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THE UNIVERSITY  
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**The Pursuit of Virginity in Thai Gay Culture:  
The Exploration through Autoethnographic Letter-Writing**

Panu Sahassanon

The Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling

The University of Edinburgh

2024

## DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP AND ORIGINALITY

I declare that all these electronic letters – a thesis -have been typed and crafted by myself and have not been submitted for any other degree. Any included publications that I use and engage in these letters are quoted and referenced.

Panu Sahassanon

11 October 2024

**To: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: The introduction to my virginity inquiry**

**Dear Examiners**

Hello and *Sawatdee krub!* (In case you don't know, that is a standard greeting in the Thai language). This will be the first time you open and read the letters written as my doctoral thesis at the University of Edinburgh. The title may give you a hint of how this thesis will go.

You might wonder where my abstract is. As my thesis is written in letter format, an abstract at the top might spoil the unfolding of this journey. Therefore, I attach the abstract as the last part of the 12th letter along with acknowledgements to the people my letters are addressed to, and others whose names do not appear in the letters themselves. Still, you can freely decide to read them before coming back to each letter. At the end of this first letter, I include the subject, addressees, and page number of all letters for accessibility.

The starting point of this thesis journey is very challenging. Simon Sinek, an English American author, wrote that once you get that out of the way, you will find the rest of the journey much easier. Well, the rest of my journey is also far from easy. Sometimes, I clearly sensed the path, but sometimes I was lost and confused. I was uncertain, for example, how I should construct my first letter to be reader-friendly but also deep and engaging. That is also true for all the letters that you will read soon.

You may be curious why electronic letter became the format of this inquiry. Writing a thesis in this format is novel for me. It is a spontaneous and dialogic activity between my thesis supervisor, Jonathan Wyatt, and me. I have written/typed to each other monthly as the process of my inquiry for more than three years. These monthly writings encapsulate personal and theoretical elements. Later, I recrafted and structured those writings into 11 letters and another epilogue, which I hope are connected seamlessly. Well, the process, methodology and rationale of letter writing, and related elements will be described in detail in the 9th letter. What I am writing here is only a brief preface that might help you prepare for what will come later.

To begin this first letter, I have nothing to share but the story of Wednesday night, February 26th, 2020, in Edinburgh. I have rewritten it many times and layered it back and forth between the story itself and academic and research articles. It is my responsibility to warn you that my whole inquiry, and specifically the story you soon will read, will include some sensitive or sexual details. My inquiry is not only about sex, but sex is the beginning of what all these letters mean.

**February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Edinburgh: A Night to Remember.**

*After many hours in the classroom, I part from my classmates. My friends and I are studying Counselling and Psychotherapy, pursuing a doctoral degree abroad. Waving them goodbye, I head not to my flat but to a pub near Edinburgh's Princes Street.*

*There sat a guy, waiting for me, at a corner table. We greet each other. He, an Asian doctoral student with a single eyelid and yellow skin, has been waiting many hours. We met on a*

*dating application and have talked on it from time to time. He asked me to meet him tonight. He stated from the beginning that he enjoyed sexual experiences.*

*He seems to be an expert whereas I am a thirty-year-old virgin gay. He knows my status, and I know what his invitation to his place means. It could be the night that my virginity would be lost.*

Yes, my Examiners, my story and this inquiry will mainly revolve around sexual topics, but specifically virginity. Virginity and virginity loss had emerged over time as an inquiry that captured my interest. It first appeared in my writing around May 2021, energising my reading of other work by Laura Carpenter that echoed the exploration. A research article, *The Ambiguity of 'Having Sex': The Subjective Experience of Virginity Loss in the United States* (2001), and a book, *An Intimate Portrait of the First Sexual Experience: Virginity Lost* in 2005, became my resource. Carpenter gathered knowledge of the experience of virginity loss among 61 young Americans from 1997 to 1998. Her interviewees self-identified as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

In one of her chapters devoted to the definition of virginity loss, the vast majority of heterosexual interviewees stated that 'virginity loss is the first time having sex' (2005, 44). Defined by Merriam-Webster, sexual intercourse means the sexual activity between two people where a man puts his penis into the vagina of a woman, or vaginal sex. It also includes anal and oral intercourse as well (s.v.). Virginity, then, means the state of never having had sexual intercourse.

Carpenter highlighted another helpful point that encouraged me to engage further regarding virginity. She mentioned that studies that have explored lesbian and gay people often focus on coming out, or attractions, but rarely explore virginity loss. In other words, virginity loss 'has largely eluded scholarly attention' (2005, 7). It seems to me that virginity in LGBTQ+ research is, therefore, scarce and limited so my inquiry, I believe, could be beneficial. Here are the articles that pioneered study of virginity in LGBTQ+ members.

Averett, Moore and Price published a research paper, one of whose aims is to explore the definition of virginity exclusively in the LGBT community in the United States. The data were collected from focus group followed by individual interview using the phenomenological framework. They found that the path to losing virginity for most men in their paper was defined based on anal penetration with another man. For lesbian-identified women, penetration with a man was claimed to be a traditional loss of virginity (2014).

Four years later, Huang explored virginity loss, specifically among gay and straight cisgender men. He mentioned that there is a growth in research about sex but not virginity (2018). Huang criticised the previous research by Averett and colleagues for their small sample size. His research used online survey and statistical analysis to compare the sexual behaviours gay and straight men endorse as the loss of virginity. The result aligned with Averett's paper that anal intercourse could be seen as a key sexual behaviour in losing one's virginity among gay men, which parallels with the penovaginal sex in straight men. Penetration (anal or vaginal) seems to signify the moment of virginity loss.

However, virginity loss seems to be more complicated and controversial than that. Huang's result portrayed the list of sexual behaviours (cunnilingus, fellatio, manual genital, or

anal finger) and percentages endorsed by straight and gay men as behaviour that would constitute a man losing virginity or not. Around seventy per cent of gay men, for example, perceived that doing fellatio-receptive and penetrative means the loss of virginity (2018). Aligning with Huang, Thai researcher Wiresit and colleagues conducted similar research surveying the definition of 'having sex' in Thailand in 1991, as cited in Peter Jackson, an Australian professor of Thai history and cultural studies in 1999b. You will come to know him better in these letters as I explore many of his works about gender and sexuality in Thailand.

Back to Huang's paper. The word 'endorsed' makes me realise that the status of virginity or virgin, and nonvirgin depends significantly on the holder's understanding of what constitutes 'having sex or *Ruam Phet* (ร่วมเพศ). The definition of having sexual intercourse, then, can include a range of erotic acts.

Another consideration is that virginity loss among participants might not be a one-time event. Averett, Moore and, Price, even Carpenter pointed out that some individuals consider themselves to have two virginities or multiple virginities. 'Two virginities' was drawn from female participants who stated that they lost their first virginity with a man, and again later with a woman. Multiple virginities were mentioned by gay men, which derived from new sexual experiences (2014). In short, they lose their virginity with each new sexual act. Some American individuals, according to Carpenter, believe that non-consensual sexual intercourse or a person who was raped could still be called a virgin. Christian texts denote that virginity possibly can 'be regained and lost anew' (2005, 55).

As I accumulated more knowledge I began to ask new questions. I wonder, my Examiners, what your definition, or any gays in Thailand of losing virginity might be. What erotic act do you endorse, and which ones do you not? By the way, there is no need to answer.

After reading these articles, diversity in the concept of virginity loss became clear to me. Understanding of loss of virginity depends on the understanding of what constitutes having sex. It is so subjective. Other gays in Thailand might share similar or different views, but for me, aligning with Huang's and Averett's and colleagues' work, penile-anal sexual intercourse is the pivotal moment of losing virginity; my virginity and other different erotic acts are not. Therefore, I found it rather unnecessary to find a consensus on the definition of virginity and virginity loss. Still, in my story, I was on the way to cross from being a virgin to a nonvirgin in Edinburgh.

*After my late arrival, his demeanour becomes urgent. His voice whispers near my ear, "Let's go". I waver. "Should I do it?" I can decline and walk back home, but my body seems to follow him. We take a bus and arrive at his boutique hotel.*

*Being alone in the room while he is taking a shower makes me wonder again if I should do it. Soon, it is my turn to clean myself. I remember the coldness of the marble floor and the water running out of the showerhead when it touches my naked skin. Now it is the time I apply what I read on the internet and what I heard from Thai gay best friends on how to prepare our bodies.*

In my story, I seemed reluctant, didn't I? Well, since I am Thai and am writing this letter in a different language, it might be helpful to introduce you to some usages of these words, virgin or virginity, in Thai contexts. Exploring the Thai language around the concept of virginity, I

realised, can be confusing not only for you but also for me. Many related English words seem to overlap.

Milles, Holmdahl, Melander and Fugl-Meyer stated the hymen or membrane that covers the entrance of the vagina will rupture during penetrative sex, which is the moment of losing virginity. This membrane is called the virginity membrane (2018, 295). The Thai language refers to hymen with *Yeua Phrommajan* (เยื่อพรหมจรรย์) or *Yeua Phrommajaree* (เยื่อพรหมจารี) where *Yeua* means membrane, so *Phrommajan* or *Phrommajaree* stand for virginity. Whenever I refer to the word 'virginity', these are Thai formal words. However, these terms do not seem to be used in daily life. Someone who has never experienced sexual intercourse, might be called or call themselves with the transliterated word *Virgin* (เวอจิ้น) or *Sing* (ซิง) as the colloquial terms. It seemed to resonate with the English term 'virgin', referring to someone who has never had sex (McArthur 2022, 65).

Thai people that I heard through social media use the word *Sia Tua* (เสียตัว) or *Sia Kwam Borrisut* (เสียความบริสุทธิ์) for having sexual intercourse for the first time or the loss of virginity. *Sia* means loss, and *Borrisut* means purity. It seems to me that the loss of virginity in the Thai language generally means losing something that could be meaningful or precious.

Before discussing virginity and purity in my 3rd letter, there is another point about *Phrommajan* that that I need to address first. This word is also translated into the word *Brahmacharya*. Honestly, this is something I have never realised before. *Brahmacharya*, translated by Merriam-Webster, is the state of celibate student life: the initial stage of the Brahmanic ashramas. I recognise the word ashramas. In Thai, we call it *Arsom 4* (อศรมสี่), which means the four stages of life based on the Brahmanical-Hindu timetable of human development.

*Brahmacharin* or *Brahmacarya* (พรหมจารี) is the first stage of youth/adolescence from birth to 25 years. This stage focuses on the student's life in education, and the student must take a vow of 'chastity, obedience and austerity' to gain knowledge and skills. This is followed by the householder stage, where adults can enjoy material things, sexual pleasures and marriage (Bansal 2022; Babu & Fatima 2022). Therefore, I realised that *Phrommajan*, in Thai, might encompass the meaning of both virginity and chastity.

The plot thickens here as *Brahmacharya*, a Hindi term also meaning celibacy, is commonly known as a vow to abstain from all sexual relationships. However, one of the differences between virginity and celibacy is that a person could have been married or sexually experienced before taking a vow to be celibate (Olson 2007, 6).

Another term that emerges when mentioning celibacy or *Brahmacharya* is the vow of chastity, which is the promise never to have sex (s.v.) in Merriam-Webster. This vow in Thai is commonly known as *Thue- Phrommajan* (ถือ- พรหมจรรย์), where *Thue* is a verb that means hold or carry something, which in this context is *Phrommajan*. So, it means you are maintaining or keeping your *Phrommajan*.

Details could be explored further, but as you see, my Examiners, virginity or *Phrommajan* in Thai, seemed to encapsulate the concept of virginity, chastity and celibacy. For most Thais I

am unsure if they - or I - can differentiate all these terms. But in that hotel in 2020, what I knew was that the status I held of not having had sexual intercourse - a virgin- would be taken away. The moment of losing my virginity (Sia Tua) could occur or not when I left this bathroom.

*Should I do it? I finish cleaning my body and come out wearing my jeans, uncertain about what to wear. The guy is lying in bed watching television. Perhaps he is waiting. I slowly, awkwardly, climb up to sit by him. He stares curiously at my clothes, specifically my jeans.*

Looking back, I was not too innocent; I could have worn only underwear or a hotel bathrobe. Those jeans might represent my hesitant feelings. Perhaps, I was hoping he might change his mind so I could leave. Or, I might decide not to do anything and maintain my virginity.

