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Alan Klima

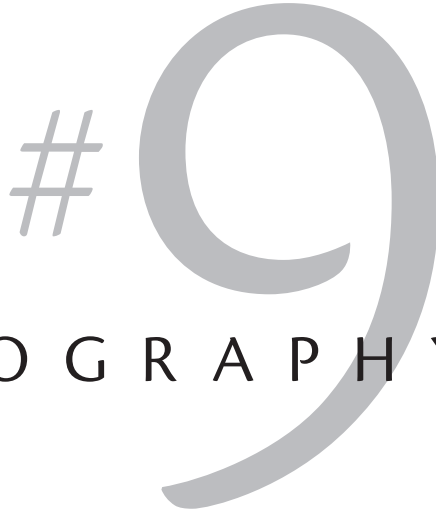
ETHNOGRAPHY

9



ETHNOGRAPHY #9

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ETHNOGRAPHY

ALAN KLIMA

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Printed in the United States of America

on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Matthew Tauch

Typeset in Merope and Cronos Pro

by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Klima, Alan, 1964– author.

Title: Ethnography #9 / Alan Klima.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2019. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019011188 (print) |

LCCN 2019980315 (ebook) | ISBN 9781478005445 (hardcover) |

ISBN 9781478006213 (paperback) | ISBN 9781478007111 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Financial crises—Thailand. | Seances—

Thailand. | Lotteries—Thailand. | Thailand—Economic conditions.

Classification: LCC HC445 .K556 2019 (print) |

LCC HC445 (ebook) | DDC 330.9593—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019011188>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019980315>

This title is freely available in an open access edition thanks to the TOME initiative and the generous support of the University of California, Davis. Learn more at openmonographs.org.

Cover art by Matthew Tauch, based on photographs by Alan Klima

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I OWE A TREMENDOUS DEBT, which will never be repaid, to Bank of America. (Note that parts of this acknowledgment, not to mention the text that follows it, may be false, and no acknowledgement of actual debt — or intention of repayment — is intended or implied.) Of course, as will become eminently clear in what is to follow, the greatest debt of all is to my, as it were, “visitor,” with whom I have struggled for so long. Rather than cover that debt up by using seamless continuities to selectively write her into the text, or writing her out for that matter, I leave within the text the traces of our exchanges and negotiations, the abrupt disjunctures in our conflicting purposes, to remain as material evidence of this debt to her and to our struggle.

I also greatly appreciate the feedback from Joe Dumit, Marisol de la Cadena, Chris Kortright, Jacob Culbertson, Adrian Yen, Cristiana Giordano, Tarek Elhaik, anonymous reviewers, and Gisela Fosado, and I especially acknowledge their recognition that there is value in sometimes contemplating the kind of thought that cannot be directly stated, but that can be said.

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1 · THE GHOST MANIFESTO

THERE ARE HUMANS STALKING THE WORLD OF SPECTERS. They want something from these spirits, and they return again and again to them, seemingly relentless. This is obvious everywhere you look, especially in narrative film in the global market but also in all the ruminations over digital transformation in the world over an ethereal realm of numbers and representation, which seems to almost beckon for metaphors of ghosts and spirits. That humans are stalking the spirit world is apparent everywhere you look, although I myself, at least in my capacity as a finite mortal, cannot look everywhere.

And yet there is a certain value to embracing that fact, and instead turning to look nowhere, no place. This series of meditations on the past in Thailand, *Ethnography #9*, is the ninth in a series of meditations on no place, the previous editions of which may or may not have ever existed.

There are humans stalking the spirit world. This is not restful, nor a sign of rest, nor something that can rest or be put to rest. The digital instantiation of social realities proliferates with such obvious relentlessness, and there are groping critical hands reaching for the spirit world, and this will not stop or lie still. And what is owed in return?

How do you understand this spirit world? Is the spirit world fiction? Is it true but unknowable? Is the spirit world a product of primitive fetish-

ism or simply inappropriate subject matter for enlightened social science to engage with, or is there some other way in which it is to be separated, barred?

And what are you, then, in relation to it?

Dubbing the Numberstream

You would not know at first glance that the room is actually built of old teak boards, because the old wood is shellacked to a point approaching vinyl. The house is built to last. For insurance, there are photos of family ancestors, kings, and Buddhist saints hung all along one wall as well as bright-red protective flags hung near every door on which arcane inscriptions of numbers and sacred alphabets are inked into complex matrices designed to cheat fate.

The brand-new flat-screen here in this Northern Thai house plays over and over the images from exactly halfway around the world of two planes crashing into New York City, of explosions, of two tall white buildings tumbling down and lashing out with giant paws of dust.

