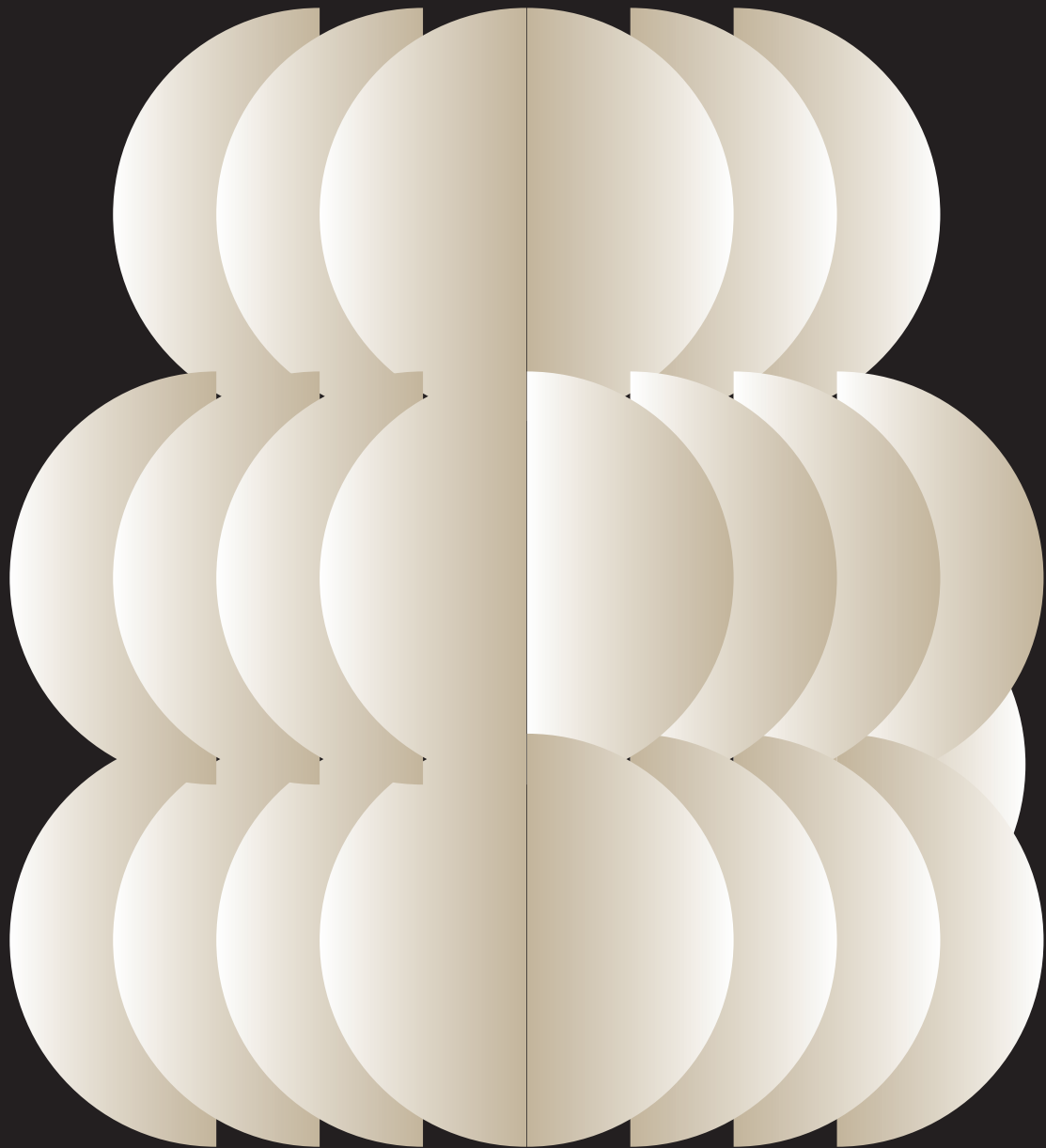


# BACC

## E-JOURNAL

# 2021



# Message from the Director

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Luckana  
Kunavichayanont

“Intelligence is the capacity to perceive the essential, the what is; and to awake this capacity, in oneself and in others, is education.” – Jiddu Krishnamurti

Since its inception more than 12 years ago, the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC) has aimed to be a source of learning based on the content of our artistic and cultural works relating to the history of modern and contemporary art movements in Thailand and around the world. It’s all a process of fostering inspiration, encouraging critical thinking and the posing of questions in order to awaken understanding, make connections, and bring rational analysis to a variety of issues.