*'Take those jeans off!' He say and, my mind is asking, 'Should I do it?'*

Can you speculate what action I chose? Before I continue, one of the significant findings in Carpenter that became a substantial foundation at the beginning of my inquiry is her discovery and theorisation of how US men and women make sense of or perceive their virginity. Carpenter devised four main metaphors: a gift, a stigma, a process/rite of passage, or an act of worship.

These metaphors are important because they seem to be associated with constellations of beliefs and behaviours, producing characteristic trajectories before, during, and after the loss of virginity (2005, 56). In my understanding, holding different virginity metaphors could lead to other behaviours, thoughts, and feelings or the idea of who to deflower, when and how it would happen. This author invited readers, me, to read the interviewees' love stories, their backgrounds, the moment they decided to lose virginity and the repercussions. Each tale was unique in detail despite locating within the same metaphor.

Each of Carpenter's metaphors was rich in information, stories, research articles and nuanced observations. I feel overwhelmed finding a precise way to explain Carpenter's finding to you. Nevertheless, this summary probably captures what I consider the key characteristics of each metaphor.

The first metaphor of virginity is a 'gift' of one's own. Carpenter calls individuals in this category, "the gifters". Gifters typically value love as the precondition of virginity loss. Therefore, they seem to be very careful when choosing their sexual partner. The long-term partner whom they dated for many months is primarily selected. In this group, most of them lose their virginity to others who are also virgins. Gifters also gradually escalate their sexual intimacy from kissing to assessing their partner's ability to reciprocate. They view virginity, a gift, as comprising part of the self or extended self, when shared between the gift giver and receiver helps bind them together (2005, 62). In other words, gifters hope that the exchange of virginity gifts will express love and strengthen their romantic relationship.

The second metaphor is an 'unendurable stigma' group. US men and women perceive virginity as a shameful condition, a sign of dorkiness, social backwardness, and a source of embarrassment (2005, 137). Being a virgin is not desirable. Therefore, the common thought for them is to get rid of their status as soon as possible. Usually, this "stigmatised" group, as identified by Carpenter, conceal their virginity status from peers and sometimes their sexual

partners. Some of their close friends or younger siblings might know, but not anyone else. They also concealed becoming nonvirgins. If they announced losing their virginity, it would mean they had been lying to others for many months or years. Being labelled deceitful is considered bad too (2005, 107).

Unlike the gifters, Carpenter observed that the stigma group expressed little interest in romance and relationships. Instead, they focused on physical pleasures and curiosity about sex. They select their virginity-loss partner quite differently from gifters, including strangers, acquaintances, friends, casual partners, and boyfriend/girlfriend whose relationships are no more than a few weeks in duration (2005, 105). One of the reasons they select losing their virginity to a stranger is because they have no mutual friends, so if their sexual performance is unsatisfactory, that stranger won't be able to broadcast their embarrassment to their close circle of friends (2005, 119). None of the stigmatised hoped to lose their virginity with another virgin but preferred a sexually experienced partner (2005, 114). However, any expressed disappointment, frustration, or dissatisfaction by the sexually experienced partner could also trigger another stigma from lying if the stigmatised group member's awkwardness or sexual incompetence is attributed to their virginity (2005, 121).

Carpenter's third metaphor is the 'rite of passage' or the 'natural step' interchangeably. For short, she called them "processors". Virginity is the central step to moving from youth to adult and gaining knowledge about sexuality (2005, 143). This group treats virginity as a kind of education that has a step-by-step process. Clumsiness and awkwardness in these experiences are typical or expected. I grasp from Carpenter's narrations that the processors seem to be situated between the gifters and stigmatised in many ways. The rite of passage group expects imperfection when losing virginity in contrast with the romantic scenes fantasised by most gifters, or the stigmatised, who are more concerned about their sexual naivety and awkwardness. They see virginity and nonvirginity as inevitable stages rather than as causes of shame or pride, feeling neither compelled to conceal their virginity status nor tempted to brag about it (2005, 151).

Processors, like the gifters, increase sexual intimacy and choose to lose virginity with someone they are dating or a friend but not the perfect one. They aim to expand sexual repertoires and not to test their partner's capacity to reciprocate like gifters (2005, 147).

The last metaphor from Carpenter's book is the 'act of worship'. Only a few interviewees posited themselves in this category but Carpenter found it unique. Individuals within this virginity metaphor share the same characteristics as the gifters who emphasise love and relationships. Scarcely any of the gifters, Carpenter wrote, believed that sexual activity was appropriate only in marriage (2005, 181). The act of worship group, instead, tried to maintain their virginity until marriage as part of worship to God. They tried to avoid almost sexual intimacy with dates or even stop dating to wait for the chosen one. This metaphor seems to be hugely influenced by the Christian sex education programme in the USA, supported by the increase of membership in evangelical and fundamentalist Christian churches (2005, 183).

This is the summary of what I got from each Carpenter's chapter. It might be a lot of information to process, but I found it engaging. After reading Carpenter's book, I wonder what

virginity metaphor might represent me or LGBTQ+ in Thailand. Is it similar or different from Carpenter's Western context? Could this become an interesting main topic to inquire about?

We are all born virgins in the aspect of sexual experiences, and most of us remain that way through childhood (McArthur 2022, 65). I continued through the age of 30. Still, I was not naïve. Before coming to Edinburgh, I had already started being sexually active around the age of 28 with other sexual activities. Still, penile-anal penetration never happened.

Apart from virginity, chastity or celibacy, which I touched on earlier, there is the word called abstinence that might need to be addressed here. Abstinence, according to Merriam-Webster, is the practice of abstaining from something. It could be from intoxicating beverages or sexual intercourse (s.v.).

Bersamin and colleagues use statistical analysis to define virginity and abstinence among adolescents in the USA. They seemed to find consensus that virginity loss was only linked to vaginal or anal intercourse. In contrast, loss of abstinence could occur from genital touching, oral to vaginal and anal sexual intercourse (2007). This term is used by Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) when informing that abstinence from vaginal, anal, and oral intercourse can be the only 100% effective way to prevent pregnancy and any STDs.

Like virginity, abstinence can be a subjective perception. Honestly, the only term I am familiar with is virginity. Looking back at my own story, I can say that I was a virgin but not abstinent when referring to non-penetrative sex. All these papers show connection and overlap between these key terms. Some have tried to differentiate, and some, like McArthur (2022), have used virginity, abstinence, and chastity interchangeably.

To prevent confusion for you and me in my letters, I will use virginity to encompass the state of never having penile-anal penetration intercourse and the decision not to engage and involve in this receptive role in anal sex. Now, let us go back to that moment again.

*In my ideal fantasy, losing my virginity would happen in a fancy hotel with a guy I am romantically fond of when that day comes. He and I are deeply in love. The day I lose my virginity will be romantic, a memorable evening with a candlelit dinner.*

*Now I am in a hotel with this academic guy without dinner. Being highly educated and good-looking he attracted me, but we do not share the same feelings. We are neither dating nor strangers and perhaps not even friends.*

*Still, my jeans finally land on the carpet.*

It seemed that my dream and the way I maintained virginity echo Carpenter's gifters. One of the statements from gifters is that 'I did everything but have sex while purposely remaining a virgin' (2005, 77). Lesbian and gay men, Carpenter wrote, rarely compared virginity to a gift. People who desire same-sex partners, perhaps, found it less appealing as this metaphor revolves around traditional ideas of masculine and feminine (2005, 68). My ideal dream about romance seemed to align with the conventional belief of masculinity and femininity, didn't it?

But at the same time, I am unsure if my metaphor seamlessly aligns with the gifters. Engaging Carpenter's metaphors, page by page, story by story, I cannot help but recognise some of the dynamics of their understanding of the virginity metaphors. One of the gifters questioned her own virginity beliefs when she moved to another college where new friends saw virgins as socially awkward or boring. She was almost stigmatised, and I believe she seemed to move closer to the stigmatised group. To alleviate feeling odd, she decided to lose her virginity to the guy she liked but did not love or consider her boyfriend (2005, 78). Most of the stigmatised, Carpenter found in the interviews, after shedding their stigmatised status and embracing nonvirginity, mentioned that virginity loss is not the way to eliminate their stigma but the beginning of a lifelong process of learning about sex. Gradually, they begin to re-envision virginity from the stigma to the step in a process (2005, 109).

One of the processors mentioned that he was once a gifter but later reinterpreted virginity loss as he realised that he might be gay and the 'waiting until I was married approach' in his State at that time was not possible (154).

Carpenter honestly explained, and I am glad she did, that most of her interviewees favoured a single metaphor for virginity rather than blending interpretations or switching between them. Still, she found that at some point in time some US men and women adopted a new virginity metaphor. These metaphors are fluid and not static and should be understood as 'ideal types' (2005, 12). It seems to me that my own experience of virginity loss might encompass more than a single metaphor. My story of virginity aligned with the gift, but something shifted that made me not wait and want to do it with an acquaintance.

I had only had one partner. We met during my undergraduate years at the University in Bangkok. Sak is his pseudonym. I write to him in the 7th letter. We never had sex, and it was a decade ago. Therefore, having the first time with a guru might be a better scenario. Perhaps this is one of many reasons I could think of that kept me following that Asian guy that night.

You might find the shift of my virginity metaphor interesting. I have explored it to some extent, but it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this letter and the whole thesis.

*My underwear falls off like my jeans. This guy leans toward me. We kiss.*

*'Slow down; no need to rush', he says. I listen to his request. It is a good feeling. After the prolonged kisses, I ask him, almost like begging, if we can do anything except sexual intercourse.*

My virginity metaphors might have been reinterpreted to the point that I changed my own behaviour and ended up in this hotel room. Still, within what I asked or begged this guy, there was a wish to maintain my virginity, refraining from being receptive to this penile-anal sex. But why?

Carpenter wrote that virginity metaphors are a 'part of the culture'. Gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, social class, and religion are important influences that shape our understanding of virginity (2005, 12). Her metaphors were conceptualised in the USA. Each of the tales in her book was bathed with their unique socio-cultural background. Therefore, I wonder how far what she found in North America might be similar to and different from my own culture.

I knew there was research about the virginity metaphor in the Philippines (Manalastas & David 2018). Despite locating in Southeast Asia, Thai and Filipino people are not the same. It highlighted to me the importance of socio-cultural elements in my own country. Peter Jackson stated that patterns of human sexuality are often culturally specific rather than cross-cultural universals (1999b, 31). The virginity metaphors among Thai gays, including myself, might be categorised differently compared to the USA or Philippines. Searching for Thai virginity metaphors seems unlikely to be my interesting topic.

Then, **what is the aim of this inquiry?** This question might be what you are wondering now. Before I answer it, I would like to add some further literature here.

Carpenter wrote that metaphor, a term she used, is synonymous with many terms, including interpretation, approach, script, and frame (2005, 11). I looked through Carpenter's footnotes and found that this term, script, was drawn from renowned sociologists Simon and Gagnon. Scripts in script theory are essentially a metaphor for conceptualising the production of behaviour within a social life (1986, 98). What attracted me to script theory is the link to culture.

These culturally available scripts are adapted by individuals to a particular interpersonal context and internalised as intrapsychic scripts. They are communicated and displayed by members of that culture and mass media. What counts as sex and what to do in sexual encounters among males and females comes from these scripts (Frith & Kitzinger 2001, 210). In other words, these scripts provide instructions for sexual activity, such as the appropriate time, places, sequences, and so forth (Wiederman 2005, 496).

In addition, Babin and Humphrey postulated that the accepted sexual scripts are for heterosexual couples. Lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals might find these scripts inapplicable to their identity. This is why some LGBT might lose their virginity with different-sex sexual partners, and later, they rewrite their interpersonal script and have a second virginity loss with a same-sex partner (2021, 400).

My story, however, did not share the same pattern with the LGBT group in Babin and Humphrey's. I have never lost my virginity to any female. My sexual script seemed to be written to use with another man.

