

# “Small Places, Large Issues” Revisited: Reflections on an Ethnographically Founded Vision of New Area Studies

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## Abstract

This contribution outlines the didactic potentials and possible limitations of an ethnographically founded vision of New Area Studies. The authors reflect upon their experiences as teacher and students in an Area Studies research project in Thailand’s lower Northeast that has attempted to implement an ethnographically founded New Area Studies research methodology in practice. While this methodology draws on ethnography, it additionally engages with theoretical questions raised in sociology and philosophy with the goal of approaching emplaced orders of knowledge that unfold as everyday practice in local lifeworlds. The outlined methodology is rooted in a particular understanding of emplacement that is explicitly spatial, so that the situatedness of knowledge that is emphasised in various attempts to rethink Area Studies remains not limited to hegemonic discourses, social milieus or moving bodies, but is located in concrete places. These places can be situated on different scales, ranging from “the local” to “the global”, producing a spatial continuum to be addressed by New Area Studies research. In this particular research project, we have focused on the “local” end of this broad continuum in Thailand. We argue that ethnographic methods in combination with social phenomenology allow us to gain particular insights into the meaningfulness of local lifeworlds and highlight the continuing relevance of this form of emplaced situatedness for New Area Studies.

**Keywords:** New Area Studies, situatedness, emplaced knowledge, lifeworld, ethnography, social practice, Thailand

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This article constitutes a kaleidoscopic writing experiment bringing together five voices in different stages of their academic lives and with distinct disciplinary backgrounds as well as personal experiences in the academic field. As we aim to emphasise the subjective and embodied character of knowledge, we write from a first-person perspective whenever passages have been composed by solely one author, while using the first-person plural for the sections we have written together.

The discipline is also concerned with accounting for the interrelationships between different aspects of human existence, and usually anthropologists investigate these interrelationships taking as their point of departure a detailed study of local life in a particular society or a delineated social environment. One may therefore say that anthropology asks large questions, while at the same time it draws its most important insights from small places. (Eriksen 2001: 2)

In April 2018, I received the Humboldt Award for Excellence in Teaching for an Area Studies research seminar on liminal spaces in Berlin. I knew immediately that I wanted to use the prize money, which had to be spent for teaching purposes, to organise a research seminar in Thailand. My goal was to enable B.A. students studying Area Studies at Humboldt University's Department of Southeast Asian Studies to conduct field research in their area of choice while simultaneously implementing central ideas of an Area Studies research paradigm I had started to envision during the writing of my doctoral dissertation (Baumann 2017).<sup>1</sup>

My second immediate thought was to align this research seminar with an exchange programme I had initiated in 2014, after returning from ethnographic fieldwork in Thailand.<sup>2</sup> The exchange programme with a Technical College in Thailand's Buriram Province was ideally suited to providing the local infrastructure needed for such an ambitious project. The students who had previously participated in this programme were already equipped with the necessary language skills and personal on-site contacts to implement the central premises of this ethnographically founded research paradigm, while additionally being able to act as brokers for those who had never visited the province or Thailand's Northeast before. The two-semester research project was titled "Area Studies Research in Thailand: Everyday Lifeworlds in Buriram" and included theoretical preparations and methodological training in Berlin, a practical field school in Buriram Province under my supervision, individual and group field research in Thailand, qualitative data analyses and a writing school after our return to Berlin. In the course of this research project, the students developed their individual research ideas and questions, going through a complete research process that culminated in the writing of their B.A. theses under my supervision. During their fieldwork, the students explored male and queer adolescent practices in the context of motorcycle races (Danny Kretschmer), gaming cafés (Jona Pomerance) and transgender beauty pageants (Tim Rössig) as well as the imaginations of love and partnership of white migratory men settling in Buriram Province to live with their female Thai partners (Johannes von Plato).

1 This fieldwork was part of my dissertation project "The Ritual Reproduction of Khmerness in Thailand" which was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

2 More information on the exchange programme is available here: <https://hu.berlin/buriram-project>.

In this article, we outline the employed research methodology and its theoretical foundations. We also present results of the aforementioned research projects to collectively reflect upon the potentials and limitations of an ethnographic foundation of New Area Studies and its claimed sensibility towards the situatedness of knowledge (see various contributions within Mielke / Hornidge 2017).<sup>3</sup> The article is thus not only an attempt at situating our individual research experiences and understandings of Area Studies within the ongoing debate on a possible reconceptualisation under the label “New Area Studies”, but also at discussing the value of ethnographically founded and phenomenologically inspired didactics within New Area Studies curricula. Its first paragraphs lay out the central premises of an ethnographically founded vision of New Area Studies, which have also underpinned the field school in Thailand. Student contributions, including reflections on personal research experiences, have become integrated into the article to demonstrate the didactic value added by an ethnographic foundation of Area Studies research. This article explicitly aims not to sell old wine in new bottles, as in anthropology as New Area Studies, but to carve out the didactic value of ethnographic methods for a socio-phenomenological project within the ongoing reformulation of Area Studies as New Area Studies and its signature emphasis on situatedness.

Having been a lecturer and programme counsellor for Southeast Asian Studies at an Area Studies institute for more than six years, my impression is that students frequently struggle to develop an understanding for Area Studies and an identity as Area Studies researchers.<sup>4</sup> Students not only have to digest the analytical deconstruction of the areas that shape their commonsensical understanding of the world, but they also need to position themselves vis-à-vis the symbolic violence that any language of areas or world regions implies. Combined with recent calls for multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity in Area Studies, this leaves many students baffled. The sole constant is often the language they learn, which is usually the language of an internally colonising majority population and which continues to situate them in a nation state – a political imaginary they have not only learned to deconstruct, but which is nothing more than a methodological container (Glick Schiller / Wimmer 2002). Programmes rarely manage to guide students through these conundrums and their potential to rethink taken-for-granted understandings of the world, with many students ultimately struggling to choose topics for their final theses and find suited methodologies to implement their research questions.

3 The term “New Area Studies” alludes to various projects that seek to distance themselves from conventional Area Studies by attempting to rethink regionality.

4 I left Humboldt University’s Department of Southeast Asian Studies to join Heidelberg University’s Anthropology Department in April 2020, where I am not only a postdoctoral associate but also the coordinator of the M.A. programme in anthropology.

Before the Bologna Process radically altered the teaching of Area Studies in Germany, the situation was different, as it was possible to study two majors over a minimum timespan of five years.<sup>5</sup> I was able to develop a scholarly identity through the methodology and theory I acquired in Anthropology, my first major, while I viewed Area Studies, my second major, as a field to gain language skills and regional knowledge. I thus began to envision myself as an anthropologist working in Southeast Asia. For students studying singular Bachelor's programmes in Area Studies today, this no longer seems possible. The challenges of identification entailed by the deconstruction of regions, trans-disciplinary training and transregional orientations in undergraduate Area Studies programmes are also mirrored by the difficulties faced by graduates from Area Studies programmes when they try to enter monodisciplinary M.A. programmes or the academic job market after completing their Ph.D. While Area Studies departments frequently hire and actively seek scholars who have received their doctorate in a discipline, the converse is rarely the case. It is therefore a strategic decision not to pursue a degree in Area Studies. Although these observations question the general value of undergraduate training in Area Studies, we will not address these structural concerns, but rather focus on the didactics of ethnographically founded Area Studies and how they can help to strengthen students' identification with the field as well as enhance their methodological skills.

With our reflections on an ethnographical foundation of New Area Studies research, we simultaneously wish to counter increasingly dominant trends in the field that emphasise global entanglements, flows, moving bodies, growing urbanisation and the inexorable spread of neoliberal capitalism at the expense of neglecting the local and emplaced aspects of contemporary lifeworlds. While these trends also serve as a response to the problems of Area Studies outlined above as they seek postmodern identities within transdisciplinarity and -regionality, the didactics and methodologies of these trends are, especially on an undergraduate level, poorly developed. This transformation of Area Studies under the label New Area Studies, along with the continuing crisis of representation in the humanities, results in area scholars increasingly staying "at home" to look at mediated representations or conduct research with diaspora communities or people on the move, following the latter's movements in multi-sited approaches (Marcus 1995).

