Affective Somaesthetics: Reflections on Flowing and Feeling with Fire Dancers in Thailand

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Abstract: *This paper reflects on the entanglement of embodiment and affect in ethnographic research with male fire dancers in Southern Thailand's tourism industry. I explore my embodied learning with dancers and my attempts to attune to the affects that structure their worlds and their artistry. Central to fire dancers' art form is the cultivation of "flow" and particular energies that can be felt through this experience and aesthetic. I examine how my gendered embodiment affected how I moved in and through spaces with fire dancers, and my learning to sense and feel in new ways. The felt experiences and affects in fieldwork created opportunities for different corporeal relationalities, including the sharing of embodied knowledge and affects, but they also created moments of rupture and disconnect. In conversation with concepts of affect, embodiment, and somaesthetics, this paper foregrounds "flow" as an affective and embodied methodology that highlights the relational nature of our engagements in the field.*

Keywords: *affect, embodiment, ethnographic methodologies, dance, gender, Thailand*

> *Energy. First it is energy. Like showing your energy because you are the one holding the fire… You can give that energy to others, because we are energy. You know what I mean? It depends on if people understand this word – energy. If I sit here and you sit there and if I'm moody, it might feel not good for you. You can feel me. You can feel that something is not right. If I feel good, you will feel that too. So, we give the energy and people can feel it.*
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> Thai fire dancer, Nu, explaining the role of performers

Fire dance is an iconic spectacle for tourists, performed at beach bars on the Thai islands almost exclusively by teams of young men from Thailand and Myanmar[1] . I was a music teacher on the outskirts of Bangkok in 2011, and as I arrived by boat to the island of Koh Samet for a weekend vacation, I saw, for the first time, the fiery swirls of this art form illuminating the beach. I was immediately fascinated as I knew that this performance was not "Thai" but was derived from global rave cultures. I wondered how it had been transformed into a touristic performance. When I returned for fieldwork a few years later, I learned of this evolution. Thai fire dance did not start as a performance genre but emerged from informal, friendly exchanges between Thai laborers and backpacking tourists in the 1990s and early 2000s. Thai dancers in the first

1 During fieldwork most of the migrant laborers on the islands were from Myanmar.

generation who witnessed this development shared that they saw tourists practicing flow art on the beaches with different "toys" (equipment) and started to learn with them. Flow art involves the rhythmic manipulation of different objects – such as batons, hoops, staff, and *poi*[2] – through improvised movement patterns that keep the body and object flowing steadily in a rhythm. When done to music, one moves to the rhythm with the object.

The art form was somewhat associated with a "hippie" counterculture in the early days when Thais and tourists would have jam sessions on beaches and in parks. However, the genre transformed into a widespread performance practice on many of the Thai islands and is now integrated into the market economy. Oral histories align this transformation with an expansion of the tourism industry in the late 2000s which saw an increase in beach bars and parties. Bar owners realized that having exciting performances in a party-style atmosphere encouraged tourists to stay at the establishment and continue spending money. Once a participatory movement practice for relaxation and fun, fire dance is now produced for tourist consumption with "toys" (flow art equipment) ignited using kerosene and lamp oil. Fire dance is a lucrative position because of the tips dancers can receive on top of their payment from bar owners. Most dancers have come from economically disadvantaged areas and leave their home villages to work in construction or customer service jobs in tourist centers. But upon learning of the notable advantages of dancing, some start to practice on the sidelines with friends until they can earn a spot on a fire dance team.

Despite its prominence on the islands, the genre is absent in official discourses and advertisements; fire dance is not valued in Thailand and it is not an aspect of Thai culture that the government feels is relevant and/or appropriate to showcase for tourist consumption. Rather, dance performances in the tourism industry tend to revolve around Thai classical and folk dance forms, and other traditions that align with very specific constructions of Thai national identity. Fire dance labor takes place with young tourists at beach parties, and fire dancers are often framed by Thais as deviant "beach boys" interested in parties, intimate relationships with tourists, and easy money, rather than as serious artists. *Farang* (white foreigner) tourist women also face stereotypes and are viewed as sexually immodest in Thailand; on the islands, this is bolstered by the fact that many tourists have romantic relationships with male beach bar laborers, including fire dancers (Pollock 2019, 2024).

