

Being(s) in Another('s) Place: Practices of the Expatriate Bangkok Novel

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Abstract

This paper investigates the depiction of mixed-race characters in two novels by expatriate authors that take place in Bangkok: John Burdett's *Bangkok 8* (2004) and Timothy Hallinan's *A Nail Through the Heart* (2007). These two novels offer contrasting but complementary views of hybrid characters dealing with the environment of Bangkok. The paper offers a different vision of hybridity from Westerners authors who posit not an abstract East but a specific locale made palpable and concrete. The hybridity of these two novels occurs in two ways: explicitly in the narration and their characters' dialogue, and implicitly in the ventriloquy performed by the authors' informants, who speak through those same narrators and characters. The conventions of the genre of hard-boiled/noir novel contribute to these novels' ability to give a partial but sympathetic account of two different types of hybrid identity.

Keywords

Bangkok, Hard-Boiled/Noir Novel, Hybridity, Identity, Ventriloquy

1. Introduction: The Expatriate Bangkok Novel and Its Companions

One of the most minor of literary genres is the novel by (sometimes only notionally) expatriate authors of Bangkok. The city seems to inspire authors to depict it and its goings-on, and the genre to fall into a broader genre of works that involve a clash of cultures or assimilative pressure. It is within that more extensive genre that such works touch on concerns that might be called post-colonial, despite the fact that Thailand was not a colony, and neither these authors nor their characters entertain any designs on establishing one. Many of these novels fall into the genres of noir or hard-boiled detective fiction (French, 2018), which is conventionally characterized by "tough-talking, streetwise men; beautiful, treacherous women; a

mysterious city [...]; a disenchanting hero who strives, usually without resounding success, to bring a small measure of justice to his (or, more recently, her) world” (McCann, 2011: p. 42), and they can be subsumed under the umbrella of Bangkok-centered works that include memoirs and histories. The importance of locale in crime fiction generally has been noted (Maher & Bassnet, 2022), and Bangkok is a city suitably “mysterious” in the eyes of most readers of English-language novels.

The most extensive series of Bangkok-centered novels is probably Christopher G. Moore’s Vincent Calvino books, of which (at the time of this writing) there are seventeen, beginning with *Spirit House* (Moore, 1992), though his protagonist travels to other Southeast Asian cities as well. John Burdett and Timothy Hallinan, the two authors under discussion in this paper, have produced series of six and nine Bangkok-centered novels, respectively. In addition to the numerous multi-volume series represented in this paper by Burdett and Hallinan, there are also stand-alone works in this genre, such as Zoe Zolbrod’s *Currency* (2010), David Young’s *Sukhumvit Road* (2006), and Jake Needham’s *The Big Mango* (2010). Authors known widely for other genres and locales have also contributed to the growing collection of Bangkok fiction, including Lawrence Osbourne (*The Glass Kingdom*, 2021) and Paolo Bacigalupi (*The Windup Girl*, 2009). In their attempts to portray the city, these novels join non-fiction works, such as Alex Kerr’s *Bangkok Found: Reflections on the City* (2010), Christopher G. Moore’s *Faking It in Bangkok: Crime and Culture in the Digital Age* (2012), Lawrence Osbourne’s *Bangkok Days* (2010), and Chris Burslem’s *Tales of Old Bangkok: Rich Stories from the Land of the White Elephant* (2013). Though many of these non-fiction works are limited to some degree by the levels of their authors’ admitted unfamiliarity with the culture of the city and its inhabitants, within those limits they nevertheless offer a varied account of events, habits, practices, and values that inform—and indeed, form—the novels.

In general, culturally distant from the communities that provide their setting, the significant characters of expatriate Bangkok novels are typically well aware of their own marginality and act both to alter and to maintain their own sense of alien identity within the city. Two works within this genre, John Burdett’s *Bangkok 8* (2004) and Timothy Hallinan’s *A Nail Through the Heart: A Novel of Bangkok* (2007)—each the first of its respective series—offer contrasting but complementary views of hybrid characters dealing with forces of Bangkok. Both protagonists are of mixed race and often conflicting impulses: one is a local police officer who has lived in Europe and is fluent in English; the other is an American whose appearance allows him to move inconspicuously around the city. Although I am not the first to pair these two books—an anonymous, undated article on the website *Travel Curious Often* (2015) beat me to it—I found myself wanting to write about both of them because of the unexpected depth of their depictions of experiences of marginality and hybridity.

