diamonds.
Film still, "Britney Spears - Toxic (Official Video)," 2009.



FIGURE 2.5 "Jenny Spears" queer aesthetic in "TOXIC."
Film still, "TOXIC - Britney Spears (BANGKOK VERSION) จำได้ยังไง ก็ร้องแบบนั้น," 2017.

Disjointed and unsynchronized, Jenny's version humorously fails at mimicking a mirror image of Spears' original: Trasher's adaptation is wholly unserious and parodic, exaggerating the original with comical and queer effects. For instance, the original opening lines of "Toxic" are "With a taste of your lips, I'm on a ride," describing a hypnotic sensuality of a shared kiss. However, Jenny's version replaces "on a ride" with "mama ride," pointing out non-native English speakers' common mispronunciation of English words. Such a failure, in its playfulness, can be read as a political and cultural act that masquerades as naïve nonsense but is also an evocative form of identity making.⁷⁵ In other words, though Jenny and Trasher idolize Spears, their "TOXIC" is not an homage that seeks to perfect the original, but, rather one that fucks with it to slyly poke fun.

Since a majority of Trasher's work involves replicating mainstream forms of popular culture and identity for national and global consumption, it is useful to discuss how the group creates queer diasporic cultures in redefining the original. Gopinath claims that many diasporic texts are typically read as translations of "'original' national texts" and that such forms of culture are problematically read as merely mimetic.⁷⁶ This mode of reading runs the risk of reifying the nation as the absolute determinant of diasporic languages and cultures, and position diasporic forms as poor imitations. Yet these bastardizations of the original are always already making something new and original themselves.⁷⁷ Trasher, Bangkok's "TOXIC" is a radical and queer disruption of dearly-held views of Thainess that simultaneously reference the "toxic" relationship that

⁷⁵ J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), xxv.

⁷⁶ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

Thailand has with the United States. Trasher approaches their version of Britney Spears' hit through a hybridized form of *khwampenthai* that is influenced by the cosmopolitanism of Bangkok, transnational American pop culture, as well as queer forms of desire and happiness. The group's performance of Spears' dance track humorously showcases a queer Thai sensibility that creates points of rupture through its collaging of incongruous cultural vocabularies. Trasher enacts a queer hybridity in their rendition of "Toxic" that represents the survival strategies of those subjected to institutional structures of violence.⁷⁸

Jenny's re-performance of Britney Spears' "Toxic," though paying homage to its predecessor, also productively crafts new ethnic and sexual views that fuck with and contest *khwampenthai* and mainstream perceptions of Thai queerness. In an example of *sanuk*, Trasher's "TOXIC," instead of depicting the original's private jetliner as its setting, uses one of Thailand's most heavily used systems of public transportation, the air-conditioned bus, as the backdrop to their version. "TOXIC" opens with the camera panning down the aisle of the air-conditioned vehicle. Like many high-end buses in Thailand, the one depicted in Trasher's video is plush: the windows are lined with curtains, the seats are shaded a rich blue, and a string of Christmas lights line the aisle. The camera stops with Jenny at one end of the bus, wearing a baby blue uniform that would be better suited for a flight attendant. Her back is to the camera but then she spins around, gracefully clasping a microphone to make an announcement. With a huge and infectious smile, Jenny gleefully sings her version of "Toxic" as she proceeds to *wai* (figure 2.6 and 2.7).

⁷⁸ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 84.



FIGURE 2.6 The opening scene to Trasher's "TOXIC."
Film still, "TOXIC - Britney Spears (BANGKOK VERSION) จำได้ยังไง ก็ร้องแบบนั้น," 2017.



FIGURE 2.7 The opening scene to Britney Spears' "Toxic."
Film still, "Britney Spears - Toxic (Official Video)," 2009.

Strutting down the aisle, Jenny, in a gratuitous frame of her derriere, pushes a beverage cart. As in Spears' original, all the passengers are sleeping. While she sings "I need a hit. / Baby, give me it," Jenny Spears smilingly holds up a packaged moist towelette and aggressively pops it open, alarming one of her passengers—played by Trasher's Tichakorn "Jojo" Phukhaotong. Apologetically, Jenny gives a warm and innocent smile to "Jojo" as she wipes down his face. Reeling from shock, "Jojo" looks into the distance with his mouth open.

The bus scene continues with Jenny eyeing one of her male passengers who is standing near the other end, pushing her cart towards him as she blocks him into the vehicle's bathroom. Inside, Jenny aggressively attempts to seduce the man, even as he gives a repulsed look. She kisses his cheek while pulling his sport coat off, ripping his dress shirt open in the process. The act exposes the male passenger's undershirt with a "Krating Daeng" logo (Thailand's version of *Red Bull*) at which Jenny grimaces. As her attempts to seduce the man continue, Jenny eventually handcuffs him to a bathroom rail, waves, and disappears as the scene cuts to an elderly Thai man driving the bus.

Trasher's choice of public transportation is deliberate. The bus is the major method of travel for millions of Thais and has thus become associated with practicality and luxury, emphasizing ease, comfort, and even the "progress" associated with Bangkok and its supposed modernity.⁷⁹ The form of transportation in "TOXIC" thus humorously localizes the video's storyline in Bangkok. Moreover, as the pleasures and desires of queer Thais are policed to inhabit the private spheres of Thai life, the group's use of the bus as their setting establishes queer Thainess in public space and everyday

⁷⁹ Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force*, 2.

life within Thailand. Trasher, Bangkok's "TOXIC" queers commonly used forms of Thai transportation and settings of public life in their work. Public transportation, especially the bus system, has been studied by other queer scholars as a primary form of transit for many gays and lesbians to access same-sex kinships, communities, and sites for cruising, cottaging, or anonymous sex.⁸⁰ As Trasher repackages Britney Spears' use of a jetliner with an air-conditioned bus, the public vehicle in "TOXIC" acts as a lowbrow parodic setting that gestures, at the same time, to public transportation as a space for survival for queer Thais navigating the everyday in the capital city. Essentially, Trasher's bus, imagined as a public and queer entity, embodies what Peter A. Jackson calls the "real gay spaces" for working and middle-class Thais in twenty-first-century Bangkok.⁸¹ This class aspect is further emphasized by the reference to "Krating Daeng," as the energy drink is targeted to mainly blue-collar laborers—such as factory workers and truckers—to boost energy and work production.⁸² Such images disrupt the heteronormative logics of Thainess and *khwampenthai* that inform the *siwilai* spaces and boundaries of Bangkok.

On a lyrical level, the content imagined in "TOXIC" alludes to a history of U.S.-Thai relations that ultimately read as "toxic." Thailand and its citizens were drawn into U.S. influence in ways that continually positioned the Thai nation-state as lesser than its

⁸⁰ See William L. Leap, "'Strangers on a Train': Sexual Citizenship and the Politics of Public Transportation in Apartheid Cape Town," in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, eds. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York: New York University Press, 2002); and Vanessa Asgard-Jones, "What the Sands Remember," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, No. 2-3 (2012): 325-346.

⁸¹ Jackson, "Bangkok's Early Twenty-First-Century Queer Boom," 31.

⁸² See Mary Catherine Nanda, "11 Astonishing Things You Didn't Know About Red Bull," *First We Feast*, August 8, 2015, <https://firstwe Feast.com/drink/2015/08/red-bull-trivia> (accessed July 2, 2018); and Kathaa Saha, "Why is Red Bull the best marketed product?," *Medium*, August 29, 2017, <https://medium.com/@kathaasaha/why-is-red-bull-the-best-marketed-product-fe224b63c0ff> (accessed July 2, 2018).

counterpart, gendering and infantilizing the Southeast Asian country. According to Mark Padoongpatt, Americans in Thailand “familiarized other Americans with the relatively unknown U.S. client state, depicting Thailand as open and adaptable to global changes, such as the intrusion of American-style capitalism and culture, and describing Thai people as lazy yet friendly and naturally subservient to hierarchies.”⁸³ The mischaracterization of Thais as accommodating and welcoming justified U.S. intervention. For instance, Thailand, which was unaffected by the destabilizing impacts of Communism in the neighboring nations, was touted as “a unique island of stability.”⁸⁴ The country was further drawn into United States’ orbit of influence which cast American intervention as a civilizing mission, nurturing a seemingly backward peoples.⁸⁵ Similarly, contemporary Thailand fell victim to the Asian financial crisis of 1997 which originated in Thai markets and forced the nation to depend on the financial assistance—a USD\$17.2 billion loan package—from the International Monetary Fund.⁸⁶ Thus the “bond” created between the two nations has historically been emblematic of toxic uses of power on the part of the United States; it was and continues to be a relationship built on racism, sexism, and vastly uneven power.

Jenny, using humor, a seemingly aloof and passive demeanor, and a welcoming smile, becomes the comic embodiment of Thailand’s double-edged reputation as the “land of smiles.”⁸⁷ Yet underneath this hospitable demeanor are histories of violence

⁸³ Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 27.

⁸⁴ Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 197.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

⁸⁶ Suchitra Punyaratabandhu, “Thailand in 1997: Financial Crisis and Constitutional Reform,” *Asian Survey* 38, no. 2 (1998): 161-167, 162.

⁸⁷ Sue Browell, “‘The land of smiles’: people issues in Thailand,” *Human Resource Development International* 3, no. 1 (2000): 109-119, 109.

and physical and sexual exploitation: Thailand's road to development and modernity have been underwritten by female, queer, and working-class labor.⁸⁸ Jenny's performance as the welcoming host calls forth the branding of Thais as "subservient and accommodating" and "as being genetically and culturally predisposed towards subordination and self-denial."⁸⁹ "TOXIC's" depiction of Jenny's exaggerated dedication to her job in hospitality calls attention to the ways that Thailand's claim to being the "land of smiles" are built on Thai exploitation.

By mimicking the lyrics in her own way, Jenny's performance is politically charged, deconstructing the way we see, enjoy, and remember popular culture. Her offbeat handling of the song's lyrics illuminate a strategy that, as Christine Bacareza Balance argues, diasporic communities use to create alternative genealogies in the wake and aftermath of U.S. investment, involvement, and occupation in Asia.⁹⁰ Though YouTube and internet comments ridicule Jenny's rendition as "scream[ing]," being "the REAL TOXIC," or—as prominent and American-based gay media outlet LogoTV claims—a "slaughter[ing]," the queer potential of "TOXIC" lies in its dismantling of heteronational and homonormative perceptions of Thai service its claim of public space and global fantasy-production for queer Thais.⁹¹ Jenny's erratic and over-the-top performance rudely interrupts and pokes fun at gendered Western expectations of Thai

⁸⁸ See Mary Beth Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force: Consuming Desires, Contested Selves* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999); and Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁸⁹ Nuttavuthisit, "Branding Thailand," 28.

⁹⁰ Christine Bacareza Balance, *Tropical Renditions: Making Musical Scenes in Filipino America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 61.

⁹¹ trashtele, "TOXIC - Britney Spears (BANGKOK VERSION) จำได้ยังไง ก็ร้องแบบนั้น," YouTube video, 3:13, May 31, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_GolwubH4hM (accessed August 7, 2017); and Christopher Rudolph, "Thai Drag Queen Slaughters Britney Spears' 'Toxic,'" *LogoTV*, June 21, 2017, <http://www.newnownext.com/britney-spears-thai-drag-queen-bangkok/06/2017/> (accessed December 4, 2017).

openness and submissiveness. By making Spears' song "painful" to hear, Jenny's rendition fucks with Spears fans' sentimental love of "Toxic," but more importantly, refuses and dismantles the expectation that a Thai performance should align effortlessly with Spears' recognizably sexual signature performance. Through "TOXIC's" parodic take, a space for remaking culture and different forms of Thainess begins to take shape. Jenny sings "Toxic" for herself and those who appreciate her queer and campy artistry's taking on of *khwampenthai* and its exclusions.

"Trashtime by Jenny": A queer guide to *khwampenthai*

"Trashtime by Jenny" is Trasher's definitive statement on Thai forms of queerness that departs from their strategy of parodic mimicking the diva. Instead of mimicking a recognizable global star, Jenny and Trasher embrace the diva identity themselves. Divas, according to Alexander Doty, "offer the world a compelling brass standard that has plenty to say to women, queer men, blacks, Latinos, and other marginalized groups about the costs and the rewards that can come when you decide both to live a conspicuous public life within white patriarchy and to try and live that life on your own terms."⁹² Trasher's invocation of the diva results in a transgression that reorders the world and understood norms relating to Thainess: it unravels what is known about the world and remakes it into its queerer and more fabulous form. In other words, "Trashtime" fucks with Thainess by saturating it with the vernaculars of their queer survival, queering the world in no uncertain terms.

"Trashtime by Jenny" opens with the group's leading *kathoey* performer seated on a plush, off-white couch as the sounds of a Thai pop song play in the background.

⁹² Alexander Doty, "Introduction: There's Something about Mary," *Camera Obscura* 2007, Issue 65 (2007): 1-8, 2.

Her hands are clasped at the knees while her legs are crossed, adorned with gold-colored tights. She is wearing a red shirt and jean jacket with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Her hair is messily done as if she just came from the beach. Her eyelashes are obviously fake and her lips are colored a deep red. There is a digitized, hot pink speech balloon to her right that says, “Trashtime by Jenny” (figure 2.8), and the lettering is written out in a squiggly font. In a high-pitched voice, Jenny sassily says in Thai, “Sawasdee ka. I am [dramatic pause] Jenny Panhun of Hat Yai, Fried Chicken.”⁹³



FIGURE 2.8 “Trashtime by Jenny.”

Film still, “Trashtime by Jenny 5 นาทีขย่ะไร้สาระกับเจนนนี่,” 2012.

Her hands come together as she gives a traditional *wai*, bowing slightly with her palms pressed together in a prayer-like fashion. Looking directly into the camera, Jenny then assuredly reminds her audiences of her “hot” digital performances in other Trasher

⁹³ Hat Yai is a town in Southern Thailand, near the Malaysian border, that is known as a sprawling commercial hub and shopping destination, as well as a culinary specialization—fried chicken.

videos, noting the fame that she garnered from both local viewers as well as international followers such as celebrity blogger Perez Hilton. However, for today's digital short, Jenny explains that the video she has brought us focuses on a serious topic: how to flirt with and win over men from around the world.

With confidence, Jenny informs the viewer that she has dated men of various ethnicities and racial backgrounds, asserting that all men lust over her queer and "beautiful body." I cannot help but think how such a candid toast to Thai sexuality speaks to globalized fantasies of Thainess. However, in Jenny's casual acknowledgement of the desirability of her queer body, she decenters the exploitative languages of desire and pleasure constraining Thais, fucking with who can fuck or be fucked. In other words, Jenny uses understood stereotypes of Thainess to play with them, deploying them in order to show how ridiculous they truly are. Using her fingers, Jenny lists all the men that she has been both romantically and physically involved with, naming people from all over the world. Jenny's comment and her list of various men reference the recognizable practices that hinge on fantasies of Thai hypersexuality. For example, in *101 Asian Debutantes*, director and performer Jean Marc Roc films Asian female prostitutes from Thailand, Korea, and the Philippines to ostensibly "counter" contemporary pornographic practices in the United States. His work, as described by Celine Parreñas Shimizu, "presents images that celebrate Asian female sexuality and womanhood" through his personal enjoyment and profit of having sex with different Asian sex workers.⁹⁴ Roc's work, in filming, profiting, and sexually exploiting women from different Asian nations, constructs these women of color as objects to be

⁹⁴ Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 202.

subjugated—to be fucked—perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes of Asians as idealized for sexual exploitation. By naming different men from around the world, Jenny comically fucks with the stereotypes placed on Asian and particularly Thai availability. She reworks Western traditions and expectations of Asian sexual conquest by flipping them on their heads, reorienting foreign—but, particularly, white—desire and back onto her brown and queer body yet being its agent. Jenny redirects the politics and psychology of desire—of Western men positioning themselves as universally desirable—by reframing desirability onto her, but also claiming the part of the desirer. She does not long for just one man, but many. Additionally, many men desire her. In this sense, she has power and makes it a force that she demands and wields.

As a *disidentificatory performance*, “Trashtime” does more than just draw from mainstream notions of Thainess, it “disassemble[s] that sphere of publicity and use[s] its parts to build an alternative reality.”⁹⁵ “Trashtime with Jenny” reformulates the world, transforming previous global imaginations of Thainess with queer counterpublics that draw upon queer cultures to form new orientations and collective social and communal configurations of Thainess.⁹⁶ By repackaging Thai desire and ownership back onto Thais, Jenny’s invocation becomes an act of survival for gay, queer, and *kathoey* communities.

In a different scene, “Trashtime” goes on to note that if a Thai person wants an international lover then language skills, especially English, must be “on point.” That “To have a boyfriend from another country, your English must be perfect, your accent must be faultless, and, of course, your grammar should be foolproof.” Jenny goes on to list

⁹⁵ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 196.

⁹⁶ Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad*, 64.

the grammatical rules of the English language that Thais should adhere to: “part perfect future; part simple future; part present continuous; part, like, con perfect con, [a confused pause] perfect con future.” Proudly listing all her fabricated grammar guidelines, Jenny says with a girlish smirk, “I tested the Eiffel [Tower] with a full 1,000 points,” “all by myself, yah.” Comically, her list of English grammatical rules illuminates the ways that Thais are constantly forced to connect and communicate with foreigners using English as the primary mode of transaction. Jenny’s claim to high “Eiffel” scores references the absurdity of how TOEFL, the Test of English as a Foreign Language, operates as the barometer of fluency and civility.

This absurdity is further pronounced as English is a measurement for desirability and purchase between *farangs* (a generic word for foreigner of European descent) and most of the Thai women and men involved within the sex trade. Erik Cohen, studying the relationships between sex workers and travelers in Bangkok, Thailand, observes that English is an important tool when negotiating transactions between prostitute and the sex tourist, arguing that “chances of a girl to attract desired foreigners are much increased by the knowledge of a foreign language”.⁹⁷ Language is therefore a tangible way that foreign and Western identity and culture are privileged around the world, hegemonically orienting tourist economy nations as subservient to Western and American desire.

As tourism and foreign investments are major economic factors in Thailand, English is key to communicating with foreigners for service-industry workers. The Thai government embarked upon a project that implemented an ambitious nationwide

⁹⁷ Erik Cohen, “Thai Girls and Farang Men: The Edge of Ambiguity,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 9, no. 3 (1982): 403-428, 410.

program aiming to teach English as a part of the 2012 school curriculum and onward.⁹⁸ Aiming to cultivate Thai students' comprehension and fluency in English was fueled, in part, by Thailand's 2015 entry into the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) community creating Southeast Asia as an economic zone where English became the "*universal language ... required* for communication and business."⁹⁹ Furthermore, as tourism accounts for an every growing percentage of the nation's annual income—40% of GDP in 2014, news agencies and educators have encouraged learning English as necessary for the future of the nation's economy as well as for the Kingdom to stay relevant and remain *siwilai*.¹⁰⁰

Jenny's officious yet erroneous discussion of English, in this sense, troubles Thai claims of sovereignty and how Thais value, make claims to, and position themselves against and in relation to Western cultures and lifestyles. At the same time, Jenny performs a comedic lack of fluency and expertise, but frames it as a disregard for proper English, decentering *farang* desire, and emphasizing that Thailand and Thainess are not limited to working to fulfill foreign needs. Jenny's lighthearted and smug remark, stating that she passed the "Eiffel" with flying colors, mocks the ways that standardized tests—such as the TOEFL—measure non-native speakers' qualifications for entry into English-speaking universities. Her mockery of the test alongside the image she conjures of the Parisian monument speaks of the absurdity to which Thais and other non-English

⁹⁸ Kate Hodal, "Thai schools urged to boost speaking," *The Guardian*, February 14, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/feb/14/thailand-speak-english-campaign> (accessed April 4, 2017).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* (italicized emphasis mine).

¹⁰⁰ Jyrki Loima and Jutarat Vibulpho, "Motivating kids to learn English is vital for the country's future growth," *The Nation*, June 2, 2012, http://www.nationmultimedia.com/news/opinion/chalk_talk/30235183 (accessed April 4, 2017).

speaking persons are asked to adhere to the homogenizing universalisms of the West and *their* forms of communication (figure 2.9).



FIGURE 2.9 Jenny boasting about passing the “Eiffel” examination.

Film still, “Trashtime by Jenny 5 นาทิชยะไร้สาระกับเจนนี,” 2012.

Jenny’s apparent inability—or the fact that she just does not give a fuck—to comprehend the TOEFL as a legitimate test gestures to an alternative reality where local knowledge is enough, recentering structures of power and communication by articulating ways to adjust the local and destabilize the international. Thus, while Jenny promotes knowing English in the video, she actually performs the potential of exactly the opposite; it is a critique arguing that access to this worldly language presents prostitutes with supposed “advantages” for greater exploitability.¹⁰¹ English is a greased business in the red-light district for the American john, pimps and employers, and the

¹⁰¹ Cleo Odzer, *Patpong Sisters: An American Woman's View of the Bangkok Sex World* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994), 302.

Thai sex worker, but as Jenny’s deliberate miseducation points to—it is a fluency that engenders violence.¹⁰²

In the last half of “Trashtime,” Jenny interviews Clay Hemmerich, a mixed-race Thai and Canadian man, whom Jenny uses as an example to showcase the extent of her sexual prowess and competence to the audience (figure 2.10).



FIGURE 2.10 Mixed-race Canadian and Thai man, Clay Hemmerich.

Film still, “Trashtime by Jenny 5 นาทีขยะไร้สาระกับเจนนี,” 2012.

The beginning of Hemmerich’s scene shows the young man walking to the center of the screen; his name, age, nationality, and physical statistics are shown to the left of him. Immediately after, Jenny is shown sitting down on a couch with Hemmerich as she prods him about his personal life in addition to his favorite Thai culinary dishes: “What food you like?” Showing that his Thai language abilities are limited, Clay lists, with some uncertainty, *som tum* (papaya salad), *khao niew mamuang* (coconut sticky rice and mango), and finally, because he cannot recall the Thai equivalent, “cashew nuts with chicken” (or *gai pad med mamuang himaphan*). All the while, Jenny girlishly celebrates

¹⁰² Ibid., 18.

Clay's attempts to name the various dishes, squealing over every little movement and sound that comes out of Clay's mouth even if what he says is incorrect or untranslatable. It is Hemmerich's last attempt to translate "cashew nuts with chicken" in Thai that prompts Jenny to finally drop her act. Jenny gives Clay a vacant look of confusion, not fully understanding what he is saying as it is not Thai. Though brief, the moment is awkward enough as a silent exchange is shared between the two individuals. In its awkwardness, the scene focuses on Jenny's puzzled expression and her over-the-top fake eyelashes, locking our attention on her face and nothing else (figure 2.11).



FIGURE 2.11 An awkward moment shared between Jenny and Clay.

Film still, "Trashtime by Jenny 5 นาทีขยะไร้สาระกับเจนนี," 2012.

Breaking the silence, Jenny hesitantly nods and gives out a loud "Ah! *Ah-Roi! Roi! Roi!*" (or, "Ah! Delicious!") as to pretend that she fully understands what Hemmerich has just

said.¹⁰³ Excitedly, our girl says in broken English, “Oh! Oh! I like too! I like too” as Clay, in the foreground, gives himself a nod of approval that the two were able to overcome their differences. It is in this moment where Jenny turns her attentions away from the interviewee and back to her cameraman where she says in Thai and in a lowered register, “What the fuck is that?” The moment breaks the fantasy of Thai women presenting themselves as conservative and “traditional”—eternally pleasant, refined, caring, sincere, family oriented, and, above all, “respectable.”¹⁰⁴ Jenny’s unscripted “fuck” detaches her from the genteel and domesticated stereotypes of proper Thai women or even accommodating improper women, distancing her from that ideal of subservience and accommodation to male pleasure and comfort. Jenny, as a *kathoe*y figure who attempts to play the feminized stereotype of Thai hypersexuality and hospitality, disrupts the fantasy by breaking character, failing to maintain the illusion that underwrites Thai female and queer exploitation.

As the scene with Clay Hemmerich closes, Jenny tells her viewers that the ultimate way to bring around a man from another country to love you is to invoke the Thai adage, “เป็นแม่ศรีเรือนในครัวเป็นอีตัวบนเตียง,” or “[You’re] A mother in the kitchen, but a slut (or thing) in the bed” (figure 2.12).

¹⁰³ In Thai, the term “*ah-ro*i” directly translates to “delicious.” “*Ro*i” reads as an abbreviated form of the word; a colloquial way to say delicious quickly.

¹⁰⁴ Wilasinee Pananakhonsab, *Love and Intimacy in Online Cross-Cultural Relationships: The Power of Imagination* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 81.



FIGURE 2.12 Jenny's rule, "You're a mother in the kitchen, but a slut on the bed."
Film still, "Trashtime by Jenny 5 นาทีขยะไร้สาระกับเจนนี," 2012.

Flipping her hair, Jenny notes that being domesticated and a mother in the kitchen is "out," telling her listeners that one could easily walk to your *soi* (or "street") and quickly grab street fare from a local food truck. She goes on to suggest that, unlike making dinner, summoning "slutty" qualities in bed is much harder work. Jenny shares that, unlike those who have not been formally trained or gifted with inherent powers of seduction, she has been exclusively and internationally trained. Uncrossing her legs to a wide stance, Jenny prepares to show audiences her sexual authority, cueing up Britney Spears' hit, "I'm A Slave 4 You," as she crawls around the floor and proceeds to give Clay a massage.

Jenny's invocation of hypersexual "training" evokes the exploitative images linked to Thai men and women. However, the hypersexuality that she performs mocks the orientalized and global depictions of Thai sexuality and eroticism by working both on

and against dominant representations. Trasher and Jenny's overexaggerated sexuality plays with and ultimately "fucks with" leading ideologies that denote Thais as only ever sexualized objects. The fact that Jenny is over the top in her adoration of Clay, presenting seduction as carnivalesque technique, fucks with sexual exploitation through campiness, dethroning "the serious."¹⁰⁵ The campy nature of Jenny's sexualized performance is further pronounced as she awkwardly moves around Clay to "I'm A Slave 4 You," attempting to seduce her guest with floundering movements—such as crawling on the floor while "humping" the air in addition to sitting behind Clay and throwing her hair in his face. The seductive qualities that Jenny demonstrates are comedic bumbling rather than successful attempts at being alluring. In other words, Jenny's performance draws upon *sanuk* elements of flamboyance and the nonsensical to critique how Thai identities are presented in popular culture, exposing the relationship between Thainess and fantasies of Thai subservience and hypersexuality as unnatural and artificial.

Finally, Jenny's call to be the "slut" is a call for her viewers to reimagine ownership and desire over their own sexuality in a way that gestures to its role in the national economy. After the "massage," "Trashtime" ends with Jenny telling her audiences that it is the patriotic duty of Thais to enact their sexual desires. "I promise you that if you, my viewers, take heed of my instructions, the Kingdom of Thailand will never again be weakened by the 'balance of trade.'" The comical declaration is followed by Jenny singing, showtune-style, the first stanza of "เราสู้" ("Lao Su")—a patriotic anthem that translates to "We Persevere," emphasizing the dutiful job of Thais by

¹⁰⁵ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), 88.

owning their own sexuality and bedding a man from outside Thailand. With a mild lisp, Jenny sings, “Ancestors of Thailand / Shield our homes and protect our nation / The sacrifices made with our blood and our bodies are not inconsequential / It is our duty to keep pushing forward.”¹⁰⁶ Though brief, the concluding scene of “Trashtime” invokes histories of Thai people used as sexual ambassadors to servicemen and tourists, and the ways that Thai sexuality has operated as a currency for transnational capitalism and the development of the nation.¹⁰⁷ As a multibillion-dollar business, sex tourism and its relationship to Thailand’s economy and foreign investments rests upon the flesh labor of Thai women and men.¹⁰⁸ Thais are no stranger to sex work and prostitution: these practices have been foundational to the ways Thailand has maintained its “sovereignty” and participated in the global market. Sex has helped fuel its emergences as one of the world’s “the great development success stories.”¹⁰⁹ From the 1967 Rest and Recreation (R&R) Treaty during the Viet Nam War to the expansion of the service sector as a part of the larger global economy, the Thai sex industry has been integral the nation’s modernization process or the “Thai Economic Miracle.”¹¹⁰

As much of Thailand’s national development and its prosperity have relied heavily on the sexual exploitation of its citizens, Jenny’s declaration and call for “sluttiness” is disconcerting. Read through the radical and queer potential of what Celine Parreñas Shimizu calls politically productive perversity, however, Jenny’s statement

¹⁰⁶ Translations by author.

