



Representing ‘Cross-Cultural’ Relationships: Troubling Essentialist Visions of Power and Identity in a Thai Tourist Setting

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the dynamics of intimate relationships between Thai men working in the tourism industry and tourist women from various countries including England, Australia, USA, Canada, Italy, France and Spain. Relationships between men who work in the tourism industry and tourist women have received considerable academic attention over the past decade, yet much of the analysis seeks to pin the identities of the men and women down to essentialised categories. This paper seeks to challenge existing understandings of relationships that cross axes of difference by bringing a feminist perspective on the spatiality of identity to the analysis. Drawing upon 10 months of ethnographic field research conducted in Southern Thailand from October 2000 to August 2001, I argue that the identities of the men and women participating in these relationships are spatially and temporally specific.

Keywords: romance tourism, cross-cultural relationship, gendered identity

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This research seeks to chart the boundaries that delineate binary identity categories in order to demonstrate the arbitrary, constructed nature of the boundaries and the categories themselves (see: Manderson, 1992, Pratt, 1999, Underhill-Sem, 2003). Dualistic thinking permeates discourses around intimate relationships between people who are culturally and racially different (see for example: Cohen, 1982, GoASIA, 2004, Westerhausen, 2002, Sanchez Taylor, 2001). The mobilisation of the term *cross-cultural relationship*, used to refer to sexual/romantic relationships between culturally (and usually implicitly also racially) *different* partners, is often underpinned by binary concepts such as rich/poor, emotionally manipulative/emotionally naive, First World/Third World, legitimate relationship/illegitimate relationship, non-commercial sex/commercial sex, man/woman, and so on (see for example: Pruitt and LaFont, 1995, Phillips, 2002, Sanchez Taylor, 2001, Cohen, 1971, Bowman, 1989, Dahles, 1998, Dahles and Bras, 1999). Such concepts rely upon being able to fix the identities of the people being represented and the power relations between them.

This paper sets out to challenge the stability of these dualisms by mobilising two key arguments. First, I argue that the motivations of the men and women engaging in relationships across axes of cultural, economic and racial difference can be much more complex than previously acknowledged in the literature. Second, I bring geographical insight to bear by arguing that the identities of the men and women are spatially and temporally specific. It therefore follows that the power relations between intimate partners in such relationships can potentially shift and change as they move through different sites and contexts. Accordingly, this paper is organised in two broad sections. In the first section of the paper I review the romance tourism literature, focusing on the way in which identity and power have been conceptualised. In the second section of the paper, I present empirical research based on fieldwork done in Southern Thailand, which demonstrates the complexity of relationships that cross axes of difference and supports the argument that they are spatially and temporally specific.

Representing cross-cultural sexual encounters

Academic analysis of intimate relationships between men from places configured as *out of the way*² and tourist women from places configured as *central* has

² I use this term to refer to places that have been variously labelled as the Third World, Developing and/or Underdeveloped countries. *Out of the way places* was a term first coined by Tsing (1994). This term is an attempt to step outside of narratives of power that are imbued in the more commonly used labels mentioned above. 'Out of the way' refers to places that have been discursively marginalised in global hegemonic discourses of centre and periphery.

tended to focus on economic and racial difference. Moreover, much of this analysis has cited dissonance in communication and negotiation across these axes of difference as evidence for the 'failure' and impossibility of these relationships (see Dahles and Bras, 1999, Bowman, 1989, Phillips, 2002, Sanchez Taylor, 2001, Zinovieff, 1991, Pruitt and LaFont, 1995, Lette, 1996, Herold et al., 2001). I acknowledge that the project of charting the inequalities in relationships that cross axes of difference is an important one. Nevertheless, I argue that it is also important to highlight the possibilities that such relationships open up and to value the ways in which the relationships are understood and enacted by the men and women involved in them.

By measuring the ultimate success or failure of these relationships against an assumed 'normal' heterosexual relationship, the possibilities that are opened up by these relationships are often ignored in the existing literature.³ My notion of success in relationships that cross axes of difference does not necessarily hinge upon the relationship being enduring. Rather, I define a relationship as successful if it opens up new possibilities for the partners. Those possibilities exist in a wider frame than a monogamous relationship, including increased cultural understanding, new work opportunities, the possibility to explore new forms of masculinity or femininity, living in a new country and so on.

Surveying the literature in the 'romance tourism' area, two basic ways of theorising these relationships can be seen. One group of theorists (Dahles and Bras, 1999, Bowman, 1989, Phillips, 2002) theorise the relationships in very unidimensional and contradictory terms, fixing identities to essentialised categories. These studies are also underpinned by strongly moralistic theoretical frameworks. A second group of theorists (Sanchez Taylor, 2001, Pruitt and LaFont, 1995, Lette, 1996) position the relationships as moments of fluid negotiation over gender roles, focusing on the multiple and conflicting roles individuals take up as they negotiate their sexual relationships. The analysis in my research builds upon the second group of authors by highlighting the fluidity of subject positions that the partners take up as they negotiate everyday encounters. More precisely, this research extends the current scholarship by incorporating a theorisation of the importance of space and place in the negotiation of identity as a way of challenging dualistic representations of selfhood in relationships across axes of difference.