According to Simon and Gagnon, sexual scripts are learned from culture. They reject 'the apparatus of biology that located the explanations of sexuality as internal to the body.' In my understanding, sexual drive or instinct could not be used to explain sexuality. 'There is no sexual wisdom that derives from the constant physical body. It is the historical situation of the body that gives the body its sexual meanings' (2003, 492).

What I take from their quote is that the social factors, or the influence of the surroundings, take shape in an individual's sexual desire, meaning, sexuality and perhaps virginity, which I seemed to value and hold until I passed the age of 30.

And now this story/virginity is coming to an end (for this letter).

*No! My request not to have sexual intercourse is denied. He adamantly desires penetrative sex. I succumb to his desire and perhaps some part of mine as well. He moves*

*some pillows and rearranged them on the floor. Like in films, I imagine that the bed was supposed to be the usual place. Nevertheless, I follow his lead.*

*Both of us are now on the floor; he takes the lead in choreographing positions. My gay best friends told me joy would come after the pain. Would I feel the same?*

Even within the same country, each gay, or to be more inclusive, each Thai LGBTQ+ might tailor their sexual scripts or virginity metaphor uniquely, like the differences between me and my gay best friends, TJ and Kayle. Both of them (who I will write to in the 5th letter) passed this milestone many years before me. They were Thai, like me, but our sexual careers started differently. I was the last one who kept virginity. It seemed to me that my sexual scripts were different.

Do you think losing virginity at the age of 30 is delayed? It might be hard to say due to cultural disparity.

I found some statistics in Thailand. Visut Dispanurat explored the prevalence of compulsive sexual behaviour among Thai men who have sex with men (MSM) and receive services at the Anonymous Clinic, Thai Red Cross AIDS Research Centre. This centre has various supportive services provided for sex-related well-being, including HIV tests and antiretroviral medical prescriptions.

One of the questions he asked in research was the age of their first sexual intercourse. He found that most MSM (64%) had first sexual intercourse at the age of 18 to 25, whereas 28.5 per cent experienced it under 18 years old. Around 8 per cent had their first sexual intercourse after the age of 25. The average age was 18.7 (Dispanurat 2011, 39). The numbers have to be read with caution. It was unclear in Dispanurat's work what precisely constituted 'having sex' for him or his participants. Also, when using the word MSM, these men could be identified as gay, bisexual, transgender or *Kathoey* or even heterosexual men. Nevertheless, this was the result based on Thai people, which is also important because I am not alone in the group over 25.

*Lying naked, he picks up lubricant and prepares my receptive organ. Soon, he prepares himself with a condom.*

*Should I, but it might be too late to go back? I think about what I could do while maintaining that position. I close my eyes...*

The stories of that night will be continued, but to end this letter, I shall give you the explicit purposes of my thesis. My inquiry, then, is the question of why I decided to refrain from penile-anal sex. In other words, why did I maintain my virginity status as a Thai gay? What in Thai society and culture informed, perpetuated or perhaps controlled the idea of 'sex' and 'virginity'.

This first letter you are reading is about that vivid night in Edinburgh in 2020. Reading it so far, you might have a negative reaction towards virginity. I am aware that the concept of virginity receives such criticisms, which I shall elaborate more on in the letter to my sister (3rd). Looking back, I was previously uncritical in my life, but trust me, there are reasons why criticism towards this concept rarely or never occurs.

In subsequent letters, I shall invite you to go back, observe and explore how my understanding of virginity or sex was formulated. The cultures, including gender/sexuality, family, education, and religion will be written and explored with some key theories. Juxtaposing with these cultural aspects, I explore the interplay of them in counselling practices.

All these letters and their order are meticulously crafted and arranged. I decided to change them for each significant person. It gives a dialogical sense between me and those significant people who relate to this inquiry, including you, my Examiners. You are copied (CC) into them all. I hope there is continuity in each letter so that you can engage the flow of my inquiry and see the answers.

In the next letter, the story will relate to the moment before I closed my eyes. It was about the condom.

All in all, I hope these letters will hold your attention and engage you to follow me, not to that hotel room as I did, but to turn the next page of each letter and keep on turning until the end.

Sincerely Yours,

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**To: My Father**

**Cc: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: The Mystery Box, Sex & The Carpet of Silence**

**Dear Khun Phor**

Hi Dad, this is a letter that I want you to read, but not today. It is a part of my doctoral thesis, which my Examiners will read before you. In my previous letter, I ended a story with the condom that another guy is tearing from its foil packet. Dad, my doctoral thesis is around virginity and sex. To be more specific, I am trying to understand how the idea of virginity came to my life in our home in Bangkok, Thailand and why I seemed to follow it accordingly. In this letter, I look back to the beginning of my understanding of sex.

Truthfully, the first time I saw the condom happened like two decades ago. It was neither with the guy I had sex with nor at school. It was at our home. I was unsure if you knew about my unexpected discovery. I have never brought it up directly with you. I think we are old enough to be more open about this private topic, Dad. Here are my memories from back then when I was young, not yet an adolescent, which I also share with my Examiners. I call it **The Mystery of a Condom Box**.

*I enjoy exploring our house. I accidentally open one of the cabinets where my parents, you and mom, keep the stock of tissue or mats under the counter. I find one strange object, a small mysterious black box. With some knowledge at that time drawn from television or other sources, this couldn't be anything but a condom. Curiously, I pick it up and wonder when it was last used. I forget if I open the container or not. I put the black box back where it belongs.*

*I can't clearly remember whether I talk about this discovery with my sibling. But I remember when I reopen that mysterious cabinet a week later - it is gone. The black box disappeared. Where was it? Was it disposed of or relocated? By whom? I wonder.*

Is it you, Dad? In my – our - family, you and I never speak or discuss sexual intercourse or any sexual topics. Like a secret, it is quiet and silent.

Before continuing, I must address Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and historian. Thai historians rarely engage with the work of French historians. Wongyannava stated that 'Eurocentric' thinking might not be suitable for Thailand's history, except for Foucault who was warmly welcomed (2010, 155). With a background in Psychology, I had never heard about him until I came to Scotland, Dad. Foucault wrote many famous books. He mentioned the word 'silence' in his renowned book, The History of Sexuality. Here is what I would like to share with you.

*"Silence itself - the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers - is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary*

*division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorised, or which form of discretion is required in either case (1978, 27)."*

That is long and not easily understandable, Dad. I was helped by Robert Morrell (2003), who seemed to contextualise Foucault's ideas. Foucault observed that children, 'preliminary sexual beings', tend to 'indulge in sexual activity', which could 'pose physical, moral, individual and collective dangers'. Parents, educators and many related occupations, therefore, need to take charge of this endangered sexual potential (1978, 104).

What they can do, according to Foucault, is to speak of and speak to their children about 'it' (sex), which in turn causes children to talk about it, to receive knowledge or to enclose them in the 'web of discourses'. 'The sex of children and adolescents', Foucault remarks, 'has become so important that many institutional devices and discursive strategies have been deployed (1978, 30).'

I wonder if it adds more confusion here, but we need to understand what 'discourse' is. Discourse or *Wathakam* (วาทกรรม), summarised by Wongyannava, is a compound of two Pali/Sanskrit terms. Watha means speech, while Kam or Kamma means an act or action, which means a speech act or the effect or effectivity of a word (2010, 162)

The definition of discourse, according to Foucault (1978), is the practices which systematically form the object of which we speak. It shapes how people can understand an issue; they have the power to constitute subjects, produce recognisable identities, and delineate their boundaries. Riley, Robson and Evans gave me a simple example of when people feel guilty for not exercising, not because we 'naturally' feel guilty about exercise. However, this guilt was enabled by the idea of health or lifestyle produced by medical, psychological, and economic institutions (2021, 286). In other words, these institutions circulate the idea of health or exercise to us. Discourse produces knowledge.

Back to what Foucault said about preliminary sexual beings and the web of discourses, I think it means parents, you and mom, via many institutions, provide knowledge to children, me, of what sex is. Silence, according to Morell (2003), is the result of prohibition and policing. It is understood as a suppressed discourse. Silence functions and relates closely with discourse.

So, to simplify for you, Dad, and me, if silence works alongside discourse or another type of discourse, it also produces something/knowledge. In our family, it seems that silence from the parents, you, becomes a profound message or knowledge to a child - me. What kind of knowledge would be produced if you were me, Dad?

If I am not mistaken, the clear impression the young me received from that moment is the idea that something about sex or any sexual-related things is forbidden. It is very secretive, private, and supposed to be quiet. We should not talk about sex in the family. It is a taboo to address it.

Here is another related experience during my adolescence I would like you to read.

*One day, I woke up but forgot what I had dreamed about. "Did I urinate while sleeping?" I am surprised as I recognise the dampness on my lower part. There is a stain on my lounge pants. When I touch the fabrics, they are sticky and slippery - a different sensation from other liquids that I was aware of.*

*It must be a Fan Piek (ฝันเปียก or wet dream). My focus swiftly has shifted to how to clean it. With a little paranoia, I hop to the toilet, checking that no one notices. I turn on the faucet, rubbing that area with soap and letting the stream of water rinse the emissions away.*

*"If my parents ask the cause of the wetness, what can be the plausible answers?"; I ponder. The train of questions and concerns continues. Should I dispose of my nocturnal emission evidence into the laundry bag right away or hang it to let it dry?*

Writing all these memories, I ask myself why I was so worried about wet dreams. Why have you never mentioned it to me? Perhaps it showed how silent this topic was in our family. It seems to me it is not only you who might find it difficult to talk about sex in Thailand.

'Why Thai parents do not discuss sex with their children: A qualitative study' was published by Sridawruang, Pfeil and Crozier in 2010. They interviewed teenagers and conducted focus groups with parents in rural areas in province in the northeast of Thailand. Four years later, Meechamnan, Fongkaew, Chotibang and McGrath (2014) also published a paper 'Do Thai parents discuss sex and AIDS with young adolescents? A qualitative study'. Participatory activities were used among adolescents and parents' groups and focus groups with only adolescents to discuss their perspectives on sexuality and AIDS.

As you can see from the titles, their results showed that many Thai parents found that discussing sex might be perceived as an encouragement for young people to explore or experiment. Also, they might think their offspring are still young and naïve or need to concentrate on their studies. In the course of talking, parents worried that young people might become aware of their own lack of knowledge and misunderstandings. They could fear being judged. Therefore, silence or avoidance might be a preferred solution (Sridawrung et al. 2010, 440; Meechanan et al. 2014, 99).

Our family does not live in Chiangmai or the northeast region of Thailand, where these researchers studied. I was raised in Bangkok, the central area of Thailand. Nevertheless, their findings identified the variety of barriers, or reasons for the difficulty in discussing sex education between parents and Thai adolescents.

Even in the United States, I found a qualitative article about young adults' communication with parents before their first sex. Goldfarb and colleagues found that messages from parents delivered through silence, for example, are heard loudly and clearly by adolescent children (2018, 48). They are likely to interpret silence from their parents as a sign of parental discomfort or disapproval, which also causes them not to try to discuss things with their parents.

Dad, nocturnal emission is one of the milestones of sexual development. It is actually a natural - normal - process. You must have experienced it during your teenage years. Nothing about it ever came up in our conversations. This natural process seemed to be an unaccepted

element in our house. So, how could I dare to address it with you? Perhaps that is why the young me needed to hide it and repeat this surreptitious destruction of evidence every time a wet dream happened.

I wonder further, Dad, if you or Mom were taught about this sensitive topic by your parents, my grandparents. It could be intergenerational. Since I started crafting this inquiry through letters, I asked Mom via Facetime. I told her this was related to my academic inquiry. This was my conversation with her.

*'Do you remember who taught you or how you know about sexual kinds of stuff?' I ask.*

*'My aunt and I are pretty conservative ...'. I feel her reply is quite judgmental toward herself, and the answer might not go anywhere. I want this conversation to be relaxing and casual.*

*'That's OK, Mom. No pressure.' I tell her I am just curious about it.*

*She recalls that no one exactly tells her. 'My aunt prohibited me [my mother] to hang out with male friends'. She could not remember how she gained more understanding about this topic. She speculated that it was the natural step when she started dating her first boyfriend after she had graduated from university and started working.*

Dad, perhaps your family might share some similarities with Mom's. I think it makes more sense now why neither she nor you ever mentioned sexual topics in our conversation. When you were young, your own parents might not know how to have sex talk properly. I want to convey here to you that this could be intergenerational or cultural restriction.

