

# PERFORMING MASCULINITY ON THE THAI BEACH SCENE

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a new framework for researching the identities and power relationships between locals and tourists in developing countries. Moving away from conceptualizing identities as tied into binary frameworks, this paper conceptualizes identities as fluid, multiple and context-specific. Based on ethnographic fieldwork from 1999 to 2001, this research explores the everyday lived experiences of Thai men working in the bars and bungalows of Had Rin Peninsula on Koh Phangan in Southern Thailand. In this paper I map the ways that the identities of these men shift and change as they move between the different social geographies that overlay their everyday lived spaces on Had Rin Peninsula. In highlighting the ways that the masculine identities shift as they move through space I argue for the importance of space and context in theorizing identities, demonstrating that dualistic representations are inadequate to capture identities which are actually very complex, multiple, and subject to change.

## **Introduction**

Narratives of tourism in which people from developed countries visit developing countries are replete with dualistic representations—home/away, mundane/exotic, Self/Other, West/non-West—to name a few. Embedded in such representations are assumptions about identities: that identities coalesce in neatly bounded categories arranged in bipolar, oppositional configurations. Yet lived identities are rarely as neat or bounded as dualistic representations might suggest: identities shift and change across space and context.

Coming from an economic geography lineage, much of the tourism geography literature has focused on meta-narratives of the economic and social impact of tourism, thereby eschewing narratives of everyday lived experience. This research moves away from tourist studies frameworks where the assumption of Western domination of, and impact upon, countries that are visited informs and directs research questions. Instead, this paper focuses on microgeographies of power and spatiality of identity, looking at the ways people negotiate their identities across spaces, and the ways they assert agency in their everyday lives. By examining the ways that identities shift and reconfigure as they move through space it is possible to challenge the hegemony of West-as-dominant and active/non-West-as-subordinate and passive meta-narratives of tourism encounters (see, for example, MacCannell 1973, 1976; Wood 1980; Bowman 1989; Enloe 1989; Nash 1989; Urry 1990; Silver 1993; Leheny 1995; Spreitzhofer 1998; Macleod 1999; Herold et al. 2001; Phillips 2002). In making this move away from hegemonic narratives where identities are aligned in binary power configurations, I argue for the incorporation of insights about fluidity of identity from other sub-disciplines both within and outside of geography.

This research was conducted in Southern Thailand and explores the potentialities and possibilities arising from intimate relationships between Thai men working in bars and bungalows and non-Thai tourist women. There are many possible ways to research and represent intimate relationships between men working in the tourism industry in developing countries and tourist women from developed countries. Surveying the literature in this area two basic ways of theorizing these relationships can be found. The first group of researchers (Bowman 1989; Dahles and Bras 1999; Phillips 2002) theorize the relationships in very unidimensional and contradictory terms, pinning identities down to essentialized categories. Many of these studies are also underpinned by strongly moralistic theoretical frameworks that delineate legitimate and illegitimate relationships and conceptualize identity in a binary framework (Bowman 1989; Dahles 1998; Dahles and Bras 1999; Herold et al. 2001; Phillips 2002).

The second group of theorists (Zinovieff 1991; Meisch 1995; Pruitt and LaFont 1995; Lette 1996; Montgomery 2001; Sanchez Taylor 2001) frame the relationships as moments of negotiation over gender roles, focusing on the multiple and conflicting roles individuals take up as they negotiate their sexual relationships. This research builds upon the analysis of this second group of authors by highlighting the importance of space and place to the fluidity of the subject positions that the partners take up as they negotiate everyday encounters. Drawing upon a number of theorists both within the discipline of geography and beyond it (Manderson 1992; Bell and Valentine 1995; Askew 1998, 1999, 2002; Law 2000; Montgomery 2001), this paper incorporates a more fluid and multiple conceptualization of both identity and power into the analysis. Significantly, in this paper I extend the current scholarship in the tourism literature by arguing that space and place are central to the negotiation of identity.

## Background on Koh Phangan

Koh Phangan is located in the eastern side of Thailand's southern peninsula approximately 600 km south of Bangkok and 15 km from Koh Samui (Westerhausen 2002). Koh Phangan has been a tourist destination for approximately 17 years. It was initially incorporated into international tourist imaginings as a destination for intrepid travellers, providing scant services and infrastructure. Local landholders saw the potential for expanding their livelihoods by engaging with international tourism and invested in infrastructure to support the burgeoning tourism industry. Much of the tourism development on Koh Phangan has been in the form of small-scale businesses that have remained in the hands of the original landholding families on the island. Today the island has a well-developed infrastructure to support its role as a backpacker mecca: bars, restaurants, internet cafes and travel booking establishments, a 24-hour bakery, tattoo shops and an abundance of bungalows and other accommodation.