Kamnoi, in her sixties with failing eyes, is latched to the set. With her notebook and pen in hand, she searches the screen through big frog-goggle glasses. Her jet-black wig is tilted off-kilter, but she takes no notice. A plane hits; she writes down the time. A building crashes; that gets jotted down too. The colors of the smoke, the shape of the rubble, and the numbers estimated to have died, all these are inscribed as quickly as Kamnoi can perceive them or can receive information from the on-the-fly Thai translations of live video feed that chime in and out of the foreign broadcast almost randomly.

Interpretation runs in her family. As a young woman she would attend the backyard cinema her neighbor would set up on Sundays, where it was her uncle who served as the voiceover translator and dubber for Hollywood films, although he knew no English. Sitting in the back, throwing his voice through a PA system, he would ventriloquize whatever he decided the characters might be saying to each other. A deep voice for men, a high voice for women. The drama did not suffer, Kamnoi has insisted on several occasions.

Her notebook is a mess of observations, readings, and numbers. "These

are the raw events,” she explains. “The rawness is the misfortune. But it leaves a hole in the world. And to that hole of extraordinary misfortune, fortune is drawn. Then you have to pull out the cooked meaning, and you get the number.”

As Kamnoi moves quickly but calmly, my own mind is spinning political nightmare stories and future scenarios (which, it so happened, paled in comparison to reality). I am comforted by Kamnoi’s combination of assurance in the future and her whatever-will-be-will-be attitude. If she gets the right numbers, she will know soon enough.

But in a few days it will become apparent that they are not the right numbers. Actually, she could have won if she had not spent today decoding her TV set and had instead gone out to the market, where she normally would have gone had none of this happened exactly halfway around the world. If she were in the market, she would be privy to the general consensus, which is short and sweet not to mention correct. There are four planes, and two buildings have gone down. Four and two are the hot numbers. Everyone in the local market is going to clean up.

Meanwhile, the bet takers in the local underground lottery (which uses the last numbers of the government lottery number drawing) will lose big and almost be bankrupted, as sometimes happens when a large social body cooks the raw event in just the right way.

Kamnoi is one of innumerable people in her rural Northern Thai district who spend a considerable portion of their lives attending to the world for the numerical communications lying behind its appearances. And it is 2001 by Christian accounting, which is not quite foreign to her or anyone around here, where it is also 2544 in the Buddhist calendar. It does seem like the first year of a new millennium. But we are not going forward much here. This is, more or less, the end. That millennium will not ever come, as we know. But here, now, near the end of time for Kamnoi, opportunities for numerical perception come while she is reeling from the financial catastrophe of the Asian financial crisis that has just unfolded over recent years. This happens to be a place severely impacted by the spread of neoliberal discourses of financial liberalization, which set up conditions of capital free-flow and financial panic and set in motion a painful aftermath of unemployment, inflation, and economic stagnation that is still very much present now, materially, as the trade towers come crashing down. And that was that. War, destruction, hate, loudness, the end of the human

race, and the destruction of the planet followed, and we all know how that turned out, so we will not go further into all that came after life was over.

Instead it is here, in this conjuncture between two different lives of numbers, and on this exact position in the line of past time, that I wish to drop the question of fantasy and the real. On one side lies financial liberalization, with its global imagination about a most abstract sense of monetary value that was to be set free to live as pure number in a deterritorialized and digitally mediated virtual environment in which it could roam and trade freely without limit. On the other side are those impacted by this regime of numbers but who are, in their turn, at least as ardently engaged in an abstract realm of numbers and fortune, all the more so as the money has dried up in all other economic forms beyond the quick wins and losses of gambling on numbers. And there may be, of course, no coincidental relation just at this moment between these two numerical worlds.

But, then again, this is also fiction, because there never was such a thing as “this moment,” any more than there is a “this moment” now that it is all over. You can check this for yourself. Just look for the present, and what you will see is a memory of the near past drifting ever away, crumbling, unsteady. There is only the past, and not even that can be grasped.

Still, one might be tempted to cling to something other than time, at least, as real. One might be tempted to designate these animated realms of numbers — if we understand Marx’s idea that they are, ultimately, themselves also bizarre social containers of labor “time” — as somehow unreal, yet with reality effects. What, then, to do with the fact that digital markets of currency exchange, derivatives, and abstract monetary entities and futures are traded in nominal volumes that dwarf in thousandfolds the commodity economy and occasionally crash with extreme fury to suddenly scorch people, creatures, land and air and water? Some abstraction, right? This conjures up something that seems almost an autonomous power: the notion that abstract time-value exchange realms could be apart in their nature let alone trickle out from themselves with value.

