

Book Review: Pollock, T. R. (2024). *Fire Dancers in Thailand's Tourism Industry: Art, Affect, and Labor*.

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Tiffany Rae Pollock's *Fire Dancers in Thailand's Tourism Industry: Art, Affect, and Labor* is perhaps the first anthropological monograph in Anglophone scholarship to explore the complex nexus of identity, affective labor, and the art of prominent fire dancers in contemporary Thailand's tourism industry. Throughout its nine chapters, the book sets out critical engagement and extensive ethnographic research with fire dancers, whose backgrounds are intricately intertwined with the complexity of socio-cultural narratives. They are listed in three main categories: local Thais, immigrant Burmese, and white *farang* (and mainly backpacking) fire dancers. Through each case study of individuals and their conversations with the author and with each other, the book highlights how fire dance is perceived differently by the dancers themselves – based on their diverse backgrounds and the initial motivations of taking the art form – and by related interlocutors, like hotel managers and tourist visitors partaking in these nightly fire dance performances. Whether you are an avid traveler or a student taking anthropological classes with a geographical focus on Southeast Asia (or more broadly Asia), this book will benefit your curiosity of exploring a lesser-known subject of research. Fire dance, as it appears in Pollock's work, has made substantial impacts on Thailand's tourism industry while the narratives of various interlocutors have been written in a storytelling form, which is easy to follow through.

Following Erving Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical approach in anthropology, Pollock participates in, observes, and narrates the many different lives of fire dancers, including herself as a fire dance student, in such illuminating lights as their on-stage and backstage quotidian lives drastically differ. This is an insightful study as perceptions of fire dance become more nuanced, given how social and economic status, gender, and class greatly determine the profession's image, hence demystifying stereotypical discourses that demoralize fire dancers and their art practices.

From a tourism studies perspective, the book provides insightful information on how fire dancers make up a substantial workforce on the islands in Southern Thailand (primarily on Koh Phi Phi Don and Koh Samui, where the author did her fieldwork). The art itself becomes a secondary factor next to the prospect of earning tips from tourists, which drives these dancers to pursue their jobs. "Behind-the-scenes" stories expose how certain categories like ethnicity, color, artistry, networks, and skills dictate various outcomes for each fire dancer, socially and

economically. In Chapter 6, for example, readers can learn more about the efforts to revive Koh Phi Phi Don's tourism industry after the tragic 2004 tsunami, the fetishization of male fire dancers as they become dominant entertaining acts to attract tourists, and the uneven distribution of economic power based on who can choose and recruit fire dancers to perform each night at their venue (pp. 112-121).

In the first four chapters, affect theory is developed alongside the book's main interlocutors, Thai and Burmese male fire dancers on Koh Samui and Koh Phi Phi Don. The stories start at the front stage, where these male fire dancers perform their art to attract tourists, and go on to examine the energy that they have to generate to earn extra tips and display their masculinity. I appreciate how Pollock problematizes stereotypes of tourist performing arts in Asia, which tend to be associated with female bodies, when male fire dancers become the main initiators of eroticized acts. As described in Chapter 2, fire dancers go through a series of acts to attract tourists' attention, offer them alcoholic drinks, and invite intimate interactions with their bodies. Their goal is to close the gap between them and the tourists and to create a sense of familiarity and acknowledgement to get higher tips (pp. 45-46). The intimate interaction between mainly white female tourists and the fire dancers ultimately insinuates a different affective phenomenon, which Pollock calls "agro affects" (p. 50): competing gestures from typically white men to aggressively pull their counterparts' attention away from the fire dancers. Fire dancers have to maintain professional manners, as this emotional development is ultimately "saturated by incommensurabilities and attachments that never fully disappear" (p. 56).

National identity comes as an additional factor that spurs competition among fire dancers themselves. The stories portray how Thai and Burmese dancers perceive their performance as either a source of survival or a breakthrough to freedom. Behind the façade of a utopian and community-building form of art, Pollock reveals a nuanced, internal hierarchy rooted in the interpretation of fire dancing as a luxury art exclusive to Thai tourism. Burmese fire dancers are, therefore, positioned as less experienced than Thai dancers in practicing spaces while simultaneously making less money when directly competing with local Thai dancers on the Thai islands (pp. 81-86). These narratives intertwine in the subsequent three chapters (Chapter 5, 6, and 7), which reveal even more tensions arising in training spaces. Monetary competition sets the background against which conversations on kin economy take place, where a true form of fire art is challenged by materialistic desires, intensifying national and ethnic disparities.

Another strength of this book is the juxtaposition of gender categories in the fire dancing industry. Chapter 7 brings forward the lives and stories of five female fire dancers (three Thais and two *farangs*), including the author herself, who practiced the art to better understand her research subject. The existence of female fire dancers emphasizes how fluid perceptions of gender are in Thailand, challenging conventional expectations of female bodies in Thai society and diversifying an art form that is predominantly centered around male bodies. Pollock's positionality further encloses the circle of identity, where hierarchies of national identity, socio-economic status, and gender complicate performers' affective labor. In specific *kalatesa* (time-space)¹, when observing dancers' performance in front of the audience or interacting with them in rehearsal spaces, the author's unique role as both a scholar and dancer enables a space in which male dancers could easily express their thoughts, while the female counter-partners

¹ In her book, Pollock defines *katalesa* as the concern of time and space coming together that "determines what is possible in a particular moment; the creation of a gendered surface might involve slight changes to physical appearance, language, tone of voice, and a multitude of embodied gestures and prescriptions that can vary based on context" (p. 127).

could not (p. 148). These insights attest to the valuable empirical research this book offers, making a great introductory invitation to the study of fire dance in Thailand, but also methodologically to other forms of entertaining art aimed at tourists.

Future scholarship building on this book may be concerned with the strict confinement to the anthropological approach that makes the book well-articulated in the realms of “affect” and “labor”, but less so in that of “art”. More detailed anthropological analysis of the art could focus on the symbols and iconography of fire dancing and flow art (which it derives from), how they have shaped livelihoods on these southern Thai islands and the Thai tourism industry at large. A deeper analysis of the symbolism and iconography of fire in the context of a Southeast Asian country would benefit from juxtaposing the integral role of fire in Buddhist practices and the mere entertainment purposes of fire dance (for fire symbols in Buddhist practices across the world, see Payne & Witzel, 2016). Could fire rekindle old sacred values, or has it been ultimately secularized for capitalist gains? How do fire and bodily dance movements – a practice introduced to Thailand by foreign backpackers – take on a different meaning from traditional rituals in Thailand that also use fire? What are the connotations of fire as they transition from a ritualistic sacred symbol to a supposedly demoralizing symbol of sexual desires in nightlife entertainment? Lastly, future studies can extend conversations by drawing further connections between theories of kinesiology in dance and affect theory (see Joseph & Kriger, 2021; Kim et al., 2025; Noton, 2023).

Overall, Tiffany Rae Pollock’s *Fire Dancers in Thailand’s Tourism Industry* provides substantial empirical data on fire dancers’ affective performances, labor, and socio-political identities on the islands of Southern Thailand. From the anthropological lens, Pollock draws on affect, gender, and queer theoretical frameworks to make productive distinctions between the display of bodies in front of and behind the stage, where personal stories complicate fire dancers’ decisions to participate in eroticized performances as well as their standing in the industry. Want to start learning about fire dancing and the tourism industry in Southern Thailand? Start with this book.



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Book Review: Pollock, T. R. (2024). Fire Dancers In Thailand's Tourism Industry.

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DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.