



Alan Klima

ETHNOGRAPHY

9



ETHNOGRAPHY #9

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ALAN KLIMA

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

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

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1 · THE GHOST MANIFESTO

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dubbing the Numberstream

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And one knows who or what one is.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

an invitation to the wildest speculations . . .

breaks with gravity . . .

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

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

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

Insistent and Real

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

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

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

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

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

But I can also see another.

A Haunted Teak Pillar

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

permission to sell the gold chain he had given her. In fact, it had been his former wife's favorite chain, and he had had bad dreams from the moment he had first given it to his girlfriend. Now she wanted to sell his wife's gold chain to help with the debt payments she was in for with a local money-lender, which she had contracted in building her own new house. As Uncle Wua was in the midst of building his, he could hardly fail to sympathize and quickly agreed to the idea.

His wife, apparently, felt differently. The dreams became worse. At the end he could not sleep. He would lie on his back and stare at the ceiling. Every night, after an hour or so, he would become aware of a figure standing beside him. He could not turn his eyes toward it, so he would close them for a while, hoping it would go away. But when he opened them, it would still be there. He definitely was not sleeping or dreaming, he says, because he was too scared to sleep. He would open his eyes again, and the thing would still be there, and he would see it from the corner of his eyes, staring at him. Then, as the night wore on, it would try to touch his face, and he would go into a frozen-still frenzy. Finally he would become weak and faint, fall asleep, and then wake again in early dawn with a twitch of his whole body and a gasp of cold, wet morning air.

One day, soon after the sale of her gold chain, while Uncle Wua was looking around his construction site and talking to the builder, one of his big teak pillars fell down, hard, on top of him. The dense, heavy tree trunk pinned him down at the small of the back, and he was screaming and pounding the ground with his palms.

They eventually rolled the teak trunk up off him, though he himself never did get up ever again, at least not without being pulled up by others. The bad dreams and visitations stopped after that, but the punishment has worn on to this day, every day, as poor uncle Wua lies paralyzed on his bamboo platform while the really living live out their lives around him.

An injustice, perhaps, in some worldly calculus of economical punishment. But the ghost of his wife was operating with otherworldly anger about her gold. It is dangerous and unpredictable to ignore the hold that is placed on valuable things. As the seemingly material embodiment of value, such things already seem in their nature embedded in two places at once, as idea and as matter. If matter is something that is even possible. For if the universe is actually made of this so-called matter, and if ideas

are simply notions inexactly correlated to this material universe, then this reach of the idea to topple upon a man is impossible.

Yet, if it happens, could it be that it is the material world that is the mere notion?

At least we can say that when a ghost lashes out, available to it are other things that seem to be in two places at once, things of value, no matter how seemingly solid, no matter how apparently dense. In this case it is precisely the density of teak that embodies the traversing hold of wealth.

But that is not the only sense in which the ideas of matter and bodies of this world are seized by a beyond, by autonomously consensual value, or by the possible impossibility of this divide being real.

The Suicide Tree

It is impossible to walk past a “luscious tree,” a *don cham chaa*, without wondering whether anyone has ever hanged himself there. Or if someone will one day.

“Cham chaa” is expressive of juicy, vibrant green life, a long-living tree with exposed roots like a shaggy dog paw, thick branches and leaves. A perfect shade tree for the increasingly barren and hot countryside of Northern Thailand. But not a soul would seek a cham chaa tree for relief. You walk past just as fast as you can, try not to look, try not to wonder.

Once, in the 1970s, there used to be a cham chaa tree that everyone had to walk past when entering or leaving Jai Village. It was not far behind the ornate red gate of the village that fronts what is now a busy road to the power station. It grew tall in the cremation area that flanks the village temple, which was what made the tree even more creepy.

This is the area where the dead are burned. Corpses are placed on a pile of wood but also mixed with old tires so that the oily burn is hot enough to melt sinews and cartilage, which do not give up easily. Sometimes the heat is too little, such that it merely pulls on the body’s strings, and the corpse sits up suddenly in the fire, raising its arms stiffly and hissing a crazed shower of black ash.

When the corpse sits up, naturally many people scream and some run all the way home. But, of course, a sudden reanimation on the pyre is not itself real haunting. Lek, the funeral groundsperson of Jai Village, says

that to him, it is old fare. There is nothing especially scary about a cremation grounds for him, and the sight of corpses burning could never become associated in his mind with the sight of a great cham chaa tree hovering over the dispatches of the dead. But the emotions were different for the others. He had been in the grounds a long while, and he was even there watching with his father, who was also a funeral groundsperson, when the entire village marched into the charnel ground to chop down that luscious tree and then madly hack up its stump and burn its roots until there was no trace.

They do not always do that to a cham chaa tree, which is why you have to wonder when you walk past one. Maybe someone hanged himself there, maybe not. It is dark under the tree, even in the day. Its scraggly branches are strong, hang low to the ground, are easily climbed and inviting. That may be part of the reason people always seem to choose it in which to kill themselves.

Chopping down a haunted tree is usually a last resort. The first recourse is a powerful ritual to “suck” the spirit out of the tree. The tree is wrapped round and round with blessing string, a simple white twine, and the blessing string is held in the palms of nine Buddhist monks who stand, encircling the trunk, chanting for hours around the suicide tree until they have the spirit drawn out of the wood and back into the proper, intermediary realm for the recently dead, neither completely passed nor completely here. But something had happened with that cham chaa tree of Jai Village that roiled things to another level.

Back then, Mr. Gongkam had been a truck driver. Perhaps more often than anyone else, he drove past that cham chaa tree in front of Jai Village. Gongkam had his own truck in a time, the early 1970s, when few had more than a bicycle. He would hire himself and his truck out for the long hauls over the mountain passes to the northern border towns and outposts of the kingdom. It was rough riding before they started carving big paved highways into the mountains as an anticommunist strategic policy, years later.

Actually, the story of the tree all started round about then, in the 1970s, when his life on the road seemed like it was about to get a whole lot smoother. But his truck broke down to an extent beyond his economic means to repair. Gongkam was already in trouble with debts, and people were angry with him about that. He did have a sister, who had become

relatively wealthy as the main groceries dealer in Jai, who was, however, notorious for her stinginess even, or even especially, among relatives. Gongkam beseeched his elder sister to borrow the money to fix his truck. After all, he had a family riding on this. For several days he talked and talked about his troubles with everyone, getting more and more visibly unhinged. How could his own blood do this to him? His own sister was sucking the life from him, for without the cash, the whole scheme would crash: no truck, no hauling fees, no sending his kids to school in Lampang Town, no paying down his debts, no more respect from anyone, completely dry in every way. To cut off the flow of this money was to cut off everything in his life. Often he recounted his woes, helplessly, to anyone who would listen. And he visited his sister every day as well. He had never borrowed from his sister before, and as he heatedly pointed out to her, she had rarely shared anything at all with him, ever. Finally she reluctantly gave him a ten-baht note to make him go away. That was about enough for a bottle of rice-grain alcohol. So Gongkam bought a bottle of it from his sister with the money she had just given him and was last seen storming off toward the cremation forest.

The next day, early in the morning, children on their way to school and monks on their way to alms were the ones who found Gongkam, dead and dangling from the cham chaa tree in the charnel ground.

Gothic Ethnography

That is not the end of the story of Gongkam. It is only getting started. There will be a ghost. And this, too, marks the ending of what may have seemed like it was going to be an ordinary enough ethnography about abstraction, immateriality, finance, and ghosts and the beginning of something else.

Because that is what is due, at least literarily if not intellectually: these relations between idea and matter, fiction and nonfiction, construction and reality, holding their formation throughout the marching, incremental progress of the conquest of the unknown by the known. Is allegiance to this fantasy ever unwarranted?

