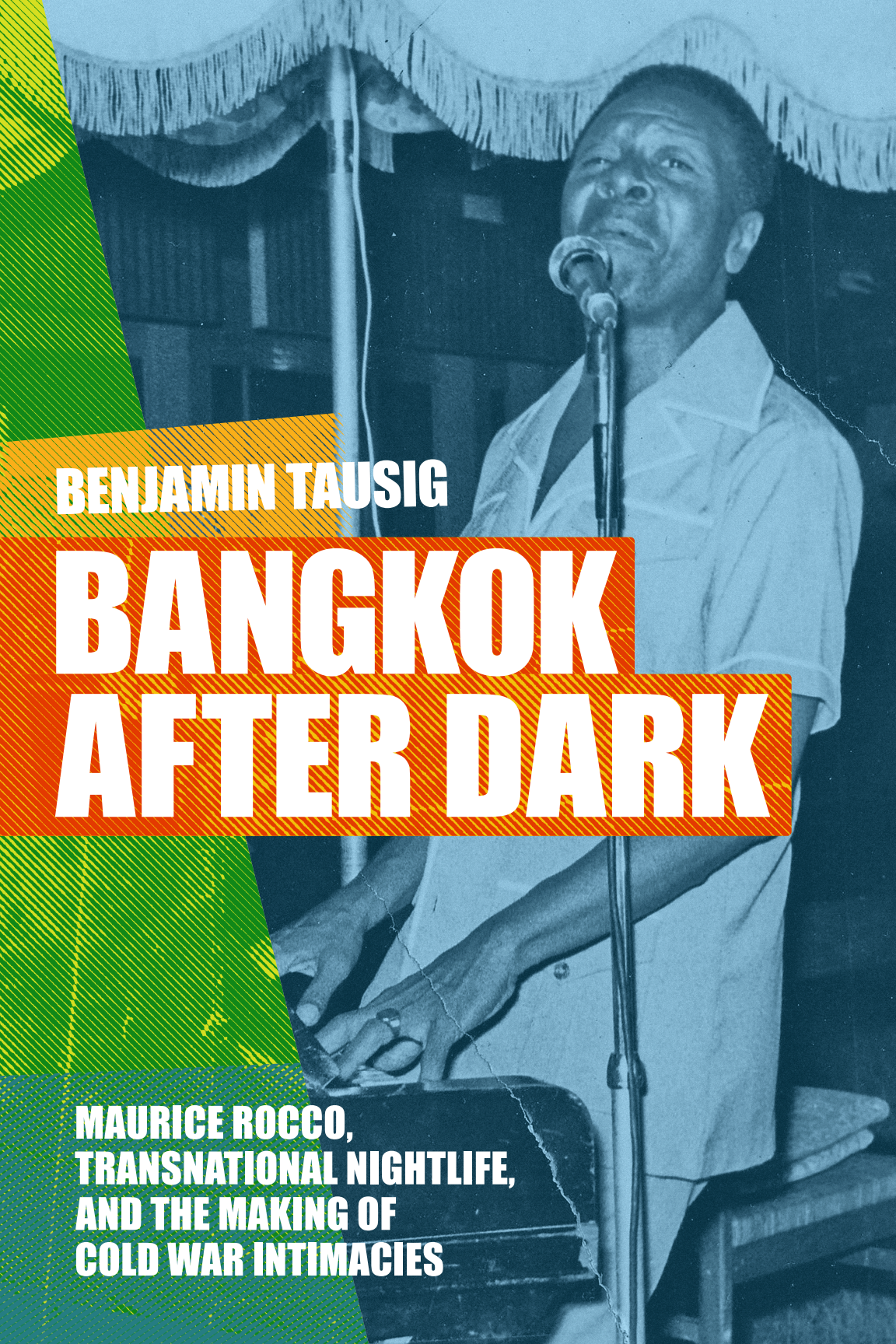

BENJAMIN TAUSIG

BANGKOK AFTER DARK

MAURICE ROCCO, TRANSNATIONAL NIGHTLIFE, AND THE MAKING OF COLD WAR INTIMACIES

BANGKOK

after Dark

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Benjamin Tausig

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2025

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Livia Tenzer
Cover designed by Matthew Tauch
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Tausig, Ben, author.
Title: Bangkok after dark : Maurice Rocco, transnational nightlife, and the making of cold war intimacies / Benjamin Tausig.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024029873 (print)
LCCN 2024029874 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478031703 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478028475 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478060680 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Rocco, Maurice. | Pianists—Biography. | African American jazz musicians—Biography. | Jazz musicians—United States—Biography. | Expatriate musicians—Thailand. | Musicians—United States. | African American gay people—Thailand—Bangkok. | Nightlife—Thailand—Bangkok—History—20th century.
Classification: LCC ML417.R674 T38 2025 (print) | LCC ML417.r674 (ebook) | DDC 786.2/165092 [B]—dc23/eng/20250211
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024029873
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024029874

Cover art: Maurice Rocco in performance at the Oriental Hotel, Bangkok. Courtesy of the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok.

For Serena, Julius, and Mae, my family,
whose support and love I acknowledge

always

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Note on Transliteration and Style

Thai names are Anglicized using a person's own preference, where known. Thai words are Anglicized using common convention whenever possible, regardless of transliteration system (such as *mor lam* for หมอลำ). In cases where there is no clear preference or convention for a name or word, I use a modified version of the Mary Haas transliteration system, with the primary aim of accommodating nonspecialist readers. Thai characters are included for titles, quotes, or individual words in cases where the original sense may be particularly helpful to have available.

I follow Viet Thanh Nguyen in using the term *American war in Vietnam* rather than the more common *Vietnam War* in order to identify this conflict with its primary aggressor, the United States.

The book uses endnotes for most citations, except for a handful of in-text acknowledgments, which appear as footnotes marked ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this book are by the author.

INTRODUCTION

Acknowledgments

The only known recording of American jazz pianist Maurice Rocco playing in Bangkok was made on a Saturday night: January 30, 1965.[a] That evening,

a ACKNOWLEDGMENT: My thanks to the three anonymous readers of *Bangkok after Dark*. All provided rigorous, engaged comments that have improved the book immeasurably. Thanks as well to Duke University Press editor Ken Wissoker, who has been a tremendous reader and source of feedback and support, as well as to assistant editor Ryan Kendall, project editor Livia Tenzer, and copyeditor Iza Wojciechowska. Special thank you to James Cui, a developmental editor who guided late-stage revisions with genuine care and remarkable insight. Thanks also to the many friends and colleagues who offered expert advice on aspects of the research or manuscript (or simply listened to me ramble) over many years: Ray Anderson, Brooke Belisle, Jonathan Bollen, Matthew David Brounley, Chiranuch Premchaiporn, Lawrence Chua, Kameron Austin Collins, Alexandra Dalferro, Martin Daughtry, Kyle DeCoste, Peter Doolan, Duangkamon Wattanasak, Valerie Elliott, Fai Lamubon, Benjamin Foley, Danielle Fosler-Lussier, David French, Kaleb

Rocco led a small band at the Bamboo Bar, a venue inside the Oriental Hotel, which sits palatially along the river, on the eve of war in nearby Vietnam. But there is no hint of conflict or even tension on the tape, only joy and abundance. Rocco is backed by a drummer, Nonda "Peter" Buranasomphob, who in other moments played in a combo with the king of Thailand. Rocco banters with the crowd, then eases into a slow, soulful version of "Don't Worry 'bout Me," a jazz standard popularized by Cab Calloway and Billie Holiday in the 1930s. He follows with Duke Ellington's "Take the 'A' Train," written in 1939. Later comes "Darktown Strutter's Ball," Rocco's showpiece from the 1945 Hollywood film *Incendiary Blonde*. The scene on the tape seems borrowed from another time, if not another world. The looming war is nowhere.

