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"We resolve not to smile"

Speculative Contact Reimagining Thainess in Bangkok Wakes to Rain

ABSTRACT This essay examines Pitcha Sudbanthad's *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* (2019), an episodic novel revolving around a single plot of land in the city now known as Bangkok, and the many characters and narrators who are connected to it. Adapting Samuel Delany's ideas of network versus contact as a way to conceptualize urban encounters, I consider three sites of contact and speculation within the novel: first, representations of the 1970s protests led by university students and their subsequent massacre by the military; second, a futuristic, sunken Bangkok that alludes to the impending reality of climate crisis for this Southeast Asian megacity; third, interactions between English and Thai languages that produce what I call a *speculative grammar*. Focusing on the local specificities of Bangkok as an urban space and the particular affordances of Thai grammatical structure within these three sites, I argue that *Bangkok Wakes to Rain's* unique narrative style contributes to ongoing processes of defining Thainess that are obscured by the hegemonic, nationalist narrative of Thailand's three pillars of nation, religion, and monarchy. KEYWORDS Thailand, Bangkok, Samuel Delany, contact, speculative grammar

INTRODUCTION

Pitchaya Sudbanthad's *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* (2019) is an episodic novel that revolves around a plot of land in the city now known as Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand. Following the novel's title, I will refer to the city by that name throughout this essay, although the official, modern Thai name for the city is Krung Thep Maha Nakorn (usually shortened as Krung Thep) and in the futuristic chapters of the novel the city's name changes yet again to Krung Nak. The novel's many narrators initially appear disconnected. They include a nineteenth-century missionary doctor, members of the wealthy Bangkok family who purchases the plot of land, migrant laborers building a new condo on the family's property, activists in the Thai student movement of the 1970s, teenaged tour-guides in the new city called "Krung Nak" that grows from Bangkok's flooded remains, and a woman who leaves the sunken world behind to return

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to her childhood vision of Bangkok in a digital reality built from scanned data and uploaded memories. As the novel unfolds, it becomes apparent that each of these disparate narrators has a unique connection to the land that holds the narrative spine of the novel in place. Ultimately, the novel is constructed from many parallel stories that span hundreds of years as the pivotal plot of land transforms from swamp to city, then returns to the water in an imagined future of rising sea levels.

My reading of *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* focuses on how the novel reimagines Thai identity or Thainess (*khwam pen Thai*) through speculative encounters between these diverse narrators, and between the human narrators and the more-than-human presence of Bangkok itself. The novel's speculative portrayal of Thainess serves as a foil to techno-Orientalist portrayals of Thailand as a simultaneously exotic and futuristic "land of smiles" and to homogenizing, nationalist imaginations of Thai identity that obfuscate Thailand's cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and ideological diversity. In contrast to both these reified visions, the combination of the novel's unique narrative structure and its speculative-fictional elements—namely, a futuristic Bangkok's parallel existence as both a drowned city and an echo in virtual reality—create a mode of speculative contact that intervenes in hegemonic constructions of Thai identity and national belonging. In this article, I foreground the alternative possibilities for Thainess offered by speculative contact in three settings. First, in the past of the 1970s student protests and their aftermath; next, in the future of a sunken Bangkok reaping the results of climate crisis; finally, in language itself, namely the speculative grammar of interactions between English and Thai. Ultimately, I argue that the speculative contact encounters facilitated by the novel's narrative structure carve out spaces for more expansive, inclusive, and heterogeneous depictions of both Bangkok and of Thainess.

Bangkok Wakes to Rain's title and narrative structure indicate the eponymous city's central role. An electric megacity with a population of over eleven million and exponentially larger than the next largest city in the country, contemporary Bangkok is one of Thailand's most well-known destinations (*Bangkok, Thailand Metro Area Population 1950-2024*). Bangkok became the capital city of the country then called Siam (now Thailand) in 1767 following the razing of the previous capital in Ayutthaya during war with the Burmese (Baker and Phongpaichit 21, 26). Since then, Bangkok has been the political hub of the country, housing the monarchs of the Chakri Dynasty and their courts, with the later addition of the modern, constitutional government following the dissolution of absolute monarchy in 1932 (Baker and Phongpaichit 118–21). By placing Bangkok

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structurally at the heart of the novel, *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* demands that we recognize the city itself as a critical interlocutor in the contested process of constructing Thainess.

CONTEXTUALIZING THAINESS: NETWORKING AND CONTACT

Given the importance of Bangkok and the types of relationality enabled by the city to *Bangkok Wakes to Rain's* narrative structure, I turn to Samuel Delany's writing about New York City's urban space as a conceptual framework to make sense of the novel's innovative form. In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), Delany proposes that the city's social and built landscapes engender two different modes of social interaction: "networking" and "contact." Delany's work is an important framework for understanding *Bangkok Wakes to Rain's* intervention because these two modes can helpfully map the distinction between the novel's representations of Thainess and traditional, hegemonic definitions of national identity.

While cautioning against drawing too stark a binary between the two forms of social relation, Delany notes that networking tends to be more formalized: a gathering of people with "the same or relatively similar needs" who engage in "self-replicating structures of knowledge and desire" (169, 139). These relationships also involve a strong element of competition as the individuals present in the networking encounter are all striving to access the same, seemingly limited, set of resources (139). Networking is dependent upon institutional structures to facilitate connection and therefore ends up being more regulated and more easily replicates existing social structures such as class or ethnic divides (129).