³ Even given the diversity of ways that a 'normal' heterosexual relationship can be defined, relationships that cross racial, cultural and economic difference are still often positioned as abject or illegitimate.

Theorising cross-cultural relationships through essentialised categories

Dualisms that vary around the theme of powerful/powerless can be seen in a number of articles about sex and relationships between local men and tourist women in tourism settings (see: Bowman, 1989, Dahles and Bras, 1999, Herold et al., 2001, Phillips, 2002). There are two basic alignments of power that are argued in a number of articles about sexual/romantic relationships between local men and tourist women in tourist settings. The first binary power alignment commonly argued is that the tourist women are exploiting their lovers who are positioned in these narratives as powerless victims of their 'girlfriends':

O'Connell Davidson (1998) has similar views to de Albuquerque (1998) regarding female tourists and she believes that these women are deluding themselves by imagining their relationships to be romantic rather than sexual. She argues that they are as exploitative as male sex tourists in that they use their greater economic power to gain access to and exploit the third world partners (cited in: Herold et al., 2001: 980).

Such stark delineation of identities around a power dualism cements an us/them framework and obscures the other possible subjectivities internal to those categories (Anderson, 1996). The insistence on classifying the relationships as *either sex or romance* tourism belies the complexity that these intimate relationships have the capacity to entail. As Anderson (1996) argues, intimate relationships have multiple valences of power and multiple meanings. Therefore it is possible that the motivations for being in the relationship of either of the partners may change over time and context as the relationship is negotiated and the partners re-position themselves and their expectations of the relationship to accommodate the changing circumstances of the engagement between them.

Cohen's (1971) article entitled *Arab boys and tourist girls in a mixed Jewish-Arab community* is one of the earliest contemporary examples of research into sexual relationships between tourist women and host men in a tourism setting. He conceptualises the relationships as moments of possibility for young Arab men to escape their marginalised situation. Cohen's focus is on the men, exploring their motivations for pursuing tourist women (who come from Europe, North America and Australia). Cohen argues that the structural oppression that the young Arab men are subjected to in Israeli society is the major motivational force in their pursuit of tourist women. He argues that the men have much more invested in the relationships than the women who, he states: "...do not attach the importance to the relationship which the boys, in their relative lack of experience and under pressure of their own circumstances, tend to attach to it" (Cohen, 1971: 229).

While Cohen conceptualises the identities of the Arab men and tourist women in relatively fixed ways, in his concluding remarks he makes the important

point that tourism encounters can offer possibilities for social transformation for structurally marginalised members of the host society. Cohen does not conceive of power as fixed on the side of tourists, instead, he argues that: "Through the institution of tourism members of different and far-away societies regularly meet and influence each other's lives" (Cohen, 1971: 233).

Another scholar writing on sexual encounters between Arab men and tourist women is Bowman (1989). In an article titled *Fucking tourists: sexual relations and tourism in Jerusalem's old city*, Bowman (1989) offers an ethnographic account of young Palestinian men working as tourist merchants and their attitudes to their sexual encounters with tourist women. Bowman focuses on the ways that sexual encounters are given meaning by the Palestinian youths in relation to issues of social and economic power.⁴ In Bowman's account the economic and social power of the women tourists is contrasted with the economic and social powerlessness of the tourist merchant men. Bowman argues that in sexual encounters, a simple reversal of this power binary can occur:

...sexual tales relate how the structurally fucked—the victims of a market and of a map—become the fuckers; they tell, in other words, of the way a group of persons 'feminised' by their economic and political positions are able, by sexually dominating the women of the dominators, to retake a 'masculine' position both in relation to the women and, in a triangular struggle in which they proved more masculine than the women's men, in relation to those men as well. Thus in a domain which I can only refer to as mythological, the slaves become the masters of those who, in the real world, appeared in positions of dominance (Bowman 1989: 88).

Bowman argues that the motivations of the tourist merchants for engaging in sexual encounters with tourist women are uniform—that the men are motivated by a desire to 'master the masters' (1989: 79).

There is a strong moral discourse underpinning Bowman's narrative whereby 'fucking' is positioned as the less legitimate and 'nastier' manifestation of sexuality when compared to the sexual encounters that happen between the women and their (white) husbands. It is this moral discourse, where success is measured against a normative heterosexual relationship—one that does not cross cultural, racial and economic boundaries—that stops the author from exploring the possibilities that the sexual encounters could enable.

⁴ Social power is conceived as access to education, health care, modernity and the spoils of the 'West'.

By conceptualising the encounters as either relations of dominance or subordination, researchers' ignore the potential for ambiguity or complexity in motivations, practices and discourses around relationships. Focusing exclusively on the men's tales of their sexual encounters (usually told in the presence of their peers), Bowman is able to assert a very particular reading of the men's motivations for engaging in sexual encounters with tourist women:

The tourist merchants' obsessive interest in having sex with, and in stories of having sex with, foreign women served a dual purpose: it provided merchants with a field in which to play out scenarios of vengeance against foreigners who, in their eyes, oppressed them both economically and socially while at the same time constructing an arena in which the merchants, all of whom were similarly at the mercy of economic demands over which they had no real control, could compete for the status of being one of those few able to master the masters (Bowman 1989: 79).