¹⁰⁷ Katharine H.S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korean Relations* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1997), 84.

¹⁰⁸ Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, 9.

¹⁰⁹ The World Bank, *Thailand Home*, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand> (accessed December 4, 2017).

¹¹⁰ Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, vi.

embraces “new discourses regarding the controversial representations of sex.”¹¹¹ In other words, the hypersexual is more than just exploitative: its productive perversity also allows for individual pleasures and alternative modes of kinship to flourish.¹¹² Similarly, Nguyen Tan Hoang reconceptualizes the sexual receiver, the bottom, as a method to create alliances, aesthetic and affective bonds, complicating racial and sexual passivity through “an inescapable exposure, vulnerability, and receptiveness in our reaching out to other people.”¹¹³ Cumulatively, these works queer empire’s heterosexual frameworks of race, sexuality, desire, making room for sex outside of exploitation and violence. Jenny’s assertion refashions hypersexuality as an opportunity for creativity and being, for queer ideas of agency and pleasure.¹¹⁴ Though it does not erase the trauma associated with sex tourism, a queer reading of hypersexuality as prompted by Jenny’s performance, offers us an approach that allows complex subjectivity and desire for Thai women and queer folk rendered faceless objects under global capitalism.

If one employs queer diasporic reading practices to Jenny’s performance of “We Persevere,” one can reconceptualize the multiple ways that LGBT Thais “sacrificed” their blood and bodies to the development of the modern nation of Thailand. In the original, the lyrics of “Lao Su” read as a romanticization of Thai sacrifice and diligence, maintaining claims of “Thai exceptionalism”—the idea that Thailand was the only Southeast country to escape direct colonization from the Western world—and holding

¹¹¹ Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 23.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹³ Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom*, 2.

¹¹⁴ For instance, though designated tourist zones are hotbeds for sex work and prostitution, these spaces, as argued by Peter A. Jackson, potentially offer LGBT Thais a place to circumvent heteronormative expectations of the nation without leaving Thailand. Peter A. Jackson, “Capitalism, LGBT Activism, and Queer Autonomy in Thailand,” in *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, ed. Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 202.

up the sacrificial ways that Thais aided in the nation's development and prosperity.¹¹⁵ The song's lyrical content additionally renders a heteronationalist perspective of Thailand, promoting a patriotism that celebrates the monarchy, militiamen, the police, and the armed forces while making no mention of women or LGBT communities.¹¹⁶ In this sense, Jenny's performance of the anthem unsettles conventional ideologies of both Thai nationalism, gender, and development, challenging the lyrics' observance to heteropatriarchy, dutiful citizenship, and Thai nationalism, inserting herself into the landscape of the nation. Jenny's queer invocation of the song recasts patriotism and sacrifice written in the anthem, destabilizing the anthem's heteronormative content by using it instead to address queer communities who have given so much to the country. Though Jenny's "Lao Su" maintains some of its original imagery, a queer reading of the anthem makes the case that queer labor that Jenny references and exhorts (such as gay sex tourism) is central to the nation's road to development. Such work reincorporates queer claims to the formation of the nation-state by reestablishing the crucial role of women and LGBT labor within Thailand's development and the success of its economy. Particularly in the twenty-first century, Thai queer cultural development has played a major role in advancing economic and cultural flows from Thailand to the rest of the world—especially the United States.¹¹⁷ Jenny's repackaging of "Lao Su" to incorporate LGBT and queer innovation and labor thus honors individuals such as those

¹¹⁵ Rachel Sturman, "Subject Siam: Family, Law and Colonial Modernity in Thailand," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 8, no. 1 (2007): N.P.

¹¹⁶ Lanna Collectables, Thailand, "Rao Su' Thai Royal Music - The Musical Compositions of HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand," YouTube video, 3:07, January 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJ8eSAfxbLU> (accessed February 20, 2018).

¹¹⁷ Jackson, "Queer Bangkok after the Millennium," 11.

in Trasher, Bangkok for their participation in “Creative Thailand,” and for their work to help reproduce Thailand beyond *khwampenthai*.

“I’m A Slave 4 You”: Queer Thainess as a most “wondrous fortune”

I end my discussion of Trasher, Bangkok by returning to the group’s adaptation of *Nang Tard*, tracking how the group fucks with “happy endings” that are typically reserved for heterosexual romance. In Trasher’s adaptation, the story culminates not with Jenny’s Yen but with Praya Sihayotin taking on another lover—the male servant, Boonmee. In the original, Yen, who is accused of adultery, is banished from the house and is stripped of her title, reinstating her position as a slave. Sihayotin eventually reconciles with Yen, asking for her forgiveness as the pair live happily ever after; returning eventually to a conventional heterosexual script. This ending dismisses the agency of the Thai woman, shuffling her between and within different definitions of enslavement—as the house slave, the wife, or the lover. Trasher’s version, however, ends with Yen attached to no one. The group’s “I’m A Slave For You (นางทาส)” concludes with Salee, Sihayotin’s second wife, mocking a humiliated Yen. While Yen is seemingly beaten down, Salee, along with her handmaiden, scorns Yen by saying, “You are just a slave. Don’t try to climb up to my level. Don’t even dare to dream!” “Dumb people are always the victims of beautiful people” (figure 2.13).



FIGURE 2.13 Salee (L) and her handmaiden in Trasher’s adaptation of *Nang Tard*.
Film still, “I’m A Slave For You (นางทาส) - Britney Spears เวอร์ชันละครไทย (Thai Soap Opera Version),” 2015.

To this jabbing remark, Yen, sitting with her legs indecorously wide open, speaks in a dialect unfamiliar to the *siwilai* vernaculars of Bangkok, and retorts with a smirk, “Watch out!! Karma will follow you. When your house floods like the city of Bangkok I’ll ride a submarine to shoot your fucking house. Motherfucker!! You fucking asshole. Selfish cunt” (figure 2.14).



FIGURE 2.14 Yen’s crass reply.

Film still, “I’m A Slave For You (นางทาส) - Britney Spears เวอร์ชันละครไทย (Thai Soap Opera Version),” 2015.

Feeling accomplished that she ruined Yen’s life, Salee is shown gleefully walking towards Praya Sihayotin’s bedchamber, rubbing her hands all over her body while singing “I’m A Slave 4 You.” As she opens the door, the second wife is shocked to see her husband in a passionate embrace with the male servant Boonmee. Distraught, Salee clasps her golden necklace as she stumbles out of the room and is overcome with disbelief. Boonmee takes over the lip syncing of Spears’ song, licks his thumb seductively, and blows the audience a kiss as he closes the bedroom window. As the screen fades to black, Trasher’s soap opera concludes with a shot of Khun Ying Yaem, Sihayotin’s first wife, sitting above two *kathoey* servants. While gripping a wooden stick, Khun Ying Yaem, or Countess Yaem, rings an old brass bell and humorously says, “To have a gay husband (or lover) is a most wondrous fortune” (figure 2.15).



FIGURE 2.15 Trasher's golden proverb.

Film still, "I'm A Slave For You (นางทาส) - Britney Spears เวอร์ชันละครไทย (Thai Soap Opera Version)," 2015.

The scene queers Thainess and its relationship to gender, sexuality, and power as it remakes a Buddhist proverb that jokingly says, "To not have a wife is good fortune."¹¹⁸ Though the saying plays on Buddhist rules enforcing male celibacy and spiritual obedience, it perversely reifies the sexist ways that women are read as pollutants, their bodies are dirty and destructive forces against the sacred nature of manhood.¹¹⁹ Trasher refashions gender roles and sexuality by queering the motto, unsettling Thai domestic life and the male privilege centered within Theravada Buddhism. The heteronormative fantasy of Thai domesticity is fucked with as Khun Ying Yaem is portrayed not with her husband, but happily surrounded by queer and *kathoey* men. Positioning Khun Ying in such a manner shifts the patriarchal and heteronormative

¹¹⁸ Li Philips, e-mail message to author, August 13, 2017.

¹¹⁹ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 78-79.

strictures on Thai women, fucking with how females uphold heteronormative desires and tradition, exemplifying “obedient sacrifice”.¹²⁰

Additionally, as the scene comes at the end of Trasher’s adaptation of *Nang Tard* and with all the ways the group has fucked with national and global notions of Thainess, I am drawn to think of the ways that the performance troupe fucks with notions of “happy endings” as they relate to sexualized economies. As trends in Thai tourism rely on intimate and gendered labor as well as marking Thais as hospitable and willing to please, Thai traditional massage—one of Thailand’s main tourist attractions—has carried ambiguous meanings—like a “massage with a happy ending,” eroticizing the act as a part of the sexual economies of homo- and heteronormative tourism.¹²¹ Trasher fucks with the slogan by rebranding it to fit the needs of their queer desires, reshaping *Nang Tard’s* patriarchal ending with queer happiness; further depicting that Yen and the other women do not need the love of Praya Sihayotin to survive. Such a happiness is informed by what Sara Ahmed calls a “social hope” that imagines a world existing beyond normative society where discrimination and homophobia are overcome.¹²² The ending is utopic as it imagines a Thai world that is bearable, filled with queer desire, being, and joyful, irreverent forms of *sanuk*.

Analyzing the potentials of Trasher, Bangkok’s cultural labor allows us to see how pop youth culture, social media and technology play with global musical troupes and national culture to create new modes, spaces, and practices of queer worldmaking.

¹²⁰ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 46.

¹²¹ Sirijit Sunanta, “Thailand and the Global Intimate: Transnational Marriages, Health Tourism and Retirement Migration,” *MMG Working Paper 14-02*, <http://pubman.mpdl.mpg.de/pubman/faces/viewItemOverviewPage.jsp?itemId=escidoc:2007856> (accessed February 20, 2018), 10.

¹²² Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 113.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner claim that queer culture is a worldmaking force that deploys alternative forms of intimacy that exceed the boundaries of heteronormativity, domesticity, kinship, ownership, and the nation. It produces counterpublics that fucks up and with normative ideas of what constitutes order, belonging, and being.¹²³ Trasher's construction and legitimization of queer visibility through popular culture and digital media enacts forms of agency that render queer forms of Thainess and belonging as fantastic sites at work against the oppressive reach of a patriarchal and heteronationalist Thailand. Their works invoke happiness, eroticism, desire, affinities towards popular culture, and flamboyance, enjoining us to think about the political and emotional labor of exposure for subjectivities that have been misused or unwanted.

As Trasher attempts to remake the boundaries of Thainess with personalized forms of their pleasures and desires, the group celebrates their versions of a queer and Thai identity by drawing upon popular culture. It is a diasporic cultural form that interrogates nationalism and citizenship; further rethinking Thainess as fragmented and already unraveling at the seams. Drawing from the work of Mimi Thi Nguyen, the performative labor that the group has and will produce is a celebratory love of Thainess that "may no longer require a reference to the original (which may be disappearing, or disappointing) in order to continue" and plainly exist as a humorously fuckable, campy, and altogether different vision of *khwampenthai* that is completely different from the original.¹²⁴

¹²³ Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 558.

¹²⁴ Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Diasporic Erotic: Love, Loss, and the Copy," *Camera Obscura* 82, 28, no. 1 (2013): 68-101, 84.

CHAPTER 3

The Country Singer:

Pumpuang Duangjan, After/life, and Queer Diasporic Commemorations

Pumpuang Duangjan (1961-92) is a celebrated and revered *luk thung*, or “Thai country music,” singer in Thailand, important to the nation’s people (figure 3.1). Her significance to the Thai people is manifested through her repertoire, which depicts the lives of ordinary people—peasants, lorry drivers, struggling farmers, and sex workers—and encompasses themes that grapple with the rural-urban divide, intimate issues of infidelity, pain, desire, and the everyday struggles and dreams of Thai men and women.¹

¹ Lucy Ridout, *The Rough Guide to Thailand* (London: Rough Guides, 2009), 839.



FIGURE 3.1 The Country Singer: Pumpuang Duangjan (“พุ่มพวง ดวงจันทร์”).
Original Photographer Unknown, Reproduced by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.²

Duangjan herself came from humble origins as she was the daughter of sugarcane farmers from Suphan Buri, a quiet town two to three hours north of Bangkok. The singer was illiterate, but adept at memorizing lyrics and expressing her songs with rich feeling and emotion. Said to be both modern and fearless, her success gave “hope [to] the poor” and disenfranchised.³ The bond between Pumpuang Duangjan—sometimes referenced as “Peung” or “Mother Peung”—and her fans is demonstrated by how she is

² Some of the images featured in this section are photographs of pictures, portraits, and magazine covers of Pumpuang Duangjan featured and housed at Wat Thapkradan. Though I, as the author, took many of these images, it is important to note that, for many of these pictures, the original photographer is unknown. Said images are denoted and captioned as “Original Photographer Unknown”.

³ Yanapon Musiket, “The queens and I,” *Bangkok Post*, July 28, 2011, <https://www.pressreader.com/thailand/bangkok-post/20110728/283424893266594> (accessed December 29, 2017); and Pattana Kitiarsa, “Remembering the Pop Queen: The Cult of Phumphueng Duangchan and Lottery Mania in Contemporary Thailand,” (master’s thesis, Suranaree University of Technology, 1999), 18.

celebrated by Thais in Thailand and the diaspora, even after her untimely death in 1992. Examining diasporic acts of queer commemoration for this country singer—such as a shrine resurrected and established in her name, I contend that Duangjan’s after/life lends itself to a common language that engages the energies of diasporic Thais who have been shuffled and marginalized by global capitalism, heteronationalism, and dominant idealizations of Thainess.⁴ In other words, I look to how contemporary Thais in the nation and the diaspora draw upon the life and legacy of this country singer to renegotiate their marginalization, using the acts and rituals of her memorialization to lay claim to her queer and feminist legacy, in turn unsettling and challenging normative ideas of Thainess.

The after/life of Pumpuang Duangjan provides a roadmap for how contemporary diasporic Thais articulate their disenfranchisement in conjunction with their belonging. In her book on Selenidad and performing the memory of the late-Tejana recording artist Selena Quintanilla-Pérez, Deborah Paredez contends that “cultural memory and collective mourning can generate and transform concepts of national, racial, and

⁴ With a slash (/), I separate the term “afterlife” in two as to reconfigure how we think about memory and what is leftover after a person’s death. Drawing upon the work of David Palumbo-Liu (1999), the slash, for me, works as a mark that makes both terms distinct in their different meanings; yet, furthermore, adheres to the labor of the initial term that they came from. For instance, “afterlife” is defined as life after death. However, by imposing the slash in the middle of the word, I draw upon the work that both “after” and “life” do as separate entities, thinking about, in regards to death, commemoration, and remembrance, the spectral energy left behind those who died and the kinds of cultural magic and excitement that forms by those who wield the memory of the death as a place of inspiration, action, and motivation. Additionally, the work of Jafari S. Allen (2012) is useful when thinking about the slash, or, as he names it, the stroke(s). For Allen, the stroke works to bridge terms together but also push them apart, sharpening their focus. What emerges from Allen’s use of the slash / stroke is a holistic and energetic way to think about the words being used in addition to, by extension, those who are impacted or embraced by the words we bridge together or push apart. Unlike Palumbo-Liu, the latter’s use has an emotional structure to it, engaging a politics of survival, of meaning, and of love; a mode of feeling that, like the diasporic cultural forms in my project, draw upon their love and admiration of Pumpuang Duangjan, Thainess, and how they imagine the past, present, and future.

gendered identities.”⁵ Acts and performances fueled by the imagination, memory of the image, and spirit of dead celebrities enable communities to contest, improvise, and reimagine belonging and citizenship. Following Paredez, I argue that Duangjan’s after/life is formative to the collective, as anonymous acts of representation and contestation that renegotiates what it means to be Thai against the definitions and exclusions of the Thai Buddhist state.

A Daughter of Suphan Buri: Pumpuang Duangjan

Ramphueng Jitharn was born on August 4, 1961 in the Chai Nat Province. She was the daughter of poor sugarcane farmers who eventually resettled in the Song Phinong District of Suphan Buri. Because of financial hardships and the family’s poverty, Jitharn was forced to leave primary school and take to the fields like many poor Thais during that time. Though she was unable to finish her compulsory education, the young Jitharn daughter—the fifth child out of twelve—devoted her life to working alongside her family while taking up music with one of her older brothers, Amnat Jitharn. While she was illiterate, Ramphueng Jitharn had a talent of memorizing lyrics which allowed her to participate in many local singing competitions. These local performances coupled with the beauty of her voice earned her the moniker of “Namphueng Na Rai Oi” (Honey from the Sugarcane Field), or “Nampung Muangsupan (Honey of Supan).”⁶

Jitharn’s professional career took off in 1975 when she was singing at a local annual fair and a famous *luk thung* band, led by Waiphot Phetsuphan, noticed the folk

⁵ Paredez, *Selenidad*, 8.

⁶ Pattana Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012), 59; and Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, “Thai Pop Music and Cultural Negotiations in Everyday Politics,” in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1998), 216.

singer, bringing her to Bangkok. In the late 1970s, Ramphueng Jitharn's name was later changed to "Pumpuang Duangjan," following the Thai belief that original names must be altered to win the approval of audience members and to maintain an auspicious persona.⁷ Though various scholars have translated her name differently, "Pumpuang Duangjan," a name given to the singer by composer Mon Muangnua, has been interpreted as "[the] chubby and beautiful [lady] like the full moon," "Pretty Boobs," as well as "Bountiful fruit" of the "Moon."⁸ The importance of Duangjan's new name was that it gestured to a more voluptuous and decadent image, complementing the singer's evolution from sweet and virginal to sexually aggressive.⁹ Her new image, a mix of independent and unbridled femininity, propelled her to instant stardom.¹⁰ Ubonrat Siriyuvasak notes that such an eroticized female persona was unprecedented in *luk thung* and that Duangjan herself initially resented her new name, citing that it was indecent.¹¹ However, the singer eventually warmed to her new persona, conceding that her fans liked her new look and that it defined her as "trendy ... [with] a bit of masculine smartness."¹² With a new image, Pumpuang Duangjan embraced her identity as a sexy and modern Thai woman in a heteropatriarchal Thailand. She began changing the

⁷ Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, 60.

⁸ Pattana Kitiarsa, "Remembering the Pop Queen: The Cult of Phumphueng Duangchan and Lottery Mania in Contemporary Thailand," (master's thesis, Suranaree University of Technology, 1999), 6; Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, "Thai Pop Music and Cultural Negotiations in Everyday Politics," in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1998), 216; and James Leonard Mitchell, *Luk Thung: The Culture and Politics of Thailand's Most Popular Music* (Chiang Mai: Silk Worm Books, 2015), 123.

⁹ Siriyuvasak, "Thai Pop Music," 216.

¹⁰ Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, "Commercialising the Sound of the People: Pleng Luktoong and the Thai Pop Music Industry," *Popular Music* 9, no. 1 (1990): 61-77, 67.

¹¹ Siriyuvasak, "Thai Pop Music," 216.

¹² *Ibid.*

genre of *luk thung*, challenging how sensual and risqué lyrics—once confined to only male singers—could be used.¹³

Once settled in the capital, Pumpuang Duangjan began modernizing the genre into a dance-ready form known as *electronic luk thung*, or “electroluk thung.”¹⁴ The modernized genre, now drawing upon electronic instruments such as the bass guitar and synthesizer, and borrowing much of its influence from pop, rock, and disco, made Duangjan into a national sensation.¹⁵ The modernization of *luk thung* notably coincided with American military occupation in the Northeastern Thailand region of Isan and further continued with its withdrawal in 1973. As many of the Thai bands performed Western hits for U.S. servicemen, the musicians incorporated Western techniques into their music by blending rock, pop, and disco with *luk thung* and *molam*—another form of country music from the Lao and Thai hinterlands, a practice that continued even after U.S. military withdrawal.¹⁶ The incorporation of foreign musical elements, like disco or Latin rhythms, was a “natural move” for Thailand’s country music as there were many similarities between them.¹⁷ The genre modernized even further as new technology in the 1980s began to influence *luk thung*, industrializing the traditional form with new instruments, the advent of cassette technology in 1975, as well as the introduction of sensual dance moves and more racy fashion styles.¹⁸ These changes increased the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “From the Heart,” *Bangkok Post*, N.D., <https://www.pressreader.com/thailand/bangkok-post/20090612/282389805455107> (accessed October 6, 2017).

¹⁵ See Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, “Commercialising the Sound of the People: Pleng Luktoong and the Thai Pop Music Industry,” *Popular Music* 9, no. 1 (1990): 61-77; and Amporn Jirattikorn, “Lukthung: Authenticity and Modernity in Thai Country Music,” *Asian Music* 37, no. 1 (2006): 24-50.

¹⁶ Laurel Tuohy, “Thailand’s Forgotten Country-Psychedelic Music Is Having a Global Renaissance,” *VICE*, March 6, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mvxdmy/thailands-forgotten-country-psychedelic-music-is-making-a-comeback (accessed April 27, 2018).

¹⁷ Mitchell, *Luk Thung*, 69.

¹⁸ Jirattikorn, “*Lukthung*,” 25-28.

popularity of the genre as new listeners reimagined *luk thung*'s classic themes of rural life through contemporary trends in popular music. Pumpuang Duangjan and her production team took what was already happening in the Thai music scene, developing *luk thung* into a contemporary category of music that helped revive the genre.¹⁹

Pumpuang Duangjan thus became known as “revolutionary” in the history of *luk thung* music.²⁰ Her accomplishments were so prolific that exact number of her albums, songs, and performances are unclear. However, as a large number of her songs and albums came out during the eighties, the singer's most popular albums, said to transform *luk thung* overall, came out between 1985 and 1987.²¹ Duangjan's popularity earned the singer numerous awards for the albums that she produced and led her to perform for royal audiences and guests in five-star hotels in Bangkok, in addition to numerous live concerts nationwide.²²

Along with rejuvenating *luk thung*, Pumpuang Duangjan became important to everyday Thais because she addressed the daily struggles of the working-class in her lyrics and further defied restrictive pleasures placed on Thai women, singing openly about female sexuality and desire. Millions of Thai women identified with the music of the singer because of her humble roots and how she spotlighted the harsh realities faced by many female migrants in the capital city.²³ Such themes were conveyed through her signature and impassioned delivery; her sound was distinctively country, marked by a strong and emotional vibrato that was further pronounced by her lyricism.

¹⁹ Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, 62.

²⁰ Kitiarsa, “Remembering the Pop Queen,” 8.

²¹ Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, 61.

²² Kitiarsa, “Remembering the Pop Queen,” 9.

²³ Lockard, *Southeast Asia*, 181-182.

As her career advanced, Duangjan's music shifted from lovelorn stories of the countryside to more "sexually seductive" songs that appealed to listeners in urban Bangkok, especially men.²⁴ Wichian Khamcharoen, a professional composer and *luk thung* teacher, describes Pumpuang Duangjan as "very talented and gifted. Her voice and tunes were deep into whatever emotion was required by each song's genre."²⁵

In the eyes of millions of Thai women, Pumpuang Duangjan was the quintessential definition of the "modern" Thai woman.²⁶ She evoked eroticism in her music, how she dressed, and her presentation, signaling pleasure and modernity through her uninhibited style.²⁷ She critiqued the gendered politics of respectability enforced by the nation-state through direct confrontation.²⁸ For example, Duangjan openly discussed her love affairs, through her performances and her very publicized life, with her then-husband, divulging her indiscretions as a strategy to head off public scandals.²⁹ Her shows were also said to be "spectacle[s]" as they were full of life, rivaling Vegas nightclub acts in terms of production, costume, and design.³⁰ Journalist Wise Kwai comically concludes that it is "[n]o wonder Pumpuang became a gay icon and idol of drag queens."³¹ Even today, gay journalists and fans have said that the country singer who modernized the *luk thung* genre as well as the sexual politics of Thai femininity became an "icon" due to her fashion sense and fearless attitude.³² In her work

²⁴ Kitiarsa, "Remembering the Pop Queen," 8.

²⁵ Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, 61.

²⁶ Lockard, *Southeast Asia*, 181; and Yanapon Musiket, "The queens and I."

²⁷ Siriyuvasak, "Thai pop music," 220.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Wise Kwai, "Review: Pumpuang (The Moon)," *Wise Kwai's Thai Film Journal*, August 1, 2011, <http://thaifilmjournal.blogspot.com/2011/08/review-pumpuang-moon.html> (accessed March 9, 2018).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Musiket, "The queens and I."

and life, Duangjan resonated with many everyday Thais who sought to reimagine their subjectivities and desires outside the normative and restrictive regimes of Thainess.

Though she was successful and beloved by thousands, Pumpuang Duangjan's personal life was shaped by heartache, failed marriages, and personal loss. As she was illiterate, her finances were always managed by other people. Many have speculated that a poor handling of finances caused a deep rift between Duangjan's family and her second husband, Kraisorn Sangkarn—who was accused of having an affair with a woman in Chiang Mai and may have embezzled the singer's money (figure 3.2).³³



FIGURE 3.2 Pumpuang Duangjan, her husband—Kraisorn Sangkarn, and their son. Original Photographer Unknown, Reproduced by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.

³³ Kitiarsa, "Remembering the Pop Queen," 12.

Furthermore, Duangjan's success adversely affected her health.³⁴ In the last few years of her life, the singer suffered from systemic lupus erythematosus and angio-immunoblastic lymphadenopathy with dysproteinemia. In her search for success, she overworked her body because "she couldn't say enough was enough."³⁵ Owing to many people in Duangjan's life coercively depriving her of her earnings, the singer was unable to afford treatment for her blood disorder, leading to her death at age thirty-one on June 13, 1992.³⁶

Collective Mourning: The funeral of Pumpuang Duangjan

When she died at thirty-one, Pumpuang Duangjan was at the height of her career and was one of the most beloved celebrities in the country (figure 3.3).³⁷ Her death was shocking to thousands of Thais across the nation, generating a "collective emotion" of bereavement (figure 3.4).³⁸

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁵ Wise Kwai, "Review: Pumpuang (The Moon)."

³⁶ Lockard, *Southeast Asia*, 182.

³⁷ Kitiarsa, "Remembering the Pop Queen," 13.

³⁸ Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, 65.



FIGURE 3.3 Fans commemorate Duangjan by memorializing her photographs.
Photograph of Shrine by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.

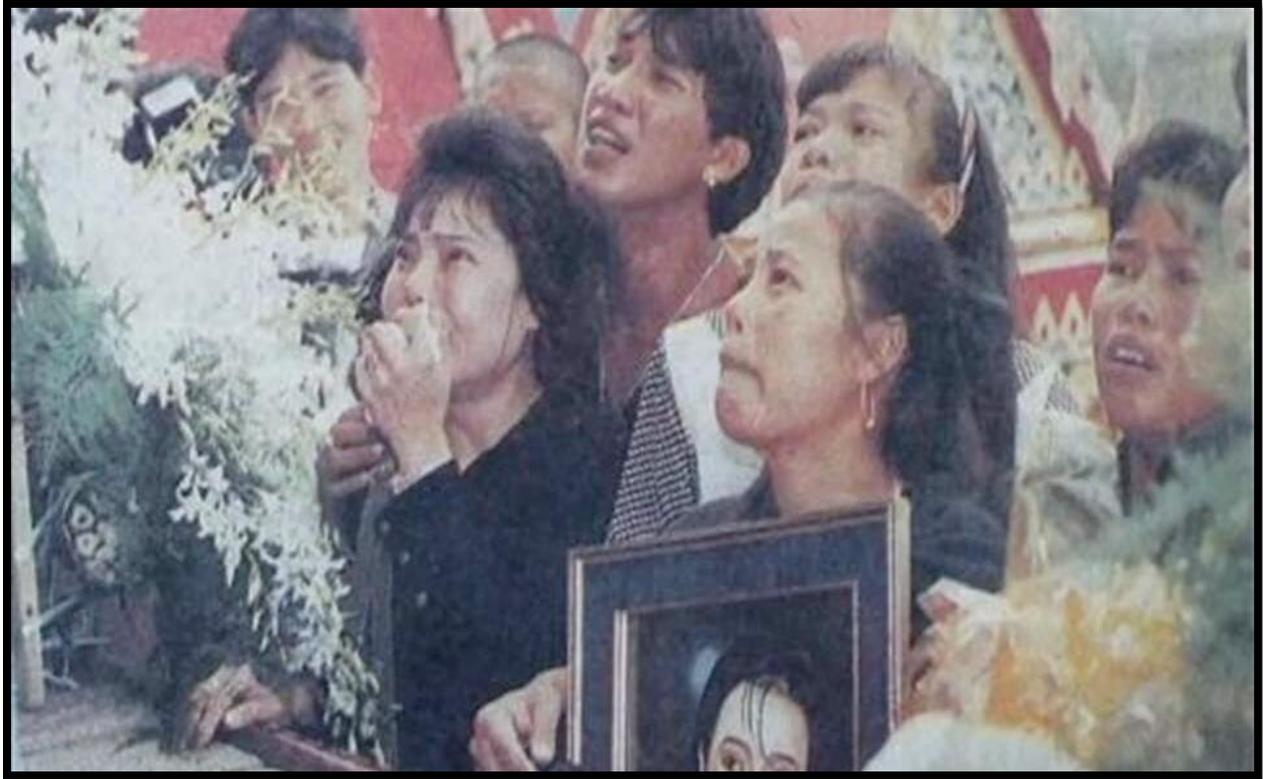


FIGURE 3.4 Fans mourn the loss of their country singer.

