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Alan Klima: The Funeral Casino

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Introduction

EIDETIC MEMORIES

In Bangkok's upscale Royal Hotel, Channel 11 is taping a talk show, a special memorial edition of "Looking from Different Perspectives," the *Maung Dang Moom* show. Three years before, here in the Royal Hotel in 1992, prodemocracy protesters had holed up until the bitter end of a month of street marches against an unelected general who had taken the office of prime minister. Here, under the beaded strings of glittering lights hanging from the atrium, they had set up their field hospital and morgue for those shot by the soldiers. Back then, the video cameras were not deployed smartly for center, right, and left angle shots as they are now. Camera crews were frantically milling about. People were shouting, and journalists from all around the world were tripping over each other, while Thais, peaking on adrenaline, would carry in faint, bloodied people whose expressions were muddled in the confusing moment of their approaching deaths. A camera was an emblem of sovereignty then. People cleared a path, as if for a king. They shouted, "Shoot, shoot, go right ahead!" as they cleared a good space around a corpse.

Then Special Forces stormed the building, and took up all the space in the world's camera lens. Yet it was far from merely unfortunate—from a media business angle as well as from a political angle—that the soldiers would then trample over and kick the protestors with big black jackboots, while the bodies lay shoulder to shoulder on the lobby's bloody marble floor. Beating them with rifle butts, the soldiers corralled them outside the hotel, and made them kneel in the sun, hands tied with their shirts behind their backs, which with a wide-angle lens looked like an endless sea of bare-backed slaves bowed before a machine gun on the horizon. Then they were herded toward trucks that looked like cattle cars and, pulled up by the roots of their hair, lifted onto the vehicles and carted away to wherever that dark, off-camera place is that military dictatorships take people.

Today is the third anniversary of the Black May massacre of 1992. The relatives of the dead have been invited here to be on TV, or at least in the studio audience. Last night, the parents, siblings, and children of the Black May dead, those who were not from Bangkok, slept on the floor in a nearby temple. Later tonight they will sleep on the straight-backed

CHAPTER ONE

benches of dusty, rumbling buses heading back for their provincial villages and towns. But for now, as they are at this moment part and parcel of Thai national TV in the making, they are actually let into Bangkok's Royal Hotel, where they can sit in first-class style.

Bird is bubbly, happy this morning. He got to sit up front, just as he wanted. I have set up my own video camera and sit with him and his mom for a while before the show starts, because his excitement is contagious. People with walkie-talkies and white pressed shirts are connecting cables and testing electronic things all around us. He likes TV and likes being here while it is made. But it is not his first time on TV. I saw him three years ago on satellite dish, or rather on one of the black-market video tapes of satellite transmissions that could be bought on the streets of Bangkok. The military had suppressed TV images of the violence, but the Thai video piracy industry had nevertheless quickly gotten in on the trade in these images, which was moving freely in most other parts of the world. In freewheeling entrepreneurial spirit, the street vendors and pirate video operators managed to proliferate images of the dead and dying through a local black market. At that time, only a few days after the massacre, they did not do it in the usual tourist ghettos of Bangkok where intellectual property rights are relaxed. Instead, the black market appeared right out in the open, on the actual site of the killing in the heart of the old city; and this market was transacted side by side with massive Buddhist funerary rites of gift exchange being held there for the spirits of the unquiet dead.

Bird's body was a part of this trade. It had been spirited over the surface of the globe by the BBC, and then returned and passed around in cassettes for sale by the enterprising Thai traders on the exact spot where he had been gunned down. The fuzzy pirate video showed the BBC reporter standing right here in the lobby of the Royal Hotel, in front of little Bird, who was a bloody mess on the floor. Like most people facing a camera, if he had had a choice he would have much preferred a chance to comb his hair and put on his best shirt. But he had been shot with an M-16, and the reporter was standing over him, narrating, "The military has not even spared young children. This boy couldn't be more than nine or ten." Actually Bird was thirteen at the time, but because he is retarded he has a face that looks younger, even when in pain and shock.

He was curious, he explains. He had wandered off from home because he heard loud noises not too far away. He had wanted to see what was going on. "There were lots and lots of people there. Then soldiers came with big guns, and everybody ran. It was scary, and I ran too." But he didn't get away. Now he has a plastic leg. Reporters come to talk to him and take his picture once a year. Every year there are far fewer than the previous year.

INTRODUCTION

Now I sit with this boy and his actual body, the one that had wandered him into the global flow of media images, the one that had been electronically swept away in currents of international trade and transported back to the ground on which he had been shot. His had been one of the pivotal images upon which the politics of death oscillated between the military regime and prodemocracy marchers within a dialectic of local and global imagery.

“What do you think about the state of politics in Thailand?” I ask him.

For a while he is silent, holding my microphone up close to his face. He had wanted to hold the microphone. With a pained and searching expression, he grasps it for some time, and then can finally only repeat, “Thailand.”

After a long wait for the *Maung Dang Moom* show to begin taping, the lobby of the Royal Hotel finally settles down, and the show begins. The TV guests soon launch into free debate; the talk-show format is both performative and emblematic of the new media freedoms earned as a result of the prodemocracy demonstrations and the massacre—a structural triumph of the bourgeois public sphere—three years before. Now the combat alights only in forms that can keep at bay from the public sphere the borderline, shadowy realm of violence, its Other.

On the first anniversary Black May taping of the TV talk show, the guests and audience actually erupted into a chair-tossing, free-for-all brawl, after the relatives of the victims were told by a promilitary guest not to “use the dead just to make a point.”

The violence was cut out at broadcast time.

Because it is now the third anniversary of the massacre and they are again taping auspiciously in the Royal Hotel, a few things are said at the outset about the importance of remembering the event. But—even though the relatives of the victims have come all this way, and one of the four guests on the panel lost a son in the massacre and is there to represent the interests of the families of the dead—there happen to be other, more current and interesting issues in the air, and the discourse quickly turns toward these. The massacre is forgotten and left behind, and the leader of the relatives of the dead just sits there quietly on the stage, left out of the loop because he doesn’t have anything interesting to say about new affairs. And yet. . . .

And yet as the relatives and I file out of the cool lobby on this hot day in 1995, and walk out onto the central plaza in the heart of Bangkok’s old city, and they speak to me about the neglect of their dead, they are not completely dejected at the speed of forgetting that was so palpable there, in the realm of the public sphere. There is good reason for not being dispirited. The hot new news, the latest story that has displaced them one more step away from the main stage of national memory, is the story that

CHAPTER ONE

the Democrat Party is going to dissolve parliament. The party, which came to power after the massacre, lasted just over two years in office. For the sake of democracy, back in 1992, the relatives of the dead let the “prodemocracy” parties use them to win an election and employ them as moral symbols of suffering in photo opportunities and features. The relatives voiced their support of the parties, and put aside issues of personal compensation, as well as politically sensitive issues like building a monument to their dead. All of that was for the sake of facilitating a transition of power.

After that election, the Democrat Party got what all parties want, the office of prime minister. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose by stirring up the “past.” And then, when things had settled down, the relatives of the dead asked for better compensation for their loss, demanded it from the government that had come to power with the deaths of their kin. They were told by the new government, “Don’t use corpses for your own gain.”

When the relatives first arrived here in Bangkok two days before, the parliamentary coalition was still together. But exactly three years after the Black May incident that had put the prodemocracy politicians in power—precisely on the anniversary of the massacre—the government tumbled. It was almost as though, just as Black May commemoration rites were unfolding elsewhere in the city over the last couple of days, the neglectful new prime minister’s chair slipped out from under him, despite the fact that Black May was not an issue anymore and almost no one was paying any attention to ceremonies being held for the dead.