Had Bowman explored the meanings of the sexual encounters in contexts other than the recounting of stories of conquest among peers it is possible that other meanings might also have emerged. While the men may have wanted to represent themselves as hyper-masculine 'conquerors' in the presence of their peers, this does not exclude the possibility that other, contradictory meanings could be attached to the same encounter in other contexts. As Plummer (1995: 18) argues, stories are much more than 'narrative truths' awaiting our analysis. Stories are constructed in social contexts, and for particular purposes. Therefore, in order to understand the meaning of sexual stories we must look at the nature of sexual stories, the social processes for producing and consuming stories and the social role stories play (Plummer, 1995).

Bowman, like many others who write about sexual encounters between male tourism workers and female tourists, seems keen to neatly sew up the encounters with unambiguous explanations, claiming, for example, that tourist women 'arbitrarily' choose their sexual partners 'from amongst an undifferentiated mob of would-be seducers' (1989: 85). The possible subject positions of the men and women are also limited by the analysis being static in the sense that it presents only one slice of time/space and assumes that that single context represents all possible subject positions and identities. By propagating a narrative of a power struggle where sex is a symbolic struggle for victory in a simple bi-polar power configuration, Bowman fixes the subject positions of each side of the struggle: the women are positioned firmly in the role of tourist consumers of tourism 'product' (in the form of the local men) and the tourist traders are positioned as essentially defined by their economic and social marginality. By ignoring the other social networks that both partners are engaged in Bowman ignores other subject positions that the men and women could possibly take up. Moreover, the complexity that those other

social networks might introduce to a reading of the meanings of these cross-cultural sexual encounters is also ignored.

The tendency to separate power relationships and identities into binary categories is also evident in studies where some attempt is made to capture the complexity of relationships between tourist women and non-tourist men (for example: Dahles and Bras, 1999, Dahles, 1998, Herold et al., 2001, Phillips, 2002). In these studies, a paradoxical oscillation in the positioning of the partners in the relationship occurs whereby the authors position the local men and tourist women as alternately powerful and powerless. In the everyday power networks of encounters in the tourist site, men are positioned as powerful and women as powerless, whereas in the wider economic power networks of encounters between West and non-West, the men are positioned as powerless and the women as powerful. In each of these arenas, the identities of the men and women are neatly bounded.

In everyday encounters, Dahles and Bras (1999), Dahles (1998), Herold et al (2001) and Phillips (2002) argue that the men's power comes from their ability to deceive their tourist girlfriends because many women lack access to the local language and the networks to which their boyfriends are connected. Deception is positioned as evidence of the failure of the relationship to live up to a normative ideal of shared expectations and understandings in romantic intimate relationships. The men's predisposition to deceive their tourist girlfriends is conceived as paramount and uniform among all local men engaged in relationships with tourist women. Dahles suggests:

Whatever role model a street guide is associating with, there is only one desire all of them are cherishing. They all share the dream of acquiring a ticket to one of the 'promised lands' where their ever-changing 'true loves' come from: America, Europe, Japan, or Australia (1998: 39).

In this reckoning then, the tourist women are positioned as cultural dupes, unaware of the manipulations by their partners are effecting in order to 'trick' them into believing they are in a romantic relationship (see also Phillips 2002).

Sexual encounters between local men and tourist women in *out of the way places* are embedded in global capital markets. The economic strength of *central* markets makes it possible for tourist women to travel to the countries where their lovers live and prohibit or make unlikely the possibility of the reverse without significant financial assistance. This economic relationship is interpreted as evidence that the women are exploiting their sexual partners because they are economically more powerful and have the opportunity and freedom of movement that financial power provides (for examples, see Dahles (1998), Dahles and Bras (1999), Herold, Garcia and DeMoya (2001) and Phillips (2002). The argument that economic difference means that the motivations of the partners to be in the relationship are less

likely to be for 'pure' reasons (pure meaning 'genuine' affection or love) is again underpinned by a moral argument that positions relationships that cross economic difference as marginal. While this dual positioning (alternatively powerful and powerless depending on the scale of observation) hints at a multiplicity of subject positions, the tendency to fix the power position to either the local or global scale of interaction means that the fluidity with which subject positions can change in everyday interactions is ignored.

Theorising cross-cultural relationships as moments of fluid negotiation

Several authors (Pruitt and LaFont, 1995, Lette, 1996, Meisch, 1995) have moved beyond simple binary conceptualisations of power and identity in relationships to highlight the ways that both power and subject positions can shift and change in everyday contexts. Pruitt and LaFont (1995) argue that relationships between tourist women and local men allow both partners to explore possibilities of new gender roles. They highlight the fluidity of power and desire in everyday interactions between local men and tourist women, arguing that motivations and power alignments in relationships are multiple and shifting, with conflicting motivations and framings of the relationships often being held concurrently by the men, women, or both simultaneously. Unlike the other authors (Dahles, 1998, Dahles and Bras, 1999, Herold et al., 2001, Phillips, 2002), Pruitt and LaFont (1995: 428) focus on a variety of fields of power and desire, refusing to characterise the relationships as purely financially motivated on the part of the men, or purely sexually motivated on the part of the women:

The men hold their own ideals about the potential for emotional intimacy in relationships with foreign women. Many believe foreign women to be more tender and emotional than Jamaican women and imagine that they can experience an emotional and sexual intimacy in these relationships that is lacking in their lives, particularly if they are increasingly rejected by local women for their activities with foreigners.