Thaweessit and Boonmongkon record the history of sexual education in Thailand. The first national policy on sexual education in schools was announced in 1938. However, sex education was not taught in schools until 1978 (2011, 47). If this record is accurate, you were already adults and had left school at that time. Therefore, you grew up without exposure to sexual education. Talking about sex between parents-children perhaps never occurred to you.

But Dad, can I write and ask for more in this letter? Even without the taught knowledge, you still have practical knowledge. Still, you were reluctant to talk about it. I have read and explored further. I think the cause happened before you and I were born, even before my grandparents. Maybe something about culture and discourses relates to it. Foucault, and scholars who read and write about Foucault, observe this concept. It is called 'biopower', and here is Foucault's original quote.

*Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate domination was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself... that gave power its access even to the body. (1990, 142-3)*

In contrast with sovereign power, which focuses on taking life or letting live, biopower - power over life or bios, and lives - is the power to 'foster life'. Through norms, Chloe Taylor explained, biopower aims to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, and optimise. Generally, biopower can be perceived as having two levels. The level that targets individual bodies is called

disciplinary power, which I will write about later. 'Regulatory power' targets populations or species (2014, 46).

The reason I touch upon types of power is because Peter Jackson introduced this idea with his bio-history of Thailand's gender/sexuality landscape.

Dad, you and I, or perhaps many Thai citizens, believe that Thailand or Siam was fortunate not to be colonised directly by an invading Western power. Colonisation, Jackson wrote, was justified by the ideology of bringing civilisation to the barbarous or semi-barbarous Asiatic races (2003, 10). My second supervisor, Seamus Prior, questioned this belief, and it made me realise that some scholars, even Peter Jackson, assert that Siam is subordinated through the domains of international economics and law. This makes our country look like a colony. Unlike countries surrounding Siam/Thailand that were colonised and ruled by foreign empires, our ruling elite or Thai monarchy has power over the local population. Peter Jackson suggested our country's status as semi-colonialism is unique (*Keung- Ananikhlom or กึ่งอาณานิคม* 2010).

Perhaps ordinary people like you and me, still believe that Thailand was never a Western colony (*Ananikhlom or อาณานิคม*). We only knew Siam/Thailand lost some territories to avoid colonisation. For political scholars, this might be called the conservative discourse, but that debate might be beyond this thesis. What I would like to address is that the monarchy and elites use many strategies to contest the Western perception of Siam's barbarism. One of them, according to Jackson, is the intense application of a new form of power over the bodies of all Siamese/Thai men and women, for example, the nakedness of the Siamese body and the sexual excesses of polygamy (2003).

Jackson observed and wrote that the effect of Siam/Thailand's self-civilising state is only on the public representation or public image, whereas the private domain was untouched. In my understanding, there is a split between the public and private domains of life.

To be civilised, according to Jackson's paper, it seems that the Thai state expelled public representation of eroticism into the private sphere (*Suan Tua or ส่วนตัว* in Thai). The public representation in my country prefers to be a de-eroticised domain. Whereas citizens' sexual practices in the private domain were not restricted or interfered with by the Siamese state (2003).

Sex, desire and eroticism then become personal and private. Perhaps, when sexual issues resurfaced to the public domain, it was attached to a perception of 'uncivilisation'. Jackson cited Sutham's writing, which I found interesting.

*When it comes to sex, 'everyone knows' and knows full well who is doing what and how. Most people understand this situation and consider it normal. However, the force of negative attitudes toward sex in Thai society constructs a culture of silence about sex' which shuts mouths and imprisons the thoughts, feelings and desires of every person. Everyone knows the truth but cannot speak loudly out of fear of being labelled morally degenerate ... and being punished by society in various ways (n.d. cited in Jackson 2003).*

Control of the image, Jackson concluded, permits a variety of consensual sexual acts but forcefully silences these acts. Public representations and 'accusations of moral degeneracy may attend more to talking about sex than to having sex' (2003).

From Jackson's paper, it dawned on me that the discouragement or the silence about sex talk in Thailand might be, in part, influenced by this Thai biopower regarding sex and eroticism. It was not only you but also many Thai people/parents/grandparents who might be hesitant to talk openly about this topic. Sex and sex talk then are supposed to be quiet and private in Thailand. Talking about sex might produce shame and embarrassment.

Dad, with the disappearance of the condom box in our house and many things that followed, I came up with a metaphor. I frequently use metaphor or analogy as a counsellor with a client. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors – conveying understanding of one kind of thing in terms of another - are routinely used to make sense of everyday life (1980, 5). I shall use it in letters sometimes, too.

In this letter, 'sex' and 'sexual elements', or objects like condom boxes, were metaphorically perceived like dust under a carpet of silence. Sex seemed to be a mysterious and secret thing, hidden or concealed from the daily conversation under this metaphorical carpet which itself emerges from the Thai bio-history, providing knowledge/discourse of sex. It was here in our house before you and I were born. Other Thai households might also have it. I believe this sets the tone for the concept of sex or the discourse of sex in Thai children, at least for me.

But does the carpet of silence still have power today? Undeniably, there is a shift in the sex talk in Thailand. The intensity and the degeneracy attached to it has relaxed under the influence of many TV programmes or Thai YouTubers. Celebrities have openly talked more about it. Sex talk is more open than in the past. It permeates the public sphere. Still, growing up in our family, there was never permission to acknowledge sexual elements or talk about them

Do you remember, Dad, the times we watched many Western movies? Sometimes sexual or intimate scenes - kissing or undressing between men and women and seeming to be naked - appeared unexpectedly on television. From what I remember, you switched the channel without explanation, or we watched without saying anything. The silence crept into the room.

In those silences, I wonder what you were processing. Is it that I was too naïve, or this scene was inappropriate? At that moment, neither did I ask, nor did you explain. Sex appeared, inevitably, to be something to be avoided. Even when I reached puberty, it was more than a wet dream that I was capable of. Touching myself or masturbation became my adolescent routine. Still, this act is hidden in the private realm. I have never brought it up or asked you.

The effect or power of the carpet of silence or the split between the private and public realm, I believe, still largely exists though now it has become possible to open up about sex to close friends.

The Thai regime of the image will be revisited in other letters, but now, Dad, I have another thing to share before ending this letter. I have worked as a counselling psychologist in Bangkok and as a counsellor here in Scotland. Here is the story that emerges when I think about

the impact of sex and sex talk. Despite reaching adulthood, perhaps, the residual effect of the carpet of silence and the discourse of sex is still there with me.

### **The Story with Leo: Sex Talk in Therapy**

*In this online placement, I asked for my clients' be LGBTQ, like me. My goal is to gain more experience in therapeutic work with these clients. In my previous placement, all clients I have worked with are, as far as I was aware, heterosexuals. This new client, Leo, an Asian gay, works in the UK and lives alone. One of the reasons he seeks therapy is to enhance his confidence in many domains of his life.*

*During an exploration of his relationship with his ex-partner in our first contracting session, Leo shares that he had been asked to try a consensual non-monogamy. He was reluctant but nevertheless agreed. Leo further shares some details of this type of relationship. As I listen, there would be an exploration of thoughts and feelings around the topics of love and sex to some extent.*

I wondered how Leo would feel regarding talking or discussing sex in our session. How comfortable or appropriate he might feel, I ponder. But interestingly, what do I think about sex talk in therapy if Leo decides to share this issue in our therapy room?

There is a counselling blog, I found, written by Nicole Gricius. She pinpointed the challenges of talking about sex in therapy and why talking about sex in therapy matters. She wrote that there are some difficulties in bringing up sexual issues with therapists and doctors. The reason is that the client might experience the counsellor's reaction, which indicates a lack of comfort and embarrassment (2022). In her [simplepractice.com](http://simplepractice.com) website, Gricius, refers to the survey research conducted by Metz Seifert that many clients are often waiting and hoping the clinician will initiate sexual discussion (1990).

Brandenburg and Bitzer provide a general overview of the challenge of talking about sex between patients and physicians. Disclosing sexual difficulties may be embarrassing for some clients. Feeling shame or fearing being judged negatively by a doctor could be one of the patient's barriers. The authors also list the barriers from the physicians' side; for example, sexual matters might create too much closeness to the patient or take too much time (2009, 125).

These articles, I believe, are heavily and broadly based on Western populations and from the patient/client and physician perspectives. I could not find any articles specifically referring to the dialogue between client and psychotherapist/counsellor. Even Gricius's blog used the physician's article to imply it reads across to the counselling realm. This knowledge, nevertheless, at least informs the barriers or challenges when having a sexual discussion between a client and helping professional in Western countries.

From an Asian perspective, I found one article from Eli Leiber and colleagues which explored the sociocultural contexts and communication about sex. One of the themes they published is that talking about sex is taboo, private, and shameful in the Chinese community. One powerful quotation for me was that 'the only people who would talk about this [sex] would

be prostitutes'. In broader terms, sex talk in Chinese culture can be embarrassing and uncomfortable, and this taboo continues (2009).

According to Walter, taboo, in everyday usage, refers to 'something forbidden and prohibited'. Something might be too terrible to think of or 'not to be mentioned in conversation' (1991, 295). Taboo is also mentioned in Sridawruang, Pfeil, and Crozier's paper that Thai parents are struggling to discuss sex openly because sexual matters are also taboo subjects (2010, 439). Perhaps the taboo is related to the carpet of silence of my experience, something that must be treated as a private matter. Now let's go back to Leo's session.

*It's only the beginning of our therapeutic work, I thought. If our therapeutic work continues, Leo might spontaneously share it. Still, at that moment, I heard myself saying to Leo.*

*"I am not sure how you feel talking about your sex life in session", I continue. "If you would like to, please feel free to share."*

It is a simple statement, but I wonder why I said it. I wonder how he feels talking about sex. Is it inappropriate, shameful, or embarrassing for Leo to disclose his sex life to a therapist? Or is Leo, a client, expecting a counsellor, me, to initiate the conversation? Does he also check the counsellor's level of comfort?

In other words, I wonder if his life, to some extent, has also experienced 'the carpet of silence' and carried it from his home to our counselling room. As a counsellor, the carpet of silence affects me, undeniably, Dad. Sex talk can be very private and taboo. However, as you see, sex talk has become possible in the private sphere with close friends. Friends are the trusted avenue where talking about sex becomes possible in my life. However, it might not be as possible with older and more respectful people like parents or acquaintances. So where does the client, Leo, stand in this demarcation of public and private? I was aware that my own carpet could block the conversational flow with Leo.

My invitation to Leo that sexual topics can be openly discussed, perhaps, signified an aim to lift the carpet in the therapy room. With the client, sexual discussion is welcomed, if necessary, without judgment and criticism, at least from the counsellor's side. If I am honest, I wonder if that would equally apply to other clients whose age is much older than mine.

*After offering this message, Leo seems to take it in. We explore his feelings further about his experience with a guy he dated.*

Throughout the therapeutic work with Leo, the topics of sex were only mentioned occasionally. In each session, the issues were shifted between life, work, and relationship domains.

Please do not get me wrong, Dad. My intention here is not to encourage clients to talk more and more about sex. The client's topics can be various. It depends on the therapeutic relationship and the issues they would like to address. What I want to iterate here is about the counsellors' readiness and comfort if clients have the desire to open up about sexual issues that might be related to their love and relationship problems.

How do counsellors' or clients' cultures regarding the taboo of sex and sex talk come into the therapy room? How many details do counsellors need to listen empathically with unconditional positive regard? And how comfortable or necessary do clients need to be to open? And when does it become unnecessary, inappropriate, or beyond the counsellor's competency? I believe these questions are worth reflecting further on with respect to the counsellor's sexual agenda and their historical background.

How does that sound, Dad? I think these discussions could benefit other counsellors who might come across this letter. I have one final story I would like to share before I finish this letter. I looked at my note, and this happened around August 2022.