Learning in this space not only generates excitement and entertainment through forms of art that are beautiful, impressive, diverse, or represent new trends; it also trains us to read both past and present phenomena, thoughts, beliefs, and various paths hidden in the society that produced those art works. This type of learning allows us to use our senses in areas that require more than just reading or listening like we do in school.

During this time, the BACC organized art exhibitions, design fairs, movie festivals, dramatic presentations, and music performances through the efforts of its Exhibition, Activities, and Education departments to create learning processes whose content covered a wide dimensional array of individual lives and society in general. This has also resulted in deeper connections with society, with space provided for other organizations to come produce various events and activities in building areas outside of the main art gallery on floors 7-9. In any case, the BACC’s knowledge management is structured in ways that are closely related to activities in its primary physical space. While lectures and workshops are available in a variety of fields, the emphasis is on “on-site knowledge” before these activities are produced on an online platform at a later date.

The BACC agenda has begun its second decade with an expansion of new possibilities, utilizing other platforms for displays, participatory activities, and information dissemination to help us reach a larger audience. Beyond organizing lectures by artists and experts, we are thrilled to have these opportunities because they expand the potential for learning beyond the Pathumwan intersection. At the moment, the wonderful collaborative participation we have received from artists, curators, professors, and experts in art and culture, as well as various fields of the social sciences, can be seen in the articles they have contributed to Volume 1 of the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre E-journal.

The Bangkok Art and Culture Centre places a high value on the presentation of diverse artistic and cultural works, as well as the promotion of cross-disciplinary collaboration. In this first e-journal, the different articles should reflect this position as a great source of learning about many aspects of society and life. We have compiled narratives relating to movements in the visual arts, such as the culture of a new generation, political activism through artistic activities, two decades of Thai performing arts, local cultures as seen in food, the Thai art market, the evolution of cinematic world viewing spaces, a lesser known architectural heritage, issues of Thai identity in modern society, and even some subcultures which have gotten “lost in translation.”

We hope that our newly launched E-journal will aid in the spread of knowledge about social phenomena related to creative currents in contemporary art and culture. The goal is to gain knowledge, insight, and perspective that will allow us to coexist peacefully in society. In this difficult time when the entire world is dealing with the Covid-19 disease, it is our sincere hope that the E-journal will help fill in the gaps in this period when we must maintain physical distance from each other for quite some time.

The Bangkok Art and Culture Centre wishes to extend our gratitude to all of the writers who have contributed to this project, as well as our readers and those who have always supported our work, and urges all of you to remain strong and safe.

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Luckana Kunavichayanont  
Acting Director  
Bangkok Art and Culture Centre  
May 2021



# Notes from the Editor

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The task of putting together the BACC's first English language journal came to me in late October of 2020. My first thought went to the complexities of the translation work involved between Thai and English languages. There are many incidents where, in my opinion, Thai-written texts end up losing much of their sensibility and culturally-related connotations due to language rules when translated into English. Often, words and phrases that do not fit into English language's regulations provide more story, linking one point to another and help expand the content beyond descriptive words. The author's voice essentially gets buried under the English syntax. I questioned whether the journal should be a translation at all, but an English original version instead. Thoughts of forming a special translation team or Thai/English co-writing were discussed, but finally the BACC's Education Department worked closely with the translation house and the authors to satisfy what needed to be said and to put the content across fully the best it could.

Perhaps in the near future, I optimistically hope that there could be another version in the "English" language where it can be used as a neutral communication tool between different cultures, with room for word accents and curved sentence structures for a more flexible translation communication, allowing for the original text to stay intact and most importantly to have the words still belonging to the author.

To begin, the first volume of the journal houses a general survey of Thailand's current art and culture landscape, grasping at diversity within subject matters. This includes a variety of research, personal and critical essays from Thai writers of multiple backgrounds.

In order to represent the BACC and its institutional practice, the assembled texts are in parallel with the centre's outreach; beyond the visual arts, the art centre is also an important home for performance art, literature, cinema, music, and educational activities, and serves as a public space for self-expression. This journal will therefore act as an essential platform for archiving English-language writing material that reflects past and current Thai art and culture.