Had Rin, the peninsula where this research was focused, is the tourist epicentre of the island because it is the site of the monthly full-moon parties—huge events that attract up to 30 000 tourists to the island for a few days before and after the full moon. The full-moon parties started out 15 years ago (in 1988) as a private event for a group of friends staged by a local landowner and have grown into a world-renowned event and “must-do” part of backpacker travel in Southeast Asia (Westerhausen 2002). At full-moon time every month a huge dance party is staged on the beach complete with constructed psychedelic landscapes, laser shows, vast amounts of drugs and alcohol and the latest techno and trance music played by DJs flown in from around the world. It is a carnivalesque space where transgression of social mores is the norm.

In this carnivalesque space where intense interactions<sup>1</sup> between Thais and tourists often occur, particular opportunities are opened up for exploring the intertextualities of space, identity and power. The particularity of Koh Phangan (and other tourism spaces) is that they are spaces where many different imaginings of place<sup>2</sup> intersect in ways that allow for the permeation of boundaries around mores, behaviours, and subjectivities. For example, international tourists provide access to international capital and windows into far-away cultural practices for local people. At the same time, the practice of being a tourism worker separates the worker in some senses from Thai cultural practices and inserts them into foreign framings. There are spaces in this nexus where both Thai and non-Thai cultural mores are suspended, re-invented, and/or shifted. The interconnections of the various social spaces create an interesting micro-geography where, within one small peninsula, a number of very different social spaces exist. Moving between these different social spaces necessitates fluid subjectivities—the adoption of different cultural mores in different spaces becomes part of everyday negotiation through these diverse social geographies.

The social geographies of Had Rin peninsula are much more complex and diverse than a simple Thai/non-Thai binary. Had Rin is populated by a diversity of social groups, including international tourists; Phangan-born local business owners;

expatriate business owners from Europe, Australia and the US; migrant workers from Northeast Thailand and Burma who work in construction and cleaning positions; bar and bungalow workers (mostly young Thai men from all over mainland Thailand); and Thai women who work mainly as receptionists, waitresses and masseuses. This research focuses on the power relationships between the local business owners, bar and bungalow workers, and tourist women. In focusing on micro-scale power negotiations between these groups this research highlights the fluidity and complexity of power relations within the “Thai” identity category, thereby moving beyond simple binary representations of identity and power often found in the mainstream tourism literature.

## Context-specific identities

The identities of the men working in the tourism industry as bungalow attendants and bar workers are constructed differently depending on the situation and context in which the men are located. They could be young migrants trying to find a new place and life for themselves; they could be underprivileged but good-hearted men, misunderstood by their community; they could be unruly outsiders who need to be forced to acquiesce to tight community control; they could be gigolos who use their bodies to access money and opportunities; or perhaps they could be *tum-a-dah*—ordinary, unremarkable Thai men. Depending on who is attempting to fix their identity, the combination of the situation and perceptions makes for the complexity of fluid identity formation. The identities of the bar and bungalow workers are not fixed in a “marginal” subject position in all places and at all times.

In this paper I will explore the ways that the identities of these men shift as they move through different spaces. In some spaces, and at particular times, power is imposed on the bar and bungalow workers as a means of regulating their identities in place. In other spaces and times, the bar and bungalow workers utilize power creatively to imagine and enact their identity in place. The stories of negotiation of identity in and between these spaces of creativity and spaces of constraint illustrate how space, place and time (i.e. context) are pivotal aspects of identity and the ways in which these men negotiate new opportunities for themselves. By creatively utilizing the possibilities that the intertextualities of place, identity and power offer, the men craft opportunities for themselves and actively engage with the possibilities that intimate relationships with tourist women open up.

In the narratives of the enactment of different identities on different spaces that follow, I situate the masculine identities in relation to three overlapping discourses: first, in national Thai discourses of Thai identity and labour markets; second, in discourses around appropriate behaviours originating from the local Thai community in Koh Phangan; and, finally, in discourses that the bar and bungalow workers create for themselves in their everyday spaces as they negotiate their relationships with non-Thai tourist women.