In contrast, Delany appears more interested in the second mode of relation, contact, because of how it affords more spontaneous yet egalitarian interactions that can cross social boundaries of race and class. He describes "contact" as the quotidian social encounters between unaffiliated individuals that take place in public, urban spaces: the "conversation that starts in the line at the grocery counter," the "exchange of pleasantries with a neighbor," or even the casual sex that occurs in public restrooms and parks (123). Most contact encounters remain as small, forgettable moments in a day; however, some lead serendipitously to job opportunities or lifelong friendships. The "payoff" of ordinary moments of contact is often delayed or unplanned; it is after many small, repeated encounters that something significant or surprising occurs (Delany 123–25). Delany deems contact most rewarding when it occurs across class lines, thus providing opportunities for social movement, connection, and flexibility (173).

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Adapting Delany's framework to the Thai context, networking's planned and institutionally dependent mode is useful to describe multiple policies that consolidated political and cultural power in Bangkok during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These acts of centralization cemented Bangkok's privileged role in the mainstream understanding of Thainess. Beginning in the mid-1800s with the encroachment of European imperialism, the Thai kings went to great lengths to establish Thailand in the eyes of the West as a modern sovereign nation, rather than a territory ripe for conquest. In the region's popular imagination, Thailand stands out as the only Southeast Asian country "that has never tasted the bitterness of [Western] colonialism" (Akhyari). Centralization was a significant part of these efforts to attain modernity. The provincial administration reforms beginning in the 1880s and 1890s were designed to organize the rule of a heterogeneous set of tributary states and remnants of former empires into a singular centralized system; these reforms gradually transferred administrative infrastructure such as taxes, the judicial system, and education away from local leaders and consolidated power with officials based in Bangkok (Thongchai, *Siam Mapped* 102). In the twentieth century, these centralizing efforts helped form a Thai nationalism that reacted to continued colonial pressures by advocating for an understanding of "Thainess" that condensed diverse linguistic and cultural groups throughout the nation into a homogenous identity centralized around Bangkok's political elite (Suwilai 3). This conflated Bangkok with Thainess and relegated all "non-Bangkokians" to the periphery of Thai identity (Phrae and Koraya 91). The centripetal construction of Thainess with Bangkok at the center aligns with Delany's mode of networking: there is a concentration of individuals in the city sharing the similar need to oppose Western imperialism by replicating Thai identity as knowledge and desire.

In addition to Bangkok's geographical role in demarcating the boundaries of Thainess, early twentieth-century Thai literary culture also played an important role in the networked construction of national identity. Many of the Thai Kings are upheld as some of the nation's most renowned writers. King Vajiravudh, or Rama the Sixth, who ruled Siam from 1910-1925 was a fan of the literary arts and a prolific author, translator, and playwright (Thosaeng 63).[1] He was also an ardent nationalist and popularized the well-known definition of Thainess as grounded in allegiance to three pillars: "nation, religion, and monarchy" (Morakot 133; Thongchai, *Siam Mapped* 4; Suwilai 19; Harrison 14). He established the Royal Society of Literature, an organization that selected texts as "exemplars of Thai literary excellence" and established "authoritative texts" or singular, correct versions of popular texts that otherwise had many different versions

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(Thanapol 51). The Royal Society of Literature was one way that the Siamese ruling elite selected and elevated particular literary works as exceptional, and exceptionally Thai (Thanapol 49). The sense of exclusivity inherent in such a project also reflects the competitive nature of networking as texts were judged against one another while striving for recognition by institutionally dictated literary values.

Considering the impact of formal institutions like the monarchy on the construction of Thainess, it is also relevant that Thailand has some of the world's harshest *lese majeste* laws, which makes insult of the monarchy a legally prosecutable crime. Literary scholar Rachel Harrison notes that while the link between literary production and projects of power and cultural authority is not unusual, in the Thai context literature was also associated with the unimpeachability of the monarchy, with the *lese majeste* laws making substantive critique of the status quo difficult (Harrison 14). Historically, this contributed to shaping Thai literary culture—and literature's attendant influence on cultural authority—into a self-replicating network with a tendency towards a singular, hegemonic, and nationalist voice.

While a traditional construction of Thainess that depends on allegiance to the institutions of nation, religion, and monarchy might align more closely with the networking model, Delany's second mode, contact, is an apt term to describe the relationships between the incongruent narrators in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*. For example, after the former student activist becomes an office manager at a condominium building, later chapters are narrated from the adult perspective of a child who lived at the condo and took swimming lessons from her. Then, another condo resident's daughter becomes a doctor who volunteers in the flooded remains of the city, where she is mocked by new local teenagers who have moved onto the condo's sunken grounds. These characters come into contact with one another, often unintentionally, in brief moments that cross political and class affiliations. Crucially, Bangkok—and more specifically, the single plot of land within Bangkok—is the common denominator that enables and witnesses these moments of contact. As a mode of social relation, contact highlights how the novel's narrative structure depends on the form and affordances of the city's evolving urban space.