In a study of sexual/romantic relationships between North American and European tourist women and men from Otavalo in Ecuador, Meisch (1995) problematises the binary of tourist as powerful versus local as powerless. She argues that power binaries are disrupted by the complexity of the power relations between Otavalo men and tourist women because Otavalo men have access to travel and money by playing traditional Otavalo music to appreciative audiences in America and Europe. The ability of the local men to engage successfully with global capital as well as a number of other cultural points of connection enables Meisch to look at everyday practices and negotiations in relationships, rather than focusing on meta-

scale inequalities in economic position and following the assumptions that are often connected with sexual relationships around the axis of economic difference:⁵

Otavalo exemplifies a number of contradictory trends of contemporary tourism and travel. The visited are now visiting others and women as well as men are sexual aggressors, considering an affair to be an added bonus on a vacation, business, or research trip abroad. Power is not weighted on the side of a particular gender or ethnicity. Indigena have the power to end financially draining relationships, and some do, insisting on equitable sharing of expenses, and in the romantic relationship, or like Sarah, leaving her Otavaleno husband (Meisch, 1995: 460).

While Meisch argues for a multiple picture of power in relationships, she concludes that the relationships are often tangled in stereotyped ideals of the Other by both the European and North American women and by the Otavalo men, and for this reason are often unsuccessful in a long term context.⁶ This static vision of the character of the connection between the men and women in relationships belies an understanding of relationships as evolving and potentially changing over time and context. Many of the relationships described by Meisch were played out over a number of contexts: in the tourist markets of Ecuador as well as in the countries of origin of the women. Perhaps the original attraction of the partners may have begun as fascination with the exotic Other as Meisch argues, but given that the relationships are sometimes long term it is possible that initial perceptions and motivations could shift. Meisch's notion of success here is an important one: success is measured only by whether or not the relationships are enduring. As discussed earlier, my notion of success in cross-cultural relationships does not necessarily rest on the relationship being enduring.

In this section, I have shown how academic representations of sexual/romantic relationships between tourist women and local men are often constructed around binary representations of identity. Moreover, many such representations rely on moralistic discourses that align economic and social difference with illegitimacy and commercial sex. Such discourses are certainly underpinned by heteronormative understandings of power at the meta-scale of political economy and its alignment with power as expressed in personal relationships and encounters. My review of the existing literature leads me to the conclusion that these represen-

⁵ Factors such as Otavaleno's approach to tourist women closely matching the way that the women expect to be courted, Otavalo culture's acceptance of women having a high degree of social and economic equality and gender equality in sharing household tasks.

⁶ Long term here meaning that the relationships are of greater than a few months duration.

tations do not encompass the full range of experiences possible in sexual relationships between tourist women and local men in tourism settings occurring across axes of cultural, social, and economic difference. Moreover, that by removing the moralistic discourses that force identities to coalesce around good/bad axes of alignment I hope to open up possibilities for seeing a multifaceted and varying field of experiences that sits outside of an 'us/them' 'good/bad' discourse.

Doing things differently: spatialising tourism sexualities

Stepping outside of binary frames of analysis around the negotiation of difference allows us to open up the number of possibilities for communicating across difference. Such forms of communication may vary from encounters between individual people, to encounters between people and cultural milieus. Discourses that highlight the impossibilities of cross-cultural connection privilege differential power and identity as defining constructs that determine the possible outcomes of interactions. Through this privileging, such discourses perpetuate the re-performance of differentiation because *difference* is positioned as the lens through which we understand cross-cultural encounters. This section of the paper addresses a number of the new possibilities that emerge if an interpretive frame is mobilised that does not seek to measure cross-cultural encounters against pre-set notions of success, morality and power.

A spatialised analysis of subjects' enactment of their sexual and non-sexual identities involves tracing everyday interactions and making visible the processes whereby shifts between different spaces elicit very different subject positions. In Southern Thailand where I did my fieldwork, identity is negotiated in different material spaces around a number of issues: bodily deportment and dress, sexual practices, practices around consumption of drugs and alcohol, and practices around displays of physical intimacy in public spaces. In tracing the trajectories of subjectivities as they shift through space and coalesce around different nexus of power, I argue for a move beyond the dualistic representations seen in much of the literature outlined in the previous section that effectively contains Thai men and tourists women's relationships and identities in static ways (see for example: Bowman, 1989, Dahles and Bras, 1999, Herold et al., 2001, Phillips, 2002). I propose a new model of analysis that involves tracing the micro-geographies of power as the men and women move through different temporal and spatial locations. By focusing on the complicated messiness of everyday interactions, many of the dualisms that are perpetuated in meta-narratives of power and identity begin to unravel.

