

The time has come for me to leave Thailand. My visa runs out in two days, so now I have to pack up and go back to Cambodia. The time here in Thailand, since I came back from Cambodia, has gone amazingly fast. Once I make the trek to Cambodia, I am not totally sure if I will stay there or come back into Thailand. I still am not clear how it is decided how much I have to pay at each border, and how much time I am admitted for. I could simply stay here by paying to extend my visa, but I found out the hard way how expensive that route is. Since I will need to leave Southeast Asia within two more weeks, it does not make sense for me to pay that extension fee. I had hoped that I could go to Burma (Myanmar) before leaving, but that border is closed due to the recent international criticism of Myanmar's military government over its failure to take effective action after a huge tornado devastated parts of that benighted country.

I have not written for awhile, for several reasons. One is that I started having many problems with my Sony laptop computer. Suddenly the keys stopped working, or did commands instead of typing the letter. I took it for repair to a computer repair shop in Maha Sarakham, but after spending 800 baht they could not fix it and told me I would need to replace the keyboard. They explained that the closest place that has a keyboard is the Sony Repair Center in Bangkok. I also needed to go to Bangkok where, I was told, I could get a prescription that I have run out of, but which is available at the biggest pharmacies in the capital city. So, with little other alternative on both these matters, I reluctantly packed up everything in the Isan village where I have been living in northeastern Thailand, said goodbye to my housemate and longtime friend Lek, and made the 8 hour bus ride back to Bangkok.

After waiting two days for the computer to be repaired, I got it back and tried to use it with the new keyboard, but it was still giving problems. The Sony technician said that the hardware was OK, but there was a software problem. It was likely caused by a computer virus, and he said I should delete everything and reinstall Windows. The most trustworthy person I have found to work on computers is a man named But who I worked with before in Kanchanaburi. Since my boyfriend Lon has been making daily phone calls to me, telling me how much he misses me and begging me to please come back to be together again before I have to leave Thailand, I decided to relocate to Kanchanaburi in western Thailand.

I had originally come to Kanchanaburi not only because I wanted to be with Lon again, but also because it represented an additional aspect of my research. The northeastern part of Thailand is the most impoverished part of the country, and many Isan people have left their village to find greater employment opportunities elsewhere. This is the case with Lon's family as well. Faced with little work available in the village, where the average pay for work in the rice fields is 100 baht (\$3.30) per day (when it is available), Lon's brother and his wife, with Lon's sister and her husband, got jobs in Kanchanaburi making 600 baht (\$20) per day. Building on the experience of Isan villagers in working with concrete, they work at a site manufacturing concrete posts. Every day the four of them begin work before dawn, turning out concrete posts. They speak highly of their employer,

and seem to enjoy the work even though it is quite dirty. They wear clothes covering head to toe, but also take showers several times a day.

After Lon's mother died, the family decided to bring their father to Kanchanaburi. Lon came along to do the cooking and childcare for his sister's two kids. There is plenty of space because they have free housing provided by the employer. It is a simple concrete block building that sits between the construction site and the shed where the employers keep their cows. The residential building is divided into large rooms, with two bathrooms at the end of the building. Lon and I live in the middle room between his brother and his wife's room, and Lon's sister and her husband's room. Before I came here, Lon stayed in another room with his father. But when I arrived I preferred this vacant room because it has a nice view of a large tree, rather than looking out on the concrete construction area. I don't like having to walk outside to the bathroom, and I don't like the fact that there is space at the bottom of the doors, meaning that little frogs that are everywhere sometimes hop into the room. After sticking my foot into my shoe one day and feeling something cold and slimy inside, I learned to shake my shoes to get the frogs out before putting them on.

I sat up my computer with a desk so that I can look out the window as I work. Every day I look out my window at the large tree and the cows. Before living here, I did not realize how kinky cows are. The cows are often licking each others' genitals and anuses. They also commonly drink each others' urine. They all seem to get along pretty well, and perhaps this behavior reinforces their closeness to each other.

