

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Karma Masters: The Ethical Wound, Hauntological Choreography, and Complex Personhood in Thailand

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Stonington Karma Masters

ABSTRACT In contexts of severe illness in Northern Thailand, many conceive of themselves as combinations of beings assembled through the binding ethical force of karma. Scholars working in many world areas have built frameworks for understanding “complex” (distributed, partible, fluid, transient) personhood. In this article, I bring these frameworks into conversation with ethical theory to ask how one can make sense of ethical action when one is always already partly the other. For many in Northern Thailand, the answer is an *ethical and hauntological choreography*; rather than relying only on rational frameworks for right action or cultivating individual ethical dispositions, people seek to assemble optimal elements—other people, beings that have become components of themselves, material objects infused with ethical force—into scenes where the residual karmic “stickiness” of all can be unmade. This unmaking is achieved through a form of forgiveness and kindness that moves beyond individual agency. [*personhood, ethics, ontology, haunting, Buddhism, Thailand*]

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RESUMEN En contextos de enfermedades severas en el Norte de Tailandia, muchas se conciben así mismas como combinaciones de seres ensamblados a través de la fuerza ética unificadora del karma. Investigadores trabajando en muchas áreas del mundo han construido marcos para entender la compleja (distribuida, partible, fluida, transitoria) condición de persona. En este artículo, introduzco estos marcos en conversación con la teoría ética para preguntar cómo puede uno entender la acción ética cuando uno es siempre ya parcialmente el otro. Para muchos en el Norte de Tailandia, la respuesta es una *coreografía hauntológica y ética*; más que depender solamente de marcos racionales para la acción correcta o cultivar las disposiciones éticas individuales, las personas buscan ensamblar elementos óptimos—otras personas, seres que han llegado a ser componentes de sí mismos, objetos materiales infundidos con fuerza ética— en escenas donde la “pegajosidad” kármica residual de todos puede ser deshecha. Este deshacer es logrado a través de una forma de perdón y bondad que se mueve más allá de la agencia individual. [*condición de persona, ética, ontología, atormentar, Budismo, Tailandia*]

INTRODUCTION

During fieldwork on end-of-life care in Northern Thailand in 2009, I met Mahu, an older man with locally invasive rectal cancer. The tumor was causing a gnawing pain in his abdomen, relieved only in brief bouts when he fell asleep each night. But in spite of this pain, he was jovial and fun-loving. When I asked how he managed this, he explained:

It is because my disease is a karma master [*čhao kam nāi wēn*].¹ My whole life, I was a buffalo farmer. I leashed buffaloes with rings through their noses. Then, last week, when I went into the hospital, I had an oxygen tube, and they put it in my nose just like a yoke ring. When they put it in, it made me sneeze and cough like the buffaloes used to sneeze and cough. And when they took it out, there was still a tube through my nose into my stomach [a nasogastric tube], and when I turned my head, it pulled on me like I pulled on buffaloes. Also, I used to ride the buffaloes. And now, my legs are bowed outward.

We were sitting at a small cement table outside his home, and he stood up from the table to show that his knees were pointed out to the sides, his legs curved like closed parentheses, as though he were permanently astride a buffalo. “Because of this, my knees and hips hurt,” he said. “The buffalo and I stuck together [*tit kan*]. The buffalo is my karma master [*čhao kam nāi wēn*], first in my legs, and then in my abdomen.”

The buffalo had somehow infused or imprinted Mahu’s body to achieve vengeance. Mahu saw this as a gift, not a punishment. “It is my opportunity to resolve old karma,” he explained, and in fact it might be his final opportunity, given that his illness was severe, and he did not know how it would end. Despite his pain, he was always smiling and enjoying life, feeling blessed for a chance to right old wrongs.

Later in my fieldwork, I met a man named Chonawat, whose left arm was paralyzed and extremely painful. He had been riding his motorcycle at night, and a dog had run out of the woods, causing him to swerve, crash, and land on his left shoulder, tearing the nerves of his neck, leading to

¹ All transliterations of Thai language in this article follow the American Library Association-Library of Congress romanization system.

both paralysis and pain. Like Mahu, Chonawat explained that his injury was due to a *čhao kam nāi wēn*. As a young man, he had mistreated dogs for sport. They returned the night of his motorcycle crash to exact revenge, to “resolve karma” (*wēn kam*). And the dogs continued to plague him, merging with his body. “Now the dog is in my arm,” he described. “Sometimes it comes to me in my dreams and chews on my arm from the outside. But mostly it chews from the inside, like my arm is part dog.”

Between 2007 and 2015, I spent three years conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Thailand, first on end-of-life care, and then on pain management (Stonington 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). Jointly trained as an internal-medicine physician and anthropologist, I recruited critically ill patients in hospitals in the city of Chiang Mai and then followed them through their daily lives and to their homes in the mountainous countryside. During my fieldwork, many people that I encountered explained that their severe illness was a “karma master” (*čhao kam nāi wēn*), a being from the past that had come forward into the present to work out an old grievance for past action (*kam*). The mechanism for working out grievances was often material. Some, like Mahu and Chonawat, explained themselves as interacting with their *čhao kam nāi wēn* through objects like nasal cannulas and tumors and motorcycles. Others, like Chonawat, described their *čhao kam nāi wēn* as having become part of themselves in some way. Their stories introduced me to an ethical world very different from those I had encountered in both Western ethical philosophy and academic accounts of Buddhism. Specifically, they pointed to a kind of ethics built out of complex and nonbounded personhood, involving combinations of beings (like people and buffaloes) and things (like nasogastric tubes). It is this ethics that I explore in this article.

