

## The Poetics of Recording: Zakariya Amataya in Thailand

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### Recording My Friends

At the end of a 10-day trip to Thailand to study politics and poetry, I am at the departures terminal of Suvarnabhumi Airport in Bangkok where I am approached by a representative of the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT). She is aiming to interview tourists about their spending habits, favorite tourist sites, and the general experience of being in Thailand from a foreign perspective. She asks me a set of routine survey questions but we often go off-topic. The survey seems related to an official attempt to moderate the impact of that week's Erawan Shrine bombing in the heart of Bangkok's shopping district. Were they aiming to send off departing tourists with the image of the things they liked most about their trip—along with a free pocket-sized resin magnet of two elephants standing face to face with trunks raised?

During the twenty minute interview I reeled through the places I'd been over the past ten days: the volatile global city, the distant landscape of a former sultanate in the southern border region, collecting various academic accounts of a cosmopolitan imam named Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir al-Fatani (1875-1954?)<sup>1</sup> and his impact on a contemporary poet; along with the hopeful optimism that first-time visitors will forge connections that can develop—over the years—into sincere friendships. She may have perceived my response as useless detour from the business of tourism, but I felt we could be friends if we were to have this conversation in another context. That interview channeled my own reflection on how we might transcend the trappings of guest and host. Friendship may mean that we do not look at our in-country colleagues as 'informants,' and that we will knowingly fall short in the attempt to reciprocate what they do for us. The challenge of recording others is to document something greater, more intimate, and far more complex than the elements we are trained to document—especially those fragments we are challenged to reveal. In a world that is tragic and unsettled, how might we reveal our own 'turns' as a re-cording of the recorder?

When I arrived at this airport to begin fieldwork ten days earlier, I continued a repetition that began first as a graduate student writing a dissertation on Thai politics, literature, and cinema, and now as a Japan-based college professor. The way I position myself in Thailand

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<sup>1</sup> Haji Sulong's enforced disappearance took place in 1954, but there is not evidence of his actual death.

changes, as both people and events lead me into new corridors of thought that disorient and defamiliarize surroundings. I enjoy reading sometimes more than I enjoy existing among others, and this is why I look for people who inspire me to enter their world.

In 2010, the Malay-Thai poet Zakariya Amataya took *New York Times* reporter Thomas Fuller to Thailand's 'deep' South to tell a story about political division.<sup>2</sup> The interview revealed the poet's otherworldly (I hesitate to use the word 'spiritual') approach to writing that is fascinatingly rare in the contemporary media landscape. I have long admired his ability channel marginal stories through the filters of popular culture. The poet is, he wrote, like the poem:

Like a demon craving  
to be free from entrapment  
Shaking pen in hand  
Across scrap paper  
Into a keyboard  
Onto the monitor screen  
Down the cable  
Into the pages of newspapers,  
Magazines and journals<sup>3</sup>

Zakariya's frequent encounters with international news outlets reflected his heightened distinction after winning the Southeast Asia Writers Award (SEAWrite), the region's most prestigious literary award. But this global recognition also coincided with Thailand's attempt to grasp a misunderstood regional conflict in the poet's Southern border province. Zakariya, who goes by the nickname 'Che,' writes his poetry in Thai, a language which even his parents—born into a country called Thailand—do not speak. A largely Muslim region in a country dominated by Buddhism, the nation's three southernmost provinces have resisted Buddhist settlers and the cultural policies of the Thai state for a century. The persistence of *bahasa Melayu* as a mode of resistance reflects a history that predates the Thai state. In this sense, Che is an anomaly, a recipient and spokesperson of an esteemed literary award and of Thailand's selective incorporation of its border regions. I first met Che in 2009 at Suan Ngeun Mee Ma, a writers' training center in Bangkok. Writers living there would often congregate around picnic tables in the evening and engage in lively debate about their craft. An oasis amid traffic, it is one of the rare residences with trees. We would later meet in 2011 when he arrived in my home city of Honolulu, where he spent three weeks as an artist-in-residence at the Doris Duke Center for Islamic Studies. We have met at least once per year since.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Fuller, 'A Poet's Return Home to Thailand's Violent South,' *New York Times*, Oct 20, 2010. Accessed from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/21/world/asia/21iht-thai.html>. For me, Fuller is an extremely vivid journalist, from his piece on the importance of poetry in the South to his moving eye-witness account of the May 14, 2010 assassination of Maj. Gen. Khatiya Sawatdiphol during that year's Red Shirt anti-government protests. I want to point out that the concept of a 'deep-south,' as Piyada Chonlaworn observes, 'inevitably reflects the remoteness and peripheral status of this area' from the central bureaucratic arm of the Thai state. See Piyada Chonlaworn, 'Viewing Deep-south Thailand from a Historical Perspective,' *CSEAS Newsletter* (Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University) 4, No. 3. (2015), accessed January 20, 2015, <http://www.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/2014/05/viewing-deep-south-thailand-from-a-historical-perspective/>.