*Facetiming routinely with Mom, she asks me about my research topic. We continue discussing unplanned pregnancies and sex education during my time in school. Then she moves her iPad screen to allow me to greet you, Dad. You have just come back from work.*

*"Have you ever taught (my name) about sexual protection or anything?" my mom asks you.*

*"Me?" raising your voice. "That's supposed to be a school's responsibility."*

Do you know your answer resonated closely with other Thai parents in Sridawrung and colleagues who also perceived that sexual education is not a parental duty (2010, 439)? Your answer also foreshadows the next letter about sexual education in Thailand that I want to explore further.

I agree that in my time in school, sexual education was included in Thai pedagogy and curriculum. It might be justifiable that you believe this lifted responsibility from your shoulders. But I guess my wish is that we could have talked more and opened up about sex. Perhaps it is much better to hear it not from strangers or the media but from my own family members - you. The carpet of silence, still, seemed to lie between us.

Since I have not come out to you yet, Dad, sharing or talking about the contents of this letter seems impossible. Still, this writing, as Jonathan Wyatt, my supervisor, wrote, is an act of resistance to the pressure to be silent, to do nothing (2019, 20). This letter is my effort to resist the silence and challenge this carpet of silence. I am trying to bring it to the public, to you and to my Examiners who will assess this letter.

Whenever I am ready, I will give you this translated version of this letter as my coming out letter, Dad. I am gay and have many topics to ask, to share, and to connect to. But for now, I hope you accept what I have written about us.

I miss you,

**To: My Sister**

**CC: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: The World of Sex Education: Being a Thai Boy vs Thai Girl**

**Dear Sis,**

Hi! I know we are geographically distant. But, thanks to technology, we can talk quite often. In these five years we have both grown up, Sis.

I have been writing a thesis in electronic letters to our father and others. The overarching theme of this thesis is about virginity and why it has become such an important concept in my life. You might be surprised that I have been writing about sex talk and how silent it is in our family. Now, in this letter, I am writing to you with another dimension of sex. I hope you do not mind if I disclose some private issues or secrets with you and let my Examiners read them all together. The first secret happened almost three decades ago before I welcomed the teenage time of my life, Sis. **It was my naïve fear.**

*I am playing hide and seek in my bedroom at our house with other friends who live nearby. I am under a blanket with a girl. The blanket hides what happens underneath it. We turned our faces toward each other. Our lips touch. It is a strange sensation. I feel awkward but simultaneously indescribably good.*

*This girl and I stop when the blanket is pulled aside by other playmates. After that situation, we never talked about it, ever!*

I was unsure at the time, but I think this is called a kiss. It might sound romantic. But Sis, can you guess what I felt afterwards?

*From that moment and a month afterwards, I am utterly terrified! Whenever I am in our dad's car and turns into our street, a scene of a police car parked in front of our house appears in my mind.*

You might frown and ask what's the connection between a police car and kissing a girl?' It seems odd. But trust me, they were connected.

'Sex' in our family is vague, like a secret under a carpet of silence. This is the metaphor I used in a previous letter, but it does not mean the things called sex can't pervade our house. Before learning about sex education in the classroom, I learned something through media and films. At that time, in Thai TV series, movies, and even Western ones, there were frequent loves scenes with male and female actors. They kissed each other, and then they turned toward the bed. The camera then shifted the focus, maybe to the lamp on the nightstand, and the screen froze on that object before cutting to a different scene. Later, the female character would be revealed to be pregnant with symptoms including vomiting after smelling foods that used to smell pleasant. Pregnancy could demand the male character to be responsible for the woman and child by getting married.

Being young I could not understand what action impregnated a girl. In the movies it seemed that kissing could cause pregnancy. The police car represented that they might visit our house and force me to be responsible.

I held this fear for some time until, I think, after a few months it was clear that that girl under the blanket was not with a child. I realised that a kiss alone cannot cause pregnancy and some other actions are required. That is why I have called it my naïve fear. It might be funny looking back but, Sis, those were fearful months for me. I suppose this kiss happened around the time that school had a lesson that demystified my naïve understanding.

To add academic sense, I wrote earlier about Foucault's writing that children and adolescents are in the 'web of discourse' receiving knowledge when educators/teachers or family come to 'speak of and speak to about sex' (1978, 30). They were introducing us to the concept of 'sex'.

Echoing Foucault, Gagnon and Simon wrote that during puberty, 'the hormonal changes are not directional in terms of a necessary outcome in developing masculine or feminine structure.' Puberty is the time that 'society at large (parents, peers, schools, and media) recognizes and imposes on the conventional sexual capacity of the individual (2017, 35-36)'. In my understanding, Sis, society and institutions come to impose ideas and knowledge about sex on children. It is not only limited to school but also through films and TV series that these messages about 'sex' are circulated. All these discourses offer messages for Thai adolescents, you, I, and other Thai teenagers to experience.

Imposing ideas about sex to children seems to be an important task. Our father once told me that sexual education is supposed to be the school's responsibility. I think there is an exception.

Orrathai Rhucharoenpornpanich and colleagues conducted a survey and in-depth interviews among the participants in the Bangkok Metropolis area, our hometown, in 2012. From their statistical analysis, some Thai parents discussed sex with teens, and some did not. So, it seems that some Thai parents might be more open and talk more about it. Common topics such as body changes were discussed. However, the topic of 'what sexual intercourse is', 'not having sex until older', STIs, and condoms/birth control pills were never mentioned, or mentioned once or twice (2012, 385). Personally, the data focused on the frequency of communication, but the quality of the sexual discussion seems unclear.

I never asked if your all-girls school taught you about this topic or how they taught their students. Did you talk with Mom about the female body? It did not happen between me and dad. So, school was one of the central official institutions providing me with the discourses and knowledge of sex, especially via **Sex education**. Do you know that sex education can also be taught with different approaches?

In this letter, I would like to demonstrate my story and links to the influence of this sex educational lesson. Some research articles or theoretical ideas will be shared along the way. Hopefully, I will make it digestible for us.

The definition of sexuality education, or *Phet-Withi Suksa* (เพศวิถีศึกษา), by the Student Protection Centre in 2015, summarised by UNICEF, is the process of learning about sexual matters that seem necessary for individuals and assisting them in a happy and safe sexual life. Sexual matters include the body and mind, anatomy, health care and hygiene, sexual attitudes and values, relationships and culture, and more (2016, 1).

You and I have learned about this class in school. In our time, it was called *Phet Suka* or Sex Education (เพศศึกษา). It was included as a part of the health and physical education subject. The concept of Phet will be discussed further in the following letter.

Thaweessit and Boonmongkon's paper summarised the different approaches to sexuality education, including conservative and liberal ones. The liberal pedagogy and its curricula are aimed at enabling adolescents to make their own choices regarding their sexual behaviour and to promote analytical and comprehensive thinking. On the contrary, the conservative focus is on controlling sexuality to deter what is considered inappropriate sexual behaviour, such as premarital sex (2011).

Can you speculate what approaches were mainly used in Thailand during our school times and what is used nowadays? But the more interesting part is how sex was created by it, Sis. There is another story when I was in high school, I would like to share.

*"Hot news!" My friend speak excitedly while we are walking to a cafeteria at lunch break. A that time, my school has changed from all-boys to mixed-gender.*

*Footsteps quicken. A group of four or five gather round. The upper parts of their bodies lean in so they could easily hear what is coming next.*

*"What is it?" Someone asks.*

*"Shhhhh! Be quiet. Rumour has it that yesterday evening, a guy from room X and a girl from room Y did something in the toilet at the auditorium building".*

*There are various responses, including 'Really?', 'What happens next?', 'Do they get caught?'*

Engaging in gossip is generally enjoyable. It carries the sense of belonging to a friend's group. But at that moment the young me could not understand why those students needed to engage in sexual behaviours, especially in school. I heard some teachers were on the lookout for students' sexual activity in secluded areas of school. Some were caught in the act. Teachers seem to send a clear message that sex in school is prohibited. It could lead to many problems. However, the disapproval of sexual activity during school age does not mean that all Thai boys and girls will comply or hold to its values, like this young couple who surreptitiously engaged in it.

If I could ask you, Sis, I would like to know if you heard gossip like this in your school? Even though we are in the same family and similar culture, how our selves - our subjectivity - is formulated and experienced is influenced by those surrounding us. This is why I and other friends hold similar or different values towards 'sex'.

This is something novel I have learned that I was not taught in psychology. It is the theories, perhaps philosophy, of **poststructuralism**. Have you heard about poststructuralism? Before I continue, please allow me to share with you. My Examiners might need to know what I understand about this school of thought.

Catherine Belsey's book helped me engage with this theory. Poststructuralism, generally speaking, is the group of theories that pinpoint that consciousness is not the origin of the language we speak and the images we recognise (2002, 5). That might be confusing, I know. When I first read it, I felt perplexed and lost. It was against what I had learned. These parts of Belsey's work help me understand this school of thought more.

*The subject is in the first place the subject of a sentence, the agent of a verb, and the figure that says 'I'... I am in that sense a source of initiatives, actions, decisions and choices. But at the same time the subject is subjected to the meanings and sentence structure that language permits (2002, 37).*

Poststructuralism informed me, Sis, that the subject's status, you or me, can be both agent and subjected being. We are produced by knowledge or idea. Poststructuralism questions that consciousness is the origin. Instead, it is an effect of signification (2002, 66). It flips my worldview that there might be something that precedes my consciousness. The language I was taught is the main transmitter carrying knowledge, values, or culture and norms. Perhaps language is the medium that provides me with the understanding of many concepts, such as gender, sexuality, or even 'sex'. Meaning, cultures, and norms, according to Belsey, are the force that controls us, me, and you, and inculcate obedience to the discipline inscribed in them.

I, you and other Thai students who view sex differently not only come from our consciousness that these are my beliefs or values, but we are the 'subjected being' - that many discourses and norms inform and shape how we think, believe, feel, etc. This web of discourses or ideologies means that each person can take a different position.

*At that moment, that female student who had surreptitious coitus in a toilet was perceived, in my opinion, to behave inappropriately.*

*'It is misconduct, and she might get into trouble,' I judged, shaking my head with disapproval, but continuing to listen to my friend's gossip. These students were not good or well-behaved. They would definitely not be friends that I would choose to hang out with.*

*Later, the consequences of this scandalous incident were unclear. I heard my friends say that both were asked to relocate to another school. Some rumours were that they were still in school but on parole. Some said later that she was with a child.*

These snippets of gossip and rumours revolved around the concept of sex. My response, which represents my thoughts and feelings if looking from a poststructuralist lens, might emerge from the discourse that Thai society, through school and family, provides the understanding of 'sex'. If you look closely, you might see the idea of what is appropriate, inappropriate, or good and bad for students when I grew up was constituted and perpetuated in Thai society through my responses.

So, what does society say (discourses) about students' behaviours which influence my reluctance to befriend those females and males who have sex in school? Or why I was worried that the girl I kissed might be pregnant. This is my recollection of what society conveyed about sex in school and beyond. You and I might hear in the present day that some of it is considered traditional Thai value.

There is a common proverb that is used in daily conversation, textbooks '*Yar-Ching-Suk-Kon-Ham*' (อย่าชิงสุกก่อนห่าม) or 'Do not hasten to ripen before being nearly ripe first'. This is the one that connects with sexual intercourse. I found the translation by Mahamontree quite helpful (2014, 25). The explanation is that there are three fruit stages, from unripe to ripe. The fruits are picked from the tree by a farmer for the ripening process, but the taste will not be as good and sweet as those allowed to ripen on its tree. This nature of fruits seems metaphorically to parallel early sexual intercourse. Thai people, especially girls or women, therefore, are traditionally taught not to have sex and to keep their virginity until the right time/the ripe time.