Great respect is due to the ontological turn in anthropology for its ingenious alternative to this question. To characterize this turn — if you can

abide a sweeping simplification (and whether the ontological turn itself is a thing, I will not debate) — one could say that it has, among other things, sought the admission of ontologically inadmissible entities into narrow academic discourses in order to destabilize rigid ontological assumptions, open conversations, and disrupt academic business as usual. “Taking seriously” in this context has often meant to allow previously barred things to enter into participation with the seriousness of academic discourse (perhaps also secular materialist discourse). Academic discourse can admit into its menagerie of real things more real things to be taken seriously.

Seriousness has appeared to be central to the ontological turn in anthropology, prompting Tom Boellstorff, for one, to comment in his meditation on the digital real and the ontological turn that it is almost “conflating ontology with ‘taking seriously.’”⁶ To be sure, there are many ways in which to take things earnestly in anthropology that do not require specific kinds of ontological parity. But that is an easy out that Boellstorff does not take because it forecloses the productive avenues that the ontological turn provides for his work: destabilizations of the assumed difference between the digital as somehow unreal on the one hand and the so-called real world that is more real on the other.

One could also say that there are ways of taking certain things earnestly in the turn that have not necessarily equated to a demonstrable ontological shift. Yet this distinction between seriousness and ontology has even another possibility, which is not to question the ontology side of it so much as the seriousness side of it. This seriousness itself, its very form, literarily as the performance of academic truth, is not as questioned and remains more stable. It is not like Viveiros de Castro and Phillipe Descola’s thought—as writing—looks any different in form than any other standard anthropology. That is on purpose.

And if we just keep on this slight focus/emphasis on writing as such, then we might shift the interpretation a little bit toward what can be done with this: that the ontological turn’s main disciplinary effect could be not so much to admit previously unacceptable entities into anthropology but to expand what could possibly count as acceptable writing.

Those two alternatives might sound as if they are almost the same thing, but they are not quite. In fact, the first — the admission of barred entities — is not so easy as it seems. It requires another kind of work, work

that cannot easily or ever be done outside a recognition of and alteration in the medium.

Perhaps — and for now, let us just gently initiate this here, not insist, and merely follow up with the stories to come — there are other possible starting places than the earnest realism of anthropological discourse as a method of critical thought.

So, it is not a better starting place here but a different one: Why take spirits more seriously? Why not, instead, take less seriously the form of knowledge delineation and resultant image of what is real in academic writing?

This can start with nothing less than *recognizing writing as writing*. For example, need we really take seriously sentences like the following (published) ones?

Forms of political power and influence created through the public re-definition of certain emotions in Thailand can be neither completely understood through local categories and conceptions nor can be accounted for as simply an extension of globalization, nor likewise can they be understood as simply assertions of local resistance nor an enfoldment into the global order of things. Instead, these rituals of national sentiment and value embody the power, tensions, and unstable points of opportunity for liberation and domination that are inherent in the phenomena of globalization.⁷

Leave it to an anthropologist to manage to write a lot that does not say a thing. And I was the one who wrote that (not that “I” means much here). Although the register of the prose is as reference to real things — as it is in many such sentences in anthropology — looked at carefully as writing, it is not really pointing to anything but conceptual creations, is it? Yet this can count as “serious” and is about the real simply by virtue of it being *written in the form that signifies the real*.

I realize this is a simple idea, yet strangely, I feel the need to pause here, because it seems sometimes that so many academics do not get this simple idea, or do not really take it in. There is a way of writing, of diction and syntax, that *itself* signifies the real, seriously. That is, it is not the referents that the content of writing is pointing to, whether understood naïvely as real things or understood as signified, but the form and style themselves that signify seriously realness.

Take this example, chosen almost at random and yet also so typical in prose style (but which may be more skillful than the previous example). Here, Karen Barad is positioning the aim of a project in distinction to the “linguistic turn” and to go beyond how, in the linguistic turn, “even materiality . . . is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation.”⁸ In other words, opposing the situation where “language has been granted too much power.”⁹ To simplify things quite a bit, it can be said that Barad is joining an ontological turn with an astute call for admitting an entity that seems to have been rendered inadmissible into scholarly discourse: matter itself! This is more interesting and pot-stirring, obviously, than the piece of my own text quoted above, which tells us more about dull routines than it does about ontology. Barad’s text breaks a hole in the wall for others who are refugees from cultural construction, and in some ways this present text is in alignment with that. But while I would caution against founding anything on an unexamined belief in matter, and note that faith in matter is anything but in need of rescuing, I would not disagree about the turn from constructivism and cannot fault anything for its primary story concept. The point of the story is to bring this barred thing, “matter,” back. Without that, there is no story. And so instead, it is specifically about ways of writing and reading themselves and their aims that I am wondering about in passages like the following:

What is needed is a robust account of the materialization of all bodies — “human” and “nonhuman” — and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked. This will require an understanding of the nature of the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena, an accounting of “nonhuman” as well as “human” forms of agency, and an understanding of the precise causal nature of productive practices that takes account of the fullness of matter’s implication in its ongoing historicity.¹⁰

Wow. Is that all?

And remember, this text is calling for going beyond a “representation-ism” that seeks to correlate words to reality.¹¹ Looked at in a certain way, as intended seriously, as a conquest of the unknown by the known and the transcendence of language in a project for precise understandings and robust accounting of “matter” that would be accurate about the workings

of the processes and phenomenon named, present and accounted for, and which are presumed to actually exist . . . who wouldn't want all that? I would like some fries with that, too. And yet is this prose really up to the task of exiting from representationalism when it clearly borrows so heavily from its stylistics, departing from that style not one bit? Or, by contrast, is it academically required that it have this serious realness and will-to-knowledge, performatively, to launch a contestation?

But such prose could be read another way. This signification of serious realness through diction and syntax could also seem humorous in its reach, and ironically so given its position as “countering” a preoccupation with language and a critique of representationalism. What if, instead, we were to take it as a kind of sci-fi fantasy, intentionally wacky in its will to a thorough and direct knowledge: does it not now look kind of cool and funky?

Yet what seems to underlie the serious believing-in-its-own-thoughts of this literary form so common in the social sciences and anthropology is the tie to the performance of itself as a document of the real, expanding the territory or precision of our knowledge over the unknown or over the wrongly known things there. But rather than leaving the reference to the seriously real relatively intact as academic literary form, might one possible alternative — not a methodological requirement but a possibility — be to create a need to destabilize these forms of writing themselves?

What follows, therefore, is a twisted-reality balance that might shift the attention to a somewhat different reach, in this case for spirits. And in this case it is a question of how to work with these spirits as more — or at least differently — than either merely as a source of metaphor to be extracted in social theory's service, or “granted” a realness or seriousness whose status is officially stamped in the currency of social theory's own forms of knowledge and value.

Perhaps, for now, we could think of this as an *in-between* — a subject upon which Derrida and other writers of ghosts have alighted upon with some enthusiasm: the category of the specter provides an ontological-like category that hovers between being and nonbeing, real and unreal, present and absent. Not quite ontological but hauntological.

Perhaps nowhere is the drawing upon the spirit world for inspiration more curious than in Derrida's essays on justice and Marx, where there

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has been a strange flicker, like a sudden switch to photographic negative, in the notion of hauntology. It starts with Marx's "spectropoetics," as Derrida called it: the fairly constant availing of images, tropes, words, drawn from the Victorian literatures of ghosts, spirits, phantasms, revenants, werewolves, and vampires, all recollected in *Specters of Marx*.¹² For although Derrida does take these with tongue in cheek, as they seem to have been meant by Marx, he moves toward something greater in his contemplation of this inheritance, that the image and economy of ghosts are not merely tropological and, instead, that inheritances of past injustice are manifest in ghosts as a kind of trace-like presence of the call of justice that we can neither accept nor discard and instead need to learn to *live with*, which is not a question of law or human right, but of responsibility, that in order to live, we must learn from the dead. What justice do ghosts require?