Building on this connection, A.J. Rocca makes a compelling comparison of Delany's speculative and urban writing that further theorizes the interdependent relationship between urban space, contact, and literary speculation. Rocca notes that in *Dhalgren* (1975), Delany "understands the city as a kind of contact machine, and he uses it as a conceptual engine for generating

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literary encounters in an environment where total synthesis is impossible and no single discourse can entirely dominate the others" (59). In this reading of *Dhalgren,* the space of the city and its corresponding moments of contact are a model for the literary and narrative encounters offered by science fiction. Specifically, the city as "contact machine" and "conceptual engine" for literary encounters foregrounds a horizontal narrative structure without a singular, dominant narrative voice. While *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* and *Dhalgren* are very different novels born of distinct historical, sociopolitical, and cultural contexts, Rocca's reading of *Dhalgren*'s engagement with city space offers a compelling example of how the dynamics of urban space can become a model for literary form.

Following Rocca's insights, *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* constructs Thainess through speculative contact whereby heterogenous narrative voices encounter each other meaningfully without one singular discourse dominating the others. While all the narrators have moments of contact with the ubiquitous plot of land at the narrative heart of the novel, none of their individual narratives are privileged over another. The many (sometimes conflicting) narrative voices are a stark contrast to the centralization of narrative authority through projects like the authoritative texts created by the Royal Society of Literature. This narrative structure, that uses Bangkok as a literary contact machine, also enacts two key concepts of sf: speculation and extrapolation. Because of the novel's temporal breadth, some characters come into contact with one another, but many others do not—their lives remain separated in time by hundreds of years. Therefore, the only two perspectives that can realize the full payoff of the contact encounters layered throughout the novel are the land and the reader. To understand the impact of the novel's episodic moments of contact, readers must extrapolate based on their knowledge of various moments in the novel and then speculate about the relationships between characters. From the privileged vantage points of both land/Bangkok and reader, the multiple narrative strands collide in moments of speculative contact, joining together into a heterogeneous chorus that defies totalizing synthesis.

Finally, *Bangkok Wakes to Rain's* construction of Thai identity through speculative contact between heterogenous voices is a counterpoint to rather than a repudiation of an ongoing national struggle to define Thainess, with the networked creation of a unified and centralized identity currently holding sway. This dovetails with Delany's insistence that, rather than binary opposition, it is more a matter of scale and degree that separates the two modes of networking and contact as they "collide with and displace each other" (Delany 142).

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Therefore, the polyvocal, speculative contact in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* takes shape in the lingering legacies of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century history and the push towards a singular authoritative vision of Thai literature and identity. This canny use of literary form suggests a multiplicitous, still contested and evolving definition of Thainess.[2]

RE-VISIONING THE PAST

The 1970s student protests that took place in Bangkok, and their aftermath, are a key site where the novel turns to speculative contact to reimagine historical events. During this decade, university students and other leftist activists contested the narrow, nationalist definition of Thainess through the demands for political, economic, and social reform. While the movement achieved some significant shifts, such as temporarily ousting the country's military dictatorship in 1973, an increasingly polarized political climate culminated in a military-led massacre of students on Thammasat University's campus on 6 October 1976. The novel's inclusion of scenes from these specific moments in Thai history is important because, at the time, military-orchestrated propaganda painted anyone involved with undesirable political and social change movements as "un-Thai" and "treasonous 'enemies of nation, religion, and king'" (Baker and Phongpaichit 194). In contrast, *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* holds narrative space for these voices, deemed un-Thai at the time, to contribute to the chorus that defines the city. Within the fictional space of the novel, speculative moments of contact between the student narrator(s) and the city itself intervene in the otherwise fatalistic logic of collective versus individual to provide an alternative possibility of survival for one of the protestors.

First, the novel illustrates the safety gained through unity in numbers and the danger that comes from standing out in a crowd. In 1973, the protestors gathering against Thanom Kittikachorn's military dictatorship increase "their number" every day "by thousands more" (Sudbanthad 69). "They moved together like a giant animal, each tiny human a cell of the beast," and "when it needed to sleep, cardboard and scraps served as mats. When it needed to eat and drink, money was pooled to haul in pickup truckloads of water and canisters and sacks of rice" (Sudbanthad 69-70). In this language, the swelling crowds who were initially referred to with the third person plural "they" become incorporated into the singular "it," a giant animal. Together as a unified entity, the protesters meet their basic needs while continuing to agitate for their cause. The giant animal absorbs individual protesters into a collective mass that eats, drinks, and sleeps as it spreads out across Bangkok's streets.

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Over the course of the chapter, the narrative voice switches from the collective of the giant animal and narrows down to an individual engineering student who is singled out by his efforts to help build toilets. For a few pages, his ascent through the ranks of the student movement is narrated by his position as "the engineering student." Then later in the chapter he gains a name: Siripohng. He survives the conclusion of the 1973 protests, stays involved with the movement, and begins dating another student activist, Nee. Near the chapter's close, however, Siripohng is shot and killed on the Thammasat University football field during the October 6, 1976 massacre.

The transition from collective to singular narrative scale culminating in Siripohng's death suggests that, while there is safety in numbers, individuality remains dangerous. For Siripohng in particular, this shift precipitates danger as he emerges from the crowd-animal only to be killed. The scene of his death reads: "Siripohng lay spilling on the ground. Nee dragged him behind a concrete wall and tore off his shirt, revealing two torrential holes under his ribs" (Sudbanthad 87). In this scene, the safety of existence within the crowd is gone and the scale of the narrative has narrowed to Siripohng and Nee as individual characters. While Siripohng was not individually targeted in the mass violence, it is still his separation from the crowd-animal and his specificity as a named character that allows his death to gain narrative legibility distinct from the many others who died in the 1976 massacre.