“They call it the law of Kamma,” says Pi Nok Gaow, who lost her two sons, “It is the law of Kamma. Chuan Leekpai did this to himself. Our flesh and blood died on this day so that he could be elected prime minister. Then he forgot about the dead, and neglected us, so on this day of their death, his power collapses.”

THE NEOLIBERAL ECONOMY OF HISTORY

It is the project of this text to examine the appearance of an event. This event has served as a crucial plot device in a dominant narrative of Thailand’s emergence from military dictatorship and its entrance into a new liberalized world order and “global modernity.” In Bangkok, in May 1992, prodemocracy demonstrations ended with a massacre of unarmed citizens by the Thai military, an institution long backed by U.S. support. Around that time, the top gun in the army had displaced the government and the constitution in the seventeenth coup since 1932, then staged corrupt elections and seated himself as prime minister without standing for

INTRODUCTION

election himself. Prominent hunger strikers led hundreds of thousands of people in a month-long series of street protests, which proved fruitless until the army opened fire on them, hoping to disperse them. That was when gory images of violence began to circulate around the globe—and in an illegal pirate video market on the site of the massacre—destabilizing the regime on two fronts with instant photographic memories. The premier, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, was finally forced to resign.

Although the deployment of graphic death imagery was very powerful and, consequently, the political impact of the massacre very great at the time, the incident quickly faded out of memory, and “Black May,” as it came to be called, had little meaning or influence in the dominant political culture that immediately succeeded it. This occurred within a longer trend in which death imagery has played a vital role in political transformations. Twice before during the struggle for democratic freedoms the Thai military had massacred unarmed citizens in Bangkok streets. The struggle over the representation of these deaths in various forms of public media has been crucial to the outcome of each these incidents, which occurred in 1973, 1976, and again in 1992. Oppositional strategies for visualizing dead bodies and commemorating violent deaths have been influential in shaping events, and in the story of this struggle the meaning of death to political culture has become increasingly subject to proliferating technologies of mass media, the economic values that animate them, and power relations shaped by a global discourse in which national image management has become central to the perceptions of investors. In Thailand, for the most part, the corpses of political victims have lent their evocative power to realizing the transformation toward a liberal free-market politics, in step with the values of global capitalism. Nevertheless—although locally the mass media profit from both the sensational value of violent death and the powerful argument for liberal freedoms that military massacres provide—the new order, as we will see, does not acknowledge the sacrifice of the demonstrators for its sake. Their death, although at times effectual and invaluable, can be rapidly divested of value. A momentous historical struggle for those Thais who dedicate themselves to it turns precisely upon these matters of accounting.

This book explores historical processes such as that between the short-term power of graphic violence and the structure of forgetting in a not-so-long *durée*. It is this power to electrify but then enervate death, this evocative power of violence and corpses in a fast-paced market of images, that I comment upon here through what may seem at first to be entirely different realms of visual and economic culture: Buddhist meditation on corpses and Buddhist funerary exchange. This book is an attempt to draw a critical position from some very different ways in which visions of death have value, truth, and power in Thailand, from the visions of death circu-

CHAPTER ONE

lating over the surface of the earth, to the interplay of violence, its representation, and commemoration in the practice of radical democracy in Thailand, to the inner visualization of Thai Buddhist meditators contemplating death, corpses, and the repulsiveness of body parts, and finally to rural Thai rites of funeral exchange.

Imagine the possibility of performing an autopsy on yourself, even while you are still alive. Imagine that your scalpel and arthroscopic filament, cutting and sliding through the flesh of your corpse, left no traces, drew no blood, and that you could move through the organs without hindrance, and see and touch them intimately. Imagine that you could nestle right up next to the skeleton upon which everything hangs, and even draw so close as to lie within it—to wait quietly within, as it waits; to see and feel things from its point of view.

Such is the quiet abiding in Buddhist meditation on death, corpses, and bodily parts. In deep states of embodied concentration, relentless meditators focus their inner vision and sensation upon the parts of the body and the body as a corpse, absorbing into an interior charnel ground that festers with graphic images and insights. In Thailand it is called *asubha kammatthāna*, “contemplating the repulsiveness of the dead body,” one of the most powerful practices in the Buddhist repertoire of form absorptions.

“It cracks open, divides, and separates,” says the nun Mae-Chi Liem of her forays into the charnel ground within. “This body opens up for you to see. You see bodily ooze, clear ooze like in the brain; thick, filmy ooze and clear ooze. The body splits open into intestines, intestines the size of your wrist, *na*. Liver, kidneys, intestines, the stomach, you can see it all.”

With this sense faculty of seeing in deep meditation, the mind’s eye impinges upon the objects of its attention. It rubs itself into the gory aspects of embodied existence, brushing up against an insight into them. That is the Buddhist faith in visions of death—not only that death is certain and yet, in its own predictable way, unpredictable, but that in death, intensely examined, there resides a pressing and almost (but not quite) absolute truth about existence that can be seen and touched, intimately. *Dukkha*, suffering, is always groping at us, and those who dwell in stark lairs of its imagery discover that if you can lay your hand on it intimately you can grasp it, take its hand off you, and then let it go.

As though performing an autopsy on themselves, Thai meditators practice a form of concentration-visualization that causes absorption into graphic images of death and dismemberment. And in the practice of this art, they use gory photographs of others as an aid to realizing their own corporeality and mortality. This practice is parallel to a similar, conspicuous use of photographic memory in Thai political protest rituals and commemorations.

INTRODUCTION

Political commemoration rituals, given their dual function in the presentation of both graphic corpse imagery and gifts to the dead, call up not only the particular practices of Buddhist death meditations but also the economic principles of gift exchange practiced more widely in Thai funerary rites. Such rites of exchange with the dead are a critical comment on the nature of a commerce in which so much may seem to conspire toward the obfuscation of social obligations. And yet the practice of funerary exchange is in Thailand never far from an entrepreneurial spirit, even as it embodies what Marcel Mauss dubbed, waxing romantic, the “spirit of the gift.”¹ The sense that exchange objects retain a connection to the people who exchange them, rather than passing along anonymously and without obligation, is very much alive in Thai death memorials, even in the midst of an intense entrepreneurial milieu. This is important. The spirit of the gift mediates in culturally explicit ways both the relations among the living and the relations between the living and the dead, and so generates an economy that connects both people and time from within the very heart of the latest in capitalism.

This is the “funeral casino”: a fusion of funeral rites with gambling. The fundamental ethnographic context to be explored here, the funeral casino is investigated figuratively throughout the text and literally in its conclusion. I find this form of freewheeling, obligated exchange performed both in the gambling wakes of northern Thailand depicted in the final chapter and in the ad-hoc black marketeering and Buddhist rites that spring up in moments of protest, danger, and mourning in the Thai struggle for freedom. Funeral wakes for the dead highlight potentials in Thai cultural practice that can establish memory in powerful and usable forms which are by no means either inimical to or washed out by the latest in capitalism.

Ultimately, this book is about the politics of telling history under obligation, an attempt to write *The Gift* into history. It is about the passage of time over the bodies of the dead, which is also a story of the apparent passing of the military-gift economy of the Cold War into the liberal free market of a new world. In Thailand, political cadavers are simultaneously catalysts, plot devices, and sublimated messages of this global story. The fusion of funerals and markets—whether accomplished in rites of mourning or in black markets of massacre imagery—offers a critique of the neo-liberal economy by which a new world order can appear to sever its connection to an old order that has given it its life.

It is no coincidence that Thai political protests, tied to anniversaries of violence, are modeled upon the principles of gift exchange at Buddhist funerals, as we will see. And it is no coincidence that use of graphic death imagery has always been a standard appurtenance in their performance of social mnemonics, just as it is in the practice of Buddhist meditation on death.