The impression I took from films and movies, if you remember, left me terrified pregnancy would follow for the girl I kissed. Another of the recurrent plots in media concerns a female character who has an unplanned pregnancy. A TV drama called 'Innocent' or *Kwa Ja Roo Dieng Sa* (กว่าจะรู้เดียงสา), is a good example. This drama, broadcast on many platforms, tells the tragic story of Thip, a sixteen-year-old rich girl who met Chaiya, a playboy, in school. He falls for her beauty and flirts with her. Inexperienced in love, they went on a date, and one thing led to another. She got pregnant. Ashamed, Thip decided to run away from her family and became a prostitute to make ends meet. Eventually, she gave birth and committed suicide (Sammabat 2000).

In other dramas I have seen, a female character with an unplanned pregnancy sometimes decides to have an 'underground' abortion. There is blood and screaming, creating a horrifying experience for the audience.

The rumour of the girl in my school echoed this theme. I heard that that after she found out she was pregnant, the girl had a medical abortion. Some said she used other methods.

I never discovered the truth. They might all only be rumours, but whatever the facts this was not a movie. It was real life. Looking at all these messages from movies or Thai proverbs now, I can't help but think that the portrayal of sex is inevitably connected to many negative consequences for students' lives. I also cross-checked with the handbook of health and sexual education in Thailand from The Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education (ONIE). This is what I found, Sis.

The content, written in Thai, is about contemplating sexual intercourse. A woman who has coitus is warned of the public rumour, unplanned pregnancy, and being dumped by a guy who impregnates her after sexual intercourse. The readers were asked in the handbook, if a person decides to lose virginity, how can one know that guy will truly be a life partner? (ONIE 2011, 60).

In terms of unplanned pregnancy, the consequences were extensively explained with the ripple effect on three levels. On an individual level, there are feelings of shame, guilt, or suicide attempts. In addition, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) can be passed by

unprotected sexual contact. Underground abortion potentially causes fertility issues or complications in future pregnancies. At the family level, especially on the female side, the mother will be primarily responsible for the child. The parents' forgiveness and understanding are crucial for the pregnant teenagers' mentality. The third level is the society and nation. Government expenditure might be diverted into supporting the welfare of pregnant teenagers and their offspring (ONIE 2011, 60-61).

It is not only Thai women who may suffer negative consequences. Men who cause impregnation can also face condemnation from the female's family if they reject the legitimization of the child. Potentially, a male could be publicly perceived as irresponsible and shameful or even face a lawsuit.

Let's revisit the first memory I shared with you when I kissed that girl and the aftermath with my fear of pregnancy and a police car. If kissing can cause pregnancy, as my younger self believed, it sounds terrifying with a considerable responsibility. What will our parents say or do to me? What punishment would I receive? Could I be responsible for a child? Definitely not. Would my parents hate me? It is pretty evident that the young me was terrified of the consequences of unplanned pregnancy. Do you see, my writing and stories seemed to repeat the message about sex that I was given, heard or taught from both media and in the classroom. The message was all about the negative consequences of sex.

One of the conclusions reported from UNICEF is that sexuality education in Thai educational institutions is centred on reducing or preventing the incidence of unwanted pregnancy among youth (2016, 41). One teacher spelled out the negative consequences of sex during school.

*It could make their parents sad or if they get pregnant and need to have an abortion, they might get a serious infection and even die. I try to speak in extreme terms to make the kids afraid (2016, 11).*

Thaweessit and Boonmongkon observed that these sexuality policies in Thailand perhaps derived from a need to 'solve problems' and were initially intended to protect Thai teenagers from prostitution and later to solve sexual behaviour problems, such as unplanned pregnancy, teen birth, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases. Due to such policy objectives, the government's sexual education curricula and pedagogy still focus primarily on guidelines for controlling sexual behaviours. (2011, 50)

Thai policy towards teenagers, in my view, resonates with the policy of sexual abstinence in the United States. Neil McArthur summarized the idea that young people are believed to be less able to consider consequences, control their impulses or resist peer pressure, which can lead to risky sexual behaviour. Unplanned pregnancies are an issue in the United States that requires support (2022, 69).

There have been some changes in sex education in Thailand, Sis. Present-day Thailand is better than it was, with more channels for communicating about sexual matters, and sex education is more comprehensive than it used to be (Thaweessit & Boonmongkon 2011, 51). It is leaning more towards a liberal approach. However, the number of schools teaching the new approach of sex education curriculums is 'a mere drop in the bucket (2011, 48)'. The

conservative approach to sexuality education is still influential in Thailand's societal and educational milieu.

Another interesting finding from UNICEF is that Thai sexuality education class teachers rarely mention the positive aspects of sex (2016, 33). This aspect seemed absent when I was growing up. Also, they found that in many schools, sexuality education is a lower priority than other curriculum areas (2016, 26). This makes me think of the time I was in school. When the school timetable needed to provide extra hours for important activities or ceremonies, Health or Sex education classes, along with Guidance classes, were suspended or shortened.

I think that confirms the priority given to this class. Did your school manage like this as well, Sis? Apart from emphasising the dangers of sex, sex education and perhaps society in general also provide the knowledge of how we should properly behave. In the first letter I wrote, Sis, I introduced the term Brahmacharya (พรหมจรรย์). It is the first stage of a student's life in education. During learning years (0-25 years), sexual intercourse seemed to be prohibited. The main task for student's lives was dedication to study. Likewise, the social mores in Thailand up to the present day, Thaweest and Boonmongkon wrote, still hold that students should remain single and that their main duty is to study, refraining from sex during their schooling years which is deemed the appropriate behaviour (2011, 50).

In Thai health education textbooks, it seems that the tools that the government/Thai State provide in the discourse on sex education aim to determine the state of gender behaviour. The ideal image of a Thai woman is that of an archetypal homemaker wife. Women are taught and informed how to behave modestly in society, staying at home, looking after things, and doing household chores. Written in Thai, Pannaporn Theppanich's article 'Keep Your Virginity to be a Good Thai Girl: The Impacts of Sexual Identity from State Sexual Education Programs' stated that the ideal image of Thai women includes the homemaker, 'Rak Nuan Sanguan Tua' and 'Yar-Ching-Suk-Kon-Ham' attitudes which are repeatedly produced to formulate the propriety of gender roles, especially for Thai ladies (2016).

I already described the word Yar-Ching-Suk-Kon-Ham. Another proverb specifically for women is called '*Rak Nuan Sanguan Tua* (รักนวลสงวนตัว)' It signifies the idea that traditional Thai women are encouraged to follow the mainstream frame of sexuality by being reserved and preserve their chastity. They ought to dress appropriately and should not travel unchaperoned. For young women, expressing sexual desires or interest in the opposite sex was discouraged. These actions would be socially condemned (Reargkeaw 2006; Boonmongkon et al., 2013). I believe these maxims reinforced the idea of virginity to us, Sis, to keep their virginity until the right time, which is after marriage.

I think this Thai belief also resonates with what Claudia Winkler wrote about the benefit of sexual restraint during courtship. It prevents unplanned pregnancy and allows both parties to explore characters, habits, and tastes before deciding they are worthy of a lifelong commitment. Sex creates sexual bonding that could interfere with and increase the chance of an unstable marriage (2005, 18)

Earlier 'sex' then carries a negative connotation. Premarital sex is prohibited and could bring shame and disgrace. When Thai women, especially during school, have sex, the colloquial

expression is the term *Rad* (มรด) or *Rarn* (รารน) or slutty in the offensive English term. This means that this is not a good woman, and perhaps this is why the young me detested the idea of female students who have coitus in school. They were supposed to study, like I did. Refraining from sex and focusing on studying were the right things to do. My response reflected what Thai society said about good and bad gender behaviours.

From the sexual education textbook/classroom where our dad placed the responsibility to be the main source of sex education, through the stories and scandalous gossip to the Thai proverbs in daily life, the significant message I took, and you start to see, is that sex can do more harm than good. The emphasis was on sex and pregnancy, and the need to protect yourself from those risks during school years. Sex seems to be an inappropriate act which needs to be refrained from. The focus on studying and abstinence is more appreciated and reinforced. My worldview reflected what messages/discourse Thai society shapes or defines as sex to students, including me, you and many Thai students. It might not cause fear to every student in school, but it is apparent throughout my stories, I was one of the students who were influenced by this information, Sis.

Theppanich addressed that these traditional ideal images are quite contradictory to the realities of today's modern sexual relationship (2016, 128). Using a postmodernist perspective, Boonmongkon and colleagues wrote that a person's subjectivity is not necessarily fixed and coherent; rather, it is fluid, influenced by a person's upbringing or their position within a complex system of discourses, which sometimes may contradict or compete with each other. This means that discourses about Thai women can be 'clashed' (2013, 1163).

Perhaps this clash is between the traditional frame valuing virginity and the modern one, of more freedom, that Thai women - you, Sis, and my other girlfriends - have experienced and need to negotiate. Both discourses are influential for Thai women.

I found an article from Supametaporn and colleagues, who used grounded theory to explore in 2010 how Thai women managed to avoid heterosexual intercourse and maintain their virginity for 'the right time'. Thai women in this paper do not allow opportunities for sexual intercourse to occur, such as being in a secluded place with their partner. The selected 'right time' for these women can be 'after graduation, after establishing a career or after getting married' (2010, 747). I think this is an example of how Thai women negotiate for themselves regarding their right time.

I think you might recognise from my writing so far that Thai society seems to provide slightly different 'sexual scripts' regarding sex and virginity to men and women. The undesirable consequences of sexual intercourse appear to be specifically placed on women, whereas Thai men seem to receive less attention. Men who had premarital sex and impregnated women could also be viewed negatively, but compared to Thai women, the effect seemed disproportionately light.

For Thai men, there is a specific colloquial term called *Kuen Kru* (กวนครู). The sexual meaning of this term is the time the Thai men have first sexual intercourse with the experienced woman or the prostitute. 'Kru or ครู' in Thai means teacher. I believe it implies that the experienced woman will give the inexperienced boy his first sexual experience. It is unclear how

I learned this concept. It seems to circulate in a group of friends, society or even erotic films. You might hear this term, too, Sis. However, for Thai women, Kuen Kru seems impossible and incompatible. Nevertheless, there are other places or tribes in the world where first coitus or the virginity loss of a woman needs to be practised by an elder, priest or holy man before the husband. It came from Sigmund Freud's article, the taboo of virginity.

Have you known him, Sis? Most psychology students, like me, must learn his renowned theory. Interestingly, based on the anthropological data, Freud observed that a woman was viewed as someone who can be mysterious, strange and incomprehensible from a man, and the first coitus with them is altogether taboo (1981, 4). The woman could portray hostility or frigidity towards her husband. Women were believed to have the capacity to paralyse a man's strength, bringing bad luck, which is why mock intercourse occurs with the representative of the husband (1981, 7).

Personally, this is very novel, but Freud also reinstated that in civilised society, virginity is highly valued. Women influenced by societal milieu and education are taught to build up their resistance, waiting for the man who firstly satisfies her desire for love and deflowers her, which results in the woman's bondage, binding her lastingly to the man (1981, 11).

Back in our country, I genuinely truly believe that some Thai women no longer follow the traditional gender roles, regarding virginity. However, the influences of its discourse might still have an impact to some extent. Women who maintain virginity until 'the right time' still exist but, perhaps, are rarer. Premarital sex is more commonly in Thai films and media. Still, some Thai conservative families might hold to it firmly.

I wonder, Sis, what is your position/idea regarding virginity? Do you lean more conservative or liberal, and what about the past? Don't worry; it is your private affair. I am only writing/thinking out loud. Our house seems to be quite traditional and conservative. Perhaps this could explain the disparity between raising Thai boys- me- and girls- you. Growing up, I was allowed to stay over with friends more frequently than you, Sis. Staying over might require more questions from parents, including who will join and where you will stay. It was for safety reasons, but I believe this is implicitly relatable to gender as a girl/woman.

While crafting this thesis, I found this quote from Richard Troiden. I am moved by it. I wrote to my supervisor that I was unsure where to weave it in my inquiry/letters. I think I found the right spot.