<sup>3</sup> Zakariya Amataya, *No Woman in Poetry*. (Bangkok: 1001 Nights Edition, 2010) p. 9.

Che's time in Honolulu helped me to experience the ability of friendship to reach across global space. We shared conversations on Thailand's political divisions, the intimate connections Hawaiians and the Malay have with the ocean, but also warm conversations in the homes of friends around the city as these occasions built toward the performances he hosted at the University of Hawai'i and area libraries. Friendship can also transcend the desire to study or write about others by shifting the relationship between recorder and recorded. One night, reversing the role, he recorded my friends and me playing music and even posted a video where he reads a poem sound-tracked to one of these songs.<sup>4</sup> The day before he left Hawai'i, we stood together on the roof of the Doris Duke ('known as the Playhouse') overlooking massive peaks of water unloading treacherous energy upon the same razor sharp reef. As I'd only seen this exclusive gated settlement from the water, I felt a strange privilege standing here as an indigenous Hawaiian. Doris Duke was a billionaire globetrotter that someone like me could only meet in novels by W. Somerset Maugham. But ironically, this securitized 'Shangri-La,' where her priceless works of Islamic and Asian art are housed, made it possible for Che to come to Hawai'i as a statement against the continued project of Euro-American colonization. On the roof, Che told me the story of his first sleepless night here where the haunting sounds of a rising swell beckoned him to the roof to acknowledge a mysterious spiritual force:

There were only three people, two guards and me. On the first night I went out alone to where the balcony met the sea. There were huge waves that appeared like a woman dancing in a white cloth, as if emerging from my imagination. It felt like I was being called out to, that I should to jump. This is a special place, as if the world began here. In the morning, the Hawaiians there told me that the *mana* of the place was welcoming me.<sup>5</sup>

In different ways, we have both been touched by this place and from this we have built a kindred bond. I am moved by his writing. But I see something just as profound in his love for and fear of the ocean.

All of these things drew me into a desire to create a visual portrait of the writer as he returns home to Southern Thailand. The scenes assembled here are part of a recording positioned between friendship and violence. The record I wrote is unlike the one I originally anticipated.

## Writing Violence

I arrived in Bangkok as the sun rose against a backdrop of convenience stores, commuters, skyscrapers, hotels, abandoned lots and sidewalk food vendors that attest to the contradictory rhythms of the city. My bag is heavy with field recording equipment, camera lenses, and a small tripod I made from a microphone stand. My aim is to visually document Che's return to the South, but also to observe his sensorial encounters with cemeteries where unnamed insurgents rest, the mosques where the Thai military exhibited its disinclination for the sacral, and the formative influence of 'family,' the dominant metaphor of nationhood—especially in Thailand. This visual document will culminate at the Haji Sulong Home (the Thai government has not allowed his descendants to register as a foundation) where Che will perform two poems on the

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKvU8jwuwtw>

<sup>5</sup> Zakariya Amataya, Videotaped conversation by Noah Viernes, August 13, 2015, videorecording.

61<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the disappearance of the southern imam, Haji Sulong. At the request of the family, Che has given a title to the event, ‘That those without tombs might everywhere find their cemetery.’ The line gives volume to the necessity of remembering the worlds the Thai nation-state would rather forget.

Haji Sulong is best known for his Seven Points on Southern autonomy, written in 1947. The document is read in different ways, for example by contemporary Thai Studies scholars like Thanet Aphornsuvan, Carlo Bonura, and James Ockey, as a source for coding the political positions on the contemporary Southern question around Thai state legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> Due to the popularity of the Seven Points during the period of post-War Thai nationalism, Haji Sulong was tried and sentenced to four years in jail for treason under the military regime of General Phlaek Phibunsongkhram. In Pattani, many believe that Haji Sulong fell victim to a repressive Thai state, which needed a body to project a threat—marking the starting point for security operations that persist into the present. His permanent disappearance at a Songkhla police station in 1954 sealed legendary status and the quest for answers. But it is really Ockey’s reading of Haji Sulong’s cosmopolitan life in Mecca that moves this historical figure beyond the geopolitics of the South. Ockey’s careful treatment of the geopolitical transformations of the Middle East in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century helped me to imagine how transregional forces like nationalism and Islamic modernism spawned independence movements throughout the non-Western world. In Mecca, Haji Sulong would study under numerous Arab scholars, forge a Malay-Jawi intelligentsia within Mecca, and witness the betrayals of Western colonial powers in the region. Though Haji Sulong seemed destined to cement his place in Mecca, his departure arose from a convergence of personal and political circumstances. With the death of his wife and child, and the Saudi-influenced Wahhabi backlash against the modernists, Haji Sulong was propelled back to Pattani. In Pattani, his global and modernist development would take shape.