The concept of “complex” personhood has generated an array of tools for making sense of lifeworlds like Mahu’s and Chonawat’s. Some of these concepts have come from ethnographies of situations in which certain people are deemed by those around them to be “partial” persons, mostly in phases of the life course—such as in utero (LaFleur 1992), infancy (Gottlieb 2004; Schepers-Hughes 1992), death (Hertz 1907), disability (Gammeltoft 2008)—or in states created by medical

technologies, such as vegetative states (Kaufman 2003) or brain death (Lock 2001). Another powerful set of concepts for understanding complex personhood, and more appropriate for Mahu's and Chonawat's stories, has emerged in studies of "dividual" or "partible" personhood. These terms initially emerged from ethnographies of South Asia, in which persons were often considered temporary composites in ongoing flows of food and bodily fluids rather than bounded and consistent individuals (Marriott and Inden 1977). The concept was later taken up and expanded by scholars of Melanesia, who laid out a broad array of processes that produce these composite persons (Strathern 1988). In parts of Melanesia, for example, persons are "composed of gendered substances, such as father's bone and mother's blood, plus lifetimes of donations of embodied and non-substantial labor by other kin and relatives such as food, magical knowledge, ceremonial wealth, land, and so on" (Mosko 2010, 218). This means that persons are always "multi-authored entities" (Finlay 2018), both "distributed" (connected to and originating in other beings [Gell 1998]) and "partible" (consisting of multiple components that can, at times, be treated as independent, and at other times as part of a unified whole [Mosko 2010, 2015; Vilaça 2015]). This set of conceptual tools is helpful for understanding Mahu's and Chonawat's descriptions of their severe illnesses: Mahu's tumor, part of his body, consisted partly of vengeful buffalo nature, and Chonawat was clear that his arm was "part dog."

For Mahu and Chonawat, dividual personhood had a mechanism to it: a logic of *karma*, of the natural consequences of right and wrong action. In this article, I use Mahu's and Chonawat's experiences to bring the concept of dividual personhood into conversation with ethics. *How can one make sense of ethical action when one is always already partly the other?*

Interestingly, conceptual tools from studies of complex personhood have not yet fully penetrated the realm of ethical theory. Michael Lambek (2013), in a synthetic piece culminating many of his arguments for ethics as a universal aspect of human societies, poses the question of whether ethics requires a concept of a consistent self. He ultimately concludes that most cultures contain (but

variably weight) two ideal-type conceptions of the self. The first, particularly dominant in the post-Enlightenment West, is of the self as “unique, self-continuous, bounded, forensic and ‘possessive’” (846), allowing one to claim that someone “is or is not” an ethical person. This echoes many schools of Western ethical theory, and is particularly true of deontology and virtue ethics (Aristotle 2004; Kant 1999). Even utilitarianism, focused on maximizing collective good, still largely assumes individual personhood and action (Mill and Bentham 1987). Lambek contrasts this to a second ideal type: the self as discontinuous, allowing persons to “move through a relatively fixed set of distinct, socially recognized positions that [they] successively come to inhabit, or through which they may alternate” (846), which he calls “personnages.” Although this is a kind of complex personhood, key to his formulation is that one inhabits a cleanly demarcated role at a given time, thus doubling down on discrete personhood, if not individuality. Lambek presents spirit possession as a paradigmatic example of this, arguing that it is the exception that proves the rule of individual persons, since “the host and the spirit are clearly distinguished from one another” (839), and so an individual simply alternates between discrete persons, allowing ethical action and consequence to be attributed cleanly to each of them.

Notably, this approach has its reverberations in Buddhist ethics as well. Two core tenets of doctrinal Buddhism are nonself (Thai: *anattā*), the idea that the self assembles continuously out of conditions, and impermanence (Thai *anicchang*), the closely related idea that the self is constantly changing (Cassaniti 2015; Klima 2002; McMahan and Braun 2017). But despite these concepts, most theorists and ethnographers of Buddhism have noted that Buddhist ethics is usually predicated on a *continuity* (if not permanence) of the self, such that one may be held accountable for past actions, as demonstrated by the canonical stories of the many lives of the Buddha through successive animal incarnations, during which acts of selflessness and generosity accumulated over time into an ideally positioned mind that could attain ultimate wisdom (Cozort and Shields 2018; Harvey 2000; Keown 1992).

Key to understanding Mahu's and Chonawat's severe illnesses, however, and to how they might help us rethink some assumptions in the anthropology of ethics, is the fact that ethical action for them took place in a world where their personhood was not this cleanly discrete. Rather than possessing selves that were simply transient through time, they explained visions of their own personhood as partible (with different parts of themselves having different ethical valences) and distributed (where some of their parts consisted of other beings). This is not to say that Mahu and Chonawat always described themselves as partible and distributed. One might say that they followed Marilyn Strathern's emphasis in her outline of the concept of dividual personhood in Melanesia that "social life consists in a constant movement . . . from a unity (manifested collectively or singly) to that unity split or paired" (Strathern 1988, 13). In line with this, I rarely heard interlocutors in Northern Thailand discuss "karma masters" (*chao kam nāi wēn*) or the partible nature of themselves outside of the context of severe illness. There was some way in which severe bodily suffering triggered a model or manifestation of partible personhood.

The central question of this article is how one can make sense of ethical action in a lifeworld of dividual personhood. Mahu and Chonawat both provided answers to this question. For them, there was a clear mechanism for the connection between ethical action and self: ethics themselves are "sticky" (*yut tit*), a kind of contagion that moves between beings, bodies, and objects, binding them through time. Their worlds were built in part on this version of karma, of cause and effect, in which ethical responsibility was complex, diffuse, and fragmentary, but nonetheless dramatically determined the course of their lives. Their understanding of ethics existed not in spite of but as deeply dependent on a model of dividual personhood when it came to explaining severe bodily suffering.

For Mahu and Chonawat, this form of personhood was not simply a fact but something to be navigated and worked. As we will see below, Mahu's and Chonawat's strategies centered on a kind of *ethical choreography*, strategizing in multiple ways to assemble the right elements into their own personhood, including characters that might fuse with and possibly co-constitute their own body and

spirit. They did this either by improving relationships with existing components of themselves, such as befriending their karma masters, or by behaving well, bringing their selves into relationship with more-benevolent ethical elements.