By contrast, the world of divination, ghosts, and specters is famously regarded — in certain circles around and about the world — as being wholly dependent on cultural constitution and only possibly, just possibly, touching the real occasionally (while many would completely disagree).

But there is, in my estimation, a profound irony involved in a realist discipline like anthropology as it peers into the realm of fantasy (and this

is a problem of interpretation compounded by the long-standing association of capital with fantasy in critical theory). The problem that insists and intrudes here is how an anthropology of fantasy might tend to cast both the documentarian of fantasy and the inspected content of fantasy itself “in the land of the real.” In other words, one presumes that any dream content that appears before the documentarian’s view is really there, that is, that the documentarian of fantasy is working with and through “really existing fantasies” and is not making them up, hallucinating, or even substantially duped by their own inherent or constructed desires.

Not to mention the belief that we already know that the documentarian, the author, or the writer is her- or himself real, and we already know very well just what sort of a thing that being is.

No more thought or attention to this matter need detain us. One may write about fantasy, but what one writes is, on balance, not fantasy but reality delivered in a realist frame.¹

And one knows who or what one is.

This realist frame becomes doubly privileged when we bring fantasy and capital together, no doubt beginning at least with Marx, or so it seems to me, and the fanciful images of commodity fetishism that he drew of men chasing, interacting with, speaking to, and finally bowing down before animated fantasies of value without seeing that they were, in fact, their own creations. Of course, in this playful image that Marx causes to arise, there is a certain sense in which the ardent capitalists imagine nothing but, in fact, accurately perceive the real state of value under a social regime of commodity fetishism. But what they lack, as Marx makes evident through his tropes, is a conscious sense of the fantastic to it all, of all the human creation and the ordering of this codification of desire. Or that is how I would prefer to phrase it. One could also draw on the colonialist frame of “fetishism,” the thought-world of the “primitive,” for a trope (or rather, is it not meant almost literally?) that can capture the lack of enlightened perception into things as they really are.

The extrapolation of Marx’s read on abstract monetary value into other cultural realms of fantasy has, of course, been much elaborated over the previous century, especially enabled by Freud’s tactics of dream reading back to primary messages displaced in dreamwork and all the analogies it became possible to draw with primary social conflicts and their expression in the cultural life of groups. Arguably, though, the analysis of dream and

capital has returned full circle as it contemplates forms of life tendered in abstract monetary entities; the digitized and globalized realm of financial communication; and the space, time, territory, and sovereignty it re-forms and deforms. Figures of the spirit world, the spectral and ethereal, seem to beg to be used to describe this, and, of course, they have been used, particularly within critical logics of debt and haunting.

There the spectral functions as metaphor and trope. Famously with Slavoj Žižek: revenants return from death as the “collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt” and represent “the fundamental fantasy of contemporary mass culture.”² The ethereal is the sovereign metaphor for global empire in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.³ Cultural geography has a “spectral turn” that Emilie Cameron has so pointedly exposed for its exploitation of spectral imagery that reproduces colonial power relations.⁴ This tapping into the spirit world in social theory, of course, begins at least as far back as Marx.

And what if there were a different question than that critically posed most often to the liberal use of spectral metaphors in thought about the expanding virtual world? The common reaction to the overuse of spiritualist metaphors to contemplate the digital future is to demand that we be shown the insides of the black box: the material realities, the precise wirings and apparatuses, their global routes covered and passed over, and the social structure that enables their construction in a way that grounds analyses of the virtual world in actual material relations, networks, or hardware. In fact, such questions are not inherently inimical to spectral theory of globalization, as, after all, a notion of an actual physical material world was, in fact, where Marx seemed to be headed when he first invoked the images of so-called primitive fetishism and exposed capitalists as new pagans with occluded vision.