While we do not wish to deny the unquestionable relevance of these "trans" perspectives for an understanding of the contemporary world, the ethnographically founded sub-field of New Area Studies we envision seeks to carve out the continuing relevance of the "local" and emplaced as study objects *sui generis* in a world of global entanglements. We imagine this sub-field as a

5 I limit this discussion to Area Studies in Germany, as this is the academic field I am most familiar with.

project to map what Jackson labels as “spatialities of difference” (Jackson 2019: 61), in which the in-depth study of the emplaced can thrive against the backdrop of being increasingly neglected in all other disciplines and transdisciplinary projects. It thus presents an antidote to the atopia of poststructuralism that flourishes under the banner of New Area Studies (Favret-Saada 1981: 38).

In formulating this sub-field, we are also seeking to write against the growing “political scienceification” of New Area Studies.<sup>6</sup> An increasing focus on questions of instrumental forms of power is clearly discernible in contemporary Area Studies research. Self-acclaimed critical scholarship frequently argues that “everything is political” and, in the end, reducible to questions of power. It is no coincidence that, as a co-organiser of the 2019 EuroSEAS conference, I made the observation that Southeast Asian Studies are becoming increasingly politicised. Upon raising my concern, during informal conversations alongside the conference, that other topics are vanishing from the programmes of Area Studies conferences, two scholars with political science backgrounds independently responded that such a fear was unwarranted as “everything is political!” This simplification is increasingly shared by Area Studies scholars, a fact demonstrated not only by the dominance of panels addressing politics at this conference, but also mirrored in Peter A. Jackson’s power-critical interpretation of New Area Studies (Jackson 2019). Co-organising this conference also revealed to me that scholars with backgrounds in philology, linguistics, archaeology, art history and religious studies view this simplified and morally charged politicisation of Area Studies under the label New Area Studies not as an opportunity, but increasingly as a marginalisation of research that does not directly address questions of power, resulting in a reluctance to participate in any debate to rethink the field.

Marshall Sahlins has convincingly deconstructed the political claim that “everything is political” from an anthropological perspective, succinctly labelling the totalising thrust of self-acclaimed critical scholarship “powerism” (Sahlins 1999: 405, Baumann 2017: 159–168). Sahlins reveals how powerism ridicules the detotalising outset of poststructuralism that simultaneously underpins this branch of critical scholarship, and how culturally reductive many power-critical explanations of social phenomena are. This most fundamentally owes to the neo-functionalism that speaks through the universalisation of instrumental forms of power that characterise much of this scholarship, as it impedes our ability to fully understand how social inequalities unfold in the Global South. Powerism denies the need to undertake the epistemological breaks we identify as the foundation of ethnographically founded Area Studies research, as it assumes universal thrusts of “power” and “inequality” linked to

6 “Political scienceification” is the admittedly awkward translation of the German *Verpolitikwissenschaftlichung*, designating a growing encroachment of Area Studies by issues, perspectives and paradigms from political sciences and their normative universalisms.

colonialism, the inexorable spread of neo-liberal capitalism and the global hegemony of naturalism (Baumann / Rehbein 2020). In order to counter these totalisations of powerism, which also thrive under the label of transregional studies, and evade the paradoxes produced in attempts to acknowledge alterity while simultaneously emphasising the political relevance of human universals, an ethnographic foundation of New Area Studies seeks to acknowledge alterity without translating it into an analytical language of dual oppositions enmeshed in modern identity politics. Engaging ethnographically in New Area Studies means practicing epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2011); its central goal is to counter the ontological imperialism of well-intentioned scholarship that pursues a supposed human universalism and repeatedly incorporates others' "objectivization of themselves into our own objectivization of ourselves" (Descola 2013: 81).

Given this point, ironically, any efforts to eradicate the idea of otherness, however well-intentioned, may do more to perpetuate than to combat the violent conceit of colonialism. For by denying otherness, these efforts too manage really to belittle the distinction and authenticity of the other. (Dumont / Evens 1999: 16–17)

## The continuing relevance of “the local”

Nobody lives everywhere; everybody lives somewhere. Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something.<sup>7</sup> (Haraway 2016: 31)

Developments in the field of Area Studies, above all the analytical deconstruction of areas in their geopolitical sense, severe budgetary cuts as well as the need to invent bachelor's and master's programmes that attract as many students as possible – a process Peter A. Jackson calls “the neoliberalization of the global university sector” (Jackson 2019: 64) – have led to various responses at German universities. While some Area Studies institutes and departments have responded by emphasising the philological foundations of conventional Area Studies, others have tried to align Area Studies more strongly with established disciplines such as the Social Sciences or History, and yet others are attempting to implement an oxymoronic vision of post-area Area Studies under the banner of transregional studies, which “argue against studying forms of knowledge in terms of spatiality or geographically bordered epistemologies” (ibid.: 50).

Humboldt University's Department of Southeast Asian Studies has tried to formulate its own concept of New Area Studies, a process that is far from complete and also not uncontested within our parent institution, the Institute

<sup>7</sup> Even Berlin's public transport company BVG seems concerned with ideas of emplacement: Haraway's quote was spotted on the infotainment screens installed throughout Berlin's underground train network in February 2020.

of Asian and African Studies. While writing my dissertation under the supervision of Vincent Houben, who initiated the debate on New Area Studies in Southeast Asian studies with his seminal reflections (Houben 2013, 2017), my own vision of an ethnographic foundation of New Area Studies took shape, further solidifying during research seminars in Berlin and subsequent fieldwork in rural Thailand.

This vision builds upon Houben's central idea of developing a "view from within" (Houben 2017: 202). Since this goal is not only the founding idea of modern anthropology but is still shared by most ethnographies making up the realist genre (Malinowski 2005: 19, van Maanen 2011: 45–72), this contribution suggests theoretical and methodological tools to achieve this "view from within" through an ethnographic foundation of New Area Studies research. Ethnography has become a collective term for multiple writing genres that all rely on fieldwork as a way of relating with humans, non-humans and their environment. Despite this proliferation into multiple ethnographic genres, the characteristics of Area Studies ethnography are rarely addressed. One of our central questions is thus how ethnography as a writing genre within New Area Studies may be practiced. While the research and theoretical debates that ground this contribution are inspired by Thai Cultural Studies, envisioned by Peter A. Jackson as a power-critical sub-field of Southeast Asian Studies (Jackson 2005: 29), we argue that the premises of this ethnographically founded research paradigm are applicable to all scholarly projects striving to understand everyday life in socio-spatially grounded areas.<sup>8</sup>

We envision this ethnographically founded sub-field of New Area Studies as a transdisciplinary project that seeks to engage with theoretical questions raised in various disciplines regarding emplaced orders of knowledge. This notion of emplacement is explicitly spatial, entailing that orders of knowledge are investigated in their relationship to physical space and concrete locations. The situatedness of knowledge emphasised in New Area Studies thus remains not limited to hegemonic discourses, social milieus, subcultures or gendered, moving bodies, but has an irreducibly spatial dimension that has increasingly been denied in Area Studies and anthropology since the mobility turn. In order to challenge the apparently unequivocal understanding of globalisation as a homogenising force, this outline of our vision draws upon authors who are frequently employed within transregional paradigms to argue against spatial forms of emplacement and to instead make a strong point for the continuing social relevance of the emplaced and immobile in contemporary lifeworlds.

Haraway has criticised "disembodied scientific objectivity" as a "conquering gaze from nowhere", a "gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be

8 As ethnographically working Area Studies scholars, we emphasise socio-spatiality in this contribution instead of Houben's historical emphasis on "time-space configurations" (Houben 2017: 202).

seen, to represent while escaping representation”. This “view of infinite vision is an illusion, a god trick” (Haraway 1988: 576–582). Seeing from everywhere while being nowhere is impossible. If there is no immediate vision from a partial perspective, if “we are irredeemably situated, located in a material semiotic weave, there is no detachment” (Law 2019: 7). And if only “instruments of vision can mediate standpoints” (Haraway 1988: 586), we need epistemological instruments of emplacement. How can this “god trick” be avoided and vision be emplaced in New Area Studies? Instead of claiming to understand the world in its entirety or from the vantage point of nowhere, Houben suggests splitting up the world “into smaller parts in order to be opened up to comparative scientific analysis”, further elaborating:

Area Studies aim at a deep understanding of “situated difference,” which in sum consists of a complex set of correlations on human societies, distinguishing between them on the basis of location. (Houben 2017: 200)

New Area Studies and its reflection on the situatedness of knowledge in a particular place can consequently become what Haraway has coined an “instrument of vision” (Haraway 1988: 586).<sup>9</sup> We seek to argue that social practice becomes meaningful only in relation to bodies situated in physical space, in a “there” which requires the researcher’s physical presence and active participation for an understanding of it to be attained (Geertz 1989). It is this dialectic of place and meaning as it unfolds in everyday social practice that an ethnographic foundation of New Area Studies research seeks to explore. The locations of social practice can be situated on different scales, ranging from “the local” to “the global”, producing a spatial continuum to be addressed by New Area Studies research. With our research on Thailand, we focus on the “local” end of this broad continuum.<sup>10</sup> This focus on “the local” has various reasons, the most important being that the lifeworlds of actors who do not actively participate in the flows, movements and mobilities studied by transregional studies risk remaining largely hidden as they become increasingly invisible under the mobility turn in Area Studies. In the worst case, the analytical significance of these emplaced lifeworlds is outright denied.