Hybridity has been theorized notably by Bhabha (1994), though his account has been criticized by Acheraïou (2011), Ahmad (1992), and Parry (2004), among others, and both the theory and the criticism it has received concern themselves

largely with issues of colonialism and post-colonialism. These issues will be addressed only tangentially in this paper, since the locale of the novels it discusses was not a colony, and its argument may complicate some of the most influential critical accounts of Western writers who address the East, such as those of Said (1979) and Spivak (1981). Nonetheless, parts of my discussion below echo the references to identity in the discussion of hybridity in Bhabha (1994), as well as his descriptions of it as moments and experiences rather than a fixed state. The point of this paper, however, is not to wade into these theoretical arguments, but to offer an example of a different vision of hybridity from Western authors situated not in an abstract East but in a specific locale made palpable and concrete by these texts. The hybridity of these two novels occurs in two ways: explicitly in the narration and their characters' dialogue, and implicitly in the ventriloquy performed by the authors' informants, who speak through those same narrators and characters.

2. Hallinan and Burdett: The Stories

2.1. Synopses

Through a third-person narrator, *A Nail Through the Heart* tells the story of Rafferty, a half-Filipino American travel-writer and rather unwilling private investigator who is hired by a murderous former Khmer Rouge torturer to find out who has stolen the photos that would prove her past crimes, and by an Australian woman looking for her uncle, a long-time resident of the city who has disappeared. At the same time, Rafferty is trying to formally adopt Miao, a street urchin he has been raising, and convince Rose, a Thai and the love of his life, to marry him. His efforts to help his clients start to threaten his nascent family, and he takes whatever steps are necessary to protect it.

Bangkok 8 is told through a first-person narrator, a police officer who is half-Thai and half-Caucasian. Besides his appearance, he is marginalized in the police force by his unwillingness to take bribes and kickbacks. He was ordered to become an honest cop by the Buddhist abbot who took him in after he and his childhood friend Pichai had killed a drug dealer. The abbot's brother happened to be a police colonel with a particular talent for corruption, but despite the obvious conflict that results, the colonel hires both Sonchai and his friend. When his friend is killed in the line of duty, Sonchai vows to avenge him. Sonchai can thus be seen as a hybrid also in the conflicting obligations he feels as a devout Buddhist and as a friend. If we assume that in humans cultural hybridity offers the richest opportunities for understanding human behavior as well as conclusions likely to be of the widest applicability, it is worth noting such conflicting obligations in Sonchai (i.e., his Buddhist beliefs vs. his desire for revenge for his friend), for in this case they come from within Thai culture. Indeed, as I will suggest, without any claim to originality, that characters of any depth are all hybrids in one way or another, that the impression of depth we receive from their stories wells out of the conflicted identities they face as a result. That is, an identity is a collection of values and

loyalties, including those connected to race and culture.

2.2. Marginal and Hybrid Protagonists

In these two works, the protagonists are generally aware of their own marginality and hybridity. Clearly, Rafferty and Sonchai are of mixed race, and see themselves as such. While Rafferty is an outsider in Thai society, Sonchai is at home in Bangkok and very familiar with Western culture, but he is an outsider on the police force and his mixed-race status is obvious to everyone he meets. Rafferty speaks Thai rather inexpertly, but Sonchai is fluent in Thai and English, and has some command of French as well. Resourceful operators both, they take advantage of their ability to switch from local (or, in Rafferty's case, seemingly local) to foreign identities.