This line of inquiry has implications beyond the confines of critical illness in Northern Thailand. If care for others depends, in part, on an understanding of who oneself and the other are, then expanding the conceptual apparatus of ethics to make sense of dividual personhood may make it easier, as scholars like Lisa Stevenson (2014) might suggest, to “imagine care” in contexts outside of narrow Enlightenment individualism. In the sections below, I first draw on ethnographic material to explain the forms of personhood and ethics characterizing the lifeworlds of those like Mahu and Chonawat who are experiencing critical illness in Northern Thailand. I then expand to what consequences this might have for a formulation of ethics that is unbounded by individualism.

KARMA MASTERS

I first spoke at length with Chonawat in the summer of 2015, at his cluttered house in a suburban subdivision outside of Chiang Mai, as part of my fieldwork on pain management (Stonington 2015). He served me water using only his right hand because his left arm hung lifeless at his side. The limp arm ached (*tīr tīr*), and at times sparks traveled down it (*plāp plāp*), or it felt like *rāo*, the cracks that form in glass before it breaks.

I asked him about the accident that had led to his paralysis, and he tellingly started his story in the much more distant past than the night of the accident. As a teenager, Chonawat had been handsome and wild and became the leader of a group of brash boys. He felt invincible and that he could achieve great things through inborn talent and charm. The girls of his village, just outside of Chiang Mai, showered him with attention. But mostly he spent time with his gang, whose members challenged one another each evening to games of daring. One day, for sport, Chonawat took a street

dog onto his motorcycle, ignoring its whines and struggles, and sped it in circles around the neighborhood, making his friends collapse with laughter. The trick became a favorite until one evening a dog accidentally slipped off of his motorcycle while banking a sharp turn. The dog skidded along the pavement and collapsed into a heap, its front leg clearly broken, its fur matted with blood. The image of the bloodied dog stayed with Chonawat after that, and he wondered from time to time about it, especially because it disappeared from the neighborhood shortly thereafter.

Years later, in his mid-twenties, Chonawat's wild energy settled down. He began working fields, either the family orchards or for hire for other villagers. Then, on the night of his fateful accident, he was riding his motorcycle through the mountains when a thick fog settled on his path, obscuring his view of the forest on either side of the road. Suddenly, a dog bolted out of the woods, no more than a dark shadow, a line of movement coming toward his front tire. He swerved, but not in time, and felt the thump of the dog's body on his leg. Then his tire hooked over the edge of the road, pulling the motorcycle down under him, throwing him hard onto his left shoulder. He skidded along the pavement, the drag of his body prying his head from his arm, tearing the skin and flesh of his neck. He slid from the road onto dirt and then into the woods, where he came to rest against a tree. Pain seared through his mangled neck, and he noticed that he could not move his hand. He lay in pain all night, surrounded by the sounds of the forest, with the eerie barking of dogs in the distance. He thought of the parallel between his current state, slumped on the side of the road with a broken limb, and the state of the dog that he had injured years ago.

It was a year after the accident when I met Chonawat at his home, where he now lived with his mother. He had begun to compensate for his disability to some degree but had been without work and thus dependent on others. After relaying the events of his accident, he paused and switched to a different kind of explanation: "The dog," he said,

is a karma master [*chao kam nāi wēn*]. I hurt the dog so much that time when I carried it on my motorcycle. And so the dog came back to punish me, to resolve the

karma [*wēn kam*]. Now the dog is in my arm. Sometimes it comes to me in my dreams and chews on my arm from the outside. But mostly it chews from the inside, like my arm *is* part dog.

The word *chao kam nāi wēn*, which I have translated thus far as “karma master,” bears some explanation. *Kam* is karma, the concept that all (moral) actions have (moral) consequences. *Wēn* means both “duty” and “fate,” and when combined with the word *kam*, implies that one is yoked by duty to one’s past actions. *Chao nāi* means “authority” or “master,” something that reigns over or owns something (one might use it to refer to a boss or landlord). Lumped together, the compound word described Chonawat’s arm as a living entity from the past that had come forward into the present to work out an old grievance, a taskmaster of ethical consequence.

Chonawat took great consolation from the presence of dog in his arm. Although the dog was continually harming him, it was a being to which he was beholden, and it gave him an opportunity to make amends for his past sins. When his arm hurt particularly badly, he would pause in his day and send loving-kindness (*mēttā*) to his dog/arm to ask its forgiveness and request that it be gentler in its treatment of him. He also often made merit (*tham bun*) at the temple, some of it on behalf of the dog.

I present these details of Chonawat’s accident as a way to understand the connection between his nonbounded understanding of personhood and his clarity about the path forward for right action. In his work on gift exchange with the dead in Thailand, Alan Klima (2002) concluded that Buddhist ethical theory relies on a concept of personhood different from Western ethics, largely due to the transience of the self: “Generosity brings a return for someone else, a stranger, some other person in the future (even in the next moment), to whom you might habitually refer as ‘yourself’” (272). Thus, in Buddhist lifeworlds, “what one is ultimately left with is the acts themselves, and this is something of profound significance for the formation of certain forms of Buddhist ethics, which are, at least among some, strangely devoid of personhood” (274).

This was even more profoundly true for Chonawat, whose personhood was not only transient through time but also composed of multiple beings. Chonawat's abused dog had now become *part* of his arm, and the mechanism that had caused this fusion was action in the past that had generated a force that rippled through time and space to manifest many years later. It was difficult to sort out who was who in this configuration. Chonawat remembered harming a dog, which then returned later in dog form, though certainly not the same dog, and certainly not exclusively bound by the consequences of that single interaction so long ago. This dog then stuck around as a gnawing pain in his arm and as a figure haunting his dreams. Could one draw a boundary between Chonawat and dog? What was Chonawat's arm: did it consist of Chonawat or of dog? And which Chonawat and which dog? And what about the dreams? Were they simply Chonawat dreaming about a dog, or are we to take seriously the claim that the dog was there inside him?

The concept of cause and effect woven through Chonawat's story is very complex. In some ways, Chonawat's explanation was incredibly concrete: he was unequivocal that the dog of his childhood had become a *chao kam nāi wēn* and that this was the result of a specific event. But the mechanism of how a dog from long ago had come to be a dog on a foggy mountain road, or some dogness in his arm, was less clear.