Original Photographer Unknown, Reproduced by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.

Due to her widespread popularity, Duangjan was granted a royal cremation ceremony—the culminating event in royal Thai funerals, drawing over 150,000 fans, as seen in the photograph above, from around the nation to Wat Thapkradan in Suphan Buri.³⁹ The

³⁹ In Thailand, funerals vary depending on region and location, in addition to social stature. Typically, a Thai funeral begins with a water ceremony where attendees will pour lustral water to bless the deceased. The coffin and body are then displayed for three to seven consecutive days, allowing daily rites to be held in addition to affirm merit-making (*tum boon*) rituals. Finally, the body is then cremated and the person's ashes are given to family members or, at times, scattered in nature to symbolize rebirth and progression. Merit-making rites last up to 100 days after the cremation. However, Thais in power—typically royalty, government officials, or high-ranking individuals—will be granted a royal funeral, highlighted by the ceremony's elaborateness, its sponsorship by the state, and made public. Curator Clark Cunningham says that “the more prominent that people were in life, the grander their cremation ceremonies would be at death” (Clark Cunningham, “Three Funerals in Rural Central Thailand,” *Spurlock Museum of World Cultures*, March 1, 2017, <http://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/blog/p/three-funerals-in/117> (accessed June 13, 2018)). In the case of a royal funeral, the event begins with a bathing ceremony and is followed by the body being dressed in white and placed within a *kot*—or large funerary urn. The deceased is then enshrined for 100 days, allowing the public to pay their respects; such an enshrinement is like lying-in-state. Eventually, the coffin will be prepared for cremation and is paraded in a funeral procession. The *kot* is then brought to a pyre where Buddhist rites are held and the cremation commences in the evening. The bones and ashes of the deceased are eventually placed in smaller urns where they will be interred in the royal cemetery.

sheer number of Thais who publicly mourned the singer was one of the largest gatherings ever for a person of “common” origins in contemporary Thailand (figure 3.5). The event was so significant that Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the royal patroness of *luk thung* music, presided over Duangjan’s funeral, making the ceremony one of “the most memorable event[s] in public memory.”⁴⁰



FIGURE 3.5 Thousands attend Duangjan’s royal cremation.⁴¹

Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn attendance at Pumpuang Duangjan’s funeral in addition to Duangjan’s quasi-royal ceremony and cremation illustrated the power of working-class popular culture. It is important to reiterate that *luk thung* was cast as “low” art because of “Central Thai chauvinism.” Its female singers, like Duangjan, were

The word “wat,” in Thai, refers to a Buddhist and Hindu temple in Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

⁴⁰ Kitiarsa, “Remembering the Pop Queen,” 14.

⁴¹ ongchainineoneone, “ผู้คนร่วมหมั่นแห่รับศพคนดัง ไม่ได้เกิดกับ”ปอ-ทฤษฎี”ครั้งแรก ก่อนหน้านี้มีใครกันบ้างอ่านด่วน!” *POSTJUNG.COM โปสท์จัง.คอม*, 630 × 357 pixels, N.D., <https://board.postjung.com/941806.html> (accessed June 21, 2018).

blamed as being immoral, urging Thai women to embrace sexuality and physical pleasure.⁴² Pumpuang Duangjan, her music, and what she represented continually pushed the boundaries of what constituted appropriate behavior in Thailand, drawing the ire of upper-class, conservative, and central-residing Thais. I contend that the royal imprimatur upon Duangjan's death was less about state approval of what Duangjan stood for, but rather an attempt to render public mourning of a female celebrity into a "state spectacle" that served to channel, control, and mediate grief to appease a mass gathering of disempowered people.⁴³ The theatricality of the funeral thus served as a renegotiation of state power where, like other funeral services of celebrities and honored figures, "claimed visual power through layering, the addition and augmentation of traditional and nontraditional elements."⁴⁴ Sirindhorn's attendance in addition to honoring Duangjan's funeral as regal were ways that the monarchy could police everyday citizens through grief and sentiment, associating peoples' mourning with grand aspects of Thainess, the nation-state and its prized history. By associating Duangjan's death with the monarchy and the traditions of the upper-classes, the "royal funeral" privileged a nationalized past that instantaneously monumentalized the present under a sanitized umbrella of Thainess.⁴⁵ In other words, Pumpuang Duangjan's funeral was appropriated and even hijacked by those in power, using the diva and everyday peoples' love for the star to promote an idealized and forcefully united vision of *khwampenthai*.

⁴² Mitchell, *Luk Thung*, 37, 36, and 123.

⁴³ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 140.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Yet, simultaneously, the fact that the monarchy took notice of the singer's death and honored her in such a way speaks to the political and cultural weight carried by working-class Thais. I argue that these marginalized communities forced the royal family and those in power to recognize the singer's sentimental power as someone who personified the inequalities that many Thai citizens face. Duangjan's posthumous power, harnessed by the masses, demanded Bangkok elites and the monarchy to publicly mourn and show emotion for the people's "Queen of *Lukthung*." In other words, the peoples' veneration, love, and devotion for their singer forced *siwilai* Thais and the monarchy to recognize her, her accomplishments, and what she gave to the Thai nation as significant contributions. While the monarchy's acceptance and mourning of Pumpuang Duangjan could be seen as voluntary or appropriative, because *luk thung* and Duangjan were seen as low brow and not *siwilai*, I contend that the posthumous recognition demanded by everyday Thais compelled social elites to show empathy in the face of the power of mass sentiment.

The funeral spectacularized Wat Thapkradan, canonizing the temple as a spiritual, supernatural, *and* commercialized destination for fans to pay homage to the famed singer. Fans began constructing physical memorials around the place of worship, transforming Wat Thapkradan from an unknown *wat* Thai into one of the country's wealthiest, most glamorous, and most visited places of worship.⁴⁶ Today, the religious site is known as a tourist destination.⁴⁷ The theatricality of Duangjan's funeral consecrated the temple as a site and spectacle of divine power, redefining the rules of traditional and male-centered Buddhism.

⁴⁶ Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, 69.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

The accumulation of shrines honoring Pumpuang Duangjan at Wat Thapkradan directly defies the patriarchal ordinances found in Thai Buddhism. In Buddhist tradition, the memorialization of ordinary people is typically restricted to a photograph of the deceased, placed on a stupa or a wall in the temple. Their ashes are sometimes interned within the building.⁴⁸ If physical shrines are constructed, they are generally reserved for monarchs, national heroes, soldiers, or the spirits invoked through Thai animism.⁴⁹ Duangjan, though a celebrity, was still just a commoner and, more importantly, a woman with provincial roots. The singer's spectacularized funeral in and the memorials dedicated to her on temple grounds directly confronted the patriarchal institution of Thai Buddhism—which considers women to be of a lower moral status—challenging Buddhism's power to define the value of Thai life.⁵⁰

Over time, Pumpuang Duangjan's shrine came to be seen as a site imbued with supernatural power, giving good fortune and lottery luck to those who worshiped her – especially women and working-class migrants.⁵¹ The mystic elements surrounding the temple led to its reputation as the “Amazing Wat Thapkradan” by journalists and the Tourism Authority of Thailand.⁵² Due to contributions made by fans, fortune seekers, visitors, and Buddhists, the temple became prosperous, allowing for the maintenance of Wat Thapkradan, Duangjan's relics, in addition to the shrines dedicated to her.⁵³ On a

⁴⁸ Erik Cohen, “Roadside Memorials in Northeastern Thailand,” *OMEGA* 66, no. 4 (2012-2013): 343-363, 347.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 67.

⁵¹ Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, 66.

⁵² Kitiarsa, “Remembering the Pop Queen,” 17; and Tourism Authority of Thailand, “Attractions: Wat Thap Kradan - Tourism Authority of Thailand,” *Tourism Authority of Thailand*, N.D., <https://www.tourismthailand.org/Attraction/Wat-Thap-Kradan--5077> (accessed November 20, 2017).

⁵³ Cohen, “Roadside Memorials,” 348.

busy day, the temple has been said to collect over ฿300,000 (around USD\$9,000) in cash in one of its many donation boxes.⁵⁴

As Wat Thapkradan prospered due to the popularity of Pumpuang Duangjan's shrines and subsequent donations brought in by fans, it could be argued that the temple—an extension of a state-sponsored and heteronationalist Buddhism—coopted the radical and queer commemoration of the singer, overlooking how her presence on temple grounds disrupted the religion's traditional values and conservatism. Yet, while the *wat* does utilize the wealth brought in by monetary gifts, the temple and shrine are entangled in a relationship that benefits both in unique ways. For one, the monument gave devotees a centralized space to congregate, giving fans from all over Thailand—a number emphasized by the over 150,000 mourners who made the journey to Duangjan's funeral—a pilgrimage site. Secondly, Wat Thapkradan benefited as the singer's memorial caught the attention of local and international tourists, turning a relatively unknown temple outside of Bangkok into a prosperous place of worship.⁵⁵ The money accrued from donations allowed the *wat* to participate within Thailand's booming tourist economy in addition to global capitalism.⁵⁶ This adaptation allowed for some Buddhist temples, like Wat Thapkradan, to “outlast[] ... in the modern capitalist market.”⁵⁷ It is of importance to note that the price for economic prosperity for the *wat* was high; it demanded the reconfiguration of Buddhist beliefs about women, especially in this particular space. Yet, the reconfigurations of Thai womanhood by Buddhism, though radical to a degree, were only limited to this one space.

⁵⁴ Kitiarsa, “Remembering the Pop Queen,” 22.

⁵⁵ Kitiarsa, “Remembering the Pop Queen,” 18; and Cohen, “Roadside Memorials,” 348.

⁵⁶ Jiemin Bao, “Merit-Making Capitalism.”

⁵⁷ Kitiarsa, “Remembering the Pop Queen,” 38.

Noting the significance of Wat Thapkradan, this chapter examines the singer's commemoration by Thais nationwide, as a part of the local diaspora, in order to track how individuals and communities situated themselves as political agents from the 1990s and onward. Drawing upon the singer's image as a queer icon, a Thai feminist, as well as her title of "Queen of *Lukthung*," I home in on moments where the commemoration of Pumpuang Duangjan unsettles mainstream notions of Thainess by exhuming deviant desires and performing forms of celebrity worship as a path to queer worldmaking. Borrowing from Martin F. Manalansan IV, I frame Duangjan's commemoration and the *messiness* of this archive, as instantiations of "underrecognized practices, stances, and situations that deviate from, resist, or run counter to the workings of normality."⁵⁸ The power behind sites of commemoration for Duangjan rests in the mundane, ordinary, and intimate—such as the shrine or the value of her music—that Thais continue to generate in order to keep the country singer "alive." By focusing on the quotidian, I argue that the singer's persona provides the material for creativity and strength for those who loved her, inspiring everyday people to question the social conditions that affect their lives.

"The Queen": Pumpuang Duangjan as a queer and feminist icon

Though Pumpuang Duangjan died quite young, she continues to be celebrated as "*rachini lukthung*," or the "Queen of *Lukthung*," emerging as a queer and feminist icon for Thais within the nation-state and the local diaspora.⁵⁹ Pumpuang Duangjan herself was not known to be queer or declared herself to be a feminist, but her persona lends itself to an expansive reimagining of social norms constrained by Thai ideas of

⁵⁸ Martin F. Manalansan IV, "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 120 (2014): 94-107, 97.

⁵⁹ Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, 62; and Jirattikorn, "Lukthung," 36.

gender and sexuality. For example, her glamour was deliberately immodest, contesting Thai female respectability under the logics of heterosexuality. Thai women were typically and continue to be defined by both authoritative and conservative discourses that name “good womanhood,” structured by Thai ideas of *riap roi*, or that which is “prim and proper.”⁶⁰ While in public, Thai women are expected to embody a demeanor that is modest and respectable, practicing filial piety, responsibility to family, valuing marriage, and caring for children.⁶¹ Yet, Pumpuang Duangjan’s appearance queers these dominant expectations placed on women by living life on her own terms. Scholars have pointed out that the singer reimagined Thai gender roles in the 1980s and 1990s by being the “original model” of an unhindered female sexuality, introducing Thailand to the “modern woman” (*phuu ying thansamay*)—a fearless female who was open-minded, fashionable, sensual, and defined her identity on her own terms. Her charisma and boldness destabilized a male-dominated Thailand, refashioning notions of Thai femininity through her success and boldness (figure 3.6).⁶²

⁶⁰ Suchada Thaweessit, “The Fluidity of Thai Women’s Gendered and Sexual Subjectivities,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 6, no. 3 (2004): 205-219, 210.

⁶¹ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 103; and Thaweessit, “The Fluidity,” 207.

⁶² Kitiarsa, “Remembering the Pop Queen,” 8-9; and Musiket, “The queens and I.”



FIGURE 3.6 Pumpuang Duangjan as a sex symbol and fashion icon.
Original Photographer Unknown, Reproduced by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.

Duangjan's queerness materializes as a position and strategy, enacting Thai femininity as a subversive approach, practice, and imaginative navigation of daily life inside and beyond Thailand's heteropatriarchy.⁶³ As a Thai woman who challenged a male-dominated industry and society, the singer epitomized everything that marginal Thais—such as rural women and gay men—wanted in an icon or “best friend.”⁶⁴

Though it has been documented that many gay men and women found the singer to be inspirational, there are no substantial studies discussing how Pumpuang Duangjan impacted the lives and identities of queer women. This lack is due, in part, to the marginalization of *tom* (tomboys or lesbians) and *dee* (a *tom*'s feminine companion, or the femme) lesbian cultures like the more spectacular (and spectacularized) Thai gay and *kathoey* areas of study.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, Duangjan's modernized femininity paved the way for queer Thai women to openly participate in contemporary urban culture, helping re/define commercial spaces and fashion choices as pathways to representation. While Pumpuang Duangjan was gaining celebrityhood during the 1980s and 1990s, *tom* and *dee* Thais, through their participation in urban consumer culture, such as the mall, became more visible. Queer Thai women used the sexual languages found in the culture of the market space and “‘new, modern’ apparel” to enact both romantic and homosocial relationships as well as visual forms of representation, integrating themselves into existing spaces in Bangkok's market economy.⁶⁶ During the 1990s Thai women in general also began to commodify the image of female masculinity

⁶³ Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad*, 27.

⁶⁴ Musiket, “The queens and I.”

⁶⁵ Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok*, 102; and Peter A. Jackson, “Capitalism, LGBT Activism, and Queer Autonomy in Thailand,” in *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, ed. Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 197.

⁶⁶ Wilson, *Intimate Economies*, 128.

in magazine and popular culture, helped along by celebrities such as Duangjan.⁶⁷ The connections between *phuu ying thansamay*, clothing trends, and structures of capitalism made the 1980s and 1990s a rich era for reconceptualizing both heterosexual and queer Thai womanhood by way of Pumpuang Duangjan's trailblazing.

In addition to being held up as a “queen” and a queer icon, Pumpuang Duangjan personified traits that defined her as a feminist by Thai standards. It is important to note is that there is no absolute definition of feminism in Thailand as many activists consider feminism to be an extrinsically Western idea, inappropriate for the conditions and issues faced by Thai women.⁶⁸ Penny Van Esterik asserts that Thai feminism, if there is one, is based on pragmatism, suggesting that “the consequences of gender inequities and poverty [are] often [addressed] without theorizing about their historical and cultural causes.”⁶⁹ In other words, Thai feminism and Thai women's movements are shaped by the immediacy of everyday experiences—such as sexism, child-rearing, and intimate relationships, all of which are refracted through Thai culture.⁷⁰ Thai feminist ideals therefore align themselves with the music, image, and after/life of Pumpuang Duangjan as she sang about the struggles and desires of women trapped in a patriarchal, sexist, and capitalist Thailand, as well as mundane or commonplace issues—such as making *som tum*, or “green papaya salad.”⁷¹ Singing about her own personal experiences,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 129-130.

⁶⁸ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 58.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁰ Chalidaporn Songsamphan, “Localizing Feminism: Women's Voices and Social Activism in Thai Context,” *Gunda-Werner-Institute: Feminism and Gender Democracy*, March 9, 2011, <https://www.gwi-boell.de/en/2011/03/09/localizing-feminism-women%E2%80%99s-voices-and-social-activism-thai-context> (accessed April 27, 2018).

⁷¹ “ส้มตำ,” or “Som Tum” (“Green Papaya Salad”), is the name of a song (N.D.) and album (N.D.) by Pumpuang Duangjan. The song is fun and carefree, pointing to the singer's love of preparing and eating the Thai delicacy.

Duangjan “assumed the symbolic center of political discourse” through which Thai women contending with the everyday struggles for equality and visibility could identify.⁷²

Prior to delving into the archive, it is important to discuss *luk thung* as a genre of music, its history, and its significance to the Thai people. Literally translated as “child of the fields,” *luk thung* emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as the music of the impoverished Isan region.⁷³ Not appreciated by citizens in central Thailand, the genre was stereotyped as “backward[s]”, “rustic”, and even “inferior” because of its simple lyrical content, distinctive country accent, as well as its connections to Isan and neighboring Laos.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, songs in the genre reflected the lifestyles, hardships, and lack of political power felt by many rural Thais. Distinctly lowbrow, *luk thung* is significant because it was born out of a rich culture of political protest and representation. *Pleng chiwit* (“songs of life”), coming out of the 1950s, and the 1970s’ *pleng phuea chiwit* (“songs for life”) both highlighted rurality in addition to serving as cultural markers for progressive students and academics.⁷⁵ The songs that came out of these genres brought attention to the inequalities in Thailand and the struggles felt by many who were oppressed by conservatism. They embodied a desire to improve the nation and how it treated its citizens.⁷⁶ *Luk thung* highlights the lives of those in the countryside as well as

⁷² Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, 24.

⁷³ Jirattikorn, “Lukthung,” 24; and Craig A. Lockard, “Luk Thung: The Culture and Politics of Thailand’s Most Popular Music by James Leonard Mitchell (review),” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 32, no. 1 (2017): 176-179, 176.

⁷⁴ Lockard, “Luk Thung,” 177; Mitchell, *Luk Thung*, 37; and Pamela A. Myers-Moro, “Songs for Life: Leftist Thai Popular Music in the 1970s,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 20, no. 3 (1986): 93-113, 98.

⁷⁵ See Pamela A. Myers-Moro, “Songs for Life: Leftist Thai Popular Music in the 1970s,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 20, no. 3 (1986): 93-113; and The Isaan Record, “Luk Thung – The sound of political protest and Isaan’s cultural revival,” *The Isaan Record*, October 30, 2015, <https://isaanrecord.com/2015/10/30/luk-thung-the-sound-of-political-protest-and-isaans-cultural-revival/> (accessed April 20, 2018).

⁷⁶ Myers-Moro, “Songs for Life,” 101.

those not belonging to Bangkok's bourgeoisie. The genre itself is a queer performance of Thainess as it critiques hegemonic and heteronormative understandings of race, gender, and sexuality.⁷⁷

I argue that *luk thung* is queer as it identifies with an "earthy sexuality" and is further driven by its sexual imagery, explicit jokes, and charged symbolism that are deemed immoral and improper.⁷⁸ The crass and queer imagery that subvert the logics of normative and conservative heterosexuality destabilizes the traditional values set by the bourgeois to maintain Thai propriety and ideas of *siwilai*. The moral codes deployed by the state and those in power held up heteronormative relationships as the epitome of civility.⁷⁹ *Luk thung* diverged from such modesty as it embraced sexuality as decoupled from reproductive sexuality, testing society's boundaries.⁸⁰ In this sense, Pumpuang Duangjan's modernized *luk thung* queered patriarchal and conservative Thai culture as it unabashedly privileged the modern woman, in addition to her sexuality, desires, and representation. She queered the musical category by contrasting the "normalizing tendencies of hegemonic sexuality rooted in ideas of static, stable sexual identities and behaviors."⁸¹

Examining how Pumpuang Duangjan radically embodied queer values and Thai feminism, I look at the after/life of the country singer as it serves as a queer cultural touchstone for diasporic Thais—both inside and outside Thailand. For these individuals

⁷⁷ Martin F. Manalansan IV, "Queer," in *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, eds. Cathy J. Schlund Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and K. Scott Wong (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 200.

⁷⁸ Mitchell, *Luk Thung*, 122-123.

⁷⁹ Peter A. Jackson, "The Performative State: Semi-coloniality and the Tyranny of Images in Modern Thailand," *SOJOURN* 19, No. 2 (2004): 219-253, 238-240.

⁸⁰ Mitchell, *Luk Thung*, 123.

⁸¹ Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens: the radical potential of queer politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997) (2007): 437-485, 438.

displaced by the nation's attempts to develop, modernize, and participate in the global economy, Duangjan's legacy is generative for redefinitions of Thai identity. In making space for ideas of Thainess distanced from heteropatriarchal interests, commemorations of Duangjan reference a queer, "alternative hermeneutic, [that emerges as] particular interpretive strategies that are available to those who are deemed 'impossible' within hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses."⁸² In other words, queerness can operate as an approach that allows for different understandings of identity and culture situated under heteropatriarchal and heteronationalist forces. Moreover, this challenge is not about the incorporation of marginalized peoples into the norm, but rather a redefining of what constitutes the normative itself. Thai women, queers, and those whose labor and lives have undergirded Thailand's participation in modernity, can thus be said to utilize the image of Duangjan to imaginatively recuperate the desires and subjectivities rendered unintelligible and unworthy in its push for development. Rebuking normalized understandings of *khwampenthai* defined by a hegemonic bourgeoisie, the queer and commemorative work that fans enact in the memory of Pumpuang Duangjan regenerate versions of Thainess that echo the singer's challenge to social order and love of rural life and people.⁸³

In what remains of this chapter, I use queer diasporic cultures as a lens to approach how individuals from maligned communities—such as women, queers, the rural, poor, and working-class folk—commemorate Pumpuang Duangjan through a politics deeply rooted in the local. I draw from Gayatri Gopinath's contention that queer and diasporic public cultures allow disregarded subjects a chance to articulate new and

⁸² Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 22.

⁸³ Ingawanij, "Nang Nak," 181.

alternative modes of kinship and collectivity via “clandestine counter-memories” that allow them to “reimagine their relationship to the past and the present.”⁸⁴ The queer and diasporic cultures animated by way of Pumpuang Duangjan’s commemoration produce an archive that contests, redefines, and repurposes Thai identity toward a different future. The spirit and after/life of fallen stars, like Selena or Duangjan, crystalize as an energy for disenfranchised people that emerges through sites of culture and contestation. By examining a Thai temple that has been dramatically altered to celebrate the life and spirit of Pumpuang Duangjan, I argue that the queer diasporic cultural forms studied in this chapter point us to the imaginative and radical ways that marginal Thais make claims on Thainess and Thailand by drawing on the energy and passions of the country singer.

Pumpuang’s Temple: Shrine, deification, and queering Buddhist spaces

Temples are ubiquitous in Thailand, reflecting that 90 percent of the nation identifies as Theravada Buddhists.⁸⁵ Penny Van Esterik notes that Thailand is built as a nation of Theravada Buddhism, arguing that “To be Thai is to be Buddhist.”⁸⁶ However, Thai Buddhism and its temples are predominantly male-centered, undervaluing the contributions of women and forcing them to inhabit inferior positions.⁸⁷ Many of the negative associations with women are due to the fact that they are believed to be born of bad karma from previous lives.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Nicola Tannenbaum alleges that Buddhism characterizes women as more worldly and sensual than men, denoting that

⁸⁴ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 21.

⁸⁵ Bao, “Merit-Making Capitalism,” 120.

⁸⁶ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 65.

⁸⁷ Khin Thitsa, *Providence and Prostitution: Image and Reality for Women in Buddhist Thailand* (London: Change, International Reports, Women and Society, 1980), 20.

⁸⁸ Archana Paudel and Qun Dong, “The Discrimination of Women in Buddhism: An Ethical Analysis,” *OALib* 04, no. 04 (2017): 1-18, 4.

female desire and sexual powers are antithetical to the survival of Buddhism.⁸⁹ This belief has forced many Thai women to take up positions as prostitutes, nuns, or spirit mediums due to society's imbalanced gender roles.⁹⁰ Even nuns, known as *mae-chi*, or spirit mediums, who are seen as respectable, are usually looked down upon as most of their ceremonial rites are done privately, delegitimizing their spiritual authority.⁹¹ The sexism found in Thai Buddhism is further demonstrated by the fact that Thai women are referenced as "second-class citizens" even as their labor in the service sector and sex work has helped underwrite Thai development.⁹² The second-class status of Thai women is exacerbated by state-sanctioned religion and the nation's endorsement of giving women fewer opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions, leaving them—particularly those from the countryside or impoverished areas—with little to no education and no other choice than to enter into prostitution.⁹³

Against and in response to Theravada Buddhism's sexism, fans and followers of Pumpuang Duangjan have altered the gender and spatial dynamics in Wat Thapkradan, celebrating both Thailand's religion as well as the life of the country singer. Fans have found a way to memorialize Duangjan while maintain the temple's legitimacy and religious order, even (and perhaps because) it is increasingly commercialized.

At Wat Thapkradan, the shrines commemorating Pumpuang Duangjan dominate an otherwise masculine space and sanctuary. There is a shrine located to the left of Wat Thapkradan's *ubosot*—the holiest prayer room or "ordination hall"—hidden

⁸⁹ Nicola Tannenbaum, "Buddhism, Prostitution, and Sex: Limits on the Academic Discourse on Gender in Thailand," in *Genders & Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, eds. Peter A. Jackson and Nerida M. Cook (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999), 248.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 249-250.

⁹³ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 65-71; and Tannenbaum, "Buddhism, Prostitution, and Sex," 243-251.

underneath a large bodhi tree that is draped in multi-colored silk garments, exhibiting the belief that trees contain spirits and heavenly beings. At the tree's base are framed images of Duangjan decorated with vibrant red, orange, and magenta *phuang malai*, or floral garlands, signifying a thriving respect for the late singer.

This shrine is in the shape of a *sala*, or open pavilion with a similar pyramidal roof, and is housed underneath the massive tree, overlooking a small pond. The *sala* has a red roof, no walls, and is dressed in golden-yellow curtains that are pulled back to allow the aroma of incense and burning candles to permeate the space. The area is lined with white tiles, which are made wet by heavy rains in the region. Following traditional Buddhist customs, pilgrims remove their shoes as they enter the *sala* where a medium-sized wax statue of Pumpuang Duangjan stands in the center, robed in a green and gold sari.⁹⁴ The statue is further surrounded with more framed pictures of the singer, cradled by multicolored Christmas lights; traditional silk garbs that fans donated in her honor; bouquets of fresh and plastic flowers; aromatic incense sifting through the air; in addition to plastic vanities that individuals purchase to gift the singer's spirit (figure 3.7).

⁹⁴ I was told by a layperson that the clothing fashioned on the wax statue changes annually, cycling different costumes that show Pumpuang Duangjan's style and glamour.



FIGURE 3.7 A wax figurine of Pumpuang Duangjan.
Photograph of Shrine by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.

Though a spiritual space, the shrine is somewhat campy, displaying a tackiness and flamboyance that mirrors Duangjan's glamorous but earthy persona. The decor is excessive and in that excessiveness the memorial makes the singer grand and otherworldly. For instance, the framed posters and images situated behind Duangjan's mannequin are extravagant in their size: they are so big that they overlap, taking up every inch of space on the *sala's* walls. This excess, as Brett Farmer argues, works as an "artificial masquerade" that recodes female stars, such as divas, and what they represent and how they perform, denaturalizing hegemonic gender codes that articulate female performance.⁹⁵ From the collection of synthetic and fresh flowers; the Christmas lights; the massive portraits; and the wax figurine itself, the space is a performance in excess, destabilizing normative forms of worship on Buddhist grounds. The location reconfigures how Thai women are expected to uphold the burden of female identity and sexuality, which is to personify notions of gratitude through self-sacrifice and humbleness, to endure pain and tribulations, and to care for one's children and husband.⁹⁶ I argue that the shrine's décor, as designed and put together by Duangjan's fans, allow individuals the chance to live beyond the state and Buddhism's ideas of Thai moderation—especially in regards to female propriety and moral order. Those who help design the space and maintain it thus imbue it with extraordinary forms of representation, illustrating Thainess as something extravagant, beautiful, and uncontainable by way of the image of Pumpuang Duangjan and her shrine. In a way, such an over-the-top remembrance defies not only Buddhist values, but Duangjan's

⁹⁵ Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 149-150.