Of course, there was even then, no less than today, nothing entirely new about the propagation of haunting and scary stories of economic change, of the bodily and material transmogrification of value into the fantastical immaterial recomposed into increasingly abstract realms. It is one of the most common plot movements in the genre of economic horror stories. Even Adam Smith propagated this fear in his story of money and its evolution out of barter and trade into equivalency devices of valuable objects such as gold.⁵ However, that is all backstory; the real story begins to move at the point where one had to be sure that the gold in the coin was

pure and was actually the weight claimed. And in order to make this certain, the sovereign would place his stamp and face upon the gold to certify its proper value. Eventually, however, what happened was that the stamp began to become more important than the gold, and the face on the gold became, with paper currency, value in itself, representing a deposit of gold held elsewhere. Adam Smith feared the day when value would become all stamp . . . the face of the sovereign divorced from its material embodiment like a ghostly visage and trace, seen but not bodily present in the full. At that point of rupture with the body . . .

an invitation to the wildest speculations . . .

breaks with gravity . . .

without limits, material constraints, while we here, down on earth, are compelled to live, still in our bodies, and the value we have created is granted a freedom we can never have . . .

and then even the ghostly face disappears and only the number remains, virtually without form . . .

and, therefore, a freed human imagination could have the power of return, to insert itself into the very fabric of the most utilitarian aspects of human exchange and stake its claim . . .

Insistent and Real

These stories of the Nextworld from the 2500s (the Buddhist era) of ghosts and numbers, from the times of pre- and postcrashing Thailand, are stories about something missing, about debt and haunting, about the insistence of a strange hollowness, palpable yet invisible for the most part. This non-thing that debt and haunting share.

What I mean by that which is missing yet present is not like the status of reality in fiction, the missing bit of reality-ness in an otherwise convincing fictional world, that shadowland of narrative where we suspend our disbelief and therefore experience the strange light of an unreal real. I do not mean to call attention to similar “fictions” of money and spirits. It is easy enough to imagine that money has no value apart from that fictionally ascribed to it in a system of convention, commodities, or so-called fetishism. And it would be easy enough to stress that, at bottom, money, like ghosts, is empty.

Of course, when such things are said of money in social science, it is meant only to heighten our sense of the social reality, that socially, money is very real, and therefore, in its social space, it impacts people with all the effects of a socially enforced *but therefore also socially changeable* reality.

This absence of substance, with all the effects of being substantial, might be comparable to or even serve as the mirror image of the spirit world, at least from a certain anthropological perspective. There, too, it is said, the fictions of spiritual entities are formed in systems of conventions, shared beliefs, language, and media. For those who believe or inhabit the “worldview,” there are very real consequences of the agreed fictions of spirits in social space not to mention in the vibrations of intimate affect. And this only serves to heighten the reality effect that an anthropological author can transmit.

But all that social construction, you see, is only one side of the story. The whole world can seem to be understood with only that side of the story. Money, persons, the whole world can fit this picture of social construction, with all its people and animals, its forests and seas, its global connections and disjunctures, its dreamworlds and beliefs, its wired and wireless networks of information and values circulating over the surface of the earth. I, too, see that world.

But I can also see another.

A Haunted Teak Pillar

We all call him Uncle Wua, an old man who listens in on our conversations under the shade of the stilted house, talk that always makes its way around to the subject of money. As he is paralyzed, he is laid out there every day on his bamboo platform to while away the daytime hours. He is always there, hovering half a meter in the air, an almost-but-not-quite-unnoticed reminder of the call that ghosts and spirits of the dead have on the wealth of this world.

Old Uncle Wua had been in good health and spirits back in the 1980s, when this stilted house was built and the local economy was in the prime of adolescence and had started to spurt, especially invigorated by those plugged into the power plant run by the Thai state and staffed by members of the most powerful union in the kingdom, the Union of Electricity

Workers. That was the time when all the building and construction took off. Years of salaried work had slowly built up in the local economy to what seemed like a sudden tipping point in the late eighties, when everyone who could manage would become singularly focused on building the best house that money could buy.

And nothing was better in the category of best, nothing so signaled the embodiment of wealth, than wood. Teak, that is. Endangered. Regulated and therefore usually illegal. Precious beyond compare. You put in an order with the right person (and everyone knows who that is), and the teak is delivered to the construction site in the middle of the night. No one ever died at the point of delivery. It was only people out chopping it down in the forest or people carting it off in pickups or the occasional police officer who failed to obey the chain of command, pay-off, and territorial boundary who was offed in some offhand way, usually by a bullet in the head and two in the chest, somewhere off in the distance where an ordinary consumer's thoughts rarely roamed.

It is not only the endangered rarity of teak that makes of it such a solid embodiment of the idea of wealth. It is also that it is, quite plainly, hard. Solid hardwood that comes from massive, tall trees. Nowadays, as the government has relaxed restrictions on cutting down trees on your own property in order to encourage the home cultivation of teak, fields everywhere in Northern Thailand have become populated with teak trunks arrayed in something like a military review. You can see almost endlessly into the depths of the tree grids since the low-lying leaves and branches are shorn off to encourage faster growth of the trunk, straight up in the air, and for packing in tighter rows and columns. Before the new government policy, there was no incentive to plot these graphs of trees since the ordinary person would not risk cutting down teak on his own property, as it would be obvious who did it, while only the Thai Forestry Department had the legal right to fell a teak tree.