The speculative presence of Bangkok as an ecological, more-than-human entity, however, enables a sense of possibility beyond the bleak picture presented by Siripohng's death. Like Siripohng, Nee also becomes an individualized, named character. Yet, unlike Siripohng, she survives the 1976 massacre and goes on to narrate several more chapters of the novel because of her contact with the ecological entity of Bangkok, even after the dissolution of the "giant animal."

In her reading of *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* through an ecogothic lens, Thai literary scholar Pimpawan Chaipanit notes that the use of "giant animal" to describe the crowds of the 1973 protests can be read as a dehumanizing term that equates the protestors with *sat* (animals), thus implying a hierarchical, linguistic justification for the violence directed towards them (Pimpawan 61). I suggest an alternative interpretation that looks beyond "human" as a category necessary for survival. Indeed, appeals to humanity were ultimately unsuccessful for the protestors. When the army opens fire on the students sleeping on Thammasat University's football field in the early morning of October 6, one of Siripohng and Nee's compatriots yells, "we're only students" (Sudbanthad 84).

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This appeal for mercy based on their status as only human students does not stop the shootings. Rather, as the long temporal duration and multiple narrators of the novel suggest, while individual humans may perish, the ecosystem or the collective "animal" of the city will survive, even if in an altered form.

In the immediate aftermath of Siripohng's death, it is Nee's contact with Bangkok's ecological presence that enables her survival. After Siripohng is shot, Nee flees with a crowd of other protestors and dives into the nearby Chao Praya River as military "gunboats approached" (Sudbanthad 87). Nee, being a "good swimmer," escapes underwater and "broke the surface farther out and hid behind a drifting patch of water hyacinths"; she then "hung onto the hyacinths for hours. Waiters at a restaurant down the river snagged her in with the same long-handled bamboo stick they used to push floating trash from patrons' view" (Sudbanthad 87–88). Different ecological elements of the Chao Phraya River shelter Nee from the soldiers who continue to search out, beat, and kill protestors. The water of the river and her ability to swim enable her initial escape, then the water hyacinths hide her from discovery. When she is eventually rescued, it is as though her body is just another piece of trash floating in the river. While her equivalence with floating trash in the river can be read as dehumanizing, it is also this positionality that ensures she survives the massacre. This is a scene of contact between Nee and Bangkok itself.

Haunted by the ghosts of 1976, Nee has "trouble rejoining the garden of fantastical delights that was Krungthep" (Sudbanthad 161). When she meets with former classmates for dinner, she remains alienated from them. Nee's experience with her peers recalls Delany's description of networking as homogenous groups of individuals striving for similar goals: in contrast, Nee is now a misfit. The image of mainstream Bangkok society as a "garden of fantastical delights" also recalls the more planned and structured experience of networking that forecloses moments of unexpected, heterogenous contact like those offered by the more fluid space of the Chao Phraya River.

As the narrative progresses, Nee returns to contact with water to facilitate her continued existence in Bangkok. She becomes an office worker and part-time swim teacher in a condominium building established on the ubiquitous plot of land central to *Bangkok Wakes to Rain's* narrative structure. She turns to swimming in the condo's pool to cool her "undying rage" when she accidentally glances at the headlines or hears the latest news (Sudbanthad 155). Additionally, the condo's pool also facilitates another important moment of contact: one of Nee's swimming students, Mai, becomes an important narrator later in

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the novel. Replacing the trash-filled water of the Chao Phraya, the waters of the pool provide a space for Nee to exist and even to teach, passing on her skills and relationship with water to her students, even though her views and experiences are incompatible with the reality of Bangkok's political climate.

Strikingly, the final scene of the novel is one of Nee swimming through the condo's pool. Culminating her multiple moments of contact with water in the city, the pool now becomes a speculative site where Nee swims her way into an alternative reality of Bangkok. As Nee enters the water for a final time:

> she pushes on blindly, the pool's edges invisible to her. She can only hope to swim on and touch the other end of the pool, or maybe her fingertips will stop her at a rock she's never known to be there. … When that happens, she'll recognize that she's reached the shores of a Krungthep other than the one she's known. … She imagines her outstretched hand feeling the heft of that gray rock. She's pulling herself up from the water and lying down on her back. She's listening to the waves, as they arrive one after another at the rock, and will go on arriving long after her. When she's here, she doesn't feel lost. (Sudbanthad 357)

In this scene, the linguistic tone shifts from hypothetical to certain. This grammatical shift heightens the scene's speculative potential as Nee grammatically enters another world. As the scene begins, Nee *might* reach the pool's edge or "maybe" her fingertips will instead reach an unknown rock. Then "*when* that happens, she'll recognize that she's reached the shore of a Krungthep [Bangkok] other than the one she's known" (emphasis added). In this transition sentence, the present perfect mixes with the future simple tense. This slippage between the two tenses mirrors how Nee is slipping between two realities, the known and the unknown, land and water. Finally, the paragraph ends in the present continuous tense. She *is* pulling herself up from the water, she *is* listening to the waves: "she doesn't feel lost." Even if these actions are happening within Nee's imagination, the straightforward delivery of each detail moves the tone of the scene away from the imaginary and towards a sense of imminent reality.