Rafferty makes no claim at all to Thai-ness; only his complexion and dark hair allow him to blend into crowds in Bangkok more easily than most *farang* (which means foreigners, particularly white ones), and he does not speak Thai very well. As he is an author of a book about some aspects of Thailand, it is unsurprising that he reveals instances of detailed knowledge of Thai culture: "Rafferty has studied Thai houses, and he guesses this one to be at least a century old" (p. 93). More commonly, however, his unfamiliarity with local culture is emphasized by some of the extreme situations he becomes involved in. For example, when confronted by a violent street urchin that his adopted daughter Miao knows and has been trying to convince of Rafferty's harmlessness, he feels the distance between their world and his: "With one hand behind her, [Miao] waves for Rafferty to come closer. He does, but he is careful not to get too close to either child. The world they have inhabited for the past few minutes is not his" (p. 19). Here, the distance between them is not simply the result of a difference between Thais and Americans; the children's experience having to scrape a living on the streets of Bangkok is not just a matter of race and language, but of differences in age, education, and economic reality. Rafferty's wife-to-be, Rose, has to explain the most likely reason for the boy's negative reaction to Rafferty, and Rafferty realizes that often he simply does not understand the events that he has witnessed: "Even after more than eighteen months in Bangkok, he still fails to see things that are obvious to Rose" (p. 22). Compounding his lack of comprehension at times is, in his own estimation, the difference in gender between him and his wife and daughter: "Female unhappiness is as mysterious to him as plant disease. He knows it when he sees it, but he has no idea what to do about it" (p. 36). As much as he realizes his differences from those around him, Rafferty's experience in Bangkok has left him with unflattering views on the group that he used to belong to: "The tourists wear either T-shirts and tropical shorts or the kind of la-la safari clothes Rafferty found in Claus Ulrich's apartment. The Thais are dressed like human beings" (p. 105). Rafferty is not the only character whose hybridity is stressed. Arthit, a police officer and Rafferty's closest friend, is introduced like this: "He is speaking British-accented English, a legacy of long, cold, miserable years spent as an exotic brown

boy in one of the United Kingdom's better schools" (p. 40). Like Rafferty's, Arthit's hybridity causes ambivalence about some of its constituent parts; on learning that the nickname of a possible witness/suspect is "Doughnut", he comments: "Sometimes I think we Thais carry this merriment thing too far" (p. 79).

Unlike Rafferty, Sonchai identifies with Thais and Thai culture from the outset, repeatedly referring to Thais as "my people" and using first-person plural pronouns: "survey after survey has shown sleep to be my people's favorite hobby" (p. 3); "You see how entrenched is cronyism in our ancient culture" (p. 4); "Nobody jams [i.e., has traffic jams] like us" (p. 5). Keeping with hard-boiled/noir convention, these observations are offered matter-of-factly, but they show an ironic pride in elements of a culture that are not universally seen as objects of pride. Though Sonchai is part *farang* himself, he notably sees himself in opposition to Westerners, and shares the joy of taking their money: "Krung Thep [the Thai name for their capital] means City of Angels, but we are happy to call it Bangkok if it helps separate a *farang* from his money" (p. 7). He points out the superiority of Thai culture: "In my head I work out the year in the Christian era; *farangs* never like to realize that we are five hundred years ahead of them" (p. 27). Later, when he meets the deputy chief of security at the U.S. embassy, he feels his identity through his contrast to her: "I feel very Thai, despite my straw-colored hair and sharp nose" (p. 19). He is keenly aware of other people's perception of him. Only a few pages into the novel, he notes the surprise of two traffic cops when they first see him: "They come up to me in the car and there is the usual double-take when they see what I am. The Vietnam War left plenty of half-castes in Krungthep, but few of us turned into cops" (p. 6). Now the pronoun "us" refers to half-castes, not to Thais. Discussing the case with two investigators at the U.S. embassy, he imagines what they think when they look at him: "[Rosen]'s looking at me: Who is this half-caste who speaks English and French? Nape has guessed. Just a tinge of Anglo-Saxon contempt is his expression now, for the son of a whore" (p. 23). Sonchai's identities layer and overlap: compared to non-Thais, he is a Thai; compared to most Thais, he is a half-caste; compared to soi-disant reputable members of society, he is the son of a whore. When it comes to identity, everyone experiences this kind of hybridity, for our various companions and interlocutors inevitably lead us to categorize ourselves in relationship to them.