"So it would be necessary to learn spirits," as Jacques Derrida has said of hauntology:

To learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But with them. No being-with the other, no socius without this with that makes being-with in general more enigmatic than ever for us. And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.¹³

Pay particular attention to the qualification in the last words here, almost ungrammatical in English translation, "*not only but also*." We see the trace of this most important carefulness that is so easily skipped over: not to override the being-with via an absorption into a prefabricated grid of political consciousness. Being-with specters is *not only* a politics of memory, inheritance, and generations and cannot be reduced to that.

It would be easy enough, I suppose, to dismiss the shift to hauntology in Derrida as disingenuous, that where Derrida means to emphasize the importance to be with and relate to spirits, what he really means is to extract from spectral tropoi some abstract, neither/nor conceptual category standing for philosophical indeterminacy within deconstruction. I can't fully disagree with that interpretation. For instance, as Colin Davis has put it, minimally:

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Hauntology is part of an endeavour to keep raising the stakes of literary study, to make it a place where we can interrogate our relation to the dead, examine the elusive identities of the living, and explore the boundaries between the thought and the unthought.¹⁴

A fair enough aspiration, and no doubt valid to the source, yet potentially too easy and welcome for uptake. If *Of Grammatology* was where a recognition of writing became the deconstruction of philosophy, then hauntology might be simply a kind of modified and softened adjustment to this critique of the metaphysics of presence and its nihilistic potentials, a kind of not-quite-presence that works as a safety valve to release the nihilist pressure such that, in the end, there really is no other call beyond deconstruction except perhaps to a sort of academic conformity to radical common sense about current events.¹⁵

Not that it has not been taken that way. Fredric Jameson, widely quoted on this, was careful to insist that hauntology had nothing to do with whether or not one believes in ghosts (for instance, quoted in Colin Davis precisely to accomplish the function of drawing the implications safely back to an abstract notion of indeterminacy and uncertainty):

Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.¹⁶

The spectral is now expertly and safely diffused into nearly nothing. Phew!

A close call, yet not a foreclosure exactly either. Hauntology has lived on, eagerly embraced in at least some quarters in literary studies not only for the authorial trace of Derrida but because it became apparent that the idea of ghosts could have an important role in how one might mediate the understanding of writing and texts with an openness to that which exceeds fossil knowledge.

One exemplar of this literature, one of many, is Elizabeth Loevlie's "Faith in the Ghosts of Literature,"¹⁷ which is as clear as any other in finding in fictional writing a natural place where being-with spirits becomes

possible, and the unspeakable can be spoken without the conviction of ontology precisely because “literature, unlike our everyday, referential language, is not obliged to refer to a determinable reality, or to sustain meaning.”¹⁸ Moreover, in a certain sense literature is not only a medium for hauntological presences but is itself the epitome of such — literature, so the argument goes, is precisely hauntological in its nature because of its traffic in nonpresent presences. We can

explore literature as mode that invites and permits us to relate to and experience these haunting aspects of our human existence. I understand literature as a specific use of language through which the ineffable and unthinkable can, paradoxically, “speak.” Here language strangely releases those spectres of life that other modes of discourse repress, exclude or simply fail to grasp. Literature moves us because it offers the unheard testimony of the unspeakable.¹⁹

Yet such approaches to Derrida in literature are, in effect, an easy out precisely because “literature” or “fiction” becomes classed as separate from realist text, such as social science, for example, which would presumably adhere to the frame of “everyday, referential language.” The point is well made that literature allows for an “ontological quivering,” as Loevlie puts it, following Maurice Blanchot,²⁰ and expresses what these referential discourses do not. Were we to apply this analysis to anthropology, for instance, this divide would therefore posit social science as “obliged to refer to a determinable reality,” and then the divide itself is left untouched via the specialness of fiction. But these special roles for literature leave aside the deeper questioning that Derrida poses to realism and philosophy, indeed therefore also to anthropology, as to the assumption that in writing, as such, there is a “there” there, a there present, questioning that the referential language is stable *anywhere* in the ways it is imagined to be, and not merely in fiction, and what implications for writing result. Literature, defined in this way, as a special case, does not go far enough as hauntology.

Ghostly Matters

It seemed to me that radical scholars and intellectuals knew a great deal about the world capitalist system and repressive states and yet insisted on distinctions — between subject and object of knowledge, between fact and fiction, between presence and absence, between past and present, between present and future, between knowing and not-knowing — whose tenuousness and manipulation seem precisely to me in need of comprehension and articulation, being themselves modalities of the exercise of unwanted power.

— AVERY GORDON, *Ghostly Matters*

For all that literary fiction, held as distinctly separate, reveals about writing, writers, texts and haunting, that does not necessarily impact directly the implications of the disciplinary divides in knowledge. And this is where Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* differs, perhaps, by arguing for absorbing literary sensibilities of haunting into the social sciences themselves. This accomplishes what may be a more destabilizing move as a literary register and is deliberately theorized in *Ghostly Matters*, which starts with a simple enough social fact: the fact that haunting is

a constituent element of modern social life. . . . Neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis: it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import. To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production.²¹

At a bare minimum: haunting, socially, is.

And it is a subject that sociology has no tools to comprehend. As such, it demands a methodology suitable to the fact of it. For Gordon the starting point, but certainly not ending point, is literary fiction, precisely because it “has not been restrained by the norms of professionalized social science, and thus it often teaches us, through imaginative design, what we need to know but cannot quite get access to with our given rules of method and modes of apprehension.”²²

Ghostly Matters was an attempt to rethink history and haunting that challenged both positivistic sociology and what at the time was called a

“postmodernist” challenge to positivism. It is a different interest in the specialness of literature as a realm unpoliced by disciplinary enforcement of the real and from which the positivist social sciences can be informed or impacted.

By contrast, sociology’s birth, as Gordon points out, literally entailed distinguishing itself from literature, and in its early times sociology was quite consumed with the defenestration of literature from itself, even if its subject matter itself confronts “cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric traces of power’s presence.”²³ Yet, as a mode of storytelling, it is precisely defined by its not being any of those things and has historically arrived at a novel claim: “to find and report the facts expertly.” Sociology and related disciplines found their disciplinary boundary precisely around maintaining a disciplinary object, “social reality,” according to the distinction of what is socially real and true, thus doing the work to distinguish what is really going on from what is wrongly understood. In other words, dispelling social fictions. “The capacity to say ‘This is so.’”²⁴

In sociology, as it is in anthropology, what connects all its subjects in intricate webs is a story while, at bottom, what is striven for is the truth. Gordon identifies this contradiction and highlights that the facing of it is elided by policing creativity and by maintenance of the obligatory signification of not-fiction in academic prose.

As Gordon takes haunting to also be an expression of past wrongs and injustices, then rethinking history in terms of literary haunting shares potential common causes with social science, and yet this is where the analysis hardens around the interpretation of ghosts as expressions of the large-scale, abstract social and historical forces: “the ghost is just a sign” of haunting that has taken place, with haunting taken to be something vaster, “a social figure.”²⁵

The status of the real in haunting is mediated for Gordon because of a practical sociological impasse — broad historical and political dynamics and structures play themselves out in ambiguous and complex ways, exceeding the thoughts we have about those structures. Thus, sociology and all similar disciplines are “troubled by the contrast between conceptual or analytical descriptions of social systems and their far more diffused and delicate effects.”²⁶

It is in the ambiguities and complexities of everyday life, haunting per-

haps paramount among them, that we can find another way to read back into those structures: “In haunting, organized forces and systemic structures that appear removed from us make their impact felt in everyday life in a way that confounds our analytic separations and confounds the social separations themselves.”²⁷

In a sense it is precisely haunting itself that proves these “organized forces” and “systemic structures” more real by making manifest their presence.