This usually happens with reference to the twin processes of globalisation and urbanisation, said to homogenise contemporary lifeworlds to such a degree that there is no longer any need to conduct research in a village as “the rural” has ceased to exist.<sup>11</sup> Critical approaches inspired by poststructuralism

9 The investigation of Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges, as well as the link to Houben’s reflections and our New Area Studies paradigm, have been adapted from Kretschmer’s B.A. thesis (Kretschmer 2020: 5–6).

10 What “the local” is needs to be specified with regard to each individual research interest. “The local” may be a province, a village, a house, a room or simply a person’s emplacement in a “here” as opposed to a “there”.

11 The common idea that global integration yields cultural convergence is critically discussed in the contributions to a recent volume on social ontologies and social inequality in the Global South (Baumann / Bultmann 2020).

additionally argue that “the rural” never existed in the first place, but was always merely a social category invented to sustain unequal power relations. From this vantage point, “the rural” merely serves as a foil, invented as a primitive Other by ruling elites to imagine the supremacy of civilised urbanity. Mills’s well-intentioned anti-essentialism, for instance, reduces “the rural” in Thailand to a geographic domain without intrinsic meaning, denies any meaningful differences between “the rural” and “the urban” beyond the representational, and implies a total replacement of “the rural” by the homogenised urbanity of a globalised world that is synchronised by new media technologies and transcultural consumption patterns (Mills 2012). “The rural” ceases to represent a meaningful place of collective identity formation; it becomes an abstraction, a space “stripped of its holiness and its demons” (Assmann 2011: 305)<sup>12</sup> so that it poses no contradiction to the modern values of mobility and flexibility that the formerly rural populations of Thailand have incorporated into their claims of cultural citizenship (Mills 2012: 99, Baumann 2017: 169).

“The rural” thus shares the same fate as “the Thai village”, which has also been deconstructed by self-acclaimed poststructuralist critiques. These deconstructions identify “the Thai village” as an administrative category introduced to facilitate the governance of peripheral populations and smoothen their integration into the newly centralised Thai polity (Hirsch 2002). While the idea of the rural Thai village fulfilled crucial functions as a foil in the imagination of Thai urbanity, it also, after the Asian financial crisis, became a central ideological tool to reproduce romanticised images of Thailand’s past and reimagine the essence of “Thainess” (Baumann 2017: 155). Poststructuralist readings of these social categories certainly help reveal the constructed character of all social classifications in Foucault’s genealogical sense and the unequal power relations that produce them, as well as their role in modern identity politics (Foucault 1972). Yet a mere deconstruction of these discursive categories overlooks the practical ramifications they assume in everyday life and the continuing relevance emplaced categories like rurality (*ban nok*) or village (*mu ban*) have for the contextuality of social practice in Thailand (Jackson 2003, Baumann 2017: 228–230).

These currently dominant perspectives imagine the urbanisation of everyday life as so thorough that it seems possible merely to sit in a Starbucks café at Bangkok’s Siam Square, sipping a soy chai latte, to know what everyday life in Thailand feels like, or that talking to taxi drivers in Bangkok suffices to understand the political motivations of Thai peasants in their rural provinces of origin. The universal forms of power these studies frequently seek to critique legitimises not only the chosen spatial scale, but renders inscrutable the authors’

12 The central argument of my Ph.D. dissertation is that ritually reproduced relationships to emplaced “demons” (*phi*) are essential for the development of localised sentiments of collective belonging in rural villages in Buriram Province.

own entanglements in field-specific forms of power (Bourdieu 1999). While studies following this path may illuminate the twin processes of globalisation and urbanisation and how they unfold in contemporary Thailand, they neglect the continuing socio-cultural and political-economic differences separating rural and urban lifeworlds, the emplaced character of primary socialisation and the resulting differences between rural and urban habitus (Baumann 2017: 216–221, Baumann / Rehbein 2020: 19).

The potential of this ethnographic foundation of New Area Studies research lies in its sensibility towards the dialectical relationship of place and knowledge, capable of revealing how the practical meaningfulness of everyday life emerges from this dialectic in settings that are socio-spatially removed from urban centres. This potential was explicitly embraced in the design of the research project, revolving around the idea of studying everyday lifeworlds in Buriram, a province long regarded as the epitome of rurality and backwardness (*ban nok*) in Thailand's public sphere (Baumann 2017: 90–96). In recent years, Buriram has also been subject to its own, distinct forces of increasing transformation, owing to the construction of a soccer stadium and racing track that meet international standards and attract growing numbers of tourists.<sup>13</sup>

What situates an ethnographic study of emplaced orders of knowledge within the field of New Area Studies is an understanding of area that is far removed from the geopolitical regionalisations that characterise conventional area studies. The justified deconstruction of the established geopolitical units, however, does not question the analytical value of regionalisation per se, only the logic employed to delineate an area and the political essentialisation of the resulting analytical abstractions. The understanding of area that characterises an ethnographic vision of New Area Studies flexibly imagines areas with regard to each individual research question, locating the resulting analytical construction on a scalar continuum without fixed boundaries (Houben 2017: 203).

Scott's elaboration of van Schendel's outline of Zomia is one example of such an alternative regionalisation that breaks with the geopolitical units of Cold War common sense (van Schendel 2002, Scott 2009). This contextual understanding of an area is, however, nothing "new". Mus's conceptualisation of monsoon Asia (Mus 1934), based on the identification of a shared ritual language of chthonic cults that connected social collectives in the geopolitical regions we commonly label as South, East and Southeast Asia, is one early example of such an alternative regionalisation (Baumann 2020: 48–51). The contextualised regionalisations of New Area Studies are, however, not entirely random, but presuppose the sharing of family resemblances in Wittgenstein's sense (Wittgenstein 1999: 32). Areas are relational constructs and "the local"

13 In 2018 alone the number of yearly visitors has increased rapidly from 600,000 to 2.5 million (Panyaarudh 2018).

is one dimension of regionality that emerges only in light of a particular research question and thus cannot be essentialised.

Despite this alternative conceptualisation of an “area”, our ethnographic vision shares the strong interest of Area Studies in non-European socio-spatial configurations while emphasising the relevance of vernacular languages and dialects to approach the practical meaningfulness of everyday life (Jackson 2019: 58–59). We stress the didactic value of in-depth language training, which continues to distinguish Area Studies curricula from anthropology. The range of areas an Area Studies scholar can investigate under our ethnographically founded paradigm is therefore limited by the mastery of language and the ability to actively participate in everyday language games. In this sense, our ethnographically founded vision of New Area Studies research marks a return to the strong emphasis of conventional Area Studies on spatiality and spatially bound epistemologies, and in this sense contradicts the dominant calls for transregionality in much New Area Studies theorising. However, the logic applied to delineate these “spaces” and the emphasis of the epistemological multiplicity characterising them renders our understanding of regionality fundamentally different (Baumann 2020).

Our individual research projects are situated in a vernacularly recognised geographic area known as *Isan Tai* (lower Northeast). This area is characterised by a distinct socio-cultural configuration where Thai, Lao and Khmer cultural influences intersect in everyday life. Buriram Province is one of three Thai provinces commonly considered to make up this area, which constitutes a liminal frontier zone between Thailand and Cambodia. An organic hybridisation of these cultural influences characterises this area, producing distinct and highly localised language games and identities that vary considerably between social collectives. These emplaced collectives, however, share enough family resemblances to produce a regional consciousness that is imagined in contrast to social collectives in the Lao-dominated upper Northeast or the Thai-dominated central region. The lower Northeast is, therefore, not merely an analytical abstraction, but is used in everyday life as a reference point to articulate an emplaced sense of belonging that is frequently overlooked in Bangkok-centric or Isan-centric scholarship (Baumann 2017).