The entire set features music from Rocco's long-ago commercial peak in the United States, by then almost twenty years past. Even in 1965 he never wavers from the dated styles of swing and boogie-woogie. Conjuring the nightclubs of postwar New York nine thousand miles away and two decades earlier, Rocco wields old-fashioned charm, imitating Satchmo's genial rasp, greeting the crowd in simple Thai, improvising jokes and lyrics, giving propers to Peter, switching tempos. He clicks his shoes in rhythm. "In 1940 my style was called 'boogie-woogie,'" Rocco told a Hong Kong reporter later in the year. "And basically, I haven't changed much since then."[1]

Throughout the tape the crowd thrums with the warmth of inebriation. The space of the Bamboo Bar was intimate, about twenty teak tables plus the bar, as Mongkorn Pikaew, another Thai drummer who played with Rocco in the 1970s, described the scene to me. There, Rocco played in a bubble where the heyday of the American nightclub could still be staged, however anachronistically: "His favorite song was 'As Time Goes By,'" a 1931 jazz standard, Mongkorn said. "He would come and play 100 percent standing. That was showmanship. They had a spotlight. He would stand in it and sing."[2]

Goldschmitt, Jesse Grayman, Denise Grollmus, Tyrell Haberkorn, Matías Hermosilla, Anthony Irwin, Peter Jackson, Kanjana Thepboriruk, Sohl Lee, Siv Lie, Katie Linden, Wyna Liu, Tamara Loos, Maureen Mahon, Wayne Marshall, Craig Mazin, Ryan Minor, Rachel Mundy, Nattapol Wisuttipat, David Novak, Keith O'Hara, Bob Orlowsky, Pahole Sookkasikon, Parkorn Wangpaiboonkit, Robin Preiss, Maurice Restrepo, Thomas Lee Roberts, Serena Roth, Matt Sakakeeny, Shyam Sharma, Davindar Singh, Ryan Skinner, Norman Smith, Maria Sonevytsky, Emiko Stock, Sudina Paungpetch, Kelly Szott, Eng Kiong Tan, Lee Veeraraghavan, Yun Emily Wang, Yodh Warong, Ben Zimmer, and Eric Zolov. Many others are acknowledged throughout.

Mongkorn saw Rocco as he shined in Bangkok, not as he had in America earlier in the century. But the world in 1965 was no longer what it had been twenty years before, and Bangkok's Thanon Charoen Krung was very far from New York's 52nd Street. The symbols of Black queer performance that had signified so profoundly for Rocco in the 1940s meant something else to his listeners here. Such meetings of distant temporalities, aesthetics, bodies, and language typified Cold War nightlife in Thailand. These meetings became the grounds for new cosmopolitan worlds. This book is a study of those worlds. Rocco is a figure who might help us understand their shape, their history, and their stakes.

On that January night at the Bamboo Bar, Rocco and the crowd stared through their revelry toward a dark horizon, a decade-long quagmire in Vietnam that would claim countless lives and unsettle countless others. Rocco made Southeast Asia his home just as American troop arrivals in the region were set to begin. His career, abruptly uprooted from the United States, would soon be revived in Bangkok, where he would prosper. By the time Rocco came to Asia as an expatriate in 1964, the once-famous nightclub and film star had been almost completely forgotten in the United States, where he remains mostly forgotten today. Yet despite the vintage of the songs he played in Bangkok in 1965, Rocco's Bamboo Bar performance was no mere nostalgia tour. In fact, he was arguably as successful in Thailand as he had ever been in the United States, albeit on different terms.

To this point, consider that Rocco's Bamboo Bar tapes are now housed in the Doris Duke Audiovisual Collection, at Duke University, because the billionaire tobacco heiress personally recorded them. Doris Duke at that time was one of the richest people in the world. She was also a self-styled connoisseur of both jazz and Southeast Asia, where she actively traveled and collected art. In the early months of 1965 she visited Thailand with her boyfriend, the white American bebop pianist Joe Castro. Castro, Duke, and Duke Ellington had recently cofounded a small jazz label called Clover Records. Although their label would soon fold, at that moment the owners were busy scouting prospective artists. An archived receipt shows that during Duke's four-day stay at the Oriental Hotel, she rented a reel-to-reel tape machine, the very one she would use to record Rocco. The two had likely first met in 1943, near the height of Rocco's American fame, when he played a concert at the Duke family's opulent New Jersey farmstead. Duke was also a friend of former Oriental Hotel owner and silk magnate Jim Thompson. In short, Doris Duke was drawn to the bar that night by deep social ties. For someone so wealthy and connected, Bangkok was a premier city in the mid-1960s, and the Bamboo Bar was among its most

distinguished social settings. Marlon Brando, Dinah Washington, Mick Jagger, Louis Armstrong, and many others would follow her to the same teak tables in the coming years. The bar had been built speculatively in the 1940s to host cosmopolitan encounters in a rapidly globalizing Thailand. By the time of Rocco's gig, the designers' vision had been fully realized. On that Saturday night in Thailand's cool season, Duke sat with a tape recorder, gripped like everyone around her by Rocco. A faded star in America, a specter of the past there, he had returned to high society elsewhere: in a Southeast Asian boomtown postmodernized by war.

How did the Thai capital develop this way, and so rapidly? And how can one make sense of the central position of non-Thais, including a Black American expatriate, in the country's dramatic transformation? How might Rocco's individual story of displacement from the United States, and his arrival in Thai nightlife, help illuminate the dynamics of greater geopolitical shifts that entangled Southeast Asia and the West during the Cold War?

The Oriental Hotel often advertised Rocco's performances with the word *modern*. Gazing at the Chao Phraya River over a gin glass, a customer could forget that jazz had taken a different turn elsewhere, that rock and roll had long since displaced jazz as the most popular and timely music in the United States. At the Bamboo Bar Rocco's music could still be heard as essentially modern, with no nostalgic caveats. For Rocco Thailand was, at last, after nearly fifteen years of wandering, *somewhere else*, a place that would validate and sustain him. Here his erstwhile identity came into intimate contact with Thailand under American neocolonialism. This contact opened toward something like a parallel universe of modernity. As a work of history, this book is set along the paths to and through this Cold War nightlife dreamworld along which Rocco and many others traveled. It is equally and irreducibly about *both* Rocco and Thailand, two entities that I would argue are, in the lens of history, deeply interlinked. The primary argument of this book is that American and Thai cultural frameworks were synthesized in deep and consequential ways over the course of the war in Vietnam, and that much of this happened within the intimate crucible of nightlife. *Bangkok after Dark* traces and analyzes this synthesis, for which Rocco was one protagonist.

Spirits and Souls

Maurice Rocco is today almost entirely absent from North American jazz historiography. No academic books or articles have ever been written about him, and he is barely known even among devoted jazz fans. But he was, and to some

degree remains, a source of fascination to writers and intellectuals. Algerian French philosopher Albert Camus, on a visit to New York in 1945, wrote in his diary that "Rocco . . . is the best [pianist] I've heard in years. He plays standing in front of a rolling piano that he pushes in front of him. The rhythm, the force, the precision of his playing, the way he puts his whole self into it, jumping, dancing, throwing head and hair left and right."[3] Jack Kerouac writes briefly about Rocco in his novel *Visions of Cody*. Rocco has been often recognized by those who regard performance as an art form.

Rocco is also still remembered in Thailand. One recent fictional representation of him appears in Pitchaya Sudbanthad's highly regarded 2019 novel *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*, a collection of vignettes loosely centered on a single plot of land in Bangkok. Early in the novel, a trader builds a house on the land during missionary times. Generations live and die inside. In the 1990s, developers raze the ancient wooden structure to make room for a more modern apartment tower. Worlds emerge, then diffuse into the next, then the next. In an imaginary future set soon after our own time, the same land is flooded by the rising tides of the Chao Phraya River. Bygone worlds persist.

Throughout the novel, spirits good and ill visit the plot of land, as spirits in Thailand do. One vignette is set in the mid-1960s, when a rich Thai socialite hires an American jazz musician named Clyde Alston (a character based on Rocco) to play piano for a group of ghosts who haunt a wooden pillar in her sun-room. The ghosts have been disrupting the socialite's sleep because they suspect her of selling the house—their house. The socialite thus calls on a spirit medium, who tells her that the ghosts want to hear live music. So she hires Alston to give them a private concert.

Shaken, he obliges. It's a gig. With a piano in an empty room, Alston tries to pacify spirits he can neither see nor understand.

Pitchaya's story about a jazz musician playing for animist ghosts is fictional, but nearly every other detail about Alston is true to Rocco's biography. Like Rocco, Alston is a gay Black American who left the United States when his career collapsed, playing in Europe for several years before settling in Thailand, a place of opportunity. Distance from the United States defines Alston as a character, just as it came to define Rocco in reality. He plays in the shadow of the American war in Vietnam, for "young white officers on their five-day leave."[4] These officers are his countrymen, but he is otherwise nothing like them. Meanwhile the windfall he earns for playing in Asia depends perversely on an imperial world order. He plays United Service Organizations (USO) shows in Indochina and at military bases in Europe, wherever young soldiers need distraction from death. Night after night he stands at the piano—his signature gesture—despite

aged, aching knees. He misses his boyfriend, seeking community in the muted corners of queer Thai nightlife. He shares a concert bill with a Chinese woman singer likewise uprooted. They connect. He is hired for jobs that did not exist a decade earlier. In Bangkok, a city hastily globalized, he makes his way. He himself becomes something of a medium, channeling not only spirits but spiritualities, realms of inner life, which resist translation.

