

**Chapter 3: Gesture, Movement, and Silence: The Aesthetics of Forced Displacement along
the Thai-Myanmar Border**

From the in-progress book manuscript

Aesthetic Nationalism: The Dance of War and Exile along the Thai-Myanmar Border

ABSTRACT This paper theorizes how Tai exiles, who have fled military occupation in Myanmar to neighboring Thailand, aesthetically and performatively articulate a sense of nation through the production of an aesthetic regime of arts. Drawing on long-term ethnographic and ethnochoreological work with Tai political resistance movements and performers in Northern Thailand, I argue that Tai forms of aesthetic expression are highly innovative and effective modes of embodied praxis for forcibly displaced migrants. I outline three forms of expressivity at play among the Tai: *gesture*, *movement*, and *silence*. I look at gesture as a way of becoming political in the body – a way of moving toward and performing the body politic. Movement is the acting out of political consciousness through the body. Whereas the presence of ethnic minorities upsets the ordering of state governmentality, the Tai have found that the realm of the arts is rarely suppressed and therefore becomes a site of intense cultural production for those in exile. Silence is the space where movement takes primacy in politics, where political gesturing becomes possible in the shadows of the deafening discourses of the state. By analyzing Tai migrant’s acts of gesture, movement, and silence in the face of occupation, we see that resistance is not simply resentment, but rather, a space of intense cultural production. For the Tai peoples, dance and aesthetic practice are lived expressions that articulate a common tradition, an embodied culture and the micro-politics of struggle amongst a displaced people. It is the embrace of a certain refrain over another; it is what makes possible a choreography, a staged production, or even, a nation.

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Introduction: *The Moveable Feast*

As the sun sets over the Chiang Mai Hills, the torrid midafternoon gives way to the quieting breezes of dusk. Sundown brings mild respite from the damp heat of the monsoon season and the performers, monks and festival makers awaken from their afternoon slumber on the cool concrete floor of the school adjacent to the *wat* (temple). I follow the women to the well where we bathe in our sarongs, pouring bowls of cool water on our bodies, still weary from the long day of dance practice, and emerge from the well cleansed in order to prepare the temple space for ritual. The *wat* is soon abuzz with activity. Food is prepared in large vats, costumes are laid out and tried on, flowers are brought for offerings and steps are practiced silently. The stage performers move in eager expectation of the looming festival activities and the evening's performances. The grounds of the *wat* are a moveable feast and we are in the liminal stage of the rite before the passage.ⁱ

It is the eve of *Khao Pansaa* at a Tai *wat* in the Chiang Mai province of Northern Thailand.ⁱⁱ *Khao Pansaa* or *Vassa*, held each year in the eighth month of the waning lunar moon, marks the beginning of the Theravada Buddhist lent or the monk's rainy season monastic retreat period. Tomorrow, the monks will withdraw for ninety days to a monastery for deep meditation and will not be making the morning rounds for alms as is usually done throughout the rest of the year. This Tai temple in Chiang Mai celebrates on the eve of the Buddhist holiday with music, dance, theater, food, tattooing and a temporary marketplace where amulets, relics, t-shirts, costumes, CD's, books, and other religious or nationalist insignia are vended. Monks use the rainy day retreat to deepen their studies of *dham* (the dharma, or the teachings) and to sit in silent meditation. It is also a time when monks no longer make their daily alms rounds, seen as a

potentially destructive activity in old times when monks would roam about the countryside trampling sensitive rice crops. The sangha's intense movement and gestures to receive alms are punctuated by a period of silence for three months. For the laypeople, however, the night before Khao Pansaa occasions a time for expressive performances, community-building and for producing a *poy* – a ritual festival. As night falls, the temple is lit with lanterns, candles and stringed lights. The stage, decorated in bright auspicious colors of red, yellow and orange entices onlookers in from the dark while the steady beat of the *khlong* drum creates the refrain to which all of us seem to move together in time. Tonight, the coming silence of the monastic retreat is celebrated with intense movements and gesturing towards a future when these exiled Tai from Myanmar's Shan State can perform their *poy* without fear of persecution.