Ultimately, this scene illustrates the payoff of Nee's speculative contact with Bangkok's waters. Her journey through the waters of the pool to reach another Bangkok enables Nee's storyline to become more than just the assimilation of a former radical into the fabric of mainstream Bangkok society. Throughout her life, it is through the act of swimming that Nee asserts her continued existence. The land upon which the condo and its pool are built has already known many

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versions of Bangkok and, through her contact with the water of the pool, Nee is able to do so as well. She is able to swim her way to a Krungthep "other than the one she's known," perhaps one in which Siripohng survives, the ideals of the student activists are achieved, and her rage finally turns into peace. By emphasizing Nee's moments of contact with Bangkok's bodies of water—both in the Chao Phraya and the condo pool—the novel holds space within the city for a former student activist, someone previously construed as un-Thai. Closing the novel on this scene reads as a pointed message that there exists a version of Bangkok and of Thainess that belongs to Nee and individuals like her.

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

After introducing historical Bangkok as a contact machine through Nee's character, the novel jumps in setting from our contemporary time frame to a futuristic Bangkok where extreme floods have transformed most of the city's residents into climate refugees. Parallel to the sunken city exists a virtual reality constructed from data scanned from its inhabitants' memories. Individuals "afterbody" away from the material world to transfer their consciousness into the new digital world where they can sculpt their surroundings into whatever setting they desire.

In this section, the futuristic elements of the novel play important roles in diversifying representations of Thainess; simultaneously, the sf devices such as the techno-futurist, virtual world remains firmly grounded in the Thai context. By continuously centering the ubiquitous plot of land and its role in (re)imagining specific, culturally attentive visions of Thainess, the novel rebuffs the specter of techno-Orientalism that haunts the genre. An evolution of Orientalism, techno-Orientalism is the phenomenon of imaging Asia and Asians in "hypo- or hypertechnological terms," a conflation of Asia with technological futurity that continues to reify the binary of Occident versus Orient (Roh et al. 2). It is discomfortingly easy for sf set in Asia to replicate techno-Orientalist discourse due to the frequency with which the genre tackles the confluence of contemporary "existential, racial, and technological anxieties" (Roh et al. 3). As one of the great Southeast Asian megacities caught up in the rush of neoliberal globalization, Bangkok is prime material for such framing. Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), set in a dystopian twenty-third-century Bangkok, is a classic example of techno-Orientalist fetishization of Southeast Asia as it "offers the militarization and sexual objectification of a genetically engineered Japanese woman in a Southeast Asian country (Thailand)" (Estok 626).

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Bangkok Wakes to Rain's insistence on the specific materiality of Bangkok as a city and site of contact between diverse inhabitants resists such representational traps. Instead, technoscientific elements become a necessary component of the city as narrative contact machine, connecting characters across space and time and continuing to portray heterogeneous examples of Thainess, even in the futuristic setting.

The novel's investment in Bangkok as narrative contact machine means that the city, represented by the central plot of land, still plays an essential role in facilitating the crucial, contact encounters within the virtual world that replaces the physical city. Near the end of the novel, Mai, one of Nee's former swim students from the condo's pool, now lives in the digital reality. She invites an old friend to visit and shapes their world into a re-creation of the condominium building where they both grew up. The totality of the capture transports them fully back into the old Bangkok, where they see "the condo tower with its many curved balconies" and "the extent and detail of what is now here" is so complete that Mai "can forget there's still a there, in whatever condition time and nature has willed" (Sudbanthad 313). Despite her musing that she can forget the "there" of the physical world, however, the "condition" of the material world refuses Mai's dismissal by intruding into the digital space.

This happens when Mai takes her friend Pig to a specific spot near the building where they wait until a glitch appears in the flawless digital world. It is a loud roar accompanied by a growing stain that resolves into the shadow of a small person, lying on the ground. Pig asks Mai: "Is this not from someone's memory?" and Mai replies that "there's no source for this" shadow but it "might be memory, just not human memory" because "this building, this ground. … Places remember us" (Sudbanthad 316-318). There is nothing in the planned construction of the digital reality to explain the presence of the shadow of a child. Yet, it exists. Within a world built from memories, Mai hypothesizes that this glitch is a memory from the condominium building itself.

This seeming glitch is a key moment of speculative contact as the condo's memory diversifies the representation of Thainess by foregrounding the multiple identities, class positionalities, and histories of Bangkok's residents. Pimpawan Chaipanit's illuminating reading of this scene makes the connection between the unexplained shadow and the death of Gai, a migrant laborer who fell from the condo building during construction before Mai was born (Pimpawan 60). As Pimpawan notes, Gai's presence in the digital world emphasizes that, beyond the old money families and political elite, Bangkok was and

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still is also home to many others, including working-class, migrant laborers who came from other regions of the country to earn a living in the capital.