Rocco lived all of this, and his story and its context are at the heart of Pitchaya's novel. For Pitchaya and many other Thai people now, the era of the war in Vietnam was politically formative, especially because of the lasting cosmopolitan intimacies that it brought about. Rocco is a remarkably evocative figure in Thai history. Intimate Cold War nightlife in Thailand, where souls resonated together, was the setting for his career revival. Playing boogie-woogie for an audience of animist spirits is an apt parable for a postmodern age. Like Alston, Rocco spent twelve years playing to the ineffable in Thailand, where he lived until his murder in 1976. But was this ineffable object soul or *winyaan* (soul)? Or was it a resonant dialogue *among* spirits, *among* souls, between music and place, like jazz in a haunted sun-room? For Rocco, the transmigration of soul was no fictional parable but a daily routine.

Pitchaya's novel distills much of what *Bangkok after Dark* is about—meetings of ideas and identities, dialectics of people and aesthetics, all of which have only ever tenuously resolved in Thailand if they have resolved at all. Rocco spent more than a decade at the center of this upheaval. The Cold War was of course far more than a bilateral conflict. Every place touched by it had a unique experience that must be historicized on its own terms and from a distinct vantage.[5] Thailand is among the many countries that were remapped by imperial encounters in the mid-twentieth century. Faithful to its object of analysis, this book is therefore intentionally and literally all over the map, just as Rocco was throughout his sixty years on earth. The knots of Thai Cold War history have yielded a dense present that wants both explanation and reflection.

What follows is therefore not quite a biography of Maurice Rocco, although at times it resembles that genre. Rocco's life story will be conveyed more or less chronologically. But perhaps this book is ultimately more like a Thai funeral volume (หนังสืออนุสรณ์งานศพ), a type of commemorative book given out at cremation ceremonies. Funeral books are partly biographical, but they also include loosely related ephemera—photographs, recipes, legal documents, and fiction, among other things. Historian Grant Olson describes one funeral book made up of three discrete essays: "'Cancer can be cured,' 'The dangers of electricity,' and 'How to grow sour tamarind.'"[6] In other words, funeral books can be tangential, even though they center one honoree. Like human lives, they

are tangled and impure. These volumes call to mind Donna Haraway's notion of *compost*—collections of incongruous things that end up, in the slowly decaying aftermath of their heyday, interdependent.[7] This book makes compost from some unlikely interdependencies, including those that remain in the aftermath of the transnational encounters that the Cold War staged in Thailand. The reader should therefore not expect too clean a narrative, or too narrow a disciplinary focus; neatness would not do this story justice. The book does ultimately aspire to be explanatory, but please expect (and, if you are inclined, embrace) a messy, tangential path to that explanation.

Bangkok after Dark follows Rocco's life from birth to a point beyond death. But his story is told only partly for its own sake. Beyond Rocco's story, this is a book about nightlife intimacies between Thailand and the United States, from a period soon after World War II until the American military withdrawal from Thailand in 1976. That period was thick with nightlife encounters between people of many identities and positions: soldiers; Thai, American, European, Korean, Chinese, and Filipino musicians; sex workers; expatriates; spies; diplomats; developers; and many others. But the main character in the book is Rocco. After twelve years of apparent thriving in his adopted country, Rocco was killed in his own apartment by two hired sexual partners. Throughout his time in Bangkok, the last act of his life, Rocco became emblematic of the ways that Thais and westerners encountered one another in scenes of music and nightlife during a cosmopolitan moment. His late life and career show not only Thailand's growing worldliness during the American war in Vietnam but also the ways in which a variety of cosmopolitanisms emanating from different places resonated intimately together during that era, often following disjunct historical rhythms, as for example we can now hear on Doris Duke's tape of one bacchanalian evening.

As the book's author, I also place myself within these histories. This book draws connecting lines from the war era to the present, where I stand invested, implicated, and obligated, as well as ethically constrained. The authorial challenge of writing about lost figures, especially those very different from oneself, is summarized lucidly by Daphne Brooks, who reflects on another milieu of long-forgotten musicians: "Be all the time mindful that any quest to know, to touch, to inhabit is not only impossible but perhaps the wrong way to honor the questions that hover around and shroud the lost, the dispossessed, the disavowed. Expect to fail and then write yourself through the failure, write about it and draw truths from the conundrums."[8] Guided by Brooks and other theorists of archival practice, I not only situate myself within the histories at hand but aim to be humble about my limits as well as my inevitable failures.

As in the novel *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*, this book's narrative will move through history, listening for ghosts that remain unappeased. The secrets of Rocco's time, the specters that passed through the Bamboo Bar that January night, still stalk our present, waiting impatiently for acknowledgment. This book seeks to offer it.

Acknowledging Intimacy

The margins of the American war in Vietnam, where Rocco spent more than a decade, were sites of commodified intimacy and pleasure. In Thailand especially, the presence of American soldiers and other foreign visitors generated new economies that relied heavily on music and nightlife as engines of consumption. But nightlife was not only economically important. Within scenes of after-dark encounters, people heard and misheard one another, bartering for entertainment, physical protection, opportunity, sexual pleasure, and worldly knowledge on asymmetrical terms each evening. Through the 1960s and 1970s, strips of bars and clubs sprang up in Bangkok and provincial Thai cities to suit every international taste—indeed, every desire. American soldiers were drawn to these strips by the myriad prospects for release. But their demand prompted more than red-light districts. In the presence of so many wealthy and worldly visitors, rich new musical cultures emerged as well.

The success of the Thai hospitality industry, including its music, was of course underwritten by violence in neighboring countries, chiefly Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. But in Thailand violence was comparatively rare. There, western foreigners, locally referred to as *farang*, chased pleasure just beyond death's reach. Soldiers' whims and deep pockets spawned vast new sectors. In short order, Thailand built a profitable hospitality sector whose fundamental shape has survived into the twenty-first century. This industry still promises to fulfill any desire, material or spiritual. Penny Van Esterik observes with only the barest of hyperbole that "you can buy anything in Bangkok."[9] Or in any case, *farang* can. Amid the apparently boundless capitalist abundance that Thailand began offering in the mid-twentieth century, new musical worlds proliferated. Music, which played a pivotal role in fostering wartime intimacy and pleasure throughout Southeast Asia, therefore serves as a powerful analytic for understanding how Thailand was reshaped during what Benedict Anderson has called the nation's "American era." For the money that it generated, as well as its paramount symbolic meaning to Thais and non-Thais alike, music is thus a key lens through which to examine this period of intimate encounter in Thai history.[10]

Thailand was relatively peaceful and intensely capitalistic. Music thrived in such a ferment.

Among the rich *farang* circulating in Thailand throughout the Cold War were Americans working for the government, diplomatic entities, educational organizations, and international businesses. They were joined by scores of European and Asian foreign nationals, ranging from monied Japanese and German entrepreneurs to poor migrant laborers from Korea and the Philippines. Of course, there were also American soldiers, who generally flew in from fighting in Vietnam for five days of rest and recuperation (R&R), a coveted reprieve. At the peak of the R&R program in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as many as 44,000 US troops were on the ground at any given time in Thailand.[11] From 1965 forward, Bangkok was in fact considered the "main R&R center for American troops stationed in Vietnam."[12] From a menu of about ten international cities, Bangkok, with its reputation for hedonism, was reliably the most popular option. Soldiers on R&R were temporary visitors, but other military personnel remained stationed in Thailand for years afterward. Quite a few of them still live there today. In the 1960s and 1970s they were mostly young men. Many only ever knew Thailand for its nightlife, but they knew that nightlife intimately.

The concept of *intimacy*, central to this book, has often been used by scholars to examine transnational encounters. Intimacy can help explain how people develop self-identity, closeness with others, shared affinities, and mutual affection. It is an especially useful concept here. Lisa Lowe uses intimacy as a heuristic for understanding how "global processes and colonial connections" are brought to bear on individuals and their subjectivity.[13] Michael Herzfeld meanwhile theorizes intimacy as a mode of individual self-recognition within frames of intersecting national identity. Thus, the mundane habits that make one feel German, Thai, or American form a bridge between abstract national identities and everyday experience.[14] Of course intimacy can also be fragile. Lauren Berlant notes that intimacies are often unstable, potentially resulting in messy endings.[15] And under capitalism, intimacy can be captured by markets. Global intimacies have been readily commodified, including in spaces of tourism, a topic explored ethnographically in 1990s Thailand by Ara Wilson in her book *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok*, which I draw on substantially.[16] All these dimensions of intimacy—articulations of individual and national identity, messy instability, and touristic commodification—were amply present in relationships between Thais and foreign visitors in the 1960s and 1970s.