⁹⁶ Thaweessit, "The Fluidity," N.P.

death itself, extending her vivid but short life into the realms of the folklore and fantasy; it becomes the material to which everyday Thais can dream. Furthermore, the fact that the space is so vibrant and lively speaks to the affective attachments that worshippers continue to have and maintain with the singer after her death.

Though Duangjan's shrine is loud and colorful, there is a humble quality that lingers despite its splendor. The site's modest qualities materialize if we think of the emotional and physical labor of its construction within the grounds of the Thai temple. The fact that everyday Thais came together to construct spaces of veneration for Duangjan speaks to the generative ways that this bond between themselves and their queen spurs connection and identification. The shrine illuminates the energy powered by the hopes and dreams of those who loved the singer during her life and long after her demise. Though she could have been forgotten or disregarded, Pumpuang Duangjan's altar becomes a place of creation, stewardship, and excess where fans craft and lovingly preserve the singer's grandeur, along the way undermining normative conceptions of Thainess and belonging. The site's excessiveness reflects the fruit of José Esteban Muñoz's "Brown feelings," "antinormative feelings ... correspond[ing] to minoritarian becoming" that enable "a larger collective mapping of self and other."⁹⁷ Brown feelings chronicle the ethics and forms of self-care that marginalized and displaced people of color feel when they do not feel at home with normative forms of affect or behaviors demanded by state and society. The memorial is therefore a spiritual haven where Thais, marginal or not, are able to create and preserve a sense of

⁹⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position," *Signs* 31, no. 3 (2006): 675-688, 679.

community and belonging, propelled by brown feelings animated and brought to life by the memory of Pumpuang Duangjan.

As a gathering space to celebrate and worship the after/life of the country singer, Wat Thapkradan and the shrine materialize as sanctified spaces where Thai pilgrims journey in response to being displaced, shuffled, or erased by the weight of development and capitalism. In Thailand, where the nation's economic growth and placement in the global marketplace have been facilitated by the labor of hundreds of thousands of rural Thai men and women, "powerful structures of inequality" have relied on capitalizing upon and even silencing migrant and working-class laborers, exploiting them in "an otherwise hidden geography of [economic and material] production."⁹⁸ In this sense, mainstream Thainess and its prosperity have established themselves by overlooking and excluding the very bodies and citizens who labored over their making. Pumpuang Duangjan's shrine therefore becomes more than just a place of diva worship; it is a transgressive space where displaced Thais establish an area and locale where they are represented, aligned with the symbolism behind the singer. Unlike mainstream Thainess, the shrine becomes accessible and legible for the working-class and migrants shuffled in and out of legibility by the nation-state. Duangjan's shrine rises as a collective ritual that makes visible differing claims to Thailand and civic belonging.

At Wat Thapkradan, the *sala* is not the only site that commemorates the late singer: there are many more shrines and halls honoring Pumpuang Duangjan. As evidenced by the multitude of altars, Duangjan's after/life, as a product of her fans, reorients the temple space and, by extension, Theravada Buddhism, destabilizing its

⁹⁸ Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force*, 3-7.

male-centeredness through female excess. In other words, the singer's multi-sited presence at the Thai temple queers Wat Thapkradan, allowing for commemorative practices to destabilize and operate outside of the religion's normative heteronationalism. Pattana Kitiarsa argues that the monuments devoted to Duangjan are auspicious symbols for women, the working-class, and the poor, demonstrating how the singer represented the struggles of those "surviving economic hardships" in Thailand.⁹⁹

As Thais from all over the nation have emphasized the good fortune surrounding the memorials, it has driven the idea that the singer is godlike and should be revered as such.¹⁰⁰ For instance, she and her relics are placed on equal footing as Buddhist monks as her personal items are prominently displayed, like the belongings of esteemed male abbots, across Wat Thapkradan.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, wax figurines of Duangjan reside within open shrines and huge halls, adorned with flowers, pictures, and offerings (figure 3.8). Statues of Pumpuang Duangjan are even dressed in all white, resembling a "*chao mae*" or "a revered goddess."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, 59.

¹⁰⁰ Cohen, "Roadside Memorials," 349.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 360. (*italicized emphasis in original*).



FIGURE 3.8 A larger statue of Duangjan.
Photograph of Shrine by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.

The act bestowing divineness onto Pumpuang Duangjan speaks to the folkloric dimensions of the singer's commemoration, gesturing to how marginal communities have used her image as modes of expression to revise and reconceptualize who they are and how they belong both within and outside of the nation-state. In his work on folkloric tropes, Mark E. Workman claims that "it is folklore that fuels the machinery of representation, not just to provide identity with ongoing legitimacy, but to manufacture it in the first place. And if this is taken as an indication that, like other fabrications, what gets produced can never be 'authentic,' it need not be regarded as cause for distress as long as we recall that ... we are ... either obliged, condemned, or privileged to seek such strength in Others."¹⁰³ In this way, folklore becomes the vehicle for certain groups to reimagine not only the world but a reality constructed through circumstance, fabrications, and maligned *Otherness*.¹⁰⁴ The commemorations of Pumpuang Duangjan consequently develop as a fantastic and imaginative site of power, creation, and—though problematic—escape, for Thais who have an antagonistic relationship with the majority. Stating that Pumpuang Duangjan is folkloric and god-like creates and names "difference," making the impossible tangible.¹⁰⁵ For many Thais existing on the fringe, such a cultivation of identity through folklore and the dead songstress contests lower-class marginality, silencing, and even erasure.

The singer's divine status led fans to construct five specific sites to honor Pumpuang Duangjan on temple grounds; her memorials generating queer and utopic senses of worship in contrast to state-sponsored and patriarchal Buddhism (figure 3.9).

¹⁰³ Mark E. Workman, "Tropes, Hopes, and Dopes," *Journal of American Folklore* 106, no. 420 (1993): 171-183, 181.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*



FIGURE 3.9 Wat Thapkradan's directory.

Photograph of Shrine by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.

In their commemoration of Duangjan at the wat, fans imagine and petition for a queer utopia. José Esteban Muñoz argues that “Utopia lets us imagine a space outside of heteronormativity” that “offers us a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*.”¹⁰⁶ A queer utopia re/establishes a possibility that is not yet real, allowing for the lived experiences, desires, and hopes of everyday people and those residing outside of heteronormative society to imagine what else is out in the world. To illustrate, there is a more prominent building adjacent to the main hall that acts as a centralized building for many of Duangjan's relics. The items housed

¹⁰⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 35. (italicized emphasis in original).

here include numerous images of Duangjan, weathered cabinets that hold the singer's old clothes and stage costumes, more vanities, a model of one of the singer's stages, performance posters, fan souvenirs, drawings, and news clippings, and more wax statues adorned with the performers flamboyant and colorful clothing choices. The building, which could be categorized as a gathering hall, is solely dedicated to the singer. What makes the space queer is that it operates outside of Theravada Buddhism and its patriarchy, making clear that its purpose is "diva worship" and reverence of Thai womanhood rather than Buddhism's masculinity. The worship and collection of Duangjan's relics and personal belongings, here, suggests a sense of material escapism associated with Buddhism's manliness. These are practices that illuminate Brett Farmer's concept of "*queer sublimity*" where diva worship produces a "resistant queer utopianism," that enables the "reconstruction, at least in fantasy, of a more capacious, kinder, queerer world."¹⁰⁷ The adoration and conservation of Duangjan's relics and belongings thus facilitate different forms of attachment, staking claims to what is possible and what people can revere. As the temple is reworked to facilitate a queer reverence, Wat Thapkradan becomes more than just a space for Buddhism. It becomes a place where Thais can remake themselves through imaginative and collective acts as well as an appreciation for the queer aesthetics of beauty.

Through the enactment of queer beauty, Pumpuang Duangjan's memorialization and the conservation of her belongings require forms of upkeep and worship that critique Buddhism's concept of impermanence. Impermanence, or *annica*, is a suffering that emerges from an impending or inevitable loss. It is an essential doctrine in Thai

¹⁰⁷ Farmer, "The Fabulous Sublimity," 170. (italicized emphasis in original).

Buddhism and is a part of the Four Noble Truths that comprise the essence of Buddha's teachings.¹⁰⁸ Women, antithetical to Buddhism's beliefs and its order, are defined by the structures of impermanence: images and stories of dead women and their ghosts illustrate lessons that about the vanity of all living and material things.¹⁰⁹ The body and its lures are believed to be illusionary, and that vanity and attachment directly contrast with the absolute truths of Buddhism and, by extension, the state.¹¹⁰ The celebration of Duangjan and her keepsakes are thus at odds with Buddhist teachings about the inevitable nature of loss, as the singer, her memory and after/life are well-looked-after in the spaces housed in Wat Thapkradan.

Fans have immortalized Duangjan and defy the Buddhist and patriarchal teachings about loss and its inescapability in a particularly fitting way—through the vanities that are donated in her honor by visitors. Situated among the *salas* are numerous plastic and wooden vanities that line the shrines; they are gifts that her fans bequeath in her name. Many of these pieces of furniture are pink and magenta, while some are made of teak wood. On the vanity mirrors, fans write their name, their birthdays, the date that they visited Wat Thapkradan, as well as their hopes and dreams (figure 3.10).

¹⁰⁸ Public Broadcasting Service, "Buddhism: An Introduction," *PBS*, N.D., <http://www.pbs.org/edens/thailand/buddhism.htm> (accessed May 4, 2018).

¹⁰⁹ Fuhrmann, *Ghostly Desires*, 35.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35 and 48.



FIGURE 3.10 Pink and magenta vanities line Duangjan’s shrine.

Photograph of Shrine by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.

Fans pen different things on the mirrors in the hopes of being blessed by Duangjan’s spirit, furthering the superstitious belief that the singer holds mystic powers.¹¹¹ However, pilgrims’ usage of the vanity—a symbol that indicates the epitome of femininity, as well as glamour—is not only an overt rejection of Buddhist values about femininity and women (on the grounds of a wat, no less) but also an identification with Pumpuang Duangjan’s beauty and her cosmopolitan lifestyle. Fans thus value her epitomization of *phuu ying thansamay* and the promise of upward social mobility that she represented.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Poonsup Srichanchow, e-mail message to author, January 12, 2018; and Kitiarsa, *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets*, N.P.

¹¹² The Met, *Metropolitan Vanities: The History of the Dressing Table*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2013/metropolitan-vanities> (accessed January 12, 2018); and Poonsup Srichanchow, e-mail message to author, January 12, 2018.

The celebration of Duangjan's beauty as well as the belief that the vanities hold mystical powers, directly confront Buddhist teachings, queering impermanence by defying death and making beauty as important to life. As Penny Van Esterik argues, "Beauty keeps open the possibility of connections between classes and regions today, as in the past."¹¹³ The attractiveness that is celebrated by Duangjan's fans becomes a way for them to connect with their diva, using the symbols of physical attraction as pathways to reach her and defy the fatalism of Buddhism's impermanence.

The vanities additionally create community through reflection, situating visitors and their reflections alongside Pumpuang Duangjan as well as against others who visit the shrine and view themselves in the vanity's mirrors. I argue that these pieces of furniture generate reflections that facilitate intimate connections between the fans, their fantasy of the singer, and each other. As fans write on the mirrors, they spiritually connect with Duangjan through direct address. As other visitors subsequently attend the temple, they come face-to-face with the vanities from earlier gift-givers even as they seek to connect with the singer herself. In this stretch of reality, intimacy is created between worshippers, the mirror, and the spirit of the singer. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that such intimate moments gesture to alternative, if ephemeral, formations of community as these newfound bonds create a familiarity founded on notions of belonging, adoration, and the rejection of state heteronormativity.¹¹⁴ The mirrors open forms of closeness to others, extending and sharing a language of emotional gesture between persons, spirits, and even symbols to those who do not conform to compulsory heterosexuality.

¹¹³ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 129.

¹¹⁴ Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 554.

Ironically, the furniture, though going against Buddhist ideals of *anicca*, partially adhere to the Buddhist philosophy of *anattā*, or “non-self.” Predominantly made meaningful by the hardships suffered by rural Thai communities in their everyday lives, *anattā*’s concept of “non-self” refers to the belief that “the self exists solely in relationship to other beings, past, present, and future.”¹¹⁵ There is no one being and that humans are not permanent: what remains is the underlying substance of the soul. The intimacies created by the vanity’s reflections thus reproduce *anattā*’s idea of “non-self” and the connections that our souls have in relation to one another. Drawing upon one of Buddhism’s marks of existence, the vanities and fans create a queer community through intimacy and collective ritual; it is a layering of both anonymity, time, and identity forged by the many people who visit Wat Thapkradan specifically for Pumpuang Duangjan and her memorial.

At the shrine in Suphan Buri, queer anonymity both masks and enables the political agency of those who pay homage to Duangjan, enabling the development of individual and collective subversive identifications with her. As there are no formal records indicating how many visitors actually visit Wat Thapkradan, especially for Pumpuang Duangjan’s shrine, there is a clandestine element to the queer diva worship that evades surveillance, generating a kind of collectivity-in-anonymity in the countryside. Though urban spaces have historically allowed queers from rural or conservative areas a safe and anonymous space for community and kinship, the rural, in case of the Duangjan’s shrine in Suphan Buri, also has potential to foster a kind of ephemeral, nameless community that gives comfort and sustenance despite its

¹¹⁵ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 80.

amorphousness.¹¹⁶ Queer anonymity has power here and allows fans of Duangjan to remain faceless in their worship, articulating their fears, hopes, and dreams, and implicitly communing not only with the queen, but with each other.

Though Pumpuang Duangjan's memorial may seem like another superficial celebration and token of celebrityhood, it is a powerful assemblage that queers both the space of Wat Thapkradan and Thai Buddhism itself. Thai female scholars have criticized Theravada Buddhism for providing "a moral framework for man's hierarchal precedence over women, ... and [that] all beliefs and practices ... devalue the female sex."¹¹⁷ Some parts of Thailand restrict women from entering male-only spaces—like the ordination hall, creating "a parallel female religious realm outside the male *sangha*" or monastic community.¹¹⁸ At Wat Thapkradan, the worship of its unruly icon directly contests these strictures. Indeed, the housing of her remains at the wat is perhaps the most irreverent and blasphemous act that her followers have ensured.

In a small shrine at Wat Thapkradan separated from many of the other buildings, a humble building houses Pumpuang Duangjan's cremated remains. Located in a small and open-aired *sala*, Pumpuang Duangjan's ashes are contained in a child-sized urn shaped similarly to a gold *chedi*, or Buddhist stupa. Various pieces of colored glass decorate the urn and vibrant, plastic *phuang malai* drape the container. Framed images of the singer are placed in front of the container, reminding visitors of Pumpuang Duangjan's beauty and her infectious smile. At the same time, behind the framed

¹¹⁶ David Bell and Gill Valentine, "Queer country: Rural Lesbian and Gay Lives," *Journal of Rural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1995): 113-122, 114.

¹¹⁷ Thitsa, *Providence and Prostitution*, 7.

¹¹⁸ Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 100.

photos, the garlands, and the vase, a large poster of Duangjan on her deathbed is framed at eye level (figure 3.11).

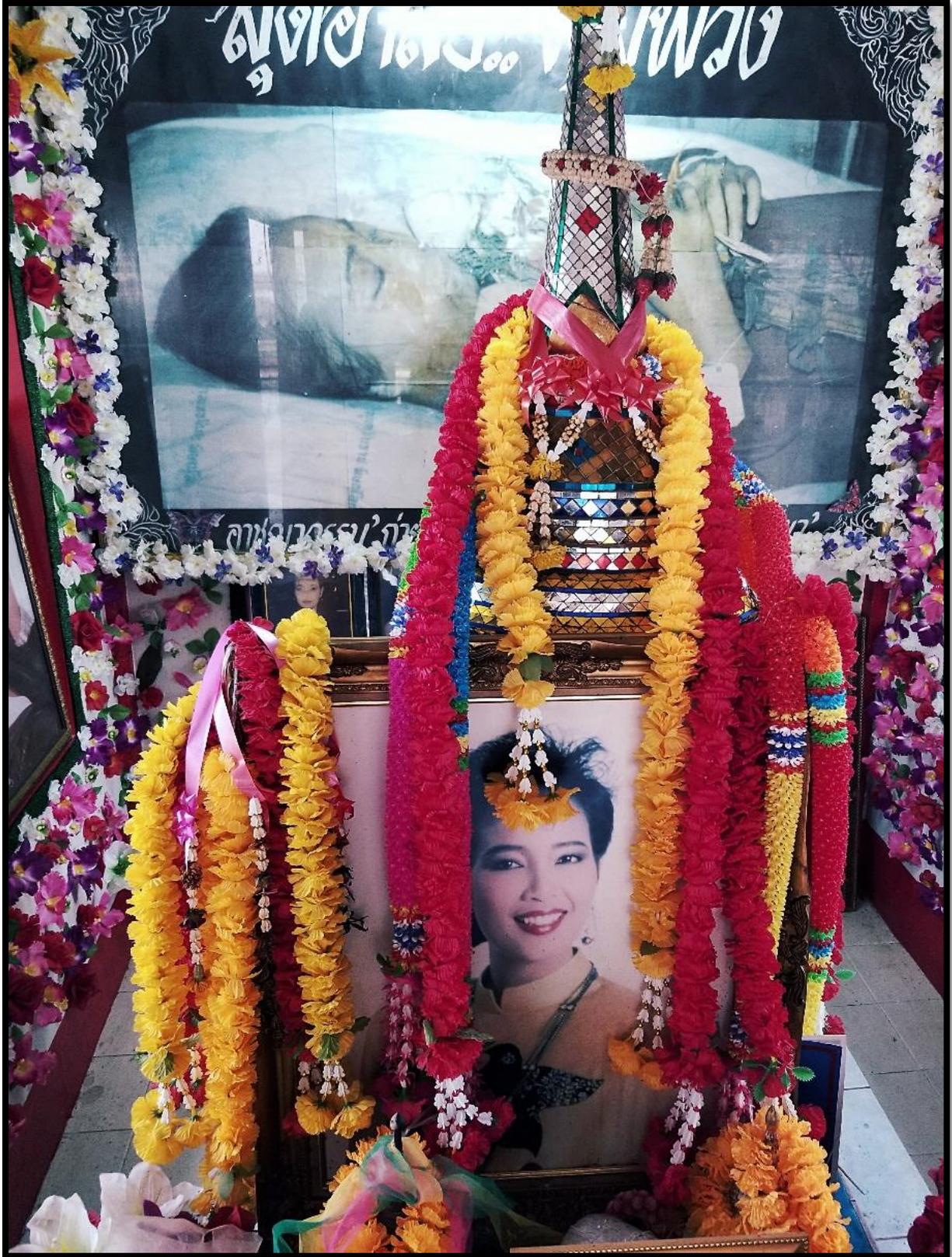


FIGURE 3.11 Duangjan's remains and the singer on her deathbed

Photograph of Shrine by the Author, Wat Thapkradan, 2017.

The contrast between the images is jarring, forcing the viewer to encounter the people's goddess as mortal and unable to elude death. Elisabeth Bronfen asserts that "the death of a beautiful woman emerges as the requirement for a preservation of existing cultural norms and values or their regenerative modification. Here feminine death serves as the site at which cultural norms can be debated."¹¹⁹ Brofen's argument suggest that the dead female body invokes an "Otherness" that contrasts with mainstream masculinist discourses, troubling what is understood as normal. She contends that women signify the subversion of dominant forms of influence and control, disrupting normative conventions to which patriarchy, heteronormativity, and power are typically affirmed. In Theravada Buddhism, grisly images of decaying women, such as beauty queens, are regularly featured in temples, reminding followers that beauty fades and that everyone is bounded to impermanence.¹²⁰ Yet, at the *wat*, the image of a lifeless Duangjan is juxtaposed with images that capture her liveliness, beauty and happiness. These contrasting photographs, when read in the context of the meticulous maintenance of her remains on temple grounds indicates a queering of and rebellion against patriarchal power. The fact that Duangjan's cremated remains lie alongside two drastically different images of her resituates the *wat* as a space of fantasy and possibility. Her shrine essentially distorts time, immortalizing the singer's presence which continues to defy the world long after her death.

Honoring Pumpuang Duangjan's bones and ashes is noteworthy because such gestures are reserved for prestigious male monks or members of the royal family,

¹¹⁹ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 181.

¹²⁰ Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 85.

reorienting Theravada Buddhism and male-centered spaces through the celebration of a dead female star. For example, the cremated remains of the late-King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1927-2016) were enshrined as relics, placed on the royal pedestals of two temples in Bangkok associated with the monarchy.¹²¹ Commoners' immolated remains are left at the temple for only a short period of time, eventually handed over to family members for scattering or bringing home.¹²² In contradiction of these established practices, Duangjan's ashes remain steadfastly at Wat Thapkradan, honored and housed for thousands to pay homage to. The singer's ashes are thus made into relics and are placed on the same level as the royal monarchy, insisting on the power and influence of an illiterate woman from the countryside.

It is important to note that the reverence of Pumpuang Duangjan's ashes at the temple reconfigures power between everyday citizens and those held in high stations—like the royal family. Such idolization and worship is considered dangerous in Thailand because it undermines the established codes of respect given to the monarchy, verging on criminal by going against *lèse majesté* law—acts of defamation or threat against the royalty. In essence, fans establish and practice a dangerous form of diva worship that not only articulates people's dreams and desires, but, furthermore, also enacts a rejection of Thailand's hierarchies of power. As her worshippers place the weight of their dreams onto their fallen star, she becomes more than just a country singer, but a symbol of hope, courage, success, and change. In other words, commemorating

¹²¹ "New Thai king selects pieces of father's remains with bare hands to become relics," *The Independent*, October 27, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/thailand-king-bhumibol-adulyadej-remains-selected-son-hands-maha-vajiralongkorn-relics-funeral-a8023161.html> (accessed March 21, 2018); and Kaweewit Kaewjinda, "Thai king's cremated remains prepared for enshrinement," *Associated Press*, October 27, 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/543be3fa9acf4f869c7851f66cc9d0cb> (accessed March 21, 2018).

¹²² Paitoon Sookkasikon, phone conversation with author, March 21, 2018.

Duangjan allows for her countrymen and women to believe that there is something more for them than what life and the nation-state has given them. She is glorified as a symbol of nationalism, produced and maintained by the people that the singer sang of and privileged.

The juxtaposition of the images of Pumpuang Duangjan as both dead and alive, in addition to the memorialization of her ashes serve as a celebratory eulogy of a woman's life and all the contributions that she gave to the Thai people. If it is said that to "be Thai is to be Buddhist" and that Buddhism is a nationally-sanctioned form of worship, what does it mean for the commemoration and legacy of one woman to inform what it means to be Thai or *khwampenthai*? I argue that such a celebration pays tribute to the labor of Thais—especially women—across the nation, particularly those who participated in the massive rural-to-urban migration beginning in 1965 and onward.

As the Thai government was eager to entice foreign investment in the pursuit of national development, the 1980s saw thousands of young men and women moving from impoverished rural areas to the capital, seeking jobs as well as the chance to participate in the *thansamay*, or "up-to-date," lifestyle.¹²³ Under the banner of economic advancement and development, migration to the capital during the nation's rapid industrialization grew at a percentage rate of "2.6 in 1965-1970, to 5.8 in 1975-1980, and to 7.4 in 1985-1990."¹²⁴ The move from rural to urban for many individuals has been described as fulfilling both economic needs and familial obligations. Some scholars, however, have attributed that many—women, in particular—moved to

¹²³ Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force*, 10.

¹²⁴ Ellen Boccuzzi, *Bangkok Bound* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2012), 13.

Bangkok because of modern consumer culture's allure.¹²⁵ Mary Beth Mills claims that "Thailand's economic growth has been underwritten by women's labor in raising rice and food, caring for families at home, selling goods in markets, and providing services for the tourist economy in restaurants, shops, and go-go bars."¹²⁶ As a part of the "Global Assembly line," the labor of many Thai women was abstracted as their lives and work were shadowed by the economic successes reaped by Thailand's development.

These acts of dedication and identification also extend outside the rituals of fandom that take place at the wat. Given that Duangjan's fans are scattered far and wide, many of them are unable to make the pilgrimage to her site. Posthumously, the singer's most important songs continue to be anthemic for numerous disenfranchised Thais. Duangjan's "นักร้องบ้านนอก," or "The Country Singer," can be said to be one of the most important pieces of contemporary Thai popular culture since the 1980s. Part of its popularity lies in the fact that it captures not only the arc of Duangjan's life, but the promise of something different for its listeners.

The song was released in 1982 and was written by Waiphot Phetsuphan, appearing originally on Duangjan's "จะให้หรือ พ.ศ. ๒๕๒๕," of "*cha hai ro pho.so. nai*" album.¹²⁷ The ballad itself has been covered many times and has been featured in numerous documentaries covering the late-singer as well as the musical biopic, *The Moon* (2011), by director Bandit Tongdee. As a first-person account, "The Country Singer" chronicles the life of a Thai vocalist who leaves her village for Bangkok in search for wealth, fame, and success. As she prepares to leave, the singer's

¹²⁵ Alyson Brody, "Beyond Duty and Desire: Reconsidering Motivations for Thai Women's Migration to Bangkok," in *Migrant Women and Work*, ed. Anuja Agrawal (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 137.

¹²⁶ Mills, *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force*, 21.

¹²⁷ Peter Doolan, e-mail message to Pahole Sookkasikon, October 9, 2017.

countrymen tell her not to go to the capital, warning her of the dangers that reside in Bangkok. Refusing to listen to their warnings, she leaves home, confronted with loneliness and heartache while in the capital city. Though she yearns to return home, the narrator says that she will not go back until she finds some success, making those she left behind proud of her. The last line of the song states, “Life will be difficult and I will be poor / But I will endure it all. / No matter what, this country singer will soothe the sisters and brothers, as well as the music fans.”¹²⁸

Though the song can be read as a historical account of many Thai women migrating to Bangkok, “The Country Singer,” as a reflection of Pumpuang Duangjan’s own life, operates as an autobiographical account. The ballad opens with a nostalgic image of the sun at twilight and “Flocks of crows” flying home: “Such a view makes me miss the fields sadly / Now, I’m still hoping and asking, ‘when will I return home?’ / While in the city, my heart only yearns to be famous / With only the hope of becoming a star. / It will all be difficult, but I will persevere while staying humble.”¹²⁹ The lyrics poignantly refer to emotional upheavals wrought by the massive, state-sponsored and out-directed migration of thousands of rural Thais moving to Bangkok and beyond for education, employment, and a better life. In a way, the song refers to the Thai diaspora within Thailand—individuals who migrated from the countryside to the capital for better economic opportunities due to transnational and global capitalism, yet who still imagine the rural as a site to return even if it is impossible.

The song’s lyrics read as a love letter dedicated to Duangjan’s countrymen and women, naming the sacrifices that many made in the name family, heteronationalism,

¹²⁸ Translations by author.

¹²⁹ Translations by author.

and Thainess. When Duangjan sings that “this country singer will soothe the sisters and brothers, as well as the music fans,” she is directly addressing her fans and recognizing the hardships they have undergone under Thailand’s attempt to industrialize and partake in global modernization.¹³⁰ Duangjan’s fans have since returned the favor of this recognition of their lives by solidifying the life, legacy, and memory of the country singer in her after/life: the bond between fans and the singer is reciprocal, even after her death. Though they are weighted down by hardships, worshippers of Pumpuang Duangjan created these shrines to articulate a sense of possibility facilitated through the short but vibrant life of the singer, “to enact queer ... ‘crossover dreams.’”¹³¹ In another way, by singing about everyday Thais, Duangjan’s life and legacy created a common point of identification—a community—for those who do not necessarily belong, or who are abjected from Thailand’s national narrative.

Pumpuang Duangjan’s heroization and commemoration by predominantly female, rural, and working-class Thais is an indirect critique of the exploitation of their bodies in the service of national economic prosperity. There is a reason why people journey to Wat Thapkradan to beseech Duangjan’s spirit for luck, granting fans their wishes and blessings.¹³² Her memorialization, as dedication to a young woman from Suphan Buri who succeeded in a hierarchal and male-centered Thailand, identifies with other young women who also participated in the rural-to-urban migration. Duangjan’s followers see themselves and their stories in the fallen diva, engendering a collective

¹³⁰ Translations by author.