CHAPTER ONE

In the four years of work on which this text is premised, 1989–1990, 1991–1993, and 1995, the study has encompassed Buddhist funerary exchange practices in rural northern Thailand, Buddhist meditation on death in central Thailand, and political demonstrations and commemoration rites in Bangkok. The text is an effort to bring these different arenas together into a political-philosophical association.

An instructive metaphor might be drawn from Walter Benjamin in order to imagine a way to write ethnography on such varied spheres of life, yet without relying on connective principles that are based in a logic of spatial contiguity or are purported to reflect a hermetic cultural structure. If the analytic architecture of philosophy were a palace, Walter Benjamin declared, his mission was “to fill up the walls of the palace to the point where the images appear to be the walls.” He called it *Gesichtesphilosophie*, which Susan Buck-Morss explains is best rendered as “philosophical history”: “to construct, not a philosophy of history, but a philosophy out of history, or (this amounts to the same thing) to reconstruct historical material as philosophy. . . . Benjamin was committed to a graphic, concrete representation of truth, in which historical images made visible the philosophical ideas. In them, history cut through the core of truth without providing a totalizing frame.”²

What follows is, in the imagery of prose, an attempt at a similar visualization of philosophy. It is a construction of philosophical history out of the stuff of ethnography, a slight deflection of the usual trajectory of ethnography toward a sense of the architecture of ideas when one walks through them. “Philosophical ethnography” is a concept that might suggest one method, among many possibilities, for linking up mutually informative practices in a way that does not fall back on cartographic-literalist notions of culture, space, and place.³

Part I of this walk-through, “The Passed,” is a genealogy of the political cadaver in Thailand, and investigates powerful and progressive politics in the confluence of political protests, free markets, and images of death in the recent history of the Thai prodemocracy movement.

In Chapter Two, “The New World,” the stage is set by a fortuitous historical conjuncture in Bangkok, after the coup d’état led by General Suchinda Kraprayoon, as the 1991 World Bank/IMF meetings were about to be held in Bangkok—meetings originally garnered for Thailand by the previous, elected government. The chapter focuses on cleaning. It was the dawn of the “new world order,” and the military sought to put forth a good public image to the world—an image of Thailand as progressive and of Bangkok as a global city. Cleanup operations performed on city space were intended to refurbish the “national image” after the damage it was believed to have sustained during the general’s coup of 1991. But at the same time, the cleanup was intended to suppress unsightly street com-

INTRODUCTION

memorations of a massacre from the Cold War past, the anniversary of which, unfortunately for the military, happened to coincide with the World Bank meetings. National identity under these conditions partakes in both a struggle over national history and the circulation and construction of identity in international arenas, an inseparable and complex relation that will be of interest throughout this text. The local history is, of course, a global history as well, but this fact is placed in a state of suspension within a discourse of new eras and a world order without history. And yet this is not the only opportunity presented by a world in which national images are adrift in the choppy seas of international imaginaries, as the unfolding series of events in this text will make clear.

Chapter Three, "Revolt History," is a reversion to the Cold War time of global community, following the lead of student demonstrators who persistently refused to detach themselves from "the passed." Violent suppression in 1973 and 1976 of prodemocracy demonstrations by the U.S.-backed military led to the public politics of the corpse in Thailand. This history, of a successful revolt in 1973 and the brutal end to its democratic aspirations in 1976, shows how powerful, potentially liberating, but also dangerous is the use of graphic death in a burgeoning public sphere, a realm that is constituted in founding violence and that therefore seeks to erase its own genealogy. This is both its unstable strength and its exploitable weakness. In the exclusion of violent ancestry and U.S. war-gifts from the memory of the public sphere, marginal and therefore potentially critical spaces of memory are generated from which contestation of these mutually bound orders of national history and global time can be launched from the sidelines, now or in the future. The recurrent time of commemoration is largely employed by direct victims of the Thai history of revolt and as a continuing inheritance by student activists, but the necromantic power of public massacre always awaits reawakening into the apprehension of a broader politics in the present, and in this "local" history the culpability of the global community can never be expunged.

Chapter Four, "Bloodless Power," resumes the narrative of the 1990s, when a protest movement against military power had the benefit both of hindsight into the death politics of the 1970s and of a far more articulated media apparatus. The chapter narrates the progress of protests against General Suchinda Kraprayoon on the streets of Bangkok. Backed by an army of mobile pushcart vendors, these demonstrators intended to force the general's resignation through nonviolent means, through the symbolism of the free market and in a contest of images in the public sphere. The protests employed mild versions of death imagery, threats of individual sacrifice through hunger strikes, and a nonviolent ideology. They made use of the presence of international journalists while under conditions of local censorship in order to place pressure on the regime, and yet it all

CHAPTER ONE

eventually ended with the massacre of Black May. In these events it is possible to see the beginning stages of the reduction of radical democratic politics to a form amenable to accession into the narratives of the bourgeois public sphere. As a result of this process, the prodemocracy movement of 1992 has come to be known, almost invariably, as a “bourgeois revolution.” This interpretation has come to enact significant and lasting effects on the performance of historical progress in Thailand; this narrative exacts a cost on radical politics in exchange for acceptable placement in neoliberal orderings of history. The demonstrators depended on the moral symbolism of modern capitalism for a construction of themselves as proper and decent citizens in step with the times, but the terms of those times made demands of their own.

Chapter Five, “Repulsiveness of the Body Politic,” examines how the assimilation of radical politics into moral orders of historical “modernity” was fairly well completed through the violence of Black May. During the event, images of death were circulated in local and global media networks; they ultimately created the leverage to displace General Suchinda and significantly shift the country toward the democracy its activists had long desired. Despite state censorship, the work of death images was accomplished, on an international level through global media networks, and with even greater effect locally through an ad-hoc black market of videos bought and sold during funeral rites for the dead held on the street where Black May had transpired. Nevertheless, the incident was rather quickly forgotten by both the new government and the media, each of which had derived great benefit from the deaths. This chapter examines the serious deficiencies in media practice, as well as in its theoretical imagination, when dominant understanding is set by the terms of the public sphere’s “modernity,” especially where violent events are exploited to support the public sphere’s own moral and historical propriety.

There are haunting similarities between theories that celebrate the new global media age and the messages on the nature of media technology that are carried by, in, and for mass media structures themselves. There is perhaps no better context in which to examine this union than one, like Black May of 1992, in which a “global mediascape,” as Arjun Appadurai has termed it, appears to be a powerful source of historical agency, and is not averse to saying so.⁴ What forms of exclusion enable such consensus on the place of media in global modernity? In 1995, the relatives of the Black May dead assembled for Buddhist commemoration rites and to demand compensation from the state for their losses (as they have every year since). But only three years after Black May, both the government in power and the mass media had little interest in their concerns anymore, and no longer valued the exchange relations that are consequent upon death and in which, during the event’s funeral marketplace, they had

INTRODUCTION

themselves participated. The public sphere's persistent refusal to recognize the gift of death demands, perhaps, an equally abrupt refusal, and for that reason the text will turn to alternative critical conceptions for the principles of exchange at work in such transitional events.

Part II of the book, "Kamma," is a countercommentary on media relations of shock, remembrance, and the cultural economics of passing eras.