This chapter theorizes how exiled Tai peoples who have fled from Myanmar's civil war aesthetically and performatively articulate a sense of nation through the production of an aesthetic regime of arts. I outline three forms of possible political and communal expressivity among the peoples who are living under military threat: *gesture*, *movement*, and *silence*. Whereas the presence of ethnic minorities upsets the ordering of state governmentality both in Myanmar and in Thailand, the Tai have found that the realm of the arts is rarely suppressed and therefore becomes a site of intense cultural and political production for those in exile. I look at *gesture* as a way of becoming political in the body – a way of moving toward and performing the body politic, often in illegible ways. Performance, for exiled migrants, often signifies a way of gesturing towards a formation of a political community without being read as overt political organization. *Movement* is the acting out of political consciousness through mobility. Silence is the language of the dispossessed, the muzzled rabble whose ideas and languages challenge the state. *Silence* is the space where movement takes primacy in politics, where political gesturing

becomes possible in the shadows of the deafening discourses of the state. Silence is not consent or compliance, however; it is the smooth space from whence new worlds are made possible through bodies in synchronous movement. By analyzing Tai migrant's acts of gesture, movement, and silence in the face of tyranny, we see that resistance is not simply resentment or resilience (Evans and Reid 2014), but rather, a space of intense cultural production. In what follows, I draw upon theorists of nationalism, politics, and aesthetics, such as William McNeill, Erin Manning, John Protevi, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, to parse how the Tai have come to adopt an aesthetic approach to maintaining their nation.

While international relief organizations and non-profit complexes often view migrants as passive victims or receivers of violence, the Tai peoples are in fact highly politically and socially active in the Thai-Myanmar border-zone. Tai who are living clandestinely in Northern Thailand organize effective assemblages that arrange cultural events, performance troupes, music ensembles and traveling theater groups, in addition to organizations that work to uncover rape, coercion, forced relocation, discrimination, and other forms of violence (SWAN - Shan Women's Action Network 2002, 2012). I draw from ethnographic work with Tai political resistance movements and performers in Northern Thailand, dance training in the theatre performance tradition called *jaad tai*, as well as observations of the protest movements in Myanmar following the 2007 Saffron Revolution. Using critical theories of nationalism, performance and aesthetics, I argue that Tai forms of aesthetic expression are highly innovative and effective modes of embodied resistance praxis for displaced peoples.

Many Tai peoples, like the performers I spent time with in the temples of Chiang Mai, fled to Thailand seeking reprieve from inter-ethnic violence, land-displacement and poverty in the Shan State. The ethnic minorities residing in the territory that makes up what the British Raj

designated as "Upper Burma" after the violent invasion of their lands in the wake of the Anglo-Burmese War of 1824, have experienced centuries of suffering. Prior to British invasion, when the Tai peoples were organized around the system of *Jao Pha*, translated as Lords of the Sky or princedoms consisting of transitional high and lowland rice farming communities, this was a resource rich and culturally influential region. The *Jao Pha*, along with any ruling power in Burma were gradually overthrown at the hands of avaricious teak traders and British imperialists, eager to make masters of themselves in this 'backwater' of the empire. What followed was nearly two centuries of oppressive colonial rule, successive military dictatorships, ethnic rebellions, and deadly wars. The last of the surviving *Jao Pha* rulers were captured and presumably executed when General Ne Win instituted a violent military coup d'état in 1962 (Sargent 1994; Aye 2010; Fink 2013). Suffering persists in the many shadow economies where peoples from Myanmar labor in mines and factories, as military porters, child soldiers, and amongst the millions of migrant laborers who have fled to neighboring Thailand. Today, the approximately 300,000 Tai peoples who have fled from the Shan State in Myanmar to Thailand comprise a nation in exile, living in the interstitial borderlands of the border zone. Despite enduring the world's longest ongoing civil war with the Burmese Tatmadaw armies, most Tai remain insubordinate to external rule by Burmans.

How have the Tai maintained their sense of cohesion in the face of centuries of pressure to become subsumed by a larger, more powerful political unit? Today the Tai have rebel armies, who control contested territories in Shan State, so one way their sense of nation is maintained is through warfare. But there are other, subtler and often illegible ways, primarily through an investment in the performing arts. What the historian William McNeill calls "muscular bonding" describes the process of embodying the nation through synchronous movement (McNeill 1997,

2). For McNeill, the drills and dances of nations and armies serve as the repeated making of an *esprit de corps*, whereby the resonance created by rhythmic movement becomes the habitus of the collective. We see this phenomenon across cultures and throughout much of human history: particularly in the military, where soldiers learn early that moving in synchronization makes for a more resilient and effective fighting machine. Where language falls short due to its boundedness, its finite significations, and its misunderstandings, synchronous movement has historically been expressive of the body politic, the community of sense a nation requires in order to endure.