Sonchai shows an understanding of and sympathy for his corrupt colleagues, even as he carefully avoids involving himself in bribes and payoffs. Describing methamphetamine dealers, he explains why he has not arrested them: "From time to time I have toyed with the idea of busting them, but [...] they buy a lot of their *yaa baa* [usually a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine] from police confiscations, so there would be professional consequences for me. Colleagues would complain I'd taken the bread out of their children's mouths" (p. 16). His self-identification and sympathy extend to the poor people who were witnesses to the murder he is investigating and who refuse to speak to him. These "men, women and children [...] are hunched, ragged, and have automatically assumed the self-effacing postures of the poor when cops arrive. Some of them own the smeared eyes

and crooked mouths of the permanently drunk. We will never know which one of them made the call. They will never tell us anything. They are my people” (p. 9). To the poor, his identity as a police officer outweighs any sense of identification that they may have had with him with him as a fellow Thai. Thus, Sonchai experiences the complexity of identity, the essentially hybrid nature of which is exposed by his experience.

2.3. Conflicting Impulses

Both Sonchai and Rafferty come across as easy-going, live-and-let-live characters, yet both have attachments to values and to other people that they are driven to uphold, protect, and avenge. Their behavior changes from self-satisfied passivity to action when they are confronted by outrageous crimes. Rafferty tries not to accept the cases that will quickly put his family in danger, but he does so out of the need for quick cash to cover his adoption of Miao. Sonchai is moved to avenge Pichai, who is in Sonchai’s words his soul-mate, who is bitten by one of the cobras used to kill an American soldier and dealer in jade, and dies. In order to gain his revenge, he must find out who was behind the murder. As the narrator, he gives explicit voice to his position, which he sees, in part, in opposition to what he takes as a foreigner’s typical view: “We do not look on death as you do, *farang*. My closest colleagues grasp my arm and one or two embrace me. No one says sorry. Would you be sorry about a sunset? No one doubts that I have sworn to avenge Pichai’s death. There are limits to Buddhism when honor is at stake” (p. 61). Thus, despite their predilection for passivity, these characters are forced to act, and we see them in turns constrained and compelled both by their own sense of identity and by their environment.

Because the murder victim was an American, Sonchai is forced to deal with a CIA operative and embassy staff who have also been tasked with investigating the murder. Despite his impressive familiarity with Western culture and customs of personal interaction, he nevertheless finds himself making missteps in his discussions with them, and his familiarity allows him to recognize them as missteps, making them painful to him: “A moment of silence. Too late I realize I am supposed to explain. Unforgivably, I let the beat pass without doing so [...] Again I miss the beat. Normally I do better than this” (p. 21). Sonchai’s liminal existence also allows him to recognize characters similar to him, but he does not necessarily approve of them. When he enters the house of the murder victim, he describes how oddly it strikes him: “[...] it occurs to me that this is not the kind of home an average marine would be inclined to show his comrades. The choice of a teak house to live in is eccentric even by Thai standards. They tend to be inhabited by oddball foreigners or Thais of the arty type who have spent a lot of time overseas in places like Paris or New York. [...] Everything is Thai, everything is alien. The whole room is begging to be photographed by *farangs*” (p. 50). He concludes: “This isn’t a home, not to me, it is an environment, a barricade against the ugliness of the city, a deliberate and very Western attempt to build a separate, personal

reality” (p. 53). Like this novel, Bradley’s house gives a kind of second life to aspects of Thai culture in a way that seems to require a foreigner or foreign influence, and Sonchai does not approve. The house seems to replace the reality of Bangkok with an escape from that reality into a vision of the city’s past. Bradley, like Sonchai, is constrained and compelled by his own values and the sense of identity they are formed by and help form.

