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# from *The Romance of Siam*

**Jai Arun Ravine**

**Abstract**

"White Love," "Backpackers," "Backpackers 2: [White Goes East]" and "Erase Every Trace" are excerpts from *THE ROMANCE OF SIAM*, which is forthcoming from Timeless, Infinite Light in 2016. This book is a subverted travel guide that interrogates the desire white people have to lose and reinvent themselves in Thailand. I track how this "white love" manifests in the tourism industry, popular American media and the western imaginary. As a person of Thai and white descent, my attempts to connect to Thailand as a place or cultural identity are completely colonized by white desire. Writing this book and performing its texts has been a way for me to utilize parody, satire and the obsessive form of the sestina to try to decolonize that relationship.

## WHITE LOVE<sup>1</sup>

Why Thailand? I literally looked through the, the catalog once  
and, um, as soon as I, I saw the, the word Thailand  
I, I knew. It's sort of a, strange  
feeling, um, to explain. But I, I went out that night and bought a, uh, culture shock  
book, um, on Thailand, read it in about three hours and decided that,  
you know, everything  
about the culture of the people, the history of the place is something that I, I  
needed to explore on my own.

I, I have never owned  
the place of my, um, mother's birth. I, I visited there once,  
twice and I, I want to apply for the, uh, Fulbright, too. I, I've read literally  
everything  
white people have written about, um, Thailand  
but I, I wasn't prepared for the, uh, shock  
of being too, um, White, too American, too, you know, strange

for Thai people. It's sort of a, um, strange  
feeling for me too, Paige, that you can own  
the experience of, uh, being there and no one's, you know, shocked  
about it. Everyone else has been to Thailand at least once:  
The People Are So Nice. And The Food!!! I, I see the word Thailand  
written on overpriced imported coconut milk cans, uh, everything

except my body has the mark. Your life, and everything  
in it changed for you and, um, nothing changed for me. I, I'm a stranger  
in a place I, I thought was mine. *Lonely Planet Thailand* says the Kingdom of, um,  
Thailand  
draws more visitors than any other country in Southeast Asia, while its, you know,  
own  
people are drawn to Europe, to study French, and not once  
do they miss the, uh, virtually irresistible combination of shocking

grandeur and ruin. Culture, um, shock  
works in many different ways, Paige. I, I pretended I, I couldn't speak English,  
suppressed everything non-Thai so I, I could, you know, belong? Once  
my, um, mother said, I, I've lived with strangers

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<sup>1</sup> **DID YOU KNOW?** This destination features lines from Paige Battcher's interview on the  
"My Fulbright Life" podcast, September 9, 2010  
[<http://foreign.fulbrightonline.org/podcast>].

**INFORMATION:** The Thai title of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's film *Tropical Malady*  
(2004) is สัตว์ประหลาด ("strange creature").

all my life, one more won't make a difference. I, I was on my own  
reading the word, um, Thailand

in books in order to learn about myself, but Thailand

loves and, uh, *accepts* you without *question* and I, I'm in shock  
and I, I don't think I, I will, you know, recover, ever. I, I want my own  
Fulbright Life. I, I want to steal everything  
you took. *Tropical Malady* or "Strange  
Creature," um, that's what I, I am. Once

and forever, not just Once In A Lifetime, I, I want to experience, um,  
Thailand—  
the strange feeling of, uh, amazing shock  
to discover that, you know, everything I am a White person owns.

## BACKPACKERS<sup>2</sup>

Every story about Thailand starts with you, a young American backpacker on holiday, walking in flip-flops and cargo shorts and Beer Chang tank tops through markets of bootlegs of bootlegs of tourists, through guesthouses overrun by roaches and beautiful French girls having sex in the next room. You have to turn on the fan just to blow away all the smoke coming off her body. Pull the pin and she's like a smoke bomb for signaling or as a screening device.