Language and text generate the edges and parameters of a nation but culture lies at the muscular and cellular level. McNeill calls attention to the ways in which language is restrictive, as he says, "[w]ords, in a sense, destroy what they purport to describe because they limit and define (...)" (1997:2), so what of the potential for an aesthetic form of nationalism that generates publics from bodies in movement? My Tai research collaborators often speak multiple languages – Tai, Burmese, Thai or even Chinese – their language abilities allow them to move across borders with greater ease. They can often hide in Thailand and pass as Thai as long as they are not caught in a police checkpoint or raid. However, when they perform the Tai dances, martial arts, opera, or march in the Shan State Armies' military parades, they become unmistakably Tai. Marching, moving, singing and dancing, produces alternate affects to language, or what Deleuze and Guattari call "a block of sensations," or "a compound of percepts and affects" (1996, 164). Clandestine and exiled migrants must look beyond language to define their identities, to recognize how aesthetics, performance, and movement are avenues towards bonding as a people.

A discussion of the aesthetically formed nation and its becomings may also be understood in relation to how states accumulate capital in what it deems "modern time."ⁱⁱⁱ Partha Chatterjee (2006), echoing Benedict Anderson (2006), reflects on the making and maintenance

of nations as temporal zones within which the nation exists in “homogenous empty time,” or a time when subalterns – and in particular migrant laborers – are seen as expedient sources of inexpensive labor, as quotidian hallmarks of a bygone era that tourists will stare at for a fee. The homogenous empty time of the nation in service of capital only values aesthetic forms of labor that can be commodified. Therefore, the production of exilic Tai opera, dance, music, and theater, as clandestine migrants practice it in sacred temple spaces, presents an alterity to the homogenizing forces of capitalist governmentality. The intense energy and time invested in Tai aesthetics and performance is not to create an export product or a tourist attraction, but rather an attempt to classicalize a repertoire of arts in service of reclaiming *Merng Tai*.

The clandestine body, deemed illegal by the state and superfluous by capital, can create space for aesthetic expression only by maintaining *heterogeneous time*, or time that is reclaimed for non-commercial purposes – privileging instead communal belonging, collaboration, worship, caretaking and aesthetic expression. The state machines of capture perceive this as an anachronism: the ethnic minority is always out of time and the migrant is always out of place. But the Tai peoples dance on, waiting for their opportunity to claim a time and a space when they are sovereign unto themselves.

Gesture

“They [the police] always show up at the festival. They say they are keeping the young boys from fighting each other. But that is not why they come. We know they don’t care about protecting us. They [gestures at three uniformed policemen] come to look at the cultural show and in the temple they do not dare to arrest us. But we know when we go home, they will have checkpoints

on the road. If you don't have money to pay them they will catch you [jail you].”^{iv}

The Tai peoples, in their investment in an aesthetic form of nationalism, reproduce their nation with every drumbeat, every note and with each flourish of a dancing hand. Their gestures are acts of subtle nation-building that the state misreads as the traditional practices of a people out of time and out of place. The Thai police don't bother them when they are practicing the arts or gathering in places of worship, but outside of that realm, Tai people never feel safe. At a migrant learning center, a research collaborator, Hseng Lao, says she never leaves the subdistrict in Chiang Mai where she lives in fear of being caught, harassed and extorted at a police checkpoint. Waan chimes in to lament her father being jailed during the Thaksin era's war on drugs. He was caught in a police checkpoint with \$1500 Thai Baht (\$50) and subsequently accused and convicted of transporting drug money despite having no drugs on him or connections to the drug trade. She says bitterly, “He didn't have enough money to bribe them, so they took him.” In urban and peri-urban Chiang Mai, where many migrants live clandestinely, the local wat becomes a sanctuary space of respite. It also become a space of intense cultural production for migrants living clandestinely in the city. Thailand, with its intense commodification of ethnic hill tribes peoples and their arts, see the cultural shows of the Tai people as quaint relics of a past people, but the Tai know that, as one Hseng Lao notes, “when we dance, we [*rak merng Tai*] love Tai Land.”^v



IMAGE 1 “GA NOK,” THE HUMAN-BIRD DANCE, CHIANG MAI, THAILAND, JULY 2017.

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

Tai aesthetics is a dance of repeating gestures echoing the history of their becoming as a people. It is not the practice of a people out of time hoping to cling to their traditions in the face of modernity – it is gesturing towards a future becoming made possible through the body. In Erin Manning’s (2006) *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*, she attends to the political worlds made possible through dance, movement and gesture. The world of choreological politics may be understood through what she calls “the politics of touch” – “a notion of politics that is produced as a means without an end, a potentiality rather than an actuality, [through which] we can begin to defy the constriction of time and space straightjacketed by the nation-state” (Manning 2007:6). Dance is gestural politics reaching toward new becomings – becomings beyond the reach of national time. Where language falls short in creating the conditions of possibility for new becomings, dance is the resounding silence that gestures on in the shadows.