The data presented here come out of a wider body of research with men and women in Southern Thailand. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over a period of 14 months from August 2000 to October 2001, with several subsequent visits to the field site in 2003, 2004 and 2005. During this time I interviewed over 40 Thai

man/tourist woman couples and had countless informal conversations with both Thais and tourists on the pitfalls and possibilities of cross-cultural relationships and cross-cultural encounters in general. Cross-cultural perceptions are invariably inflected with and influenced by stereotyped perceptions of the Other, and the perceptions of the people whom I interviewed and encountered in this research reflect this at particular times and when discussing specific aspects of their encounters. Despite this, there were also narratives of similarity, connection and possibility. It is these narratives that I choose to highlight here as a way of offering an alternative discourse to the usual understanding of cross-cultural relationships as represented in the current literature.

In order to illustrate my arguments I present data from one of the couples with whom I researched in Thailand, Sophie and Nok.⁷ The data is drawn from a combination of interview transcripts and informal conversations I had with both Sophie and Nok, as well as email communication I have had subsequently with Sophie. All of the direct quotes presented in this paper come from in-depth interviews conducted with Sophie. The information on Nok's experience of the relationship is drawn from various informal conversations we had around specific encounters. The reason for the difference in the representation of the stories of men and women is that gender difference had clear implications for the ways in which interview respondents related to the interview scenario, as I discuss below.

In general, the men I interviewed did not respond to the interview scenario by giving long reflective answers as the women did. The differences in the way that the men and women responded to being interviewed are most likely linked to their different cultural practices around sharing confidences and the different nature of their interactions with me as the researcher/friend/confidant.⁸ It seemed that the women engaged with the interview space as a site in which to share confidences with another woman and to talk through 'difficult' issues in order to gain understanding of them. The men, in contrast, had more restrained cultural practices in relation to sharing confidences, where it was seen as better not to discuss 'difficult' emotions or negative events with others.

The men were much more likely to discuss the everyday interactions and difficulties in their relationships with me in a less formal way, usually in conversations when they were asking my advice or help with particular negotiations with their girlfriends. For example, I was often called upon by the men to translate from Thai to English in disputes or negotiations with their girlfriends and in particular to

⁷ Pseudonyms have been used for all research participants.

⁸ The differentiation of fieldwork roles and relationships is often a shifting process and it is one which requires further discussion than is possible here. I have addressed the issue of researcher subjectivity elsewhere, see Malam (2004).

explain Thai gender roles and Thai cultural practices to the women. I also assisted the men with writing letters and emails to girlfriends overseas. Through my participation in the everyday negotiations that the men and women undertook in their relationships I was able to learn about the men's attitudes to and feelings about their intimate relationships. Understanding was built up over a long period of time and was highly context-dependant: through asking questions and seeking clarification on the meaning of events as they happened. Through this method, I was able to build a picture of the dynamics of the personal relationships between the men and women with whom I was researching. The stories of the men's and women's experiences in the paper, then, are represented differently because they come from different types of data.

A story of one relationship: Sophie and Nok

The beginning of Sophie and Nok's relationship occurred in what was a transitional phase for both of them because their existing life circumstances required them both to take up new roles and explore new experiences. Sophie met Nok when she was at the beginning of the trip that was planned to take her to Thailand, Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia. She was 19 when she first arrived in Thailand, having finished a childcare diploma in college and then working for one year to save up for her trip around Southeast Asia and Australasia. Sophie understood her trip to Southeast Asia and Australasia as a space of transition between her study and her eventual return to England and expected the trip to change her identity in some significant way: Sophie: "I thought I would come back [from the Southeast Asian trip] different. I remember my brother coming back different."

For Sophie, her relationship with Nok enabled her to make a deeper connection to Thai people and Thai culture than other tourists, so it was incorporated into expectations of the kinds of experiences that can happen on a 'big trip' overseas. This type of narrative where travel and transformation of identity are linked has been well documented in the literature on backpacker tourism (Desforges, 2000). However, Sophie's experiences differ somewhat from those represented in the literature in that after meeting her Thai boyfriend she stopped seeing her travel as a discrete 'time out' from her 'real life' in England and sought to imagine a future for herself with Nok in Thailand.

Nok, too, was in a transitional stage in his life when he first met Sophie. He had only been working in a bar for two months when they met, having recently moved to Koh Pha-ngan from his home city of Surat Thani (in Southern Thailand) to look for work. Before leaving home, his immediate past had been one that was characterised by unemployment and being in trouble with local authorities for delinquency. The shift to the island, then, represented a shift in employment status, but also a shift into a new arena that involved him learning new languages and en-

gaging with international tourists, something with which he had little prior experience.⁹ For both Sophie and Nok, their life circumstances meant that they were open to new experiences. As their relationship developed, it catalysed significant shifts in both their futures.