Once I came back to Kanchanaburi, I brought the computer to But's computer store. He speaks pretty good English, though sometimes we talk in Thai. Once when he did not understand what I said in Thai, I asked him if I was not saying the words correctly. He said that I speak Thai with such a heavy Isan accent that sometimes he does not understand me. I took that as a compliment to my work with Isan people.

But told me to make backup disks before we did anything. To be extra safe, I made two backups. Stupidly, I did not check every part of the backups to see that everything was copied. I had copied "My Writings" but part of that was a shortcut to other files where my writings were contained. When I made the backup, then, it copied the shortcut but not the files themselves. As a result, I lost a lot of my writings. Fortunately, I also made a backup before I left the village. I hope that I did it correctly in that previous backup. So I may have to make still another trip back to the village before I leave. Since Lek is now calling me, begging me to come back to visit again before I leave, I may have to make that return journey once more.

When But reinstalled Windows, now the computer is working well, but there are other problems. I cannot access my financial and tax records, which are on Quicken. But says that the new version of Windows may not be compatible with the old version of Quicken that I have, and so I might have to purchase the new version of Quicken. Ugh. Also, I cannot do email, and lost all my past emails plus my address book in Outlook Express. After working a long time on it, But got Outlook Express working again. I can now, at

last, received emails. But I cannot send emails. It just goes on and on. This has taken a lot of my time in dealing with these computer issues.

The second reason I have not written in awhile is that I have been busy with several writing projects. Over the course of my academic career, I have found that in dealing with publishers the process can stretch to months and sometimes years. Writings I have done in the past are only now being published. So I have had to take time to work on making revisions to those past writings. My mind bounces back and forth as I work on these different topics. To make matters even more complex, on my way back to California I decided to stop off in the eastern part of the USA to do some research on American Indians.

A prominent Civil War historian, Eric Foner of Columbia University, convinced me to write a book on American Indians in the Civil War. He says there is no one better qualified than me to write such a book. As far as I know I am the only person in the United States who has published and taught courses both on American Indians and on the American Civil War (which I taught for over a decade when I was a professor at the University of Cincinnati). Consequently, I know both subjects well, and the intersections between those topics. The Civil War years were not only a tragedy for the North and the South, but also for Native Americans. Yet very few books have been written on this intersection, and those that exist cover only part of the story. Since my last book *TWO SPIRITS* deals with the Navajo during the Civil War years, it makes sense for me to tackle this book project. Professor Foner emphasized that I need to do the research now, so that the book can be completed and published by 2011. That year is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War, and there will be much interest in anything having to do with the Civil War. So, I have decided to write a book tentatively titled *THE CIVIL WAR AND THE DEVASTATION OF AMERICAN INDIAN TRIBES*.

My plan is to fly to Spain for a meeting, and to investigate how things are working in Spain with its pro-gay government and its legalization of same-sex marriage. From there I will fly to Washington DC in July, and do research in the National Archives and the Library of Congress. While in DC I also want to visit the new Museum of the American Indian which I have never seen. Next, in early August I will fly to Chicago and do research at the Newberry Library. This private library has one of the world's best collections of books and unpublished manuscripts on Native Americans. The Newberry Library is the site of the McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian, the leading Think Tank on this subject. Back in 1979 I was a Ford Foundation Fellow at the research center. It was in the outstanding collections of the Newberry Library where I finished my first book *SOUTHEASTERN INDIANS SINCE THE REMOVAL ERA*, and where I began doing research on what became my later books *INDIAN LEADERSHIP* and *THE SPIRIT AND THE FLESH*.

After finishing my research at the Newberry Library I will fly to Oklahoma where I will do research in several archives. Before it became a State in 1907, Oklahoma was called Indian Territory. That was where the United States forcibly removed many tribes from their native lands, and even today Oklahoma has more tribes located within its borders

than any other State. It was the site of intense fighting during the Civil War, which devastated many tribes.