## **National discourses of Thai identity through labour migration**

Over the past two decades in some sections of the population in Thailand, migration for work has become common for a range of reasons relating to social and economic change. Migration for work opens up possibilities for creating new identities for migrant workers because the spatial shift from home to city equates to a shift from one set of power networks that seek to contain identities in specific ways to another set of power networks with different sets of priorities. Power networks in home communities aim to contain identities for the purpose of ensuring social harmony, but also to craft hegemonic selves—to instil the hegemonic value systems and modes of morality and behaviours into community members (Lyttleton 2000). Communities around migrant workers have different sets of objectives for regulating the behaviours of the workers. Communities where migrant workers come to be located are much less engaged with workers on an individual basis in terms of regulating their behaviours. A harmonious social environment and a certain level of work productivity are more important concerns than the morality and values of workers. The contrast is that in their “away-from-home” communities migrant workers are able to craft new identities around the aspects of self left ungoverned in the new power networks that they are located in.

Tourist spaces offer unique opportunities for marginalized Thais to recreate themselves and their future opportunities in the process. While other forms of migration for work can open up new opportunities for broadening or re-writing identity scripts (Mills 1999), tourist spaces offer a much greater potential for workers to access new skills and opportunities, such as training in using computers and the internet, speaking English, and establishing relationships with foreign girlfriends. There are still restraints to behaviour similar to those the men may experience in their home communities, in the form of governance from the local Koh Phangan community, but the men still have room to renegotiate their position due to their “outsiderness” from the local community and their roles as tourist-oriented workers. Whilst migration for work does allow new possibilities for expanding gender scripts it does not remove workers from discourses that attempt to fix their subject positions as Other or deviant (as evidenced in the case of female factory workers being positioned as sexually deviant, e.g. Mills 1999). I argue that male bar and bungalow workers are especially problematic for the local community in ways that other migrant workers are not.

The bar and bungalow workers on Koh Phangan are almost without exception all migrant workers who have come from other provinces in Thailand to work in the tourism industry on the island. Their ages range from 15 to 35 years, their education level is fairly low in most cases (many of the men involved in this research have left school at 15 years or younger) and they are mostly either unmarried, divorced or separated from their former wives. As migrant workers in the tourist resort, the men are unattached to immediate family responsibilities, they are independent, and they are distanced from their home communities (Mills 1999). These factors— independence, distance and detachment from immediate family responsibility—mean

that they are to some extent free from the surveillance and governance that being part of an intimately connected (home) community in Thailand entails. But migrating for work is not necessarily a way to escape governance and surveillance—being a migrant worker has its own boundaries and restrictions.

## **Local Island discourses of bar worker's identity**

Bar men occupy a paradoxical space in the social terrain of the local Phangan Island community. Their presence in the local community is precarious, depending on the patronage of a local powerbroker. They (fully) occupy only certain territories, and, in certain areas beyond the scope of their patron they are vulnerable to physical attack from other groups of bar men or locals. To go to some places they must go as a group, never alone—in this way they deal with their sense of vulnerability. Yet, at the same time, as a group but also as individuals, they are positioned as possible dangers to the local community (and thus attributed a precarious kind of powerful position), as their potential mobility makes them dangerous.

Potential mobility is an important concept in understanding the way that bar and bungalow workers are positioned in the Phangan Island community. They can easily leave the island by private boat and therefore cannot be traced and held accountable for their actions. Normally the threat of continuing social sanction to non-nomadic individuals residing in their home communities keeps major transgressions of social harmony in some semblance of control or balance, but with no social ties to the local community and easy mobility, the bar men are outside of this particular social control mechanism. However, mobility for the bar and bungalow workers in everyday contexts of their working life on the island remains a potentiality only. Transgressive behaviours that move beyond certain limits cannot always be dealt with by running away from the island and escaping the consequences of their actions (in cases where they are apprehended before they can escape unnoticed). Within the tolerated boundaries of transgressive behaviour the bar and bungalow workers rely on their materially located identities as workers in a particular bar as points of negotiation within the power networks of the island.