Dance and movement belongs to the realm of the extra-textual, a space where we may “imagine a politics that exceeds a state-centered governmentality necessitating a vocabulary that resists and subverts the language of the state” (Manning 2006, 7).^{vi}

As Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]) so famously has made us aware, it is the advent of the print-press, the textual dimension of public life, that enables the formation publics, and in turn various manifestations of nationalisms. Dance, however, represents a form of non-textual nationalism, what I would like to call *aesthetic nationalism* – one that does not attempt to capture, or exclude, but that expresses unity through movement. Dance and performance may become a form of nationalism that does not capture or exclude bodies from its performance the way language does. Its extra-textuality leaves it open to abstraction, reinterpretation, and play.



IMAGE 2 YOUNG WOMEN DANCE AT THE MIGRANT LEARNING CENTER, CHIANG MAI, THAILAND, 2015. PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

In the migrant learning center in Chiang Mai, young women file into the cramped room that is used for evening language and arts classes. Outside, street vendors are setting up their carts to sell quick dinners and snacks to passing motorists. The room has one fan to bring reprieve from the heat and dust that rises into the small space that is brightly lit with cheerful children's murals and art project made by the migrant children and adult learners who come here in the evenings to learn Thai, English, Chinese or Burmese, as well as practice the arts. Many of the young women have rushed here from their jobs as maids – where they work 10-12 hours per day cleaning rooms in a guest house that lies adjacent to one of the many construction sites where undocumented Tai men labor. Others work as *rap jerng* or for temporary hire, doing seasonal or occasional work in construction, as restaurant servers, maids or in the sex industry. Everyone is dead tired. Keaw tells us that her twelve-year old daughter was “too lazy” to come today. Her daughter was recently taken out of school in order to work in the guesthouse, not unusual amongst the Tai migrant workers in peri-urban Thailand, but the toll of manual labor and long hours can be especially hard on the pre-teens. We warm up and stretch our hands backwards to make them supple, so they will bend beautifully, then our knees and legs to sustain the foot patterns and level changes. We begin moving, stepping to a steady beat. Then the choreography is rehearsed again and again, the room warms and we welcome the sweat that releases after bodies move in ways that have been chosen, not forced. When I see these women in their homes or workplaces, they move through space modestly and carefully, so as to not upset the strict ordering of hierarchy. Tai women are not to take up much space. But here in this tiny room, provisionally sheltered from a world of men and work, the women become exuberant, outgoing and confident. They take up the whole space, unapologetically.