After meeting Nok, Sophie completely changed her travel plans. Because she and Nok had begun a sexual relationship, she stayed on Koh Pha-ngan and lived with him in his rented room for two months, rather than staying only a short time and travelling around Thailand as she had planned. She also decided to suspend her travel plans for Indonesia and New Zealand. She was, however, still very keen to visit Australia, so she decided to go there for a couple of months then return to be with Nok. I interviewed Sophie on her second visit to the island, after she had returned from Australia. She reflected on how her participation in the relationship had been different when she had first met Nok when their relationship was confined to the island and later, after she had been to visit Nok's family at their home in Surat Thani. The experience of going home to meet Nok's family created a space for transition and transformation within their relationship by opening up new subject positions for both of them:

Sophie: Going to Surat Thani to meet Nok's family was so amazing. I feel like I want to learn so much more about Thailand. Last time I was in Koh Pha-ngan I was here for two months and I don't know if I didn't want to learn, but I didn't learn about his language, about the culture. But this time I really want to learn more, and that started after I went to his parent's home. After going to his parent's home I understand now about some of the times when we don't get on and we have arguments are because of the cultural differences. I think that maybe if I can try and understand that it will be better.

I went to Nok's family home and saw how they live. Maybe an ordinary tourist would come and not learn a lot about Thailand, but I think that I learned a lot because I went to Nok's home and that was a place far away from other tourists. I was in a real Thai situation there. The other tourists just stay with other tourists.

Other tourists miss out on understanding Thai culture by not participating in the local community in a real way and not getting to know any Thai people. Sometimes I feel like I put my foot in my mouth all the time. When I look back on some of the things I did before I think

⁹ Bar workers engage in language learning as Kondo (1990: 12) conceptualises it: 'language learning in the broadest sense: mastery of culturally appropriate modes of moving, acting, and speaking'.

'I can't believe I did that!' and 'Oh, god that is really awful', and the average tourist, I don't think that they see what they have done. The Thai people are very tolerant toward tourists. The worst thing I did was when I went to Nok's family the first time and we were sat [sic] round in a circle with Nok's mother and Nok's friends in his mothers home. We were just sat [sic] round in a circle talking and I was pointing my feet out in front of me and they were pointed at Nok. And his mother slapped my leg! And I didn't know what I'd done. And I was really shocked. And I said 'Nok, why has she slapped me?' And he said 'You not point your feet at me'. And I thought 'Oh my god'. I can't believe he didn't tell me. And I was trying to make such a good impression on his mother! And I look back at that and I cringe! I cringe!! I didn't know that you can't step over people and that you have to bow down when you pass them and all that.

In terms of Sophie's conception of her own identity, the experience of visiting Nok's family was an ambivalent one, in that the experience caused her to reflect on the way she was understood outside of the tourist-oriented space of the island where she and Nok lived together. In the encounter where Sophie was publicly disciplined by being slapped on the leg by Nok's mother for displaying inappropriate bodily deportment, Sophie was seemingly stripped of the cultural capital that being a tourist on Koh Pha-ngan encapsulates (Bourdieu, 1977: 72, 95).

The cultural capital that Sophie enjoyed on Koh Pha-ngan was twofold. First, Sophie had cultural capital that was recognised by the bar and bungalow workers in that she had access to economic resources and the signifiers of conspicuous consumption. Second, Sophie had cultural capital that was recognised by some of her fellow backpackers in that she had learned a few Thai phrases and had what was configured as an 'authentic' cultural connection to the Thai community. In the encounter with Nok's mother, Sophie's cultural capital in both these arenas dissipated: rather than being positioned as an accomplished world traveller with deep cultural connections to Thailand (as she saw herself prior to the visit to Nok's family home), this encounter positioned Sophie as someone who lacked the most basic cultural capital required to make a good impression in this particular context. This positioning had not been apparent to Sophie earlier in her relationship with Nok because in the tourist-oriented space of Koh Pha-ngan, Thai people's tolerance to tourist's lack of understanding of Thai cultural mores insulates tourists to a large degree from seeing the Thai people they meet as being embedded in wider power networks where they are not positioned as subservient to tourists.

In terms of her conception of Nok's identity, the visit to the family home enabled Sophie to see that Nok occupied a different subject position in the arena of his family to the one she was used to seeing him occupy as a bar worker on the island. Through this shift in context, from island to family home, Sophie was able to

see Nok positioned as a man who was providing for his family and taking care of his mother; as someone who is responsible for the well-being of his family. Sophie was able to see the admiration the family had for Nok because he was going out into a different space and mixing with different people, learning to speak English, and taking on a whole new set of skills, and being brave enough to marshal those skills in order to provide for his family. For Sophie, after the visit to the family home, Nok was no longer a singular individual who she saw as somewhat downtrodden because of his labour relations and conditions, but a part of a wider network of connections where he was positioned as a leader in his family with high competency in the tourism arena of the island.

By taking Sophie to meet his family, Nok was able to demonstrate his success in engaging with what was for him a new arena: the tourist-oriented space of Haad Rin (which, as mentioned above, involved mastering a number of new skills and making connections that were far outside of his previous experience as an orderly at the local hospital). His success in mastering the tourist-oriented arenas as symbolised by his relationship with Sophie was therefore a cause for admiration by his family. As Nok explained it to me, his relationship with Sophie signified to his family that he had made the transformation from a son who had been somewhat irresponsible to one who was taking up a responsible role, as well as demonstrating his competency in mastering new forms of cross-cultural communication.