The temporal ambiguity in Chonawat's ethical world has been noted as a component of ethical life in many places. Eric Mueggler (2001), in the *Age of Wild Ghosts*, details a case in his ethnography of a community in Southwest China in which a woman's womb becomes inhabited by an animal's soul that is suggested to double as the soul of an infant. This vision of social life requires both an "oppositional practice of time and an alternative mode of history" (9), bringing beings together from different timelines through parallel but not exactly causal mechanisms. Roz Morris (2000, 61) similarly argues that haunting in Thailand "testifies to the folding and possible multiplicity of time" by defying any attempt to trace linear continuity between the selves of discrete beings.

Another ambiguity in Chonawat's world lies in the ontological forms involved: material and immaterial, entity and non-entity, all fluidly transforming into one another. Jean Langford (2013, 213), in a study of the work of mourning and interaction with the dead among Southeast Asian emigrants in Minnesota, argues that for the bereaved, spirits are conceptualized "not only as versions, but as temporary, if recurring coalescences, shifting assemblages similar to the Buddhist self." Chonawat's current self was a partible and distributed combination of dog and not-dog, calling to mind Donna Haraway's (1996) conceptualization of "cyborgs," or the many places where scholars have begun to treat animals or supernatural beings with the "flat ontology" of their informants (Kohn 2013; Luhrmann 2012; Scherz 2017).

Notably, Chonawat was not concerned by these ambiguities, nor by mechanics of this process. Perhaps this was because of "the evidence of the senses" (Keane 2008), because Chonawat could feel the dog in his arm in the form of a gnawing pain. This may also explain why theories of partible personhood appeared for Chonawat in a moment of severe illness. Regardless, one could say that Chonawat's model of ethics in the face of partible personhood did not require him to have a theory of "transduction" between ontologic forms (Keane 2013). In fact, it may have been precisely the uncertainty of mechanism that allowed the fact of haunting to have its fullest power. Lisa Stevenson (2014) opens her book *Life beside Itself* with a conversation with a young man in the Canadian arctic who was unsure whether a raven who lived behind his house was his dead uncle returned in a new form. This young man did not think it was important to resolve this question, but instead life simply persisted "beside itself," with the raven there to insist that existence was always unresolvably uncertain. Stevenson's interlocutor echoes Derrida's (2006) method of "hauntology" (Blanco and Peeren 2013; Davis 2005; Gordon 2008), an approach to investigation that examines how ideas or things appear at different times and in different places in slightly different form, leaving a true nature that is ultimately empty or ambiguous, in some ways similar to the Buddhist notion of self (Klima 2002; Morris 2000). Derrida's concept was a response to the declared "death of communism" in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union. Playing on Marx's opening to the *Communist*

Manifesto, “a specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism” (Marx 1848), Derrida wondered how something that had been a haunting force long before it took on a material reality could ever really be “dead,” but might instead arise over and again in a slightly different form in different contexts. His method is useful for tracing objects with a “deferred non-origin” (Buse and Stott 1999), an ever-changing nature and an inherent slipperiness and emptiness.

Although Chonawat was uncertain about the mechanisms that made his arm part dog, or about the true nature of the dog in his arm, he was unequivocal about one fact: the driving force behind it was ethics. He was clear both about his wrong action in the past and about right action moving forward: the forgiveness that needed to be cultivated, albeit toward the ambiguously combined dog-not-dog of himself. How could he be so clear on right action toward another when it was unclear who that other was, and whether that other might be part of himself, or partially someone who had harmed him or had been harmed by him before, albeit in a different form?

THE ETHICAL WOUND

Out of Mahu’s and Chonawat’s stories, a theory of ethical action related to dividual personhood begins to emerge. Their wounds (tumors, mangled arms) were beings that were partly self and partly other. They were results of actions that lie in the realm of ethics, in that their most important features were whether they were right or wrong, good or bad. One might thus call them *ethical wounds*, or perhaps (*un*)*ethical wounds*, given the acts that generated them. Both Mahu and Chonawat were clear that to heal an ethical wound, one must relate to it as both self and other. For them, this relationship consisted of forgiveness, loving-kindness, and compassion.

Another participant in my research explained this in greater depth for me. That, a dentist at a private office in the suburbs outside of Bangkok, was my roommate and activity partner at a workshop entitled “Facing Death Peacefully,” which I attended as part of fieldwork on end-of-life

care in 2010. That had struggled with “mild schizophrenia” all of his life. He initially presented this to me in purely biomedical language, talking about hallucinations as “mild positive symptoms alleviated by low-dose antipsychotics.” But later, he explained that the disturbing thoughts he experienced were a *čhao kam nāi wēn* from having killed a man in a past life. The man had come back to punish him for his crime. That and I had developed an intellectual rapport from our work in the training, and I was able to ask him a question that struck at the heart of my confusion about *čhao kam nāi wēn*: “Are the thoughts in your heart-mind [*čhit čhai*]² your thoughts or his?”

He considered for a moment, then answered,

They are sort of my thoughts, but if you look at it deeply, my heart-mind [*čhit čhai*] is not really my own, anyway. That man, and killing him, are part of my mind [*čhit*] now. You know—nonself [*`anattā*], impermanence [*`anitčhang*]²—that sort of thing. It doesn't really matter, because now I just need to act well and forgive myself *and* the ideas in my head, regardless of whose ideas they are.