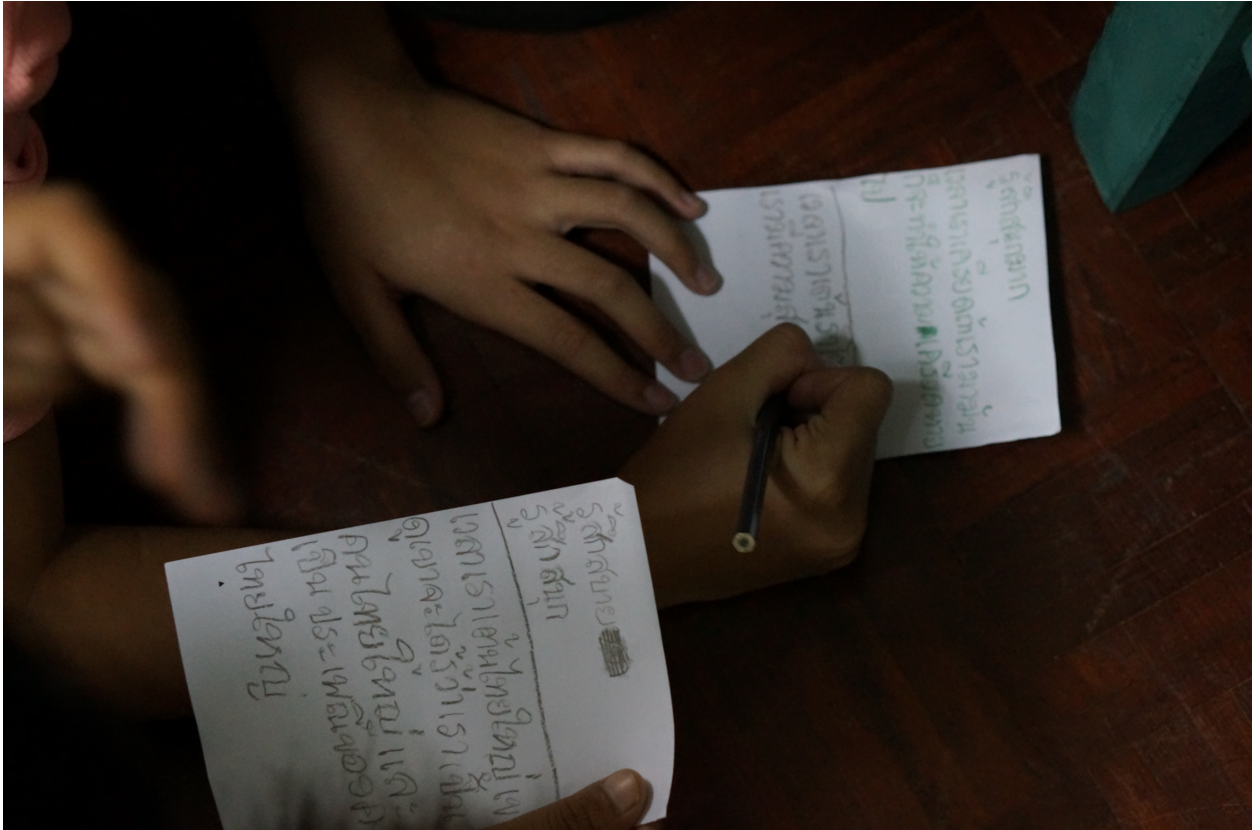


IMAGE 3 “WHEN WE DANCE, WE HAVE HAPPINESS” TAI WOMEN WRITE ABOUT DANCE, CHIANG MAI, 2015. PHOTO BY AUTHOR.

Following an hour of dancing, the serious and exhausted faces have transformed to giggles, teasing and laughter. We collapse to the floor, drenched in sweat and welcoming of a drink of cool water. Today, I ask if they can write down how they feel after dancing on pieces of paper.

Keaw, the mother whose daughter stayed home to rest, writes,

I feel good

I feel happy

When we dance Tai Yai dance,

we see and we know that we are Tai Yai people

and it is the tradition of the Tai Yai people.

Nang Seng writes,

I feel really happy.

When we are stressed,

If we come [dance]

It will make our stress disappear.

When we dance, we have happiness.

Tai dance in the border-zone represents an ephemeral expression of the Tai nation that makes possible a particular form of group cohesion as well as forms of well-being in the everyday that are difficult to see without experiencing. The dances gesture towards a language of joy, pain, and of pure expression beyond the text-centric formulations of the nation-state. Performance is often the language of the subaltern, whose voices and texts are marginalized, whose bodies are seen as sources of exploitable labor. Highlighting migrant's embodied forms of expression is not a banal attempt at "giving the people a voice" (Malkki 1996, 398), as we find beneath each flourish of a wrist and bead of sweat upon a brow, not a person in need of liberation, but layers of historical becomings, aching and longing to simply be a people. Gyatri Spivak famously challenges Deleuzian, Foucauldian, and Subaltern Studies intellectuals with the question, "can the Subaltern speak?" No, she cautions, "The subaltern as female cannot be read or heard," not within a system of Western centrism, where the desire for mastery is the engine of actors and the means through which we re-present the subaltern body (Spivak 1988, 104). But can she dance? What Spivak calls "the displacing gesture" – in the case Bhuvanewari Bhaduri's suicide, is a good foil for the Tai aesthetic in exile. The young woman ends her life while

menstruating in a final act of defiance as a way to remain pure in the midst of pollution.

Bhuvanewari shows that the speechless must express their distrust, their disgust through subtle gestures that nevertheless demand our reading. Where words fail, displacing gestures begin.

Words attempt to re-present, whereas gestures express. Can we form a notion of the body politic as gesturing bodies in movement, a body that is not simply an extension of the mind, but the habitus of history presented in the flesh?

To escape the rigidity of state ordering, role experimentation with one's body, its movements, its relationality to the world makes possible new becomings, or lines of flight, to borrow a term of Deleuze and Guarrari (1987). For John Protevi (2009), somatic engagement produces significant political affects on personal, group and civic scales. The politics of gesturing is intimately tied to a "political physiology" that often goes unnoticed by the state, but that is frequently used to imbricate subversive political ideas (think mass-protest, self-immolation, hunger-strikes) (*Ibid*). Tai migrants are seen as oppositional to both Thai and Myanmar state powers; the military insurgence movements in Shan State makes each migrant suspect. When performing in the space of the temple, however, Tai migrants are often regarded as human beings or as fellow Buddhists by their Thai neighbors and they can momentarily escape the gaze of suspicion the state directs at them. They perform a *displacing gesture* – they avoid capture – while moving synchronously towards an alternative future. Their voices have not withered. They gesture on with very drumbeat, footstep and flourish.