And yet, as a practice of writing, Gordon realizes that attention to ghostly matters allows us the possibility to “fill in the content differently.” And that means, necessarily, a different relationship to writing, found first but not last in literature: “to find in writing that knows it is writing as such lessons for a mode of inscription that can critically question the limits of institutional discourse.”²⁸

In Writing That Knows It Is Writing as Such

Might the signification of not-fiction in the prose form of anthropology act as a refusal to write and think as though writing is writing? (The other obvious culprits being reviews, standard formulas, and a kind of gate keeping and policing.)

Remarkably, there has been little uptake of hauntology in anthropology despite anthropology’s occasional attention to writing form and despite its anything-but-mild interest in ontological openness coming only a few years after Derrida’s hauntological turn.

I suspect that one key difference between anthropology’s recent ontological openness and hauntology is that anthropology’s ontological openness has an emphasis on admissibility rather than inadmissibility, knowing rather than not-knowing. Perhaps in deconstruction there is something almost too destabilizing, for the metaphysics of presence running through the prose of anthropology would, of course, lean ontologically toward copresence (ontological parity) or simultaneous presence (multiple worlds) rather than toward “writing as such.” What renders Derrida’s approach different is precisely all the deconstructive thought of decades before, where it can hardly be argued that anything else dreamed of in Horatio’s philosophy is any more “here” or “there” than the specter or

than the assumptions of material presences and of actual, existing writers who are themselves actually existing entities speaking to actually existing entities.

To be sure, it is an almost perfectly valid reading to see the specter in Derrida as merely a metaphorical extraction from the spirit world, and I still do not know whether I do not think this as well: the force of secular materialist commonsense feels strong in him. And so then the French intellectual finds the perfect category to occupy a needed slot in his discourse, surprise, surprise. The specter in that case serves the purposes of a concept that captures indeterminacy and a certain inadequacy, that is, an inability to use current analytics to adequate, to accurately point to something that lies in between the self-evident categories that seem to be at hand, such as that between the living and the dead, the human and nonhuman, time and being, past and future, and so on. But this use of metaphors and topoi of the spirit world would remain merely tropological when the self-evident task — to declare an accurate and adequate analysis of reality, and/or the impossibility of doing so — remains somehow on the front burner, or, we could also say, to the extent that it does. But clearly that is not the point with Derrida.

A mere tropological spectral writing takes metaphors from the spirit world to, as it were, complete its thoughts about what exceeds its grasp. Or it sees haunting as standing for something else that is actually real: ghosts are merely signs, emblems of social anxiety or some such, which are more real than ghosts and which emanate out of structural historical processes that are even more real than that. Tropological spectralism dashes its concepts with images of ghosts and sprinkles the writing with similes of the supernatural. Tropological spectralism sustains an intonation of not-really-meaning-it-yet-sort-of-meaning-it-but-not-really-ness. We write about ghosts, but, of course, *they are not, and we are*. The tropological becomes a kind of cushion or a kind of throwing-your-hands-up at the inadequacy of representational language, a kind of supplemental acknowledgement that allows the writing business to go on as usual; on the one hand there is that which can be represented, and on the other hand there is that which cannot be represented and for which we use metaphor, art, poetry, literature, and ghosts.

But when the adjustment and correction of referential knowledge to

reality is not the deliberative task in the writing, which is to say, when that is not the goal, the game changes. A metaphysics of presence presumes that there is a subject, a separately existing writer who views through the partial constructor of language a partial view on a reality that is also out “there,” however incompletely known, perhaps to refine that knowledge and get the language to line up.

In an interview, “On ‘Madness,’” Derrida is asked, then, “Why is it so important to write?”

The self does not exist, it is not present to itself before that which engages it in this way and which is not it. There is not a constituted subject that engages itself at a given moment in writing for some reason or another. It is given by writing, by the other: born . . . by being given, delivered, offered, and betrayed all at once. . . . Saint Augustine speaks often of “making the truth” in a confession. . . . I try, by citing him often, to think how this truth rebels against philosophical truth — a truth of adequation or revelation.²⁹

It is difficult to emphasize enough that this means to say that the writer does not preexist the text. This has been, of course, something far more assimilated to literary studies than it has been in anthropology, where the question of the ethnographer — the one who has perceived and thought the knowledge created — is not inquired into as to its ontological status. But is there a “there” there in the ethnographer? Does the ethnographer speak?

By contrast, it is not as far of a critical leap for the theorist of literature to identify fiction as a mirror of the sourceless source of the text, that there is an “affinity between the sacred speech of the oracle and the potentially literary voice that emerges through what is written because none of them originate in the speaking subject,” as Loevlie puts it, drawing upon Blanchot here:

Like sacred speech, what is written comes from no one knows where, it is authorless, without origin, and hence, refers to something more original. Behind the written word, no one is present, but it gives voice to absence, just as in the oracle where the divine speaks, the god himself is never present in his speech, and it is the absence of god that speaks then.³⁰

Yet this makes a certain kind of sense only inside a referential world where bodily presences, oracles, are taken to be what is meant by “present” and a god as something “absent.” In such a view spirits would never speak, only mediums would, because “to speak” is then tied to a subject position that is, in turn, tied to the metaphysics of sound vibrations of the body. But we could see the text as an embodiment of a voice that is originless in the sense that a writer is not a present thing. This not only includes the author but the addressee as well, a function of the code and mark in writing itself, as Derrida put it in “Signature, Event, Context”:

All writing, therefore, to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence; it is a break in presence, “death,” or the possibility of the “death” of the addressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark.³¹

This is, for Derrida, true of *all* writing, for writing “to be what it is” and therefore both the same as and exceeding the point in Loevlie’s accounting of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a point that is more narrowly hauntology inspired:

What Morrison’s text demands from its readers is that they have faith in the ghosts of literature. And to have this faith is to be smitten with the quivering ontology of that in which we believe. In *Beloved* this spectrality is more tangible as one of the main characters is a ghost. However, and here I recall Blanchot, every great text has its center of unreadability, its spectrality. Literature is the release of this middle zone, this in-between, that haunts us all. So to read literature is to be exposed to the hauntology of the text, and thereby to one’s own spectrality. In what sense am I? What is it to exist? Where do I end and does the other start? How does the death of others, and my own death, haunt me? How can I live with the knowledge of all that I can never know?³²

As an appraisal confined to literature rather than all writing, this is almost too readily acceptable, yet a certain instability opens because obviously these questions are not merely the questions of literature, at least not for Derrida or Gordon. These questions can bleed into other genres. Perhaps the spectral nature of the writer emerges more visibly in what is being classed as literature simply because the spectrality of the text and

writer is precisely that which is most studiously averted from recognition in the referential text. There is far less suspension because the referential text tells “seriously true” stories, evoking faith in its seriously meant language in ways that pass under the radar, leaving the spectrality of the text, and of the writer and the reader for that matter, unreflected. This is the seriousness of referential text seen precisely not as the writing that it is.

Not that such text always should be seen as writing in this sense, nor even that it frequently should be. It is not the common and laudable aim of anthropological discourse to address the seriousness of issues that I want to be skeptical about. It is instead about how the particular way anthropological discourse itself purports to be taken seriously, at least as literary form. In other words it is not what we might call the world that we might not take seriously but the way knowledge of it is performed that might be looked at, occasionally, as somewhat fictional and also maybe even strangely comical that it could be taken as seriously true. And this is not to say that what I propose here is a cure but merely a different attitude and a different starting point.³³

What I propose here is something more approaching the nature of the Gothic, or to be more exact, it is at play with the Gothic. A Gothic ethnography might involve, like the common definition of Gothic literature, both the approaching sense of a supernatural world that is seemingly — but not quite — lost by a (falsely) imagined “modernity,” and the fundamental subversion of modernist imagination by the return of unassimilated entities that defy and confound the new order, rendering the modern strange and unreal and exposing its incomplete vision of the world, if only in story.