With all your boy scout military backpacking skills, you're handy with pockets and a fantastic guide to getting there and away, to paradise where everything is bootlegged and cheap, where sandwiches and coffee are French and freshly imported. When you light up a roach, you're not thinking about the history of imperialism. Cockroaches scuttle like they do in fiction books on Thailand. "I want to smoke this blow with you," say the French girls, fresh out of the shower. The French girls are filming your next porn film in their minds and the main character is a backpacker: young-ish, American-ish, White-ish, with a bootleg because he has no legs.

The fan has three settings but it's stopped oscillating. Frenetic fan clubs follow you everywhere ever since THE ROACH GUESTHOUSE made it big on the bootleg circuit. Tourists want pirated DVDs made from the bootleg of the novel of the bootleg of smoke. My country is going up in smoke all because of you, backpacker, and because I studied Spanish instead of French in high school. Who colonized more people, the French or the Spanish? Either way, Thailand is in the middle asking for more fans and printing plane tickets and translating brochures badly for backpackers, asking them to go on reckless drunken tuk-tuk rides, even off-trail to get attacked by roaches—all the while blowing smoke up the ass of the fantasy of white sand beaches bootlegged from a movie banned in Thailand, which is a bootleg from America.

But don't worry, we won't forget about the French girl. We know. She wants to bum a smoke.

All we need is a fan, some phosphorescence and the scuttle of cockroaches playing shuttlecock to make you a happy backpacker. Backpackers have bootlegged THAILAND: THE MOVIE, starring roaches and French girls and fans that don't work, obscuring me in smoke.

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<sup>2</sup> **DID YOU KNOW?** "Backpacker," "bootleg," "roach," "French," "fan," and "smoke" are six words taken at random from the first few pages of Alex Garland's novel *The Beach* (1996). **INFORMATION:** "Of course witnessing poverty was the first to be ticked off the list. Then I had to graduate to the more obscure stuff. Being in a riot was something I pursued with a truly obsessive zeal, along with being tear-gassed and hearing gunshots fired in anger." – Alex Garland, *The Beach*

## BACKPACKERS 2: [WHITE GOES EAST]<sup>3</sup>

When you say Thailand is tolerant of gender variance, you're referring to the "ladyboy" you almost had sex with who turned into a zombie and threw an arsenal of coconut bombs at your head until you went into a coma. You were airlifted in a special issue Orchid helicopter operated by Thai Airways. When you came to, you got a massage ("that kind" of massage) and sat at a table with a tablecloth and silverware in a restaurant catering to White expats and served by zombies.

The real-life star of *Beautiful Boxer* would have been denied entrance because of her symbiotic polarities, but your pet boxer who runs into walls—there's a place setting for him. You think "ladyboys" are so articulate and earnest and innocent, you want to take them out to restaurants to teach them how to use forks and knives, you want to take them home and make them cook with Lite Coconut Milk from Trader Joe's, because the real kind makes you fat. You make them give you massages every afternoon at 3, you make them put tiny little orchids in your cocktails. "Devastating" and "beautiful" are adjectives used to describe orchids and the second kind of woman who finally learns how to be a boxer and defend herself on the street.

The number of White people learning Thai massage makes my back hurt. At the guesthouse there's a sign saying "IF YOU BREAK THE RULES AND BRING 'LADYBOY' WE'LL CHARGE EXTRA IMMEDIATELY 1000 BAHT." Coconut water is so trendy, they serve it at restaurants out of the can. Somewhere in the continental US, a Thai restaurant opens. Several seconds later, an orchid specialist orders take-out Pad Thai. Later that night, young green coconut pulp dries to crust on the specialist's dead body—*CSI: Bangkok*.

After the break, you watch televised boxing matches and buy miniature tuk-tuk cabs made out of recycled Singha beer cans. You think "ladyboys" are one of the most fascinating Siamese breeds. You are the first to declare that, like the orchid, it is a Perfect Hybrid of Both Worlds. I'm going to box the living shit out of the best of both and leave you with coconut-sized bruises on your face, swollen so much like a coconut you'll want me to hack at you just to relieve the pain. A massage would be nicer but I'm not fucking nice, I'm a beautiful boxer and I don't give a shit about your fancy Thai restaurant chain or the new breed of killer orchid steaming up your bedroom like a "ladyboy."