## **Disrupting identity categories: Negotiating identity in everyday spaces**

Identity categories and labels are only attempts to fix subjectivity, and such categories and representations are always partial. They can never capture the complex array of subject positions a social actor inhabits as they move through different sites and contexts (Del Casino and Hanna 2000). The very fact that an identity category must (to assert its validity) obliterate and obscure diversity and difference within the category means that there will always be a threat of such difference “spilling out”, thereby negating the neatness and fixity of the representation itself. As Del Casino and Hanna have argued:

In tourism spaces, tourism workers perform as part of the site and thus reproduce the tourism space and their identity as “hosts” through their actions... At the same time, their performances can expose the partiality of the representational action through, for example, their resistance to the acts themselves. Their ad-libbing rewrites scripts and regulated work norms. Thus, identity categories only imperfectly capture the identities of social actors performing within and beyond these categories (Del Casino and Hanna 2000:29).

By “ad-libbing” identity categories in spaces of intense interaction with Western tourists, bar and bungalow workers have the opportunity to contest their marginal status in some spaces/contexts and re-write new identity scripts. Different spaces are linked to different kinds of power for the men—power to construct their own identities, power to seduce, power to enact violence. In the following section a number of stories of identity creation in the spaces of ad-libbing—the spaces between and beyond the hegemonic discourses of bar and bungalow workers’ marginality, the *Third Spaces* (Bhabha 1994).

### **A space for empowered identity: A night in the bar**

The space of the bar is one where bar and bungalow workers often have the opportunity to enact empowered identities. Bars are spaces where the bar and bungalow workers are able, within certain boundaries, to define the rules of the space: they delineate which behaviours are acceptable and which behaviours are not. They define the boundaries of the space in ways that will advance their opportunities for seducing tourist women and performing their hyper-masculine version of Thai identity. The enactment of these aspects of empowered identity is explored in the following ethnographic narratives.

About a week after arriving in Had Rin I was invited to go out to the Drop In bar with a group of Thai men who worked at Paradise Bungalows where I was staying, and their foreign girlfriends. We sat at one of the wooden picnic tables arranged in front of the Drop In Bar on the beach. Little oil lamps flickered on ours and all the other tables on the beach, and all the way along the beach the scene was repeated, bars lined the beach with tables arranged on the beachfront, little oil lamps on each table. The scene looked enchanting, sweet. The soundtrack to this vista was in juxtaposition to the view. The latest pop and dance music from the US and England pumped out of huge speakers aimed out into the bay. A small distance away at the Vinyl Bar next bar next door hard core techno was screeching out . . . a little further along it was reggae . . . and so on along the beach . . . the whole effect was chaotic, jarring.

As I sat squashed onto a wooden bench seat between my newly made friends one of the bar men sauntered over to say hello to our group. His name was Cheep. Cheep and I were introduced and started chatting. Cheep was really skinny, witty and funny. He looked to me as though he was about 17 years old but was actually 27. He had a real charm, and, like so many of the men who work in the tourism industry, a big smile. He introduced himself to me as the “perfect man”, and when I challenged

him on this by commenting—“such a thing doesn’t exist!”—he offered as proof the assertion that he had a wife in every country of the world.

As Cheep and I continued chatting (his English was excellent) he laughingly boasted about his many female conquests, telling me the kinds of physical attributes he liked in women. We laughingly tried to spot a suitable girl in the bar for him to go and seduce. When I asked him how many women he had slept with in his life he said, “In one year, about half the world!”, then he grinned—an infectious smile. We spotted a girl with the appropriate prerequisites for seduction. “What about her?” I asked. “Nah”, he said, “she is with an Israeli, she likes big Israeli men and, look, I am so skinny!” The idea that Thai masculinity did not quite measure up physically on a global stage was something that had come up in a lot of different conversations I’d had with people in Thailand, both Thais and Westerners.

Cheep chatted to different members of our group for a while and then sauntered off toward the bar. He didn’t begin working behind the bar immediately, rather, he sat on the bar surveying the scene. Occasionally he told one of the other staff what to do, or got the other staff to make him a drink. After a while he jumped off the bar and walked over to a cleared area between the tables on the beach and started juggling an empty whiskey bottle. It seemed like a way of filling in the time when the bar was not really busy, but was also a way of connecting with women, flirting and getting attention. Cheep tossed the bottle spinning it high in the air, grinning widely, caught and tossed it again, laughing and starting over again when he missed his catch and dropped the bottle. The juggling routine was not a solitary act, nor was it a performance for the crowd in general, it was directed to a certain table of women, signalled by flashing smiles their way and the delivery of rounds of free drinks to their table by other bar staff on Cheep’s cue.