Having lived in Thailand for three years prior to conducting ethnographic research in 2015, 2016, and 2019, I knew that my presence would be scrutinized. Being a *farang* female in this scene, I was crossing lines of gender, class, race, and culture that posed a variety of relational complexities. I studied flow art intensively, which I hoped would ease some of the challenges posed by my presence in this scene, while also providing me with critical embodied knowledge. However, early in my fieldwork I discovered multiple layers of embodiment and somatic awareness that extended beyond the physical movements of this art form. This article reflects on my experience conducting fieldwork with fire dancers, focusing on how my study of flow art shaped my ability to sense, feel, and learn as an ethnographer.

Embodiment, Affect, and Ethnography

The quote that opens this article catalyzes a key aspect of my ethnographic research with fire dancers – that is, the importance of feeling and producing what fire dancers refer to as "energies" (*phalang*) (Pollock 2024). The energies that fire dancers speak of are linked with Theravada

2 *Poi* originally derives from a practice among the Māori in Aotearoa. It has greatly influenced flow art and is one of the most common pieces of equipment used. *Poi* is both the dance and the objects which consist of two ropes with a ball attached to the ends (Condevaux 2009). Flow artists typically hold one in each hand and manipulate them together in patterns.

Buddhist moralities that discourage an attachment to money and ego. They foreground a reciprocal and affective relationship between performers and audiences which is valued in Thailand (Mitchell 2011; Pollock 2024; Tausig 2014). Fire dancers spoke about gaining an energetic attunement frequently during fieldwork, and it was clear that elucidating and further exploring the role of affect in their worlds was crucial. I revisit these affective concepts and discussions in this paper to explore their methodological implications. While academic research privileges what can be seen, heard, and documented, the emotions and energies of a moment don't always allow for such capture. Nu's urging to feel energy opens ethnographers to a world of activity that goes beyond the linguistic and discursive, calling us toward the vast array of possibilities through which information is shared.

Ethnographers of dance and musical practices have long discussed the centrality of the body to anthropological research, and the necessity of moving with our interlocutors in order to better understand how movement reverberates with social, cultural, political, and historical phenomena (Foster 1995; Hahn 2007; Kisliuk 1998; Sklar 1994, 2000, 2001; Ness 1992, 1995, 2004; Wong 2008, 2019). I followed this approach and was influenced by dance researcher Deidre Sklar, a pioneering scholar on embodied ethnographic approaches, who suggests that ethnographers "attend in a somatic mode [which] is to apprehend, as felt experience, the kinetic dynamics inherent in movements, images, and sounds" (2000, p. 72). Sklar poignantly notes the richness of accessing this knowledge noting that "ways of moving are ways of thinking" (2001, p. 4). She advocates for kinesthetic empathy as a research technique in which researchers not only observe movement but also try to sense the quality of the movements – their force and dynamic. This entails attending to another's movements through one's own body, which provides "a sampling of the proprioceptive, or 'felt' dimension of events" (1994, p. 15). Empathy, in this sense, is not about aligning with or feeling another's subjective state. Rather it is "the capacity to participate with another's movement or another's sensory experience of movement" (1994, p. 15). Fieldworkers often do this work unconsciously as they attempt to build rapport with their interlocutors, not only through dance practices but also through everyday movements and activities (Sklar 1994).