Unfortunately, for reasons beyond my control, I cannot honestly say that Gothic ethnography, like Gothic fiction, is all story, however. The separation of functions between fiction and referential language cannot be observed, because what writing is cannot be apparent only in some texts and not others. Gothic ethnography here does not exclude the “true story” as conventionally understood. It is less complete than fiction, an incomplete vision, including mistakes about who is, and what it is to be, alive; who is, and what it is to be, dead; who is person and who is spirit; who is narrator, character, and writer; and a stream of other indefinite entities that definitely do not necessarily exclude real ghosts in the most literally simple senses of the terms “real” and “ghost.”

When one already knows where to put each thing, each in its place,

this is to give up all possibility, as in the nouny social science that fixates process into its nouns through the izationization of language and the assignment of classificatory schemes. There can be no easy classification scheme in a Gothic ethnography: Would a true Gothic social science suddenly reveal, in a twist at the end, that the realist narrator who described the true forces of globalization was, in fact, a robot programmed to create social science and that in the end it all was a constructed fiction? Or would it instead take the reader on a fantastic, seemingly fictional journey requiring the suspension of disbelief only to reveal in the end that it was all in fact a true story?

Or is it social-science-as-usual itself that is already committing the sin of false, uncanny fiction as Freud identified it?³⁴ Which is to say it might be like those “true stories” that Freud felt so begrudged about, where a supernatural account is told as if it were true and is meant to be taken seriously as reference and representation of what was real, thus creating an uncanny chill in the reader, because of the belief in it being real, only to reveal disappointingly at the end that it was all made up. As disciplines progress and new research and new methods and debates reveal the past chapters in the advance of the known over the unknown as false, are we not being strung along in a similar story, much like the false uncanny, induced to believe and then realizing later it was made up in the end?

Derrida said we must speak with specters. And others tell us these specters are not seriously real of course. Of course not. Don’t worry. You can read on. Derrida is not doing anything freaky.

Nothing out of place.

I said just now that I propose a play with Gothic ethnography, and yet that word “propose” is funny in that it almost implies that I am in a writer’s lab coat, exploring an experimental method — “experimental ethnography” is something I have put on my cv — that you can now build upon in the future to move the discipline forward, expand the conquest of the unknown by the known, or increase the precision of our apprehension of it. But if one looks a little askew at this, with different eyes, perhaps eyes also attuned to literary form, could that all-too-common performance of revealing the brand-new modus for future anthropological knowledge not also appear at times to be the true anthropological cheese factor?

What if, instead of expanding what is known over the unknown, the light of the known realm itself is changed, sharing in something like what

can happen in fiction or in Gothic fiction or in the brand-new anthropological method — which other anthropologists may now commence doing — of gothic ethnography?

Or not. Everything back in its place. All voices placed in their empirically real, discursive positionality, which is not a fiction. Identities fixed in the discursive grid. Authors are limited to express themselves within what their discursive positionality permits, and this positionality is real. We know who each person is on the historic grid and what each being is and, last but not least, this means also that we already know what *being* is. No mixing. No excesses. Everything in its place.

This is what I'm chanting to myself as I suddenly feel destabilized by these thoughts and as other voices enter in unbidden, ventriloquists taking over my inner voice. I'm not myself. Much like Descartes's *Meditations* at his fireside, as he intentionally imbibes his designer drug of doubt, I'm feeling out of sorts. Images of Gongkam's suicide are dancing in my brain, although I already know it is not his death that really matters so much as what happened to Gongkam, and to everyone, and even to me, after his death. Things are breaking up.

If he loves justice at least, the "scholar" of the future, the "intellectual" of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. They give us to rethink the "there" as soon as we open our mouths.³⁵

I'm losing it, but some voice inside me is telling me, "Let it happen: just lie back and think of multi-sited ethnography."

Faces in the Water

Gongkam was, in fact, my uncle, or "second uncle" I guess you call it in English. I know this vocabulary not because I know much English, or studied English much, but because I have access to the knowledge of my host, who is a native speaker of English: everything he knows, I know (it's more

complicated than simply that, but I will leave that for later). Still, we did, as children, learn the English word “uncle,” but I think we thought it meant the same thing that we mean in Thai; really any man not too old and not too young we would call “uncle” on the street in the village as a sign of respect and acknowledgment of our connection as fellow people. I only have vague memories of Gongkam, but my host knows more from asking around (he asks around a lot), and between the two of us, I get a very vivid picture of a sad story that doesn’t seem to end. It’s a complicated story, just as is the means by which it is possible to tell it. Let’s just say for now that this isn’t my first language. Nor is this my first host; far from it. I’m a ventriloquist, you could say, and more: I have the run of the body of his memories and his language, awkward, intellectual constructions as they are. There’s no good way for me to put it because his words and images and style of speaking and thought and sense of audience and this language are all foreign to me, and although I use his style and am in control, it also sometimes feels as though it’s not me who is speaking.

I am myself, however, very much a part of the story, which is not only about how my life’s course was forever impacted by that one act of my uncle. It’s also about how we can know the connection of the courses of all of our lives to the courses of all of our deaths, about the balances of account columns and lack of them between this world and the next.

For me, the seeing of this began when I was a young girl growing up in Northern Thailand. I was drawn to solitude in the quietest places. In that sense, I was quite unlike the other girls and boys I grew up with, and indeed quite un-Thai, at least given what we were taught in school by the Bangkok curriculum about our nature as selfless and generous and in constant communal connection with our family, neighbors, and nation. Maybe there could be no one less Thai than me.

When I was a girl, we didn’t have toys from the store. We made our own out of sticks and dirt and rocks and cans or waded in the stream and the creek that is now long dried and where once in a while one of us would die, drown, disappearing forever under the murky brown water to live almost forever there in a memory but also as a ghostly part of the world, part of the world’s force, embedded in the banks, in the clammy silt clay that startles at the first touch of your foot, sending a rippling shudder up your legs and all around the surface of your skin, the exact analogue in the physical world of being brushed by a spirit. I myself was always drawn

to the water, to the creek, and in the latter days of my childhood I'd often seek out the creek alone, when solitude was not a state that most Thai kids in those days sought. We loved to be together and knew no other life than that of the peripatetic band of children assembling in the tangled well-worn paths between houses, where we coursed as the lifeblood of the village through its veins of alleys rather than shipped off down straight grids like the kids of today's planned settlements. But for some reason, I was different and sought out the solace and would hurry off, without my mother knowing it, down to the creek, where I would steal a boat and paddle and drift off on the quiet surface. Have you ever heard nothing, absolutely nothing but a silence broken by the eddy of a paddle gently cutting and kissing the water? It seems unnatural, but the mind is like that. There can be a chorus of bugs and birds out there, but you hear only the one thing. It lulls you into peace. And in that calm, I knew that my friends and former playmates, and those of my father and mother's time as well, lay somewhere down below me, hungry for my company. Somehow that didn't disturb me from the singular sound of water and its partner, silence

that eased my mind and filled me with the bare and ordinary presence of the world.

Sometimes I was caught when I made my way home and was given a good slap with my father's switch for putting my life at risk. But getting caught happened far less than my parents could have dreamed was possible. I was hard to find out and hard to catch, a skinny, boyish girl who nevertheless hated boys and would constantly get into fights with them, which I won every time. I was a wriggly baby and then a bony spider-girl who only stopped moving when alone and in peace. Those were the moments that would stay with me and linger on long after they were gone. I can't tell you how much I miss that world, the feel of old wood on your feet, on your bottom, in your hands. The paddle so present in your hands, and yet there was an unsensed chaos of green grass and fiery ants waiting on the bank. Janpen was my name at the time (later I got really sick, and to fool the spirits, my name was switched to Anchalee). Janpen, "Full Moon." Like the night I was born and also like the tint of my world and feelings, always a little cool, a little unreal. A moon-child, paddling through the creek a little too late, a little later than I should have.

The dusky light coated the surface of the water while the tallest trees still prickled with the gold light of day's end. That was when the first one came to me.

It was the up in that tree by the bank, the one my mother told me never to go near.