I translate this monologue into English using the subjects “I” and “mine,” but That actually used the common Thai inflection of referring to himself as “we” (*rao*) and also dropped subjects before verbs,

² Note that although the heart-mind is considered a single entity, there is differentiating language used to refer to its thinking functions (*čhit*) and feeling functions (*čhai*). Often these two are elided together into a single term, either just *čhai* alone or a combined term *čhit čhai*. People often talk about concentration (*samāthi*), mindfulness (*sati*) and insight (*wipasanā*) meditation techniques as training the *čhit*, and loving-kindness (*mēttā*) meditations as training the *čhai*, but the terms were often elided or switched and it would be a mistake to separate them too cleanly, certainly nowhere near as cleanly as Western notions of the distinction between thinking and feeling.

leaving his monologue fully open to not differentiating between himself and this other possible self-other in his mind. He added later that the main function of forgiveness was to counteract the “stickiness” (*tit*) that had brought the two of them into a single being, echoing Mahu’s claim that the buffaloes were now “stuck” (*tit*) to him. Thot went on to explain that he was not a particularly religious person but that it was impossible to make sense of what was happening in his own mind without confronting the fact that his self was just as impermanent as all other things in the world. That self was also an illusion—thoughts were just things happening in the space of his mind. And more importantly, those thoughts were a combination built out of parts with different origins, one of which was components of the mind of a man who died by murder in another lifetime. The mechanism of this merger was ethical action itself—Thot’s prior murder had made the man “stick” to him, and now his own mind was a combination of elements.

Thot’s response referenced principles from doctrinal Buddhism and in many ways reflected a more middle-class perspective compared with Mahu and Chonawat. As Pattana Kitiarsa (2012) has elucidated, working-class lay Buddhism often focuses on actions in this proximate life and on the body as the location of karmic effects, while middle-class lay Buddhism often focuses on more distal concerns, such as past lives or the possibility of a future Enlightenment, and locates the mechanisms of karma in the mind. Regardless, the partible nature of Thot’s mind, just as for Chonawat, did not preclude ethical action. This is part of what Alan Klima (2002) meant by his observation that in an ethical theory without bounded personhood, “what one is ultimately left with is the acts themselves.” In fact, Thot knew exactly what to do. He, meaning all of the components of his multiple self, needed to love and forgive and ask for forgiveness from one another—both his “own” thoughts and those of the man he had killed in a past life. He was not concerned with sorting out whose thoughts were whose, only that his mind (with all of its component parts) be filled only with the opposite kind of action from his prior act of murder: forgiveness, a form of kindness and humility. Complex personhood aside, right action was clear.

OBJECTS IN THE SELF

Thot, whose thoughts were partible, clearly considered himself to be composed of multiple beings. For Chonawat, it was the same, given that he was sure that his arm was part dog. But there was a potentially important difference between them: the location of the self. Perhaps Chonawat's arm was not actually part of his self, but simply part of his body. Perhaps the body was just an object, and subjecthood was tucked neatly away somewhere in the mind. Perhaps, in fact, even the thoughts in Thot's mind, both "his" and those of the murdered *ĉhao kam nāi wēn*, were also simply objects. This model of personhood is not unfamiliar in Buddhism, where canonical renderings of the nature of mind generate great debate, some of which argue that all things are objects exterior to a pure form of observing awareness that exists in the mind even prior to sensory input (Cassaniti 2015; Cook 2010; Heim 2013; Klima 2002; McMahan and Braun 2017).

But just as with Chonawat, this potential materiality or immateriality of beings, and the ultimate location of the self, did not seem to matter to most that I interviewed. In fact, for many of them, material objects were just as included in the cycle of karmic "stickiness" as were thoughts (*khwāmkhī*) and emotions (*ārom*). In Mahu's world, the nasal cannula that pulled on his nose had a kind of ethical agency, infused with buffalo nature, able to deliver ethical consequences of a past action. Chonawat spoke about the motorcycle on the night of his accident in a similar way: Did it participate in his injury, or was the dog the only actor on the scene? He wasn't sure, but it was an open question. But beyond this potential agency of objects, many spoke of them as able to become parts in their dividual selves and thus become important components of their ethical actions.

In prior work, I have detailed ethical frameworks governing the choreography of the good death in Northern Thailand (Stonington 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). Among these frameworks is a "debt of life" that children owe their elders for having been given a body at birth (Stonington 2012, 2013).

This framework was encapsulated by the family of the first patient that I met in the intensive care unit (ICU), an older man dying of multiple organ failure. Despite having been delivered a grim prognosis, the family had no intention of ending treatment. They explained:

Our father gave us flesh [*nāa*], blood [*lūat*] and breath [*lom hāiḥai*]. He gave us existence [*kamnāēt*], and now we have a debt of life [*pen nī chīwit*]. We have to pay down this debt [*chai nī*]. . . . Even if father were a dog, a swine, a buffalo, even if he beat us or abandoned us. Life is a debt and we have to pay it back.

I asked how the ICU was involved in paying this debt, and they explained that the technologies of the ICU were the most powerful way to transfer the components of a living body: his feeding tube a gift of flesh, his dialysis and blood transfusions a gift of blood, and his respirator a gift of breath. I pulled out a piece of paper and asked them to list other treatments, making a small table; they helped categorize health-care interventions into the scheme by nodding and saying, “yes, something like that” (*arai bāep nan*), smiling kindly at my doctor-like need to make a table (Table 1).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Table 1. Technologies for Paying One Family’s Debt of Life.

Life Component	Ways to Pay Debt
Flesh	Nasogastric tube-feeding, surgery
Blood	Dialysis, blood draws, IV medications, pulse oximeter
Breath	Endotracheal tube, mechanical respirator, inhaled medications

Others that I worked with later often added the category “warmth” (*khwām `op`un*), making four categories of body that correspond to the elements of matter: earth (flesh), water (blood), air (breath), and fire (warmth). I would later learn that these four elements make up the body (*kāi*), which contacts with the spirit (*winyān*). At the interface of body and spirit, a constantly changing self arises.

But the Northern Thai constitution of the self was often explained to be even more complex than this. Many explained that the body is composed of various organs, each animated by a *khwan*—a spirit with its own background of cause and effect, its own ethical history. A rice field is vibrant and productive because it is infused with the *khwan khāo*, the animating spirit of rice, and the vitality is affected by the moral history of this spirit: it can be either cultivated with love and respect or damaged through immoral acts. It is possible for a field to accrue an ethical residue, its own kind of *čhao kam nāi wēn*, that determines how well it grows or whether or not it is a safe or dangerous place to work. Likewise, when a person is born, many things assemble to bring their body into existence: the blood of mother and father (themselves so deeply moral objects that they are gifts that accrue massive debt to their recipients) and a host of *khwan* that animate each of the organs of the body. And each of these *khwan* carries its own karmic background, explaining some of the luck of how well one’s organs function and how and when they fail. Likewise, when a person dies, the many *khwan* that animated their body disperse into other things, carrying onward the ethical valence that they accrued in this lifetime. All of these *khwan* are separate from a person’s consciousness (*winyān*), the thinking and acting part of the self. This, too, accrues residues of ethical life and then after death moves onward to inhabit another body (with a new and unique set of *khwan* in its organs).