Field notes fall short in the attempt to fix moments of time onto temporary destinations. They might be better described as gestures of uncertainty where infinite combinations of words struggle to anchor the scene. I desire to record movement through subterranean tunnels, clandestine routes and marginal coordinates, soundproof corridors that are particularly subversive because they have adjusted to operate beyond the constrictions of military coups and martial law. But I’m also interested in how others have taken up this challenge. In transit and traffic, I’m reading Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s, *Clandestine In Chile* because I thought the book’s documentarian protagonist would inspire a particular method for addressing the relationship between images and military rule.<sup>7</sup> Whether face down or focused on the city beyond a window, I struggle to move beyond books about other places.

Bangkok is a space of military coups in 2006 and 2014, and these national divisions set the rhythm of the story I want to tell. The pristine glare of the sun on new high rises reflects upon the early morning rush where life is discontinuous. Che’s poem ‘Silence is the Language of Humanity’ springs to mind:

<sup>6</sup> Thanet Aphornsuvan, *Rebellion in Southern Thailand: Contending Histories*, (East-West Center Washington, Institution of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007); Carlo Bonura, ‘Indeterminate Geographies of Political Violence in Southern Thailand,’ *Alternatives* 33 (2008): p. 383-412; James Ockey, ‘Individual imaginings: The religio-nationalist pilgrimages of Haji Sulong Abdulkadir al-Fatani,’ *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42, No. 1 (February 2011): p. 89-119.

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *Clandestine in Chile*, trans. Asa Zatz (New York: New York Review of Books, 1987).

Morning  
 Paints a white cloud, spreads blue  
 Lays a carpet of green grass  
 Plants purple flowers  
 And empowers the Skytrain to run  
 Beyond the vastness of Windows in a foggy room.<sup>8</sup>

These lines re-cord the city by disrupting the flow of people and things. How painterly is the morning landscape through the fog of industrialization? Free verse, his chosen mode of poetic organization, inspires—in his self-proclaimed ‘solitary’ approach—a spirit of rebellion according to a fluid vision of freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Che’s free verses are also inspired by the politics of recording. To be read he must write in Thai, not his mother tongue, Malay. He must live in Bangkok rather than an unsettled borderland where poetic reflection might serve a more direct purpose. The border needs people to record the witnesses that rarely appear in the national story. In poems like, ‘I Wish I Was a Sniper,’ Che struggles with the distance separating the writer from his homeland and the space that shields the poet from armed violence.

But I am not a sniper  
 I have no gun; I have no bullets  
 Just a pencil and paper  
 I merely scribble and arrange characters  
 That stream forth from emotions<sup>10</sup>

Che has written many other poems about the struggle of the pen to resist a violence that is both local and global. In ‘Will Bombs Fall on My Playground?’ he superimposes an image of the state’s counter-insurgency in Southern Thailand over the post-9/11 War on Terror.

Oh, mother dear,  
 Will bombs fall on my playground?  
 Will the Ferris wheel be torpedoed by tanks?  
 Will the library where we shelved tales of *1001 Nights*,  
*The Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám,  
 And my friends’ drawing books,  
 Be crushed to the ground?<sup>11</sup>

Urban life and global travel beyond the border provinces has equipped the young poet with a nomadic temperament that is no less invested in political division. His comrade, poet Mai Neung Kun Thee, was shot dead in Bangkok in April 2014 for aligning with a militant wing of the Red Shirt United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). In Thailand, such events position

<sup>8</sup> Zakariya Amataya, *No Woman in Poetry*. (Bangkok: 1001 Nights Edition, 2010) p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Zakariya Amataya, Interview by Thaweepon Amy Kummetha, August 14, 2015, videorecording.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 121.

the artist, writer, and filmmaker between the solitary cautiousness of imposing their vision on others and toward the urgency of making resistance visible. In the liminal space of work and indecision, mourning and collective memory play a highly significant role. His politics of writing intensifies my desire to see Southern Thailand, but also to think about where Haji Sulong fits in this approach.

A complete recording, however, would be a labyrinth of diversions—whether among friends at dinner or amid a crowd of protestors. In the evening, I eat dinner with my friends Boat and Ohm inside an open-air sidewalk café in the Bangkok neighborhood of Thong Lor. At a table crowded with strangers and familiar Thai dishes, we talk of books and films and sometimes lower our voices to shield our political commentary from others. I want to tell the story of how we met, and how these lasting friendships collide with fieldwork, as there is always a strong tendency to write down all we talked about in our passion to remember good times. I return to my hotel where the night folds into darkness and my memories of the day shuttle across unfamiliar blank walls.