Of course, teak's value also derives from its long use and association with the home, as it makes a great board, hard yet flexible under foot and weight while also having little expansion or contraction with fluctuations of humidity compared to many other species. But in matters of building impressive homes, it is not the usefulness of boards that signals the solidity of value so much as it is the trunk itself. Fronting the home with at least two columns, like two hard slaps in the face, the solid trunk of teak

is the only absolutely essential element of an inspiring house. Such pillars of teak trunk contain the as-yet-unformed potential of the tree and yet are harvested, in possession, the stored potential of teak wood ready at any moment to become teak boards, furniture, ornament. It is, in a sense, a formless, fungible sort of wealth in that it carries the potential to become many things. For those who can manage, every stilt of the house should be a big, dense, solid teak trunk, the fatter the better. In the best case, all the boards of the house should also be teak. Cement should appear only sparingly, in the bathroom or kitchen perhaps, or perhaps the rear stilts, or nowhere at all. But most important are the two frontal pillars of solid, sanded and stained but otherwise uncut trunks of tree.

Few obtain the ideal for the whole house, and Uncle Wua was no exception, and this is what renders the two frontal pillars all the more important, as everyone can be sure to be compared there at least. It is there where you put in your best effort to bring to material fruition the solidity of your position in the realm of wealth. And as the disciplined rows of new teak-tree fields have begun to report to duty, it is even more true than ever to say that, in a sense, one builds one's house literally out of wealth. Not just with wealth, but with wealth itself as a building material and the most important one at that.

Uncle Wua, back in the days when he was in good health, had managed to get two massive teak trunks delivered in the middle of the night. He was, it turned out, the happiest he ever again would be when he woke up that morning. They were not tall trunks, as they would only be frontal pillars to support a small veranda. But they were thick and heavy enough. Really heavy.

He was, and still is, a nice man, a good man. A guy like that marries quickly and easily. The mother of the bride likes him as much as her daughter does and tends to be content with less bride price, or "mother's milk" compensation, than she might be were he different. So things like that go smoothly. But often they do not stay that way because, as with all good men, there was no avoiding the fact that other ladies would perceive this good heart as well. And it was not such a bad thing in his mind or in the minds of most men he knew to occasionally fool around with women. Or, as it were, many women, or, as it were, rather often, or perhaps the best way to put it would be practically all the time. His wife would alternate between knowing it, not wanting to know it, "not knowing it," getting into

jealous rages, and gambling here and there in her spare time in quiet desperation and treasuring her favorite possessions, most of all a big, thick gold chain, her favorite piece of jewelry of which she was quite proud.

Things went on like this for her until she died of cancer, as many do in the area. Soon after, Uncle Wua fell in love. Too soon, it turned out. But he was sincere enough. He may have even been faithful to her (although he is not so forthcoming with the personal details the closer the story gets in time to the incident).

But even after a few years, his wife did not fade from the picture. One night, a friend came to stay in Uncle Wua's house for a couple of weeks, and his wife came as well. Uncle Wua put them up in what had been his wife's room. The very first night, as soon as they put the lights out, they heard creaking footsteps in and around their room but thought nothing of it as it was probably Wua. But why it sounded like he was in their room, they could not say. The next night, they went out drinking and on to the village temple where there was a fair where you could pay to dance with young women for five *baht* a dance. Uncle Wua, especially, had a blast dancing the night away with the women.

But when they all got home, they found, to their great alarm, that all the lights, which they had left off, were on brightly in every room. They were all afraid of robbers, but as they crept up silently to the door and slipped in, they found no one there. Instead, they found spoons from the kitchen scattered on the living room floor.

That night, when the couple went to sleep, the husband swore he woke up, or half woke up, in the middle of the night and saw red eyes peering at him through the window. The red eyes made him feel faint, and he collapsed back to sleep.

The next day they convinced themselves that it had been a cat, somehow hanging from a branch, or a dream.

During the next night, the couple woke up together, and with a sudden shock, they saw looming up over them and right next to the bed the angry red eyes and the form of a pale woman. At first they could not move away from the thing at the bedside, the side of the bed that had once been that of the dead wife. But eventually they regained the use of their muscles and sprang forth and ran out of the room and out of the house. They had to be coaxed back in but refused, in any case, to sleep in that room again.

Around that time, Uncle Wua's new girlfriend came to him, asking him