This type of somatic attention shaped how I did fieldwork, and particularly my intensive study of flow art with the dancers. Yet, the experiences and perspectives of my interlocutors also encouraged me to consider micro-movements and the barely felt sensations of a space; that is, those shared moods and energies that Nu mentions in the quote that opens this article. This type of kinesthetic empathy is not related to the macro bodily movements of dance that I was accustomed to studying, but to the interembodied surges of chemicals and vibes in a space, and to the transference of forces and moods among bodies (Brennan 2004). This requires different modes of attending to embodiment, relationality, and sensation. While kinesthetic empathy focuses on our ability to sense with others, affect theories help to elucidate what these sensations do and their particular "forces" (Rosaldo 1989). The affective turn has pushed anthropologists to rethink bodily ontologies and feeling in the field, albeit through two distinct approaches. New materialist approaches conceptualize affect as pre-conscious intensities that take shape through the interactions of bodies and environments, affecting what bodies can do. The body is understood as processual, porous, and co-participating in shaping the world (Barad 2007; Brennan 2004; Deleuze and Guattari 1983; Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Manning 2006; Massumi 2002; Stewart 2007). The second approach to affect theory is influenced by the work of feminist and queer scholars and encourages that greater attention be paid to the ways in which emotions – as conscious, subject-centered phenomena – shape and are shaped by social and political power (Ahmed 2004, Berlant 2011; Cvetkovich 2003; Muñoz 2006; Sedgwick 2002).

Affect in fire dance communities resonates most closely with the new materialist rendering of affect as energies that circulate among porous bodies. This also corresponds with Southeast Asian, Theravada Buddhist, and animist ontological perspectives that highlight impermanence (*anicca*) and the transference of forces among objects, spirits, people, and landscapes as part of the fabric of social life (Allerton 2009; Århem 2016; Errington 1989; Guillou 2017). It is important to note that this lineage of affect theory has been critiqued for its tendency to separate affect from social, political, cultural, and linguistic contexts. Emily Martin, for example, seeks to remedy this situation by calling for more "robust ethnographic accounts that are specific about how human perceptions are social all the way down" (2013, p. S157). Fire dancers' conceptualizations and discussions of affect help bridge these divides; the energies fire dancers speak of can be named and are expressed as subjective conscious states and sensations that link with social moralities and the political. Yet, affect in fire dance worlds is also expressed as interpersonal and flowing in the social landscape among permeable bodies (Pollock 2024). This demonstrates an integration of affect theories that is noted elsewhere in Thailand (Cassaniti 2015).

Thailand is a context in which discerning affect is incredibly important as it provides valuable information on what is often unsaid. Social relations in Thailand operate through a social cosmetic that privileges a smoothness of interactions. Penny Van Esterik notes that "Thailand encourages an essentialism of appearances or surfaces" (2000, p. 4). This means ensuring the right speech (or silence) at the right time, with the right people. For example, getting angry in public is a disturbance of this smoothness. It is considered a break in social relations because of how the anger of one person affects others. This means that information or feelings are sometimes not communicated directly. They can simmer underneath surfaces requiring affective discernment. Through spending time in Thailand, I've learned that one must navigate the felt dimensions of social interactions, sense the anger of another person before it ruptures and adjust oneself, and learn about others' political views and social positions by virtue of things like dress, sounds, and even gesture (Herzfeld 2009; Tausig 2019). This highlights the importance of attuning to the social cosmetic's affective undercurrents through the body. This is a crucial layer of ethnographic research in Thailand, and these felt components of social life likely resonate in many other contexts where anthropologists work.

Somaesthetics in the Field

Somaesthetics provides a valuable framework for attending affectively in ethnographic research through the body. Richard Shusterman defines somaesthetics as "the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (soma) as a site of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning" (2008, p. 19). From a practical perspective, somaesthetics highlights the importance of bodily knowledge and supports the cultivation of deeper awareness through somatic practice so that we can feel and experience the world in new ways (Shusterman 2013). The body is "our most primordial tool of tools, our most basic medium for interacting with our various environments, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought" and enhancing this tool through increased somatic knowledge will "improve our understanding and performance in the diverse disciplines and practices that contribute to our mastery of the highest art of all – that of living better lives." (Shusterman 2008, p. 4). Pragmatic somaesthetics, moreover, encourages a consideration of how we shape our bodies as ethnographers during fieldwork as we attempt to build relationships; and, as an analytic tool, somaesthetics highlights the connections between such bodily engagements to

social and cultural systems of value and meaning (Shusterman 2013).