Bangkok's speculative role as a more-than-human character is highlighted once again by how this scene, with its shadowy connection to Gai's death, is legible only from the perspective of the condominium built on the plot of land—and the readers who have experienced the sprawling, interlocked narratives up until this point in the novel. Mai and Pig witness the shadow but do not comprehend Gai's presence in their virtual world, nor do they apprehend it as a protest against the plight of migrant workers like Gai. They come into contact with Gai, but never figure out his identity. However, the land itself remembers Gai, and readers, benefitting from the novel's episodic structure as contact machine, can extrapolate his identity based on the previous section dedicated to his narrative. In this moment of contact, the novel's narrative structure privileges the overarching perspective of the land rather than any individual character.

In the end, it is the speculative ability of the land to intrude into the digital world as a more-than-human presence that allows for deviations from the normatively human nationalist script that conflates Bangkok with a singular, elitist definition of Thainess. Crucially, while Delany cautions that contact's unstructured nature remains "contoured" by institutional features of urban space like zoning laws and immigration patterns (Delany 142), it is the speculative aspect of this scene with Gai's shadow that offers a different space to contest those constraints. Simultaneously, the culturally attentive, political stakes of the digital world's role in enabling inter-class contact rejects the flattening impulse of techno-Orientalism. Through the digital space, the memory of the city's land positions Gai's life, labor, and death alongside Mai and Pig's memories of their lives in the condo he helped to build. In doing so, this scene uses the technology of the futuristic, speculative setting to emphasize the heterogeneity of Bangkok's residents. Without the digital world, there would be no possible setting where the two women could encounter a migrant laborer who died before they were born. Within the new, virtual world, Gai's shadow is not an abstract memory, but becomes tangible, observable, and real to Mai and Pig, in a way he was not during their embodied lives. Gai's shadow breaks the perfect façade of their world. By extension, this speculative moment of contact between two upper-class Bangkokians and a migrant worker breaks the illusion that Bangkok is home only to the politically powerful elites, rejecting the singular vision of the city and nation's identity.

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SPECULATIVE GRAMMAR

At the beginning of the fourth and final section of the novel, Bangkok has sunk into the ocean and a new city of "Krung Nak" has grown amid its flooded remains. In Thai, Bangkok is called Krung Thep, which means "City of Angels"; its new name Krung Nak means "City of Naga," which is a giant, mythological water serpent in Thai mythology. The speculative setting of the climate-change-ravaged city facilitates a contact encounter between Juhn—a volunteer doctor and former resident of the ubiquitous condo—and three young residents of Krung Nak who now lay claim to the area where the condo once stood. Within this scene of speculative contact between Juhn and the Krung Nak residents, there is another layer of linguistic contact between English and Thai that I call *speculative grammar*, or the potential for meaning found by extrapolating the implications of the Thai language to reconfigure the English dialogue.

First, the initial scene of contact between Juhn and the three young Krung Nak residents mirrors aspects of Thailand's southern provinces to challenge the presumed ethnic homogeneity of Thainess. Tasked with ferrying Juhn through their watery city, these three narrators are ambivalent about their visitor and their duties as guides. They explain:

> We don't like to say much to the visitors. Our mothers say that we have to make them happy, because it's part of our livelihood. Smile, be helpful. Pose for their cameras. We're sick of it, honestly. … It's time us Krung Nak people shrug off the outsiders. We resolve not to smile at her. (Sudbanthad 276)

This excerpt is narrated in the first-person plural and foregrounds a distinct sense of insider versus outsider. It also illustrates the supposed financial dependence of the Krung Nak residents on the outsiders, and the fact that many outsiders appear to fetishize Krung Nak people by taking their pictures. While this indicates an unequal balance of power, the young guides also seem to believe they and other Krung Nak people can be self-sufficient without the outsiders' presence.

Without mapping the futuristic city of Krung Nak too literally onto reality, a speculative reading of the sunken city does suggest some pointed similarities between the young guides and the positionality of ethnic minority groups in Southern Thailand. The Moklen, Moken, and Urak Lawoi peoples have long inhabited the Andaman region and are referred to in Thai as *chao lay* or "sea people." Following the rise of tourism as a core economic sector in

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Southern Thailand in the early twenty-first century, the dominant livelihood for many of these ethnic communities has also shifted from fishing to working in the tourism industry as wage laborers and boat drivers (Neef and Grayman 149; Pilaiwan et al. 179). In 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami that struck Thailand's Andaman coast increased both international and Thai awareness of the *chao lay* people and led to an influx of foreign aid for Urak Lawoi, Moklen, Moken people, while also painting them as primitive, "vulnerable" populations within a "ravaged landscape" (Robinson and Drozdzewski 536). The increased aid and recognition came with the price of a calcified definition of *chao lay* ethno-cultural identities that placed them firmly as minority Others outside of Thainess. Similarly, the fictional Krung Nak inhabitants are defined by their existence in the aftermath of the floods. The outsider versus insider dynamic between Juhn, the volunteer doctor, and the three local guides suggests that the Krung Nak people contend with similar stereotypes as the *chao lay*, which is further supported when the guides describe themselves as "sea people" (Sudbanthad 277).