I would like to use this space to thank the writers and the translation house for giving this project a lot of patience, as along with every art project and exhibition, this journal's publishing date was postponed multiple times due to COVID-19 related issues. I am beyond grateful for your corroboration.

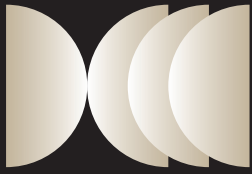
I would also like to thank the BACC and the Education Department for inviting me to be editor of the BACC's first English-language journal and for allowing me to expand my curatorial practice into another medium. It has been a great experience and I look forward to future issues.

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Adulaya Hoontrakul  
Editor, Curator, Essayist



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# An Education

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Sunisa Manning

*We are all subjects in history. We must return ourselves to a state of embodiment in order to deconstruct the way power has traditionally been orchestrated in the classroom, denying subjectivity to some groups and according it to others.*

*– bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress*

I am half Thai, half American, born and raised in Bangkok. When I researched my first novel, *A Good True Thai*, I had a hard time because I can't read Thai, nor can I write it. At my international school I studied French. This is extraordinary to me now, and a little ridiculous, because I have grown into a novelist who writes about my home country. Not to be able to read its letters is an enormous handicap.

Most of the time I want to apologize for this lack of skill. I could get into the details of when and how I have tried to remedy it, but the truth is that despite efforts over the years, my spoken Thai remains very good, but the gains I make in reading and writing don't stick. What I learn as an adult evaporates. Spoken Thai, which is my mother tongue, remains latticed even through my dreams.

It took me six years to write *A Good True Thai*. During those years I became a teacher and a mother, both full-contact sports. I also read, a lot, doing what in progressive America is called decolonizing my education. By that I mean interrogating what I thought I knew, and how I came to know it.

It's important for luk khrueng like me, who went to international schools, to claim our sense of being Thai. As Aboriginals, Black South Africans, Native Americans, and many others know, to measure membership in a particular tribe by blood is a fraught endeavor, usually done in service of an oppressor. Now that my novel has been released, I am asked with some astonishment how I wrote a book filled with full-Thai identity. I take issue with the astonishment. Why wouldn't I write it?

I went to an international school like many luk khrueng whose parents could afford the fees.

I had some dedicated teachers who pushed me to read work that would enlarge my mind, and some mediocre ones, who put the World Cup on during class, or asked, when I showed up for Higher Level Physics, if I was sure I didn't want to leave it to the lads. There were supermodels and movie stars at our school, children of diplomats, and children of corporate diplomats, who rotated around the world with Chevron or other big companies. There were also wealthy Thais, who found ways to gain entrance despite the long waiting list. In this category were the old families with big names, and the new families of the wealthy merchant class, who were often Indian Thai and Chinese Thai.

Growing up, I did not recognize that any of my Thai classmates had working-class backgrounds. This had huge repercussions for me, because my Thai family is working-class. Well, after the financial crisis in 1997, we were often *not* working, with all the struggles that statement entails. My father did more than fine. It was his job that allowed us to afford my school fees. Not seeing anyone of the same Thai background, I hid my Thai side. I internalized an orientation towards my Western side. The predilection to hide my Thai class background grew, and soon I was hiding much of my Thainess.

I believe that my experience at my school was typical, and that is what I want to look at. This isn't about bashing my school or my teachers. It's about looking at the philosophy and practice of international school education, and how that shaped the adults that we grew into. The conversation must be had. The discourse is overdue. If these schools are meant to prepare us for international citizenship, we must interrogate what values we were being taught. Teaching is more than what happens overtly in the classroom. Children internalize values and culture before they can spew out facts.

Thinking about my education, I am struck by how little Thailand and Southeast Asia featured in it. When I was learning about the Tudors and the Stewarts, I could have been learning about the Chakri, or at least connecting that faraway imperial history with our own lines of heredity and power, the teetering balance between the people and the crown. We learned about the slaughter of Jews in the Holocaust. I wish that we had compared it to the slaughter of young Thais on 6 October. A genocide is not the same thing as a massacre, by any means, but the steps the state takes to dehumanize its own people, so that citizens will kill each other, is worth charting. It makes you realize how systemic the

effort must be, how there must be a program, and people who design and carry it out, for such killing to happen. If we had drawn that lesson a little closer to home, what thoughts might have been provoked about the Thai state and Thai power?