¹³¹ Paredez, *Selenidad*, 185.

¹³² Cohen, “Roadside Memorials,” 349.

attachment that identifies with widespread marginalization and the exploitation of Thailand's most vulnerable.

The Country Singer: the radical potential of *luk thung*

A cultural analysis of the legacy and commemoration of Pumpuang Duangjan reveals the deeply seated tensions that underline Thainess and Thai society in a contemporary era. These tensions became visible to me on recent trip to Bangkok while conducting research for this chapter. I was confronted by issues of class and ethnicity whenever I mentioned *luk thung* or Duangjan. Any mention of the genre in Bangkok drew a disgusted or apathetic reaction from Thais in the capital city. At one point, my mother, a woman born and raised in the capital, advised me not to mention my studies on Pumpuang Duangjan or desires of wanting to go to Wat Thapkradan to members of my Bangkok family. Her reasoning was that these family members are part of the higher echelons of Thai society who “wouldn't get it” or “understand” why I was so attracted to the life and death of this one *luk thung* singer. Though I know that my mother was not ill-intentioned and wanted to protect me, her indifference and attempts to silence me made apparent how the cultures of those outside of Bangkok have been cast aside or denigrated by the middle- to upper-classes of Thai society.¹³³ These tensions only affirmed the class divisions that fortify Thailand's people and how society is run, gesturing to the problematic ways *siwilai* underpins what constitutes acceptable and policed forms of Thainess and Thai culture.

Such tensions were most recently evident in the bitter conflict in the mid to late-2000s between red shirt protestors, or “the United Front for Democracy Against

¹³³ Siriyuvasak, “Commercialising,” 61.

Dictatorship (UDD),” and yellow shirt followers, or “the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)”—a group that is comprised of royalists, ultra-nationalists and the urban middle class. The conflict was essentially based on class warfare and people’s frustrations with the government, the military force, as well as political leaders—such as former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.¹³⁴ The red shirt community, who predominantly consisted of rural citizens from the Isan, academics and liberals, as well as working-class supporters in urban Bangkok, used *luk thung* as a method to reach out to its constituents, politicizing the genre as to publicly critique the establishment.¹³⁵ These protestors took *luk thung* and its musical genealogy to convey the struggles of the poor and working-class, using it to protest their marginalization.¹³⁶

Thai country music has always been associated with minority peoples and cultures in Thailand. As it was aligned with the countryside, the genre did not necessarily adhere to the rigid forms of Thainess stated by the Bangkok elite and what they believed to be *siwilai*. *Luk thung* and artists like Pumpuang Duangjan thus emerged as antithetical to overarching ideas of *khwampenthai* as modern, cosmopolitan and superior, as well as civilized.

Although the utopic potentials of Pumpuang Duangjan’s after/life are limited, they make apparent the deep-rooted problems within Thai society as well as how fans have adapted to or contested them. The after/life of this one singer does not resolve the nation’s structural inequalities; however, it has allowed the singer’s fans a vehicle to “cope” with Thailand’s social discrepancies and imbalances through commemoration.

¹³⁴ Shay, “Explainer.”

¹³⁵ The Isaan Record, “Luk Thung.”

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Though *luk thung* and Wat Thapkradan have become and are cultural sites of political expression for Thailand's disenfranchised, those who celebrate the genre or Duangjan will continue to remain peripheral in relation to the nation-state and those in power.¹³⁷ I do not know how communities will overcome such marginalization and classist politics; however, the commemorative aspects of Pumpuang Duangjan and *luk thung* are approaches that allow individuals one way to practice alternative notions of Thainess and belonging in a sometimes cruel world.

Yet, there something more to Pumpuang Duangjan and her after/life than the underlining tensions that separate Thais through class, ethnicity, region, gender, and sexuality. The memory and celebration of the singer's life enabled disenfranchised Thais to create a sense of unity amongst themselves, making use of the singer's past and struggles to come to terms with their own lives. *Luk thung* and its artists, like Duangjan, offer a "continuous link" for many Thais caught within the nation's attempts to develop and modernize; they link different stages of life together: a rural childhood, present urban existences, and an uncertainty of the future while satisfying a need for community as well as the desire to partake in modern Thai culture.¹³⁸

Duangjan's persona and legacy thus create a pathway for marginal and diasporic Thais to take, allowing for creative and continuously evolving routes to notions of Thainess and what it means to be "Thai." In a poetic sense, Thainess is still place of becoming: it is a place in the horizon "When the sun supersedes the twilight [and] Flocks of crows fly [home] towards their nests."

¹³⁷ Mitchell, *Luk Thung*, 147.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

CHAPTER 4

Pattaya Hart:

Thai America, Queer Worldmaking, and the Grotesque Potential of Diasporic Drag

Celebrate life, be proud of who you are and respect others the same way.
Live loud, stay strong and be safe.

—Pattaya Hart, Interview with Chiffon Dior¹

In New York City, Thai American drag queen Pattaya Hart invokes racialized forms of queer worldmaking, bringing to life notions of Thainess that are outlandish, self-orientalizing, and even monstrous to define who she is as a queer person in the diaspora. Thainess has been historically informed by histories of U.S. militarization and touristic desire, gendered as feminized in contrast to a masculine West. Pattaya Hart draws upon these characterizations as to reimagine a queer and Thai space through the grotesque—an aesthetic that lends itself to the critical potential of drag. The drag queen’s use of the grotesque is a subversion of essentialized gendered norms solidified by mainstream society, emerging out of “sexual unease” and disidentificatory politics.² The grotesque is as an aesthetic that is empowered through the dismemberment and unsettling of normalized ideals, offering alternative identifications that highlight and legitimize queer desire.³ The grotesque is one of an array of strategies of disidentification employed by queer and marginal communities to work alongside and against dominant culture.⁴ Pattaya Hart’s specifically racialized and diasporic

¹ Chiffon Dior, “A Heart to Heart with Pattaya Hart,” *Werrrk.com*, July 26, 2016, <http://werrrk.com/pattaya-hart/#> (accessed May 5, 2018).

² Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 118.

³ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 11, 19.

performances of Thainess further stretch the limits of drag's grotesque interventions by bringing the ghosts of empire onto the stage.

This chapter shifts us from an earlier exploration of Thai popular culture to a Thai American performer in New York City in order to think about how queerness and Thainess become il/legible in this diaspora. I argue that Hart's presence and her performative work ultimately complicates the Thai diaspora and New York City's queer scene in unique ways. The 1960s, with the advent of jet mass tourism *and* U.S. immigration reform, is a key historical moment that informs both the practice and aesthetics of Pattaya Hart's drag. For Thailand and Thai people, tourism and immigration crucially rely on the feminization of Thainess which intensified during this period. Thai tourism commodified a feminized Oriental "Other" while the Thai diaspora was made possible through the framing of Thais as docile candidates for immigration to the United States, a characterization enabled by U.S. sexualized and militarized relations with Thailand.

In the 2000s, Pattaya Hart's drag performance utilizes this familiar orientalized vocabulary and imagery to produce an "immigrant act" that is both critique and creation.⁵ By playing up these stereotypes, I argue that she conjures a different historiography of Thai immigration to the United States, queering the gendered conceptualization of Thainess that defines them as "good," "economic immigrants" and models of propriety.⁶ Additionally, her performance and its focus on the historical exoticization of Thai people engenders a critique of queer America / New York. Pattaya

⁵ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*.

⁶ Kanjana Thepboriruk, "Thai in Diaspora: Language and Identity in Los Angeles, California," (doctoral dissertation, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2015), 6.

Hart's use of hybridized Thai and American props and music draw from and scrutinize the exclusions and orientalized fantasies of bourgeois gay white male culture.

Though Pattaya Hart's drag and performances may seem liberatory and transformative, they are also messy, problematic, and at times misogynistic in their deployment of Thai femininity and womanhood. Judith Butler asserts that gay drag is dangerous as it imitates femininity on the grounds of "ridicule and degradation."⁷ She argues that "Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated."⁸ Hart's drag deploys ideologies as well as notions of gender, sexuality, and Thainess defined by heteronormative logic and oppression. While examining Pattaya Hart and the power and promise behind her performative works, we must also pay heed to the violent, appropriative, and ambivalent ways that this drag queen's enactment of Thai femaleness reifies histories of sexual exploitation and subjugation borne by Thai women.

In this chapter, I analyze two particular instances in Pattaya Hart's body of work to illuminate how her use of the grotesque in drag expands queer and Thai life. I examine part of a photographic series on drag queens by Leland Bobbé (2012) and Pattaya Hart's performance in *So You Think You Can Drag?*, a New York City drag competition held in 2012. I contend that in these performances for the camera and a live audience, Pattaya Hart animates a queer grotesque that describes a world in which she, too, can belong.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 86.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

“You Better Work!”: how drag “werqs”

Drag has finally arrived at the place it deserves in pop culture, in a way that cannot be ignored.⁹

Drag queens have always been one of the most visible and criticized members of gay life in New York City.¹⁰ The drag shows and balls that they created, many of which were deemed immoral and illegal by mainstream society, facilitated a sense of community in an otherwise hostile world.¹¹ Yet early drag shows of the 1920s consisted mainly of white gay men and excluded many queers of color—especially Black queers.¹² In response, many Black and Latino queer men began holding their own events, such as Harlem’s Hamilton Lodge Ball or “Faggot’s Ball” which was attended by thousands of gay and straight people, laying the foundation for what is contemporarily known as ball culture or the ballroom community.¹³ By the 1970s, ball competitions became events where predominantly queer people of color competed, creating subcommunities and alternative notions of family and kinship. Pepper LaBeija, a drag performer in Jennie Livingston’s celebrated documentary, *Paris Is Burning* (1991), describes ball culture as a refuge from “white America”: “We have had everything taken away from us, and yet we have all learned how to survive.” LaBeija also points out,

⁹ Randy Barbato qtd. in Isaac Oliver, “Is This the Golden Age of Drag? Yes. And No.,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/arts/drag-queens-rupaul-drag-race.html> (accessed February 2, 2018).

¹⁰ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), ProQuest Ebook Central, 23.

¹¹ Oliver Stabbe, “Queens and queers: The rise of drag ball culture in the 1920s,” *Smithsonian*, April 11, 2016, <http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/queens-and-queers-rise-drag-ball-culture-1920s> (accessed April 13, 2018).

¹² Grinnell College, “Underground Ball Culture,” *Grinnell College*, N.D., <http://haenfler.sites.grinnell.edu/subcultures-and-scenes/underground-ball-culture/#ffs-tabbed-11> (accessed April 13, 2018).

¹³ Stabbe, “Queens and queers,”; and Hugh Ryan, “Ballroom Culture’s Rich Alternative to the Trans/Cis Model of Gender,” *Slate*, August 12, 2016, http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2016/08/12/ballroom_culture_s_gender_model_offers_rich_alternative_to_cis_trans_division.html (accessed April 13, 2018).

however, that the success and pleasures of drag for queers of color is often accessed through their approximation of the white consumer citizen: “That is why, in the ballroom circuit, it is so obvious that if you have captured the great white way of living, or looking, or dressing, or speaking—you is [*sic*] a marvel.”¹⁴

Drag, once a marginalized practice, is now mainstream. Moving from gay bars and ballrooms into the intimacy of people’s homes, shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* have brought drag to the masses, prompting the “golden age of drag.”¹⁵ Yet these popularized notions of drag are problematic as they rely heavily on stereotypes or caricatures based on histories of racial exclusion and objectification.¹⁶ On *Drag Race*, for instance, host RuPaul’s and other contestants’ performances of black queenliness rely on a “very contrived idea of blackness” that is “entertaining and expected by the mainstream gay community, that happens to be white.”¹⁷ Similarly, C. Winter Han contends that Asian American contestants on the show are caricaturized by a long history of Asian exoticification and feminization by an imperial West, contributing to the stereotype that Asian men—both gay and straight—are more feminine than other men.¹⁸ As racial performance becomes a tactic for many of the contestants of color,

¹⁴ Internet Movie Database (IMDb), “*Paris Is Burning (1991): Quotes*,” *IMDb*, N.D., <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100332/quotes> (accessed April 13, 2018).

¹⁵ Oliver, “Is This the Golden Age of Drag?”

¹⁶ Kat Blaque, “Performative Blackness and the Problem With ‘RuPaul’s Drag Race.’” *The Huffington Post*, March 25, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kat-blaque/performative-blackness-an_b_9545212.html (accessed March 8, 2018).

¹⁷ Blaque, “Performative Blackness,” N.P.

¹⁸ C. Winter Han, *Geisha of a Different Kind: Race and Sexuality in Gaysian America* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 23. Like gay Asian American men, straight men have been characterized as either “dangerous” or “desexualized,” branded by popular Western media as having no real sexuality. (Richard Fung “Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn,” in *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*, eds. David L. Eng and Alice Y. Hom (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 117, 122).

Asian American drag queens increasingly flaunt an orientalist style, conflating Asianness with Asian America to appeal to judges in static ways.¹⁹

“Commercial drag,” José Esteban Muñoz contends, “presents a sanitized and desexualized queer subject for mass consumption. ... The sanitized queen is meant to be enjoyed as an entertainer who will hopefully lead to social understanding and tolerance.”²⁰ Though the visibility of the drag queen might lend itself to “tolerance,” what emerges is a queer identity that is produced and packaged for homo- and heteronormative middle to upper-class people. Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui make the case that on *Drag Race*, “*black and brown cast members were more often required to perform stereotypical racial identities*” to show their “personality.”²¹ The concocted notion of “personality,” for drag queens of color, means they must perform racial difference as an added value to their act. Muñoz refers to this demand as the “burden of liveness” that marginal groups are mandated to perform for the amusement of those in power.²² Though it is understood that the performances seen on *Drag Race* use subversive visual and performative cues to achieve queenliness, such performances walk the thin line of catering to mainstream, white audiences.

While Asian American performers on *Drag Race* draw on oriental tropes to stand out on the runway, they also find ways to exercise agency through the excessiveness of these stereotypes. These acts of self-racialization become tactical for queer Asian American survival, playing on a notion of the exotic, feminized, “eternal foreigner.” This

¹⁹ Han, *Geisha of a Different Kind*, 45.

²⁰ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 99.

²¹ Sabrina Strings and Long T. Bui, “‘She Is Not Acting, She Is’: The conflict between gender and racial realness on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 5 (2014): 822-836, 824. (Italicized emphasis in original).

²² Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 187-189.

tactic opens up the possibility to question how it is that Asians are always “Other,” deploying that very stereotype in order to unsettle it.

The power behind Pattaya Hart’s drag is its excessive and grotesque orientalism. Her drag’s over-the-top depiction of Thai femininity pivots on a cultural and historical vocabulary of orientalism coproduced by the United States and Thailand since the mid-1950s. From middlebrow culture, pageants on a global stage, militarized sex tourism, and the eventual migration of thousands of Thais to the U.S., Thainess has continually been associated with openness and accommodation, fostering an uneven relationship between Thais and Americans.²³ The following section maps how Thainess became feminized on the global stage from the 1950s and onward, providing the raw material for Pattaya Hart’s drag.

Internationalizing Thais: Feminizing Thainess and Forming Thai migration

Since the 1950s, Thailand and the United States have been in a bilateral relationship cultivated through the coercions of soft power. Culture—and through it, sentimentality—were used by the U.S. to reify America’s global presence across the world. Stories such as Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II’s musical and Hollywood blockbuster, *The King & I* (1956), served as mechanisms to fuel a “‘human connection’ [between Thailand and the United States] ... under a US-oriented world system” while “reaffirm[ing] the spirit of the American dream” internationally.²⁴ Based on Anna Leonowens’ brief time in Siam, *The King & I* served as a channel to which American ideals and values were projected onto Thailand. Through the tutelary

²³ Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 26.

²⁴ Matthew Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2015), 13; and Chalerm Sri Thuriyanonda Chantasingh, “The Americanization of *The King and I*: The Transformation of the English Governess into an American Legend,” (doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, 1999), 209.

narratives of Leonowens, the idea of America as the defender and civilizer of the free world gained traction during the Cold War.²⁵ As a good student, Thailand was depicted as salvageable in the wake of Communist regimes, deserving of the “intimate embrace” of integration rather than extermination or containment.²⁶

Two events in the 1960s further pulled Thailand into U.S.’ orbit. The first was the crowning of Apasra Hongsakula, a Thai national, as Miss Universe in 1965. The second, the passing of the 1967 “Rest and Recreation” (R&R) treaty which allowed American servicemen to seek rest and entertainment in Thailand during the Viet Nam War. The internationally broadcast footage of the pageant featured Hongsakula’s winning speech, that described her as “a girl from faraway Thailand” who had made “all the people of Thailand ... proud.”²⁷ Her declaration positioned Thai femininity as crucial to Thailand’s emergent global position, and bore a “symbolic function” that further globalized Thainess as feminine in the advent of global mass tourism.²⁸

Two years after the crowning of Apasra Hongsakula, the “R&R Treaty” codified an alliance between Thailand and the United States, ensuring that American servicemen were given access to sexual services during the Viet Nam War, and further endorsing the sexual nature of colonialism in Thailand.²⁹ The treaty deployed many Thai women to serve as temporary “breaks” from the daily psychological and physical struggles of war, making sex work essential to the diplomatic relationship between two

²⁵ Chantasingh, “The Americanization of *The King and I*,” iv; and Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 28.

²⁶ Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 194.

²⁷ ลูกโป่งลอยฟ้า ชิงช้าสวรรค์, “Miss Universe 1965 Full Broadcast,” YouTube, 14:35, June 12, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egCgLygLHRM> (accessed May 2, 2018).

²⁸ Harrison, “The Allure of Ambiguity,” 28.

²⁹ Rho-Ng, “The Conscripted of Asian Sex Slaves,” 109.

countries.³⁰ When the Viet Nam War ended, civilian sex tourists replaced American soldiers, cementing sex work as an integral part of the Thai economy. With encouragement from the World Bank, 1970s tourism in Thailand capitalized on the already existing “entertainment” and service sectors, further cultivating sex tourism as a booming industry in Thailand.³¹ Today sex and prostitution are part of the economic and cultural fabric of Thailand and integral to global depictions of Thainess.³²

These cultural and political moments position Thailand and Thais as ideal for accommodating the heteropatriarchal interests and militarized systems of power that shape its global position during the Cold War. This, in turn, affected the nature of Thai immigration to the United States. I argue that this feminization marked the Thai migrant as ideal subjects for U.S. immigration, or the “good immigrant,” compared to other Southeast Asians accused and imagined as Communists or refugees of the Viet Nam War. U.S. alliances made during the Cold War and Viet Nam War only further proved what Madeline Hsu remarked as “improved acceptance for certain kinds of Asian immigrants and conditions for their permanent resettlement” that were brokered by America’s regional Cold War interests and its sentimental view of *some* Asians.³³

³⁰ See Katharine H.S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); and Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

³¹ When discussing sexualized forms of entertainment in Thailand, an interesting fact to note, as author Scot Barmé notes, is that one of the “sex show”—a kind of erotic entertainment often assumed to have developed in relation to the Viet Nam War and “R&R”—emerged as a staple in Bangkok nightlife in the early 1920s. (Scot Barmé, *Woman, Man, Bangkok: Love, Sex & Popular Culture in Thailand* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 83). Jacqueline Sánchez Taylor, “Sex Tourism and Inequalities,” in *Tourism and Inequality: Problems and Prospects*, eds. Stroma Cole and Nigel Morgan (Wallingford: CABI, 2010), 49.

³² Nuttavuthisit, “Branding Thailand,” 24.

³³ Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 4. (*italicized emphasis mine*).

Due to U.S. militarization and cultural diplomacy, Thai migration to the United States came by way of America's presence and interference in Thailand. Thais began arriving to the United States in the 1950s and the 1960s, propelled by policy changes in U.S. immigration from the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 as well as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart-Celler Act). Between 1945 and 1965, Thai immigration primarily consisted of male government officials, politicians, and educated middle-class Thais from urban Bangkok, many of whom were privately funded by their families or, publicly supported by the Royal Thai government. This primarily male and middle- to upper-character of Thai immigration was eventually altered with the passage of the Hart-Celler Act, which eliminated the national origins quota, allowed the reunification of family members, and prioritized immigrants with select job skills and formal educations.³⁴ This second stage of Thai migration (1965-1975) ushered in Thais who eventually overstayed their visas, leading to a twentyfold increase in numbers unmatched by any other immigrant group until U.S. withdrawal from Viet Nam in 1975.³⁵ This second group consisted of women, tourists, students, some professionals, in addition to younger migrants.³⁶ The third wave of movement (1980s and onward) was a mass migration consisting of a high number of men, unskilled laborers, and individuals without a formal education, primarily coming from the rural provinces of northern and central Thailand.³⁷ Jacqueline Desbarats determines that the third wave is "where migration develops into collective behavior and becomes essentially self-sustaining."³⁸

³⁴ Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 59.

³⁵ Desbarats, "Thai Migration to Los Angeles," 302.

³⁶ Padoongpatt, "Thai Americans," 893.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Desbarats, "Thai Migration to Los Angeles," 304.

In this history of Thai immigration to the United States, sexuality—as it is for other migrant histories—is occluded. Previous Thai American scholarship has only emphasized gender, class, and profession as relevant to migration. Yet sexuality is central to U.S. immigration history: homophobic legislation barring gay and lesbian immigrants from entering the United States is written into the conditions of migrant relocation.

The amendments and laws that opened Thai movement into the U.S., specifically the 1965 Act, were based on homophobic caveats that determined LGBT immigrants to be “sexual deviates.”³⁹ Immigration law named gay and lesbian migrants as sexual miscreants who were prohibited from entering as they were pathologized as “mentally defective” and inferior.⁴⁰ Even though homosexuality was not explicitly mentioned, the language used, such as “sexual deviation,” excluded and deported gay and lesbian immigrants or those potentially migrating by inferring that they had “psychopathic personalities.”⁴¹ The Hart-Celler Act implicitly promoted lesbian and gay exclusion by emphasizing nuclear family relations as a category for migrant admissions. Almost three-quarters of all permanent immigration visas issued were for individuals with such ties.⁴² Eithne Luibhéid asserts that family preferences also perpetuated racist sentiments by upholding patriarchal gender and sexual regimes that directly targeted

³⁹ Eithne Luibhéid, “Introduction: Queering Migration and Citizenship,” in *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings*, eds. Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantú (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xiii.

⁴⁰ Tracy J. Davis, “Opening the doors of immigration: sexual orientation and asylum in the United States,” *American University: Washington College of Law*, February 14, 2002, <https://www.wcl.american.edu/hrbrief/v6i3/immigration.htm> (accessed February 2, 2016).

⁴¹ Mathew Coleman, “US immigration law and its geographies of social control: lessons from homosexual exclusion during the Cold War,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008): 1096-1114, 1102.

⁴² Luibhéid, “Introduction,” xv.

Asians and Africans since many of these groups had been barred for many decades.⁴³ Under the 1965 revisions, lawmakers calculated that individuals from these groups would not have the necessary family ties to meet the law's requirement due to prior exclusion. Just as race was used to limit immigration to the U.S. so, too, was sexuality and other factors seen as non-normative.

These structural conditions are built into the ways in which the history of Thai migration is described. One of the significant things about Thai migration to the U.S. and the formation of its community is its assumed heteronormativity. For example, Desbarats argues that a "strong family character" is commonly how Thai migration is described, suggesting that Thais migrating to the U.S. are characterized by nuclear family unit.⁴⁴ Sirida Srisombati furthers this argument when she claims that "familial networks" are important in establishing Thai belonging and community within the U.S.⁴⁵ Mark Padoongpatt also notes a related, but different kind of heteronormative migration practice after the Viet Nam War, when many Thai women migrated with their husbands, U.S. servicemen, as G.I. "war brides."⁴⁶ The gendered, familial, and reproductive language used to talk about Thai migration and Thai America reinforces heteronormative assumptions about the character of the Thai migrant community, making invisible those who do not fit into these categories.

Regarding this disconnect, Pattaya Hart recalls that she does not converse or socialize with many Thai Americans in New York City, suggesting that she did not

⁴³ Ibid., xv-xvi.

⁴⁴ Desbarats, "Thai Migration to Los Angeles," 306.

⁴⁵ Srisombati, "BKK-LAX," 55-56.

⁴⁶ Padoongpatt, "Too hot to handle," 87.

necessarily feel connected to that community.⁴⁷ She states: “I don’t have a lot of connections with them because [my] life path and routine [was] totally opposite from them, [I] came [to the U.S.] to study dance and perform. And [I] live in [Manhattan]. So [I don’t] meet them out in [my] daily life routine. Most of Thais live further out in Queens.”⁴⁸

This disengagement between Pattaya Hart and other Thai immigrants is rooted in her divergent interests and desires as a queer Thai American. Hart describes most of the Thai immigrants who came to the United States as focused on restaurant work and taking English classes, noting that many of them were not a part of the queer drag community.⁴⁹ It is significant to note here that in addition to her interests and queer desires, the logics of class play into how Hart/Sayampol is disconnected from other Thai American migrants. For one, the drag queen resides in Manhattan, suggesting that Hart is able to live comfortably in New York City while, in contrast, other Thai Americans take up residence in neighboring Queens—a sleepy, residential sprawl in contrast to Manhattan’s unflagging energetic climb.⁵⁰ Additionally, the class dimensions related to Hart/Sayampol’s existence as a Thai American immigrant are spoken of as a part of her Bangkok origins. She, unlike some of the other Thai immigrants in the third wave of mass migration, came to the U.S. from Thailand’s capital and was educated by its university system, contrasting many other unskilled Thais who came to the United

⁴⁷ Methawee “Plu” Sayampol, interview with author, March 18, 2018.

⁴⁸ Methawee “Plu” Sayampol, interview with author, April 5, 2018.

⁴⁹ Throughout this work, I use female pronouns when referring to Pattaya Hart and her male counterpart, Methawee “Plu” Sayampol. I do this because, though in interview Sayampol out of drag, he refers to himself as Pattaya Hart and answers my questions through the lens of his drag persona, emphasizing gendered lexicons that are femininized.

⁵⁰ Gregory Bresiger, “Queens is in the middle of a middle-class housing boom,” *New York Post*, April 14, 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/04/14/queens-is-in-the-middle-of-a-middle-class-housing-boom/> (accessed July 5, 2018); and Nick Baitoo, conversation with author, July 5, 2018.

States without formal schooling.⁵¹ Nonetheless, I digress as the observations prior speak to how Thai America and other migrant communities are historically and contemporarily shaped and established under the logics of a compulsory heterosexuality.

Hart/Sayampol occupies a space on the periphery where their complex identities—such as Thai, American, queer, immigrant and citizen—constantly adapt to the conditions structured by the state and other forces. Diasporic queers of color inhabit an in-between space where, as Gayatri Gopinath contends, they emerge in unseen ways, overlooked by “standard mappings of nation, diaspora, or globalization.”⁵² I argue that Pattaya Hart’s drag performance reimagines a diasporic and queer Thai identity by way of a queer grotesque, articulating a queer Thai Americanness via fragmentation, then piecing together these dismembered fragments of Thainess to assemble something different and hopeful. It is a queer presentation of Thai American drag that “serve[s] as embodied representations of ‘between negotiations’ [to] ... construct strategic self-representations in order to critique hegemonic identity scripts that are placed on and read through their body.”⁵³ In the following, I examine Pattaya Hart’s drag persona as a set of negotiations that draws from familiar gendered, racialized and sexualized vocabularies of Thainess and refracts them through the grotesque in order to establish a new script. Drawing from a stylized photographic portrait, a drag performance, and interviews, I argue that Pattaya Hart’s narrative and her performances

⁵¹ Padoongpatt, “Thai Americans,” 893.

⁵² Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 12.

⁵³ Shane T. Moreman and Dawn Marie McIntosh, “Brown Scriptings and Rescriptings: A Critical Performance Ethnography of Latina Drag Queens,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2010): 115-135, 120.

contest conditions of representation and belonging through the realms of the queer grotesque.

A fierce queen: Pattaya Hart

In her stunning half-drag portrait by Leland Bobbé—a New York-based photographer—Pattaya Hart is photographed portraying both her male and female personas (figure 4.1).⁵⁴



FIGURE 4.1 Leland Bobbé’s portrait of Pattaya Hart.
Photograph courtesy of Leland Bobbé.