And so all people are always already partible, and their parts are composed of both material and immaterial elements. And each of those elements is distributed into the past and the future by its own history of ethical forces. These are also always changing, always unstable. Personhood consists of mergers and combinations of metaphysical objects (spirits), bodily physical objects (organs), and nonbodily physical objects (in the case of this older man, the technologies of the ICU) that can affect

both one's organs and the metaphysics of their ethical fate. Paying the debt of life in the ICU is a form of exchange capable of altering individual ethical personhood.

Although it is optimal to pay the debt of life in the ICU, hospitals are also haunted by ghosts (*phī*)—spirits (*winyān*) produced by bad deaths, often with unresolved issues with the living or their former life that make them “sticky” (*yut tit*) to the living. Dying in the hospital would be dangerous because one's self might merge with these metaphysically polluted parts of others. The process of paying the debt of life thus does not continue indefinitely; it is limited by the fear of dying in the hospital. Many dying elders are terrified that they will get worse suddenly and not be able to get out of the hospital before dying.

The home, in contrast, is an optimal place to die: full of positive moral residue generated through domestic activity (ritual, child-rearing, caregiving) that becomes part of an elder's self upon rebirth. One woman, Fawng, whom I spent a lot of time with at home at the end of her life, exemplified this well. I met Fawng at the hospital, where she underwent the initial imaging that diagnosed her cancer. During that time, she received a blood transfusion, which her family explained was a great object for paying back the debt of life. Fawng then went home to her family's house in the mountains and was placed on a mattress in the living room. Her bed was surrounded by bags containing her favorite possessions: clothes, a pile of photographs, an old doll from childhood. In her hand was a wad of bills. I asked Fawng's granddaughter if these objects were to take with her into the next life. “No,” she answered,

when we die, we can't take anything, not this body, not these things. But something from them does go with us, the luck [*chōk*] or the merit [*bun*]. Also, if she misses these things, if her heart is stuck [*yut tit*] to anything at the moment that she goes, she will be reborn with that negative merit [*bāp*].

She went on to explain that the home was full of other, less-tangible good things:

It is not just the rituals [performed here]. All of her children were born in this house. She spent thousands of hours cooking meals for them, taking care of them, helping them with school work, protecting them from harm. Her marriage was here. And my father died peacefully here, so many years ago.

The home was the site of motherhood, care, protection, love, duty. This is the feminine side of Buddhism, often underrepresented in accounts of Buddhism, which tend to be male- and clergy-centric (Gross 1992; Murcott 1991; Paul and Wilson 1979; Ueki 2001). And this list was more than a set of associations, it was a list of actions. The actions had generated something, had left a residue of goodness that accumulated in objects, in clothes and photographs, and then ultimately in Fawng's partible ethical self that she would take onward into another set of forms. "All of these things make merit [*tham bun*]," explained Fawng's granddaughter, "they are part of what makes rituals so effective here. And the ceremonies that accompanied those events took place here, too."

The home, as a place, was full of power, a kind of power that had been generated through ethical action over time and had accrued in material objects that had the power to transfer positive ethical consequences to Fawng's self. Her family had paid the debt of life in the ICU by infusing blood, a simultaneously ethical and material object, into her body. Then they brought her home, away from the polluting ghosts of the hospital who might "stick" to her after death, instead surrounding her with good things that could do the opposite. After her death, monks chanted in the living room over her body in an open viewing casket with a transparent plastic window above her face, her wooden abode adorned with flowers and incense. Villagers brought gifts for the monks (*sangkha thān*), a form of generous ethical action that generates merit (*bun*), which was then transferred to her corpse via white sacred thread (*sāisin*), strung between monks, shrine, offerings, and casket in a chaotic web. This string was a conduit for spiritual power, or as Fawng's daughter explained, "like electric wires for merit," meaning that ethical force, ethical consequence, was being actively transferred between objects and beings.

Stanley Tambiah (1970), in his classic work on spiritual power in Northeast Thai Buddhism, describes the process by which objects and places become infused with power. Amulets and Buddha statues begin as simple physical objects, and then through meditation, chanting, and gift exchange, monks generate and pour sacredness (*saksit*) into them. By this process, the images develop a kind of force, a portion of the Buddha's existence and power, and it is this power that in turn generates goodness when people worship those images (247–49). These transductions between different ontological forms (Keane 2013) are explicitly about ethics, about right action. Karma—and its measurement as either positive (*bun*) or negative (*bāp*)—has a thingness to it. It is the materialization of right action, and it lives on in the world after the acts that created it.

In this world, in which immaterial and material things flow between and become one another, it is not surprising that Mahu might claim that he now had vengeful buffalo nature in his legs, or Chonawat that his arm was part dog, or Thot that his thoughts consisted partly of someone else. The force that formed these combinations—both of beings with one another and of beings with material objects—was ethical: karma, the “stickiness” that ties fates together.