Movement

People have always moved – whether through desire or through violence (L. Malkki 1992, 24).

While spending time in a Tai wat in Chiang Mai, I met the Venerable Sai Pa, a monk in his late twenties, whose early life was marred by terror, fear and forcible displacement. Ven. Sai Pa grew up in the Loilen district of Shan State, a disputed territory that the Restoration Council of the Shan State (RCSS) army fights to protect from the control of the Tatmadaw. The Myanmar military routinely invades the RCSS controlled territory, taking land away from farmers for opium cultivation or burning villages where they think anti-government dissent is brewing (Derks 2012; Buchanan 2018). He was sixteen when the Burmese military invaded his village and killed his parents and siblings. Ven. Sai Pa explained to me that his family was accused of involvement in anti-government activities and they were shown no mercy.

Fearful for his fate and the sole survivor of his family, Sai Pa decided to flee Myanmar by walking for two months to reach the Thai border, eating leaves and forest creatures in the mountainous jungles along the way. The first time he arrived at the Thai-Myanmar border, the police caught him in a checkpoint and deported him back to Myanmar. Undeterred, Ven. Sai Pa crossed the border a second time, evading checkpoints and was this time unnoticed. Upon arrival to Thailand, he could not find a job consistent enough to pay for food and shelter. He eventually took a job spraying pesticides in the orange groves of the sub district Fang, north of Chiang Mai, a common and dangerous profession for precarious migrant laborers from Myanmar. Earning only US \$1 per day, Sai Pa grew exhausted, demoralized, and hungry. After five years of toiling in the fields Sai Pa turned to the monkhood for solace and most of all, to regain a sense of dignity.^{vii} He recounts that when he became a monk, “life was not difficult anymore.” As a monk the Venerable Sai Pa receives alms of food from laypeople, he is able to play traditional Tai music for dancers and martial artists, and he is learning to read and write both Tai and Thai. But he does not feel that the path of life-long asceticism was meant for him and he readily admits that

his dream was always to have a family and a job – any job that would allow him to support himself and a family with dignity.

The Venerable Sai Pa, as all Theravada Buddhist monks, is clad in saffron robes covering his trunk and right shoulder. The monk is also a skilled tattooist, or a tattoo *sala*, in the traditional Tai religious tattoo art. His skin reveals a dense network of inscriptions on his arms, legs and torso; traditional Tai magical formulas, animals and incantations designed to ward off evil spirits, ensure success in life, and to remind the ascetic of the *dham* he is meant to embody on his journey toward *nibanna* (Conway 2014). But on the eve of Khao Pansaa, I found Ven. Sai Pa backstage, not clad in his saffron robes, but dressed in fine pink and yellow silks, with elaborate makeup and headdress. The monk, an avid lover of theatre and dance, was a main feature in the night's performances. He spends the festival evening dancing, singing and playing Tai percussion instruments, much to the delight of onlookers and providing a great contrast to his prior life as a monk. Tonight would be the first night in over five years that Sai Pa would wear plainclothes – he had decided to disrobe and celebrated the occasion by performing multiple theatre and dance pieces to the temple audience. Sai Pa, explains that he experienced that night a shift towards his own personal goal of attaining dignity as an exile by joining in the movement towards arts revitalization.

The night of aesthetic play and performance created a space for Sai Pa to embody his love for the arts, as well as his religious and nationalist sentiments. As Connolly (2008) posits, effective uses of “role adventurism” are indispensable tools in the becomings of those who live their lives on the margins, whereby we might embody multiple roles in creative, activist, devotional or resistive ways. Further, through individual role adventurism, group orientations may be re-directed and new ways of engaging with the world may become possible. When I

returned in 2014 and 2015 to find Sai Pa in the temple, he was still working fervently towards the cause of revitalizing the traditional Tai arts. Although disrobed, he weekly instructs dozens of Tai youths in dance, martial arts and music, preparing them to perform at temple festivals and further cementing the central place the performing arts hold for Tai living in exile.

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

Role experimentation takes on entirely new meanings in spaces where violence, depravation, and injustice imminently loom. Tai migrants in Thailand have moved to escape the harrowing violence and poverty that conditions their reality in Myanmar. Yet it is within the liminal phase of exile that highly expressive forms of dissent are voiced. But not all counter-movements are violent or very loud at all. We often forget that there is affective power in the shadows, in the everyday, the seemingly banal and mundane spaces of human activity.