3. Bangkok and Habitus

3.1. Theory and Examples

In an examination of Bangkok as a setting, a useful concept is the *habitus* of Bourdieu (1990a), which he defines as “a system of acquired disposition functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action” (p. 13). Especially relevant is his insistence that, in order to avoid the shortcomings or constraints of “positivist materialism” and “intellectualist idealism”, “one has to situate oneself *within* ‘real activity as such’, that is, in the practical relation to the world, the pre-occupied, active presence in the world through which the world imposes its presence, with its urgencies, its things to be done and said, things made to be said, which directly govern words and deeds without ever unfolding as a spectacle” (Bourdieu, 1990b: p. 52). The genre of hard-boiled/noir novels provides just such an abundance of “real activity” that allows a habitus to be displayed and identified. The affinities between the Buddhist notion of karma, which is an explicit concern of both books, and the connection Bourdieu notes between habitus and history, make the concept of habitus even more applicable: “The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms” (Bourdieu, 1990b: p. 54). The application of this concept to these novels suggests that although the “active presence of past experiences” is found within an individual’s habitus, it may be both constrained and compelled by the environment within which it functions.

Here is an example of habitus, in this case of former go-go dancers who are trying to find work as maids in *A Nail Through the Heart*: “By and large they are not convincing housemaids. Something of that other world clings to them, some kind of glimmer that can’t be washed off like makeup or hidden beneath baggy clothes. More than anything else, it’s a physical attitude. People who have danced naked in front of hundreds of strangers present themselves differently” (p. 52). In another context, Bourdieu (1996) refers to the recalcitrance of habits as the “inertia of the habitus” (p. 256). Such particularities of habitus make people identifiable as members of one group or other, and thus contribute to the psychological formation of identity. One example of this phenomenon comes at the beginning of

Bangkok 8: as Sonchai and Pichai race toward the scene of the murder, they are forced by Bangkok gridlock to maneuver their car outside the normal lanes of traffic, with reactions on their part that are revealing of their character: “In no time at all I am able to drive up onto the sidewalk, where the siren terrorizes the pedestrians. [...] We [Sonchai and Pichai] are very happy. *Sabai* means feeling good and *sanuk* means having fun and we are both as we race toward the bridge in demonic haste” (pp. 7-8). It is an open question whether their glee is merely their own, or is to be taken as representative of one aspect of Thai-ness generally, or as an example of the influence of environment as it operates on the habitus of characters. Bourdieu (1990b) describes such an environment thus: “The practical world that is constituted in the relationship with the habitus, acting as a system of cognitive and motivating structures, is a world of already realized ends—procedures to follow, paths to take—and of objects endowed with a ‘permanent teleological character’, in Husserl’s phrase, tools or institutions” (p. 53). A habitus is formed in each individual, but the individuals, singly and collectively, form the social part of the environment (which forms the habitus of each individual), and the environment provides stimuli that call the individual, through habitus, to action.

After Pichai’s death, Sonchai ends up in a go-go bar, where he dances in a fit of grief and drug-induced fervor (p. 44). The active presence of go-go bars and the availability of *yaa baa* play their part in driving Sonchai to perform for the dancers as he had for fun as a young child. By portraying Bangkok as a collection of stimuli that produce an almost elemental force, however, they also allow us to consider the exigencies and motive energies of locale: how a place may impose itself on the practices, customs, and habits of thought of its inhabitants, despite—or perhaps because of—their own sense of alienation from it. What one reviewer called “the overwhelming presence of the sprawling, chaotic, illogical city, with its jampacked bars and impassable streets, that invigorates this remarkable novel” (McCullough, 2003) provides an impetus and context for the expression of habitus.

3.2. Conventions vs. Locale

The conventions of hard-boiled/noir novels utilize the characteristics of places even where those characteristics may resist those conventions. Because these novels are mysteries, they unavoidably involve the discovery, manipulation, and disguising of identity. Fowler (1982) notes that genres are “a positive support” for an author: “They offer room, as one might say, for him to write in—a habitation of mediated definiteness; a proportioned mental space; a literary matrix by which to order his experience during composition” (p. 31). Thus, a concern with genre obliges us to consider the habitus of the author as well as the that of the characters. (Indeed, the notion, drawn from sociology, is more readily applicable to the activity of a person than to that of a character.) In an author’s note at the beginning of the book, Burdett downplays Bangkok’s sex industry and police corruption, and takes pains to apologize for what he sees as the usual practice of the novelist: “A

novelist is an opportunist and it will be obvious that I have not been shy to adapt many of these stories [about corruption, found in newspaper articles, government investigations, and academic research projects] for narrative purposes, for which I trust I shall be forgiven. I hope that any Thai cop who comes across these frivolous pages will see humor rather than slight. This is an entertainment within a very Western genre, and nothing more. No offense is intended.” The genre of the hard-boiled/noir novel has its own demands, and both constrains an author’s choices of detail and endows those details with purpose.