In terms of the power relations between Sophie and Nok, the visit to Nok's family home also signalled a shift from previous configurations. Prior to her visit to the family home, Sophie had not reflected on the way that her gendered identity might be affecting the way that the relationship progressed. The experience of the visit changed that, and impacted on the way that Sophie and Nok interacted thereafter. In the space of the family home, Sophie felt disempowered because of her lack of cultural competence appropriate for the situation. Sophie's lack of understanding of basic behavioural modes in the Thai space was apparent to her when the Nok's mother slapped her leg. By being punished in this way, Sophie realised that the cultural norms that she was calling upon in order to try to make a good impression on Nok's mother had very little value in that space. Visiting Nok's family home caused a shift in the power relationship and understandings that Sophie had of Nok's subject position. Sophie began to understand that in southern Thai society, ideal femininity might be something completely *Other* than what she represented. This realisation prompted her to want to conform to an ideal form of Thai femininity: 'I feel like I want to learn so much more about Thailand... about the culture'.

While Sophie did develop a desire to conform to a certain kind of (perceived) 'ideal Thai femininity', she was not wholly committed to the 'dutiful woman' subject position that she perceived ideal Thai femininity to be characterized by. In the context of Nok's family home where Sophie was aware of her cul-

tural displacement and lack of cultural capital she was eager to be able to marshal the performative aspects of culture that would give her greater cultural capital and 'make a good impression on his [Nok's] mum'. But in other, more private spaces Sophie felt that the subject position of a subservient woman was not appropriate for the relationship she was building with Nok. She felt that Nok should conform to some aspects of her culture just as she attempted to do with his if the relationship was going to be sustained:

I think because he is a Thai man he has a certain idea about what a woman should do and be like and a man has another role. Like today the bungalow was messy and he said to me 'sokaprok falang' [dirty westerner] and I said: 'No. I clean the bungalow every day. When do you clean the bungalow?' And he said nothing. He just looked at me. I said 'You never clean the bungalow, so don't speak like that to me'. Then he just laughed and shook it off.

By essentialising Nok as a 'Thai man' who 'has a certain idea about what a woman should do and be like' in the discursive space of the interview, Sophie was attempting to make sense of the difficulties that often emerged in the relationship. By creating the distance that is achieved by relegating Nok to the category 'Thai man', Sophie is able to claim some of the personal power that she felt was compromised in interactions like the one described above. Many of the women spoke about their boyfriends in this way when describing parts of their relationships where they felt that their personal power or 'rights' were not respected by their boyfriends.

In his relationship with Sophie, Nok was taking up new subject positions as he was confronted with Sophie's expectations of him, as in the exchange quoted above. Just as Sophie was learning new subject positions by taking on aspects of polite Thai femininity in certain contexts, Nok learned that in certain contexts such as the bungalow where they lived, the gender scripts he was used to (where women were solely responsible for household duties such as cleaning) needed to be expanded in order to sustain his relationship with Sophie. By learning to perform a new gendered subject positions in his relationship with Sophie, Nok was able to make connections to global capital and symbols of modernity that would normally only be available to middle-class Thais: fluency in spoken English, computer and Internet literacy, as well as material symbols of modernity such as fashionable clothing that Sophie bought as gifts when she returned from Australia. While these are significant symbols of the relationship's success, the longevity of the relationship often came under threat from discourses of impossibility articulated in a number of sites.

In Nok and Sophie's case, the influence of discourses of impossibility about their relationship circulating both in the bar (where other bar workers urged Nok not to wait for Sophie to return because so many women promise to come back but

never do) and in other sites (where Sophie's family and friends told her she was not living 'in reality' because she wanted to pursue her relationship with Nok in Thailand) were more powerful than their connection to each other. After staying for three months on her second trip to the island to be with Nok, Sophie returned to England to work and save money so that she could return to Thailand to live with Nok. She planned to work in England for nine months then return to the island for at least four months. Sophie's parents were very apprehensive about her plans and her relationship with Nok, and put a lot of pressure on her to stay in England and continue her education. While she was away Nok continued pursuing new relationships. Sophie learned of this through other tourist women who were still on the island and had e-mailed her with the stories of his new girlfriend. Sophie still returned to Koh Pha-ngan but she did not continue her relationship with Nok. In terms of measuring the success or failure of the relationship by whether or not it was ongoing, Sophie and Nok's relationship was not successful. Nevertheless, the relationship opened up new possibilities for each of them which should not be trivialised.

Through his relationship with Sophie, Nok was able to learn about the gender roles that would be expected of him in forming relationships with tourist women, as well as learning English language and internet emailing skills. Nok has been successful in continuing to develop new relationships with tourist women. He now has a child with a tourist woman whom he met while Sophie was away working in England. In terms of his positioning with his family in Surat Thani, Nok's relationship with Sophie was an important signifier of his new-found responsibility and his successful transformation from a recalcitrant son to a responsible one. The original relationship with Sophie was an important step in opening up both of these new possibilities.