An important factor that characterises this ethnographically founded vision of New Area Studies is its attempt to transcend disciplinary dogmas and its intention to contribute actively to the production of theory from an emplaced perspective. In the context of our research project, this transdisciplinarity manifests itself most explicitly with regard to the lifeworld, a concept we have adopted from social phenomenology and seek to elucidate with ethnographic methods. Although references to the lifeworld are frequently encountered in anthropological texts as well as transregional studies, the concept is

often insufficiently theorised and its phenomenological foundation rarely mirrored in discussions of the employed methodology.<sup>14</sup> The concept's theoretical roots in Husserl's philosophical phenomenology, its elaboration in Schütz's social phenomenology as well as its continuing relevance in Berger and Luckmann's sociology of everyday life are mostly ignored (Husserl 1962, Berger / Luckmann 1966, Schütz 1971). Methodological discussions on how to understand a lifeworld that is socio-culturally far removed from one's own are even scarcer in Area Studies. In our attempt to grasp the meaningfulness of everyday life as it unfolds in emplaced practices in Buriram Province, we emphasise the premises of social phenomenology and turn the idea of the lifeworld into the essential feature of our ethnographic vision of New Area Studies research.

Following Michael Jackson, one of few scholars who has theorised the lifeworld concept from an anthropological vantage point, the lifeworld encompasses "that domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity [...] which theoretical knowledge addresses but does not determine, from which conceptual understanding arises but on which it does not primarily depend" (Jackson 1996: 7–8). While intellectual concepts and structures form part of the lifeworld, they are not its foundational element, but simply one horizon of experience among others. Of most principal significance and validity are commonsensical, taken-for-granted understandings and practical skills – types of knowledge not ordinarily brought into consciousness, indeed not actually able to be brought fully into consciousness without a degree of abstraction, yet integrally part of empirical reality (ibid.: 4–15). Instead of discursive terms and cognitive reflections, practical activity takes centre stage as the carrier of meaning, the site of knowledge that underpins everyday experience and shapes collective understandings of the world.

With our vision of New Area Studies, we thus articulate a moderate phenomenological position. Strong phenomenological positions emphasise the egological foundation of meaning and see the lifeworld as the foundation of a universal philosophy (Hitzler / Honer 1984: 58). In contrast, moderate positions stress purely the intersubjective character of commonsensical typifications and the social character of meaning in everyday life (Geertz 1973: 12). Moderate phenomenological positions outline non-egological alternatives to the strictly egological perspectives of transcendental or mundane phenomenology by emphasising meaning's essentially social character. As such they are closely related to Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, in which meaning exists only in social

14 Gay y Blasco and Wardle's book on how to read ethnography, for instance, is replete with references to the lifeworld and its central place in ethnographic texts, yet does not tell the reader what "lifeworld" is actually supposed to mean (Gay y Blasco / Wardle 2019). The lifeworld is treated as a jargon term, but as it has become part of colloquial language games and because jargon terms change their meaning over time, its analytical value remains low as long as it is not situated in a specific line of thought.

collectives and not in discourses or any other analytical abstraction (Giesen 2010: 30, Baumann 2017: 84).

Reckwitz, who attempts to synthesise approaches of various social theorists to work out essential arguments of what he terms an idealised model of “practice theories”, locates the social construction of meaning as situated in emplaced practices. Practices are necessarily bodily practices, the product of training the body in a certain way. Yet the body does not merely function as an “instrument” here: it is an irreducible part of the routinised, skilful performance that constitutes each practice (Reckwitz 2002: 244–251) and renders it meaningful in its relationship to a particular location. This dialectic between meaning and locality constitutes its emplacement. Practices transcend the alleged dichotomy between body and mind, and discursive terms and categories are once again relegated to being just one type of practice among others. Through their habituality and routinised reproduction, practices are also inherently social and collective. Human beings do not “own” practices, but rather “take over” and reproduce them (*ibid.*: 250–254).<sup>15</sup>

## Epistemological breaks

Haraway’s feminist idea of situated objectivity unfolds through a particular vision and partial perspective. Critical positioning, she argues, can produce objectivity, yet this objectivity is always situated and the truth produced necessarily partial. Not only does this question the possibility of a universal truth, it also identifies claims to it as hegemonic projects. Considering the practice of identity politics, this critical positioning is an epistemological process achieved by using “instruments of vision” since identity itself, “including self-identity, does not produce science” (Haraway 1988: 586). But what does this situatedness mean for an ethnographically founded New Area Studies research paradigm? Earlier, we outlined contextual regionalisation as an instrument of vision. We now turn to the epistemological breaks required to emplace this vision.

When approaching everyday lifeworlds, we, as area scientists, face an essential conundrum. In contrast to natural scientists, we are embedded in the field that we examine, the social world (Rehbein 2011: 52). In this world, myriad lived experiences and practices exist side by side, requiring us to acknowledge our own embeddedness in a lifeworld constituted by emplaced practices and habituated forms of knowledge. Realising this embeddedness raises the question of how to break with one’s own bodily and mentally habitu-

<sup>15</sup> The investigation of Michael Jackson’s lifeworld concept and Reckwitz’s notion of social practices has been adapted from Pomerance’s B.A. thesis (Pomerance 2020: 4–6).

ated forms of knowledge that might be impeding our ability to comprehend the experiences of actors from differing social positions. Bourdieu recognises these problems with his notion of the “double break” (Bourdieu 1977: 3). This concept does not present a step-by-step guide on how to break with taken-for-granted assumptions, but calls for an awareness of the obstacles that the partiality of the analyst’s perspective creates for the attempt to gain knowledge on the social world (Rehbein 2011: 54).

The first of these breaks is with the commonsensical explanations and interpretations of the social world that the researcher has incorporated during their socialisation into the language games that constitute an emplaced life-world (Baumann / Rehbein 2020). Bourdieu argues that in order to break with commonsensical interpretations, one must primarily reflect upon the terms employed to explain the social world in everyday life (Bourdieu 1991: 21), terms that carry meanings specific to the places and particular situations in which they are invoked. Bourdieu et al. call, therefore, for the construction of new theoretical terms to explain social phenomena (Bourdieu et al. 1991: vii). This call is mirrored by Houben, who advocates the formulation of mid-range concepts while emphasising the limits of translatability and the special role of local concepts in New Area Studies (Houben 2017: 204–210).

Attempting to break with the language of everyday life and disengage it from scientific inquiry might, at first glance, seem contradictory to the phenomenological New Area Studies approach advocated in this article. But the opposite is the case. As Bourdieu points out, a moderate phenomenological approach provides the most valuable tool for escaping one’s own taken-for-granted assumptions, which impede a reflexive understanding of social practice and the explication of its meaning. Everyday constructions of reality, therefore, need to be reflexively reintroduced into the analysis:

There is an objective truth of the subjective, even when it contradicts the objective truth that one has to construct in opposition to it. Illusion is not, as such, illusory. It would be a betrayal of objectivity to proceed as if social subjects had no representation, no experience of the realities that science constructs, such as social classes. (Bourdieu 1993: 17)

Upon carrying out the first break, we do not necessarily arrive at a more “objective” form of knowledge, as is assumed in structuralist or political-economic approaches.<sup>16</sup> Rather, we are required to break with the illusion of scientific objectivity in itself, which constitutes the second break demanded by Bourdieu. Reminiscent of Haraway’s emphasis of knowledge’s inherent situatedness, there is no position “outside” of society enabling the scientist to produce absolute knowledge in a somehow “godlike” manner (Fröhlich / Rehbein 2014: 242). This makes it necessary not only to question the rules of

16 This kind of adherence to a positivistic ideal of science characterises much of the Eurocentric social sciences, where objectivity and universal truth still constitute reachable goals.

the scientific field or the principles and strategies for acquiring symbolic capital within it, but also to question the relationship between science and the rest of the social universe (Bourdieu 1998: 84).<sup>17</sup>

Reflecting upon the epistemological breaks demanded by Bourdieu during my research in Thailand, I came to realise the need for further breaks in this kind of New Area Studies research. Studying the role that relationships with non-humans known as *phi* (conventionally translated as “ghosts” or “spirits”) have for the reproduction of emplaced collectives in the rural lifeworlds of the lower Northeast, the ontological imperialism of a rationalised analytical language impedes the explication of the practical meaningfulness of these affective bonds as well as the character that *phi* assume in everyday language games (Baumann 2017, 2018, 2020). This explication requires not only reflexive translations and the coining of new concepts, but also the reconstruction of the social ontology of everyday life and a mapping of the socio-ontological multiplicity that characterises contemporary Thai lifeworlds. Therefore, I argue that the acknowledgement of ontological multiplicity becomes not only an essential break required in this New Area Studies paradigm, but that the reconstruction of emplaced social ontologies represents its major conceptual contribution (Baumann / Bultmann 2020, Baumann / Rehbein 2020). The recognition of socio-ontological multiplicity is not only an attempt at countering the totalising thrust of post-area area studies, but also provides a response to Harootunian’s dismissal of conventional area studies in his critique of translation as ontological cannibalism (Harootunian 2000: 41, in Houben 2017: 196).