Extending Shusterman's framework into the realm of ethnography offers a perspective on bodily engagement that supports the relational nature of embodiment and affect. As fieldworkers, we share acts of feeling, sensing, and gaining an embodied perspective of a place with others; we are also being felt and sensed, and co-producing the affective atmospheres we find ourselves in. Somaesthetics emphasizes the dual nature of the body which "expresses the ambiguity of human being, as both subjective sensibility that experiences the world and as an object perceived in that world" (2008, p. 3). Deepening our bodily engagements and fine-tuning our somatic awareness naturally involves gleaning more insight into the intersubjective nature of affect and embodiment, and the co-production of social worlds. As Shusterman argues, "any acutely attentive somatic self-consciousness will always be conscious of more than the body itself" (2008, p. 8). As we cultivate our own awareness, we feel more of what is around us.

Fire dancers have a sharpened sense of bodily awareness by virtue of their labor and practice which demands a deep corporeal sensitivity that is directed not only toward themselves, but also toward others. As astute affective laborers, dancers are regularly assessing the energies of the audience to adjust their performances and ensure that they are producing the proper mix of affects for tourists. The networked nature of embodiment was always at the forefront of dancers' discussions of performance and practice. As one dancer described, performing for tourists offered him an opportunity to "put my heart in their heart to see how they feel" (Pollock 2024, p. 55). Dancers taught me the importance of attending to the micro-movements of vibes in the atmosphere and how these affects impact the social setting and our relationships with others. As ethnographers, we might learn from this type of somatic sensibility as it draws us toward more actively attending to, and reflecting on, our bodily engagements in the field and the affective environments and relations we co-produce.

Below, I reflect on my experiences doing flow art as a somatic practice and sensing in new ways during my participation in the fire dance scene. I discuss the relational nature of the shaping of my body and its energies. Particular bodily engagements helped me build rapport with fire dancers and more deeply understand the art form and its links to social, cultural, and political phenomena. However, affects intersected with these phenomena in complex ways. My gendered embodiment, I learned, could generate tensions, and our different positionalities and bodily histories meant that we did not always feel and interpret affects in the same way.

Gender, Surfaces, and Flow

Flow art, from which fire dance is derived, takes its name from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of a "flow" experience which is "a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself" (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 2005, p. 600). It is a state of deep concentration with effortless attention focused on the task, and it is noted as intrinsically rewarding and motivating (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). While the dancers I worked with often discussed their motivation for daily practice in these terms – to gain relaxation and improve focus – flow was also a particular movement aesthetic. Having flow meant generating a smooth, seamless, and controlled pace that is centered in one's personal style. This aesthetic, however, also references sociopolitical and cultural values, and is thought to produce certain affects that are felt by audiences and fellow dancers. Fire dancers spoke of how an aesthetic of flow was connected to the "energy of artists." As Julia Cassaniti explains about ghostly energies in Thailand, "The energy that people talk about has to do, for the most part, with feelings, or desires, wishes, and attachments. Often the

energy is understood as a kind of residue, described as actions and attachments that one had (or has) in life" (2015, p. 135). Producing the energy of artists is a felt intentionality that showcases one's morality as an artist, and this is evidenced by a dancer's ability to affectively connect with the audience, as discussed earlier. It is energy that comes from the body and can be felt by others through the aesthetic of flow. As an aesthetic, affect, and experience, flow aligns with the valuing of smooth social relations. Moreover, it provides an apt metaphor for thinking about relationality and embodiment in the field.