Sophie developed a lasting connection with Thailand, and returned there several times after she and Nok ended their relationship. She continued to develop her Thai language skills and formed a new relationship with another bar worker, (a relationship which is ongoing). She now lives in Haad Rin and runs a restaurant business with her Thai husband. Sophie's intimate relationships with Thai men on Koh Pha-ngan have prompted her to reflect on her understandings of femininity, and to self-consciously shift her gendered identity in different contexts. One example of this can be seen when Sophie is deferential to her husband in public spaces in order to preserve the illusion that he is the dominant partner and therefore save him from 'losing face' in his own community, but asserts her ideas of gender relations in the private space of their home by insisting, for example, on equal sharing of the housework.¹⁰ The opportunities to create a lasting connection with Thailand,

¹⁰ The term to 'lose face' means to be embarrassed or shamed, in this case it would be a cause for embarrassment for Sophie's husband if she publicly challenged him or asserted her inde-

to live outside of her own country and run her own business are just some of the new possibilities that were opened up by her initial intimate relationship with Nok.

Conclusion

Stepping away from an interpretive frame that seeks to measure cross-cultural encounters against pre-set notions of success, morality and power opens up possibilities for seeing a multifaceted and varying field of experiences arising out of sexual relationships that cross cultural, social and economic axes of difference. The relationship explored in this paper brings new insights to the romance tourism literature in a number of arenas. Specifically, it provides the opportunity to expand current representations of power, the influence of temporality and spatiality on subjectivity and the new possibilities that the relationships open up for the men and women.

As I have argued in the first section of the paper, much of the existing research in the romance tourism literature has conceptualised the differential economic resources of the men and women in cross-cultural relationships as the predominant axis around which power is negotiated (see: Bowman, 1989, Dahles, 1998, Dahles and Bras, 1999, Phillips, 2002). Yet this conceptualisation of power as immutably linked to economic resources ignores many other important axes through which power is negotiated. As the shifting relations of power evidenced in the relationships detailed in this paper demonstrate, the different nodes of power (for example economy, culture, education, gender) are not positioned in a clear hierarchy of importance for determining the outcomes of encounters. Rather, different nodes of power take on more or less importance in determining the outcomes of specific encounters depending on the social relations that configure the context in which the encounter takes place. The shifting status of Sophie and Nok as they moved through different sites clearly illustrates this point.

Insights around subjectivity and the way in which it can shift in different temporal and spatial contexts challenge existing understandings in the romance tourism literature. Much of the literature positions the subjectivities of the men and women in static ways, with the men often portrayed as economically marginalised, predatory 'playboys' and the women as either cultural dupes or hedonistic exploiters (see: Bowman, 1989, Dahles, 1998, Dahles and Bras, 1999, Phillips, 2002). By fixing the subjectivities of the men and women in these ways, researchers also fix their motivations by arguing that the men are always and only ever interested in sex

pendence too vigorously in front of his friends because of a Thai gender norm that privileges male dominance. If a man is seen to be dominated by his wife he may be teased with the phrase *klua mia* [afraid of your wife].

and/or money in their relationships with the women, and that the women are interested in either love or sex exclusively. Such analyses ignore the possibility that the motivations for participating in the relationships may change over time, and that they may be influenced by different contexts and geographies.

One of the key arguments presented in much of the romance tourism literature is that the subjectivities of the men and women and consequently their motivations, are unchanging. In Sophie and Nok's case, the motivations for participating in the relationship shifted over time, from an initial desire to engage across axes of difference to a deeper emotional commitment and desire for integration of their lives, to a distancing when the relationship ended. In other relationships I documented while in the field the importance of spatial and temporal shifts to the motivations of sexual partners for participating was clear. As they moved through different sites, the men and women crafted their subjectivities in multiple ways. At different times and in different sites, varying motivations took precedence. At some times and in some sites the motivation for participating in the relationship was primarily sexual with little sense of emotional engagement. At others, the motivation for participating in the relationship was driven by the need to escape harm. At yet others, deep emotional engagement characterised the link between the men and women. This multiplicity of engagements is largely absent from the romance tourism literature, yet it was clearly evident in many of the relationships that I encountered in Thailand.

The final theme that I want to reflect upon here is that of the new becomings and possibilities for participants, which arise out of these cross-cultural relationships. A particular notion of success underpins many of the accounts of cross-cultural relationships in the romance tourism literature (see: Meisch, 1995, Lette, 1996, O'Connell Davidson, 1998, Pruitt and LaFont, 1995). Success is determined by measuring the relationships against an assumed 'normal' heterosexual relationship and dismissing relationships as unsuccessful if it does not endure. By foreclosing the meaning of success in this way, much is ignored in terms of possibilities which the relationships may open up for the partners outside of the structure of a monogamous relationship.

My notion of success in cross-cultural relationships is not dependant on the relationship enduring. Rather, I see the relationships as successful if they open up new possibilities for either or both of the partners. These new becomings include new skills such as increased cultural understanding, new job opportunities, and the possibility to explore new forms of masculinity and femininity. The personal successes can have substantial impacts on the life-courses of individuals, and should not be eschewed as they often are in the existing literature.

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