The bottle juggling was interspersed with drinking and dancing on the bar. As the night passed Cheep’s dancing and bottle throwing got more and more wild. By three in the morning Cheep was doing a kind of masculine version of pole dancing around one of the posts holding up the bar and trying to accost almost every woman who came over to buy a drink, (his earlier attempts to target a group of women sitting at a beach table with his bottle juggling routine having failed). On this night, and many others I would see later, Cheep was very drunk and didn’t do any actual bar work that entailed serving drinks. I was a little surprised that none of his co-workers got annoyed at his laziness. Cheep didn’t behave like a supervisor, at least not according to my conception of how a bar supervisor behaved. Cheep’s self-construction as a bar worker who was in control of his space and unhurried in his work routine, a playful, provocative, entertaining as well as drunk “ladies man” was in sharp contrast to a “downtrodden” subject position that he would occupy in narratives based on economy or social status alone.

## **A space of seduction: Sexuality and work**

Sexuality was a prominent part of the work of many of the bar and the bungalow workers. In the process of a night at work the bodies of the men were often engaged

in ways that highlighted their sexuality in overt ways, through dancing, working without a shirt, bottle juggling and fire twirling. Tourist-oriented work in itself requires that the bar and bungalow workers perform outside normative roles of public, polite behaviour. Many bar and bungalow workers described their work in very sexual terms, stating that seducing women “making the tourists [women] have a good time” was an integral part of their job as tourist workers. Flirting, dancing, fire twirling bottle juggling and team co-operation were all part of a process of obtaining and sleeping with tourist women. Through sexual relationships with tourist women, men could potentially shift their social position radically. Skill in enacting their sexual selves was an important aspect for the men to enable expanded future possibilities.

The story of Rocky’s bar persona illustrates the sexual aspect of bar work on the island. Rocky was good-looking and very charming. He had long dark hair, an athletic build, a big smile and a wacky sense of humour. He was incredibly playful and flirtatious, and obviously had a lot of experience in flirting with and seducing women. His favoured method of seduction was to bombard the women with attention, shamelessly pursuing them and flattering them as much as possible. He would do this by flirting madly when he first met the woman, then by taking free drinks to her and her friends, and finally getting the women’s attention repeatedly by doing anything and everything he could to get the woman to look at him. I used to often see him call out to women, then start dancing on the bar or juggling a bottle or mimic singing like a rock star. One of his favourite flirtations was to sneak up behind a woman and then tickle her around the waist from behind, smiling shyly when she turned around to see who was doing it, or sometimes smiling and running away to give the impression he was shy. Every night was filled with little pantomimes in honour of some new woman he was trying to seduce. Almost every night he would stand up on the bar and announce: “Is there anyone here who doesn’t have boyfriend?—because I don’t have girlfriend”, which would be followed by a huge but shy smile. It was a winning routine.

Presentation of an image of mastery of space and marshalling of resources was greatly assisted by the tourist workers access to goods and services through their work. In the case of bar men, access to alcohol allowed them to be generous to their current and potential girlfriends. For bar and bungalow workers, providing free food and accommodation often allowed their girlfriends to stay on the island much longer than they would normally have been able to with their limited finances. The bar workers’ ability to create a space where a tourist woman was absolutely the centre of attention was a very effective seduction tool. Mastery of space was about creativity, creating a space where the woman being seduced was the absolute centre of attention—this, of course, had implications for bar and bungalow workers’ relations with Western men.

## **A space to enact violence**

In the bar the men were supreme, wielding almost absolute power to control the space they were in. They seemed to have unlimited access to free alcohol which they

generously gave to their friends and acquaintances. They took time off from serving drinks to sit with their friends and girlfriends, dance around or go walking up the beach to see if the other bars were full of customers or empty. They punished lewd and drunken behaviour by Western men with apparent impunity. They appeared to have complete power to define the boundaries of the bar space and the behaviours that were allowed within it.

There are, however, limits to the freedoms of the bar space and the identity scripts that workers can perform there. Bar managers are normally representatives of the local community who monitor bar and bungalow workers behaviours within certain boundaries. A certain level of bravado and fighting on the part of bar and bungalow workers is accepted by the bar manager. Heavy drinking, displaying strength through confrontation and social voracity are part of the normative model of Thai masculinity for men from the urban working class, to which most of the bar and bungalow workers belong (Fordham 1998). However, some bar and bungalow workers exceed this normative Thai male gender script, grievously injuring a tourist or member of the local community. In such cases they may be forced to flee the island or face extreme retribution from members of the local Koh Phangan community.