"That is the Tree Woman's place," she would say. "Don't go there, or she'll get you, hit your mind and possess your body."

But I was curious, so I kept looking, and up in the tallest branches, there was one that was glowing, bright white. I felt no fear, exactly, but still there was a weakness and sinking in my belly that made it difficult to even find the strength to move a muscle let alone wield the paddle. But I was drifting in the light current and passed under the branch. When I was far enough away, I could paddle again. I headed straight home.

But now my eyes darted to the eddy of the paddle. As I flicked past it, I turned my head, and in the expanding ripple on the surface was the reflection of a face. A boy's face, white as boiled rice, big black eyes desperately glaring at me. Again, the next stroke, another face, another boy, crying and angry, as if it were my fault. A girl, then a baby, everywhere I stuck the paddle in the water was another figure. I could not stop from looking, but the faster I paddled, the faster I passed them by. The faster I wanted to go, the faster I paddled, and the more faces appeared. Until the whole creek behind me was a wake of the lost faces of children, and now my heart was beating so fast, and my breath heaved in my chest.

I turned for the bank and crashed into it. I leaped from the boat, and one foot hit the bank while the other foot sunk in the clammy mud and stuck. I wasn't sure whether it was a hand or the mud that had hold of me up to the ankle. The feeling of the silty hand closing on me filled me with a superhuman strength, and I wrenched it free and ran off in a frantic hobble with one heavy foot that took far too long to shed the remnants of mud.

Later, when I got home, it didn't take long for everyone to figure out that I was responsible for the lost boat that had drifted away. I got the switch and good. But that wasn't the worst thing that happened that night. My neighbor, the man next door, became possessed by the Tree Woman that very same night. She announced herself, and he spoke in her voice, howling all night and keeping me up and scared to death of falling asleep.

Eventually, I did drift off to sleep. And by the time I woke up, he was dead.

I was very sad for him but also relieved. He had once tried to corner me all alone in a room in his house, but I had escaped. I kept it quiet back then, just as I have until now, while everyone tried to find the meaning of the possession, to figure out how and what had happened and why, when I knew who it was that had caused the Tree Woman to come out of the forest to hit his mind and seize his body. They pondered, in fear and wonder, what it meant that the tree would steal his body and then take his life.

Horror Stories

Even the face disappears and only the number remains, virtually without form . . . and therefore a freed human imagination could have the power of return, to insert itself into the very fabric of the most utilitarian aspects of human exchange, and stake its claim.

Note, however, that in Adam Smith's horror story the encroachment of human imagination into the symbolic order of utility is not merely an alien invasion of fabulations, as Smith consciously portrays it, but could also be conceived as an incursion of a real desire, desire animating ever-expanding realms of trade and value, incursions into a utilitarian realm from which it has been fantastically imagined as banished and inadmissible by the barrier of Euro-enlightenment reason, which, it is no small secret, functions also (though in no way referenced in Smith's text) to imagine the barrier between the living and the dead.

What I want to know, and what I cannot get my . . . er . . . let us for now call her my "friend" . . . to tell me, is how ghosts and spirits take hold of numbers (as they most often do these days). In thinking through and negotiating a life in postcrashing Thailand, there is hardly a sense in which the resounding effects of globalized, digitized, abstract value do not permeate everyday life, and yet that life has for a very long time already fully resonated with an interest in other abstract realms of existence, alternative immaterialities to which, it will be argued, our attention can be turned to considerable benefit. The two realms, ghosts and numbers, seem ordained, each to the other, especially among those number players who seek insider information from the next world.

The association of ghosts and numbers can be an unsettling way to

think about the settled common sense that we face an increasing abstraction of economy and the virtualization of finance transactions and all the implications that this has on the conduct of our social life, the organization of what has been called capital, and the proliferation of situations of broad disparity in access to the realms of financial power. Are the realms of abstract capital splitting off from what appear to be material relations and taking on a life of their own (an impossible horror in Marxist thought, a possible horror in classical economics), or is abstraction simply the tip of an iceberg of real social relations, which it reflects and embodies, represents and proxies? In this situation of heightened freakiness, one might be tempted to remain in awe of this realm and grant it an ontological presence that is equivalent to that of any other thing in this world.

The realism embodied in theory stories of fear and awe of this realm are disturbing in many ways, and on purpose, in the way that realism calls forth the sense of an impending and looming ethereal monster of digitization that could swallow the world, in the sense of a relentless logic that will lead the world through an increasingly momentous spiral, its horror most especially defined by the way that immaterial logic separates us from materiality and real limits, and yet has very real impacts on our mortal coils, such as on the oil that burns, the air that is breathed, and even in stirrings in the genetic calm that still settles over all the species of the planet but may erupt into yet another abstract force beyond our control; the number leads our minds away from the earth and from our bodies as though we are possessed. And the limit of material return on this matter is its fraternal-twin monster, the twin to the monster of abstraction.

And yet . . . our question of ghosts and numbers here will be different, a more twisted look at this, the conventional equation between mind and matter outlined above. Certainly, there is something spiritually suggestive and suggested by the wires, cables, and wireless transmissions as they carry invisible forces that generate a realm that is analogous, at least, with the animated energy of an immaterial existence. All notional values are given a life that is so powerful, so compelling, and the thought that we would be commanded by their imperatives is, in a way, an assertion that we can create spirits that possess us, not just the notion of spirits but ones with a certain kind of reality to them as well. We can give life to our dreams, and our dreams can take life, form. And this metaphorical flight can all make sense as long as we remain more or less in the imaginary

of the anthropological point of view — which is to say, the imaginary not necessarily of a discipline called anthropology but of a reading stance that depends upon the suspension of disbelief and a view through the lens of “culture,” where things are both agnostically true and agnostically not at the same time. In that imaginary, this is as close as one can come to a discourse of ghosts and numbers. And that is why, perhaps, the image of the specter proliferates tropologically now, just as it did in Marx.

Ground down in some Marxist sensibilities is the lesson that the money form has an animated spirit that arises from a specific and very real locality: from the sacrifice of qualitative value to quantitative value in the sacrifice of labor, which lets loose the fetish of value, which then propels the very real realm of abstract exchange.

This is the spirit of capital and the animated spiritual substance let loose from a prior and secret, or at least secreted, violence. But there are two products, are there not? The fraternal twin to the commodity fetish is the very real class of people produced by this process, which cannot be revoked. That is to say, the force that animates the realm of abstract capital is the same force that is assembling itself, seeking itself out, gathering from fragments and amassing into a wholly new specter, the “spectre haunting Europe” of the *Communist Manifesto*, a singular specter that will overpower this strange animism. It is not simply that Marx sees the capitalists as having inferior insight into the nature of reality. There is a very real connection between the abstract values of capital and actual sacrifices made on the level of the exchange of qualitative value for quantitative capital, of work for labor power. Human sacrifice.

But could a gothic ethnography be a fantastic response to this speculative capitalist spectral tropoi, or would it only represent another expression of the pagan order of commodity fetishism?

All truth is a social construction, except for this sentence.

All truth is a social construction, including this sentence.

☞ The first one, “all truth is a social construction, except for this sentence, which is not a socially constructed truth but a Truth that masters all other truths,” was the unbelievable truth that they tried to teach him before I got my, as it were, hands on him.

My own story is, I know, just as hard to swallow as these strange

learned swigs. I didn't know what to think at the time, or about the time, of this story either. I'm not even sure I believed it then, nor now, despite what happened.

But I was definitely, without doubt, frightened. Now there were two dead, my uncle Gongkam and the neighbor man, whose name always escapes me. I felt it all had something to do with me. I was a child, and that is what a child thinks of the things that go on around her.

At night I had to keep the shutters closed no matter how hot it got in the summer. Even just a crack of moonlight in my window would cause me to awake in the night. After the Tree Woman came for the neighbor man and left, I began to have other strange visits. Even talking about the visits is uncomfortable, and I feel as though the world will open its folds again and drown me again with all those presences again.