My body sometimes allowed for the easy flow of relationships and shared pleasant affects with fire dancers. But at other times, it interfered in this smoothness and created disruptive intensities, often brought forth through my gendered embodiment. Gender in Thailand is also very much about surfaces, flow, and smoothness. It is a flexible concept, that is not linked to a static idea of identity, but to a range of dynamic behaviors and bodily aesthetics. Van Esterik notes that,

> surfaces are transformable, temporary and aesthetically pleasing, while the self – who he/she really is – remains unknowable, a worldly accommodation to the Buddhist concepts of *anatta* (non-self) and *anicca* (impermanence)…Thus, gender is best theorized as a context sensitive process constructed through interaction with others. Gendered surfaces are carefully and aesthetically presented in public to communicate how one expects to be treated. (2000, p. 203)

Presenting gendered surfaces might include disguises that shift and change through behaviors, tone of voice, language, dress, and various expressions of the body, but they are always determined with astute attention to spatio-temporal context (expressed in Thai as *kalatesa*) (Van Esterik 2000, p. 36).

This insight about surfaces helped me to structure how I embodied gender as an active process during fieldwork. I crafted a conservative surface when I was practicing with fire dancers during the day, often wearing longer pants and t-shirts, little or no makeup, and toned-down jewelry. I adopted a somewhat shy persona that felt natural to me. I remained in the background and took up as little space as possible when we were hanging out. Learning flow art (specifically, *poi*) with dancers was as much about embodying the movement from an ethnographic perspective as it was about crafting a certain type of presence and gendered surface. To be clear, I don't believe this was a surface that mattered to fire dancers, but it was one I felt most comfortable with given the complexities of my positionality in a scene in which *farang* women are often interpreted as trying to have romantic relations with fire dancers. I hoped that my intensive study of flow art demonstrated to others involved in fire dancers' worlds my intentions as a researcher and artist.

I learned and practiced flow art with two teams of dancers on the islands of Koh Samui and Koh Phi Phi, and casually with expats and Thais at a park when I transited through Bangkok. While I had participated in various dance and musical practices throughout my life, flow art was new to me. On both Koh Samui and Koh Phi Phi, I was given a few initial one-on-one *poi* sessions with the leader of a fire art team, and then I was thrust into practicing and learning with other dancers through participatory exchanges in the spaces where they practiced during the day. My learning with dancers was deeply embodied. I was encouraged to incorporate the *poi* into myself and feel the equipment as part of my body. I was asked to put my hands on my teachers' and other dancers' bodies to feel the rhythm of how they were executing certain moves, to "feel the balance" of the object, as one dancer described.

While learning a new move might take a few hours, learning to flow and gaining access to a

flow experience took months. When you are flowing, the object you are moving with ceases to be an object; the balance is so perfect that it is simply your body moving. As one teacher explained, "the body is first" and the *poi* follows. The *poi* became an extension of my body, profoundly shaping my experience. In my fieldnotes, I wrote about how powerful it felt to extend myself fully into space beyond the limits of what my body could do without the *poi*. This was a marked difference to the quiet surface I was crafting which felt more like I was part of the background in the spaces with dancers. Gaining access to this new bodily force allowed me to embody space in a new way.

Social norms and expectations shape how women move and use their bodies in the world. Iris Marion Young argues that women's gestures and physical habits can subconsciously reflect gendered cultural expectations of passivity (1980). I certainly felt a breaking of embodied constraints with flow art, constraints that I didn't know I had. *Poi* grew my limbs and my body, producing a surface that extended beyond the passive persona that I enacted as I tried to tuck myself away during fieldwork. I felt as though affects of power and strength were being exuded from my body, counteracting the quiet, barely sensed energy I attempted to produce. Flow art provided an outlet through which I could experiment with different gendered feelings and surfaces, and it generated opportunities for new forms of relationality.