In an interview with [Guy Haydon \(2015\)](#) in the *South China Morning Post* on the occasion of the sixth book of the series, Burdett explains how Bangkok itself provided the impetus for writing these novels and led to his choice of narrator: “My starting point was Bangkok, a city that continues to intrigue me, and it had to be some kind of police thriller. I needed a vehicle and was drawn to the first-person narrative. I find it far more vivid than the third person. I knew I could not do an indigenous Thai voice, on the other hand the ‘Western investigator in an Asian city’ had already been done. I had to take a deep breath before daring to create a Eurasian cop [there are no Eurasian police officers in Thailand] because I knew I would be accused of arrogance. Nevertheless, as soon as I began to write with that voice I knew it was the only way to achieve the tone and perspective I needed.” This narrative strategy affords Burdett a voice that can cut both ways, puncturing both Thai and foreigner alike. Looking at a map hanging on the wall in his colonel’s office, into which pins have been stuck to indicate the locations of various crimes, Sonchai says, “Taking into account that the police are generally facilitating someone else’s scam, it begins to look as if 61 million people are engaged in a successful criminal enterprise of one sort or another. No wonder my people smile a lot” (p. 63).

Through Sonchai’s eyes, Western values are ruthlessly exposed. About the foreigners who come to Bangkok as sex tourists, he comments: “To look for nirvana in someone’s crotch, now that really is dumb. For Pichai the horror was that these spiritual dwarfs were taking over the world” (p. 34). Comparing the CIA agent and one of his mother’s former lovers who has been jailed in Bangkok for drug trafficking, he says: “In Western terms, Jones and Fritz are far apart; to me they are almost identical: two infantile bundles of appetites—except that one is a catcher and the other got caught” (p. 125). Later, Sonchai explains to Jones directly that he will not sleep with her because he sees her as a product of her culture: “No one escapes their own culture. It’s hardwired in us, from birth onward. A consumer society is a consumer society. It may start with washing machines and air-conditioning, but sooner or later we consume each other. It’s happening to us too” (p. 271). While the “we” seems to refer to non-Thai consumer society, the “us” that follows suggests that Thais are becoming susceptible to the same cultural codes of behavior. In instances like this, just as we might think Burdett’s real targets are the flaws of Western culture, he crosses us up by noting an unexpected commonality between Thai and Western culture. Another example is the insightful parallel be-

tween police corruption in Thailand and Western business practices: “You must understand, the Royal Thai Police Force has always been way ahead of its time. It’s run like a modern industry, every cop is a profit center” (p. 135).

3.3. Hybrid Art

Artistically, details of locale provide means for the novels to employ conventions of their genre, and also to resist them. The interaction between the imposition of generic conventions of these works and their locale instigates, complicates, and obscures the characters’ sense of their own hybridity. In these novels, hybridity is thus depicted as both susceptible and resistant to the risk of alienation and conflicted identity. Such ambivalence reflects the way literature works—that is, on readers: according to Fowler (1982), literary criticism “treats a distinctive sort of experimental evidence: the results of reading. The *materia critica* should not be thought of as a group of objects. It is literature subjectively encountered, individually and in part variously constructed, interpreted, and valued, within the institutions of societies that change. We can reach objective conclusions about it; but our best chance of doing so is to allow for its variety and its variation” (p. 1). In this description, there is a similarity between genre and culture generally: Fowler goes on to explain that “When we assign a work to a generic type, we do not suppose that all its characteristic traits need be shared by every other embodiment of the type. In particular, new works in the genre may contribute additional characteristics. In this way a literary genre changes with time, so that its boundaries cannot be defined by any single set of characteristics such as would determine a class” (p. 38). Like genres, cultures are concepts that facilitate come under discussion for “identifying and communicating” rather than with “defining and classifying”. For Fowler the focus of discussion of genre is the individual work rather than the genre itself: “We identify the genre to interpret the exemplar” (p. 38).