Chapter Six, "The Charnel Ground," interweaves theories on media representation of violence with Buddhist practices for meditating on abject images of death, corpses, and bodily parts. This chapter develops the critical meanings that can develop in the interstice between the politics of graphic sensationalism in the public sphere and reclusive Buddhist visualization of the body in death and decay. The chapter reflects on the media apparatus that can deliver the short-lived shock which has come to effect transfers of power so cleanly and efficiently. This view refuses, however, to accept facile condemnation of the essential "inhumanity" of visual media. Instead, the emphasis here is on the mutability of technologies of imaging (which are, after all, human constructions). I suggest that the most extreme form of disempowerment would consist in renouncing the possibility of making history through vision precisely at the moment of visual media's ascendance in influence. Through a detailed study of the theory and practice of visualizing death in Buddhist meditation, including the use by Thai Buddhists of sensationally gory photography, the chapter demonstrates that, like the image of the cadaver in the public sphere, this work with images of death can be chaotic and dangerous, though not hopelessly so. In a repetitive practice of taking abject imagery inwardly, Buddhist meditators create a vivid and powerful sphere of image reproduction that may seem morbid, unsympathetic in its agenda, and not directly political (if it can be said that a politics can exist autonomously of an ethics).⁵ But what Buddhist meditation lacks in explicit political intent it gains in its unsettling and counterintuitive deconstruction of the human being through vision. If, as many complain, the representation of violence in modern image media is not doing what we want it to do, could it be that we ask of it something that it cannot provide, ask of it the wrong questions, need of it that it represent the fully human being where that being may not, as Buddhist meditators would claim, exist in the way we might want it to? Could it be that the most effective uses of graphic imagery need not, or must not, be grounded in the humanist call of sympathy? To answer cleanly in the affirmative is perhaps to project too literally the message of this Buddhist medium onto the public screen of image politics, and is not fully practicable in any possible or even imaginable form of society as we know it. And yet, I argue, the aims of radical democracy depend upon forestalling the closure of long-standing wounds and grievances, as well as on impeding the finalization of society in stable form.

Perhaps the political work of the abject must, similarly, find a way to wound common sense and the common senses as well, for these are media through which the peacefully violent exclusions of consensus are enforced without the use of force.

Chapter Seven, “The Funeral Casino,” narrates an account of the funerary rites and gambling of northern Thais in a way that demonstrates how effective fusions of death, memory, gift exchange, and capitalism can be in Thai practices of commemoration. This chapter presents an exegesis on the practical meaning of *kamma* in giving and in entrepreneurial spirit, which should cast an indirect but clear light on the meaning of contemporary oppositional politics undertaken in the funereal idiom. Although the separation of gift and capital is quite possible to conceive of as well as to enforce, in economy as well as in history, this is not inevitable. Just as there is no inherent political meaning to the technological nature of image-reproducing media, so also is there no essential social formation attendant upon gambling—or in market and entrepreneurial practice, for that matter—that can serve as the bulls-eye for taking critical aim at the nature of the ills of our time. It might be noted in passing that it is unfortunate, for instance, that the term “casino capitalism” has been associated with “fetishistic” and “superstitious” monetary practices among an international underclass that supposedly has no real knowledge of the equally supposed unreal and ephemeral operations of global monetary wealth.⁶ Suggesting a nonexclusive alternative to this enlightened casting of capitalism in darkness, this chapter will throw as much light as possible on socially embedded practices with money that may show how “superstitions” about value, in this case the communal generation and sharing of Buddhist “merit” (*bun*), can at least in some cases work effectively, though imperfectly and incompletely, from within the fabric of economic exchange as it stands. This is especially important to the radical democracy movements of Thailand, as the events of the text show that participation in market forms—of which there can be many—is as obligatory to political action as is reciprocity to the classic idea of the gift itself, offering both expansive opportunities and uncountable consequences. Drawing on funeral economies of communitarian value, this chapter puts forth an ethnographically coded philosophy of accountability, community, radical democracy, and responsibility to history. In particular it is a commentary intended to run across the grain of dominant plots for historical modernity.

This grain, what one might call “the neoliberal economy of history,” concerns the economics of memory and forgetting in historical consciousness and visual culture. It is ultimately an economics of storytelling, the narrative economy by which the past is left behind and exchanged for the present, and the present is left behind and exchanged for the future, where each may go its separate way, as when one economic man comes together

INTRODUCTION

with another for a single moment of exchange, when they relinquish their values completely, and then depart with no strings attached.

“As a long time friend of the Thai people, we have made it clear we cannot accept the use of deadly force as a means of resolving the issues that divide the opposition and the government,” said the U.S. State Department’s spokesperson of the Bangkok crackdown in May of 1992. To that, President George Bush added, “Let’s hope that it calms down there. We’re very concerned about the instability in Thailand, very concerned about the violence that we’ve seen there. And we’ve made this position known to the Thais.” This was a few days after the 1992 Los Angeles revolt. These diplomatic statements need to be put in their historical context: between two world orders. They are caught in a story about the passing away of a global military-gift economy and the arising of a liberal free market of a “new world.” The words come from the country that had supplied the weapons with which the Thais were shot down in the Bangkok streets, from the country that had right up to the last minute in upcountry camps been secretly training the Thai soldiers who did the killing (while officially the United States severed relations with the military), from the country that had given and left Thailand with the martial legacy of an old world order, from the establishment that once called Thailand “America’s landlocked aircraft carrier.” The statements come from the country that had once superglued the Thai domino to the table with military dictatorship and massacre, and that now sent careful words condemning the violence that was so out of step with the new times.

There is here a peculiar economics plotted on the linear passing of history, which I believe is as old as the science of political economy. It can be expressed with the equation *trade replaces violence*, as Marshal Sahlins has characterized our old discourses of time, trade, and war.⁷ In saying this, I am not pointing just to the ubiquitous faith in trade over violence as a symptomatic characteristic of capital culture, but also to the very cultural economy by which one appears to be exchanged for the other—the very economics of storytelling by which new eras arise and replace old ones, by which time yields an endless succession of births. Newness is the commodity form written into history: emergences, new worlds after new worlds.

In the late 1980s a Thai prime minister, speaking of Southeast Asia, the still-throbbing flashpoint of the cold war, avowed, “We will turn the battlefields into marketplaces!” This gained him worldwide respect and renown in finance circles, but at home in Thailand one West Point graduate, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, had him led away at gunpoint, thus setting in motion the series of events that make up the focus of this narrative. There was in the deposed prime minister’s misfired words a peculiar sort of storytelling that packs history into the loaded phrasing of develop-

CHAPTER ONE

mental time lines that imperially transform killing into clean fields of profit. *We will turn the battlefields into marketplaces*. Liberal arguments for free-market principles are seen as the nonviolent successors to a separate, discrete, violent past, to which they are radically opposed. In the neoliberal economy of history there are no strings attached. But I would suggest that our “late capitalist” economy—or, if you like, our early “new world order” economy—has accumulated a great deficit in its life-and-death budgeting, in its balancing of historical accounts and the nonviolent story that it tells about itself, nonviolently, about the triumph of peaceful trade and reason over barbarism.

EXCLUSION AND CONSENSUS

Only a few moments after the deaths, people were whispering in small groups about the spirits, *winyaan*. Public gatherings of over five people had been banned. In these huddled and in some cases officially illegal groups, they were not talking about what might become of them, the spirits, where they might go, or what their fate would be. It was too soon for that. There was no telling what would happen to the Black May dead, and those times had not even been given a name yet. They were talking about where they came from: “They are the spirits of those kids who were killed in October 14 [1973], come back to be killed again.” In the disjointed, vacant, and yet humanly speckled streets lined with bullet holes and smoking vehicles, under a cloudy and searingly hot day—a day that was ripped from a familiar hum of normal life that is never noticed until it is suddenly gone—on such a day suspended and arrested, any relation between the times of then and now might have been the case.

“Those murdered kids were reborn and killed again,” I was told repeatedly, with complete confidence.

Something undone, unquiet, not dead, not passed returns because it has nowhere else it can go. Memory manages to return among a people who so repeatedly claim they are forgetful: *khon thai rao khi lyyim* (“we Thai are forgetful”). But contained in these lingering doubts about memory are both a strong cognizance of the necessity of remembering and a haunting apprehension that what was left undone exceeds the bounds of the time which forgets. Kamma, returns on death, is the subject of this text.