As students, we were confronted with yet another break as part of our research projects in Buriram, as we were required to enter a new field, the academic field. This entailed exposing our bodies to a wide range of new practices including participant observation, ethnographic writing, learning of the academic and vernacular languages as well as engagement in critical self-reflection. Yet the most crucial break demanded in New Area Studies research presented itself upon entering the research field and attempting to meaningfully engage in it as a participant. While Bourdieu’s double break calls for the commonsensical categories of everyday life to be reflexively assessed, entering emplaced lifeworlds in provincial Thailand first necessitates an identification of these categories and their commonsensical meanings before being able to reflect them. The fact that these emplaced lifeworlds are distinct not only from our everyday lifeworlds in Germany, but also from everyday lifeworlds in urban Bangkok with respect to locally specific language games, enhances the difficulties. By drawing on the lifeworld concept, we not only critically reflect upon the universalising thrust of poststructuralist critiques that tend to reduce meaning to power, but also upon the limitations and po-

17 The discussion of Bourdieu’s epistemological breaks has been adapted from von Plato’s B.A. thesis (von Plato 2020: 8–10).

tentials of social phenomenology itself, which is always on the verge of remaining a type of spontaneous sociology (Burawoy 2017).

The analytical assessment of a lifeworld presupposes an intersubjective participation in this lifeworld and, consequently, an implicit sharing of the basic categories that render everyday life meaningful (Srubar 2009: 11, Baumann 2017: 83–85). What happens if we lack such an implicit understanding of the everyday because we conduct research in other languages and in socio-cultural settings that are far removed from our everyday experience? Is the explication of the implicit knowledge that renders a lifeworld meaningful and its translation into another language game possible or do we reach the limits of the lifeworld paradigm once we leave our own socio-cultural context and seek to understand another lifeworld? The totalising thrust of transregional studies that assumes a growing homogenisation of everyday life is convenient to avoid these principal questions that mirror the fundamental problem of solipsism within social phenomenology. Our ethnographic vision of New Area Studies, however, turns this problem into its point of departure. The goal of this paradigm thus becomes the reconstruction of social ontologies and the recognition of their continuing multiplicity in the contemporary world (Baumann / Rehbein 2020).

Owing to their fundamental implicitness, exclusively engaging in speech acts and explicitly asking for concepts and social categories in interviews does not suffice. Everyday knowledge can only be approached through being embodied by the researchers themselves. Another break then required is the explication of this form of experiential knowledge and its translation into semantic knowledge in the context of an ethnographic account. This is where questions of (un-)translatability arise and New Area Studies researchers have to ask themselves whether their analytical vocabulary and the translations usually encountered in their field appropriately capture the emplaced meaning of the social categories they seek to explicate. Therefore, questions of representation need to be addressed more explicitly in this New Area Studies paradigm than in conventional Area Studies.

Our model of social practices explored earlier presents a possible solution to the solipsism problem and offers a glimpse at the diverse types of knowledge contained within implicit, practical activity and the experiential domain of the lifeworld. With this understanding, the fact that the ethnographically working Area Studies scholar “is drawn into the lifeworld as a participant” (Jackson 1996: 29) presents itself not as an obstacle, but as a vital opportunity. Only by means of participation, by experiencing and “taking over” the same social practices invoked by those in the field, by acquiring the bodily routines and practical skills of those one is surrounded with, can knowledge be explored not as a universal system of inherent truths, but in its implicit entanglements with lived reality (*ibid.*: 8).

During our fieldwork, we attempted to achieve a certain degree of “thickness” through “taking over” the same social practices as our interlocutors. This idea of thickness, characterising our vision of New Area Studies, refers back to Geertz’s “interpretative thickness” (Geertz 1973) while also stressing the “thickness” of shared experiences in the course of “participant observation” (Spittler 2001: 12). The acquisition of “thick knowledge” represents, for us, the primary goal of ethnographically founded New Area Studies research (Baumann 2017: 30). As a form of embodied knowledge that is acquired through one’s participation in and shared experience of daily life, thick knowledge is only partially accessible to the researchers themselves. Its accumulation during fieldwork, however, allows the researcher to act meaningfully in socioculturally alien contexts, thus bridging one of the breaks illustrated earlier. The intersubjective meaningfulness of one’s participation in everyday life reflects one’s embodied (and at least partial) understanding of the interlocutors’ lifeworlds. This idea of thick knowledge mirrors Wittgenstein’s notion of language games as social practices that produce distinctive forms of life, whereby Wittgenstein remarks that we are only able to understand the meaning of a word if we are accustomed to its associated practice (Rehbein 2009: 53, Baumann / Rehbein 2020: 17–18).

While the combination of necessary epistemological breaks in New Area Studies is certainly different for scholars conducting research in their mother tongue and their area of origin, it would be ignorant to assume that “home scholars” are automatically able to explicate the meaningfulness of everyday life and translate it into a scientific account. Bourdieu envisions the double break precisely to avoid this kind of spontaneous sociology. Spontaneous sociology is a view of social structure that derives directly from experience, as if actors had a privileged and conscious insight into their predicament (Baumann / Rehbein 2020: 8). Despite our methodological emphasis on participation, we simultaneously argue against the idea that participant observation is “a ‘natural sociology’ that offers spontaneous and privileged access to truth” (Burawoy 2017: 263). What we emphasise is that participation allows us to access a particular and emplaced truth as well as that the acknowledgement of its partiality is an instrument of vision that enables us to reach a situated form of objectivity.

## Within local lifeworlds

The requirements demanded by the New Area Studies research paradigm outlined above are certainly ambitious. The major challenge of our research project was therefore to determine how a research methodology requiring the

researcher to spend extended periods of time in an area, gain access to a life-world, participate actively in it and embody a certain degree of thick knowledge could be taught and implemented. As our research endeavours as students were limited by the brief duration of our two-month semester break, our research interests revolved around lifeworlds that we initially, yet in some cases very much falsely, presumed to be easily accessible. In the following sections, we will reflect upon our experiences with this ethnographic research methodology to highlight its didactic value in New Area Studies curricula.

## Motorcycle races: On words and experiences (by Danny Kretschmer)

With my knees pressed against the motorcycle tank, my hands holding the grips, fingers ready to react on the brake lever, the boundaries between body and machine are blurred. Moving my body means moving the bike. The bike translates every change in the surface of the street into percussions running through my body. With the streetlights flying by and my upper body leaning against the airstream, my perception of “now” is being shifted. A fundamental alteration of temporal experience is taking place. Before, “now” had meant hanging out, sitting and chatting in the workshop. In this moment, “now” is more severe, as my eyes are glued to the street and the bike in front of me. Every second is meaningful, because “now”, as we speed out of the village and towards the city, a pothole, a stray dog or a car emerging from an alley will be the end. Words do not suffice to represent the sensation of vitality that comes with escaping death. As we continue our journey across the newly built streets of Buriram, the city itself starts to shift around me. This night ride opens up a different kind of spatial experience. As we ride through this space, it feels accessible, and with no one else present, the streets and the night belong to us.<sup>18</sup>

Initially, I had been planning to explore the lifeworld meaning of *wai run* in Buriram. *Wai run* translates roughly to the English category “teenager”. My aim had been to find out what is lost in translation if one translates *wai run* as “teenager”. With the focus set on the lifeworld, symbolic enactment of *wai run* as a process of meaning-making, I started to explore local language games, images and places through which this category is materialised. Unlike biological notions of “youth”, my approach aims at an understanding of how the concept *wai run* is materially-semiotically practiced and interpreted within local lifeworlds. During this exploration, a *wai run*-related category, the category of *dek waen*, became apparent to me.