Perhaps because I am *luk khrueng* I tend towards the comparative lens. W. E. B. Du Bois said that Black people have a special ability because of their enslavement to look at events through a double-consciousness, the lens of the dominated and the dominant. A different kind of double vision is available to *luk khrueng*. I can't help but translate what is Western into Eastern, Eastern back into Western, and despite the constraints of two languages built for entirely different things, I try, still, to shape what I know into a bridge back and forth.

But our foreign teachers would have been ill-equipped to prepare such bifurcated lessons. Most of them were only in Thailand for four years before moving on to an international school elsewhere. Teaching as a passport for world travel: in this way, my White, mostly-British teachers were capitalizing on their First World privilege. They could only take their Western curriculums with them, and not incorporate local history because they rarely stayed long enough to become local specialists. The fact that we had almost no Thai teachers conveyed to us students all that we needed to know of the school's appraisal of local education, and thus local worth.

There were exceptions to this dearth of local context. A dedicated Economics teacher took the class on a field trip to Cambodia so that we could understand the concept of purchasing power parity. What it takes to buy rice at a market in Phnom Penh in the late 1990s was very different, relative to what you earned, than what it took to afford rice in a Bangkok market. In this way people's living standards were different, a lesson that sat in disturbing proximity to our excursion to the Tuol Sleng genocide museum. Right next door to our perfumed and privileged lives, real hardship, real atrocity, real suffering had ripped through a country. We had an extraordinary history teacher from New Zealand who taught Modern Chinese and Japanese history. He brought the Thai writer Pira Sudham to visit. I want to say that we were assigned to read one of Khun Pira's short stories about the Northeast, but I'm not sure. What stands out in my memory is how comical I regarded this effort to give our curriculum some local color. I wasn't interested in it. I wanted to drink up things from the West: I wanted to read anything in the canon. I understood already how those things mattered. In

that way, my school was quite successful. The indoctrination of internalized racism went deep in me.

Why did I learn French? Maybe because I sensed what I can only name now, which is the condescension of much of our school towards the Thai teacher. As an educator myself, I pity the woman who taught her charges, knowing they were banned from speaking Thai on school grounds except in her classroom. We were paying astronomical amounts to learn “proper English.”

Even the location of the Thai classroom was problematic. For much of school you learnt the language in the Thai pavilion, a traditional structure with a fluted orange tile roof sitting on stilts over a pond. It was surrounded by lily pads and a field, where you were often chased by geese. Every other subject took place in the high school block, where a long corridor showed window after window of your peers sitting respectfully in class. On the one hand, the Thai pavilion was beautiful. But it was also othered—literally set apart. To me, this made it less serious than Maths and Science. Thai was a place to go and have fun, be cultural, but not to be academic.

I wasn't in that class. My Thai was reserved for home life, and because my grandparents are Chinese immigrants, I was self-conscious that I might not speak Thai properly. In fact, I didn't. My Thai had a Chinese accent, something I realized and corrected when I worked, later, with Thai nobility. I also didn't know how to banter in Thai because I spoke it with my mother and grandparents. These factors led me to turn away from my Thai heritage, mirroring the typically unequal status between White fathers and Thai mothers. In turning away from Thainess, I was turning away from my mother. That is my personal story, but the institutional racism of my school, like many international schools, colluded with the circumstances of my family to make me ashamed of the fact that I am Thai.

I don't think this is a problem confined only to me. Why, then, did I go to Thai history to write my novel? I hadn't lived back home in a long time. I had written a linked story collection fueled by rage at the way Thailand is seen. I also raged because some of those ideas—cliches—are true: the bar girls and prostitutes, the beaches, the sketchy foreigners. In that collection was one story about a wealthy young nobleman who made a friend from the Klong Toei slum. This friend radicalized him, and the nobleman joined the 1970s protests. How someone of high birth ended up at the 6 October massacre was a

problem I wanted to solve. The writer Antonya Nelson told me, “You'll never land that in 30 pages.” She advised me to make the story a novel.

To push what I knew about the student movement into a full manuscript, I had to go to the archive. I read *A History of Thailand* by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit to lay the groundwork for an understanding of my home. That book helped me realize how little I knew. My education had given me so little knowledge about the place I was born and raised, but I also had to take responsibility for the fact that I had done nothing about that. It was who was perching in a country without granting it the respect of prolonged study. I didn't have context for my family's immigration, our lack of connection, of advancement, of “luck.” I fell into other books, articles, and thesis dissertations. I spoke to my family to understand what it was like to live through the student movement, then did a research trip to Phu Hin Rong Kla, where there are still huts from the Communist encampment of the 1970s.