When I complete my research in Oklahoma I will return to Los Angeles in late August to begin teaching my courses on American Indians and on Gender-Sexuality, in the fall semester at USC.

As a consequence of all this, my mind has been occupied with making the plans for this research trip and in contacting the various archives where I will do my work. My mind has been continually shifting back and forth between gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia, and American Indians in the Civil War. I feel like a juggler in a three ring circus.

### ISAN LADYBOYS

To gain some breaks from all this intense work, and from the frustrations of dealing with the computer problems, I decided to take some time to see the sights of Kanchanaburi. I did this partly because I wanted Lon to see these things as well. A year ago I had taken Lon to see some historical museums in Roi Et, in northeast Thailand, and he found them to be intensely interesting. So we planned several trips.

Of course, being Isan, Lon did not want to do these things by ourselves. All his relatives had to come along. One of the characteristics of Isan culture is the strong identification of the individual with the family. Lon and his family exemplify this. As with other Isan ladyboys I have met, the acceptance by Lon's family is extraordinarily high. Lon is highly valued and loved by all his relatives. They have also been unfailingly kind to me.

Lon's family exemplifies all the many things that I love about Isan people, and a few things that I do not like. One thing that sometimes irritates me is the way everything is shared. Isan people can be extremely tight-fisted in their limited purchase of basic things that are needed in daily life. They will open bottles with their teeth (which terrifies me that they will chip a tooth) rather than invest in fifteen baht to buy a bottle opener. They will tear open everything with their hands, or use a knife, rather than break down and buy an actual pair of scissors. I did purchase a small scissors, which the relatives are always coming to borrow. Every single time I say, and they clearly understand, that after they finish using them they need to return the scissors immediately. Isan people are always so agreeable to whatever one asks, and they nod their assent. But not once, not one time, have the scissors ever been returned without me asking again. What makes this difficult is when they come to borrow the scissors when I am not there, and Lon gives them. Later, if I want to use the scissors and cannot find them, I do not know which relative to ask. This little thing is very frustrating when it happens over and over again. If I were not leaving soon, I would start insisting that if they want to use my things they must do it only within my room, while I am watching, because otherwise it is gone. I am convinced they are not trying to steal these little items. It is just that Isan people don't think about things like this since they are always sharing everything. If you cannot find something, just ask everybody else. There is no need to get upset over all this. Mai ben lai.

This attitude permeates Lon's relations with his family. When Thai people enter inside a house, they take off their shoes at the door. When someone comes outside, they put on the shoes again. If their shoes are not there, no reason to get upset. Just slip on whatever shoes are available. Their cheap plastic slippers are pretty pathetic and worn, so it is not like they are losing much if the shoes disappear. However, I have nice new slippers. It is irritating to me to come out the door, and not be able to find my slippers. Also, I have bought new slippers for Lon. Really nice cute ones. Within a few days they disappeared. I bought a second pair, cheap ones. They lasted a week. Lon thinks the dog took the shoes, because neither pair ever appeared again.

I said, OK, if the dog is taking the new shoes (but somehow never taking the old shoes) then please take off the shoes just inside the door rather than leaving them outside the door where the dog can grab them. Lon agrees this is a good idea. Isan people are so agreeable to every suggestion. Next day, Lon's shoes are left outside the door.

Later, when Lon was out on the town with me, the old flimsy slippers he was wearing literally fell apart. Having nothing else to wear, I bought a third pair of slippers with strict instructions that these new slippers are for Lon only. The next day, when the whole family piled into the truck to make a trip, Lon was wearing ugly old orange slippers and his sister was wearing the new nice ones I had just bought for Lon. Since the family shares everything, neither Lon nor his relatives understand why I get all bent out of shape over such a simple matter as footwear. When I asked Lon to exchange shoes with his sister, he thought that highly insulting to her and refused. But at least he has been wearing the new shoes I bought since then. Now, just yesterday, my own slippers have disappeared, and Lon cannot find them anywhere. Lon says, don't worry about it, just wear whatever shoes you see outside the door. I was intending to leave these cheap slippers here when I leave, and for the short time I am here it is not worth worrying about, but it is something I find irritating.