The image is a part of the photographer’s acclaimed 2012 project, titled “Half-Drag ... A Different Kind of Beauty,” depicting the fluidity of drag performers, or “queens” based

⁵⁴ Dior, “A Heart to Heart with Pattaya Hart.”

out of New York City.⁵⁵ As noted by the title, the project is a meditation on gender and appearance, where subjects are depicted half in drag and half without makeup, “accentuat[ing] the difference of the two sides.”⁵⁶ Reviews concurred that “the dual reality of the face-only pictures speaks to a *split identity*, of which each side is equally true.”⁵⁷ The fifty images in “Half-Drag” are rendered similarly: head shots in full color, with the subjects gazing directly at the camera. Of the almost fifty images, fewer than twenty are of identifiably queens of color. Yet even among those, Hart’s image stands out for the racialized sexuality that informs her queer gestures, use of accessories, and, importantly, differentiates her from others as her portrait is unmistakably grounded in her ethnicity.

In her portrait, Pattaya Hart deliberately draws on Thai gesture and accoutrements—both of which have been recast in Orientalist terms through global tourism. She prominently wields the *fawn lep*, or brass fingernails used in traditional Thai dancing, framing the right side of her face with their metallic shape. Hart states that “[the photographer] wanted something silver, cold – a cold feeling. But I wanted to do

⁵⁵ *TheBlot Magazine’s* review of Leland Bobbé’s project states that “Half-Drag ... A Different Kind of Beauty” was well-received globally as it raised important questions regarding gender, sexuality, and presentation. After debuting the project on his website in June 2012, “Half Drag” was shown on various websites, various art publications, and featured in highly notable magazines—such as *The Huffington Post*, *ABC News*, and *Vogue Italia*. Since then, Bobbé’s website, at the peak of “Half-Drag’s” press coverage, has received over 40,000 views and his project has been shown in over 30 countries. (Alexander, “Leland Bobbé’s ‘Half-Drag’ Series Shows Vulnerability Can Be Empowering,” *TheBlot Magazine*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.theblot.com/leland-bobbes-half-drag-series-shows-vulnerability-be-empowering-7711037> (accessed April 19, 2018)). DL Cade, “Half-Drag Portraits Show the Before & After Transformations of NYC Drag Queens,” *PetaPixel*, October 12, 2013, <https://petapixel.com/2013/10/12/half-drag-photos-show-transformations-nyc-drag-queens/> (accessed January 9, 2018).

⁵⁶ Bobbé qtd. in Tristan Rayner, “Extraordinary photos of New York drag queens in half drag,” *Lost At E Minor*, October 8, 2013, www.lostateminor.com/2013/10/08/extraordinary-photos-of-drag-queens-in-half-drag/ (accessed January 9, 2018).

⁵⁷ Alexander Brafman, “Leland Bobbé’s ‘Half-Drag’ Series Shows Vulnerability Can Be Empowering,” *TheBlot Magazine*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.theblot.com/leland-bobbes-half-drag-series-shows-vulnerability-be-empowering-7711037> (January 9, 2018). (italicized emphasis mine).

something warm. ... In my mind, *I was doing something 'Oriental,' warm. You know, kind of like a spice?* ... It's kind of like 'creature-ish.' It's what I was doing back then too. *I was doing a creature kind of thing.* But the [overall] theme was 'Oriental.' ... How do I make myself *different?* ... I want to do Thai."⁵⁸ The performer draws upon the cultural languages of Thainess and exoticism to express her identity as both queer and Thai, identifying a familiar aesthetic for queer Thai American survival. Mark Padoongpatt notes that such acts of survival are not new in the Thai American community as notions of race, ethnicity, and nation are used to package Thainess, through cuisine and food cultures, as a novelty to distinguish themselves in the multiculturalism of American spaces.⁵⁹ These survival tactics can be seen in how Sayampol defines her drag as "Oriental" and similar to a "spice," which, when thinking about Hart's drag in relation to Thai cuisine, is significant as Thai food is known for its colors, vibrancy, and spiciness. Furthermore, the drag queen's use of the fingernails is a strategic act, drawing on the visual vocabulary of feminized "porno-tropical" Thai fantasy to provoke the viewer as well as to distinguish her drag persona. Through this choice, Pattaya Hart queers what she—and others—readily identify as Oriental, as Thai.

For her portrait, Pattaya Hart set out to evoke a "creature-like" image. What makes the drag queen's appearance grotesque is its portrayal of the female form as an abjection "from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics."⁶⁰ According to Mary Russo, the classical body is represented as monumental, static, and transcendental; it is a form that aligns itself with bourgeois tastes as well as "high" culture.⁶¹ Yet Pattaya Hart's use

⁵⁸ Methawee "Plu" Sayampol, interview with author, March 18, 2018. (italicized emphasis mine).

⁵⁹ Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 87.

⁶⁰ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

of the brass fingernails disrupts the standards of beauty placed on the classical and feminine body, making it grotesque through its irregular, protruding, sharp, and non-normative stylization. In other words, the *fawn lep*'s elongation of her fingers mimics something more than human, allowing for the beauty of the monstrous. Paired with the portrait's disconcerting split of male/female, the claw-like extension created by the fingernails renders Pattaya Hart into a kind of creature whose beastliness is both tempered and focused by the metallic alloy of the accoutrement. Here is a hybrid being, both fantasy and threat. Additionally, Hart's ombré makeup emphasizes her otherworldliness. She applies purple and gold cosmetics around her eye, highlighting an eye color from a contact lens that emphasizes the freakish juxtaposition of light blue eyes with Asianness. The overall appearance is fantasy-like, underscoring the queen's desire to portray a non-human persona, which actually draws from a history of stereotypes depicting Thais as wild and inhuman.

The reference to beastly qualities recalls a long history of Thais being portrayed as subhuman and animalistic, primarily in Victorian literature. Margaret Landon's best-selling novel, *Anna and the King of Siam* (1944), based on the fantastic and embellished adventures of Anna Leonowens, refers to the Siamese as "human cattle," "poor reptiles on the floor," or "a bedlam of parrots."⁶² Landon's novel (and the adaptations thereafter) rationalized Thai subordination to the West through this rhetoric. Such animalistic and bestial views have also justified Thai sexual exploitation.

⁶² Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam* (New York: The John Day Company, 1944), 25, 54, and 33; and Pahole Sookkasikon, "Fragrant Rice Queen: The Hungry Ghost of Anna Leonowens, and Thai/America," (master's thesis, San Francisco State University, 2010).

Yet in Pattaya Hart's portrait of a Thai drag queen as "creature-like," she turns these racist colonial representations on their head by both delivering the expected and familiar visual imagery associated with Thainess, and perverting it in the same instance. By claiming ownership of a maligned animalism, Hart embraces the savagery attributed to Thainess, emphasizing its uncontainable and uncontrollable qualities. It is a grotesque identity that combines human and beast to piece together something beyond Western fantasy. Pattaya Hart's fierce gaze is instrumental to how her strategic self-orientalism ultimately refuses the pitfalls of racial, gendered and sexualized stereotyping. The element of the uncontrollable in her the direct and unflinching gaze that refuses easy dismissal.

Pattaya Hart's accessories and gesticulations give audiences what they salivate over—an exoticized "Other." The drag performer's use of the *fawn lep* recognizes them as readily identifiable symbols of Thai exoticization that have become "an indispensable [sic] part of tourism promotion."⁶³ Today, Thai dance is an integral part to the commodification of Thai culture and its people. From traditional folk dances to the global and sensationalized go-go dancer, dance in Thailand has served voyeuristic desires for a feminized, sexualized "authenticity" imagined by tourists.⁶⁴ The *fawn lep*, for instance, has been associated with "unmarried girls," fetishizing unwed women as "water orchids floating on the water": the epitome of decorative femininity.⁶⁵ However, belying the delicacy traditionally attached to the fingernails, Hart wields them with a more

⁶³ Surapon Virulrak, "The Status of Traditional Thai Dance, Preservation and Innovation," *SPAFA Digest* 7, no. 2 (1986): 17 - N.P., 17.

⁶⁴ Andrew Alan Johnson, "Authenticity, Tourism, and Self-discovery in Thailand: Self-creation and the Discerning Gaze of Trekkers and Old Hands," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 22, no. 2 (2007): 153-178, 158.

⁶⁵ Gail Giles, *Breath of the Dragon* (New York: Clarion Books, 1997), 62.

aggressive attitude, her hand clasped as if she were vogueing, demanding the viewer's attention through the accessory's length, the hardness of the metal, and the unyieldingness of the pose. Rather than a docile and accommodating Thai femininity, Pattaya Hart's nails mark instead several departures from what *fawn lep* has come to mean. She divorces them from Thai cultural authenticity and femininity, instead tying them firmly to a drag representation that is at its essence, a destabilizing of gendered norms. The face that is framed is not shyly looking down, but rather gazing directly at the viewer; the other half of it unapologetically male. The identity that Hart invokes via the brass fingernails and her makeup is an irrepressible queer and Thai character that is grotesque, showing that these exotic framings of Thainess "cannot be controlled by [its] creator."⁶⁶

Yet, as Pattaya Hart destabilizes Thai gender norms with her drag by using the *fawn lep*, it could also be argued that she harnesses the exploitative power attached to Thai women's performances, producing an "identification" that denies and rejects feminine autonomy and agency.⁶⁷ It is a thin line between representation that reclaims the desires and pleasures of Thai people in addition and comparison to the desires and pleasures of those who exploit Thainess. As she draws upon the visual archive of a Thai identity, Hart, simultaneously affirms her own persona as a queer person of color while exploiting the symbolic and performative value of Thai womanhood. Butler claims that such a usage is a "phantasmic transfiguration" that constitutes how "the site of women not only as marketable goods within an erotic economy of exchange, but ... a strategy of abjection that is already underway, originating in the complex of racist,

⁶⁶ Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 53.

⁶⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 90.

homophobic, misogynist, and classist constructions that belong to larger hegemonies of oppression.”⁶⁸ In other words, the reworking, rearticulation, and performance of Thai femininity and womanhood by drag queens and queer performers, as acts of resistance, are not always radical; it sometimes is a messy way that marginal communities mimic and utilize the desires and outlooks of heteronormativity and patriarchy. And so, as the drag queen uses Thai femininity and its cultural codes to destabilize normative understandings of queerness, she ambivalently reduces Thai womanhood to little more than a prop. In this way, Hart’s manifestation of the *fawn lep* as radical and even resistant form of drag performance appears as not necessarily destabilizing, but a queerness that, as Cathy J. Cohen gestures, “reinforce[s] simple dichotomies between heterosexual” and what is “left unexamined.”⁶⁹ In other words, though the drag queen’s photograph, queer gesture and performance does operate on a transgression that attempts to rebuild a kinship between marginal Thais, she does so by relying upon histories of Thai female exploitation to invoke a diasporic and queer alterity.

Yet there remains potential in the photograph in its fashioning of a transgressive form of Thainess. Though the image uses Thai femininity and womanhood as a prop to drag Thainess in the diaspora, it simultaneously offers viewers the possibility of intimate identifications with alternative forms of kinship built through female and gay male spectacles of Thainess. In a way, Pattaya Hart’s portrait emerges as an alternative reality that plays with, performs, and resists monolithic notions of Thainess; it is a representation that creates an ambiguous image that recalls Orientalized and gendered

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁹ Cohen, “Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens,” 438.

desire while also insisting on the specificity of Thainess as a source of connection and community.

In putting this drag persona in the public eye, Pattaya Hart joins other Thai American drag queens residing all over the continental U.S. For example, Hart and Suzy Wong/Arnold Myint—a Thai American celebrity chef and entertainer from Nashville, Tennessee “met last year—last April.” Hart goes on to describe the meeting: “I didn’t [even know she was Thai] because [her name] was ‘Suzy Wong.’ I had no idea that [she] was Thai. ... And she starts speaking Thai to me and I’m like, ‘Wait. Huh?’”⁷⁰ Pattaya Hart describes how Thai identity connects her to other Thai drag queens in the United States: “That connection. ... When you know that they’re Thai, that certain connection [makes it feel like] we’re sisters now! Best friends now! Like, there’s another [Thai] drag queen in D.C. Now, [after meeting her and discovering that we’re both Thai] ... we’re chatting a lot!”⁷¹ After discussing how excited she was to have found other Thai American drag queens, Hart/Sayampol said that these queens all kept in touch through various forms of technology—like Facebook, Instagram, and text messages—in addition to running into one another at various drag pageants. In this way, Hart, along with the other queer Thai Americans that she encountered through drag, created an underground queer and diasporic community specific to them. The act of creating

⁷⁰ Methawee “Plu” Sayampol, interview with author, March 18, 2018.

Arnold Myint, or Suzy Wong, is a food personality known for his culinary skills on the Emmy-award winning show, *Top Chef*. He has been recognized in several food publications and magazines—such as *GQ Magazine*, *Epicurious*, *USA Today*, and *Eater.com*. Myint dons on his alter-ego, Suzy Wong, at social events and pageants, saying, in an interview with *USA Today*, that “Arnold is the chef. Suzy is the socialite. She’s the queen of cocktails and home entertaining. She’s flowers and tablescapes” (Jim Myers, “Drag queen, alter ego team to beat ‘Food Network Star,’” *USA Today*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2015/06/02/drag-queen-food-network-star/28387069/> (accessed June 19, 2018)).

⁷¹ Methawee “Plu” Sayampol, interview with author, March 18, 2018

community—a queer family of sorts—circumvents how belonging has been traditionally formed. The bonds that these drag queens create, though separated by distance, refashions how community and family are understood within the contexts of Thai America, rethinking how previous scholarship on diasporic Thais in the U.S. have characterized and fostered the formation of familial networks. The drag queens’ use of social media, pageants, and modern technology to construct alternative meanings of kinship queers how diasporic Thai subjects circumvent blood family or marriage to conceptualize belonging. Additionally, I argue that such a sisterhood exists as a refuge from the United States’ mainstream and commercial gay community. What the drag queens are doing is creating real “gay places and spaces” outside the monolithic standards of community, nation, and kinship.⁷²

Returning to Bobbé’s photograph, Pattaya Hart’s portrait invokes an unapologetically *kathoe* “ladyboy” figure.⁷³ As *kathoe* individuals do not completely identify as man or woman, Hart’s portrait evokes the complexities of *kathoe* identity in its inclusion of both genders (and more) while still identifiably feminine.⁷⁴ In doing so, she does conflate queer drag with Thai “ladyboy” culture.⁷⁵ At the same time, Pattaya Hart’s play on the *kathoe* exceeds a U.S. vernacular of gay, queer, and drag identity that also does not quite match up with Thai understandings of gender and sexuality. According to Pavadee Saisuwan, *kathoe*, which is normally translated as ladyboy in

⁷² Nikos Dacanay, “Encounters in the Sauna: Exploring Gay Identity and Power Structures in Gay Places in Bangkok,” in *Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Markets, Media, and Rights*, ed. Peter A. Jackson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 101; and Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 558-564.

⁷³ Methawee “Plu” Sayampol, interview with author, March 18, 2018; and Dior, “A Heart to Heart with Pattaya Hart.”

⁷⁴ Saisuwan, “Kathoe,” 191.

⁷⁵ Methawee “Plu” Sayampol, interview with author, March 18, 2018.

English, refers to “*sao praphet song* ‘the second type of woman.’”⁷⁶ This “second type” of femininity has the potential to be much more than the “water orchid” idealized by Thai mores: it is extravagant and “creature-like” in its indiscriminate mixing of Thai and U.S. queer gender play. Even within the bounds of Leland Bobbé’s project, Pattaya Hart’s split Thai portrait hints at the uncontainable, exceeding Western and Thai notions of femininity and queerness in its grotesque assemblage of both.

Used by a drag queen, the *fawn lep* presents an illusion that consciously presents Thai femininity and masculinity as sites of contestation and theatrics. Judith Butler contends that “drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.”⁷⁷ Drag’s political perversity destabilizes gender norms through a form of parody. As parody, it shakes up normative constructions of gender, making room for marginalized communities to create “alternative signifying codes.”⁷⁸ In other words, Pattaya Hart’s usage of the *fawn lep* is a fierce reconceptualization of not only Thai femininity and masculinity, but a reimagining of who can participate and operate certain forms of diasporic notions of Thainess through a queer visioning of race, ethnicity, and gender.

Pattaya Hart’s image posits a Thai identity, gender, and kinship that is not fully appropriated by the logics of global capitalism as well as hetero- and homonormativity. In the past, kinship—or “psychic, affective, and visceral” connections—have enabled marginal individuals to resignify community, belonging, and sustainability in the face of

⁷⁶ Saisuwan, “Kathoeay,” 191. (italicized emphasis in original).

⁷⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 85.

⁷⁸ Meyer, “Introduction,” 11.

heteronormativity, poverty, dislocation, and displacement.⁷⁹ As Pattaya Hart embodies a *kathoey*/ladyboy identity referencing a “second type of woman,” “woman of a second kind,” or one who is categorized as part of a third gender, she complicates gender roles and its binaries standardized by the West, heteronormativity, and patriarchy.⁸⁰ What comes about from the drag queen’s embodiment of an alternative form of Thai womanhood is a kind of queer kinship based upon the performance of an “affective labor” that lends itself to us “recogniz[ing] new forms of labor and value in the global age.”⁸¹ In another way, the image’s gesture to a seemingly transcendent and alternative type of Thai gender and femininity is a challenge to resignify how Thainess is viewed in relation to *kathoey*-ness and womanhood. It attempts to imagine a kinship that connects marginal and oppressed Thais—in this case, queers and women—together.

The Thai American drag queen can potentially be seen as creating a radicalized community by drawing upon and drawing together femininity and queerness, generating a communal bond through resignification. Such a different reality is based upon a reimagining of Thainess, Thai womanhood, and what it means to be Thai and *kathoey* under state and global apparatuses. This radical reconstruction, as Judith Butler claims, “is in the elaboration of kinship forged through a resignification of the very terms which effect ... exclusion and abjection that such a resignification creates the discursive and social space for community, that ... see[s] an appropriation of the terms of domination that turns them toward a more enabling future.”⁸² In this way, Hart does not simply

⁷⁹ Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 2; and Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 94.

⁸⁰ Arunrat Tangmunkongvorakul, et al., “Sexual identities and lifestyles among non-heterosexual urban Chiang Mai youth: Implications for health,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 12, no. 7 (2010): 827-841: 834; Jai Arun Ravine, “Toms and Zees: Locating FTM Identity in Thailand,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2014): 387-401, 390; Saisuwan, “Kathoey,” 191.

⁸¹ Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 108.

⁸² Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 95.

appropriate or use the Thai woman as crutch to both empower and further her diasporic queerness; but, moreover, as a way to present how marginal Thais are impacted by larger forces in the world. In this sense, Pattaya Hart's use of the *fawn lep* brings an attentiveness to the shared aspects and spectacle of performing and embodying scripted forms of Thainess on a local, national, and global stage. Hart's use of the accoutrement is not merely liberatory or transcendent, and, more so, does not erase the traumas associated with how Thainess is a spectacle exoticized to appease the West, the Thai nation-state, or global imaginings of an orientalized "Other." However, I argue that the *fawn lep* and the drag queen's usage of the nails gestures to "an unstable coexistence" of agency and trauma, bringing together a cacophony of domination, pleasure, and identification in hopes to destabilize how mainstream Thainess is a drag in itself.⁸³

Hart's accoutrements not only stress the differences between man and woman or human and animal, but, also, between a Thainess rooted in Thailand and a Thai identity created in the diaspora. The accessories publicly mark Hart as Thai, forcing viewers and the photographer to comprehend that the performer's drag is defined by her ethnicity. No other drag queens are noticeably photographed with such racialized cultural tokens of identity. The brass fingernails emerge as a point of performance and agency where Hart combines dissimilar sites of identification in her life as a queer and diasporic Thai in addition to her role and participation in an Americanized gay world. Her queer gesture, as rooted in her ethnicity as well as queer Thai performance in relation to gay tourism, touches upon the fabulous nature of queer becoming where it, as José

⁸³ Ibid., 95.

Esteban Muñoz claims, has a multivalenced understanding rooted in “racialized self-enactment in the face of overarching opposition.”⁸⁴ She defiantly models a racialized queer Thainess that disrupts the photographer’s original goal of capturing the differences between male and female amongst drag queens.⁸⁵ Hart’s use of the fingernails accentuates that race and ethnicity cannot be separated from representations of gender and sexuality, especially when dealing queer communities in the diaspora.

Furthermore, as queer performance is integral to gay tourism in Thailand, Hart’s body language signals how queer Thainess is performed in tourism. From dancing sensually, to the sexual “fluidity” that Thai men take on while interacting with clients, queer performance positions young Thai men to be alluring to their (typically) Western johns.⁸⁶ While certainly alluring and unapologetically seductive, Pattaya Hart’s performance is fierce and confrontational.⁸⁷ Her adorned hand is claw-like and her gaze is direct, acting out a queer Thai identity that contradicts the “fresh and ‘unspoiled’ (*borisut*)” look desired by many gay tourists in Thailand.⁸⁸ Her otherworldliness makes

⁸⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 80.

⁸⁵ Inigo del Castillo, “Half-Drag: interview with photographer Leland Bobbe,” *Lost At E Minor*, January 21, 2014, <https://www.lostateminor.com/2014/01/22/interview-leland-bobbe-photographer-famous-series-half-drag/> (accessed April 16, 2018).

⁸⁶ Jan W. De Lind van Wijngaarden, “Between Money, Morality and Masculinity: Bar-Based Male Sex Work in Chiang Mai,” in *Lady Boys, Tom Boys, Rent Boys: Male and Female Homosexualities in Contemporary Thailand*, eds. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1999).

⁸⁷ In her work, Lynn Thiesmeyer argues that acts of seduction are integral to Asia’s sex trade, making Western sex tours to Asia profitable. She claims that “Seduction is a symbology used to implicate the victim in her own abuse by removing her from her own body and voice into the realm of another’s discursive image and text. ... [Acts of seduction] takes several forms [of silence], among them censorship, distortion, displacement, disinterest, and death” (Lynn Thiesmeyer, “The West’s ‘Comfort Women’ and the Discourses of Seduction,” in *Transnational Asia Pacific: Gender, Culture, and The Public Sphere*, eds. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Larry E. Smith, and Wimal Dissanayake (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 70).

⁸⁸ Wijngaarden, “Between Money, Morality and Masculinity,” 206.

both her queerness and femininity unsettling through a grotesque aesthetic that stitches together a Thai, diasporic and queer femininity that aspires to beauty while refusing commodification. Long and claw-like fingernails, a monstrosly piercing eye, the simultaneous embodiment of masculinity and femininity, human and creature, Pattaya Hart performs spectacle and freak, aligning herself with “divine monsters who mediate[] the natural and cosmic world.”⁸⁹ Her queer grotesque engages a different kind of beauty, eliciting a physicality that transgresses borders, boundaries, and definition.

Pattaya Hart’s complex evocation of Thainess interrupts normative American identities, refusing the rhetoric of gendered Cold War containment used to render Thailand and its citizens as manageable as U.S. allies and as objects of difference.⁹⁰ The queen’s usage of the fingernails and their placement squarely in front of her face not only flirts with and undermines American notions of Thai accommodation, but also queers hetero- and homonormative forms of identification, complicating everyday rituals, spaces, and practices. As the fingernails are prominently used in Thai classical dance, Thai cultural centers in the U.S. use the Thai accessories as one method to instill Thai culture and Thainess to diasporic Thais.⁹¹ The *fawn lep* therefore materializes as a mark of Thai American diasporic culture, gesturing to the aesthetics of citizenship, “the temporality of assimilation,” and the homogenizing vernaculars of belonging.⁹² Pattaya Hart’s use of the accessories signal alternative histories of queer community and Thai migration to the U.S. amid the other portraits in Bobbé’s series. They point to a queer Thai American community within a homogenizing gay America

⁸⁹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 80.

⁹⁰ Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*.

⁹¹ Siwaraya Rochanahusdin, conversation with author, April 24, 2018.

⁹² Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 6.

that has been historically structured by a white gay male gaze of an “an omnipresent, unreflexive observer.”⁹³

The grotesque nature of Pattaya Hart’s self-orientalization is also signaled through her drag name. Like other Asian American drag performers—such as Manila Luzon (whose creativity on television’s *RuPaul’s Drag Race* inspired Sayampol to perform drag), Vivienne Pinay, Kim Chi, and others, the “Pattaya” in Hart’s name draws upon racialized imagery that geographically locates the performer in Thailand in addition to Western fantasies of a Thai sexual and beach paradise.⁹⁴ Hart’s persona and moniker draw upon a visual economy of Thainess that elicits Western imaginings of Thainess as an Orientalized paradise: her name was inspired by the beach city on the eastern Gulf of Thailand known as “*the city of Ladyboys!*”⁹⁵ Though depictions of the town bring up picturesque imageries of Thai beaches and resorts, the seamy reality is that it is known as a major destination for sex tourism.⁹⁶ As a Western fantasy, the city resides in the popular imagination of gay tourism as brochures marvel at how “well-developed” and “flamboyant” the coastal city is for gay and lesbian foreigners, categorizing it under the banner of “gay paradise.”⁹⁷ Boastful comments through *TripAdvisor, Inc.*, an American travel website company, note that one “can bar-hop to your heart’s content, tasting the goods along the way until you find a boy worth taking home for the night.”⁹⁸ Pattaya Hart’s moniker references the beach town as a prominent

⁹³ Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 6.

⁹⁴ Dior, “A Heart to Heart with Pattaya Hart.”

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* (italicized emphasis mine).

⁹⁶ Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, 196.

⁹⁷ Howard L. Hughes, *Pink Tourism: Holidays of Gay Men and Lesbians* (Wallingford: CABI, 2006), 115.

⁹⁸ TripAdvisor, “Pattaya Best The Best Gay Nightlife Attraction,” *TripAdvisor, Inc.*, May 18, 2017, https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293919-d10104682-r485496453-Boyztown-Pattaya_Chonburi_Province.html (accessed March 2, 2018).

place where Western fantasies are materialized in Thailand. In doing so, she puts together a persona that incorporates the grotesque exploitation of Thai queers, bringing the violent reality and desires of Pattaya to the doorstep of white gay America.

Through Hart's name, Thailand's Pattaya is not just *there* anymore, but residing within and disrupting the pleasures of people in the United States. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund argue that a transgression such as Hart's disrupts the "status quo ... [as] the grotesque can be transgressive by challenging the limits of conventional aesthetics through disharmony or experiential forms", such as drag.⁹⁹ Pattaya Hart's relocation of the sexually exploited beach town in the Big Apple forces a kind of remapping of tourist desire that is confrontational and in your face. Hart's "Pattaya" in New York City is an act of diasporic reimagining that does not only disrupt the homogeneity of the white male gayness in New York City, but also the orientalisms of that culture.

While I have argued here that Pattaya Hart took control of her portraiture by deploying and subverting orientalist fantasies in Leland Bobbé's project, the next section, focused on a drag performance, examines how Hart further subverted those desires. I analyze Hart's drag of a "Thai-ified" version of Gloria Gaynor's disco hit, "I Will Survive," looking to her use of gestures and languages of the grotesque to make space for her Thai diasporic identity within the cosmopolitan queer cultures of New York City.

"I Will Survive": remaking Thai Americanness through drag

Drag as performance, according to C. Winter Han, is a political act that subverts dominant relations of power, performs racialized femininities, challenges the status quo,

⁹⁹ Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 66.

and reconceptualizes the boundaries of collective identity and belonging.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, José Esteban Muñoz contends that political drag's power lies in the uneasiness it generates, an awkwardness that subverts social norms and the ways they are constructed and maintained.¹⁰¹ Yet it is important to note that Pattaya Hart's ability to perform this particular queer identity and act is enabled by her privilege as a First World drag queen. Though the performer pushes back against mainstream notions of Thainess and articulates a nuanced queer and diasporic Thai identity, she draws upon Thai people, culture and identity to articulate her craft. What does it mean for Pattaya Hart to invoke a self that is premised on a grotesque spectacle of eroticism, exotification, as well as orientalism? What does it mean when such grotesque identities are controlled and distanced from Thailand and those who are oppressed daily by structures of subjugation? How do we talk about Hart and her performances as radical and full of potential if the lives of other Thais—Thais whom Hart draws from—are substantially unaltered or unaffected? Though such questions are difficult to answer fully, the point of Hart's grotesque drag lies in its messiness and its inability to remain so clear-cut, emphasizing how diasporic subjects defined by an identity that is hybridized by the nation-state and histories of imperialism and U.S. intervention. Though Pattaya Hart's drag may not necessarily bring change to Thais still residing in service economies of Thailand, I ask: is it possible to see her labors and craft as implicating her audiences, the U.S. and Thailand in the act?

Returning to Han's argument that drag is a political intervention, Pattaya Hart's drag performance of a "Thai-ified" version of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" is an

¹⁰⁰ Han, *Geisha of a Different Kind*, 194-195.