One meaning of *dek waen* in Thai language games refers to teenagers who race modified motorbikes. *Dek* means child, *waen* is an onomatopoeic description of motorbike sounds. Associations with the category *dek waen* are mainly negative. Due to the category’s associations with criminality in Thailand’s public sphere, its use to identify someone mostly means to deviantise this person. It is also a self-referential indicator of social belonging or of one’s own

18 This paragraph has been translated and adapted from Kretschmer’s B.A. thesis (Kretschmer 2020: 25).

practice of motorbike modifications and races. What does it mean to be *dek waen* in teenage lifeworlds in Buriram? Asking what it means to be someone in a particular lifeworld is not posed exclusively as a question for textual meaning. It extends the scope to a social practice. As explained above, it means to explore the situated, implicit, embodied logic of practice, which depends on bodies and artefacts (Reckwitz 2003: 291).

Exploring a deviantised category referring to a deviantised practice entails multiple difficulties. At the time of my exploration, it was not yet clear to me that I was exploring a discursive category of social distantiation and distinction, mostly used to identify others rather than as a means of self-identification. This led to a long period of meandering, as I failed to find anyone who could tell me what it means to be *dek waen* and what it is like. Only at the very end of my field trip was I allowed access to a motorcycle workshop and able to meet actual people who self-identified as *dek waen*. Participating in everyday life ceased being limited to hanging out with a group of racers and mechanics at their workshop. It meant that I could finally explore the sensual experience of riding a motorcycle through warm nights together with other bikers. In those nights and on the streets, my spatial-temporal perception was altered. Inhabiting space is bound to our movement through it. Space is interwoven with as well as product and producer of our social practices. Buriram is practiced differently on a motorbike, during nights, at different speeds. Racing as thick participation involves a break with commonsensical modes of movement, a break with the everyday mode of inhabiting space.

For some, the category *dek waen* serves as a conceptual placeholder that signifies the corporeal experiences described above. For others, it may signify the noise from the street interrupting their sleep. These variations of local language games enact differing relations to a social practice. Learning how these language games work is crucial for understanding the meaning of *dek waen*, yet as my research reveals, this mode of understanding has limits. Reading newspapers and conducting interviews present limited sources of knowledge. They might demonstrate how a hegemonic discourse is reproduced on a local level, but extending the frame from words to experiences made me understand what the practice typically referred to by the social category *dek waen* feels like. Ethnography became a tool for me to translate these feelings into words and to disclose silent, non-verbal / not-yet-verbal, tacit forms of knowledge and situate them in a lifeworld characterised by a specific form of regionality. In the end, my riding practice and a three-month period of waiting, trust-building and bonding with potential interlocutors at a gaming café lead my research to an embodied mode of understanding. Drawing from the wide range of ethnographic instruments enabled me to grasp the multimodalities of everyday life and finally assess the local meaning and practices of being *dek waen* in Buriram.

## Gaming cafés: Emplaced belonging (by Jona Pomerance)

I slide open the door and push aside the thick, pink curtains. An expansive room stretches out in front of me. Rows of tightly arranged computer setups divide the space into three narrow corridors, the tall chairs on each side packed with adolescents. I have stepped into a gaming café, one of over two dozen operating in Buriram's city centre today. Flickering colours radiate from the many screens and an auditory carpet of keyboard tapping, mouse clicks, humming fans, chattering voices and occasional slang-infused shouts weaves throughout the room. Players are immersed in the virtual worlds unfolding before them. At least that is easy to assume from a bird's-eye perspective. On a closer look, clusters of neighbouring screens change their colours in unison. Players' laughs and curses emerge as polyphonies, their voices and glances bouncing back and forth between adjacent seats. Additional pairs of eyes follow these joint efforts from behind the chairs. Customers arrive and depart as a continuous stream, cordially greeting the owner as well as those lounging smoking atop the motorcycles parked outside. An emplaced web of relationships revolves around the café, one that extends into the games' virtual realms yet has its roots firmly in the physical domain of this local gathering spot.

A perspective similar to the globalisational and transregional gaze critically assessed earlier can also be observed with regard to academic inquiry into digital games. Owing to the rapid spread of internet and technology access as well as the increasingly interconnected nature of gameplay, gaming tends to be framed as transcending emplaced bodies and physical localities, instead moving practices into the realm of the "virtual". Hand and Moore, for instance, largely dismiss physical gatherings of players as fleeting moments that produce merely transient relationships between those present (Hand / Moore 2006: 168–169), quickly shifting their focus to "imagined" and "virtual" forms of community. They assume that the collective nature of play as well as gaming-related symbols and artefacts "produce the experience of belonging to a [gaming] community" and assert that "digital gamers self-consciously develop different self-identities through the consumption and playing of digital games" and also that transcendent, "virtual identities" are assumed in online gaming environments (*ibid.*: 170–177).

From the vantage point of game studies, an academic field concerned with a theoretical grasp of digital games, arguments like these are reasonable. From a lifeworld perspective, however, they present a certain danger. It would be easy to simply project the above understanding onto everyone taking part in gaming practices, label them "gamers", suppose they self-reflexively construct an identity as part of a "gaming community" and assume they transcend "real-life" contexts through the "virtual" realms of online games. Ample evidence to match these theoretical presuppositions could likely be found if explicitly searched for. But would this mean these discursive categories and abstract ideas truly carry meaning within the implicit domain of each person's lifeworld? A self-proclaimed "material turn" within the game studies field has

succeeded in drawing more attention to the localised instances and material contexts of gameplay (Apperley / Jayemane 2012: 7–10), yet the principal limitation from this theoretical vantage point remains. Inevitably, it ends up exploring what gaming practices mean to an abstract understanding of digital games instead of what they mean within players’ emplaced domains of everyday experience.

In retrospect, I was perhaps lucky that my original research endeavour, which had already addressed social practices of adolescents but not yet centred on gaming cafés in particular, had come to a halt. Informed too closely by universalising assumptions in my initial research design, I had quickly encountered the discrepancy between my own analytical language and the specificity of local language games when attempts to have interviewees explicate everyday practices had yielded reproductions of a dominant discourse rather than reflexive accounts of their daily routines. In the course of these initial attempts, however, I had implicitly started to accumulate “thick knowledge” by being embedded in local students’ lifeworlds, which I was subsequently able to draw upon to readjust my research interest.

From this locally discovered, student-mediated vantage point, I encountered Buriram’s gaming cafés primarily as local sites of adolescent practices, rather than against the backdrop of abstract “gaming”-related presuppositions. Two particular gaming café premises, embedded in the peripheral urbanity of Buriram City, subsequently became my “local” reference points at which I spent multiple weeks surrounded by, talking to and gaming with the cafés’ customers and owners. Through this emplaced, participatory perspective and in contrast to the assumptions outlined above, social interactions at the cafés proved to be primarily localised, with the “virtual” online environments acting more as extensions of physical proximity instead of as transcendental domains, and the café spaces turned out to attain much of their significance as contextual sites of “informal” adolescent interaction (Mulder 2000: 64–65) not graspable by limiting the view to gaming practices alone. Faced with a local discourse that links gaming cafés to the pejorative associations also touched upon by Danny Kretschmer in reference to *dek waen* earlier, the cafés’ customers do not identify with discursive “gamer” categories. For those not deterred by the additionally gendered, masculine nature of these discursive representations, an attachment to the café spaces instead develops implicitly – as an emplaced, affective sense of belonging resting upon embodied practices within a shared, physical locality.