The way fire dancers taught me mirrored the way they had been taught through a method they called "sharing" (*baeng pan*) (Pollock 2024); this involves learning and developing one's artistry with others in a participatory manner in which you "share" different tricks (movement patterns) and knowledge. This approach highlighted the participatory ethos underpinning flow art's emergence in the country; dancers felt this needed to be kept alive in the midst of the genre's move into capitalist economies that privilege economic accumulation over the generation of friendships and the reciprocity of sharing. Attaining the aesthetic of flow is achieved by combining moves in one's own style, tempo, and patterns. And, because of the way it is taught, each move has typically been shared by another dancer. When I was combining my different tricks, a pleasant feeling of nostalgia accompanied my movements. As I flowed, I recalled each person who had taught me. Flowing felt as if I was in relation with others while also exhibiting my own style and embodiment. I learned moves in parks and on different islands from many dancers and spent hours flowing with them and by myself. It became almost a ritual practice that was less about learning and more about relating to people, building friendships, and curbing feelings of loneliness that accompanied my fieldwork. As I flowed during and after my time in Thailand, I felt the presence of each person that had shared with me, and I came to understand energies and flow as embodied interactions that connect us affectively with others even when we are not in close proximity.

As discussed, flow is said to produce the energy of artists that affectively signals to others one's commitment to the art form. While I practiced daily and was able to flow at some points, my body did not always produce these energies. Rather, it could generate affects that disrupted the smoothness of social relations and surfaces. I had to change my gendered surface frequently during fieldwork as I traversed the geographies of the fire dance scene – from secluded daytime practice sessions with dancers to the tourist-oriented beach parties at night where I watched the fire shows and got to know tourists and expats involved in the bar scenes. I felt most myself around fire dancers during the day, as described earlier. The nighttime beach parties required a completely different form of gendered embodiment in which I transformed from the serious researcher-student into a *farang* tourist. My body felt tense and unlike itself in these contexts as I had to muster new energies to produce an extroverted persona so that I could gain access to this scene. In preparing my surface for the beach parties, I wore short skirts, tight string tank

tops, and larger earrings. I applied eye makeup, blush, and lipstick, and fixed my hair into a bun. I would stand alone at the bar, my chest pushed forward appearing confident. I shook nervously beneath a surface that was extroverted and friendly, able to engage people and invite them into conversation.

While I became adept at playing with my surfaces across these different contexts, certain affects stuck to my body (Ahmed 2004); the overt eroticism of the beach parties and deviant sexuality associated with *farang* female tourists became difficult to remove, as if they had somehow reached beyond what my surface could produce. Interestingly, my gendered embodiment and surface expressions became very much shaped by the women around me, perhaps in an attempt to relieve the grip of these energies. For example, on the island of Koh Phi Phi, I became friends with Pit, a Thai woman who owned the guesthouse where I stayed. She offered to help with the research since she had lived on the island for years. I had initially thought this support might entail introducing me to fire dancers; rather, it involved accompanying me to the beach parties and/or finding others to chaperone me. One day she introduced me to a bar owner and explained that she did this so, "people will know you are here to be serious." Pit was concerned about my nightly participation on the beaches and would often ask why I was out so late, subtly signaling her concern. She was worried, she told me, that I would start to like the parties too much. While these were indirect conversations, it was clear that Pit thought I might become too closely associated with the party lifestyle of the islands.

Other encounters were more forceful and drew in tense energies that fractured the flow of relations. These interactions did not happen with fire dancers, but with their girlfriends, many of whom were *farang*. Some shared stories of female tourists trying to participate in these worlds but only with the intention of having intimate relationships with dancers, and to experience the eroticism that can accompany this scene. It is important to note that fire dancers do not view their art as sexual, even though they are often interpolated by tourists as sexual figures. Some farang women warned how this sexualization would create barriers for my research. One person advised that even though I might be serious about art and research, the beach vibes had lingering influences; the energies of the beach parties produced a sexualized feeling, generated through the encouragement of drinking alcohol, playing games that centered heterosexual intimacy, and dance parties that fueled sexual touch (Pollock 2024). These were affects I cannot name but felt as forces that compelled people at the parties to behave in highly sexual ways that reverberate with representations of Thailand as a place of abandon and sexual adventure. I often sat on the sidelines feeling this energy, but sometimes I was swept into it through the participatory nature of ethnography; I danced with tourists to the DJ'd music that happened between the fire performance sets and deflected the advances of male tourists who pursued women relentlessly in these spaces. My presence at the beach parties meant that my body was wrapped up with these energies, which seemed to swirl around my gendered surfaces even after I left these spaces. This was a stickiness that was able to break through my curated gendered displays, highlighting the ways in which atmospheric affects get inside the individual (Brennan 2004, p. 1).