Meanwhile, Che texts me two poems he is preparing for Friday’s event. One poem contains words I don’t understand because they not written in Thai or English. ‘What is ฮิกายัต [hikayat]?’ I typed. ‘Hikayat means tales, story, or history...like เรื่องเล่า [reuang rao], the Thai word for ‘narrative.’ Hikayat reflects the journey of Arabic into Malay that predates modern narratives of coherent national identities and pushes toward a transregional world of global travel. Che tells me that the family of Haji Sulong was so moved by the poem that it brought tears to their eyes. Che’s title, ‘Hikayat,’ is both clear and cryptic, moving the bodies of the disappeared into a new journey of language while speaking to the violence of disappearance.

It might be the current  
 Or a monstrous creature  
 That devoured him  
 Leaving no trace  
 No news  
 Some say that he’s inside the tale  
 Many people desire  
 That he reside in the narrative  
 No one speaks his name  
 Except in the official record  
 Or a mere flash of desire  
 For the inundated Seven Points

No one can remember him  
 Except that he became a mountain  
 A river  
 The land  
 An extension of the Malay peninsula

He is no deity  
 And thus lives and dies

Like all those at his side  
 Like all those who know and don't know him  
 Like all those upon his motherland

He lived a life beyond words  
 He traveled that he might learn  
 That he might impart wisdom  
 Seeking out experience  
 However limited or extensive that world  
 His acts validate his legacy

Was it the current or the monstrous creature  
 That devoured him?  
 No answer confirms the cause  
 It is not so important how he died  
 Those without tombs might everywhere find their cemetery<sup>12</sup>

### **The House**

I enjoy reading Che's poetry and considering the different ways the poems might be translated. But these poems are no simplistic literary pursuit because politics melts firm words onto a place one calls home. Now we are in Pattani, a one-hour flight from Bangkok to the Southern hub of Hat Yai followed by a one hour drive through frequent military check points toward the border of Malaysia. We are in a van with Che's friends, and friends of friends, and the long road between Hat Yai and Pattani feels like a buffer zone. As soldiers wave us through the roadblocks, Che's friends tell us that we're too old to draw suspicion. The militarization of the former Pattani sultanate, ceded to Thailand in 1909 as the British began to re-carve Malaysian territory, becomes increasingly visible as we near our destination. Militarization is one of many strategies to cement imaginary borders. What would it mean to remain at home within a heavily-guarded 'red zone'? Che's most recent poem, 'The House,' attempts to underscore the continuity of life beyond this bounded state by visualizing the timelessness of home. I begin to realize how central the performance of the poem itself will be to resisting the pacification of Pattani's checkpoint mentality. The lines of 'The House' invoke images of a man we will never meet, but builds toward a presence that remains here along the path of travelers.

When he built the home, a lantern was lit  
 Then they came to sweep and reignite the light  
 So its brightness would burn onward  
 When he sparked brilliance  
 Others moved to carry it forward among the people  
 So that the light would radiate luminously into the future

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<sup>12</sup> Zakariya Amataya, Facebook message to author, August 11, 2015.

The rain pours, the storm rages on  
 Shakes the frame into fragile vulnerability  
 But the home within remains steadfast  
 If the foundation perseveres and maintains its course  
 Through the whole of the village  
 Where the voice of scriptural recitation resounds far and wide  
 If we believe that tomorrow retains the brightness of the sun  
 Death is just a temporal moment of life,  
 The breaking point of a traveller who enters the moment of realization  
 That here, at this point, the long travail has not yet come to an end

That house toward which all drift  
 The first house of Ibrahim and his son  
 That casts a frame around the foundation of faith  
 Is the house of dreams and universal passion

This is the house that built faith  
 That lights the lamp to illuminate learning  
 His obscurity must come to an end  
 Illuminated wisdom, thought  
 Will lead them from the dark,  
 Though he who built the house has forever departed into timelessness<sup>13</sup>

The former residence of Haji Sulong remains in its original state. The house is a proclamation of his disappearance and a visual testament of a half century of neglect. Here, the person and the poem collide as a cinematic lap-dissolve where two images are indistinguishable because they are layered. Mahamasabree and Hadhi, Pattani-based organizers and friends of Che, walk with him around the house which seems to be undergoing a structural restoration in preparation for tomorrow evening's main event. I frame a few shots while considering a juxtaposition between the house of Haji Sulong and Che's return home.

The people I meet here are deeply committed to this place and far more capable than I of grasping its rhythms. In a small conference room connected to an office of the Haji Sulong family, I observe Che and his interactions with people from Pattani, Bangkok, and even someone from Hawai'i, whom I'm meeting for the first time. Haji Sulong's granddaughter, also a significant Pattani-based organizer, enters the room and asks Che to autograph her copy of his first book, *No Women in Poetry*. Che shows me an old black and white photograph of Haji Sulong sitting in front of the house surrounded by his friends, family, and national political leaders like Pridi Phanomyong.<sup>14</sup> The framed photograph, snapped in 1945, seems to draw Che into it. Two leaders, one Muslim and the other Buddhist, both enemies of the state with legacies firmly rooted in contemporary political struggles.