## Queer lifeworlds: Beyond globalized urbanity (by Tim Rössig)

To the monotone sound of my electric shaver's vibrating razors, my facial hair slowly trickles down onto the tiled floor. My transformation for a *kathoey* beauty pageant at Buriram's Technical College starts with a shave. The aim is to become a "real" woman. My face, my hair, my clothes, my gestures. Everything needs to become more female, become indistinguishable from a cis-woman, as befriended *kathoey* have explained to me. This is not the first transformation of my gender identity. The first time I left my male body behind was at a drag workshop in Warsaw. Friends introduced me to the art of drag. From boxes filled with wigs in every colour of the rainbow, pink and furry waistcoats, black-and-white sportswear, elegant evening gowns and airy summer attire, we assembled an outfit. My beard was dyed in various colours. I was not a man anymore, but neither a woman. We were fairies, somewhere beyond the heteronormative binary of genders. Whenever I showed pictures of my previous drag attempts to *kathoey* in Buriram, they would immediately start teasing me. "*Phi, phi* [ghost, ghost]", they would exclaim, displaying a shocking disinterest in the art of drag. The term *phi* does not merely express disinterest; it is often used in a pejorative manner. "Ghosts" play an important role in the everyday lifeworlds of rural Buriram, where spiteful, uncanny creatures inflict illnesses and other undesired destinies onto the people (Baumann 2018: 160–165). Before my time in Buriram, I had imagined drag as an inherent part of queer culture worldwide. In Bangkok, several drag shows take place daily. Thailand even has a spin-off of the famous drag series "RuPaul's Drag Race", targeting Thai and international drag fans alike. In Buriram, however, drag appears to be irrelevant to local queer culture.

My research project aimed at examining the everyday lifeworlds of gay men and *kathoey* in Buriram. The Thai word *kathoey* is a polythetic category for a Thai gender identity; its meaning can range from gay men with an effeminate habitus, sometimes including occasional crossdressing, to the complete transformation of male gender identity at birth into a female gender identity (Rössig 2019: 8). Most of the existing English literature on queer life in Thailand focuses on urban centres such as Bangkok, Pattaya or Chiang Mai.<sup>19</sup> Even though many queer people migrate from rural places to these urban centres, scholarly literature tends to overlook the lifeworlds of queer people who continue to live in smaller places. In the edited volume "Queer Bangkok", P. A. Jackson critically notes that there is a need for more specific research about regional LGBT\* lifeworlds in Thailand (Jackson 2012: 13).

It is not only the absence of drag culture in Buriram that demonstrates this necessity for specific research about local queer configurations in smaller places. Typical queer institutions cited in other articles, such as bars, clubs or saunas are likewise nowhere to be found in Buriram. Important events for queer people in Buriram, such as *mo lam* performances, which couple faster folk music from the Lao-dominated upper Northeast with a specific type of dance, or the significance of *kathoey* beauty pageants for the local *kathoey* community are,

19 While the common anglophone term "queer" is employed to refer to people of various gender identities, this does not mean to imply a "convergence between Thai and Western discourses" (Jackson 2012: 5–6).

on the other hand, rarely mentioned in the urban-centred gender studies literature. This discrepancy between a gender studies’ vision and everyday life highlights the need to explore local configurations in provincial Thailand. The differences between rural and urban queer lifeworlds do not simply cease to exist in light of Thailand’s globalisation and concomitant urbanisation or the increased mobility that characterises rural lifeworlds. In the lower Northeast, as touched upon previously, the everyday life of queer people is shaped differently by Thai, Lao and Khmer cultural influences and an agricultural economy – as opposed to by international influences and a huge service sector, as with queer lives in Bangkok or Pattaya.

Apart from needing to explore queer everyday experience as an aspect of local lifeworlds, to conduct fieldwork in Buriram it was necessary to examine the meaning of gender categories in local language games. Gender identities in Thailand can by no means be understood as self-contained, but can only be grasped as a continuum of different and contextualised meanings (van Esterik 1999: 279). Terms used in English-speaking countries, such as “trans\*” or “queer”, are rarely used in Thailand and hardly understood in Buriram (Jackson 2011: 3–6). Additionally, no differentiation between gender, sex and sexuality is made and the definitions of Thai gender (*phet*) vary between scientific articles and everyday use. Therefore, it is not only necessary to ask which *phet* people identify with, but, additionally, what is meant when these categories are employed and by whom they are used to engage in local language games.

In my first interviews in Buriram, the attempt to ask interviewees if they identified with categories used in Thai gender studies literature sometimes lead to irritation and confusion. On one such occasion, a person self-identifying as *kathoey* researched the *phet* categories on the internet upon being asked about her self-identification. She read all the listed terms out loud and had to laugh heartily because she, as a queer person of Thai origin, had never heard of some of these categories and was quite confused about their meanings. Mostly, she relied on the terms *kathoey*, *gay*, *tom* or *dee* to describe aspects of her lifeworld.<sup>20</sup> Two other interviewed people ended up strongly irritated about the various gender identities, starting to question where to place themselves within the narrow definitions of being gay or *kathoey*. All of my interviewees associated the term *kathoey* with different meanings. My intersubjective participation in their lifeworld, like the aforementioned transformation of my male appearance into a female appearance by *kathoey*, or going out to local events like *mo lam* performances or beauty pageants, added multiple layers of thickness to my embodied understanding of what it means to be *kathoey* as well as how masculinity and femininity are perceived by *kathoey* in Buriram.

20 “Toms, a self-identifying term used by masculine women in Thailand since the 1980s. The word tom implies a sexual attraction to feminine women who are labelled dee, a term that is derived from the English word ‘lady’, or pronounced ‘lay-dee’” (Sinnott 2012: 455).

After returning to Berlin and finishing my B.A. thesis, I was criticised by my co-supervisor at Humboldt University's social sciences department for not engaging with critical German gender theory. There is, however, no such thing as German gender theory about *kathoey*, as the category does not exist in German language games and the category "trans\*" is not equivalent to *kathoey* identities in Thailand.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the rare use of participant observation and thick description in German sociology confronted me, a student of the social sciences, with the practical problems connected to breaking with the monodisciplinary ideal of Germany's discipline-focused academic field. Scientific writing in the "I" perspective and the use of emotionality to understand social relations is often still devalued as too subjective in the social sciences. However, only my realisation of how implicit knowledge and my positionality shaped my research, attained through the writing of thick descriptions, sensitised me to the epistemological breaks required to transcend the boundaries of monodisciplinary knowledge production. Applying the aforementioned New Area Studies methodology to social science research fundamentally contributed to a better understanding of the emplaced social reality of gender identities in different societies. Nonetheless, disciplinary-based dogmas of objectivity continue to limit the paradigm's applicability for students with academic backgrounds in the social sciences.

## White migratory men: Limits of emplacement (by Johannes von Plato)

A row of orange motorcycles in front of an orange house in central Buriram is the signature feature of the motorbike rental business owned by the Dutch guy Finn. Upon my entry, this tall and heavy man welcomes me with a firm handshake. The dazzling light of neon tubes envelops more orange motorcycles in a cold atmosphere, pierced by the yaps of several tiny German Spitz dogs. As we sit down on the sofa, he sends his girlfriend to get us a drink. Being served like this, I somehow feel trapped in a 1950s movie. While she brings us the fresh orange juice he has asked for, he tells me about his most memorable experiences since his move to Buriram. "In Thailand," he explains to me, "the dead need to be burned for the ancestors." Upon finishing his sentence, he seeks the approval of his girlfriend, asking "Is that right, Dao?" Occupied with work on the computer, she does not answer immediately, prompting him to loudly repeat his question: "That's how it is, right, Dao?" For a couple of seconds, I feel a sense of unease linger in the air, a tension that is not eased until her voice utters the desired confirmation: "Yeah, yeah. True." He continues with his story. Upon visiting a funeral in his girlfriend's village for the first time, the fuel of the crematorium's oven had not lasted long enough to burn the corpse entirely. The partly charred body subsequently had to be removed from the oven to refuel. Everybody, even the children, had been able to see the scorched corpse. "I mean ... which normal human being wants to see his mother's or father's half-burned face?", Finn remarks. Having internalised a universalist interpre-

21 The co-supervisor's comments on Rössig's B.A. thesis prove Peter A. Jackson's argument that the social sciences continue to locate theory production in the Global North, looking to the Global South only for empirical material to prove the universal applicability of their essentially Eurocentric theory (Jackson 2019: 62).

tation of “normal” human behaviour characteristic for the hegemonic Western ontology of naturalism, he is not able to reflect upon the diversity of knowledge systems situated in different localities, but simply degrades the funerary practices of his chosen home as “abnormal”.

There are no large communities of Western men in Buriram Province and consequently no sex work-related establishments that cater to their needs in the province’s capital. Most Western men who have settled in the province dissociate themselves from the large expat communities in Pattaya and Phuket, referring to these latter men as dubious “sex tourists”. Much in contrast, they imagine their own long-term commitments to local women as more “genuine” and “serious”, declaring that their willingness to live in a rural province without major tourist attractions and infrastructure serves as proof of their “serious” intentions. Conducting research on transnational partnerships beyond the hotspots of Thailand’s “sex industry” revealed a distinct and emplaced lifeworld of Western men in Thailand. What turned out to limit my acquisition of “thick knowledge” about these lifeworlds, however, was my reluctance to actively participate in the everyday life of this expat community.