My decision to study this period from the vantage of intimacy relates to existing literature on Thailand's American era in a couple of ways. On one hand,

intimacy is already a common theme in scholarship on Thai-US relations. Studies of geopolitics between the two countries during the Cold War are dominated by tropes of intimacy, especially in the fields of history and political science. The terminology is revealing. Daniel Fineman's *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947–1958* details a history of increasing US-Thai entanglements during the middle twentieth century. In his title and throughout the book, Fineman calls these entanglements a "special relationship."[17] Meanwhile, Anderson describes Thai prime minister Sarit Thanarat as having launched an era of "unprecedented intimacy" with the United States from 1959 onward.[18] Joshua Kurlantzick observes that America became Thailand's "new friend" during the Cold War.[19] In short, intimacy and its metaphors pervade the literature. Scholars usually use words like *intimacy* or *friendship* to signal shared policy objectives, mirroring the diplomatic language that was in fact common at that time. As in a personal friendship, relations between the United States and Thailand were marked by mutual exchange and the close alignment of resources and priorities for at least two decades. The United States was of course vastly more powerful than its nominal friend, so it mostly dictated the terms of the relationship. The inequality between the two nations strains the metaphor. But Thailand and the United States were, to be sure, mutually reliant throughout the Cold War.

On the other hand, scholarship that relies on a figure of friendship usually centers intimacies between states, not individuals. This is despite the fact that, as Christina Klein argues, the individual or cultural sphere was of great importance in the United States' approach to Cold War policy.[20] Methodologically, I will not dispense altogether with analysis of state engagements. Rather, I regard individual relationships, such as those involving Maurice Rocco, as linked to geopolitical intimacies, both as consequences of those intimacies and sometimes as their catalysts.[21] The intimacies in this book should thus be understood as flowing in multiple directions. The everyday has often intertwined with national politics, and the book's analysis therefore shifts between broader and narrower scales. One American former soldier who was stationed in Thailand made the point well: "[Thais] always made us feel comfortable, made us feel at home. I think Thailand at that time and the United States had a very good relationship between the two countries and this manifested itself. I felt very comfortable."[22]

National politics affected the bar and the bedroom, just as the reverse was often true. Intimate individual relationships generated macrolevel effects: hybridized language, social archetypes, and economic sectors, for example.

Thailand is well known for its highly visible sex work industry, and this industry is considered in several sections of the book, as it was a form of intimacy that certainly drove macrolevel effects. But I also consider marriage, musical genres, nightlife, fashion, street vending, construction, transportation, and hospitality, all of which were disrupted and refigured even as they contributed to a broader transnational synthesis. To date, only a handful of book-length works in English have discussed the history of individual intimacies between Thais and foreign visitors during the American era in depth.[23] I suggest that the intimacies of the American era ushered in new forms of commodification that persisted long after most American soldiers and government officials left.

Intimacies ultimately remade Thailand. Over the course of the 1950s, the United States came to recognize its friend as an indispensable ally, and Thailand in turn came to depend on the United States in a way that quickly turned from windfall to tragedy. The United States began materially supporting the Thai military at a substantial level in the early 1950s, just a few years into the Cold War. By the time the war in Vietnam became a near certainty, American support had snowballed. Thailand was bloated not only with military investment but with developmental resources of all kinds, earmarked for everything from roads to education and issuing from both government and private sources. The West sent spies and entrepreneurs, then military brass and private contractors, and finally soldiers and tourists, with the last pair in particular proving hard to distinguish. From nightlife worlds that once seemed spontaneous came enduring intimacies—marriages, alliances, bands. In short order, whole cities as well as sectors of the Thai economy were developed in mind of hospitality and a global gaze. Cosmopolitan communions, unplanned and libidinous, later hardened into a set of perceptions about Thailand's value as a place to do business, find love (defined in chapter 4), have sex, and conduct politics. Soldiers on leave or stationed in the country knew these perceptions well. Today the same perceptions largely account for Thailand's international reputation as a sort of libertine paradise. Yet the origins of this reputation, cultivated in the very spaces where Maurice Rocco spent twelve years reviving his career as an elite Black *farang* performer, are not often acknowledged. There is work to be done bringing light to the shadows where intimacies burgeoned.

Thailand in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was a bustling, exploitative world of transnational power brokering, often conducted in the veiled, intimate spaces of nightlife. This transnational "contact zone" created a wealth of neocolonial effects that this book seeks to draw out of their recesses of secrecy and to acknowledge.[24]

Maurice Rocco and the Limits of Acknowledgment

There is, however, a crucial caveat to the project of acknowledging intimacy. Namely, not everyone owes the world transparency, and no one does all the time.[b] At Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 2813 in Woodside, Queens, where I conducted fieldwork in spring 2019, two US Army veterans named Dan and Mike were regulars. Both gave generously of their time and memories, but they did not always want to acknowledge what they saw or did while serving in Vietnam or during R&R stints. Dan and Mike's friend Sandy, the widow of another veteran, frequented the bar as well, and Sandy often brokered my attempts to ask the men sensitive questions. But even a single military tour, now over fifty years ago, was more than enough for people like Mike (a white man who served in infantry) and Dan (a Black former medic) to remain vulnerable to traumatic triggers for the rest of their lives. Both were deployed in 1968 and could still recall their service vividly in 2019. War molded them, and the VFW serves as an intimate space for those sustained by the company of comrades. From the wall-mounted television, Judge Judy bathed the room in imperative barbs, a somatic ambience somehow. Behind the bar, Mike drew on his cigar with peaceful focus, as pearls of condensation sweated down our beer bottles. It would have been wrong to interrupt this sacred state by pressing on memories of violence, fear, and loss forever raw. Leisure was often just as taboo a topic as war. As Dan once told me, R&R was a "what happens there stays there" experience for soldiers who had no choice but to assume they would soon die. Nightlife was not only cathartic but, in its way, holy. People's experiences of service, from terror to pleasure to tedium, are not always for others to know. It is important in moments like this to be aware of the limits of acknowledgment and to think carefully about where these limits fall not only for the story at hand but for the researcher as well.

Selective withholding in fact appears routinely in the human annals of war. By hanging out at the VFW, researching in archives, and interviewing older Thai people, I have observed that gaps in acknowledgment—in admitting, sharing, or showing the past—lie at the heart of wartime narratives. Invoking methodologies in both history and anthropology, I contend that these gaps are not always voids but often deeply meaningful things.[25] Some who spent time in Southeast Asia in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s have left old identities behind for-

b ACKNOWLEDGMENT: SUNY Stony Brook music graduate students Elizabeth Lawrensen and Christine Pash helped to develop ideas about "thinking with silences" in a spring 2022 seminar on the history of ethnomusicology.

ever. Others reserve certain details. Regardless, personal omissions are very different from the denials and redactions of governments. In individual cases, archival gaps may indicate not the whitewashing of events by the powerful, or the erasure of the lives of the weak, or historiographic lacunae, but simply a wish for privacy or closure. Scholarly acknowledgments in such cases are not always an ethical good or a salutary goal of narrating the past. Sometimes archival absence is not a lack but rather evidence of a quietude that was in full force when history transpired. Sometimes there was nothing to say. Sometimes shutting up was indicated, nullity nourishing. "Sometimes a desire to be gone is simply a desire to be gone," observes author Hanif Abdurraqib, like Maurice Rocco a child of Ohio.[26] History is not so transparent anyway, even when it speaks. For these reasons, I will not try to suture every gap in the evidence. It will be my aim not to relentlessly fill in every difficult silence but instead to regard silence sometimes merely as what happened—and what continues to happen. It is our task as researchers to decide thoughtfully how to work with, rather than against, silences. As Brooks notes, the ethical goal of writing history may not always be to "shine a light on that which eludes us" but instead to "honor the silences and make poetry in the corners of [people's] histories."[27] With notable exceptions, people have the right to remain quiet about moments when fear ignited the dry tinder of their youth. Rocco leaves archival gaps like that. I approach such gaps with humility, especially as they are not always mine to bridge. I have developed my research and writing in the long shadow of historians or theorists of history like Brooks, Saidiya Hartman, and Édouard Glissant, as well as ethnographers like Audra Simpson and Michael Herzfeld, all of whom have worked at the limits of transparency, where one might find empirical data missing, untranslatable, or else compromising to someone. These authors think with the fact that certain things cannot, or perhaps should not, be translated or known at all. Their work thus provides a methodological reservoir for this book. Understanding Rocco's place in Thai history, an encounter from which I seek to generate historical explanations, nevertheless requires skepticism toward the chimera of total knowledge.