The conventions of genre work for an author in the same way habitus works on individuals within a culture. Descombes (2016) describes how the constituent power of a social group relies on an instituting power, which he defines as “the power to establish ways of acting and doing things” (p. 193) that provide the context and means for any social group to be constituted by its members. In order for recognizable traditions and customs to exist, some modes of behavior must be transmissible over time, and such transmission is possible only within already-established ways of acting. Transmission of a group identity, Descombes continues to explain, is an active process that inevitably involves change: “One cannot merely *receive* a tradition like a kind of bequest. In order to speak the same language as one’s ancestors, one must reinstitute and re-create it, and that means that it cannot be transmitted without at the same time being altered, renewed, and transformed” (p. 195). That is, change is part of the very fabric of a culture. If that change is effected through means of an element from another culture—as is nearly inevitable in an interconnected world—then to some degree every culture can be seen as a hybrid. Thus, the claim by Bhabha (1994) that, “Cultures are never uni-

tary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of self to other” (pp. 35-36) is quite justified.

The complexity of understanding a race or culture generally stems from the inevitably partial nature of an individual’s knowledge of it. Hirsch (1967) points out that, “Whenever we encounter something, we always encounter it partially, because our knowing is temporal (we experience clusters of traits successively) and because it is selective (we cannot attend to everything explicitly all at once” (p. 272). Such partiality should not, however, be construed negatively, for it also makes learning possible, if not inevitable. Hirsch posits that in the process of trying to understand something, we continually adjust our conception as we come to notice a mismatch between what we are witnessing and our conception of it: “Since the temporal and attentional limitations of consciousness give every conception of a particular thing the character of a type, we are frequently compelled to recognize that our conceptions may be inadequate to the thing” (p. 273). Hirsch concludes that, “In our knowledge of things [...] there is always something provisional in our conception (p. 274). Thus, there is a process of continual change within a culture and also—at least potentially—a process of continual learning about it.

The dangers of such learning and the conceptualization it involves have been exhibited at length by Said (1979), who argues “that ‘the Orient’ is itself a constituted entity, and that the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically ‘different’ inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or essence proper to that geographical space is equally a highly debatable idea” (p. 322). That is, the important thing to recognize about a concept like “the Orient” is that it is not merely a question of being correct or incorrect about certain facts about a location, but that in accepting the concept we are participating in (re-)constituting it. In the novels of Burdett and Hallinan that we have been discussing, we can say that Bangkok is constituted in a similar way, but the geographical area is much more limited, and the authors both take pains to emphasize the varied and layered population of the city. Said (1994) laments that, “There has not yet developed a discourse in the American public space that does anything more than identify with power” (p. 300). While we cannot claim that either of these novels forms a significant part of such a discourse, we can note that the generic demands of hard-boiled/noir fiction require an investigator who “resists the official, but not quite legitimate, authority of a decadent society, now elevated into the towering bureaucratic impersonality of the law” (McCann, 2011: p. 45). Sonchai and Rafferty fit this convention perfectly without simplistically placing blame for the wrongs committed through the course of the novels solely on East or West.

4. Concluding Remarks: Expatriate Representation of the Local

Said (1979, 1994) is open-minded to the possibility of scholars who are foreign to