Perhaps one of the most dangerous aspects of the inscription of death into history is the fact that nationalist imagining obsessively does precisely that—obsessively return to the dead, especially to the anonymous dead, for the construction of its sacral continuity and encompassing logic, as Benedict Anderson has written.⁸ This imagined community depends, Anderson asserts, on a simultaneous remembering of the dead and forgetting

INTRODUCTION

of the political conditions of their demise. Thus, one could argue, lynched African Americans can be coopted as part of a common American history, “our dead.” Or—and this is more to the point of the present text—the deaths of so many Southeast Asian people in a previous world order can be brought to consciousness in a new global community only on the condition that the community can no longer remember the conditions that put them where they are, and can stare back at them or even speak on their behalf, since they are buried in time and cannot speak themselves. And this only on condition that the conditions that buried them there are no longer remembered as present, in the present.

Thai invocations of the dead do not sidestep these problematics, either. They are conducted in expressly nationalist idioms, honoring *virachon*, or martyrs, for the nation. But the refusal of commemorators to unlink an ethical responsibility to the past from a politics in the present forestalls the assimilation of violent history into a sacral and unified community that can then move happily along. Each commemoration rite voices the calls that those in the present do not want to hear, alights upon injustices that the present does not want to see, persistently demands recognition of the dead in terms that will never be accepted. This, I would argue, is the paradoxical status of calls for justice in radical democracy. Thai commemoration is a movement that perpetually forestalls consensus and refuses the terms of peace, that makes impossible demands and never rests, that creates flashes of communal unity and throws them bitterly in the face of the fiction of national unity. It is this simultaneous demand for and impossibility of recognition, this simultaneous ethical and political call, that impedes, imperfectly and precariously, the finalization of an assimilation of the dead into national imagination, and thus prevents their political divestment.

This text will adopt a similar negotiation of ethics and politics. It is, in fact, modeled on the practice of commemoration itself. Rather than merely represent Thai commemorations, however, which are being addressed mainly to the national arena, this text emulates these practices in its contemplation of its own concern, namely, the short history of the new world order. At the same time, it is a commentary on Thai rites that shares with them an attention to the breach that affords the possibility for both ethics and politics and that must remain open to be of advantage. In the special sense intended here, one could say that if radical democracy ever got what it wanted, that would be precisely not what it wanted.

In any case, that this might happen is impossible—the impossibility of justice and its necessity, as Jacques Derrida has formulated differently.⁹ This is an uncomfortable conception of radical democracy. It is premised on ideas of the impossibility of justice, “the impossibility of society,” and in particular on the impossibility of “civil society.” The “Idea of Civil

Society” has often served as the ground of democracy’s being, as it also does now, as Jean and John Comaroff have pointedly observed.¹⁰ Questioning this idea may be as necessary to projects of freedom as the idea is itself. Is radical suspicion of the ideals of civil society tantamount to subverting freedom of thought and expression? Or are these values themselves subject to manipulation precisely because of their sanctified status? To question the idea of civil society is not a nihilistic repudiation of the political conditions that make criticism possible in the first place, but can be a call to recognize the conflictive openings that make activism possible. Radical democracy works within the fact that the exclusion upon which every consensus is based can never finally banish that which puts it in question. An agreement about what constitutes an ethical and responsible public sphere depends upon excluding disruptive and unassimilable voices, but this can never be final and sealed. And this attention to the impossibility of sealing off instability applies not only to the social body. As Thomas Keenan argues in *Fables of Responsibility*, this radical democratic apprehension must even include a deconstruction of the “responsible subject,” granting no easy alibis for personal ethics to retreat from a politics. The “No One” figured in deconstructive writing still can be, must be, ethically responsible precisely because of being formed in language, itself a series of unacknowledged political and ethical processes.¹¹ Language, however, is not the only fable through which to imbue this far from individualized state of culpability with an ethical and political moral; this is the problematic role that Buddhist practices with kamma will play in this text. To be sure, as in the irreverent and secular practice of critical reading locked in struggle, radically democratic thought must refuse the fixation into immobilized form of either the individualized subject or the society that finally binds it. But in contrast to the sometimes severe critical energy that characterizes contemporary theory, political movements in Thailand also have their quieter and more reverent sides, which recognize, as perhaps academic theorists of radical democracy may not emphasize enough, that the openness upon which democracy depends can, and possibly must, include the actual formation of coherent social figures that can engage in collective action. That may require a kind of affirmation, an opening in a different sense, a release from antagonism that can create its own forms of opening, and openness.

The principals of connection performed in Thai rites of funerary exchange generate precisely such an opening, and therefore provide some instruction on a philosophy of radical democracy in which communitarian aspirations can exist side by side with unsettling notions of the instability of the individual and of the perpetual state of rupture that is so often called society. That this is expressed in the Buddhist and religious idiom of kamma, and in literal exchange with the spirits of the dead, is

INTRODUCTION

both a problem for theory and a strength for it. The use of ethnography as a source of theoretical instruction, therefore, warrants further discussion. In particular, the principles embodied in Thai funerary rites present a problem for critical theory because little space is afforded to religious assumptions in radical academic writing (though one might also note that universalist assumptions about language are accepted). Derrida himself pointedly cautions: “There has never been a scholar who really, and as scholar, deals with ghosts. A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts—nor all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality.”¹² The obsession of Western philosophy with itself is perhaps as glaringly apparent in this statement as it is anywhere else, and yet this statement is not, in its proper context, completely untrue.

At the same time, the problems for theory presented by Buddhist exchange with the dead are also its strength. Although Buddhist kamma ostensibly encompasses in its elusive logic the entirety of the world and existence, it can never serve as an all-inclusive formulation, least of all in the Western academy.¹³ The presentation of Buddhism here as theory, with the same salience as what is normally accounted as theory, is impossible, like justice.

The empirical events depicted in this text show that expulsion of alterity creates both the unstable fiction of the good society and the marginal spaces from which critical purchase on it is gained. And though the movement to address processes of exclusion is expressed in an idiom of demands for inclusion, as it is here as well, if that inclusion were granted, the possibility of radical critique would be foreclosed. In fact, those who do not understand this may be the same as those who naïvely berate radical academics, and especially deconstructionists, for being “against everything and for nothing.” Nothing, Buddha taught, is not such a bad thing once you get to know it. It is necessary that criticism take a form that is in some way unacceptable, that it present a gift that from the start will be, at least in part, refused. Such a breach renders the idea of consensus into clear resolution as a fiction without resolving its inherent contradiction.

But how does one proceed to see kamma in history, when so much recent history is already inscribed with its own principles of procedure, already comes with its own subtle and not-so-subtle programs running in the background, checking the grammar of historical consciousness? For the beginning chapters of the text, I write of kamma and meditation on death rather surreptitiously, through the matter and imagery of history, as Benjamin recommended. In the final two chapters, this method is exchanged for explicit theorization, which is to say for a language that departs from particular contexts and speaks across them. And yet on balance ethnographic context is enlisted here not as an object of analysis but rather as a method of analysis; it is not so much illuminated by theory as

it is itself a commentary on theory. That necessarily entails difficult and irrevocable choices. Ethnography often and habitually contextualizes the exotic, pins it down in sociohistorical context while allowing, say, Roland Barthes to caper freely around the world and be brought in to comment on any situation the author finds worthy.¹⁴ We might ask, for instance, what does it really mean to “use” theory? I am habituated enough to this practice of using theory to be neither capable nor desirous of completely abandoning it. And yet I have made the difficult choice of cutting “the ethnographic” (even, I could say, many of the Thai people I know) a little slack, too: what if Thai practices of meditation on death and ideals of funeral exchange were to be taken at a value so that they could go traveling, as a poststructuralist might?