¹⁰¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 100.

example of such a political act. Like Bobbé's portrait of Pattaya Hart, this performance is one of the few times that Pattaya Hart explicitly draws upon Thainess to showcase her drag, fashioning a queer Thai American identity through her theatrical and parodic use of the grotesque.

On YouTube, user "Thomas Trinity" posted a video titled "So You Think You Can Drag? Season 3 Season Finale - Pattaya Hart Act 2" which shows Hart's fierce performance, competing in the 2012 drag competition. The show's title is a play on popular reality T.V. shows, *So You Think You Can Dance?* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*, that follow the format of reality television where everyday contestants compete for accolades, prizes, or a title. Held at the Green Room Lounge in New World Stages—a renowned performing arts complex—in Midtown/Hell's Kitchen, *So You Think You Can Drag?* is a nine-week competition where a group of rotating celebrity judges and audience members vote on the top two drag performers who must "lip sync for their lives!"¹⁰² Held weekly, the event gives contestants a chance to win cash prizes, their own show, as well as vie for the ultimate title of the next best "Drag Superstar of NYC!"¹⁰³

Emerging from a black curtain to the cheers and applause of the audience, Pattaya Hart dances onto the stage, wearing colorful silk garbs and a conical Asian hat, her fingers adorned with *fawn lep*. With her arms stretched outward, she moves on the stage fluidly, enacting the traditional moves of *rumwong* (or "Thai dance"). Her arms

¹⁰² "Lip sync for your life" is a phrase popularized by RuPaul and her show. In *Drag Race*, RuPaul's invocation of the statement comes at the end of each episode where two drag queens are faced with elimination. To continue on in the competition, the two performers must battle by lip syncing a LGBT anthem, vying for the approval of RuPaul and a table of judges.

¹⁰³ So You Think You Can Drag?, "About," *Facebook*, N.D., https://www.facebook.com/pg/soyouthinkyoucandrag7/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed November 30, 2017).

move in a circular pattern, occasionally extending to showcase her delicacy and the timid nature of the dancer as traditionally represented by the choreography (figure 4.2).



FIGURE 4.2 Pattaya Hart emerges in *So You Think You Can Drag?*
Film still, “So You Think You Can Drag? Season 3 Season Finale - Pattaya Hart Act 2,” 2012.

The music that she first walks out to can be characterized as a part of *rumwong*—a genre of Thai and Lao music characterized by exuberant rhythms, use of percussion instruments, and lively singing. It is stylized by its “rhythmic dialogue” promoting thematic narratives of “persuasion, teasing, praising, and partying.”¹⁰⁴ Centering herself on the stage, Pattaya Hart gives her audience the traditional Thai greeting of a *wai* and mouths, “sawasdee ka, brothers and sisters.” The only audience members that we see in the duration of this clip are individuals who read as white. Their facial expressions

¹⁰⁴ Chun Che Fung, et al., “iThaiSTAR – A Low Cost Humanoid Robot for Entertainment and Teaching Thai Dances,” in *Technologies for E-Learning and Digital Entertainment: Third International Conference, Edutainment 2008, Nanjing, China, June 25-27, 2008, Proceedings*, eds. Zhigeng Pan, Xiaopeng Zhang, Abdennour El Rhalibi, Woontack Woo, and Yi Li (N.P.: Springer, 2008), 103.

look on with amazement as one man gives a “wow!” clasping his hands together as to mimic the *wai* that Hart gives. Though the moment is brief, the exchange between the performer and audience members—in particular, the man who returns the drag queen’s *wai*—speaks to the exotification in how Thainess is perceived by the West. The audience’s act of imitation is reminiscent of the infantilized ways that tourists emulate cultures that are foreign to them. The *wai*, described as opposite to the handshake, a “gentle” and “graceful” Thai greeting, is out of context in this setting, especially as expressed by a voyeur.¹⁰⁵ Yet the response speaks to the desires of the audience for connection, and their recognition of those desires in Hart’s self-exoticization.

As the predominantly white audience gawks at her performance, it is safe to say that the attendees are not reading the performance as liberatory, leveled, or politically engaged. In fact, the audience is more fascinated with the Thai American drag queen’s act merely and only as a drag performance that satisfies orientalist desire or broader cultures of drag in a gay New York. In her discussions on Hollywood’s portrayal of Asia, Gina Marchetti contends that mainstream media has long been fascinated with Asia as embodying the “mysterious and exotic,” promising the allure of adventure as well as forbidden pleasure and decadence.¹⁰⁶ Hart’s drag—as both an orientalized and kitsch spectacle of Thainess—accentuates the orientalist fantasies produced about Thailand, its people, and its culture, using familiar cues that suggest Thai hospitality and accommodation. For example, the *wai* and genteel persona that Hart opens with signals

¹⁰⁵ Hjørleifur Jonsson, “Mien through Sports and Culture: Mobilizing Minority Identity in Thailand,” *Journal of Anthropology Museum of Ethnography* 8, no. 3 (2003): 317–340, 329; and Jody Houton, *Geek in Thailand: Discovering the Land of Golden Buddhas, Pad Thai and Kickboxing* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2016), 51.

¹⁰⁶ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1.

globalized images of Thainess, codifying Thais—especially women—as “[b]eautiful, gentle, gracious, and charming.”¹⁰⁷ This genteel stereotype attached to Thainess is further propelled by the white audience member’s return of the Thai greeting and his overexaggerated “wow!” And so, even if Hart’s performance of “I Will Survive” “speaks to [the performer] a lot” and enables the drag queen to invoke Thainess in her performance, it is safe to say that her audience members do not always receive it in the same way. In this sense, what emerges from this initial exchange is what Marchetti describes as “[a] romance with Asia [that] tends to be *a flirtation with the exotic* rather than an attempt at any genuine intercultural understanding.”¹⁰⁸ The flirtation between Hart and her white audiences reifies the representational exploitation already linked to global notions of Thainess. In its reception then, regardless of Hart’s intention, this performance operates to perpetuate ideas of Thai hypersexuality and submissiveness. However, Pattaya Hart’s drag and her movements disidentify, acting as a third option that simultaneously employs and resists dominant representations of Thainess to reimagine her diasporic identification through performance. Though Hart’s gesture does not erase the traumas of sexual violence and prostitution in Thailand, her rebellious movements name the possibilities of bodily ownership and demand Western gay reflection of their own culpability in the exploitation of Thai queers.

The *rumwong* music fades, and Pattaya Hart positions herself at the end of the stage’s catwalk. She spins in a circle, ending her entrance’s choreography in a bold diva

¹⁰⁷ Godfree Roberts, *How to Retire in Thailand and Double Your Income: A 12-Step Program for Getting More Fun Out of Life* (Chelmer, Australia: CreateSpace Publishing, 2012), 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. (italicized emphasis mine).

stance to transition to her “Thai-ified” rendition of “I Will Survive.”¹⁰⁹ In many LGBT circles—especially for gay men, the 1970s disco song, “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor, has been often described as a “gay anthem” that describes the experience of coming out and surviving in a homophobic world most violently defined by the HIV and AIDS epidemic.¹¹⁰ Though scholars have dismissed it as cliché or predictable, the disco track allows drag performers to make a political stance, pushing for queer and LGBT acceptance and the affirmation of one’s sexuality amid social persecution.¹¹¹ “I Will Survive” thus reinforces “a collective gay identity,” of shared feelings, traumas, and experiences.¹¹² Elizabeth Kaminski contends that the song, for many gay men, sends a message of sexual liberation and freedom.¹¹³ Nadine Hubbs further argues that “I Will Survive” carries symbolic power in disco as it resides within a “musico-social movement[s]” that bespeaks of subcultural forms of companionship and intermingling in certain subgroups.¹¹⁴ The song itself is a meditation on marginalization in addition to transcending loneliness. Though “I Will Survive” anthemically carries the codes of queer defiance and the will to live, what makes the song even more relevant for Pattaya Hart’s purposes are the racial cues that cast the song and reimagine it in the contexts of empire and racialized sexuality.

¹⁰⁹ The term “Thai-ified” and “Thai-ification” is a process that aims to create a strong and unified Thai culture, attempting to bring about unity under Thai control and power.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Kaminski and Verta Taylor, “‘We’re Not Just Lip-syncing Up Here’: Music and Collective Identity in Drag Performances,” in *Identity Work in Social Movements*, Jo Reger, Daniel J. Myers, and Rachel L. Einwohner, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 58.

¹¹¹ Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 128-131.

¹¹² Elizabeth Kaminski, “Listening to Drag: Music, Performance, and the Construction of Oppositional Culture,” (doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 2003), 64; and Kaminski and Taylor, “‘We’re Not Just Lip-syncing Up Here,’” 58.

¹¹³ Kaminski, “Listening to Drag: Music,” 63.

¹¹⁴ Nadine Hubbs, “‘I Will Survive’: Musical Mappings of Queer Social Space in a Disco Anthem,” *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 231-244, 233.

Pattaya Hart's lip sync of "I Will Survive" is not to the canonical version sung by Gloria Gaynor, but that by Napada Sukkrit, emphasizing a transnational Thainess as key to the performer's drag. This version is remixed to showcase the rural sensibilities of the Thai countryside through its lyrics, and is further hybridized by the use of Thai instrumentals. A psychedelic organ riff saturates the room as Pattaya Hart performs. The sound is layered with a variety of electronic beats from both Western and Thai instruments, such as the *khaen* player, which is a bamboo mouth organ with bass tones. The lyrics, some in Thai and others in English, are sung in an elongated style, stretched out vocally. The *molam* version, or a genre of traditional Lao folk music mixed with Tai-Lao languages and cultures, of the song is just as anthemic as the original, yet, like Pattaya Hart herself, is also specifically Thai.¹¹⁵

Pattaya Hart's use of the hybridized *molam* track is a way for her to refuse total integration into mainstream gay culture. Using an identifiable and iconic song as an entry point and common language, she nonetheless includes moments of unintelligibility. Such a politicized and coded performance is similar to how other gay and diasporic men of color use hybridized cultural codes, such as language and different ways of speaking—such as *swardspeak*, or the queer way of talking used by gay Filipino men, to stake claims in different sites. In his study of Filipino gay men in the diaspora, Martin F. Manalansan looks to these mis/translations "as part of their attempts to claim a space for themselves as queer citizens in both the homeland and in the new place of settlement, the United States."¹¹⁶ By using a *molam* rendition of "I Will Survive,"

¹¹⁵ See Supap Tinnarat, et al., "Development of Lifestyle Following Occupational Success as a Mor Lam Artist," *Asian Culture and History* 7, no. 1 (2015): 91-96, 94; and James Leonard Mitchell, *Luk Thung: The Culture and Politics of Thailand's Most Popular Music* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2015), 57.

¹¹⁶ Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 47.

Pattaya performs a song that is literally made partially foreign to most Americans. Though Napada Sukkrit does sing most of Gaynor's classic in English, the lyrics and its tonal register are accented due to the singer's Isan pronunciation of the words. The song is hybridized, making it both English and distinctively Thai. This hybridization is most apparent in the beginning when Hart mouths, for example, "Kept thinking I could never live without you by my side." The pronunciation of the lyrics and vowels are lengthened, utilizing a surreal and psychedelic quality distinct to the *molam* genre.¹¹⁷ For instance, "by my side" is drawn-out, characterized by the elongated "I" sound in "my." The song's extension of the pronoun creates an ethereal quality which is quickly interrupted by how "side" is sung. Sukkrit's "side," like "my," is stretched out; however, the word is broken up, producing a continuous glottal stop as she sings, breaks, and repeats the long-"I" in "side." The emphasis in the "stop-and-go" quality is visually paired with Pattaya Hart acting out the breaks with her body. With her arms cast out like wings and her knees bent, the drag queen, giving a disgusted look, cascades down with every glottal stop pronounced with "side." Due to the jerky motions, her dance and the song are disjointed and disembodied, producing a grotesqueness that mixes the fantasy of drag and its supposed femininity with repulsion, a lack of gracefulness, and awkwardly positioned bodily extremities.

While the song itself is a cultural marker for queer survival and legitimization, the Thai lyrics interlaced throughout the song and mouthed by Hart engage a Thai identity that is not fully comprehensible by the predominantly white viewers. Their inability to understand the nuances of Hart's performance speaks to the differing ways queers of

¹¹⁷ Laurel Tuohy, "Thailand's Forgotten Country-Psychedelic Music."

color perform, resist, and offer alternatives to the mainstream. While Pattaya Hart struts on the stage, promising a drag performance that might play to Orientalist fantasies, her use of Sukkrit's "I Will Survive" as her soundtrack sets up, as I will argue, a multilayered narrative of America's militarized presence in Thailand—especially the Isan region. Though the connections between the *molam* version of Gaynor's song and U.S. militarization are not explicit, I contend that the empowering message of "I Will Survive," particularly for women and for gay men during the HIV/AIDS crisis, continues to resonate and evolve in this adaptation by a Thai singer and its performance by a Thai American drag queen.¹¹⁸

I argue that Sukkrit's version gestures to a narrative of U.S. imperialism in several ways, all of which are related to the grotesque effects of empire in Thailand, its hybridization of Thai culture, and the production of Thais as a feminized and docile shell in the service of the militarized sex industry. First, Pattaya Hart's chosen track is geographically linked to Laos and the Isan: it connects histories of U.S. militarization in the region and its impact on the local cultural forms, like the hybrid version of the song. Thanks to U.S. servicemen stationed in the Isan region, rock, soul, funk and psychedelic musical forms were taken up by local Thai bands and singers, infusing Thai country with popular music from America.¹¹⁹ More significantly this geographical, cultural, and historical connection evokes the roles that Thai women came to play in the region's service industry, roles that Hart draws on for her drag.¹²⁰ Treated as "sexual

¹¹⁸ Chris Bodenner, "Track of the Day: 'I Will Survive' by Cake," *The Atlantic*, February 27, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/02/track-of-the-day-i-will-survive/471339/> (accessed April 26, 2018).

¹¹⁹ Tuohy, "Thailand's Forgotten Country-Psychedelic Music."

¹²⁰ See James Leonard Mitchell, *Luk Thung: The Culture and Politics of Thailand's Most Popular Music* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2015); Mark Padoongpatt, "'One Night in Bangkok': Food and the

commodities,” prostitutes in Thailand were written off as property brokered by the nation for U.S. servicemen to use during the Viet Nam War.¹²¹ Designated as an official rest and recreation (R&R) station for American servicemen, Thailand’s sex and service scene was integral to how Thai women could be treated “as subordinates without consequence.”¹²² Due to the fantasy that Thai women were conditioned to serve and be used, many American men married Thai villagers and sex workers, bringing many of them to the United States as war brides. Thai women in the sex trade were consequently dehumanized as sexual objects for American soldiers. Jacqueline Desbarats recounts that female immigrants made up a large percentage of Thais coming to the United States after the Viet Nam War, as “war-bride[s]”, consisting of 42 percent of Thais admitted to the U.S. during this time.¹²³ Tapping obliquely into these histories of sexual violence and trauma, I argue that Pattaya Hart’s drag performance to the *molam* version of “I Will Survive” symbolically references the violent transactions that relied on and trafficked in Thai femininity. At the same time, Hart also includes these commodified Thai women as part of the diasporic community of survivors, much like herself, who have had to deal with the fallout of colonization. Though “I Will Survive” does not expunge histories of violence and trauma related to militarized sex work in Thailand, Napada Sukkrit’s rendition is a part of a genealogy of empowerment that runs through Thailand’s queer communities as well.

Everyday Life of Empire,” in *Flavors of Empire: Food and the Making of Thai America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); and Rho-Ng, “The Conscription of Asian Sex Slaves.”

¹²¹ Rho-Ng, “The Conscription of Asian Sex Slaves,” 107.

¹²² Padoongpatt, *Flavors of Empire*, 35, 36.

¹²³ Desbarats, “Thai Migration to Los Angeles,” 306.

In addition, Pattaya Hart's performance of "I Will Survive," performed in front of predominantly white audience members, operates by drawing in the gestures, performative labor, and histories of Thai women and queer men working near U.S. bases as well as in red-light districts. In a history of militarized and commercialized straight and gay male culture, Thai bodies on stage are typically rendered for consumption—both visually and physically—through the history of sex tourism. America's military presence in Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s called upon numerous Isan women to enter the sex trade and the entertainment sectors, establishing "entertainment locales and the practice of 'renting wives.'"¹²⁴ Many of these entertainment sites were Thai go-go bars where servicemen and tourists enacted their fantasies.¹²⁵ These districts were like Disneyland, and "like Disneyland, the ... bar is a simulacrum: a copy of something for which no original exists. The entire scene is a projected fantasy."¹²⁶ Though she does not explicitly reference go-go dancing, Pattaya Hart's sensual movements on stage, the ways she invokes beauty and sexuality in her routine, and the audience's gawking response to her performance—an amalgam of experiences covered by an entrance fee—are reminiscent of the intimacy, fantasy, and voyeurism produced in exotic dancing, especially in Thailand's tourist spaces.¹²⁷

Following U.S. militarization in Thailand, the Thai government, since the 1980s and with the encouragement of the World Bank, has invested money and resources developing the nation's service sectors, promoting tourism as foundational to the

¹²⁴ Chris Lyttleton, "The Good People of Isan: Commercial Sex in Northeast Thailand," *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 1- 2 (1994): 257-279, 260.

¹²⁵ Bishop and Robinson, *Night Market*, 153.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹²⁷ Constance Bernard, et al., "Exotic Dancers: Gender Differences in Societal Reaction, Subcultural Ties, and Conventional Support," *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 10, no. 1 (2003): 1-11, 2.

country's economy.¹²⁸ As a part of this booming economic venture, go-go bars became a cornerstone cultural establishment that sold "spectacle and fantasy, affection and flattery, and access to an array of available young women" further cementing Thai femininity and accommodation as national commodities.¹²⁹ For gay men, go-go bars equally served as spaces for entertainment, but, additionally, as locations where tourists and the bar's clientele intentionally seek out sexual encounters.¹³⁰ Though it is not blatantly said, there is something to notice as Pattaya Hart's drag performance symbolically draws on the choreography, voyeurism, and spectacle of go-go dancing. Her movements and the usage of Sukkrit's song engage a history of Thai bodies dancing on the stage for predominantly white audience members. Yet as her drag performance unfolds, she redirects the anticipations and expectations of the audience, for whom Thai bodies have come to mean a certain way.

For the first part of her performance, Pattaya Hart's drag is desexualized, a mix of frenzied gestures and uninviting glances. It is a stark contrast to the suggestive gyrations typically associated with Thai exotic dancing. Unlike Gaynor's original, Napada Sukkrit's version is slowed down in the *molam* style, with Sukkrit holding and repeating her notes. As she sings the line "Kept thinking I could never live without you by my side," the last syllable is wailed out, sounding like a broken record. Pattaya Hart, lip syncing the line, performs it with an exaggerated look of fear on her face. Her mouth is wide open, grotesquely unlike the graceful orchid of Thai femininity (yet also in gaping in a sexual parody of openness). She positions her arms, bent at the elbows, out to the

¹²⁸ Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok*, 78.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹³⁰ Wijngaarden, "Between Money, Morality and Masculinity," 195.

side, enacting a stop-and-go motion that follows the song's lyrics and melody. The dance is not graceful or sexy. Her movement is grotesquely disembodied, irregular, almost machine-like. The queen's Thai body is defamiliarized, distanced from the smooth femininity of Thai dancers. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund argue that such dehumanized bodies represent a grotesque aesthetic "marked by decomposition, decay and disgust."¹³¹ In this moment, Hart's jerky movements embody a choreography of resistance that refuse the pleasures to be found in viewing Thai go-go dancers or the sensual promises held out in Thailand's red-light districts.

Pattaya Hart's dancing queers the dynamics between the white viewer and how they enjoy the Thai body presented in front of them. Her ungraceful and grotesque gesticulations refuse the objectification of Thai bodies that have been naturalized as available for consumption and purchase. As she performs for the semi-enjoyment of American viewers, Pattaya Hart reimagines the environment of Thai go-go dancing, troubling the seductive expectations and dynamics of the go-go dancer and his/her audience. From movements that exaggerate assumed Thai female fragility to crass and grotesque gestures that play with masculinity and fierceness, Hart's choreography serves as "*choreographies of resistance*, embodied practices through which minoritarian subjects claim their space in social and cultural realms."¹³²

Through choreographic choices that play up the humor of drag, Pattaya Hart in fact engage histories sexual violence and Western pleasures in Thailand. When Napada Sukkrit sings "But then I spent so many nights thinking how you did me wrong / And I grew strong / And I learned how to get along," Hart grimaces, seizing her crotch

¹³¹ Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 59.

¹³² Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad*, 161.

aggressively while following the obscene motion with her biceps flexed to show her musculature. The act of grabbing one's penis is a coded gesture referring to masculinity, setting the terms of "patriarchal competition ... where the phallic male" wins and comes out on top.¹³³ Pattaya Hart, as she grabs her genitals, conjures up a history of Thailand and Thai people's imperial penetration by the West. The move is a grotesque parody of go-go dancing's suggestive sexual movements, upon which a sexual trade is negotiated.¹³⁴ Hart's forceful grab of her penis, as Sukkrit belts out "I Will Survive," queers the temptation attached to her dancing, displacing seduction with grit, a rough handling, and masculine posturing. Such acts are grotesque as they "destabilize the idealizations" of the Thai female body and its appeal, realigning what Mary Russo calls "the mechanism[s] of desire" by way of its defilement by the female grotesque.¹³⁵ Pattaya Hart's grotesque choreography additionally subverts patriarchal forms of virility and masculinity, reconfiguring the structures of power between spectator and dancer.

Though Pattaya Hart plays into the militouristic histories of Thai go-go dancing and exotic entertainment, it is important to note that her drag is not parodying women; but, rather, bringing in a history of how Thai women have been looked at, gawked at by an imperial West. José Esteban Muñoz contends that drag, as a "painful contradiction", is a tactic underpinned by misrecognition. He states, "Sometimes misrecognition can be *tactical*. Identification itself can also be manipulated and worked in ways that promise

¹³³ Craig J. Thompson and Douglas B. Holt, "How Do Men Grab the Phallus?: Gender tourism in everyday consumption," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4, no. 3 (2004): 313-338, 317.

¹³⁴ Wijngaarden, "Between Money, Morality and Masculinity," 195.

¹³⁵ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 65.

narratives of self that surpass the limits prescribed by the dominant culture.”¹³⁶ Hart’s innovation of the go-go scene is not about parodying the sexual labors forced upon hundreds of Thai women, but confronting such histories by queering the hetero- and homonormative structures of desire and viewership. Though I am not arguing that Hart’s drag invokes a liberatory or transformative politics, I do claim that her hypersexualized and grotesque nature on stage redefines the conditions to which Thai bodies perform for in the sexual economies.

As the first third of her performance ends, Pattaya Hart, standing at the end of the catwalk, removes her conical hat and disrobes from her *sabai*—a shawl-like garment that goes across one shoulder—revealing a gold-colored bodysuit underneath. The music fluctuates as the song changes from its *rumwong* stylings into a more anthemic and commanding version of “I Will Survive.” As Nipada Sukkrit belts out “And so you’re back / From outer space!” Hart tosses the *sabai* aside and boldly sashays back to the front of the stage with her arms stretched out and her legs showcasing the length and sensuality of Sayampol’s figure (figure 4.3). Donning a bleached-blond wig, the drag queen owns the stage, shifts her movements’ style to more recognizably diva-like qualities. She draws on a repertoire of contemporary dance moves, and, as the song hits a climactic moment Hart frees herself from the confines of her previous self-orientalized persona (figure 4.4).

¹³⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 95. (Italicized emphasis in original).



FIGURE 4.3 Hart disrobes, freeing herself from the orientalized persona.
Film still, "So You Think You Can Drag? Season 3 Season Finale - Pattaya Hart Act 2," 2012.



FIGURE 4.4 Pattaya Hart becoming the Thai American diva.
Film still, "So You Think You Can Drag? Season 3 Season Finale - Pattaya Hart Act 2," 2012.

Here, Hart becomes the diva. She is bold and she is fierce. The second half of her performance showcases a queerness that rejects understandings of what constitutes normative Thai Americanness. In other words, as she disrobes and casts aside the grotesque and orientalized Thai gestures that she opened with, Pattaya Hart becomes *the* Thai American diva. Hart, as the Thai American diva, creates a grotesque spectacle of femininity who unabashedly finds “transformation, empowerment, and survival” in herself.¹³⁷ The diva attitude that Hart takes up is one that fractures the need to fit in, refusing to reside within that community’s conventions. Pattaya Hart’s Thai American diva is based on self-love, acceptance, and finding joy in one’s own identity against a long history of rejection, exploitation, violence, and non-normativity. It is a grotesqueness that valorizes survival over a community that is not capacious enough for the assemblage of histories she pieces together.

One of the key things that separates the first of half of Hart’s “I Will Survive” with its livelier second act are the queer gestures that Pattaya Hart invokes to narrate the onstage story. José Esteban Muñoz argues that queer gestures are a refusal of certain limits which access the performative force of “queer ephemera.”¹³⁸ Instead of using the traditional dance moves with which she began, Pattaya Hart’s movements dramatically alter, characterized by bold and flamboyant gesticulations that come off as defiant, self-engaged, and obscene. The moment when Sukkrit sings “I should have changed that stupid lock, I should have made you leave your key / If I'd known for just one second

¹³⁷ Farmer, “Diva,” 185.

¹³⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65, 72.

you'd be back to bother me,” Hart poses in the middle of the catwalk and brings her hand down to her pelvis to engage in a masturbatory motion (figure 4.5).



FIGURE 4.5 Hart’s masturbatory gesture.

Film still, “So You Think You Can Drag? Season 3 Season Finale - Pattaya Hart Act 2,” 2012.

The moment is grotesque and unrefined, completely in opposition to the ideals of Thai femininity, civility, and decorum. Here, Hart refuses to adhere to these traditional ideas of womanhood, where a “good” Thai woman should be “virtuous, nurturing and monogamous.”¹³⁹ Instead, her performance invokes a sexual deviance that is grotesque because of its unruliness, and because of its defiance.

As the song’s lyrics gesture to moving on and resistance, the motion of masturbation that Hart enacts veers away from the Thai hypersexuality at the service of

¹³⁹ Suchada Thaweessit, “The Fluidity of Thai Women’s Gendered and Sexual Subjectivities,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 6, no. 3 (2004): 205-219, 207.

tourism and foreign pleasure, and toward sexual pleasure on her own terms. With Hart, the masturbatory gesture is about sexuality for self-pleasure rather than as a commodity for trade. Her movements queer the foundations of desire and power upon which Thai sexual exploitation relies, disrupting white imaginations of brown bodies serving foreigners. With Sukkrit belting out “Just turn around now / 'Cause you're not welcome anymore,” Pattaya Hart turns her back to the audience, juts out her hip in a diva stance, points to her derriere, and gestures that no one is penetrating her (figure 4.6).



FIGURE 4.6 “Do Not Enter.”

Film still, “So You Think You Can Drag? Season 3 Season Finale - Pattaya Hart Act 2,” 2012.

Hart’s act refuses the fantasies of Thai openness, instead insisting on autonomy over her body. Such a defiant gesture is significant as gay Asian/Americans have historically been relegated to the sexual (the bottom, or insertee) and social roles (i.e., masseur,

houseboy, and others) of passivity.¹⁴⁰ These fantasies of gay Asian American male passiveness stem from histories of “psychic traumas of sexual and racial difference”.¹⁴¹ For Thais, this sexual submissiveness is more apparent as sex and fantasies of Thai willingness have branded themselves onto what constitutes a national Thai identity—especially for women and gay men.¹⁴² However, Pattaya Hart’s drag dispels dispositions of Thai and queer availability by empowering the bottom as she reorients the assumed openness of Thai gay bodies. Hart’s queer gesture, paired with Sukkrit’s lyrics withdrawing welcome and love, declares that diasporic Thai bodies are not open for business.

Negotiating Power

Though I believe that Pattaya Hart’s performance of “I Will Survive” is a radical queering of Thai gender and sexuality – especially in diasporic contexts, it is important to address that Thai femininity and other non-normative communities are “manhandled” through Hart’s gestures and routine. The performer’s gratuitous and vulgar gesticulations are premised on a queer and male view of what it means to be a Thai woman, prompted by a power that Hart holds: a gendered power that, as other scholars have discussed in terms of drag, performers hold as men.¹⁴³ In essence, Pattaya Hart is able to perform certain acts of Thai femininity or what she imagines it to be because Methawee “Plu” Sayampol, the queen’s counterpart, borrows from an archive of womanhood that is not necessarily informed by their own lived experiences or

¹⁴⁰ Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 84.