I did not intend to focus on Rocco when my research for this project began; indeed, I had not heard of him. Despite significant national fame in the 1940s, few people now know his name, including most jazz historians. Aptly, I found Rocco in the margins, precisely where he had chosen to be. Examining peripheries can at times illuminate how power is structured at the center. Studying people like Rocco, whom institutions struggle to accommodate, can reveal what those institutions define themselves against. Certain others play an important role as capital-*O* Others. Rocco's gaps are therefore evidentiary—he was in many ways

an exemplary Other, whose absence illuminates normative social structures and their exclusions. But in this book I move beyond an analysis of institutional power by also looking to Rocco's own agentic silences, not only the moments when he was excluded but also the moments when he deliberately withdrew. In this way Rocco offers a powerful case study for understanding how Thailand in the 1960s and '70s was a place of extraordinary refuge as well as financial opportunity for people who had things to run from, fairly or unfairly, or who had reasons to cultivate secrecy. Apart from a series of acts of alleged domestic violence in the United States in the 1940s, I read Rocco's archival gaps more or less as they lie, working *with* them as gaps rather than valorizing exposure. I rein in the sorts of "hungry" impulses that might lead us to seek answers to every conceivable question about a musical life.[28]

I first learned about Rocco when I found one of his regular gigs listed in a bawdy 1968 booklet marketed to American soldiers in Bangkok. The booklet was called *Bangkok After Dark!!!!*, with the first letters of the title words enlarged to spell "BAD," in a conspicuous nod to mischief.[c] The listing read:

> *Windsor Coffee House (285 Silom Road)*
> Under new management. Spacious but cozy with modern decor. An inviting selection of food and drinks are offered at reasonable prices. The inimitable Maurice Rocco entertains on piano nightly.
> วินด์เซอร์ กำแฟเฮ้าส์ ถนนสีลม[29]

The listing was in small print, buried among ads for dart boards, a revolving restaurant, and "huge, tasty pizza." Rocco played a notable role in twentieth-century popular music, including being the most decorated American musician living in Thailand at the time, but a *Bangkok After Dark!!!!* reader would not likely have known this. In the booklet his nightly shows were instead nestled quietly in the margins.

Rocco lived in Bangkok under many layers of secrecy. He had long since become estranged from his previous life in the United States, including from most of his family members and friends. His erstwhile fans, jazz audiences old enough to remember his stardom in America in the 1940s, had no idea where he'd gone by the mid-1950s and certainly by the 1960s. He did not navigate the wake of the Cold War as a soldier or, no less, as the archetypical white

c ACKNOWLEDGMENT: I thank archivist Sheon Montgomery of the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University, who assisted me in locating materials from within the archive's vast collection.

heterosexual man that both the US military and Thai tourist economy were then assertively courting. Nor was he a diplomat. Rather, he was a Black gay musician who relocated, along the prevailing currents of wartime deracination, the uproot that conflict so often brings, to seek opportunity and refuge in a place of relative anonymity. Such privacy had become newly possible in the cosmopolitan pockets of music and nightlife that the Cold War opened in places like West Berlin, Paris, South Korea, Tokyo, Panama, and Bangkok. Cosmopolitan Bangkok granted him privacy.

Rocco was not closeted in the contemporary sense of the term. But throughout his life he spoke about his sexuality selectively, even among friends. Each of the different worlds where he spent his early years, including southern Ohio, New York City, Chicago, the film industry, and the US nightclub circuit, presented its own homophobic affronts. But in Thailand Rocco was not compelled to answer for his sexuality. There, whatever visibility he experienced was more of a novelty than a mortal vulnerability. Although sexuality would figure importantly in his life, career, and death, and while this book devotes significant attention to queer histories—indeed, Rocco was present during the very genesis of modern gay identity in Thailand (see chapter 5)—there is little trace of his own perspective on these matters. If indeed Rocco lived in Bangkok in part to escape the hypervisibility and vulnerability of his race and sexuality in the United States, then the archival absences that resulted are part of the history of his experience in Thailand. These absences should be treated as evidentiary.

Rocco chose to live in an archival gap; this is a fact of his life. That gap is now a fact of the same life observed through a historical lens. Queer studies has in recent years grappled with the historiographic implications of working among gaps. Historian of transness Scott Larson argues that "gender-variant subjects have been overexamined" in historical writing, at times redoubling the violent exposures to which trans people were subjected by law, medicine, or religious authorities during their lifetimes.[30] This point might equally be applied to histories of cisgender queer people like Rocco, who routinely navigated life- or career-threatening exposures of his sexuality. Kara Keeling suggests that "a critical apparatus predicated on making visible hidden images, sociocultural formations, ideas, concepts, and other things always drags what interests it into the terrain of power and the struggle for hegemony. On this terrain, the benefits of visibility are unevenly distributed."[31] A project devoted primarily to exposing that which was invisible in Rocco's lifetime would risk reproducing such an uneven distribution of benefits (as well as harms). Rather than relentless detail-gathering in narrating the history of a person like Rocco, Larson therefore calls for a method of "critical *trans-attendance*, which shifts the scene

of inquiry to attend to alternate frameworks and articulations of power that surround the subject of examination."[32] I often work in such shifted scenes of inquiry, a choice that accounts for a number of this book's tangents and experiments. Most of the details about Rocco's life that are missing remain so because of Rocco's own actions and concealments. I do not withhold information so much as commit critical time and attention to the places where direct evidence is conspicuously absent, writing poetry in the corners, as Brooks suggests. Among other things, sites of absence allow reflection on how opacity figures into some still-powerful political arrangements.

Still, the significance of Rocco's anonymity in Bangkok cannot be fully explained by examining his years as an expatriate. The book therefore begins chronologically with his youth in Ohio, continuing to the early and middle periods of his career in different parts of the United States. Chapters 1 and 3 situate his family, art, career, performative craft, and identity in the United States and elsewhere, before he moved to Thailand. Rocco was a significant musician whose contributions to jazz and rock and roll merit more attention than they have received (effectively none), but this early history is also important because of how it contrasts with and connects to the worlds he would later traverse in Thailand. Rocco's early life describes vital aspects of the American contexts that fused intimately with Thailand during the war in Vietnam.

It is a subplot to the early chapters that Rocco was an important hinge in the shift from boogie-woogie and other blues-based styles to rock and roll in the early 1950s. His is an important story about queer Black contributions to popular music. Later chapters trace how these facets of identity took on different meanings in Thailand, where the category of gayness in the 1960s was still developing. Rocco took cover in a fog of unsettled sexual identities. He also used global valuations of American Blackness to his strategic advantage as an expatriate artist. In telling both his story and that of the path along which he traveled, this book takes up radical historical juxtapositions (for example, from chapter 1 to chapter 2) between the United States and Thailand, which structurally mirror the dramatic shifts in Rocco's own life. He moved from a world governed by the gravitas of Duke Ellington, white Hollywood, his family, and local Black newspapers to one shaped by the Thai military, voracious imperialism, an increasingly powerful Thai monarchy, and globe-trotting Cold War entrepreneurs. The contrasts that emerge from this relocation might tell us something about how race, sexuality, and music were each transformed in global circulation during the middle of the twentieth century, including when nestled in the neocolonial intimacies between the

United States and Thailand. Rocco's odyssey through starkly different worlds is a story about the disruptions, intimacies, and ultimately persistent effects of the Cold War.

The span of time that Rocco spent in Thailand (1964–76) nearly dovetails with the most active phase of the long American war in Vietnam (1959–76). Neither the beginning nor the end of that span was coincidental. The late 1950s saw the advent of an anti-communist military network across Southeast Asia, as well as an explicitly pro-American commercial and developmental infrastructure in so-called free nations like Thailand. Rocco took savvy advantage of this infrastructure. By 1960, Thailand had become a financially rewarding place for international musicians (as chapter 4 will discuss). The rewards were doubly rich for Rocco, for whom the trials of being gay and Black as well as an aging popular musician had piled intolerably high in the United States in the 1950s. On the other side of the world, things were different, at least for a while. In Thailand, the phenotypical Blackness of an African American was a matter of curiosity more than stigma within the local matrix of skin-tone politics. And in 1960, gayness was not yet an identity category in Thailand at all. The end of Rocco's years abroad, marked tragically by his murder in 1976, preceded the final withdrawal of US troops from Thailand by just a few months, occurring amid near-daily political violence. Rocco's murder was an indirect consequence of the collapse of a political stability—and the end of an invisibility—that had by then granted him anonymity, work, and safety in Bangkok for more than a decade.

Given the intersections of his identity, Rocco was not merely an American in Thailand. This is part of what makes him fascinating. The term *farang*, though a significant marker of identity in its own right, in fact has many subtypes. Rocco's unique position given his race and sexuality show the limits of the privilege that *farang* held in Thailand. Although he enjoyed such privilege for a while, the progression of the war and its impact on Thailand left him exposed in the end, under conditions of homophobia and racial hierarchy that in certain ways came to resemble those of Thailand's patron, the United States. Rocco's years in Thailand thus describe a line around *farang* privilege precisely by showing where (and for whom) this privilege never fully applied. Rocco could enjoy some but not all the status of being *farang*, and his murder shows the vulnerabilities of queer and nonwhite western foreigners in Thailand. I study Rocco not as a scholar of Black studies or queer of color critique, as these are not where I am primarily trained, but rather because his is likely the richest life story within the scope of this research project. Work from these intellectual

ferments, cited throughout the book, provides necessary explanatory tools for doing justice to parts of Rocco's biography. I place these literatures in conversation with work in anthropology, Thai political history, and music and sound studies to derive an analytical apparatus suited to the story at hand. The unruliness of this disciplinary apparatus intentionally mirrors the messiness of the history under investigation.