These clashes of energies and surfaces provoked my initial experience dancing with my *poi* lit on fire. I was at a bar outside the tourist area with a group of fire dancers and their girlfriends one evening listening to a band and sharing food. Many of the dancers were off work that night and had brought their flow art equipment for fun. The pleasant energy of our evening was interrupted, quite suddenly, when a girlfriend of one of the dancers told me that I should light my *poi* on fire and dance. The atmosphere filled with tension as if the oxygen had been sucked out of the space – silence and a deadness of feeling subsumed the conversation. I knew the dangers of dancing with fire and had decided prior to fieldwork that I would only do it if

and when I felt fully ready. I immediately expressed my discomfort in front of the group and explained that I was not yet experienced enough. There was silence from dancers who looked on in bewilderment at her suggestion and, I imagine, sensed the friction. But the pressure from her continued. I felt as if I was being challenged to prove that I was "serious," and that my intentions were truly artistic and scholarly. My body shook with adrenaline as I explained that I really needed more time. One dancer broke the tension and took me aside. I thought he was giving me an opportunity to say no. But instead, he said compassionately that I should try and that he would help me. I sensed there was no other choice but to dance in an attempt to contain the odd vibe that had infiltrated our group.

I walked to the side of the area where the band was playing while that same dancer prepared the equipment for me. He stood close by and instructed me to let the *poi* move my body, expressing that it was no different from what I had been practicing. He dipped the *poi* in accelerant, ignited them in a burst of heat, and handed them to me. I stood with the *poi* in my hands and felt a different weight than what I was used to. The balance was different. Shaking, and as others watched, I stood up straight and began to swing my arms at the sides of my body to get the *poi* moving. The intensity of heat was overwhelming, as was the sound; I could not hear anything other than the flames whipping around my head, and the sweet smell of kerosene began burning my nose. This was far beyond what I had sensed kinesthetically from watching fire dance shows. It was a moment when the full force of kinesthetic empathy beckoned for my attention – trembling limbs, sweat dripping down my back, arms tingling with warmth, kerosene and smoke entering my nose and eyes, and the eerie silencing of the music and conversation by the noise of the flames.

One of my biggest fears was that the fire *poi* would become entangled in the air and then wrap around my body. As I spun, I recalled the dancer reminding me that I was in control of the *poi* and to "just drop them" if anything went wrong. However, the body's impetus is to move away from danger, and to respond to the overwhelmingness of sensory experience. But, if your body moves, so do the *poi*. The urge to have the fire *poi* as far away from my body as possible was nearly uncontrollable. I was imagining extending my limbs as far as they could go, but I felt as if I had shrunk into myself and become smaller. A desire to disappear took over my body which wanted to fold in on itself to escape the flames extending out from my hands. Fire dancers on all islands discussed how powerful they felt dancing with fire, but I did not feel this. The sense of power I felt extending my arms and (re)embodying space that I knew kinesthetically from flow art practice was absent. At some point, I dropped the *poi* beside me and we carried on with our night out.