a culture nevertheless writing about it responsibly, but there remains the question of how such writing might be accomplished. I have tried to suggest that in the case of Bangkok fiction, the tendencies of a particular genre can help. Both Burdett and Hallinan do more than make a wise choice of genre, though; it is clear that many of their scenes would not be credible unless they were based on more authoritative sources than their own (necessarily limited) exposure to the people and culture of Bangkok. In other words, the final form of the stories is theirs, but many of the details have been provided by Thai informants. At the end of *A Nail Through the Heart*, Hallinan acknowledges the contributions of two Thais to the novel: “Amphornnet Phanphunga Pridgen made some valuable suggestions about Thai interior life and contributed greatly to the scene that closes the book. Pritsana Chomchan reviewed the entire manuscript from a Thai perspective, something that I was obviously not capable of doing myself, and helped keep that aspect of the book on track” (p. 328). Burdett is less specific about the contributions of his sources, but he lists more of them: “I thank [...] Nong Ruamsantiah [...] for showing me Thailand at grass roots level; and, in no particular order: Thip, Nit, Tao, Toy, Marly, Lek, Da, Song, Mimi, Yen, Jin, Ay, Wan, Pat, Nat, without whom this book would never have happened” (n.p.). These thanks acknowledge an implicit ventriloquy, as the authors pass on fragments of local habitus gleaned from their local informants. Some details could have come from these informants, or been witnessed personally by the author in one form or another. For example, Sonchai witnesses bar-girls worship the Buddha on their way into work, and notices a token ceremony that must startle most Western readers: “When the Swiss has paid up, the mamasan takes his five-hundred-baht note and brushes all her girls with it, for luck” (p. 37). More detailed is his description of how he expects the funeral of his friend will go: “Pichai’s body will sit in its decorated coffin under a pavilion in the grounds of the local wat, with a band playing funeral dirges all afternoon. Then at sundown the music will live up, Pichai’s mother will have succumbed to community pressure to throw a party. There will be crates of beer and whisky, dancing, a professional singer, gambling, perhaps a fight or two” (p. 14).

Such implicit ventriloquy of the authors is mirrored by scenes of explicit ventriloquy at the end of both novels. The exorcism of the spirit of the evil Madame Wing, whom Rafferty kills in his own apartment when she comes with thugs to kill him, is one of the most remarkable passages of the novel. To release the spirit of this ruthless Khmer Rouge torturer, the ruiner of countless lives, Rose prepares a rite with candles and string and instructs Rafferty in the proper formula: “‘Tell her you’re sorry,’ Rose says. [...] ‘Tell her you don’t blame her for the karma that trapped her, that made her do such terrible things. Tell her you know she had light inside her. Tell her you wish her spirit well. [...] Now tell her she’s free’” (p. 323). Rafferty speaks as he is instructed by his Thai partner. Similar ventriloquy occurs at the end of *Bangkok 8*, after Warren, a powerful American dealer in jade, has been forced through blackmail into having gender reassignment surgery. One of the results of the surgery is that Warren also becomes a spirit medium: the spirit

of Sonchai's dead friend Pichai becomes able to speak through Warren. Pichai gives last final critique of Westerners: "'See'—I jump, for it is Pichai again speaking in Thai, using Warren's vocal cords—'this is his soul: life is all on the outside, on the other side of the glass. Inside there is only stone. This is your *farang* for you'" (p. 310). The characters involved with ventriloquy are (willingly or unwillingly) made to repeat the words of other characters that they would not have managed to come up with by themselves. The need for ventriloquy suggests that the characters are somewhat under-developed in ways that require an infusion of knowledge or language from a character more firmly placed within one culture or another. Such a need speaks to the ambivalence or uncertainty that hybridity can involve.

These two episodes of communicating with the dead within the realistic world of a hard-boiled thriller utilize a local like Bangkok to accommodate their conflicting tendencies. We might term this effect *the suasion of locale*: the disparate and inevitable impositions of place on concepts and choices of action that might otherwise be seen as deliberate and unconstrained. Though hard-boiled crime fiction has its origins in American literary realism (Porter, 2003), the Bangkok setting allows the inclusion of events that an insistence on a stricter realism might exclude. Thus, the place makes plausible the possibility of an alternative habitus, a wider notion of what it is to be human. In *Bangkok 8*, when the CIA operative later returns to Bangkok and is asked why she has returned, she admits she finds it irresistible: "'The bottom line is it's so damn human'" (p. 314). This insistence on the humanity of the city and its people is central to the means of two authors who manage to write about a place and people that are foreign to them through sympathetic accounts of two different types of hybrid identity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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