*"People learn to be sexual pretty much as they learn everything else. Women and men are born with an open-minded, diffuse and relatively fluid capacity for bodily pleasure that is shaped and expressed through sexual scripts. From the gender role socialization, men and women are taught differently regarding sexuality (1989, 44)."*

The more I read articles about virginity and wrote and rewrote these letters, the more I started to realize that I grew up with the unfairness or double standard between Thai boys/men and girls/women. It seems, to me, virginity or Phrommajan and what society teaches women/girls is somehow limiting and controlling, whereas men comparatively gain more freedom. Even the Freud's article about taboo of virginity, it might have unconventional

perspective aspect towards virginity. But as you see, Sis, the woman's sexuality and virginity - both to be kept for her husband or for the representative- were needed to be control and disciplined (1981). There seemed to be a lack of right in woman's body. It represents gender oppression and control under a patriarchal society. I believe it is not only in Thailand but in many countries. Some countries or some cultures still hold virginity to the extreme.

Açisi wrote that there are countries where females' sexuality and body have been under the control of a patriarchal society and the virginity norm (2015, 430). For example, in Turkey, one of the Islamic countries, losing virginity before marriage is a condemnation and dishonour to the family, metaphorically called a stain on the family. This can result in severe or fatal punishment towards females called 'honour killing'. In Turkey, therefore, there is a blooded-sheet test after the marriage night, which is the way to check the bride's purity. (2015, 432). That seems more severe and dangerous than the situation in Thailand.

For Western countries, I am thinking about the Carpenter's virginity metaphors in the USA, which I described earlier to my Examiners. Carpenter wrote that historically, US men have been encouraged to frame virginity as a stigma, to be got rid of, whereas women treat it as a gift. Some men and women in the US might take an opposite view of these virginity metaphors in their own life. Still, men were more likely to favour the 'stigma' than women (2005, 109). So, virginity for men is more likely to be something negative that needs to be shed away, whereas, for women, it is something precious to gift.

In Sweden, Milles and colleagues write, the mainstream norm is to promote sexual freedom in all genders/sexes as long as individuals are responsible for their actions. Still, the patriarchal discourse is running in parallel with the Swedish culture, where young women are expected to be virgins when they marry (2018, 295-296). The clash of discourses, perhaps, happens everywhere.

Even the concept of premarital abstinence which was once valued and beneficial is now questioned and counterargued by McArthur, that sex before marriage might help women ensure sexual compatibility before committing to a serious relationship and be satisfied with a partner for long-term relationships (2022, 71). I also hear this perspective more often with Thai girlfriends.

Well, to resist the patriarchal society and the double standard between genders, the concept of virginity inevitably needs to be challenged or in McArthur's terms, 'abolished', because it is one of the tools that are used to restrict and control female agency. Thai women, I believe, should earn more freedom, not endure a double standard compared to men.

This comes to the last part of our letter, Sis, as I write and realise that the concept of virginity or refraining from sexual intercourse seems to be praised and cherished during school years and beyond, mainly in Thai women. Thai sex education seems to be developing, but it is not perfect, and some areas still need improvement. Still, the main messages via sexuality education seemed to inform that sex is 'bad' and virginity is seemingly 'good'. There are also the traditional and liberal discourses of sex that clash with each other.

There is one point that you might frown upon and would like to challenge me. I am a Thai boy/man who might be able to evade the concept of virginity. Sexual intercourse is not

perceived as 'bad' for men, and there is less expectation in society to remain a virgin before marriage for Thai men. The discourse of sex for Thai men seemed to be more relaxed and open.

So why did I side with and internalise what society says about Thai women's gender? Why is the idea of virginity held tightly? I valued it. If virginity is criticised as an oppression, does it mean I oppressed myself? Why? It must be something deeper. Or could there be other experiences or discourses that cast a shadow over me or my subjectivity?

It will be my journey to explore these questions in the next letters, Sis. But one thing that came to my mind is the word black sheep. I wonder if you heard it before. You know that I was not simply a Thai boy/man, but I am gay, Sis.

This is not an ordinary letter written from a brother to a sister. It combines both personal and academic elements. The secrets I share might relate to 'sex', but I hope the content will not create any discomfort for you.

Love you from big brother,

**To: Grandma**

**CC: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: Gay, Blacksheep, and Christianity**

**Dear Khun Ya**

I never wrote - or had no chance to write - any letters to you. How are you? Studying the doctoral programme in Edinburgh has been very challenging since the first day here. Coursework and the struggle with client work have drawn many tears. Apart from professional struggles, I cried because of love too. I fell for many guys here. Grandma, your grandson is gay.

I have never come out directly to you, but you must already have known. In this letter, I want to introduce you to a guy I care about. His name is Tul. He is one of my closest gay friends with whom I find solace. By the way, Grandma, this is my doctoral thesis, and this letter could be assessed by my Examiners.

I am inquiring why I held my virginity very tight. You might be confused how introducing Tul will help me or my Examiners to understand virginity. Writing about Tul could help me explore three related concepts: Christianity, being gay and virginity. Hopefully, this letter will gradually unpick or challenge them altogether.

I wrote to my sister, your granddaughter, in the previous letter, and I ended with the words 'black sheep'. Grandma, I believe this analogy was inspired not directly by you but by Christianity. Before clarifying this term, let me start from a memory I had with Tul on **Easter Day 2023**.

*Easter in our family is the annual gathering at the family cemetery in Bangkok. Dad and Mom buy flowers from the market. We spend time cutting stems, making bouquets, and placing them on each ancestral tombstone.*

In my understanding, burial in a cemetery is a Thai Protestant Christian tradition, whereas many Thai Buddhists prefer the cremation process. Since I came to Scotland, I could not join this family ritual. But this Easter in 2023 was slightly different.

*A friend of mine visited Edinburgh, Tul, and we planned to visit some good restaurants. My feelings have grown from friendship into romance, but only on my side. He recently broke up with his partner, so I planned to confess my feelings to him during his visit.*

Grandma, do you think that is a good idea?

*'My family calls me to greet Easter'. Tul tells me on Easter morning. I freely allow him to receive a call in my room.*

I am Thai, but his nationality is not – somewhere else in Asia. Both of us identify ourselves as gay. Despite identifying with the same word, I wonder if my 'gay' and his 'gay' are similar in each country. So, contextualisation or exploration of the word 'gay' could be helpful, at

least for my Examiners who read this letter along with you. Perhaps you might also want to know about this term, Grandma.

When I came to Edinburgh and referred to myself as ‘gay’, sometimes I encountered texts or comments that ‘gay’ needed to be followed by either ‘man’ or ‘woman’ such as ‘I am a gay man’.

This experience made me see clearer that in English, gender and sexuality seem to be separated. Gay or lesbian seems to be located in the area of sexuality, whereas man and woman are in the gender. Meg-John Barker stated in the Good Practice Across a Counselling Profession handbook that there might be a cultural variation in that some cultures do not separate gender and sexuality in the same way as Western countries. Or some cultures might have more than two genders (2019, 12). Perhaps the understanding of ‘gay’ can be different in each country.

Whenever considering the ideas of gender, sexuality, and poststructuralism, the doctoral course in Edinburgh introduced many thinkers. Among them is Foucault, especially in his History of Sexuality book. In Foucault’s writing, there are cultural differences between erotic arts (Ars Erotica) and sexual science (Scientia Sexualis) in contemporary Western societies. After reading Foucault’s first chapters, I wrote to my supervisor, Jonathan Wyatt: ‘Something is known and pondered, but my understanding hardly becomes concrete’. I struggled to understand Foucault’s writing, Grandma.

I found help in engaging with and digesting Foucault through Peter Jackson, whose many publications are about Thailand’s culture, gender, and sexuality. Jackson’s work deciphered Foucault’s writing and postulated the ‘taken-for-granted’ concept of Thai sexuality. That word is **Phet (เพศ)**.

*...If identity is constituted within discourse, and if Asian gender/sex discourses are distinct from Western discourses, then Asian subjectivities are not reducible to Western forms of sexual identity. If this is true, then in Thailand the ‘objects’ of this inquiry are not sexual identities, but rather varieties of what in Thai discourses are called Phet (เพศ) or eroticised genders (Jackson 2000, 407).*

Phet in Thailand, according to Jackson, depicts an unclear break between gender and sexuality. Growing up in Thailand, I know that Phet is a word Thai people commonly used in daily life. It represents the identity of *Puu-chai* (man) or *Puu-Ying* (woman). Apart from men and women, there are lesbians, gay, tom, dee, and kathoey, etc that represent other Thai identities, which could be collectively called the third gender or *Phet tee Saam* (เพศที่สาม) or LGBTQ+ in English. Jackson continued.

*Within this local discourse, gay and Kathoey are not distinguished as a sexuality and a gender, respectively. Rather, gay and Kathoey, together with man, woman, tom and dee, are collectively labelled as different varieties of Phet (2000, 415).*

Jackson's observation echoed the statements of Kittiteerasack, Matthew and Park, a group of researchers who developed Thai questionnaires about sexual stigma in 2021. They wrote that Thai indigenous culture has identified sexual and gender categories as '*Pheet*' (เพศ)

It seems that all Thai gender/sex categories continue to be understood in terms of 'Phet/Pheet'. Either Phet or Pheet, the meanings are the same in Thai. This term encapsulated the constructs of sexual difference (male v female), gender difference (masculine v feminine) and sexuality (heterosexual v homosexual) within a single formation (Jackson 2000, 414). But to prevent confusion for foreign Examiners, Grandma, I will use Phet (เพศ) throughout my letters.

Phet is an essential element of understanding. It explains why I do not add 'man' whenever I use the word 'gay' (เกย์). In most Thai official documents, there are only male and female boxes to tick, so I still choose male Phet. Personally, gay is Phet, which includes gender and sexuality within a single word.

Do you also know, Grandma, that there is an important continuity of the word Phet in Thailand? Thai feminist scholars coined the terms *Phet-Saphap* (เพศสภาพ) or *Phet-Saphawa* (เพศสภาพ), translated as gender denoting Phet condition or status, in the 1990s. Later in the first decade of the 2000s, there was a word called Phet-Withi (เพศวิถี) to denote sexuality. Phet-Withi, or the path/direction of Phet, seems to be based on the English-language expression 'sexual orientation' (Jackson & Duangwises 2017).

Nowadays, it seems to me there is an effort to differentiate between Thai genders (Phet-Saphap) and Thai sexuality (Phet-Withi). This distinction may be found mainly in Thai academic writing. I am unsure if other Thai friends or others fully understand the differences when identifying their gender and sexuality. I believe the word Phet is still an important keyword that represents the overlapping of Thai gender and sexuality. What I have written so far is very academic, Grandma, but I think it is useful.

I never asked Tul if he perceives his gay identity to be divided clearly between gender and sexuality. Is it a blurred boundary like mine? But for a Thai gay, me at least, especially in all these letters, 'gay' is the inclusive term of my *Phet*.

There is another point about gays that I can share with you. I know that the word 'gay' originates from the West. Since I was born, many Thai words have represented whosoever is neither man nor woman. Kathoey (กะเทย) is the broad and common word that represents those who do not fit into those two Phets (men and women). I refused to identify myself as Kathoey. It did not sit well with me. But the word gay seemed right. I have no clue how this word came to Thailand. Peter Jackson's paper observed the emergence of this term in our country, and I found it quite historically interesting. I believe neither you, me, or my Examiners may know about this.

According to Jackson, the word 'gay' seemed to emerge first in the Thai press in 1965. The Thai Rath, a famous Thai newspaper, reported a den of men who sell themselves and who call themselves 'gay'. In late 1965, gay was not in general use in Bangkok's sexual subculture and was perhaps restricted to Thai men who had relations with homosexual expatriates. But by the early 1970s, it had become the preferred self-reference term among many actively

homosexual men in Bangkok (1999a,389). So, this word immigrated to Thailand almost twenty years before I was born.

Before the emergence of gay, Kathoey was used to identify those cross-dressing male transvestites, male hustlers and masculine homosexual men who do not cross-dress (Jackson 1999a, 387). The Kathoey who is more masculine is called Kathoey Pu-chai (กะเทยผู้ชาย) or the second type of Kathoey which seems to be a subcategory of Kathoey.

Jackson pinpointed that these types of Kathoey disappeared from the language of Thai identities. The terms were certainly unfamiliar to me. The term 'gay', Jackson wrote, appeared to supplant the category of masculine Kathoey, an existing indigenous category, rather than to mark a new phenomenon. It might be the reason why Jackson wrote that the origin of gay identity in Thailand is a hybrid. It is linguistic, not cultural, borrowing from the West. Gay identity does not displace or destroy the feminine/effeminate Kathoey (1999,397).