Well, it started in the moonlight in my bed. At the foot of my bed I would see a tiny childlike figure, the size of a rat, crawling on all fours toward me. It was all yellow and glowed. It had a little child's face with a big smile, which made me smile at first until I saw that the grin did not move. Just one smile, always the same, and it had no eyes, just spots of black nothing for eyes, crawling on all fours toward me, smiling, smiling. I screamed and woke up the whole house and spent the rest of the night with *mae* and *paw* even though I was a bit too old for that. I cried whenever it came back so that I could go to bed with *mae* and *paw*.

That was the first crack, when I was very tiny, and it is one of my earliest memories. There would be more later.

That was when the numbers started coming to me. That was when my mother began to latch on to me the way I latched on to her. She wanted the numbers, and I wanted to be near her forever. It worked out for both of us. She would ask me for numbers and then bet on the last two or three numbers in the black-market lottery.

Somehow, I was right half the time.

It didn't last my whole life. Mae told me that eventually a child grows up to the point where she is no longer pure. She begins to understand winning and losing. She begins to take an interest in money. It's at that point that her vision becomes stained. But an innocent child with no idea what the numbers are for can announce numbers freely and without passing through the stain of consciousness. For luck in numbers and money, you always go to the small children.

But I felt differently. I always thought, and still kind of believe, that my encounters with these presences were instead what put the numbers in my mind. Perhaps it was just a coincidence, and yet living in my skin, I can't help but feel there was a real connection. And feeling the connection is the same thing as there being one.

I was not the only one having encounters. There were other dabblers. That's why the problems really started.

After the children and monks found Gongkam's corpse dangling from the cham chaa tree, the villagers came, and before noon, cut him down, lugged him deep into the forest, dug a hole in the ground, laid him down, covered him over, reemerged from the wood without looking back, and then hitchhiked to work at the sugar mill because they had missed the one company bus what with the suicide business.

Gongkam's family, my cousins and aunts and uncles, were finally convinced — by horrible stories of ghosts, of the intense violation that suicide represented, of how miserable and obsessed Gongkam must have been at the time of death — that it was best to leave the ghost out in the forest rather than bring the corpse to the home for proper rites. Gongkam's elder sister, now the senior figure of the family, had no reluctance at all about this, as it would avoid the expense of a funeral wake, which would at a bare minimum last three nights and to which she would be obliged to contribute.

Of course, even with Gongkam's body ferreted away in the woods, he was nevertheless all too present in the village — in the talk that ran wild of the suicide, of the horrible expression on Gongkam's face, of his strange behaviors, of debt and money, of his miserly sister, the last one to speak to him alive.

Others continued to speak to him after his death, though secretly. Taking him way out into the forest had apparently not worked. One night a local medium, a pleasant enough woman with a soft-spoken way about her, was approached by some gamblers, some of whom had been friends or acquaintances of Gongkam's. After calling out to and plying Gongkam's spirit with cigarettes and rum, the medium began to gag, choke, and dry heave and finally erupted with a howl, bringing Gongkam into her body, where he proceeded to beat his chest, sob, cry, and yell in anger, all in quick alternation. He was cold, cold. It was so dark. There was pain down the back of his neck. He was grasping at his neck, clawing at it. Sometimes screaming in pain with his palms pressed hard against his temple.

These are mostly the things Gongkam was doing or saying at first, or so I am told. It took a long time to get Gongkam out of this funk, to stop telling everyone how he was feeling, to get him to focus on them and their desires. They wanted Gongkam to come with them, be with them, hanging over their shoulders, when they went to funeral wakes and while they were gambling there. They wanted him to guide their hands to the right numbers, let them release their money to drop softly down upon the gambling mat, on the right numbers. “Come on,” they pleaded. “You owe your buddies.”

And what will you do for me?

“Liquor and cigarettes every time we win.”

But what about my body? I am cold.

“We will come to get you if you help us. Come on, share your knowledge with us.”

And what will you do about my elder sister?

People may say various things about what the gamblers’ response to that question might have been. The nicer version is that they finally pleaded their way through it with other promises and convinced Gongkam to accompany them to funeral casinos and share his insights into the numbers. The other version of this story might — given what happened later — be evidence admissible in a murder trial.

People talk a lot. This whole story is based on talk, most of all mine. The more important fact, in general, about that night is that it was the reason the story didn’t come to an end with the hasty burial. Because these guys could not be satisfied and so would not leave Gongkam to his terrible fate alone. And so, to what would become the great misfortune of Jai Village, Gongkam shared his fate with them, with everyone.

☞ Do you want to know what happened next? The numbers did not come easily, not without a price.

That price was to discover what I am. Which was the same thing as the death of me.

But before I can even begin to go into what I mean by the death of me, there are some things you need to know about what happens when value and spirits mix themselves up in the seeming alternatives of immaterial and material form. And to really get it, to really understand what I have to

say, it is not going to be easy, not without a price. You are going to have to want it for yourself. Which is to say, you are going to have to want to partake in this death, if even only a little, and without knowing what it means. Which is to say that you need to start with desire, from a stance of desire and a look of desire. But desire for what?

A list of the objects that will appear here:

- 1 The description of a locale in Northern Thailand in several dimensions of memory and observation, including the context of global situations but by no means limited to, or even mainly, that.
- 2 Real ghost stories.
- 3 A terrible economic crash.
- 4 Money schemes of some variety.
- 5 Lottery.
- 6 Ghosts in global film, their distantly close hands.
- 7 The Nextworld, which can be divided into two subcategories:
First, the realm of the afterlife and the beings beyond our dreamworld's thin barrier.
Second, the ideas of spiritual animation that seize, and are seized by, those minds turned upon and enraptured by our dreamworld's orchestra of numbers in furious exchange and giving birth to an emergent future, those metaphors of spirit, which they use to call back down to earth the abstract beyond, or else to imagine, indefinitely and in delusion, that there will be no return.
- 8 Trees. Some with spirits.
- 9 A mirror. One in which you can see what you really are but not the kind you can hold in your hands.

These are just some of the things in this Nextworld, not necessarily the most important ones. I stopped at nine only because nine is the luckiest number in Thailand. Now I have mentioned that number three times, which is good because three is one-third of nine. But nine nines would be best, so now I have six, and three more to go to get off to a good start.

The word for nine is *gau* in Thailand, which is almost homonymous with the word for step and stepping forward and so represents forward momentum, progress, things getting better, advancement. Nine therefore

is the most coveted number for birthdays, cell phone numbers, license plates, home addresses. Nine.

The things in an ethnography always exceed the capacity of the symbolic order of the reasonable everyday to satiate itself on full and final possession of them in its perception. To consider the consequences of this state of affairs in writing as such, however, cannot entail the stance nor the look of an objective realist lens. It is one thing to strike critical poses on the social construction of objective realism and its oppressive effects, which has been done with great fervor and repetition in scholarship. It is quite another thing to ask for something more than that.

To wake up through the social life of story is not to see through the mass fantasies, their ideological imaginary, and identify the desires, fears, and anxieties embedded and wedded to power. Is there something available that is even more resistant than such penetrating “insight”?

And so it is very much from the sidelines of the realist optic and frame that I will return us again, at long last, and feeling like we are ourselves again, to the end of things and the ardent attention of Kamnoi, sitting by her TV set, searching — and thus return to the ardent attention she places on the meaning of numbers in this life. There are countless realms in which she experiences a constant stream of imagery that can she can read back as displaced expressions of numerical values:

Sometimes the numbers are there in the simplest of things. If I dream of a snake, that could be one. If it is “blue,” that rhymes with two, if the snake slithers, then it is a five. Sometimes the dead, my father, mother, my ancestors, the place spirits, the Buddhist saints, or the lords of olden times appear with signs and symbols, or sometimes they speak the numbers. Sometimes I see car crashes, on TV or on the side of the road, and I note the number of dead, the number of vehicles, the license-plate numbers. Other times I see visiting dignitaries on TV or disasters at home or abroad. Everything that draws my attention could have a number lying within it.