Acknowledging *Farang*

There are many secrets in the stories that follow. This is unsurprising, because Thailand was (and remains) a place where non-Thais could readily hide. Its policing and legal system give wide berth to foreigners, especially those with money, political connections, and light skin. These people, as mentioned earlier in the introduction, have generally been called *farang*. Millions of foreign nationals visited or lived in Thailand during the American war in Vietnam, transforming the kingdom and creating new categories of privileged identity, including modern *farang*ness. These transformations continue to be felt, though their roots in a secretive war and its neocolonial sphere of influence are in many ways now concealed. *Farang* today generally do not know why their experience of Thailand is so easy.

As it turns out, Thailand's $70 billion annual tourism industry grew directly from Cold War contact zones. A national tourist program, inaugurated by the creation of the Tourism Organization of Thailand in 1959, dates to the exact years when the United States was beating the drums of war in Southeast Asia. In late 1964, on the brink of invasion, with Maurice Rocco installed in his new nightly gig at the Bamboo Bar, the *New Yorker* reported that the number of tourists arriving in Thailand had tripled in the past five years. War and tourism were moving in lockstep. *Bangkok after Dark* is a history of encounters that took place in and around this remarkable moment. It is moreover a history of America's role in how that moment occurred, what it displaced, and what it has wrought ever since. The book is therefore also a reflection on how the past has shaped the myths and hierarchies of the twenty-first century. Substantial parts of the research are set in the present, in the memories of living people, in spaces of tourism and commemoration, and within the forms of family, economy, and aesthetics that first appeared during the war.

The war in Vietnam dramatically altered Thailand's relationship with the United States and other countries outside of Southeast Asia. Beginning in the 1950s, this era concretized Thailand's role as a friendly site for global capitalism. Historian Sudina Paungpetch argues that the American war in Vietnam,

though a failure militarily, pushed Thailand sharply toward a US-friendly form of capitalism.[d] She concludes that in Thailand, "the U.S. won the cultural front of the Cold War using as weapons its own popular culture and democratic ideals."[33] Although this cultural victory was overshadowed by the mire of war in other parts of Southeast Asia, in Thailand America arguably succeeded in tightening its grip on global power.

One consequence of these "cultural front" victories is that in the twenty-first century, creating knowledge about Thailand as a *farang* means traveling along tracks first laid during America's and Europe's colonial and neocolonial incursions into Southeast Asia. These tracks remain open to *farang* now as paths of opportunity for doing just about anything, from research to pleasure-seeking. Just as many *farang* can "buy anything" in Bangkok, so too do they enjoy unusual levels of research access. Wilson observes that in Thailand, "Europeans' economic and political power intertwined with national and racial identities and established an enduring high status to whiteness that informs the experience of white tourists and scholars today."[34] This status might be called "*farang* privilege," after the more familiar (and not unrelated) concept of white privilege. The term *farang privilege* has even been used occasionally in passing, including by Yuping Mao and Rukhsana Ahmed, as well as Kristen Hill Maher and Megan Lafferty, but has never to my knowledge been theorized as a specific strain of global white privilege.[35] And yet to some degree this privilege shapes not only tourist experiences but all claims made by *farang* working in journalism, history, political science, or ethnography in Thailand, no matter how reflexive, informed, or well intentioned an individual researcher may be. Intellectual work performed by *farang* in Thailand is never separate from tourism's apparatus of privilege. I have routine access to this privilege, and I strive to identify where it shapes this book's authority, audience, and limits. Though I acknowledge many people, this book is ultimately my work, and I am solely responsible for its claims. I have worked on and frequently in Thailand for fifteen years, and I bring particular perspectives and informed opinions to my analyses. Still, *farang* privilege is an inescapable outgrowth of recent neocolonial histories, and for *farang*-identified people there is no space entirely outside of it. "Colonial watermarks," Ann Stoler reminds us, "cannot be erased."[36] *Farang* privilege has endured within a still intact, Cold War–era "infrastructure of America's . . . global dominance."[37]

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d ACKNOWLEDGMENT: This book has been deeply informed by Sudina, who has guided me toward sources and interview subjects regularly since 2018, in addition to being a great friend.

This infrastructure should be acknowledged, because it shapes global power relations, including everyday ones, still today. While writing *Bangkok after Dark*, I've experienced bumps, but the tracks along which this book runs have mostly been smooth. These tracks were laid long before my research began. Thailand and the United States have been allies for decades, and their relationship scales from the level of the state to intimate contact between people. *Farang* scholars and journalists working in Thailand, especially those identified as cis men, benefit from assumptions of power and status. *Bangkok after Dark* is reflexive in that it asks what relationships, nodes of access, institutional and social hierarchies, and existing systems of favors have made its own insights possible. This book acknowledges the networks that have led to its own stories of musical, sonic, and nightlife intimacies between Thais and foreigners in Thailand. The need to do so arises directly from the subject matter. The book reveals its own circuits of knowledge, examining how conditions of privilege have come into being. It is a reflexive exercise less at the level of authorship (although that too is considered) than at the level of identity categories writ large. If there is power in keeping the advantages of *farang* privilege a secret, then surely the better alternative is acknowledgment.

Acknowledgment is all the more vital a framework because the facts of the American war in Vietnam have been so thoroughly obscured by the US government. The US military and CIA led major secret operations in Laos and Cambodia, with American citizens unaware that they were funding the mass killings of Hmong, Lao, Thai, and Cambodian people. The cost of these operations in dollars and lives was brazenly hidden. People in Laos and Cambodia even today navigate the deadly threat of unexploded ordnance, not to mention the traumas of past secret wars.[38] The history of the American war in Vietnam, much like the milieu where Maurice Rocco played his final act, remains a black box. The project of studying intimacies in Thailand during the war, and their consequences in the present, is thus a labor of acknowledgment. This is the warrant for writing a book of acknowledgments, especially as a *farang*.

Prolegomena to the Project

This book takes an unconventional approach, which I will explain before outlining its chapters. *Bangkok after Dark* is, at its core, about intimate Thai-American relationships during the Cold War. It takes both sides of that relationship seriously, interpreting the entangled relationship between them as a kind of synthesis. That is the book's intended primary contribution. However, whereas most book-length scholarship is streamlined, if not singular, in methodology, I have

applied different approaches to the US-focused parts (especially chapters 1 and 3) and to the Thailand-focused parts (especially chapter 2). Chapters 4 and 5 as well as the conclusion, which describe the synthesis of a global relationship, are interdisciplinary in their own ways. The juxtaposition of different research methods and disciplines is atypical but intended to enact interdisciplinarity in a way that mirrors the real historical paths that the United States and Thailand traveled in the course of their intimate relationship.

In the first three chapters, the story shifts between Thailand and the United States (among other places), between Thai and non-Thai stories, and between Thai and non-Thai archives. These shifts complicate certain binaries, including the distinct national categories of the United States and Thailand. The reader may feel unsteady from the narrative motion between Thai political history and American popular music—not just different places but different intellectual frames. But as Kuan-Hsing Chen notes, "If attempts to engage [questions of imperialism, colonialism, and the Cold War] are locked within national boundaries, we will never break out of the imposed nation-state structure."[39] This book is organized by the idea that anti-colonial scholarship should bring putatively separate frames together, even if the results might feel like an adulteration of different historical knowledge areas. Every part of the book, from biographical discussion of Rocco's years in Ohio to the history of the electrification of traditional instruments in Northeast Thailand, is oriented toward examining Thai-American intercultural encounters.

This same point about bringing separate knowledge areas together also applies to disciplinary boundaries. As Lowe observes, "The modern division of knowledge into academic disciplines" makes disciplinary cohabitation unusual in scholarship, even though most of us are aware that the world is chaotic and interconnected and that few things can be explained by any one kind of analysis alone. This book thus heeds the call for interdisciplinarity as well as border-crossing historical thought. It insists, for example, that Black and queer studies have quite a bit to say to Southeast Asian history, because in fact histories of Blackness and queerness have long been part of Southeast Asian history. So you are invited, as a reader, to think *with* any feeling of unsteadiness you might experience in the pages to come and to consider (perhaps even feel!) how epistemological nausea must have been a routine part of an itinerant musical life during the Cold War. Sometimes the book's theoretical resources and primary sources draw on studies of American popular music, only to shift or combine in subsequent pages with material from Thai historiography. During the Cold War, disparate worlds were intimately entangled in precisely these ways. "[World War II] drew Thailand deeper into a complex international politics involving

Japan, China, and the Western powers, especially the US," writes Janit Feangfu. "Any attempts to define the Thai nation, to control the Thai state and to assert political decisions in Thailand became inextricable from the country's entanglement in the Cold War."[40] This book stays with messy junctures rather than pulling historical threads apart forensically.