<sup>13</sup> Zakariya Amataya, Facebook message to author, August 11, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> A good account of the context can be found here. Thanet Aphornsurvan, Malay Muslim 'Separatism' in Southern Thailand. In Michael John Montesano and Patrick Jory, *Thai South and Malay North: Ethnic Interactions on the Plural Peninsula* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008), p. 101.



But the image that catches my attention sits on a cluttered desk in a nook of the conference room. It is a painted portrait of the Muslim leader that personifies gravity, a steadfast gaze into the eye of the viewer that haunts the history of enforced disappearance. This is the image that will be brought to the center during my time here. This face dominates my thoughts, superimposes itself over a contemporary poet's performance, and reappears in the work of several Pattani artists who reimagine this portrait in their own paintings. I realize that this is not my house, and that the house extends to embrace the ruptured existence of a broken home. To outsiders like me, the home is painted in the broad-brush strokes of Thai media stories about terrorism and a counter-insurgency; and, more recently, Thailand's relationship to its border provinces during the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006). When we arrive at Krue Se Mosque two hours later, for example, I immediately imagine this as the setting of an April 2004 news story where 32 Muslim separatists were gunned down by the Thai military after raiding a weapons depot. But this observation obstructs an intimate engagement with another person's home. The three-century old mosque sits in a high traffic area, surrounded by main streets running in different directions, where a flock of sheep roam amid the discontinuous plots of green along Pattani's urban backdrop. Che walks alone around the perimeter of the mosque where he snaps different angles with an old 35mm camera. This is where the young Haji Sulong went to school before leaving for Mecca at the age of 12. Like Haji Sulong's house, the mosque is also undergoing interior reconstruction. In many areas of the mosque, from signposts to brick walls, there are visible bullet holes left over from the 2004 stand-off. Many of the so-called combatants who died here were buried in an unofficial cemetery at Wadi Al-Husein Mosque, which we visited later in the day.

From site to site, from Pattani to Narathiwat, the dilapidated Thai flags outside of schools and mosques showcase an ailing state managed by frequent military checkpoints. Many of the soldiers seem young, dominantly male, manning a tollbooth paid ahead of time by others we will never meet. Only the lunch feast at Che's house seemed to provide a temporary escape from this brutal fact. I feel the warmth of this home as the source of stories he's told me. Three months ago, at Haroon Mosque in the middle of Bangkok, he narrated a childhood memory where recorded stories of family members, while extending their stay in Mecca, would arrive in the form of cassette tapes sent home. The family would listen to the stories, record their own on the same cassette, and mail it back to distant lands. The cassette player, Che continued, was a bridge between two homes, utilized as a means to 'connect the old time and the new.' Beyond the discourse of media, but behind the military checkpoints, the house is a crossroads where stories travel.

### **The Reappearance of Haji Sulong**

Amid plants I am a weed  
 Amid flowers I am a grass flower  
 Amid the galaxy I am a falling star  
 Amid tyrants I am a rebel<sup>15</sup>

The concept of rebellion is significant for understanding why Che writes. He is a frequent advocate of the late Algerian-French writer Albert Camus who, in *The Rebel*, wrote of the

<sup>15</sup> Zakariya Amataya, 'Forgotten One,' in *No Women in Poetry* (Bangkok: Khled Thai, 2010) p. 79.

dilemma of standing so firmly for a position that one would deploy any means to implement it. The systematic violence of domination is so narrowly focused on its vision of harmony, that it overlooks the costs and evacuates alternative viewpoints. The artist, poet, and what Camus called the 'just assassin,' are the reminders of the alternatives beyond the state. One can see in poems like 'I Wish I Was a Sniper' and 'Will Bombs Fall On My Playground?' the struggle of the poet to maintain a personal pliability within other people's demands to stand firmly behind a single position. This spirit of rebellion, which Camus tried to envision in solitary freedom and collective solidarity, is what I believe Che emulates in the art of poetry. Poetry is marginal to other modes of expression and free verse is a form of resistance to dominant rules for writing poetry. Is it possible that my recordings, through the camera lens and these daily field note captions, dilute the force of rebellion that unfolds in the moment of its performance?

I am constantly pulled outside of the moment by the struggle to close the distance that separates me from knowledge about this place. Before I arrived in Pattani, I methodically organized numerous articles on Haji Sulong and the politics of Southern Thailand to guide my thinking about a monumental figure. But Haji Sulong disappeared under traumatic circumstances in a time and place that would remain a sensory void to me if not for the empathic bonds of friendship. Friendship is what helps me, the fieldworker, the recorder, the invitee, to overcome the unpleasantness that bounce between background and foreground: the sweat and humidity, the weight of a carry bag stuffed with equipment, the sustained lack of sleep, and the recurring realization that I am never as good at speaking and listening as I should be. These limitations inspire me to record much as I can. But I am not alone in this. Everyone is recording.