I am so thankful that I have had training in anthropology, which stresses that people have different values and concerns. I have to analyze my irritation as a product of my own American cultural upbringing that values individual ownership of material goods. While this attitude has advantages, it also leads Americans to experience a lot of stress when their things disappear. I think the next time I come to live here, as a present I will buy new slippers for all the relatives. I will just buy all the slippers the same size that I wear, then I can be assured of having new slippers to wear all the time!

Sometimes, though, my cultural assumptions are misplaced. When I first arrived here, I saw the typical bathroom arrangement for Thai bathing. There is a spicket and a big metal barrel where they keep water for bathing. I bought a nice new shower nozzle, hooked it up, and showed them how much easier it is to turn on the nozzle and bathe while the water cascades over oneself. Later, I find the nozzle inside the barrel, refilling the water that they have continued to use for bathing. Even Lon prefers to dip the plastic dipper into the barrel of water and throw it over himself repeatedly. Seems a lot of extra work to me, but if they prefer to bathe that way then that is certainly what they should do.

Lon is totally devoted to his family and the family is totally devoted to Lon. I do not see how a family could be any more kind or accepting of Lon. Scholars who have emphasized the problems facing ladyboys in Thailand either have not seen Isan patterns of acceptance, or are distorting the picture. When I showed Lon's family photos I have taken of transgender people in other parts of Thailand, or from other countries, their only comments are "suay" [Thai word for beautiful] when they see a ladyboy who passes well as a woman, or "buffalo" [said in English, with a laugh] when they see a ladyboy who is not attractive. I have never heard any disparaging comments about transgender people in general or gays.

I met Lon three years ago, and was first interested in Lon as a research subject. Lon and Lon's entire extended family have proved to be a major focus of my research. But, as so often happens with anthropologists who do research among a people that they like and admire, Lon and I fell in love. With my approach of "always mix business and pleasure" guiding my living, one of the great joys of my life these last three years has been with Lon. What I have noticed this year, more than previously, is Lon's desire to be together with me all the time. Whenever I stay downtown at the internet shop for too long, doing email or online research, Lon always shows up asking me to come home to eat and rest. Lon is very concerned that I not overwork myself. When we were apart, Lon phoned me often, begging me to come back so we could live together.

Now, for the first time, Lon has started talking about wanting to get married to me. Since Thailand does not legally allow same-sex marriages, what Lon means is to have a wedding ceremony. When we pass a store with bridal gowns on display, Lon talks excitedly about wanting to wear such a dress at our wedding. To Lon, there are two important aspects to a wedding. First, Lon admires the beauty and elegance of the wedding. Second, Lon wants the public recognition within the family and among the villagers in general, that Lon and I are life partners. Lon highly wants this kind of ideal security in life. I have found this desire to be married to be common among Thai ladyboys. Thai society is highly oriented toward marriage and stability of relationships. Lon wants that with me.

Though I am highly complimented by Lon's devotion to me, and wanting to take care of me through my old age, I also have tried to explain that marriage is no guarantee of happiness. I have given Lon the feminist critique of marriage, but Lon does not accept that at all. But my main reluctance to the idea of marriage is knowing the kinship obligations that will fall upon me if I become a full-fledged member of the family. At first, Lon was saying that Lon and I should take full responsibility for caring for Lon's elderly father. When I asked if we could share that with Lon's other siblings, Lon agreed. Though the father really seems to want to live with us. He is a nice man, but I don't like that he smokes, and sometimes when he drinks he loses control of himself and does things he later deeply regrets. Lon's sister is highly critical of her father for his drinking, and I guess he thinks if he lived with us I would be less condemnatory of his drinking. However, I agree totally with the sister, and would not tolerate such behavior.