The Thai masculinity script that the bar workers are most closely aligned with, given their strong performances of machismo, is termed *naklang*. According to Keyes, a *naklang* is

a person who is not afraid to take risks . . . who lives dangerously, kind to his friends and cruel to his enemies, a compassionate person, a gambler, a heavy drinker, and a lady-killer. The *naklang* epitomizes the man who accentuates desire for power, wealth, pleasure and sexual domination (Keyes 1986:87).

An archetypical *naklang* is able to pursue his desires to the fullest without bringing suffering and negative consequences as an immediate consequence to his (narrowly defined) community. In many senses then, the bar workers could be seen to be *naklang*—they drink heavily, seduce many women and are able to mobilize resources for seducing women, so also have a form of economic power in the bar space. Within the confines of the bar and their own community of other bar workers, and in the presence of tourists they are free (within certain externally imposed limits) to exert power and domination, to be the masters of that space and define its rules and boundaries.

## **A space of confession/a space of seduction: In the room**

The bravado of the bar and bungalow workers subjectivities in the public space of the bar was often softened in more personal, private spaces. In conversations about their past histories and their motivations for coming to the island to work in the tourist industry, vulnerabilities and strategies of creating self emerged.

After I had known Cheep for a couple of months and spent time talking to him almost every afternoon, he started telling me stories of his life before he came to work on the island. I had been helping him send e-mails from his room as I had on

many other occasions. When the e-mails were sent, we sat listening to music played through the computer and talked. Cheep began regaling me with stories of his past as a gangster in Bangkok:

I used to live in Bangkok and make so much money. I was part of a group of men who worked for a big [meaning high ranking, important] man in the police. I was making about 10,000 baht per day then, I had 10 *mia noi's* [mistresses, minor wives]. They were so expensive! Money, money, money. I had to pay for their apartments and jewellery, shopping, and clothes, they always wanted money (field notes, 2001).

I asked him if he had been doing mafia work in Bangkok, as 10,000 baht a day seemed too much to earn from a regular, legal job.

*Cheep:* Yeah, like mafia. We collected money, controlled the business . . . [his voice trailed off]

*Linda:* Sounds like a lot of money there, good life. Why did you leave and come here? Here is so little money . . .

*Cheep:* We all got problem with the boss, somebody steal a lot of money from him and he couldn't know who from the group did it so he wanted to kill all of us, so we all run out [away from Bangkok] (field notes, 2001).

Sitting as we were in Cheep's sparse room above the bar with music from below thumping through the floor and so little space to move, the contrast between his current circumstances and his former glamorous life in Bangkok as a gangster made the story very hard to believe. It seemed like a way of invoking a more heroic past, one that positioned Cheep as more than what he appeared to be, someone with very limited material possessions and little opportunity for changing those circumstances. It was a way of re-writing a script (where economic power is equated with success) that positioned him as downtrodden.

Cheep also told me that during the time he was living in Bangkok he had been married and he had a daughter. It seems that he had not saved any money from the time when he was apparently earning so much in Bangkok because now he said that he always saved his money from the bar wages to try and give his daughter a better life, and that he could only save a little bit of money, not much. I asked him when had been the last time he had seen his daughter. He said he had not seen her since he left Bangkok when she was only one year old. He said that he had had a "big problem" with his wife and her brothers and couldn't go back, that he could never see his daughter. I was not sure what the big problem was with the wife and her family, but I understood it to mean that Cheep's life would be under threat if he returned to see his wife and daughter. I could not understand how he was planning to give his daughter the money he was saving if that was the case. If Cheep had left Bangkok because of problems in his work life, this parallel story of a major negative event that caused him to leave Bangkok on the threat of his life from his wife's relatives did not fit—unless the two events occurred at the same time.

With his story about his daughter it seemed that Cheep was trying to engage my sympathy, to position himself as a victim of circumstance. His feeling of responsibility toward his daughter as he expressed it was also likely to be a script he had rehearsed before he knew had appeal as part of a script of seduction. The story of

his former life as a powerful gangster coupled with the story of his feeling of responsibility toward his daughter created an identity of an ennobled but unlucky man, which was more appealing and created more opportunities for him than other possible readings of his identity which might have occurred had he not offered these narratives.