On Friday evening the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2015, Che and I arrive at the Haji Sulong Home for the event that brought us south. We enter through a curtain designed with Arabic transcriptions of the Islamic prayer call. Behind the curtain, though not yet into the event area, we pass through a dimly lit corridor that is decorated with names of people associated with the life of Haji Sulong. We exit through a curtain that reads (in local Jawi and Thai script) Che's final line from 'Hikayat' that titles the evening's gathering. The corridor's exit marks the entrance to the large courtyard where empty seats are turned toward the corroded frame of Haji Sulong's original residence, where a stage has been connected to the front porch. To the left, an exhibition hall has been arranged to showcase contemporary paintings of Haji Sulong by an award-winning painter from Pattani. The white wall against which the paintings hang is arranged in a kind of sequence. The sequence begins with an iconic portrait that sits against a window in the family conference room, which I first observed the day before. The other portraits depict Haji Sulong to fill holes ruptured by local histories: a formidable religious scholar, a hero of the insurgency, the builder of the house, a figure who inspires a rare and unseen beauty 'covered' in journalistic images of death and violence. This eerie last image, of a Haji Sulong portrait arranged around small floral patterns, is displayed beneath a thin black funeral veil.

Outside the gallery, I observe more arrivals, eat an assortment of southern foods, and consider ideal locations for recording the event. No one sits until the sun fully sets, which is significant because a bright lantern illuminates the interior of Haji Sulong's house where the performances will begin. I am wearing a light brown and white Keffiyeh with a beautiful light green baju melayu shirt designed after the local patterns. The clothing was given to me by Che. In local attire I seem to blend more naturally. But I realize this is not the case when an elderly man asks to take a selfie with me. At Che's side, I shake people's hand and say *As-salamu alaykum*. There are many cameras here, of non-governmental organizations, national news

agencies, and local residents. I am reminded of a line from an anthropologist who recorded the violent military crackdown in Bangkok on anti-government protestors in 2010: ‘It is almost funny how you can judge the danger level of a spot by the presence or absence of video and photo journalists. If an area is full of them, move away. It is dangerous.’<sup>16</sup> These cameras add another dimension to that relationship by attesting to the need to have this story here, out-of-view, at the margins of the nation-state.

The people I encounter force me to rethink the relationship between local and global space. There are local reporters who must balance their attachments to place with the national demand for information about the South, former combatants, and exceptional artists who—I feel—are far less challenged than I am to convey the direct relevance of their work. I also see the positioning of so many global institutions, from scholars to the national foundations of other Asian countries. On one side, the local extensions of Haji Sulong, the moving parts of the quest for regional autonomy; on the other, the body parts of the region’s global narrative. Some faces smile more than others.

I set my camera in a small space on the dirt between other tripods and press record as Che’s poetry reading is announced, first in Thai and then in English. The performance of ‘The House’ and ‘Hikayat’ is colored by moments that belong to this space and time. Exiting a dimly lit room, the white-robed poet pushes through the front door leading to the stage outside, but the old hinges seem to require effort. The poet emphasizes the greatness of the task to make Haji Sulong’s legacy visible by repeating lines that are written only once in the script. The words flow through the seating area into the entrance to the gallery, through the entry corridor and into the streets. At the same time, I wonder if the echo of the microphone resonates in the numerous cameras, including my own, from television to Youtube where some sense of being in the moment is overcome in the flow of ubiquitous imagery.

Beyond the performances in memory of Haji Sulong, I will always remember the strange serenity of the surrounding streets. After the event’s drink vendors close down, Che and I walk for blocks and blocks looking for a convenience store to buy cold water. This is the central Meuang district of Pattani, and I begin to recall what little I learned from Thai newspaper articles. Since 2004, over 6,000 civilians, militants, teachers, imams, monks, village headmen, convenience store workers, and others lost their lives to cross-fire, IED detonations, and pipe bombs. The geography of death in Thailand’s southern border region runs through these streets. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2014, five 7-11 convenience stores were simultaneously bombed here. We continue walking. In the trees above us I notice an assortment of red, white, and blue tube-like lanterns that line our route. The illuminated colors of the Thai flag suggest that this might be a busy traffic artery in another similar size city to the north; symbols of the nation abound in subtle forms of visibility. This six-lane street is divided by a continuous line of trees where the lanterns hang so we walk in and out of the lanes. There are no cars. I snap pictures as we walk but reconsider where to point and shoot when we cross several military checkpoints built into the empty silence of the city. I think about how out-of-place I must appear to the young soldiers, which must be a symptom of my submission to their authority. There are no tourists, sidewalk vendors, or active manifestations of festive evening gatherings. In Pattani these things exist, but not here amid the militarized corners that mark our path to the convenience store.