But such traveling and traversing of traditional intellectual maps is itself problematic. In *Siam Mapped*, the historian Thongchai Winichakul delivers a principled critique not only of the discourses that have, historically, created the sense of nation in Thailand but also of the necessary complications involved when what is called *khwambenthai*, “Thainess,” becomes an object of study by those designated as Thai or other, or in scholarship shared between them. He criticizes the self-ascription among some Thai national scholars who stake a claim to knowledge based on authentic insider perspective while reproducing notions of national identity that are in fact buttressed by historical processes of national construction that operate across these discursive divides. This body of scholarship and “elite discourse,” argues Thongchai, ultimately contributes to the reification of the national discourse and shares a formal affinity with the booming daily military propaganda radio broadcasts in so many villages and neighborhoods around the country.¹⁵

This is mirrored in the inordinate attention and importance lent by foreign scholars to the role of Buddhism as a nation-ordering institution. This only amplifies the insistence of nationalist propaganda. As Rosalind Morris has put it, “Shoring up Thailand’s own national culturalist self-representation . . . are the anthropological texts in which the almost uniform valorization of Thai Theravada Buddhist ideology has left questions of difference and power too often unasked.”¹⁶ As Morris implies, statements made in elite discourse about the role of Buddhism in Thai society have often been taken at face value rather than questioned as to their sources in a nationalist imaginary.

This is further demonstrated by the high degree of foreign interest in what has been called “reform Buddhism” or “radical conservatism,” which Thongchai singles out for criticism.¹⁷ Even if in some cases they explicitly reject “Western modernity,” these Buddhist developments share what we can recognize as a self-consciously modernist outlook that downplays cosmology and ritual in favor of practices of cultural critique and

INTRODUCTION

social action. The appeal to Western scholars is obvious: otherness, but not too much. The leaders and followers of this small yet influential aspect of Thai politics hold ideals of freedom and often also democracy that appear to be in step with the liberal taste of academic intelligentsia. Elaborating on Thongchai's criticism, I would argue that the progressive Buddhists hold out a difference that legitimates Euro-American values as quasi-universal, in that those values appear to originate from an "other" setting. This "other-self" might even promise a better mode of thinking or practice than that of the self-self. Ironically, the source for this Buddhist otherness is often, historically, an adoption by the purported "others" of what they themselves perceived as either Western or modern styles of thinking. Robert Sharf makes a similar case in relation to the American fascination with the Western-trained Zen philosopher D. T. Suzuki: Westerners have found in his teaching their own philosophies repackaged to them as "oriental wisdom," apparently rendering them both intuitively true and irreproachable due to their inaccessibility as Zen truth.¹⁸

Critiques by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere of the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka and its connection to Orientalist discourses in general, and in particular to the influence of that new age precursor, the Theosophical Society, might point the way toward gaining some critical purchase on Thai reformist Buddhism.¹⁹ What Gombrich and Obeyesekere label "Protestant Buddhism" offers, characteristically, a psychologized version of Buddhist philosophy; values the personalization of meditation and the altruism of social action; presents Buddhism as a science rather than a religion; and disfavors ritual, cosmology, "corruption," and, at least at its inception, implication in established power structures. This always-already-modern Buddhism is as established in Sri Lanka as it is in Waldenbooks. Similarly, in Thailand what is often referred to as the essence of Thainess or the foundation of Buddhism often consists of modernist accommodations and rationalizations presented as a truth that always was. The case of Thailand complicates this picture, however, in that the historical connection to colonialism (Thailand was never colonized) and the standard carriers of modernity are less straightforward than in most other cases. Many of the tenets of Thai modernist Buddhists are, arguably, considerable innovations, which calls into question assumptions about the origins of modernity in the West, a situation that in the Sri Lankan case is less obvious but probably also true.²⁰

It is no coincidence that a certain bastion of liberal thinking, Charles Taylor, in his debates with multiculturalists and with proponents of "Asian Values," chose of all places around the world—and such liberal essayists can have their pick—Thailand and this particular Buddhist current, and even the prodemocracy movement that is the subject of this text, as the exemplar for how "an unforced consensus on human rights" could

be possible, given human cultural diversity.²¹ Western values about what constitutes acceptable actions in the realm of human rights can be held in common, argues Taylor, even if the cultural motivations are completely different. He offers, alongside the trust inspired by the benevolent Thai king, progressive Buddhist politics as the central example in a world where functionally equivalent goals of the democratic representation and respect for human rights that are held sacred in the West (in principle, we might add) are motivated by and understood through completely different cultural sources. As Taylor quotes John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* on the possibility of "overlapping consensus," "different groups, countries, religious communities, civilizations, while holding incompatible fundamental views on theology, metaphysics, human nature, etc., would come to an agreement on certain norms that ought to govern human behavior. . . . We would agree on the norms, while disagreeing on why they were the right norms."²²

In this happy consensus, what is unmentionable is that which is excluded, irreconcilable, conflicted—in short, everything that is in fact the case in the world, and in which, arguably, politics consists. The assumption is that what Thais do with their bodies we can agree with; what they do with their minds is their own business; on those terms, there are some "Asian Values" that we can accept. What is not examined is the metaphysical existence of this other mindedness, and the readily available history, were the mind inclined toward it, which would indicate that the values in "reform Buddhism" in fact have a long and deep connection to Western discourses of human right, among a plethora of other Western and modernist discourses. More to the point, they have quite simply not been germinating in a space without world history.²³ The problem lies, of course, not in the fact that Thais are bricoleurs but in the theorist's mode of evaluating cultural difference. That Thai political thought and practice might actually inhabit the same world as that of the liberal theorist, that Thai Buddhist ideas and ideals might actually inform, contest, defeat, or be defeated by established modes of liberal political thought is not possible in a world of multiple and mutually exclusive cultural worlds—and that is precisely the point of imagining them that way. Exclusion of the disruptive is a necessary condition of consensus, after which "culture" is a favored form for readmitting alterity into liberal discourse on that discourse's own terms. Not coincidentally, the aspect of reform Buddhism that Taylor singles out as its special ethical value consists in the fact that it "attacks what it sees as the 'superstition' of those who seek potent amulets, and the blessings of monks, and the like. It wants to separate the search for enlightenment from the seeking of merit through ritual. And it is very critical of the whole metaphysical structure of belief . . . about heavens, hell, Gods and demons, which play a large part in popular be-

INTRODUCTION

lief.”²⁴ In contrast, the alterity of a Buddhist ethicopolitics, which “popular belief” might indeed possibly present in a contest of thought, might not speak back what, and how, a liberal discourse would desire it to speak. And yet the exclusion of consensus theory does not completely prevent Taylor from perceiving in Buddhist activism that the “gamut of western philosophical emotions, the exaltation at human dignity, the emphasis on freedom as the highest value, the drama of age-old wrongs righted in valour . . . seem out of place in this alternative setting.”²⁵ And what would one make of all this if it were not confined to its proper setting?

It is difficult to avoid the too-easy celebration of the “other self” if one engages with relatively different ideas, ideals, and practices as more than a mere gesture and, in one’s work, participates in them. How does one engage in such practices and yet not in a manner that cordons them off in an unapproachable otherness that is ultimately irrelevant (save as “data”)? This is the tightrope traversed in this account of protest politics and the attendant ethnography of Buddhist practice which comments on that account. This is very different from reading political movements as expressions of Buddhism or as shifts in the Buddhist structure.