### **A space of constraint: In a restaurant**

Cheep came to the entrance of a restaurant where I was sitting with the restaurant owners, having just finished eating a meal with them. It had been a long time since I had spent any time with Cheep. Several months earlier he had stabbed a man in a bar brawl and I had withdrawn my self from the bar scene since that incident. I still spent time with some of the other bar workers during the day and in their few hours off in the evening, but didn't go to the bar much at night anymore because of the ongoing occurrence of violence. He was here to see the young Thai girl who worked in the restaurant as a waitress. She had recently started spending a lot of time going to the bars on the beach after she finished work and was (I was told) suspected by the owners of the restaurant of having become part of a group made up of bar men and young women who were heavily into taking a local type of amphetamines, yabba.

Cheep lingered in the entranceway, not entering the space of the restaurant until he had called to the owners, excusing himself for intruding and asking where Om (the waitress) was. He was deferential, subdued. He came to stand near the table where we were sitting but was not invited to sit down or offered a drink of water. This surprised me a little as usually any Thai person from the local community who came to speak to the owners of the restaurant were offered water and a place to sit. Cheep stood uncomfortably near the table as he waited for Om to come from the kitchen. He was not engaged in conversation with the owners and didn't appear to know what to do while he waited. He seemed very obviously unwelcome in the restaurant. When Om did come to talk to him, they went outside and sat across the road at the motorbike rental stall, which was by that time closed (it was about 7:00 pm)—not in the restaurant, which was not busy at all and had so many seats. After that night I saw Cheep come to visit with Om many times, but he always waited at the threshold of the restaurant for her and went to sit with her at the stall across the road. I was surprised by his deference to the owners of the restaurant, and by his exclusion from a space that is usually perceived as a public space. It was a very open restaurant with no walls; it looked like anyone who wanted could come in.

The lack of hospitality by the owners of the restaurant was strange in contrast to the usual reception of Thai visitors and I asked my friend Wan, the manager of the restaurant, why Cheep had been unwelcome.

People like that are not welcome in locals' homes [the owners lived upstairs from the restaurant and so considered the restaurant space to be their home also]. He is from a drug group, very low class people, low culture, not like good Thai people. None of the locals will let *this kind of people* come into their home (field notes 2001, my emphasis).

For the local woman, who was born on Koh Phangan, there was a very clear distinction between bar workers and locals. Cheep was obviously very aware of this: he waited in the entranceway of the restaurant before entering, occupied the space uncomfortably, and left quickly. He was not able to master this space, as he could the bar space. Here he was not central to the social space, here he was marginal.

## Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the agency that bar and bungalow workers exert by creatively negotiating their identities through the complex social geographies of Koh Phangan. By crafting narratives of their identity in the private spaces of their rooms and in the public spaces of the bar and beyond (at private beaches or waterfalls, for example), bar and bungalow workers are able to open up possibilities for shifting their subject positions out of framings that seek to position them as marginal. Through their intimate relationships with tourist women they have the potential to re-imagine their gendered and classed subject positions—for example, by becoming eligible, desirable boyfriends/husbands; gaining access to international capital, or becoming business owners themselves.

Both the bar and the private spaces of their rooms and girlfriends' bungalows are places that bar and bungalow workers utilize to actively create identities. These spaces of creativity stand in contrast to the spaces of constraint, where the bar and bungalow workers are subservient to wider power networks, such as in restaurants and homes belonging to Phangan Island local people. The landscape of Had Rin is a mosaic of microgeographies of power. The spaces are geographically very close, but are sedimented within very different power networks, which demand very different social mores and behaviours. Bar and bungalow workers move between these spaces and at the same time, between contrasting subject positions. The complexity of the identities of the bar and bungalow workers as demonstrated in this paper belies accounts of them as simply marginal characters, as either exploiters or victims (see Bowman 1989; Dahles and Bras 1999; Phillips 2002). Instead, we get a sense of the fluidity and multiplicity of identities as these men negotiate their relationships across the landscape of Had Rin, overlain with a diverse array of social geographies.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Such as sexual relationships/interludes/affairs and violent altercations.

<sup>2</sup> Global tourist's imaginings of place, Phangan local's imaginings of place, migrant worker's imaginings of place and so on—each imagining involves expectations of the kinds of social mores that will govern the space.

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