The life story of Maurice Rocco is a device for understanding, at a granular level, how American and Thai contexts converged. He is, of course, only one person, whose life was moreover not always well documented. His biography cannot bear the full weight of the Thai-American relationship on its own. But his story does at times allow us to see into dense phenomena like cosmopolitan aesthetics; global formations of race, sex, and gender identity; and the military basis of tourism. His story also shows the extent as well as the complexities of *farang* identity and privilege in ways that I hope will compel reflexivity in the neocolonial center. But this illumination would not be possible, or at least not nearly as powerful, without attending carefully to the American context of Rocco's life and career and without giving due attention to the particulars of his life, family, and humanity. The book therefore moves across disciplinary oceans, just as Rocco moved across a liquid one.

Chapter 1 details Rocco's early life, from his birth in 1915 through the apex of his stardom in the late 1940s. This chapter makes a freestanding argument for Rocco as an important figure in the history of jazz and the early development of rock and roll, steeped in Black queer performance modes. This chapter establishes the performance and identity context of Rocco's life in the United States, giving close attention to musical and biographical details.

Chapter 2 then turns sharply from the world of American nightclubs toward Thailand in the 1950s. As the Cold War accelerated, Thailand moved into the political orbit of the United States. Thailand began developing local infrastructures, from roads and bars to laws, that would suit American visitors and ideologies in the years to come. This chapter focuses on the construction of two spaces that would eventually house cosmopolitan encounters in the 1960s: the Bamboo Bar in the Oriental Hotel and Bangkok's New Phetchaburi Road, where a busy American military bar strip would soon be built. Both spaces, though quite different from each other materially, were emblematic of how Thailand began building infrastructure to serve *farang* visitors, especially Americans, beginning in the early years of the Cold War.

Chapter 3 returns to the story of Rocco, examining his professional decline in the 1950s, and detailing his turn toward leaving the United States permanently. This chapter covers the same approximate period as chapter 2, ending in 1964, when Rocco moved to Bangkok. Rocco's ebb in popularity in the United

States in the 1950s was owed to factors ranging from the precarity of working in the culture industries, especially for Black artists, to the lingering effects of World War II on American nightlife. Rocco compensated for his faltering opportunities in the United States by seeking more work abroad. World War II opened this frontier, which increasingly afforded him both security and compensation. In effect, playing abroad became a second act. Rocco began trying it out in partial fashion in the 1950s before becoming an expatriate in 1959.

Chapter 4 begins to synthesize the two distinct stories that have so far run mostly in parallel. This chapter historicizes Thailand's cosmopolitan nightlife in the 1960s in Bangkok and other Thai cities, examining its development over time. How did foreign nationals during the war begin to patronize forms of music and nightlife tourism that have since become indispensable to the Thai economy? Who were the laborers working in this nightlife? What choices did they make, what incentives did they respond to, and how were their lives—musical and otherwise—altered by the American era?

Chapter 5 is similarly syncretic, tracing the excluded or invisible zones of Thailand's cosmopolitan nightlife culture, namely Black bars and the early emergence of a visible gay culture. In contrast with the largely heterosexual, white *farang* spaces discussed in chapter 4, these scenes mostly stayed out of public view. Rocco found a comfortable, private life there. But his cover slipped away as the war wound down. In the 1970s, as combat in Vietnam declined, the United States began withdrawing troops from Thailand. The chapter ends in spring 1976, as the United States prepared for its final troop withdrawal. In the ensuing power vacuum, Thailand was rocked by violence, both politically driven and opportunistic. Amid this chaos, Rocco was murdered.

The conclusion describes a trip to southern Ohio in spring 2022, when an Ohio Historical Marker devoted to Rocco was unveiled in Oxford's public cemetery, where his ashes now lie. In Oxford, Rocco's memory matters enormously to the local community. This final chapter summons hope for a historical revision in which Rocco might be reimagined as a meaningful (if complicated) part of the history of jazz and rock and roll, of Cold War music in global circulation, and of the mobility of Black artists in the twentieth century. Acknowledging Rocco in each of these ways can also aid in acknowledging the forms and extent of American neocolonial influence in Thailand, including its lingering effects.

After more than five years of archival and ethnographic research, I view nearly everyone who was impacted by the upheavals of the war to have been victimized by their experiences, even though some also enjoyed privilege. People's sacrifices are irreducible and cannot be easily compared. But the

ways that different subjects were differently impacted by cosmopolitan encounter interest me greatly, for the histories offered in this book are ultimately composed not of two broad, national groups (Thais and Americans) but of a head-spinning array of subjects whose identity positions affected how they profited, suffered, or simply lived. By the time of the full American withdrawal from Thailand in 1976, many identity categories had changed or been created anew. To be Black, Isaan, *kathoey*, gay, *lûuk khrûng*, *mia chao*, *farang*, and so on was to occupy novel or altered positions in Thailand by the time the war ended. Each of these positions retains a specific character that cannot be disentangled from neocolonial histories.

The history of the American war in Vietnam has been written in English, through the eyes and ears of Americans, from countless angles. By comparison, there are very few treatments of Thai experiences of the war (even though some five thousand Thai soldiers fought alongside Americans in Vietnam, as Richard Ruth describes).[41] For that reason, this book is anchored by interviews and engagements with Thai people, as well as research in Thai archives both formal and informal. In particular, chapter 2 draws from Thai state ministry and archival documents. Chapter 4 utilizes funeral books, interviews, fiction, journalism, song lyrics, and message board threads. Thais who lived intimately with foreign visitors during the war are the book's most important sources. I do not speak for these people. I acknowledge them.

The book has also been written in active correspondence with Thai scholars, musicians, artists, and activists who at the time of this writing are pursuing projects related to Thai Cold War history. I have been lucky to get to know people like Oui (Panachai Chaijirarat) and Som (Punyisa Silparassamee), the two head curators of the Noir Row gallery in Ubon Ratchathani in Isaan (Northeast Thailand), who organized an art exhibition at a long-abandoned American radar base known as Camp Ramasun in 2019. New works were installed in situ in the crumbling ruins of subterranean conduits and overgrown grass around a massive circular antenna array called the Elephant Cage. Oui and Som took me and a fellow researcher, a Thai music specialist and friend named Peter Doolan who was integral to this project, on a half-day tour of the sprawling grounds. At their request and in thanks, I shared every primary-source document I had about the American presence in Ubon with them. Although our personal stakes in researching this history are different, our interest in the war era overlaps. That period shaped the economy and culture of Isaan in the present, and the 2010s were a late opportunity to understand that shaping through interviews with living subjects. Researcher Arthit Mulsarn meanwhile developed a traveling exhibition called the Molam Mobile Bus Project, which

in 2017 presented histories of Cold War *mor lam* music to contemporary audiences throughout Isaan. An amateur historian named Suphawat Muangma runs a Facebook page called วันนี้ที่ตำคลี (Today in Takhli), which maintains documents, images, and memories of the American era. In brief, people in Isaan are highly invested in these genealogies. The ways that *Bangkok after Dark* might resonate with the continuing concerns of Thai stakeholders are a paramount reason for writing the book. I acknowledge the histories, personal experiences, rigorous research, and incisive curation of Oui and Som, Arthit, Suphawat, and many others.

The research for this book involved a roughly equal mix of archival and ethnographic research. Fieldwork and archival research in Thailand was conducted during the summer of 2019 and was concentrated in four cities (Bangkok, Rayong, Ubon Ratchathani, and Udon Thai), with routine follow-up conversations by phone, email, and video chat in subsequent years. Further ethnographic fieldwork in the United States was conducted in Queens, New York, and Oxford, Ohio. I meanwhile worked in approximately fifteen different archives, some in person and some remote (especially during the height of COVID-19 pandemic travel limitations). The line between ethnography and history was often blurred, however, especially when communicating with subjects whose lives continue to be shaped by the American era. I frequently asked these people questions about the past, which turned out to be also inquiries into their present. Although the research was undertaken ostensibly as a history, work with living subjects frequently became ethnographic. My inquiries were rarely quick shots; rather, they unfolded over lengthy periods, through different media, in some cases over years.

The research process was also notably social. In Oxford, Maurice Rocco's hometown, Valerie Elliott of the Smith Library of Regional History had been studying Rocco's background as a topic of local history for years before I reached out to her in 2019. Val and I began a near-daily correspondence, eventually adding another correspondent to the thread, a highly knowledgeable Rocco fan named Bob Orlowsky. Our conversations were one of the best things I've ever been part of as a researcher, not in terms of information gained (though there was lots of that) but in terms of shared excitement.