Lon's father also asked me to pay for a dance to memorialize his departed wife. In Isan culture, when someone dies there is a funeral. But later, it is expected that a family should throw a big party in honor of the person. It is believed that the spirit of the departed will look down on such a happy event, and will be gratified that so many people are enjoying themselves in honoring them.

I may do this when I come back next year. I have been coming to this Isan village for over five years. The people there have been incredibly welcoming and gracious to me. So I have been thinking that I should do some kind of event in return. With their value system being focused on "sanook" [enjoyment of life], Isan people get intense enjoyment over a party. So, especially given the fact that Lon's dear mother was always so kind to me, I could think of nothing more appropriate than to throw a party in her honor. She really was a wonderful person.

Actually, I am acutely aware, the things that Lon's family have asked of me involve significantly less money than what is usually expected of a groom. In Thailand, when a man wants to marry a woman he is expected to give a large payment of money to the bride's parents. This requirement is one reason why young Thai men often cannot get married until they have worked a number of years to save enough money for the wedding payment. For a well-educated beautiful young woman, the payment is quite large compared to the salary a typical Thai man can earn. And then, after marriage, the husband is expected to move into the house of the wife's family and live as part of her family.

Lon's father approached me one day and asked me to guarantee I would take care of Lon after he dies. With tears in his eyes, he reached out and took both of my hands in his. He asked me to promise, which I did. I take that promise seriously.

Much more than in the past, Lon seems committed to a long relationship with me. Lon asks me several times a day to be sure to come back as soon as I am able. Last week I was piqued at Lon for playfully squeezing my nose when I repeatedly asked him to stop. He was doing it for no other reason than to get a rise out of me. I have stressed to Lon that when I say "stop" that is exactly what he should do, right then. But this time he would not stop, and kept on to the point that I really got irritated. I said, "Well, if you are going to be like this, I'm not sure if I want to be married to you." When I said this, Lon noticeably sucked in his breath. He realized I was serious, and he started crying and apologizing. "Please, please don't say that. I want to marry you very much."

One thing that makes me uncomfortable is that Lon is now starting to talk about wanting to undergo a sex change operation. Before, I thought Lon was just a fem boy, but now I realize Lon is committed to being and living as a transgender person. Lon dresses in pants and t-shirts, but they are women's styles. Lon asked me to buy a woman's wig, which I refused, saying his hair looks better than that wig. When Lon's mother died, Lon cut his hair short as is typical for sons to do. Daughters do not cut their hair. So Lon is still considered as a male. That is why I refer to Lon as "he" rather than "she."

But more than in the past, I can see Lon moving more and more in a transgender direction. Lon got really upset at me one day when I slipped up and said he was ‘lor’ [handsome] rather than ‘suay’ [beautiful]. Lon wants to be a woman, and a wife to me. I have stressed the medical dangers of surgery, and the fact that I prefer a male body. From a research perspective, it is interesting to see this process of transgender identity formation in action, but from a personal perspective I like Lon just the way he is. I realize, however, that Lon has to make those decisions for him/her self.

In my final weeks here, and also as a break from all the writing I have been doing and the stress of dealing with the computer problems, I decided to take Lon on a number of trips in Kanchanaburi province. First, we went to Safari Park, a wild animal sanctuary. I was pleased that the animals were given spacious amounts of land, and herd animals were kept in groups rather than just as isolated individuals. We both particularly enjoyed the giraffes, who stuck their heads inside the tour bus looking for fresh fruit which we fed to them. Lon was fascinated by the animals, I think most especially the gibbons. Lon observed that their hands and feet were very similar to humans, which I used as an opportunity to talk about evolution and to give some geography lessons, showing on a world map where each animal lives. Lon was more interested in picking many leaves off of trees to feed to the animals, who gratefully accepted the greenery to eat. But I am pleased that I have taught Lon how to read a street map, and to identify the continents on a world map.