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<sup>16</sup> Claudio Sopranzetti, *Red Journeys: Inside the Red-Shirt Movement*. (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012), p. 92.

**Outro: ‘That Those Without Tombs Might Everywhere Find Their Cemetery’**

Bangkok’s global cosmopolitan façade can often convey a sense of safety and convenience. Unlike regions under continuous martial law, as in the South, my return to this urban hub invokes a sense of routine where hotels, shopping malls, and automated machines pull me into temporary visual dreamscapes that belie its perpetual demolition and reconstruction. In the city, Japanese bookstores carry contemporary Thai-language fiction, friends are fluent in multiple languages, and the journey from neighborhood to neighborhood—from ‘Arab street’ in Nana to the South Asian alleyways of Pahurat—project something like a postmodern Silk Road. Here, the patterns of interpersonal exchange struggle amid competing centers. For me, leaving Pattani did not mean entering into Bangkok’s safety net of global convenience, or entering a capital of a modern nation-state, but it meant thinking about how to record the struggle between the two.

In the café of a hotel in Bangkok, I am organizing field notes and preparing interviews scheduled for the final two days here. On the television set, scenes from the Bike For Mom event are being broadcast live. The event, a national Mothers Day celebration of the Queen, was organized by the crown Prince. Such events are highly significant, as the King’s ailing health impacts the frequency through which observers of Thai politics are now discussing the taboo subject of succession. The Prince is a well-known cycling enthusiast, but the event is also an opportunity to raise his otherwise unpopular status among conservative royalists. In the previous month the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority set Bike For Mom preparations in motion by power washing the large traffic circle around Victory Monument. But ritual formed a stark contrast to the military dictatorship’s appeal to drought-inflicted rural regions to conserve their water usage. Perhaps the live coverage of the event provided a strange form of karma. The strategically positioned cameras accidentally captured a sequence where the Prince falls to the ground as he dismounts from his bicycle. In the cafe where I watch this unfortunate accident unfold in realtime, facial expressions temporarily escape from routine. I finally sit down to write.

The national bicycling event recalls a chapter from Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel *Persepolis*, entitled ‘The Bicycle.’<sup>17</sup> In Satrapi’s illustrations, the bicycle is a symbol of the movement, the circulation of ideas in a nation constricted by the policing of the Shah and the conservatism that followed the rise of the Ayatollah after the 1979 Revolution in Iran. It is a contradiction that the very wheels which set the revolution in motion were later dismantled to regulate everyday life more rigorously. Perhaps, falling from a bicycle expresses a fracture in the stable image of military rule and royal support for their May 2014 seizure of power. The rhythms of the streets are disordered, offering no traction for elites. But the Bike For Mom event is a reminder that streets uphold the fragile legitimacy of royal power.

The corridors of the city shelter and alienate us. The next evening, I weave between buildings on the BTS Skytrain as if floating through Bangkok in a protective bubble, safely distanced from the noise and people below. Twenty-five minutes from now a bomb will detonate on the street corner below me at the Erawan Shrine, a golden statue representing the Hindu god Lord Brahma. I am here, in this city, but separated from someone else’s wounded world because I move along a different corridor. I feel privileged to meet with writers, editors, and colleagues

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<sup>17</sup> Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and The Story of a Return* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

who have become my friends over a short decade. But the strange freedom of this corridor, as well as its contradiction, is its disconnection from the many other worlds of the city. No one can know a place as a totality, but in connecting with some people we are making choices about the distance we retain with other possible parts of that place.

The distance is bridged with a steady stream of ‘social’ media. At a restaurant with my friend, the intensity of global geopolitics disrupts our insulated academic world with text-messaged pictures of severed corpses and a flood of instantaneous updates from Twitter citizen journalists who speculate reasons for the explosion. Rumors of ‘10 dangerous sites’ where other bombs were found are combatted by official government announcements in Thai, English, and Mandarin. Exiled former-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, conspicuously silent in recent memory, posted three messages on Twitter to condemn the attacks, while U.N. Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon also expresses his shock through an instant press release. I returned to my hotel to flip between Western media channels like CNN and BBC, which say so many things that matter very little. In the continuous flow of the media massage, there are evening talk shows on Thai politics, Japanese soap operas, and game shows. I record the strange flow of contradictory images, subtitle them, and (several weeks later) project them on a big screen so that 130 Global Studies students can also experience these images. But in this distance, people disappear in the magnitude of events measured in death tolls—which are then emphasized in ethnocentric terms that are only possible by the distance social media allows.