HEALING THE ETHICAL WOUND, OR HAUNTOLOGICAL ETHICS

In prior work, to explain how certain acts may be ethical in one place (such as the home) but unethical in another (such as the hospital), I proposed the term *ethical location*, a unique constellation of ethical frameworks inhabiting a place (Stonington 2012). But this concept had only a vague sense of mechanism, simply suggesting that ideas might reside in places.³ The idea was also static and passive,

³ Others writing on the connection between ethics and place have proposed much more viable mechanisms, such as semiotics (Basso 1996), ritual (Mueggler 2001), and memory (Langford 2005, 2013).

as though each place simply “had” a set of ideas in it. On further fieldwork and analysis, the families that I lived with in Northern Thailand clarified that the mechanism of *ethical location* is karma itself, a force that brings ethical consequences into the materiality and immateriality of places, things, and people. This is a form of “situated ethics” beyond that formulated in most social science scholarship (Haraway 1988; Keane 2017; Kleinman 1998; Strathern 1988; Zigon 2007). In these Northern Thai ethical worlds, instead of individuals simply interacting with one another in complex relationships and contexts, their ethical actions also become them and make them become part of one another. And so the path to ethical goodness is thus one of cultivation, of trying to build the best individual personhood possible given the materials at hand.

In a training on how to approach the “end of life” that I attended as part of my fieldwork, famous monk and public intellectual Phra Paisal summarized the process of crafting a good death as one of peacemaking, not just with beings such as *chao kam nāi wēn* but with one’s own multiple selves. “When we arrive at the end of life,” he explained, “if we cannot get along with our past selves, they may return to demand payment for moral debts [*thūang būn khūn*] or haunt us [*lōk lōn*] and avenge us [*kāe khāen*] in our last moments. We need to befriend all of our selves, before we get to the last moment.” In our training, we also practiced identifying different parts (*sūan*)⁴ of ourselves in the present moment, manifest as contradictory desires or impulses, to unlock the “knots” (*pom*) created by their entanglements with one another. This was similar to Thot’s claim about nonself (*anattā*) and impermanence (*aniccā*)—if one’s self is individual, then the path forward is one of reconciling and bringing into harmony a multitude of ever-changing parts.

The result is a model of ethical life that attends to everything that is *in the room*: all the parts of oneself (including one’s partially incorporated others), all the parts of others, and all objects that

⁴ Note that the Thai word for part (*sūan*), just as in English, can denote a portion of something but also a role played in a script. For more on the ethical implications of this dual meaning, which fully applies here as well, see Stonington (2014).

may be infused with ethical force or parts of other beings. The role of an ethical actor, then, is to try to get the optimal set of characters on the scene. If the hospital is full of polluted, hungry ghosts, then one must escape them, find a less polluted place to be at the moment of death. One such place is most homes, which contain better characters: objects infused with merit, benevolent spirits produced by good deaths. But one cannot control all components of an ethical location, and so the work of ethics also entails trying to transform dark and harmful components into more-benevolent ones. So Mahu, Thot, and Chonawat did not fight against the parts of unhappy wronged spirits (buffalo, dog, human) that were part of their heart-minds (*čhit čhai*), bodies (*kāi*), or the material objects around them. Instead, they endeavored to treat them with loving-kindness (*mēttā*), ask their forgiveness (*ahōsikam*), and make merit (*tham bun*) on their behalf. This vision of ethics emphasizes that *ethical locations* are generated through a kind of choreography or recruitment, an ongoing active dance to transform a constantly changing constellation of ethical elements. And following the uncertainty and ultimate emptiness of the constitution of the self, one might say that this is a *hauntological choreography*, implying both that it is a spirited world being navigated and that the personhood being crafted is ultimately slippery and uncertain in nature.

One dying woman with whom I spent time at the end of her life, Arirat, taught me about this process. She had decided not to treat her metastatic pancreatic cancer, partly because of how she needed to relate to it as a *čhao kam nāi wēn*:

I have always taken care of myself, eaten healthy food, never smoked. So I know that this tumor must be some old karma [*kam*]. I must accept this, and as soon as I accept it, I relax, I let go into it and stop suffering. The tumor is here because it is suffering, and it thinks that this suffering is because of something I have done. So I cannot be angry at the tumor. If I am angry, then I will harm it more, and it will grow and gnaw at me like an angry little dog. It would just bring more bad consequences [*wibākkam*].

So instead, I meditate and send loving-kindness [*mēttā*] to the tumor and ask its

forgiveness [*`ahōsikam*]. Forgiveness is letting go of all of the actions [*kratham*] and consequences [*krathop*] between people, so that the heart can be free, and we can eliminate our residual karmic duty [*mot kam mot wēn*].⁵

Given that her tumor was an inevitable character on the scene of her end of life—a character that was both a component of her own self and partly some other being, a product of her own past actions—the only remaining option was to transform it, to direct loving-kindness (*mēttā*) toward it, ask for its forgiveness (*`ahōsikam*), to try to convert it into a positive force before the final moment. And the fact that it was such a profoundly dark force, painful and fatal, made it all the more important to resolve.

It is in this way that free will and action are possible despite complex personhood. How can one make decisions if one is a combination of so many parts? Perhaps, similar to how scholars working through ethnographic material in Melanesia might explain, the “partibility” and “distribution” of personhood doesn’t result in a fragmented self, because even as parts separate or transfer or change, they also come together temporarily into coherent wholes (Strathern 1988; Wagner 2008). And possibly more to the point, as Thot explained, “it doesn’t really matter [if my thoughts are my own], because now I just need to act well and forgive myself and the ideas in my head, regardless of whose ideas they are.” The ultimate way to resolve all actions and their consequences, to resolve the cycle of karma, is for all to forgive, be forgiven, and send one another loving-kindness (*mēttā*). And so it doesn’t really matter who is who; all involved must start down the path of making everyone and everything good again.

⁵ Note that, like Thot, Arirat used the subject “we” (*rao*) in this monologue, rather than “I.” I have not translated it as “we,” because I do not want to overread the meaning of this use of “we,” which appears everywhere in (and particularly in middle-class) Thai society and is almost unquestioned as a way of saying “I.” One might muse, however, as an anonymous reviewer of this article suggested, that the blurred line between singular and plural implication might be suggestive of the complexity of Thai personhood, with the listener transiently becoming part of the speaker during the relationality of conversation. Regardless, for Arirat, the pronoun allowed a certain freedom in describing her partible self. Another way of saying this might be: English forces one to declare one’s bounded individualism at all times, while Thai does not.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Just as in all ethical action in a Thai karmic framework, people described themselves as always already failing, with the exception of the distant ideal of attaining enlightenment, of reaching an “unconditioned” state, of having nothing “stuck” (*tit*) to one self at all. In my fieldwork, Arirat perhaps came the closest of anyone I met, or at least was the most determined and persistent. The pain from her locally invasive and metastatic pancreatic tumor was so intense that she needed to meditate around the clock to keep the suffering from overtaking her. But despite the pain, she seemed to be in a constant joyful mood. One day, I was interviewing her in her room at the hospital in Chiang Mai where I was conducting fieldwork. She had broken her meditation briefly to talk with me. As we spoke, she had the gentle calm look on her face that I had come to expect from her, only occasionally wincing from pain due to the interruption in her meditation practice.