¹⁴¹ Nguyen, *A View from the Bottom*, 19.

¹⁴² Nuttavuthisit, “Branding Thailand,” 21-30.

¹⁴³ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, “When the Girls Are Men: Negotiating Gender and Sexual Dynamics in a Study of Drag Queens,” *Signs* 30, no. 4 (2005): 2115-2139, 2133.

subsumed into who they are as a queer man or drag queen. Hart's conceptualization of Thai American femininity is one that both benefits and emerges from a history of female ambivalence coded within gay male drag.¹⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier, Judith Butler claims that "drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality."¹⁴⁵ In essence, drag's rebellious power comes about through its re/performance and repackaging of heterosexuality. Though it is a subversion of gender's normalization and how it is understood, drag becomes an act of mimicry as it is unable to wholly overcome heterosexuality and the hegemonic ways that it determines and defines gender. This inability to overcome heteronormative constructions of gender is highly dangerous in the contexts of Thainess as gender and sexuality, for some, is a life and death situation, premised on labor, money, and representation. The drag queen's personification of and play on Thai femininity thus comes at the expense of Thai women, drawing from a long and massified history of "Thai sex/gender norms that stigmatize female sexual expression."¹⁴⁶

The stigmatization of Thai femininity that Pattaya Hart pulls from is furthermore a site of gendered power and appropriation that complexly and problematically enforces "the politics of vulgarity" in addition to acts of flamboyance and imitation that cannot fully overcome heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality.¹⁴⁷ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp argue that "Drag queens ... are gay men who dress and perform as but do not

¹⁴⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 85.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴⁶ Megan Sinnott, "The Romance of the Queer: The Sexual and Gender Norms of *Tom* and *Dee* in Thailand," in *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities*, eds. Fran Martin, et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2008), 143.

¹⁴⁷ Taylor and Rupp, "When the Girls Are Men," 2123.

want to be women or have women's bodies[.] ... [They are performers] who regularly break [the illusion of being a woman] in order to accentuate the inherently performative nature of gender and sexual meanings."¹⁴⁸ Though the sentiment glosses over the complex nature of drag, it does lay out the performative dynamics and problems arising between drag queens and the women or individuals being impersonated. In this context, Pattaya Hart's grotesque drag—though radical in its queer restructuring of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, in addition to belonging—is provocative only in the sense that it reinforces dominant assumptions of Thai womanhood as well as Thainess as a gendered spectacle for a hetero- and homonormative West. Similarly, it is additionally imperative to note that Pattaya Hart's association with *kathoey*/ladyboy identities, like the Thai femaleness that she performs, in relation to her drag persona additionally incurs weighty complications.

Though Hart sees her Thai American drag as synonymous with a *kathoey* persona, the sexual category of "*kathoey*," like womanhood or trans, is a distinct class that is and must be separate from drag – especially in the contexts of the West. When interviewed, Pattaya Hart said that when she first start drag it all about "acting" the part and that her mother, when discovering that her child performed as a drag queen, warned, "don't come home and have, like, 'titties' or a vagina."¹⁴⁹ Though the mother's sentiment may read as homophobic or transphobic, the reality is that, at the time and according to Hart, there was no real terminology for drag in Thailand and that the nearest thing were *kathoey*/ladyboy acts in nightclubs, dancehalls, or what was seen in

¹⁴⁸ Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, "Chicks with Dicks, Men in Dresses," *Journal of Homosexuality* 46, no. 3-4 (2004): 113-133, 115.

¹⁴⁹ Methawee "Plu" Sayampol, interview with author, March 18, 2018

popular media.¹⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Hart's drag and her mother's remark articulate how female and *kathoeys* identities are sometimes rendered as a prop in relation to drag performance and how the drag queen is essentially *dragging* other marginal groups in search of her own queerness. In other words, when the drag queen's performance is done, so to speak, Hart is able to disrobe, stripping away the identities that she performs for audiences. In other words, she is able to return to her gay masculinity.

What emerges in this dragging of identity is yet another way that *kathoeys*, comparable to Thai femininity, are subjugated to male dominance; they are relegated to perform *sanuk*, the unserious, or are staged as comic buttresses to the constructions of dominant and public gay cultures, their desires and fantasies, as well as their liberation.¹⁵¹ In this context, I ask: how does Pattaya Hart become accountable to the identities that she invokes, especially if they repeat certain acts of violence in addition to exploitative structures of power in the quest to repackage and perform alternative identities? At the risk of sounding liberatory, I refer back to José Esteban Muñoz's disidentifications and its relationship to fantasy. He argues for "a fantasy space ... [that is] about the complicated function of disidentification in which oppressive, shameful, and sometimes dangerous cultural influences and forces are incorporated, mediated, and transfigured."¹⁵² Drag is fantasy as much as it is a reality for many individuals. Though the performance may replicate certain oppressive structures, its promise as well as political and humorous power lie within its transgression of boundaries, emerging as

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ünaldi, "Back in the Spotlight," 70.

¹⁵² Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 55.

“not neat or clean, but ... messy and blurry.”¹⁵³ Eir-Anne Edgar contends that drag’s complications and its messiness come from its multifaceted identity where “everyday gender and drag gender” are layered, creating tensions for those performing, that which is performed, as well as those watching.¹⁵⁴ What develops through “layering” is a situational knowledge where the artificiality of gender is performed and made apparent, exemplifying the queer and non-normative theatrics of gender and sexuality.¹⁵⁵

Even though it is significant to acknowledge that Pattaya Hart’s grotesque drag relies on the imitation and superficiality of Thai femininity and a *kathoey* subjectivity, I do not want to disregard the potential and radical labor behind the drag queen’s performance. Taylor and Rupp further contend that drag queens are “an in-between or third-gender category in a society that insists there are only two” and that they “bridge or challenge the division[s] between masculine and feminine.”¹⁵⁶ Pattaya Hart did believe that she was cultivating a drag identity that drew from multiple subjectivities—femininity and the *kathoey*/ladyboy-ness—at a time when she did not have a drag language to speak in.¹⁵⁷ Yes, Hart’s grotesque drag is problematic; however, simultaneously, it is an identity that is continually evolving, prompted by the intersections of Thai gender, sexuality, and lack of community. Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund warn that one of the problems with grotesque texts is that the categorization can be an over-determinant: “it can mean everything and nothing” at the same time.¹⁵⁸ The potential behind acknowledging that something, someone, or an act is grotesque depends on time and

¹⁵³ Eir-Anne Edgar, “*Xtravaganza!*: Drag Representation and Articulation in RuPaul’s *Drag Race*,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (2011): 133-146, 141.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 261.

¹⁵⁶ Taylor and Rupp, “Chicks with Dicks, Men in Dresses,” 130.

¹⁵⁷ Methawee “Plu” Sayampol, interview with author, March 18, 2018

¹⁵⁸ Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 11-12.

region; its potential is in its grotesque historicization of an object or moment against certain contexts that emphasize its strangeness, estrangement, and dislocation from the normative or accepted.¹⁵⁹ In analyzing Pattaya Hart's drag while weighing it alongside her own testimony, what emerges is a Thai American drag queen who attempts to challenge and expand what it means to be queer and diasporic within Thai America as well as mainstream gay New York. For her and us—her audience members, Pattaya Hart's grotesqueness, its complexities and problems are a part of a diasporic identity that is continually moving and adjusting.

Performing Thai Womanhood: Thai femininity, drag, and queer grotesque

In Hart's performance, Thai femininity and *kathoey*-ness are the material through which her grotesque drag achieves its critical power. In a way, femininity, as gestured throughout this analysis, disappears as Hart becomes the Thai American diva. Though it may seem as if representations of Thai womanhood are merely a "prop" (though one that does critical work) for queers to gesture to the grotesqueness of U.S. empire and desire, I argue that femininity goes through a transformative process along with Hart as she becomes the diva. When I interviewed Hart/Sayampol, she said, "I was mesmerized by how people would turn into a different character. Literally, another person. ... And it feels like it's scary to a point. It feels dangerous and this sense of mysterious [*sic*] that you go into another girl. ... [To transform into a woman from a man,] it's daring."¹⁶⁰ What emerges in Pattaya Hart's drag performance is a transformative site of becoming for both the feminine and queer grotesque. If we take Hart's words into consideration and previous discussions of *kathoey*/ladyboy identities as "the second type of woman," I

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Methawee "Plu" Sayampol, interview with author, March 18, 2018.

believe that both work alongside each other, creating spaces that dislodge patriarchies while simultaneously allowing representation for empowered feminine and queer identities.¹⁶¹ Pattaya Hart does not necessarily invoke an American drag which sees the performance of females as parodic, funny, exaggerated, or fantasy-like, and “ignoring any possibilities of intellectual or creative capacities.”¹⁶² In her performance of Thai American diva, Hart articulates her diva agency with oppressed Thai femininity and kathoey identity: her drag does not disappear womanhood and femininity. Rather, it brings the conditions that constrain them onstage.

Pattaya Hart’s performance is a freak show that uses race, sexuality, drag and fantasy to make space for queer Thai America. Hart’s persona embodies a grotesqueness that “transgress[es] the borders separating the fantastic from the real, the imaginary from the historical, the human from the animal, [and] the male from the female,” utilizing the grotesque’s queer power to subvert norms of essentialist sexualities and notions of community produced by mainstream gayness and Thai America.¹⁶³ As she brings otherworldly conceptualizations of Thainess into being on page and stage, the drag queen collapses the divides between queer forms of Thainess and Thai Americanness, as well as manhood and femininity. As a Thai immigrant in the United States, Hart’s performance both enacts and disrupts the postcolonial conditions that brought thousands of migrants from Southeast Asia to the United States.¹⁶⁴ She disorders a history of Thainess that has been premised on exoticized fictions of Victorian

¹⁶¹ Saisuwan, “Kathoey,” 191.

¹⁶² Kevin D. Nixon, “Are Drag Queens Sexist?: Female Impersonation and the Sociocultural Construction of Normative Femininity,” (master’s thesis, University of Waterloo, 2009), 70.

¹⁶³ Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 126.

¹⁶⁴ Fiona I. B. Ngô, et al., “Southeast Asian American Studies Special Issue: Guest Editors’ Introduction,” *positions: asia critique* 20, no. 3 (2012): 671-684, 672.

literature, U.S. militarization, Thai tourism, in addition to hetero- and homonormative notions of belonging and community.

CONCLUSION

I think with Mr. Hyphen, you're kind of like this temporal [and] transitory celebrity in the Asian American community, and you can do a lot. I figure that people who apply are people who are active in their community ... [You] do it for the community. You do it for the people you love. Because I did it for the Thai American community, I did it for my parents ... It's beyond you and that's why you do it.

—Pahole Sookkasikon, “Mr. Hyphen 2010 Interview”¹

In 2009, I took part in an Asian American “man-pageant,” *Hyphen Magazine’s* Mr. Hyphen, that aimed to dispel stereotypes about Asian American men and women. To compete, contestants went through a question and answer section, modeled fashions by local designers, and participated in a talent portion. For my talent, I performed a hybridized version of Thai stick-fighting, or *krabi krabong*, to the soundtrack of Kim Zolciak’s “hit” song, “Tardy for the Party.”² As part of the contest, a competitor had to pick an Asian American nonprofit of choice to receive a thousand-dollar check in the event that he won. I chose the Asian American Donor Program (AADP) and the Thai American Scholarship Fund. I competed because I had never seen Thai Americans represented in any capacity in discussions of or events regarding the Asian American community. I wanted to shed light on Thai American life. At the end of the night, I won and was later featured on the cover of *Hyphen Magazine’s* “Inside/Out” issue in 2010 (figure 5.1).

¹ Hyphenmagazinetv, “Mr. Hyphen 2010 Interview,” YouTube video, 1:24, September 17, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luBeL-S7ykQ> (accessed May 5, 2017).

² Kim Zolciak is an American television personality from *Bravo TV’s* hit show, “The Real Housewives of Atlanta.” (Brian Moylan, “‘Tardy for the Party’ Live Will Give You Nightmares,” *Gawker*, November 6, 2009, <http://gawker.com/5398814/tardy-for-the-party-live-will-give-you-nightmares> (accessed May 1, 2018).)

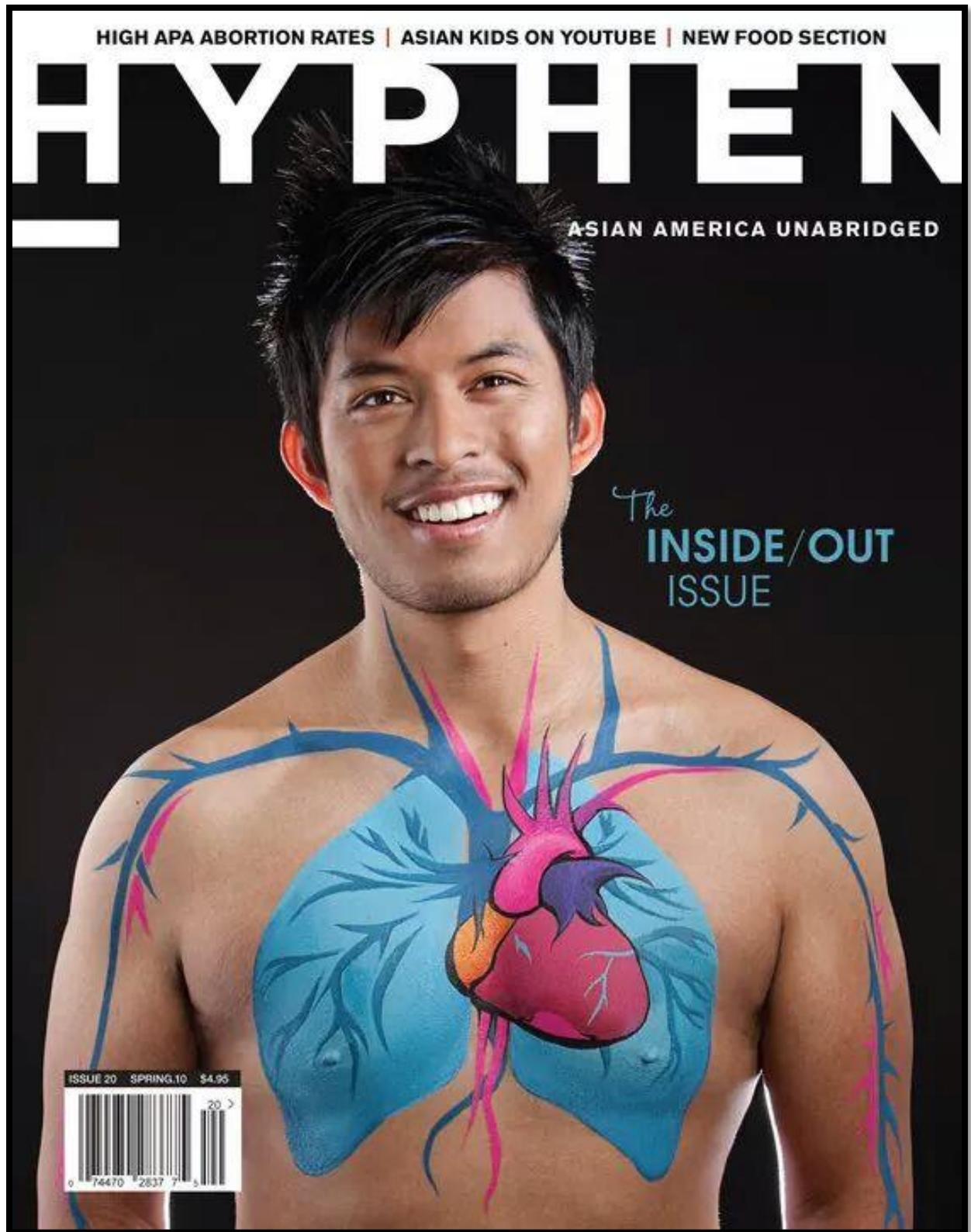


FIGURE 5.1 Featured on *Hyphen Magazine's* "Inside/Out" Issue. Photograph courtesy of *Hyphen Magazine*.

Though the event is marketed as “a raucous good time” and is quite informal, my goal to represent Thai America as a diasporic queer Thai was serious and sincere.³ In my application, I wrote, “I want to fully promote Thai/American ... visibility as much as I can. I think what gets lost in the translation or definition of Asian/America [are] the smaller ethnic groups who ... have begun to emerge into the community. Winning ... will help bring some acknowledgement that our ‘community’ is changing.”⁴ Thai America is an almost invisible social enclave in relation to mainstream Asian America. To be visible, we have had to rely heavily on ourselves to help establish and define what it means to be “Thai” in the United States. Additionally, while building our community, Thai America has had to simultaneously deal with the surviving images of America’s Thainess that render Thais as faceless, mute, and exploitable people—images from *The King & I* (1956) or *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) make up an archive of Thai visibility. Drawing from my community while helping to confront fantasies of what embodies Thainess, I joined *Hyphen Magazine*’s competition on more personal and selfish grounds. I wanted to help represent a Thai identity that was more than just the dominant fantasy of Thailand as “sex paradise” for the West or, alternatively, a barely visible group.⁵

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, America’s version of Thainess has been fueled by the orientalizing, feminization, and sexualization of Thailand, its people, and their culture. A Westernized idea of Thailand revolves around an exotic

³ Mic Nguyen, “Mr. Hyphen 2009 Contestants!,” *Hyphen Magazine*, October 20, 2009, <https://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2009/10/20/mr-hyphen-2009-contestants> (accessed May 1, 2018).

⁴ Pahole Sookkasikon, personal documents, October 2, 2009.

⁵ Odzer, *Patpong Sisters*, 2

place where foreigners can indulge in hot weather, hot food, and hot women.⁶ In his collection of short stories on Thailand, Thai American writer Rattawut Lapcharoensap simply refers to this fantasy as “Pussy and elephants. That’s all these people want.”⁷ However, as I have argued throughout “Bangkok is Burning,” everyday Thais have pushed back against bourgeoisie, elite, and *farang* understandings of Thailand and Thainess.

Though I have not thought about Mr. Hyphen in a while, I was reminded of this moment while working on this project. In a conversation with Thai Americanist scholar Mark Padoongpatt, he mentioned that what I did with *Hyphen Magazine* was simply a part of a larger phenomenon of other diasporic Thais doing similar work.⁸ Like my primary sources in “Bangkok is Burning,” I was simply trying to recreate a world where Thainess and Thai Americanness could instead be shaped by everyday people with the goal of creating spaces to exist for ourselves and for our communities.

As this dissertation’s title, “Bangkok is Burning: queer cultural productions of Thainess in diaspora,” suggests, the focus of my project has been about how Thais in Thailand and in the United States use other “worldviews” to reshape reality.⁹ As argued throughout this work, the concept of worldmaking is a way to understand how contemporary diasporic Thais have reconceptualized Thainess and Thai Americanness in a sometimes-hostile world. From a remake of a nineteenth century ghostlore; the digital videos of a queer performance troupe in Bangkok; the diasporic commemorations of a Thai country singer; to the grotesque and Oriental performances of a Thai

⁶ Srisombati, “BKK-LAX,” 3.

⁷ Rattawut Lapcharoensap, *Sightseeing* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 2.

⁸ Mark Padoongpatt, conversation with author, April 26, 2018.

⁹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 196.

American drag queen, this project has been about re/situating what it means to be Thai in the world and what it means for individuals and groups to take hold of their own representation, rewriting the scripts that define them.

Paralleling my experience as Mr. Hyphen, it is notable to mention a contemporary Thai queer, Apichet “Madaew” Atilattana, who has been using popular media and performance to renegotiate the terms of belonging and representation re/establishes what it means to be non-normative and Thai on his own terms. Atilattana, a self-identifying *kathoey* from the Isan region, has been wielding social media and the internet to express his creativity and ingenuity, marketing himself, his fashion designs, and his concepts of Thai materiality.¹⁰ Referring to himself as a freelance model and designer, Atilattana takes everyday items—such as *pak beung*, or morning glory; dyed cabbage leaves; chicken wire; tree branches; ripped pieces of fabric; mosquito netting; and other discarded items—and turns them into sustainable pieces of fashion.¹¹ One of the earliest images one can find of Atilattana and his designs is from 2016, portraying the young designer posing in front of a rice paddy (figure 5.2).

¹⁰ Charlie Campbell, “The Mixmaster of Fashion,” *Time Inc.*, October 6, 2016, <http://time.com/collection-post/4518801/apichet-atirattana-next-generation-leaders/> (accessed April 25, 2018).

¹¹ Apichet Madaew Atilattana, “About,” *Facebook*, N.D., <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009705038225&lst=100025690358206%3A100009705038225%3A1524773608&sk=about> (accessed April 26, 2018).



FIGURE 5.2 Apichet “Madaew” Atilattana and his sustainable fashions.¹²

Photograph courtesy of Apichet Atilattana.

Juxtaposing elements from both urban culture, such as his high heels, and the rural—everyday throwaway material, Atilattana’s fashion choices depict how he reimagines the role of mundane items to create new and different understandings of fashion and Thainess. The picture above, for example, shows how the fashionista utilizes bamboo steamers to add volume and definition to what he is wearing. In doing so, he repackages how the traditional kitchen implement is used.

The bamboo rice steamers used by Atilattana become more than just everyday kitchenware as the designer repurposes its possibilities, making different claims to the

¹² Apichet Madaew Atilattana, “Apichet Madaew Atilattana’s Photos in Mobile Uploads,” *Facebook*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=250824635251036&set=pb.100009705038225.-2207520000.1529549782.&type=3&theater> (accessed June 20, 2018).

seemingly ordinary. In an article by *Time Inc.*, Atilattana said that “[he] want[ed] people to see that ugly things that don’t seem to go together can become something beautiful ... And that looking good doesn’t depend on money.”¹³ His statement is reminiscent of José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of *disidentifications* and how it is up to marginal or castoff peoples to reimagine themselves past the limits imposed on them and recasting who they are and their cultures into something “beautiful” or worthwhile. Muñoz contends that “Disidentification for the minority subject is a mode of *recycling* or re-formatting an object that has already been invested with powerful energy. It is important to emphasize the transformative restructuring of that disidentification.”¹⁴ Recycling, as a disidentificatory act, repurposes energies of what has been utilized, reinjecting them with usefulness and purpose so that they are not simply thrown away. Recycling is therefore about manifesting new energy from the old, breathing new life into something that is sometimes rendered strange, off-centered, broken, inadequate, dangerous, or queer to see its full potential.

Circling back to Mr. Hyphen, I conclude “Bangkok is Burning” by discussing the queer dimensions of my talent performance in the “man-pageant.” As I mentioned in an *Associated Press* interview with journalist Jesse Washington, I did not think my nonsensical and everyday hobbies—such as drawing, cooking, or “flirting for free drinks at the bar”—would “translate well to the talent portion of the show.”¹⁵ Instead, I fell back onto what I learned as a child while attending cultural immersion classes at the local Thai

¹³ Charlie Campbell, “The Mixmaster of Fashion,” *Time Inc.*, October 6, 2016, <http://time.com/collection-post/4518801/apichet-atirattana-next-generation-leaders/> (accessed April 9, 2018).

¹⁴ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 39. (italicized emphasis in original).

¹⁵ Jesse Washington, “Mr. Hyphen’ redefines image of Asian-American men,” *Jesse Washington*, December 1, 2009, <http://www.jessewashington.com/mr-hyphen.html> (accessed April 30, 2018).

temple: *krabi krabong*—a weapon-based *Muay Thai* or “Thai kickboxing,” originating around the thirteenth century in Siam (figure 5.3).¹⁶



FIGURE 5.3 Performing *krabi krabong* during Mr. Hyphen 2009.
Film still, “The Rise of Mr. Hyphen 2009 -Talent Segment Part II of II,” 2009.

Historically, *Muay Thai* and *krabi krabong* have been referred to as “hegemonic[ally] masculin[e],” encouraging men to perform “manly duties ... central to masculine identity”.¹⁷ In Thailand, the combat is said to be a “brutal sport,” often used by

¹⁶ Christoph Delp, *Muay Thai Basics: Introductory Thai Boxing Techniques* (Berkeley: Blue Snake Books, 2005), 11; and Greg Roza, *Muay Thai Boxing* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2013), 11.

¹⁷ Pattana Kitiarsa, “Lives of hunting dogs’: *Muai Thai* and the politics of Thai masculinities,” *South East Asia Research* 13, no. 1 (2005): 57-90, 59.

male soldiers, warriors, and kings.¹⁸ Even in popular culture, Thai kickboxing and its weapon-based form have been popularized by the West through films such as *Ong-Bak: The Thai Warrior* (2003), starring martial artist and actor, Tatchakorn Yeerum—better known as “Tony Jaa.”¹⁹ Recycling how it is conventionally seen and how I learned it as a child, I updated the martial art to reflect my contemporary identity as a queer Thai American, infusing the traditional sport with pop culture references, hybridized forms of Thai classical dancing, as well as the staging of three female friends who “seductively” danced and posed behind me and my opponent.

I made my version of *Muay Thai*, a “national symbol,” operate both inside and out of the logics of heteronationalism as well as Western perceptions of Thainess. It generated a performance of Thai identity that played and poked fun at static ideas of Thai gender and sexuality.²⁰ For instance, traditional *sarama*—rhythmic music played during *Muay Thai* and its pre-fight rituals—is hugely ceremonial in *Muay Thai* and *krabi krabong*: it is used to show respect to instructors, the gym, and used during combat to create tension.²¹ By replacing *sarama* with Zolciak’s dance hit, I contested the conservatism aligned with the brutality, masculinity, and heteronationalism set in the martial art’s ritual music. Our diasporic performance imagined Thainess beyond a heteronationalist and patrilineal discourse and point-of-view, cultivating a Thai identity that played with commodified and heteronormative images but also critiqued them.

¹⁸ Paraphan Rungsikulphat, “Opportunities of Thai Boxing Camps,” (master’s thesis, Assumption University, 2002), 5; and Garrison Wells, *Muay Thai: Kickboxing Combat* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2012), 8-9.

¹⁹ Katrina Hill, *Action Movie Freak by Action Flick Chick: Katrina Hill* (Iola, Wisconsin: Krause Publications, 2012), 148.

²⁰ Peter Vail, “Muay Thai: Inventing Tradition for a National Symbol,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 29, no. 3 (2014): 509-553.

²¹ Roza, *Muay Thai Boxing*, N.P.; and Delp, *Muay Thai Basics*, 34.

In addition to queering the heteropatriarchal and masculine associations placed on *Muay Thai*, I had three Thai female friends strike comedic poses in the background, modeling and dancing as to mockingly deconstruct the exploitative fantasies placed upon Thai women. As an example, my friends' dancing was a hybridization of contemporary club moves as well as traditional Thai gestures. Such a mix articulates the particularities of the Thai American experience, engaging sexualized popular culture while disidentifying with it. Finally, the joy with which we collaborated to choreograph this hybridized performance makes evident the emotional power of working together as Thais as we remade and redefined ourselves against a history of orientalization *and* disappearance. (figure 5.4).



FIGURE 5.4 “Striking a pose.”

Film still, “The Rise of Mr. Hyphen 2009 -Talent Segment Part II of II,” 2009.

As my friends and I concluded the talent performance by joining together in the spectacle of dance, we exhibited a “moment of ecstatic display and identif[ied] in it the potentiality of our own experiences, the possibility of our own pleasure[s]” as Thai Americans.²² Our performance in the Mr. Hyphen competition invoked not only Thai American representation, but a way for us to create identity on stage, grounded in our own desires while having fun. As I jokingly mentioned to the reporter who wrote up the event, “It was a hot mess, man. But it was funny.”²³

²² Rivera-Servera, *Performing Queer Latinidad*, 163.

²³ Washington, “‘Mr. Hyphen’ redefines image of Asian-American men.”

Representing notions of Thainess or a Thai Americanness are not always so straightforward, or easily interpreted; it is messy work—especially when dismantling or working within thriving stereotypes. However, mess is activated when marginal communities reimagine the burdens of life and its mischaracterizations, demonstrating, as Martin F. Manalansan argues, “a route for funking up and mobilizing new understandings of stories, values, objects, and space/time arrangements.”²⁴ In this rearrangement, new worlds form and are created, fashioned from the many impossibilities conditioned by dominant culture. In another way, mess, as a process to unearth unrecognized practices, partakes in worldmaking where minorities and communities rarely heard are able to establish alternate understandings of the world.²⁵

²⁴ Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives,” 99.

²⁵ Manalansan, “The ‘Stuff’ of Archives,” 97; and Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 195.

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