We also visited some beautiful Buddhist temples, the World War II railway museum, and several nice parks along the riverside. As a final family outing, we all went to Erawan Waterfalls. I had been there a year ago, but only managed to hike up to the middle of seven waterfalls. Each was so beautiful I wanted to come back and see all seven. With my bad knee I knew I had to take it slow, but I really wanted to do this. We hiked and hiked, and finally managed to get to each of them. I got so many incredible shots.

Finally, Lon had never been on a train before, so we took a train trip to see Mueng Singh about an hour west of the city. Lon thoroughly enjoyed the train ride, though as we rode along my enjoyment was tempered by my knowledge of history. This rail route was carved into the mountainsides by the Japanese military, using Allied prisoners of war during World War II. Using not much more than picks and shovels, the prisoners were tortured and terribly mistreated by Japanese engineers who were rushing to build this rail line across Thailand to facilitate Japan’s conquest of Burma. The Japanese wanted Burma as a base to invade British India, a plan that was cut short by Japan’s defeat in 1945. Until then, they pushed the prisoners relentlessly to build the railroad. As we rode over the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai which was part of this Japanese project, I thought about my father who had been captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge, and was grateful that he did not experience this kind of oppression.

#### THE KHMER EMPIRE IN THAILAND

After an hour on the train we reached the stop for the archeological site of Mueang Sing. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century this was a large urban center of the Khmer Empire. Khmer King Jayavarman VII, who built the grand four-faced gates of Angkor Wat, and the incredible



palaces of Angkor Thom, also embarked on a building program throughout the empire. Mueang Sing was the westernmost city of the empire. It was built not only as a religious and political center, but also as a frontier fort.

This was obvious upon approaching the ancient city. It was laid out next to a river with a high cliff, that would be easily defended from attack. On the other three sides, deep moats were constructed, alternated with high stone walls. If one section was penetrated by an enemy, other defenses faced them. This multiple defense was directed against the Burmese, traditional enemy of the Khmer. Over the centuries Burmese forces attacked the Khmer Empire and, after its demise, Thailand, across the mountains that still today mark the boundary between Thailand and Myanmar.

When we reached the main temples inside the city, I was immediately struck by the square water basins in the ceremonial centers. They are exactly the same style as I saw at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. These were the base for the sacred penis symbols, over which water was poured. The blessed water ran into a small trough leading from the basin. Each pilgrim coming to the temple would bend down low to receive the spiritually powerful water over their head. None of the water basins had one of the phallic symbols on top of it, either because such stones had been carried away over the years, or because some prudish official in the Thai Culture Ministry had made a decision not to display these obvious phallic symbols. I thought about what the subsequent history of Southeast Asia would have been if Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam had remained as part of the Khmer Empire? Would a strong unified empire have been able to fend off the French imperialists who established French Indochina in the 1860s? If all of Southeast Asia had been able to remain independent, as Thailand in fact was able to do, would tragedies like the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge have been able to be avoided? That is an unanswerable question, but the vast constructions of Mueang Sing led me to think this ancient city could have continued to be a political and religious center. I thought about how worship of the Sacred Penis might be continuing, even up to the present.

With that thought in mind, today I began to pack my things for the journey from western Thailand. Lon does not understand why I cannot take him to America with me. I try to explain that if Lon were female I could do so if we were married, but because we are both male I cannot. Since I had earlier told Lon about the recent historic California Supreme Court decision that legalized same-sex marriages in California, Lon thought that now we can get married and Lon can come to America with me. I tell Lon that despite the acceptance of same-sex marriages in California and Massachusetts, we still could not get through U.S. Customs. When Lon asks why, I explain that the United States government passed a law called the Defense of Marriage Act, saying that the government will only recognize marriages between a man and a woman. Lon and I have to be apart because of homophobia. When I try to explain that, Lon does not even understand the concept.

Lon is left only with my promises that I will return next year. Lon has asked me a thousand times to come back as soon as possible. I feel so lucky to have such a devoted person waiting for me, but sad that the ideal world for a relationship like ours does not yet exist. I wonder if I will live long enough to see the end of this kind of discrimination.