Meanwhile, though the average reader of this book may not be concerned with local genealogy, it was imperative to me that all materials about Rocco be made fully available to the public and especially to people in Oxford, including Rocco's living relatives. I came to care as much about this book as a document of genealogical value to Oxfordians as I did about it as a scholarly intervention. These same principles have been applied to relevant research findings from

Thailand. I often had occasion to share materials with Thai people who were connected by family or musical lineage to the subjects of the book. Although academic books, including this one, are principally argumentative, the research had the dual purpose of locating information of interest to historical subjects and their communities. Being in regular contact with so many people, in both Thailand and the United States, transformed research and writing from an often lonely task into one of great fulfillment and friendship. If I might offer one lesson about my experience to other researchers, it is that building true mutual bonds with those whose interests dovetail with your project, holding yourself accountable to them, and sharing the fruits of your inquiries are healthy scholarly habits. For much of the drafting of this book, I refreshed an otherwise desiccated professional identity in the depths of the pandemic by corresponding with people who shared my bottomless appetite for historical questions about Maurice Rocco and Thailand during the Cold War.[e]

A Final Word on Acknowledgments

In this book, acknowledgment is both a grand structural frame and a feature of the writing. Rather than aggregating all thank-yous into a single, isolated section before the introduction, individual acknowledgments are distributed throughout the text. In other words, acknowledgments are part of the story.

Walter Mignolo thinks with Anibal Quijano's notion of a "colonial matrix of power," meaning that the West and its others are tethered together in a common network of exploitation and domination.[42] The history of the non-West is therefore always also the history of the West and vice versa. In both the colonial past and the neocolonial present, the two realms cannot be decoupled. In fact they remain intimately linked. In the case of Thailand, an anti-colonial history must be one that resists the secrets, the redactions, and the exoticist marketing that insist Thailand is a world apart from the United States and Europe. Acknowledgments can help refuse this fetishistic distancing. An anti-colonial history must show how the intimacies between Thailand and the West (especially the United States) have constituted these geopolitical entities mutually, if often less than equitably.

Acknowledgment can of course refer to *the revelation of knowledge*. But acknowledgment can also mean a public recognition of who and what made

e ACKNOWLEDGMENT: My children, Julius and Mae, sustained this project through their patience and presence. They are funny and good.

something possible, the support systems which are pillars of any project—that is, *an expression of gratitude*. This latter sense describes what an author typically does in a book's acknowledgments section. But it is useful to reflect on how much these two different senses of the word have in common. Showing gratitude reveals the truth that work is never done in isolation. Perhaps revealing historical truths shows gratitude in turn.

Often even more than citations, acknowledgments sections offer views into the deep structures of research projects. And yet acknowledgments, rarely cited or understood as part of a book proper, are usually brief and relegated to front matter. This book is an acknowledgment from beginning to end.

Notes

INTRODUCTION: ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1. Alex Serra, "Alex Serra's Night Spot," *Star* (Hong Kong), September 19, 1965.

2. Mongkorn Pikaew, interview with the author, March 26, 2020. Translated by the author from the original Thai; unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

3. Camus, *Travels in the Americas*, 41.

4. Pitchaya, *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*, 21.

5. Chen, *Asia as Method*; Westad, *Global Cold War*.

6. Olson, "Thai Cremation Volumes." Funeral books were initially limited to Siamese elites, who in the late nineteenth century had access to printing presses, which suggested a degree of proximity to western modernity. Decades later, after funeral books had grown more accessible to common Siamese, the books became a common type of funerary gift.

7. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

8. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 263.

9. Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, 4.

10. Bourdaghs, Iovene, and Mason, *Sound Alignments*, is a recent collection with a similar premise at the scale of Asia more broadly.

11. Subcommittee on US Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, *Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam*.

12. *Political Situation in Thailand: Hearing Before the House Subcomm. on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Comm. on Foreign Affairs*, 93rd Cong. 55 (1973).

13. Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*, 18.

14. Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy*.

15. Berlant, "Intimacy."

16. Wilson, *Intimate Economies of Bangkok*. See also Povinelli, *Empire of Love*.

17. Fineman, *Special Relationship*.

18. Anderson, "Withdrawal Symptoms."

19. Kurlantzick, *Ideal Man*, 46.

20. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*.

21. This approach echoes that used in Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*; Miller and Del Casino, "Spectacle, Tourism, and the Performance of Everyday Geopolitics"; Mostafanezhad and Norum, "Towards a Geopolitics of Tourism"; and Boczar, *American Brothel*. Boczar suggests, e.g., that "urban development in South Vietnam was directly linked to the rise of intercultural intimate encounters" (60).

22. "Interview with Arthur Wiknik," November 11, 2008, Vietnam Center and Archive, oh0650, Arthur Wiknik Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.

23. Among these are Wilson, *Intimate Economies of Bangkok*; Phillips, *Thailand in the Cold War*, and Sudina, "Domino by Design." The journalist and fiction writer Rong Wongsawan, writing in Thai, covered similar terrain over the course of his prodigious and unique literary career. Wilson's research was conducted years after the war in Vietnam, but she takes that conflict and its effects on Thailand as a point of departure for a discussion of "intimate economies," wherein Thailand began to sell not just goods and services but intimate experiences. The marketing of intimate experience has characterized the country's tourist economy ever since. Rong, with the help of his wife, Sumalee, who conducted the interviews used in his books, wrote in a mixed journalistic-fictional style about the lives and motivations of sex workers, soldiers, and nightlife laborers during the war.

24. Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone."

25. On this point, e.g., see Herzfeld, "Silence, Submission, and Subversion"; and Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*.

26. Hanif Abdurraqib, "The Art of Disappearance," *New York Times*, August 11, 2022.

27. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 266.

28. Robinson, *Hungry Listening*.

29. "Booklet—Bangkok After Dark," November 1968, Vietnam Center and Archive, box 3, folder 17, 22920317001, Larry Woodson Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.

30. Larson, "Laid Open," 222.

31. Keeling, "Looking for M—," 576.

32. Larson, "Laid Open," 223.

33. Sudina, "Domino by Design," 122.

34. Wilson, *Intimate Economies of Bangkok*, 16.

35. Mao and Ahmed, *Culture, Migration, and Health Communication in a Global Context*; Maher and Lafferty, "White Migrant Masculinities in Thailand and the Paradoxes of Western Privilege."

36. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.

37. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, 15.

38. The US government has committed almost no resources to reparations or acknowledgment of its actions during the war in Vietnam. Meanwhile the health effects of cancerous herbicides have been continually denied, especially through restrictions on journalism. Some American veterans have spent their lives seeking benefits from the US government to compensate for lifelong ill health or their children's birth defects, including from dioxin exposure. In many cases, widows have taken up the struggle after their partners' deaths. I wish to acknowledge Sandy from the VFW, mentioned earlier, in

this regard. Southeast Asian victims of wartime atrocities have received even less, as Viet Thanh Nguyen reminds us. And much remains unacknowledged still. Notably, the National Archives and Records Administration has not yet declassified all of its "Vietnam War" materials. Accessing certain records can entail lengthy Freedom of Information Act petitions (sometimes with multiyear waits), which may or may not be approved in the end, depending on sensitivity. Infamous as it is, and despite enormous discussion and analysis, the American war in Vietnam remains difficult to understand thoroughly.

39. Chen, *Asia as Method*, 159.

40. Janit, "(Ir)resistably Modern."

41. Ruth, *In Buddha's Company*.

42. Mignolo, "Coloniality of Power and De-colonial Thinking."

CHAPTER 1. ROCCO BLUES

1. A. Kelley, "Revolution in the Atmosphere."

2. Ashe, "'Hair Drama' on the Cover of 'Vibe' Magazine."

3. Clifford-Napoleone, *Queering Kansas City Jazz*; Tucker, *Swing Shift*; Stephens, *Rocking the Closet*.

4. See Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight?," for a discussion of this phenomenon.

5. McGinley, *Staging the Blues*, 19.

6. Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout!*

7. Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout!*, 73.

8. Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 42.

9. Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 315.

10. On Soundies, including their recording process, see Eyman, *Speed of Sound*; MacGillivray and Okuda, *Soundies Book*; and Delson, *Soundies and the Changing Image of Black Americans on Screen*.

11. It is uncertain whether the lyrics were first adapted in this fashion by Rocco or by Maxine Sullivan, who also recorded a deathless version of "Molly Malone" in 1940. Rocco's and Sullivan's respective versions were released within a few months of each other, his on Decca and hers on Columbia Records.

12. LeBlanc and Eagle, *Blues*, 81.

13. I have found no evidence attesting to the enslavement of any members of the Rockhold family in these years, but it is possible that some were enslaved, given the inhuman conditions under slavery as an institution and its horrific treatment not only of individuals but also of families.

14. "Special Schedule—Surviving Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines, and Widows," Minor Civil Division, Oxford, Ohio, S.D. 3, E.D. 232 (1890), 2.

15. Ohmer Rockhold, "A Musical Family," *Oxford (OH) Press*, March 31, 1938.

16. Eileen Southern responds to Booker T. Washington's shock at seeing poor former slaves spend their money on organs by explaining that musical competence was an important symbol of independence for Black people in the early twentieth century. According to Southern, for this reason Black parents considered it vital to give their children a musical education. Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 315.