I'm Thailand's # 1 tourist attraction: a "ladyboy" in a coconut milk can imported on Royal Orchid Airways. Excuse me, Sir, chair massage is the only way to fly. Please stow your authentic restaurant inside this box.

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<sup>3</sup> **INFORMATION:** "White Goes East" is a chapter heading in Maurice Collis' book *Siamese White* (Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1936). **DID YOU KNOW?** This destination references the film *Beautiful Boxer* (2004), about the life of Nong Tum Parinya, a Thai transgender woman (or *sao praphet song*, "second kind of woman") who is also a professional boxer. The guesthouse sign was spotted by the author in Chiang Mai in 2011.

**ERASE EVERY TRACE<sup>4</sup>**

in the voice of Nicolas Cage as hit man Joe in Bangkok Dangerous (2008)

*it takes an emotional resilience to be on the outside,  
year after year, required by law to leave  
the country every three months for a new visa.  
that may sound like a small thing, but it gives life a bite,  
a spin. concessions must be made. dreams  
and desires are changed and shaped.*

i sit down to play chess in a white tuxedo as the drama takes shape.  
my opponent is a deaf mute girl who works at a pharmacy. i stand  
outside  
looking in. small glass vials clack against the counter like knights dreaming  
of pawns. i want to manipulate the material and leave,  
impose some order, but Bangkok bites.  
here i will eventually break all my rules. for example, my heart is already accidentally  
visaed,

lines stamped and drawn, a 2-color print-out. all my clothes, cash, credit cards and  
paper visas  
fold up into passports—in silence i decide which country will take my shape,  
which metropolis will grant me anon. it doesn't matter that this is a remake; i bite  
my tongue and say to the customs agent, "holiday," never taking an interest in people  
outside  
of work. emotional attachments leave  
only sacrifice and abrupt cinematic ends to dreams

i allowed myself to want. in the original, my dream  
girl speaks and i am a deaf mute. without a visa  
to enter her world i am stuck within a country i cannot leave.  
it begins and ends in silence, a breakage that shapes  
sinew and severs it from bone, separating feeling outside  
of action—blown up, bitten.

i am impenetrable on a black BMW K1200R, but what bites  
into the consciousness of this lonely assassin is a dream:

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<sup>4</sup> **DID YOU KNOW?** This diary entry features a quote by Christopher Moore regarding the expat life, cited by Jerry Hopkins in *Bangkok Babylon* (99). It references Nicolas Cage's character in the 2008 remake of the original *Bangkok Dangerous* (1999) Thai film. In the original, the deaf mute character is the hit man, but in the remake, Cage's love interest is the deaf mute. The reference to chess is taken from the Murray Head music video to "One Night in Bangkok," which was a song written for the musical "Chess" (1984/1986).

a kid with jasmine flower, fragile in the alley, interrupting my getaway.  
outside,  
numbers are uneven, i'm always a split second too late, visas  
expire in my pocket. the shape  
of my future has upturned the elephant's trunk. the unlucky often leave

in search of another chance, so i cross the border again. leave.  
try to speak to the girl who can't hear me. and when i take a bite  
of my target, i imagine the gunshot naked, a silent picture. death takes  
shape  
not with sound, but with its silence, and when i dream  
i have no ears, no mouth. i ask for a visa  
to her heart. she smiles and collects her things outside.

on the outside i can leave,  
come again on a new visa, bite  
but never taste the dream's silent shape.

### About the author

Jai Arun Ravine is writer, dancer and graphic designer. As a mixed race, mixed gender and mixed genre artist, their work arises from the simultaneity of text and body and takes the form of video, performance, comics and handmade books. Jai's first full-length book, แฉีก AND THEN ENTWINE: LESSON PLANS, POEMS, KNOTS, re-imagines immigration history and attempts to transform cultural inheritances of silence. Their short film TOM/TRANS/THAI approaches the silence around female-to-male (FTM) transgender identity in the Thai context and has screened internationally. Their second book, THE ROMANCE OF SIAM, is forthcoming from Timeless, Infinite Light in 2016. Learn more at [jaiarunravine.com](http://jaiarunravine.com).