Building on this figurative connection, the speculative grammar of the scene of contact between Juhn and the young guides reveals a site of linguistic rebellion that challenges the normative social hierarchy and resulting marginalization of the Krung Nak community. Speculative grammar builds on the term "translingual," which linguist Suresh Canagarajah uses to describe how communication "transcends individual languages" and "involves diverse semiotic resources and ecological affordances" (6). Translingual thinking acknowledges that language as a system cannot be extricated from other contextual features such as the "social and physical environment" and "objects, the human body, and the setting" (Canagarajah 7). Further, rather than an adversarial relationship, Canagarajah notes that "the influence of one language on the other can be creative, enabling, and offer possibilities for voice" (6). One of the most flexible and powerful tools that a translingual reading or writing practice offers is the ability to reconfigure one language using the resources of the other (Canagarajah 8; Doloughan 38; Dowling 5). Therefore, while the contact between Juhn and the Krung Nak guides takes place entirely in English, reading for the "speculative grammar" of the scene is a translingual act of speculation that reimagines meaning in the unruly space between Thai and English.

Specifically, a translingual interpretation of the young guide's use of the pronoun "we" when conversing with Juhn reveals a canny appropriation of Thai grammatical structure onto the English text that contests the guides' subservient

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position relative to their land-dwelling visitor. After the three young people take her on a roundabout way towards their destination Juhn comments:

> "This is not the first time I've come around here; you should probably have guessed."
> "We thank Big Sister for taking care of us sea people."
> "You don't mean that, but it's okay."
> Big Sister doesn't say anything further. We don't either. (Sudbanthad 277)

Juhn's comment "you don't mean that" immediately flags the insincerity of the response, "*we* thank Big Sister for taking care of us sea people" (emphasis added). The English first-person plural pronoun "we" is usually translated into Thai as *rao*. Unlike "we," *rao* can also be used informally as the first-person *singular* between speakers of equivalent social status (Smyth 44). For example, it would be appropriate to use *rao* to indicate yourself when talking to a friend or peer. In traditional Thai social hierarchy, however, young Krung Nak teenagers and a visiting doctor would not be conversing as equals. Reading the use of "we" (or *rao*) as an act of speculative grammar, the response of the young Krung Nak guide gains multiple implications. It is possible that the speaker who replies to Juhn's comment about not coming here for the first time is simply using the first-person plural to speak for the group: "we (plural) thank Big Sister for taking care of us sea people." However, drawing on the affordances of *rao* in Thai, the potential use of "we" as a singular pronoun becomes a refusal to be grammatically subservient to the visiting Bangkokian doctor, i.e., a grammatical refusal of the established social hierarchy.

As an act of speculative contact in which the social valences of Thai grammar overlay the English text, the dialogue would read, "I (first person singular) thank Big Sister for taking care of us sea people." This sentence drips with teenaged sarcasm. Interpreted through a translingual lens, it is also impolite. It would be improper to use the singular form of *rao*/I when speaking with someone that you would refer to as "Big Sister" because "Big Sister" implies that the person is older or has seniority and higher social status. Yet, the plausibility of an English, neutral, first-person *plural* "we" means that the response also skirts the edge of outright rudeness, relying instead on irony and backhanded impertinence. In the 1973 student protests, the collective, plural voice of the giant crowd-animal provided safety for Siripohng. Likewise, the ambiguity and flexibility of the pronoun *rao* allows the Krung Nak speaker to shelter behind the safety of the plural voice while also facilitating the critique of social hierarchy implied by the singular voice.

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Reading translingually and superimposing the implications of the Thai *rao* onto this scene is an act of extrapolation that foregrounds the importance of speculation in facilitating the novel's critical commentary. While the English definition of *rao*/we understands "we" as a neutral, first-person plural pronoun, using the translingual as a vehicle to facilitate a speculative approach to the grammar of this scene allows for the irreverent, first-person singular *rao*/I to emerge from the plural voice. The possibility of this second meaning acknowledges the grammatical agency of the Krung Nak teenagers as ethnically coded narrators rather than confining them to the role of marginalized victims of environmental disaster. Without this speculative grammar, the young Krung Nakian's reply would be bereft of the impudent linguistic rebellion against normative social hierarchy.

In another nod to the novel's speculative structure, the flooding of Bangkok (located in Central Thailand) allows the metaphorical contact between the country's Central and Southern regions. Juhn's comment, "this is not the first time I've come around here," refers to her childhood spent in the condominium building that now lies below Krung Nak's rising tides. In the flooded city, the young Krung Nak teenagers have replaced Juhn as the inhabitants of the now-drowned condo at the heart of the novel's narrative structure. This speculative flood plays a similar narrative role as the virtual reality experienced by Mai and Pig. Just as the existence of the digital world enables a contact encounter across temporal space, here, the speculative future of climate change plays a crucial role in allowing the novel to address ethnic tensions between Central and Southern Thailand. The encroaching waters collapse geographical distance and bring the real-world stakes of the *chao lay* Indigenous communities into the fictional space of Krung Nak. Ultimately, the speculative existence of Krung Nak (on the site of the former capital city), populated by characters that read as *chao lay,* pointedly reminds the reader of Thailand's ethnic heterogeneity and dismantles the presumed ethnocentricity of Thainess.[3]

CONCLUSION

The three traditional pillars of Thainess—nation, religion, and monarchy—present a striking architectural metaphor in contrast to the sprawling visions of urban spaces in *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*. The three upright, solid pillars uphold a centralized and homogenizing definition of Thainess constructed through networking. This Thainess is (to use Delany's term) self-replicating and relies upon the institutionalized and planned centralization of people and power in

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Bangkok to construct a supposedly unifying, yet ultimately exclusive, sense of national belonging.