NARRATIVE 1 WHEN LIFE IS DIFFICULT, I HAVE MY INSTRUMENTS

Upon my return to the temple two years after first meeting Sai Pa, I found him there again sitting in the shade of the Vihearn, playing Tai instruments. We talk about his parents and he laments, “I miss them, but I have my instruments.” He touches the mong [the cymbal]. “When life is difficult, I have my instruments. My heart feels better [pen kamlang jai – encouraging, strengthening your heart]. When I first came to Thailand. I worked by spraying pesticides on plants. I made 30THB per day [US\$1]. I worked for five years in the field. I was in Fang and made 900 THB per month [US\$30]. While I was working in the fields, I missed my instruments. When I am working in the field, I cannot play instruments. I miss it a lot! I missed my instruments, so I became a monk [pay bhoot phra]. When I became a monk I could go anywhere and learn to play instruments. [He touches his heart].

Sai Pa joins a growing number of Tai peoples who gather in the safe space of the Buddhist *wat* to learn their own language, practice their traditional dance, song, music, and martial arts. As they gather to revive their arts, they also communally develop strategies for surviving state-level forms of oppression and a capitalist economy that exploits their vulnerabilities as migrant laborers.

The ability to move – across borders and through various roles - speaks to the nomadism that has become the marker of Tai identity. By most definitions, citizenship applies to an exclusive group of people identified by their belonging to a clearly demarcated, well-defined, and well-defended state territory. The ever growing number of exiled people challenges that definition and its territorialization of the concept of citizenship. But nomadism as role adventurism is a very different reality than forced nomadism. Though nomadism presents a viable alternative to being captured by state-level homogenizing forces, for the Tai clandestine

migrant, sedentarism is a luxury they too often cannot afford. So, perhaps we must still hold on to some sense of belonging and within this space of belonging we find possibilities for virtue and performance. The task for the nomad is to not allow the state, or capital, to lay claim to a territory, but to leave it as an open field, upon which free expression becomes possible.

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

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

intelligible.

In the same sense, Tai who gather in the temple space to dance and sing are also organizing a formidable movement with political aims. During my time there, many meetings were held amongst both youths and elders to discuss the insurgency movement along the Thai-Burma border after dance practice. Indeed, it was often the most avid cultural practitioners who are most vocal about gaining traction for a Tai sovereignty movement. To their advantage, their aesthetic movement in the temple space is not always read as political by the ever-vigilant Thai state. Guha (1999) finds that insurgent movements often occurred on sacred days in Colonial India because in Hinduism the coming of Kali Yuga calls for the inversion of all social roles and temple rituals allowed for an inversion of social statuses. On such days the slave may find himself a master, and within this liminal space he may see the extent to which he is oppressed and choose to rise up against his over-ordinates. Whereas rituals traditionally were used to empty rebellion of their contents, during colonial times they were used to reinforce anti-hegemonic sentiment. Guha argues that “groups held in a position of subordination develop small strategies of resistance that grow” (Guha 1999, 12). From our discussion of gesturing towards, and becoming a movement, we may now turn to silence as a particular mode of expressive dissent.

Silence

In 2007, Theravada Buddhist monks from all over Myanmar, clad in saffron robes, silently walked through the streets of Yangon and Mandalay. They made no public demands, yet all onlookers knew what they were protesting. They marched in long parades with their alms bowls upturned. Silence, that most cherished virtue amongst Theravada Buddhists, who often spend

days, months or even years in silent meditation, can also be leveled as a potent mode of resistance discourse. Monks walked barefoot upon the streets of Yangon with their alms bowl turned down – silently signifying to the military generals that their crimes against the people have barred them from accumulating merit. A monk knows he cannot publicly speak out against atrocity as monks are not supposed to engage in politics in Myanmar. The sangha, of course, has been politically active – either joining forces with or helping to topple monarchs and empires throughout history. But in this particular historical moment the greatest form of protest the monk could levy against the Military Junta was to bar them from the merits they could accumulate from donating alms.

The monk's silence spoke volumes and eventually sparked a violent crackdown of all protests in Myanmar. It so shook the core of the military establishment that within a matter of years, Myanmar began a slow and contested transition to democracy – a process that analysts have hypothesized may be tied to the effects of international media attention on the regime's behavior during the Saffron Revolution (Chowdhury 2008; Rogers 2008). We learn from the monks that silence is never consent, rather negative space is space filled with possibilities. The 'master-signifier', in this case the upturned alms-bowl, is effective precisely because of its vagueness and its refusal to engage in a rhetorical debate with the oppressor. Ernesto Laclau (2005) reminds us that in some situations, vagueness is a precondition to constructing relevant political meanings. He posits:

- (1) that vagueness and indeterminacy are not shortcomings of a discourse about social reality, but, in some circumstances, inscribed in social reality as such;
- (2) that rhetoric is not epiphenomenal vis-a-vis a self-contained conceptual structure, for no conceptual

structure finds its internal cohesion without appealing to rhetorical devices. (Laclau 2005, 67)

Laclau points to meaning generated by silence that does not need “rhetorical devices” in order to make possible a politics that desires difference. Rather than seeing difference as an obstacle to politics, silent protest creates a space to imagine a world that could be multiplicitous. A theory of silence, therefore, is the creation of a methodology of emancipation without having to resort to violence. Emancipation is possible without liquidations if we replace solidarity and totality with chains of equivalence. The silence of the monks *is* signification, expressivity; it has profound politico-affective resonances. The saffron-clad silent monks are moving signifiers. They express dissent through their bodies rather than through language, which allows for blocks of sensations that tarry with the affirmative.

Conclusion: A Politics of Expression

Words, in the border-zone, are dangerous. Talk about politics is always frowned upon. The Venerable Sai Pa once told me that, “the word *politics* is not used” [my emphasis].^{viii} A refrain that would be repeated with many research collaborators whenever I attempted to bring up the question of “politics or “nationalism.” Bad things happen to those who become too involved and to those who overtly organize politically. The Venerable Sai Pa laments that perhaps his parents would still be alive if they were not suspected of assisting the RCSS. He is relieved to speak of the arts and not politics. The arts are an arena where the political lives in the body, not in the word. *Merng Tai*, the Tai Land, is a political project, backed by both military and party-political powers, but for the Tai peoples in exile, *Merng Tai* is a lived mission. It is a

space that is created whenever the Tai people will it into being. It requires constant care and repetition in the form of gesture; the dances, the performances and the practice of the arts. The bringing into being a future nation also requires constant movement; traversing political boundaries and social roles. The project of deploying *displacing gestures* (Spivak 1988, 104), must be subtly heard through their silence. The authorities that govern their lives must be made to think they have been muzzled, but don't be fooled, *the art of not being governed* takes multiple forms for the exiled subaltern (Scott 2009).

I have so far delineated multiple strategies of becoming for the exiled peoples of Myanmar. Through a discussion of the affective politics of the everyday, a theory of gesture, movement and silence may hopefully bring nuance and complexity to the way we engage with the study of migrant “subjects.” Performances are a potent practice *because* they are relegated to the sidelines – as belonging to the realm of culture and not politics. But performance and practice contain within them potent bodies politics, they are the habitus of a people seeking to restructure the orderings of hegemony. They are the thresholds and patterns of behavior that upend existing systems, slowly, nonviolently and almost imperceptibly (Protevi 2009, 13). I have outlined a micropolitics of gesture, movement, and silence within which, the hard work you do to organize blocks of becoming make new kinds of sovereigns possible. Politics is not just language, discourse, or even power, it is expression all the way down.

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Endnotes

ⁱ From the author's filednotes, Chiang Mai, Thailand, July 2012 and July 2017.

ⁱⁱ *Khao Pansaa* (ພຽງປາສາ, ກຽງປາສາ) is a Buddhist festival that celebrates the beginning of the rainy day retreats for the *sangha* (Buddhist monastic community). The rainy day retreat came about as peasants in ancient India grew impatient with wandering monks and ascetics, who would accidentally trample their freshly sowed rice fields during their morning alms rounds and meditation walks. Sitting meditation in silent monastic retreat replaces walking during the monsoonal months, which protected crops and insects that could be crushed by the wandering mendicants.

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

^{iv} Personal Interview, Chiang Mai, Thailand, April, 2015.

^v Mostafanezhad, Mary. (2013). Returning the Gaze: Exploring the Possibility for Dialogical Tourism in Northern Thailand. *Anatolia* 24(3): 489–492. Quote from Personal Interview, Chiang Mai, Thailand, April, 2015.

^{vi} For Manning, Tango is the transnational dance of passions and affect, it "is the politics of the unwritten, yet the palimpsest on which everything political aspires already to have been written. It is the voice of the immigrant displaced through movement. It is the movement of the stranger, echoing in the distant resonance of a music that has any times crossed the world" (Manning 2007, 3).

^{vii} It is common for all Tai men to enter the monkhood at some stage during their life. Some become novices as early as five years old, while most will have ordained for some period of time

around the age of 21. Although there is great family and cultural pressure to ordain, it is at the discretion of the individual to decide the length of ordination – some remain ordained for only a few weeks; others stay in the monastic community for life.

^{viii} Personal Interview, Chiang Mai, Thailand, January, 2015.