Yet reflecting upon these limitations of developing an embodied understanding, a central feature characterising the everyday life of my interlocutors became apparent to me. Similar to my difficulties to partake in and adapt to their everyday lives, most of these men, especially those who regularly meet up in bars and sports pubs, are unable to recognise the incommensurability of the situated commonsensical typifications that separate their own lifeworlds from those of their local partners. These difficulties in adaptation go beyond a mere inability or reluctance to speak Thai, which became especially evident in the men’s open discussion of their distrust towards local women and their derogatory comments about “Thai culture” and “Thai women’s greed for money”. The frustration that is expressed with these derogatory comments and that characterises the everyday life of many of these men is partly explainable through this incommensurability. The men’s strong belief that their commonsensical typifications constitute human universalisms results in misunderstandings that, over time, lead to feelings of anger and disappointment.

To understand these feelings, it is essential to recognise the Western ideal of romantic love that most of these men have incorporated through their socialisation into neoliberal Western societies. In the West, romantic love is commonly perceived as something selfless, irrational and therefore “pure”. Despite the fact that most Westerners assume it to be a notion universally shared by all human beings and grounded in “human nature”, it can be traced to individualisation and privatisation processes that began in the 18th century and altered the imagination of passionate love in the West. From the idealisation of an unreachable other in medieval Minnesang and via the quasi-religious commitment of choosing a partner along financial and social parameters in Victorian

societies, the modern ideal of romantic love shifts the choice of a compatible partner to the individual, disguising the financial or social qualities of a partner as personal qualities and making romantic love seem informed entirely by disinterest (Luhmann 1992: 49–57, Illouz 1997: 26).

This belief in the universality of the Western ideal of romantic love contrasts with the men's partners' expectations of their relationships as well as local women's often negative experiences with the way Thai imaginations of romantic love manifest in rural settings. Women from the rural villages of Buriram Province frequently enter into these relationships with expectations closely linked to what Angeles and Sunanta call "daughter duties" (Angeles / Sunanta 2009: 554). These gender-specific obligations involve the (financial) care for their parents along with the active support of the local community. Relationships with Western men may grant access to economic capital, enabling them to fulfil these duties. These locally situated expectations and women's frustrations in partnerships with Thai men contradict the aforementioned notion of a selfless and "pure" love, which functions as the ostensibly "objective" reference point for Western men's evaluations of their relationships with local women.

Despite the ideal of romantic love shared by most men, my participation in their everyday conversations revealed the implicit interests connected to their relationships without explicitly being designated as such. I was frequently told that former relationships in their home countries had failed due to a lack of time to settle conflicts or maintain passion and intimacy. Most of the men I encountered in the bars belonged to a particular working-class milieu and were (or had been) employed as truck drivers, factory workers or sailors, confirming Illouz's claim that such partnership problems are typical for this Western working-class milieu; the men's lack of economic capital and sufficient leisure time makes it harder to sustain long-term relationships in their home countries (Illouz 1997: 293–306). Coming to Thailand and engaging in long-term relationships during their early retirement consequently serves as an imaginary opportunity for men from this milieu to finally engage in the kind of relationships they had previously strived for but which had frequently failed.

During my attempts to participate in the lifeworlds of these Western men, I frequently found a feeling of aversion rushing through my body, exposing my own unfamiliarity with their lifeworlds. Yet precisely these feelings and my reluctance to thickly participate in the men's everyday lives served as an important instrument to situate my vision. My inability to participate in their lifeworlds mirrors their inability to participate in and understand their partners' lifeworlds. Through the theoretical instruments provided by the moderate phenomenological approach formulated in this article as well as my attempt to master the epistemological breaks this approach requires, I was able to trace my reluctance to thickly participate to the discrepancy between my own back-

ground, having been socialised into an academic family, and the men’s specific working-class backgrounds. Reflecting upon my ambivalent feelings during my research in Buriram Province sensitised me to the epistemological breaks required in ethnographic encounters and the gaps separating the everyday lifeworlds of different social milieus in Germany.

## From lifeworlds to larger issues

As these reflections on our individual fieldwork experiences during the research project indicate, the notion of thick participation, attained through the “taking over” of the same social practices invoked by our interlocutors in order to emplace our scholarly vision, has the potential to address the larger issues of New Area Studies. Our paradigm of emplacement as an instrument of vision in turn entails the necessity of multiple epistemological breaks to understand emplaced orders of knowledge and avoid their de-contextualising translation as well as the ontological imperialism of well-intentioned, politically motivated universalisms which can easily turn into ontological cannibalism when the unproblematic translatability of social ontologies between emplaced and scientific language games is assumed. Most importantly, this ethnographic foundation of area studies research allows us to address the situatedness of knowledge from an emplaced and lifeworld perspective, thus adding an essential dimension to the burgeoning “trans” perspectives and power-critical discourse analyses that characterise the re-imagination of Area Studies under the label New Area Studies. The powerism inherent in both trends often fails to address the emplaced specificities of power and the multiple forms that power assumes in local social ontologies. At the same time, the accompanying self-affirmed moral righteousness limits our ability to powercritically question its Eurocentrism and scrutinise authors’ own interest-guided exertions of power within the academic field and beyond (Behar 2009: 107, Bourdieu 1999: 369). Adding a more nuanced understanding of how social inequality is imagined, practiced, experienced and understood in emplaced lifeworlds is a central contribution that ethnographically founded research can add to the power-critical project of New Area Studies (Baumann / Bultmann 2020).

Our reflections simultaneously reveal possible limitations of such an ethnographically founded New Area Studies paradigm. Investigating the localisation of Thailand’s possession complex in rural villages throughout Buriram Province, I faced similar limitations as the students during their research projects since my thick participation in mediumship rituals was constrained by my bodily dispositions. Having been socialised into a social ontology produced by naturalist language games and modern individualism, I simply lack the

dividual body and permeable bodily boundaries necessary to experience possession actively. Over the years, I have, nonetheless, accumulated enough thick knowledge about these rituals and non-human beings worshipped in the associated cults that villagers from my “home village” sometimes consult me after they return from a mediumship ritual to ask me either about my opinion regarding the veracity of a medium or whether I think the medium’s classification of the non-humans addressed during the ritual was correct. When I try to answer these enquiries, I rely not so much on abstract scholarly knowledge, but rather on an embodied sense of appropriateness that relates the medium’s performance to the ethnolinguistic configuration of the respective location. Because of my reputation as a specialist of the local possession complex, members of my host family frequently tease me with the nickname “Doctor Phi”. What shapes my sense of appropriateness, however, is not only my theoretical knowledge of localised cults, but also my practical knowledge of what it feels like to plant rice, fill a rice barn with sacks full of the new harvest, catch frogs in the fields and kill them to prepare *lap kop*, listen to seemingly endless Buddhist sermons in local temples while my body turns numb or just hang around in front of one of the few village stores engaging in village gossip.

Our examples demonstrate that although it is not possible to thickly participate in all social practices we seek to understand as Area Studies scholars, we are nonetheless able to develop an embodied, thick understanding of them through our practical enmeshment in emplaced lifeworlds. This development requires us being “there”, requires our co-presence in these small places and an active participation in our interlocutors’ everyday lives in order to undertake the epistemological breaks required to situate our scholarly vision in local lifeworlds. New Area Studies is not (yet) a discipline, but an interdisciplinary project in which multiple scholarly perspectives meet to understand socio-cultural phenomena located on a scalar continuum of regionality. Emphasising the “local” end of this continuum, we have attempted to outline a vision of New Area Studies that acknowledges the continuing relevance of the emplaced in a world of global entanglements. While ethnography is always an argument (Gay y Blasco / Wardle 2019: 98), ours concerns the significance of small places and how insights from “good old” ethnography can reveal the multiplicities of situated knowledges that may be rendered invisible by the power-critical gaze of transregional New Area Studies. An ethnographically founded vision of New Area Studies is ultimately not about reinventing the wheel, but about re-envisioning an Area Studies methodology that is increasingly declared superfluous by transregional approaches.

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