It took some time to process the feelings surrounding this event. My initial impetus was to critically assess the problematic nature of the encounter with the *farang* woman who pressured me to dance. However, there was an affective force (Rosaldo 1989) accompanying that moment. Sticky affects (Ahmed 2004) and atmospheric intensities (Brennan 2004) shaped my presence and each of our experiences that evening. Perhaps there were conversations among girlfriends and fire dancers about my presence that demanded this to happen. I will never know. However, upon reflection I understand this moment as an affective urging for me to access sensations that I likely would have never felt otherwise; that is, what this art form feels like for fire dancers who get up nightly, some with little training, and dangerously whirl fire around their bodies. I could not experience the power they felt dancing with fire, but I glimpsed what surely must accompany some of their performances – the body reacting to fear with surges of chemicals and hormones that produce shaking limbs, and which compel the body to escape from the fire that surrounds it. Fire dancers maintain their strong surfaces during these moments, gaining control

over their bodily reactions to the intensities that whirl and drift in this scene.

This experience revealed how affects of power, fear, and precarity coincide. Importantly, it highlighted the unequal stakes of flow; it is a beautiful and calming art form that fire dancers dedicate their lives to, but danger and precarity lurk in ways that I hadn't felt in my daily practice; fire dancers must contend with their bodies breathing in fuel, the possibility of sustaining burns, of precarious and unstable forms of labor, and of a haunting presence of marginalization in Thailand. I say this not to take away from the power these dancers feel. Rather, I am foregrounding the different opportunities for sensing and working with affect we each brought to flow art. My understanding of the energy of artists deepened through this encounter. There is far greater difficulty in achieving and maintaining a flow during the heated pressure of performance. Perhaps what was being practiced as we did flow art each day was less about the movements and tricks I was trying to perfect, and more about the ability to enter the state of deep concentration that flow is said to elicit, and develop control over the body – the breath, the heart, adrenaline – as it responds to a range of atmospheric intensities.

Conclusions

Our embodiments in the field are never neutral; my gendered *farang* embodiment was swept up into different flows of energies and produced affects alongside those I was with. In this sense, my crafting of surfaces only allowed me a limited extension into the scene and its felt sensations. Other atmospheric interventions shaped how I was perceived and felt by those around me. In this sense, while affects might be pre-conscious intensities and vibes, their energetic flows reverberate with the social, cultural, and political. Affects, like our bodies, are not neutral. Thinking through these intersubjective flows of energies bridges what are often assumed to be gaps between the two different affect theory strains; affects are immaterial potentialities, but they can also flow with and collide into contexts and, as such, are "social all the way down" as noted by Martin (2013, p. S157).

As a somatic practice, learning flow art fostered experimentation with bodily feelings and opened me to sensing the subtleties and textures of micro-events and movements; these are the inner bodily sensations, the whirls of chemicals and hormones, the twitching of muscles, bodily tensions, and the chills on one's skin that signal an unidentifiable atmospheric happening. I did not always sense in the same ways as dancers and, at times, misinterpreted bodily knowledge. However, I agree with Shusterman who notes that "rather than rejecting the body because of its sensory deceptions, we should try to correct the functional performance of the senses by cultivating improved somatic awareness and self-use, which can also improve our virtue by giving us greater perceptual sensitivity and powers of action" (2008, p. 5). Flow invited me into a new framework of sensing with dancers and sharpened my body's ability to feel.

Revisiting these experiences of flow opens a consideration of its meaning as an affective and relational mode of being with others in the field. Flow, as a methodological tool, urges us to attend deeply and fully to the smoothness and fractures in our relations with others. Flow is ultimately about finding a balance of how our bodies interact with others and how we extend into particular spaces. In this sense, flow is a way of being in the field – of feeling energetic moments and undercurrents of affects with curiosity and bodily awareness to help guide our responses and relations. Doing affect-based research requires a much deeper commitment to embodied fieldwork, one that delves far below the surface to better grasp the most minute sensations being expressed and co-produced. Somaesthetics is a valuable framework for cultivating this affective awareness, for understanding the relationality of our bodies, and for analyzing how embodiment

reverberates with sociocultural and political realms.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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