My reading happened in America. From that distance I felt safe enough to engage with the material I was accessing. So much of what we say is censored in the Kingdom; it isn't only a question of what we can read, but whether we can allow our minds to grapple with what we find. For some years, I've taught students from Mainland China. When I bring up the issue of censorship they talk about VPNs and how they can get around “the Great Wall.” Sure, but my answer to them, and to Thais, too, is that if you don't know what you are looking for, you will never find it. That's the thing about growing up behind a wall. You don't know what you are missing, that there are regions that lie off the map.

When you finally go to the archive, it yields horrors. Or enlightenment, because of the chance for growth. I started to integrate history with my lived experience, like learning that King Rama V wanted the center of Bangkok to be a place reserved for “true Thais,” and connecting this with my immigrant family's house so far outside the city that it wasn't even a suburb for a long time, just rural. Or the names of the dozen Sino-Thai families which dominate business in the Kingdom. I know a member of many of those clans between my international school and the Thai community at the university I attended in the US.

I anticipate that my particular school in Bangkok, taking offense, will probably issue a statement saying that they are committed to guaranteeing a proper English education for all their students. They

will say that their curriculum is shaped accordingly. The International Baccalaureate, IGCSE, AP and A Levels—the curriculums of international education in Bangkok—aren't designed to incorporate local elements, but there's a lot a school could do if it chose to. Some quick ideas are to have a Thai history month; bring in Thai speakers; hire Thai faculty; partner with a sister school upcountry, so kids could have buddies with English language learning going one way and Thai language learning going the other.

Why were there no merit scholarships for low-income Thai students? Why are there none now? Because access is not a priority. It probably isn't even a consideration. There was *pride* in the years-long waiting list for Thais, and pride if you were able to vault over it. In the country with the largest wealth gap in the world, being able to afford to pay farang to teach your kids is one more status marker.

I also understand that international schools were probably built for kids who would return to their homelands in the West, at a time when it was assumed that you didn't need to learn anything about the less-developed country you happened to be living in. It is time for this to change.

For us Thais, we were made to feel lesser *in our own country*. This is a signature colonial achievement. There is something awful and funny about the elite giving their children an education that will make them come to feel dispossessed. The effect of studying the doings of far-off, usually-White people is to breed a colonial mindset into those from a country that says it has never been colonized. What happens instead is a colonization of the mind, a positioning that over there is power and rightness; over here is terra nullius—uninhabited land, the fraudulent claim that the British, in particular, used to justify their colonization over land that was occupied, was peopled, even if the British weren't prepared to recognize them.

Not everyone wants a radical education. This is the truth of the matter. As long as we were sitting in rows chanting the lineage of Tudor kings, which seemed to have no bearing on our own lives, we were not interrogating the line of Chakri ones. We were not studying the deliberate way King Chulalongkorn had to mimic Queen Victoria, how Siam had to modernize quick so that he could be recognized as a monarch and Siam as a sovereign nation. We were not looking around the room when the names of 19th century Thai courtiers matched those of the students sitting among us.

What is so wrong with that, some will ask. It is still not a crime to be wealthy in a capitalist society. The shame, to me, is the obfuscation of the extreme wealth and power that was concentrated among the Thais in our school. That we did not speak of this is a disservice to the education we might have had. We needed to name and recognize what was going on, which was that we were taught a colonial mindset towards locals. And, Thais were represented only by the most elite, unless we were luk khrueng, which put us in a neither-here-nor-there category.

We could have situated ourselves honestly in the context of our society. Integrating history with your place in it allows you to see what is really happening around you. This is part of what is meant by critical thinking. It's also important to growing up. It's what we should have been doing at international school: thinking about our place in the country we inhabited, and interrogating how we got there, instead of perching on the thin crust of expatriate life, or in the hot air balloon of the hyper-privileged, floating above the ordinary.

# Biography

Sunisa Manning was born in Bangkok, Thailand. She graduated from Brown University and Vermont College of Fine Arts and is a writer. She has received the 2017 Steinbeck Fellowship from San Jose State and the 2018 Emerging Writer Fellowship from the SF Writer's Grotto. *A Good True Thai* was a finalist for the 2020 Epigram Fiction Prize. It is her debut novel.