For Kamnoi, finding the expression of winning lottery numbers is a constant interpretative endeavor of sorting through all apparitions of life, from satellite broadcasts circulating over the surface of the earth to dreams in the sleep of the night to the visitations by spirits and ancestors to strange occurrences appearing before the attention of everyday life.

Now one of the most remarkable things about such people who are so singularly focused on lottery is how lacking they are in elaborated consumerist fantasies about winning. When asked what she would do with a big lottery winning, Kamnoi's answers are remarkably mundane and mirror those of hundreds of others: she would buy a house for her children, pay for their schooling and that of her grandchildren. Asking questions about winning big in the lottery will not get one very far into anyone's fantasy life. All the mental work is turned instead, rather purely, toward interpretation of the numbers themselves. And it is here, in what may at first glance appear to be an elaborated work of fantasy in the realm of numbers, that we can begin to unbalance the equation of realism and fantasy we started with.

Imagine a life where you will do almost nothing without first making sure the numbers add up, that it is the right day, the right time, to buy a new motorbike, get married, bless your new baby, change the color of your hair, or even leave the house and buy a chicken in the market. Where the phenomenal world is a constant stream and series of incidences, coincidences, codes, symbols, all representing a constant iteration and language of figures, an utterly digital world with a fortune insistently but unclearly present, just waiting for the right read-back from the apparent to its numerical substrate. Imagine a world where there is not a thing that cannot be the occasion to place a bet, and after finding suitable partners, one gambles constantly not only on lottery, football, and the closing stock market index number but also on how many people will walk through the door of the shopping mall in the next five minutes or how many grains of rice have stuck to my third finger; whatever is happening is always translatable into a numerical instrument on which to turn, and harness, the generator of fate, which is at the source of financial fortune, a moment-to-moment living with a felt consistency that occurs on a plane of relationship with numbers that is difficult for those who spend far less time reading it that way to fathom.

Is this the famed, promised, and feared penetration of the neoliberal regime of economic abstraction into the thoroughmost recesses of intimate life, most especially of fantasy life?

Tracking seamlessly between television images, incidents in daily life, sleep, and dreams, including all the world that is normally conceived of as real, all phenomena are equally susceptible to interpretation as, in effect,

dream, in that all phenomena can be read back through the dreamwork of the fateful universe to the primary numbers lying behind and within its appearances. In the manifest content of what we call the real world, nothing is as it seems, and everything arrives instead predigitized into phenomenal form.

Kamnoi's derealization of the phenomenal world might be likened to a popular cinematic fantasy, that of *The Matrix*,³⁶ where the clear-seeing hero Neo ("the One") finally perceives the illusions of the Matrix as the displaced representations of what is, at base, a number stream, thus gaining freedom from and power over that world.

But, of course, it is very different in one supremely important respect. For the clear-seeing Neo, who sees through the digital fantasy and into the black box and wired base, the real is a very present counterground upon which is rooted his existence, his eye, and his brain. But, of course, in Kamnoi's digitized world of phenomenally manifesting numbers there is nothing that is not ultimately linked to fate and the number stream, to an immaterial beyond. All phenomena, which one might classify as either dream or reality, are equally manifestations of a dreamwork worked upon the base of numbers.

Quite awry from a passive reaction to the neoliberal dream- and nightmarescape, quite displaced from desperate clinging and desire to the world driving bizarre cultural behaviors that are manifestations, in the real, of primary socio-historical forces, living in a world of apparitions of numbers has less grit and pull, is less serious, and has less traction on the mind.

Consider the occasion, to cite only one example from her life, when world leaders from the United States, China, Japan, Russia, Venezuela, the entire twenty-one nations of the Asia-Pacific Economic Corporation (APEC) Pacific Rim, descended on Thailand for an elaborate spectacle and performance of a shining new and ethereal world of a global finance and investment utopian community hosted by the Thai national leader. As Kamnoi sits transfixed to the constant live-video feed, she is not imbibing the hegemonic dreamworld but looking for other significances, connecting with numbers in the same way she would if the APEC meeting were a natural disaster, act of terrorism, or car wreck on the side of the road.

Living a rather otherworldly life of numbers has done nothing to increase a sense that the hostile and fearful world out there will strike her

down into poverty and longing and that she must join up with the dominant solutions offered. Nor is she ruled by the consumerist fantasies displayed on her TV set. This consumerist dream material does not create serious objects of desire but instead is an occasion to look for correspondences and displacements of the number stream. Thus, reading against the grain and back from the manifest content of the dominant fantasies to the unstable field of probabilities that underlies her phenomenal world, her looking awry at fantasy itself is perhaps a more thorough apperception and freedom than the realist optic.

And if that is fantasy (although I am not saying that it is), then perhaps anthropology should get a little less real.

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NOTES

1 · The Ghost Manifesto

- 1 One might think that the anthropology of fantasy might be of use here, but this work does not seriously challenge the reality status of anthropology itself. While fantasy is a category that appears in anthropological scholarship, it has never to my knowledge been the case that any anthropological approach to fantasy has questioned its own reality status. It is always “real fantasies” that are the objects of study.
- 2 Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 22–23.
- 3 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.
- 4 Cameron, “Indigenous Spectrality.” Note that while some will read into her position only a prohibition on spectrality, using standard politico-aesthetic templates, her text is clearly about opening possibilities that are politically different than what has come before.
- 5 Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*.
- 6 Boellstorff, “For Whom the Ontology Turns,” 387–407.
- 7 Klima, “Thai Love Thai,” 448.
- 8 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 801.
- 9 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 802.
- 10 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 810.
- 11 I am using “representationalism” at the moment in the same or similar usage as in Barad’s text. More commonly, it is taken in philosophy to mean the position of af-

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firming a world out there that is real but that is only known as mental or subjective thought or image and so might require a rigorous process of getting knowledge to correspond with or resemble that reality out there or, in the extreme “constructionist” or “cultural” version, renders that task impossible.

- 12 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.
- 13 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii–xix.
- 14 Davis, “Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms,” 373.
- 15 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.
- 16 Jameson, “Marx’s Purloined Letter,” 373.
- 17 Loevlie, “Faith in the Ghosts of Literature.”
- 18 Loevlie, “Faith in the Ghosts of Literature,” 337.
- 19 Loevlie, “Faith in the Ghosts of Literature,” 337.
- 20 Loevlie, “Faith in the Ghosts of Literature,” 334.
- 21 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 7.
- 22 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 25.
- 23 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 20.
- 24 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 20.
- 25 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 10.
- 26 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 23–24.
- 27 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 19.
- 28 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 26.
- 29 Derrida, “A ‘Madness’ Must Watch Over Thinking,” 347.
- 30 Loevlie, “Faith in the Ghosts of Literature,” 38.
- 31 Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” 91.
- 32 Loevlie, “Faith in the Ghosts of Literature,” 347–48.
- 33 Perhaps this is more like what Stuart McLean fabulates about anthropology in *Fictionalizing Anthropology* when he says that “anthropology’s most radical potential consists — and has always consisted — of its capacity to undermine conventional distinctions between documentary and fiction. By collapsing the representational distance on which such distinctions depend, reality — and not just human beings’ culturally circumscribed representations of it — is rendered open to questioning and, potentially, refashioning” (*Fictionalizing Anthropology*, xi). Perhaps, or perhaps not, what radical anthropology has “always consisted” of, but certainly a radical imagination about that!
- 34 Freud was speaking specifically of scary stories that are presented as being true but instead are revealed to be made up, thus giving cheap, uncanny effects. See the next chapter for more on Freud’s separations of fiction and reality and how important they are for his analysis. Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 217–56.
- 35 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 291.
- 36 Wachowski and Wachowski, *The Matrix*.