On Facebook, contemporary Thai fiction writers like Uthis Haemamool and Che quickly express their sorrow for this attack. Che asks me to translate the following passage from Thai to English:

Even though the group of persons who carried out this tragedy is not yet clear, and while the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) came to power unlawfully, the use of violence as a response is not the way out. Those among the dead and injured are not sections of the sidewalk along a political route. I would like to express deep sorrow for those who lost their lives and suffered injury, and denounce these barbaric acts.<sup>18</sup>

I think these messages are significant because they assert the power of mourning over the necessity of explanation. The struggle to find a language for the event quickly filters through rumor and hearsay where non-experts and eye-witnesses provide filler for live television and citizen journalists pouncing leads through the ubiquitous yet dominant screen of social media. The gravity of the situation, for many, resides in knowing the level of threat a group poses to the future of tourism and shopping; for others, it is the ability for governments to provide security. In silent corridors, writers register the magnitude of loss as empathic witnesses. In empathy there is the struggle to connect.

As I set to leave Thailand, I spend one last evening with Boat and Ohm whose many years of compassion and generosity inspire hope for future opportunities to reciprocate that. We speak of books, films, and music, as we always do, but also of our selfish desire to convert the people behind these works into one of us. In the background, the song ‘Thee Wang’ (Emptiness), by the

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<sup>18</sup> Zakariya Amataya, Facebook message to author, August 17, 2015.

Thai band Pause, leads into a conversation about its singer, Amarin ‘Joe’ Luangboriboon. Joe killed himself through a self-inflicted gunshot wound in an elevator in February 2002, during my first year in Thailand. While I would never know him, or anyone that knew him personally, he is a figure that many Thai people imagine as one of them. Joe was an outsider, a ‘khon baan nork’ from the rural outskirts of Uthaithani, remembered in frames of uncertainty, antipathy to the mainstream, and elusiveness. As songs like ‘Thee Wang’ hover in the present in outdoor bars and through the PA systems of shopping malls, his death remains cloaked in mystery. Some call the suicide a murder, since Joe was found dead carrying a bag of rice porridge. Ohm asserts that Joe was gay, like many ‘indie’ vocalists, such as P’ Boss of the band Modern Dog. Our discussion of Joe this evening leads me to imagine whether these pop icons are not unlike Haji Sulong who, in disappearing six decades ago, created a space for the projection of contemporary forces in the silence of his fallen corpse. Is this perhaps one possible meaning of Che’s vision ‘that those without tombs might everywhere find their cemetery?’

Recording the present is an act of recalling and assembling the forces that circulate around us. This ‘field’ of fieldwork is not an actual place, but the parameters that have been set for replay. In a field increasingly mediated by distance and depersonalization, connections between people deepen the resonance and resolution of the recording. In recording Che, I was problematically distancing myself from the moments of fieldwork by projecting some unified narrative within a visual record. My field notes, some of which are replayed here, reveal the clichés of keeping distance. But throughout the process, re-cording meant calibrating the tensions between self and place and considering the very reasons Che’s attachment to Haji Sulong means so much to me. To re-cord is to consider the auditory and visceral senses that move and change us and to work ourselves back into the nervousness of that record—the violence, the imprecision of academic preparations, the disparate worlds of the border and city, and the moments that fill the political impasse with empathic vision. Re-cording challenges us to reveal our own vulnerabilities that are not exactly obvious through simply playing back our records. Is there a sense in which we can be more revealing of the moments that coincide with the story we try to tell?

One of my favorite memories of my time with Che was recorded by Che at the Suan Ngeun Mee Ma writers training center in December of 2011.<sup>19</sup> In the video, now posted online, Che records his friend Korb strumming a newly composed song called ‘Happiness is Tragedy Life’ on a beat-up acoustic guitar. Hadhi, who met Che and me at a Southern Thai airport six days ago, is also there. Four years have passed but what I remember most is the collective possibilities of the moment that could channel the bonds of friendship by recording the moment. Korb’s performance moved me in its raw and improvisational newness but also in his willingness to share. Stretched out on a small table in front of him, an unfolded piece of paper where barely legible English resembles the nervousness and cosmopolitan contradictions of our global present. That day, around that table, we talked politics, music, and poetry from mid-day until darkness. Che pressed *Record* to inaugurate a scene and opened an opportunity for others, like me, to access the memory. The memory remains unclear, a transitional assemblage of what I remember

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<sup>19</sup> Piyachat Jongtong, ‘Happiness is Tragedy Life.’ Uploaded by Zakariya Amataya 24 December 2011. Accessed at <https://vimeo.com/34164376> Suan Ngeun Mee Ma also functioned as a safe house for several university students charged with violating the military’s emergency decree against political protests after the May 2014 coup. It is here that they were taken into custody and jailed while campaigning under the hashtag #wearefriends.

and what Che's video helps me see, where I, too, must critically examine the relationships that allow me to record others.

When I am no longer my self  
As one might say  
I will become an Other  
Someone else that I must come to know  
And that person might be you<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Zakariya Amataya, 'I Am Other,' in *But in Us It Is Deep As The Sea* หากภายในเรารู้กรวมหาสมุทร (Bangkok: 1001 Books Edition, 2013) p. 22-23.