In contrast, *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* evokes a Thainess constructed through speculative contact. Grounded by the ubiquitous plot of land in the heart of Bangkok as a speculative contact machine, the novel's horizontal narrative structure nurtures a heterogeneous chorus of voices, each contributing something unique to the reimagination of Thainess. The many narrators represent ideas and aspects of Thainess that fall outside what nineteenth- and twentieth-century national and literary purists might have imagined. As student activists from the 1970s movement, Nee and Siripohng represent perspectives that were explicitly confrontational to the Thai state. The futuristic presence of Gai and the Krung Nak teenagers further expands the boundaries of Thainess by insisting upon socioeconomic class and ethnic diversity. Throughout *Bangkok Wakes to Rain,* speculative contact encounters enable the novel's many narrators to cross boundaries of geography, temporality, language, ethnicity, class, and even reality. In these contact encounters, the collaboration between the sf elements and the Thai settings comes full-circle in service of the novel's more expansive and inclusive vision for both Bangkok and Thainess.

Indeed, the context of sf as a global genre is an important part of understanding the full scope of *Bangkok Wakes to Rain's* interventions. Tracing the novel's subversion of techno-Orientalist tropes illustrates how that same subversion is also a crucial component in effectively diversifying representations of Thainess. For example, techno-Orientalism is rooted in the conflation of Asians with technology. When this ideology is taken to the extreme, the Asian body becomes a form of expendable technology—a pattern observable from the treatment of Chinese laborers working on American railroads in the late-nineteenth century to the exploitation of contemporary low-wage, sweatshop workers in China, India, and Southeast Asia (Roh et al. 11). The presence of Gai's shadow in the virtual recreation of Bangkok shows how the novel successfully blends speculative elements with nuanced attention to place, power, and positionality to complicate the conflation of Asians with technology. The city's memory of Gai's laboring body intruding into the virtual world refuses to consign the boy as a piece of expendable technology. Rather, this scene is an explicit acknowledgement of labor, specifically migrant labor, that is disavowed when Asian bodies are conflated with technology. In this way, the novel deftly navigates the overlap among the futuristic, technological, and Southeast Asian narrative elements. Even as the novel's treatment of Gai's character pushes back against the techno-Orientalist archetype of the

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Asian body abstracted as technology, the presence of his virtual shadow also enacts a pointed critique of a singular, ethnocentric vision of Bangkok and its inhabitants.

The novel's rejection of techno-Orientalist tropes dovetails with its critique of exclusionary constructions of Thainess and highlights the fact that both discourses rely on essentialist logics of nationalism and colonialism. Thailand's nationalist self-construction has long maintained an essentialist narrative of superiority over its Southeast Asian neighbors, in part because Thailand is the only Southeast Asian nation never formally colonized by a Western power (Thongchai, "Foreward" xviii). This does not mean Thailand was immune to the pressures and influences of the colonial era in Southeast Asia, however. Rachel Harrison and Peter Jackson's *The Ambiguous Allure of the West* (2010), for example, anthologizes a number of Thai Studies scholars on this topic, including work by Tamara Loos that traces how the twentieth-century Thai elite modeled their rule, including legal reforms in Southern Thailand, on bureaucratic techniques learned from the British and Dutch colonial regimes. This legacy suggests that the central Bangkok government could therefore be framed as a neo-colonial power exerting its influence over culturally and ethnically distinct areas of the country with the goal of unifying any unruly diversity beneath the national umbrella of Thainess.

Grounded in the affordances of its contact-based narrative structure, *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* instead turns to the speculative as a powerful counter-imaginary to nationalist discourse. In doing so, the novel engages the ethos of "spicepunk," a designation akin to "silkpunk" or "Africanfuturism" that Ng Yi-sheng uses to describe sf that draws intentionally on Southeast Asian "heritage and history" not only to "resist the totalising visions of the West, but also to shun the small-mindedness of nationalism and ethnocentrism" (Ng). Fittingly, the most overtly speculative-fictional settings of the novel—the futuristic virtual reality and the flooded landscape of Krung Nak—are the sites of *Bangkok Wakes to Rain's* most striking interventions to disrupt essentialist class and ethnic hierarchies. The presence of narrators coded as migrant laborers from Thailand's northeast region and as Indigenous, ethnic minorities from the southern regions in these settings creates a more diverse and inclusive vision of Thainess. The novel's narrative vision of Bangkok as contact machine depends on the speculative mode to enable these acts of literary reimagination.

Ultimately, the final site of speculative contact is the between *Bangkok Wakes to Rain* and the reader. Sharing the land's vantage point as human narrators slide in and out of focus, we find ourselves faced with the full power of the city as literary contact zone. Through its innovative narrative structure, the novel invites

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us into a speculative literary space where we—like Nee swimming through the water of the condo's pool—can reach the shores of a Krungthep other than the one we have known. ■

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NOTES

1. For citations of Thai scholars, I have followed the Thai convention of referring to them by their given rather than family names. This practice is also reflected in the placement of items in the Works Cited list.

2. For further discussion of the evolving representation of nationalism in contemporary Thai literature see: Morakot.

3. The "Thai" in Thailand originally referred to the Thai ethnic majority group. Therefore, the shift in the country's name from Siam to Thailand in 1939 was a linguistically ethnocentric act.

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