Not unexpectedly, at the peak of scholarly interest in Thai reform Buddhism, just before the events of 1992, there were prophecies that this “movement” could amount to a political revolution.²⁶ I have to admit that my original research plan, and much of my actual effort, at first centered on investigating these “new Buddhist movements.” But in fact the focus had to change, as the revolution of 1992, if there was one, came from far more pedestrian sources (from pedestrians, in fact). The consensus following the wake of the event, as depicted in the media that represented it, was an unsurprising attribution of the revolt to modernization, economic expansion, and the growth of the middle class. This interpretation of a “bourgeoisie revolt,” however, is also one I take considerable empirical and political issue with. The same critical skepticism that is applied to the identity of peoples and nations needs to be applied to the overdetermined narratives of history, where the new and emerging features of global modernity are somehow not as susceptible as are national or cultural identity to criticism as discourse—that is, to criticism not for being unreal nor untrue but as practice that participates in the creation, always incomplete and unsuccessful, of the reality it purportedly only describes and knows. Although the outlines of a new and future global order must be traced, I focus instead on the complementary task of putting the imagination of our global modernity in question. This is not to declare that “there shall be no metanarratives,” for this is a naïve and impossible suggestion, but to exercise critical practices on a strategically chosen subject—in this case, the short history of the new world order. In practice, Thailand was one of the most cooperative countries of all in the

schemes for a borderless world economic order, and in return for that, by 1997 suffered a crushing economic blow that entailed both moral and practical submission to world economic authorities. Given this development, in fact, it is uncertain at the moment whether there is not some role that nationalism can play for countries like Thailand. I am not a little haunted by the possibility of a world in which *khon thai rao*, “we-Thai,” can no longer be uttered with some form of referential meaning. It is the various uses to which such discourses are put, rather than the simple assumption of a single political meaning, that may need to be the focus of future scholarship.

In this text, neither the attempt to debunk Thainess nor the effort to identify its essence is the question in focus. Thongchai Winichakul’s great contribution in *Siam Mapped* was not in discovering that Thailand never existed but in discovering how it ever became possible to believe it existed in the first place—particularly through maps, through the development of the sense of what he calls a “geo-body”: a territorial-national identity dependent on the technology of mapping for its conception and distribution. On top of Benedict Anderson’s idealist tendencies Thongchai over-lays an attention to techniques and technologies, and so brings an emphasis on extralinguistic discourses into the analysis of imagining community.²⁷ What maps in particular bring to the fore—which Anderson never emphasized enough—is the fact that self-imagining is almost always in relation to other-imagining, exclusion, since the borders on maps are by their nature about precisely this dialectic. Thongchai demonstrates further that it was not possible to conceive of an “enemy within” Thailand, much less kill it, until an answer could be shown to the question, “within what?” Similarly, I would ask, what are the conditions of possibility for conceiving what lies within and without the “new” and “emerging” in our world? What phenomena count as belonging to the new global modernity and what are counted outside of it, and acted upon by it? What are the means by which it is possible to conceive of and distribute a conception of the new and global, particularly in an imaginary where the geo-body has many contenders? On a general level, I have chosen to address these questions by engaging those narrative and material media through which a passage to the present and future is granted. On a particular level, this story about storytelling is set in Thailand lest one forget that these history-making globalisms do not and cannot exist apart from the contexts in which they simultaneously declare their own existence and appear to do their own work.

In the matter of the material for writing, one must choose the enemy, and the friend, carefully. In making any choice or taking any stand, of course, there must be a certain violence wrought on the inseparable, a certain arbitrary power of the authorial hand exercised in recomposition,

INTRODUCTION

but also a certain respect and dignity granted where it may be, could be, just possibly, warranted and useful to see it. Here, this will amount to a manipulation of the balance not only between ethnography and theory but also between criticism and practice, in a search throughout this text for the formulation of ideas and theoretical directions that are based on values whose salience has been impressed upon me by my “informants,” which are of concern and relevant to the contexts in which they live.

The possibility of this move is immediately foreclosed in the expulsion of alterity implicit in the flat figure of “hegemonic Theravāda Buddhism.” This is the special danger that attends a too-eager desire to purge Thai studies of its own sins, at the expense of its subjects. It is possible, perhaps, to depict Thai Theravāda Buddhism as a monolithic structure that includes the ecclesiastical hierarchy, modernist revivalists of all stripes, and village monks (conveniently forgetting the thriving and sometimes independent practice of nuns and laywomen), all together in one male, rationalist, oppressive structure that comes on with a singular force and, coincidentally, is the opposite of everything we value in America: it values order, enforces gender identities, is against imagination and dreams, and is over-intellectual and bookish. Although no specific detail I mention is untrue by itself in many contexts or among many people in Thailand, such a picture of the whole would decidedly be so, especially in its depiction of Thai Theravāda Buddhism as a whole in the first place. Although wholesale critique of Thai Buddhism, by definition, would not directly participate in the unquestioning acceptance of Thai elite discourse against which Morris cautions, a strange side effect may indeed be a reification—though not ratification—of the Thai elite discourse, mirroring exactly a certain strain in the Buddhist construction of tradition. There are Thai Buddhists who would agree eagerly with everything about the idea of a Buddhist “hegemony” except its negative moral valence, and eagerly wish for or believe it to be true. But it is not true. The antiritualist interpretations of scripture and practice are only the wishes of some, not a description of what, in fact, most Thai Buddhists actually believe or practice. The gendered identity of Buddhism as a male religion is something to be contested, not attributed to its nature. Such an approach is, at least, necessary for many of the women within the tradition, who are rarely consulted by critical scholars on these matters (while obviously Thai Buddhism is easy pickings for those who do not want to live within it).

This is a long-known and perhaps unavoidable consequence for the ethically motivated critic, especially in criticism deployed across lines of difference and privilege: in characterizing the enemy, one lends it an essential identity. Although this may serve the critical and theoretical purpose of one’s own elite discourse, it may not serve as well the people for whom one is presumably concerned. For instance, identifying Buddhism as es-

entially patriarchal to the core does not serve Buddhist women well, since any change toward more inclusion of women in its highest established structures would amount to a change in the “essential” nature of the religion, making it, to the discourses of such essence, no longer essentially Buddhism (as has been pointed out by feminist scholars).²⁸ In terms of practical accomplishment, Thai Buddhist women have served their interests better by contesting the received wisdom of what counts as essential Buddhism. This does not necessarily require the creation of convenient fictions. In fact, the great heterodoxy that actually characterizes Thai Buddhism, rather than the faceless homogenizing stamp so conveniently embossed with the vague outlines of “hegemony,” has long been utilized adeptly by women who have recognizable feminist goals as well as by those whose practice and achievement are defined in other terms and those who fall into both categories.²⁹

Perhaps it is necessary to return to Antonio Gramsci’s lesson, quickly forgotten, that hegemony can never be defeated by antihegemony.³⁰ To take a position of leaving Buddhism in Thailand to the pleasure of those forces that wield it so unfortunately may create a critical out for some, but for those who live within it such a surrender of responsibility is decidedly not empowering, and in any case is unlikely to happen. In Thailand, the fact is that exclusively anti-Buddhist criticism is not a viable political strategy, nor is it a significantly desired one. Although the exposure of Buddhism to radical intellectual critique is long overdue in both Western and Thai academies, it is important to recognize that this concern does not encompass all that matters, particularly to the people who are subjects of study, nor encompass all that is the case in the diverse, heterogeneous, open, and leaky field which is “Thai Buddhism.” Most Thais will never renounce Buddhism, regardless of how many expulsions of its alterity can be accomplished through monochromatic theories of its abuses.