And then, in the middle of a sentence, she moaned, arched her back, clenched her fists and her face—not like a seizure, but more like the tumor had ruptured and released something into her blood, precipitating a sudden episode of full-body pain. I ran to the door and called down the hall for the nurse and then returned to Arirat’s bedside.

“Hold me down!” she gasped, urgent, breathless. “Press on my muscles!”

I leaned my weight into her and squeezed her arms with my hands. I could feel her shaking.

“Please let us give you some morphine,” I pleaded. “It will help with this. There is no need to suffer.”

She opened her eyes momentarily and gave me a stern look. “I need to focus. *You* are having a problem with this. For me, it is an opportunity [*`ōkāi*]. Now hold me down, I need to study [*phīchāranā*]!”

After a few long moments, the shaking subsided, and Arirat slowly relaxed. As suddenly as the pain had come, she opened her eyes and beamed her joyful smile. “That was so interesting,” she

said. “I have been trying to understand the connection between heart-mind [*čhit čhai*] and body [*kāi*]. I thought I understood, but that was so intense, I couldn’t control my body at all. Very interesting.”

Later, she explained that part of what had been so difficult about the moment when mind and body could not separate was that the intense pain made it almost impossible to relate with loving-kindness (*mēttā*) to the tumor. Her pain was formulated as a failure of a relationship. The tumor had become particularly cruel, and Arirat had failed to be compassionate in the face of that cruelty, so she had suffered.

“I don’t think that anyone could have done what you’re proposing,” I said to her.

“Maybe not,” she responded. “Maybe that is why the Buddha needed to spend all of those lifetimes until he had no more residual karmic duty [*mot kam mot wēn*].” By the time he reached enlightenment, he had no *čhao kam nāi wēn*, no tumor in his abdomen to cough evil humors into his blood and give him a rush of suffering. In other words, he had made peace with all of his own parts, so that they were all working in concert with him, or perhaps so that there were no parts at all, just the emptiness that might be the ideal dance of a true *hauntological choreography*.

COMPLEX PERSONHOOD, ETHICS, AND IMAGINING CARE

The concept and existence of complex personhood are important generative materials for the anthropology of ethics, which needs to break away, when ethnographically necessary, from the bounds of individuals and their actions, lest it fail to make sense of the full array of ethical life. But beyond this, the connection between complex personhood and ethics may also have some transformative potential for a wide array of problems. The most obvious from the stories in this article are the possibilities for the care of those suffering from severe illness. The older people that I interviewed in the throes of illness in Northern Thailand related to their suffering as a *čhao kam nāi wēn*; for all of them, this relationship seemed to be a source of meaning, clarity, and purpose. Mahu

described his *chao kam nāi wēn* as the reason that he was still “finding meaning in life” despite the gnawing pain in his abdomen. That explained that the voices in his head would be terrifying if they weren’t a being that was partly other and partly self, one with whom he could cultivate an intimate and caring relationship. For those that I interviewed, dividual personhood seemed to provide positive psychological benefits in the face of tragedy and suffering. Of course, in Northern Thailand, this personhood was deeply tied to karma as the organizing force of human life. But outside of this ethnographic context, an anthropology of ethics accounting for dividual personhood might suggest a path toward a bioethics beyond the goal of destroying illness (of annihilating tumors or voices or pain), one that recognizes the transformative potential of *relating to* illness instead. One might imagine metaphors not of war but of friendship, dialogue, détente, or love.

But the implications of complex personhood for ethical theory also extend beyond the care of individuals. In an influential essay in 2008, Roy Wagner argued that the concept of dividual personhood allows one to think about how persons are composed not only of multiple sub-elements but also of components normally thought to be larger, with personhood arising at various scales, like a fractal. Following on Wagner’s insights, one might describe forms of collective personhood that assemble beyond the individual. In the case of Northern Thailand, this involved everyone tending to what Felicity Aulino has described as the Thai “social body” (Aulino 2014, 2019). In the case of those in this article, this entailed choreographing an optimal set of ethical elements, including individuals, other beings, material objects, their relationships, and the space between. This opens a possibility for “imagining care” beyond the biopolitical management of populations as collections of individual bodies (Stevenson 2014). One might imagine many examples of this. One suggested by a reviewer of this article was Avery Gordon’s (2008) work on complex personhood. Working through Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, Gordon argues that the ghost child at the center of Morrison’s story was not only the manifestation of an individual (a child murdered in infancy to protect it from slavery) but also of the many souls of the Atlantic slave trade who suffered fates worse than death. If slavery might be thought to haunt the world at different scales—from individual suffering to durable social

structures—one might think of slavery as a kind of (un)ethical wound in a large-scale formation of personhood (Chakrabarti 2007; Taylor 1994). Given the *ethical or hauntological choreography* described by those in this article as a way to improve constituent parts of personhood, one might imagine zooming out this choreography even further, incorporating traces of things like collective traumatic memory. Perhaps it is in such a framework that global political technologies like reparations could be formulated to have ethical consequences for both giver and recipient, for the improvement of a collective social body.

Regardless, whether complex personhood leads one to recognize subcomponents that make up persons, or formations of persons larger than the individual, incorporating it into ethical theory is an important step for the anthropology of ethics, which has too long been bound only by notions of individuals. The lived experiences of those in Northern Thailand provide a vivid portrait of what is possible in such an expanded notion of ethical life.

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