The Buddhist practices that appear in this text cannot be understood solely as representative of a hegemonic structure, nor as uncritically yoked to the hegemonic discourses of a modernist Buddhism that has swept them along in an enormous historical wake seen, paradoxically, only by those few who possess the right, highly specialized training. The manner in which Buddhist practices are presented here is, therefore, in an unorthodox and problematic relation to the issues just discussed. Arguably, this text results in the “valorization of Thai Theravāda Buddhism” that Morris censures (though it might be noted that “valorization” can also mean “to value”). At the same time, this study of the Thai democracy movement, in the context of a globalist imaginary, is not a sociological study of the institutions of Thai Buddhism, critical or otherwise, and is neither a positive nor a negative evaluation of those institutions. It is simply not about them. Nor are reform Buddhist movements, as sources of political action,

INTRODUCTION

the subject of study, though that is a valid subject so long as its influence is not reified beyond the role these movements actually play in Thai activism. And, as well, this is not a study of Thai academic scholarship and theory on politics. My sources are almost exclusively oral, although that does not mean they are less edifying than academic sources. This text is an artificial employment of ethnography as theory, drawing from the instruction I have received from people, some of them illiterate, who are not normally counted as theorists and whose concerns are not normally considered accurate or usable in the public sphere that is academic writing. It would be ironic, given the premise that a consensual public sphere is founded on exclusion, if these ideas were then presented in terms we could all agree on. The moment that political thought can agree on what constitutes political thought is the moment politics is effaced.

Whether this approach can function as intellectual capital is not a conclusion I am making but a question I am exploring here, a question of unsettling the exclusions of validated political practice, language, and thought—a concern that some would argue has long been important to the aspirations of cultural anthropology. The following text is merely the only way, given my limited abilities, I could figure out how to express the insights I know are there in “my material.”

When I returned from the field I was asked, “Did you get good material?” The answer, in fact, is yes, “but not just the way we want it.”³¹

In comparison with many people I know, I almost feel I have no right even to speak of this material, or of death, save for the fact that I have been taught well that what matters is not how much of death you have seen but how you handle it, and what you are willing to do with that accursed portion. My preoccupation here is the question of what to do with these matters, rather than a focus on the violence itself. The anthropology of political violence has voiced its share of cries over “the horror,” staked its share of claims to authority over “the things I have seen,” its words wielded conspicuously, almost violently. It should not be difficult to understand and acquit this anger at the world, especially if one has no desire to transcend the political worlds addressed by ethnography. It should be possible even to empathize with the fact that the invocation of these accursed matters always carries the potential for rebounding on the one who invokes them. What follows is an attempt in some way to do something with this lamentable share—in this case, not the greatest in scale, by world standards. What follows could be thought of as an attempt to translate a sensibility of Buddhist meditation on death imagery and village funeral rites into something quite different from them (and so not to be confused with them): ethnography and history, words, images, and storytelling.

CHAPTER ONE

“I don’t know who to tell our story to,” Pi Gai, mother of a son crippled in the Black May crackdown, said to me. “Who can I tell it to?” She did not really see my ear as the answer. Nor did I. What could I do for her, after all? But then again, there must be something.

These stories of those with whom I have had direct connection, the saddest stories I know, will not necessarily be so when at the end of the day they are dissolved into the great connections between minds that dwarf that here in this text, between you and me. And as each day passes and the history in these tales gets farther and farther away, my connection to its spirit becomes only more tenuous. It is more difficult to give anything at all back to it, even memory, let alone honor. One only ventures, however treacherous it is, to write about death—their death, our death—in the face of dangerous possibilities of evoking its sensational aura, or inciting fear, or fascination, or in abusing the very sentiments between people by manipulating them by faking them, by maudlin or pointless repetition of them, by indulgence in them, or by linking those sentiments to some ideological or philosophical program in order to hide the collapse into which all that must always lead, or through analysis or cleverness, or histrionic twitching, or narrative incompetence. To do so would be to destroy the meaning of the lives and deaths behind these tales, to commit a form of murder that drains the life not only from the living and the dead but from death itself.

But even my torturous list does not exhaust all the possibilities for that which kills, which recapitulates what already seems to be a severed consciousness of meaning in death and a severed connection between the living and the dead. I am not sure, anymore, if I have what it takes to care enough about these stories or spirits, any more than I can exhaust all the forms of little murder that conspire against our caring.

And yet the repetitive tasks of memory performed in Thai funerary rites keep orienting attention toward the salience of such preoccupation, just as the repetitive mental motions of Thai Buddhist meditation keep returning to a similar practice of reminder, within the very process of passing away itself. Whether there are dangers in mindfulness of death cannot be in question. Nor can there be doubt that there is often proffered some purported standpoint that remains outside implication in these matters—due to a more sophisticated critical armature wielded from a transcendent position or due to an historical “lateness” in intellectual progress beyond the concerns of people who recognize a need to present the passed and to exchange with the dead. But these are not accurate and useful positions for, at least, some small proportion of the people in the world today. In a time of the global ascendance and proliferation of a particular and unfortunate form of accounting, perhaps other forms of accounting should also count for something.

INTRODUCTION

FORGIVING THE DEBT

Even later than the events recounted in this text, but only a bit, the hulking skeletons of unfinished high-rises in a perpetual state of suspension hang over a city dried of its liquidity. Perhaps they will never be finished. The crash of currency has arrested them, causing these girder ghosts to come back from the future to scatter all the Thais and immigrant workers who depended on them for their lives.

All in all, it has been said, the collapse of economies in Asia may be a good thing in the long run. Asian ways have been cut down through an inevitable power and plot to the biography of the world market, and the free world will eventually visit in their stead. At least to a certain portion of the world's financiers, what was deserved was received, and for them the question of an Asian way of progress has been settled once and for all with the return of the real. That is, at least, one way of keeping accounts of what must be traded in for an upgrade.

But where is, when was, the deal settled? This book looks elsewhere. It is a short history of the new world order, set in Thailand before the crash and during the hopeful period heralded as one of world transition. It is a study of the Thai democracy movement of 1992 and its entailments both in the legacy left to it by the country's partnership with the United States in the Cold War and in the altered array of possibilities and restrictions when the field of power changed. This is difficult terrain to traverse—the changeable. It is not easy to write about political action in what has come to be called “global modernity” without capitulating to the demands that the idea of global modernity makes on a picture of the world, especially that of a “new” world. The same remains true for Thai democracy, of course—a movement that has taken great advantage from the integration of international finance, the expansion of world media communications and, at least for a time, the burgeoning of wealth beyond the capability of existing hierarchical structures to absorb it, all of which have created fissures in state power and have made numerous political contests potentially effective. But the trade for agency in this situation must of course come at a cost, and the terms of the deal with these forces do not always make themselves clear at the time of exchange. Perhaps, in the underfinanced concrete waste of the time being, it has become clear. And it is the strange and awkward purpose of this book to explain that it is not people like the relatives of the dead of 1992 who do not understand how this exchange in history does its work.

In the Southeast Asia of the new world order, people still die and are maimed by the previously undetonated bombs and mines of the Cold War. In southern latitudes, the Cold War was never cold, and it still is not. But the historical imagination of this presence-of-the-past-in-the-present need

CHAPTER ONE

not be limited to the easily graspable concept of buried explosives. Far more is in order, and this book, such as it is, is an attempt to reach askew—to other, unobvious and unorthodox accounting practices for the processes whereby new world eras are born. Somewhere the lines have crossed, demanding an audit.

That an alternative historical accountancy might be relevant to assessing what is at stake in the world today can be no better indicated than by the present penchant for discourse on forgiving third world debt. The idea that the world's debtors might be "forgiven" by the same countries that previously had colonized or imperially governed and exploited them certainly could not have come at a more auspicious time.³² The methods of calculation are all ready and in place, so that this forgiveness need not be articulated in a language of historical justice but can be reasonably calculated in the econometric equations of greatest good in the present time. The case can certainly be made—I am not denying it—for the economic perspicacity of forgiving the debt: to free oppressed economies and bring prosperous returns, in different degrees, for everyone, and far out of proportion to the loss of the unrecovered credit. But even before this thought can be grammatical there must be a production of forgetting to condition the possibility that such forgiveness might occur in the first place. Where is this place, this first place that forgives the third place?