That's why, in my understanding, Kathoey nowadays refers to men who desires to be a woman and someone who undertakes gender affirmation surgery. Gay seemed to represent the homosexual men who has no wish to alter genitals. Honestly, I was not sure if the word gay I call myself is either hybrid or not, according to what Jackson wrote. But personally, gay is the type of homosexual man who likely dresses like men and relates sexually – romantically - with another man. It is the common thing between me and Tul. We both like other men or gay, and this is why I was attracted to him and wished we could be more than platonic friends. This has been a small introduction to the history of Thai gay identity that I traced back. The evolution and fluidity of Kathoey and gay continue, Grandma, but now let me share what happened next with Tul.

*Tul is still on the phone. I am waiting in the hallway outside. I hear his voice through my door. Student accommodation isn't very soundproof. Private business can sometimes be a public matter.*

*He finishes his call about half an hour later. Tul asks me about my usual Easter plans. I tell him about my rituals for the cemetery, flowers, and family gatherings. Tul's response is loud and clear.*

*'Religions are like brainwashing'. I could not hide my surprise.*

At that time, I had known Tul for a year, but we rarely discussed religious beliefs. His family members pressured him to attend church and read the Bible, even after he came to the UK. That was one of the reasons he felt reluctant to call his family during this religious festival.

Coming from an Asian country where religion strongly prohibits homoeroticism, Tul has not come out to his parents, concealing his status and only disclosing it with trusted friends. I am fortunately included, and that is why we became friends. Religion is another common ground between me and Tul. We both grew up with the influences of Christianity.

Did you know, Grandma, that 1.2 per cent of the Thai population, according to the Department of Religious Affairs, is Christian? That's approximately eight hundred thousand, whereas 92.5 per cent is Buddhist (2021, as cited in the U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Thailand 2022). Within Christianity, there are two influential denominations: Catholicism and

Protestantism. The former is colloquially called *Christung* (คริสต์ตั้ง), and the latter is *Christian* (คริสต์เดียน).

One way my life differs from Tul's is that you, Grandma, encouraged me to attend the Protestant church though I never felt pressured by you even though you are a devoted Christian. Dad is also relaxed and chilled about attending church. Perhaps our family is a bi-religious household with Buddhism and Protestantism. Maybe it is simply that Tul's family is more religious than ours.

Despite the relaxing vibe about Christianity, I felt that I was the odd one out as I could not discern if there was any person in our church who embodied the same Phet/identity as me. This is why I perceive myself as a black sheep or *Gae Dam* (แกะดำ). I wrote about these experiences before. I published a chapter called autoethnography a few years ago during COVID time. Autoethnography is a research methodology I learned since I came here, Grandma. I will write more detail in another letter. You do not have to know much about that methodology in this letter. Instead, I shall share some of what I wrote in my published chapter.

It began with a cartoon Bible in your bedroom. I enjoyed reading it, Grandma. In the book of Genesis, God creates Adam and Eve, the first man and woman in the world. But there was no room for Adam and any other guy (Sahassanon 2022, 40). Can Adam have affection towards another man, or can he embody some femininity like Eve? At church, the young me was the odd one out. No one seemed to be like me. Looking back, what do you think I would feel, Grandma?

This could be one of the reasons that I metaphorically call myself a black lamb/sheep or *Gae Dam*. For Christians, this animal is normally represented in the picture of Jesus as the shepherd. The black sheep then means the one who deviates from others. This is the backbone of my chapter, where I repeatedly ask God why I was created this way (Sahassanon 2022).

I grew up with this sense of alienation. But still, I truly love God, you know. Towards the end of my chapter, I wrote that I found friendship in straight and gay companions. This is how I ended that chapter.

*Still, he (I) might not fully answer the question of why God created him as a black sheep/gay, but throughout this paper and his everyday life, he was never truly alone (2022, 46).*

I believe there must be a reason why I was born gay, and I shall continue living, but it seems to me that Tul's answer about brainwashing Christianity seemed very strong. Hearing this unexpected answer, I asked him why he thought that way.

*Tul recites to me a list of verses from the Bible about homosexuality. He tells me these verses has made him doubtful and uncomfortable around this religion. Honestly, I am surprised by his good memory, and how he could accurately recite these verses, which I hardly remember. Perhaps it shows how religious he once was. With disbelief, I follow his directions. Before heading out for our food tour in Edinburgh, I search the same verses, again, in the Thai Bible. I am shocked.*

These are bible verses I found, Grandma.

*Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable (Leviticus 18:22).*

*Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:29-32).*

Is it true, Grandma? I searched the history of Christianity, and since its beginning, most Christians have regarded homosexuality as morally wrong and sinful. This led to the position being upheld today by most mainstream denominations worldwide, including Catholic, Orthodox, and most Evangelical Protestant (Subhi & Geelan 2012, 1383). This was my first time hearing of this branch of Protestant Christianity. Trammell wrote a statement that captured this condemnation.

*The notion that Christian faith is incompatible with homosexuality is so dominant in evangelicalism that "gay Christian" is considered oxymoron at best, and heresy at worst (2015, 3).*

Another resource I found is from Kubicek and colleagues, who used mixed-method research about religiosity, resilience and internalised homophobia in young Los Angeles men who have sex with men (YMSM). The homophobic messages that YMSM in this paper experienced came from the church through sermons or statements such as 'Gays are sinful and going to hell' (2009, 611).

In my understanding, homophobic messages are statements that devalue people who are not heterosexual. They create the impression that is perpetuated and circulated in religion, that being gay is something morally wrong which has a tremendous impact on young gay people in the United States who are starting to form and crystallise their identities. Exposure to these messages, Kubicek and colleagues wrote, led each individual to view homosexuality as a sin which will condemn them to hell. YMSM in this paper seemed to employ many strategies to manage this experience and continue living (2009, 616). Perhaps distancing themselves from church and its sermons is how Tul and some YMSM in the States survive.

Grandma, these Bible verses frightened me. Truthfully and literally, I have never found them or heard someone mention these verses from my Protestant Sunday class or even in my Thai Catholic school. My life was attached to both denominations. I was only exposed to these messages when Tul and I discussed them in Edinburgh. I could not imagine how terrified Tul or the YMSM in Kubicek's paper would have felt growing up with these sermons and verses. Even though I grew up without clear awareness of these serious or punitive statements toward homosexuals, I still felt like a black sheep.

Looking at my own feelings as a black sheep, I connect them with the concept of discourse I wrote about before. To simplify, it means, Grandma, that the way I perceived myself emerged from what society and institutions say about gay or homosexual people. Homosexuality was neither mentioned in the Bible nor condemned in my Thai church. It seemed to be a silent topic. Homosexuality seemed to be non-existent.

I wonder, Grandma, if my experiences and subjectivity might have been shaped and formed differently if I had grown up with these antigay messages or homophobic discourses. This is what I reflected afterwards, but at that moment with Tul, I replied,

*“I have never found these Bible verses before, but I still believe there is goodness and supportive verses from the bible”.*

*The response from Tul is immediate, “But if some parts of this book are written in this negative way, how it can be trustworthy?”. His answer silences me. I am stunned. We change the topic. Church and Christianity do not come up again. We leave my flat and explore some cafes in Edinburgh, walking through the Botanical Gardens. I had intended to stroll through some cemeteries, but that plan was scrapped.*

I am aware that in the country Tul came from and in some other countries even nowadays, being homosexual is forbidden or illegal. I never heard of gay or Kathoey being arrested in Thailand. Also, I am aware that the climate of homosexuality and Christianity nowadays has shifted and improved. Perhaps it is more complex than I thought.

I found one article by Jim Trammell, who analysed Christianity Today. I had never heard of this magazine before, but it seemed similar to Time in layout (2015, 5). It appeared to be a popular publication with a sizable readership. Trammell found that this evangelical magazine allows homosexuals to have a voice and share their experiences. However, these voices ‘do not testify that their sexualities are empowering, uplifting, or positive’ but that they were ashamed to be gay. These writers considered homosexuality a burden and a source of depression, turmoil, and of self-destructive behaviour (2015, 8).

Another resource is Thai Christian Thinker (TCT), which published a book called Q&A: LGBTQ+ in Thai. Reading through 30 questions, I got the impression that this book suggests Christianity should reject homophobic behaviour and unconditionally welcome Thai LGBTQ+ Christians. However, rejection and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ Christians and the belief that being LGBTQ+ is more sinful compared to others still occurs (2020, 39). The church, according to TCT, is in a learning process. The writer hopes that LGBTQ+ Christians will be patient and forgiving of whoever has evinced misunderstanding towards them (2020, 58).

Overall, homosexuality or LGBTQ+ is becoming more accepted in mainstream culture and Christianity and gaining more equality at both local and international levels. I felt good about that, but the situation was still far from perfect. Those antigay messages and hostile attitude towards LGBTQ+ to some extent still exist.

Christianity, especially Catholicism, has been present in Thai society for a long time, from Ayutthaya in 1555 until today. Christian doctrines and rituals have influenced many aspects of Thai life, including education and marriage. In education, there are many private Catholic all-boys and all-girls schools in Bangkok and other provinces in Thailand (Udomphol & Euajarusphan 2023, 5). So, Grandma, Christianity inevitably interrelates with my life and virginity, which is what I am inquiring about.

Here, I would like to narrate **messages about virginity** circulated in schools, churches and Thai society.

Studying in a Catholic school, I recognise its differences from Protestant doctrine, particularly in the veneration of Mary. I dug deeper and found that Protestants believe, according to Gregory Baum, God and Jesus, his eternal Son are holy and revered. Even humans who have gone far on the road to goodness, remain sinners and need God's mercy. Mary is a human being who is always dependent on God. Veneration of Mary might lift her above her human situation and might misrepresent the holiness of God (1962, 456). Baum argued that God had assigned her role in human salvation, which could not be minimised. He believed that Mary seems to receive more sympathy from Protestants nowadays.

In my Protestant church, Mary is recognised as the mother of Jesus but there is no statue of her in the church, whereas there were many Mary statues, life-size or small, in many places in my Catholic school. August 15th every year is Assumption Day when the Virgin Mary is ascended to heaven by God. This day is a special holiday exclusively for Catholic schools in Thailand, at least in my Catholic school and others within the same religious institute. However, one thing in common between these Christian and Christung is that Mary is the Virgin who gave birth to Jesus, as portrayed in the nativity scene.

Every Christmastime the nativity scene was always recreated in my Church through the figures of Mary, Joseph, shepherds and three Magi. The story was often acted and played out by children. This Christmas scene was exhibited likewise in my Catholic school.

Told and retold many times I remember the Bible story of the birth of Jesus. Mary is visited by an angel while she is engaged to be married to Joseph. The angel tells her that she had found favour with God and would give birth to his son, who would be called Jesus. Mary asks how this is possible, as she is a virgin. The angel replies that the Holy Spirit will come upon her. *'I am the Lord's servant; may it be as you have said,' Mary says. (Luke 1:26-28).*

Unlike Tul, I might not remember all the Bible's antigay verses, but Mary and the nativity scene are strong memories. Worshipping the Virgin Mary in a Catholic school established her importance in Christianity. The concept of virginity was not far from my life. Chosen by God to become a mother of Jesus, being a virgin- refraining from sexual behaviours - seems to be such a crucial idea.

Virginity seemed to hold such value in Catholicism. It is not only the Virgin Mary but also the nuns who devote themselves to worship and give up all forms of sexual life. Lifetime virginity is one virtue, but another one is premarital virginity. Catholicism praises the value of marriage and monogamous relationships (Udomphol & EuaJarusphan, 2023). Protestantism, according to McArthur, also places value on premarital chastity (2022, 67).

Writing this so far, you and I might recognise the pattern here. In the previous letter, Thai education seemed to bind information about sex tightly to its negative consequences. Likewise, the messages in Catholicism about the value of pre-marital virginity and of the Virgin Mary posit refraining from sex in a good or positive light. Engaging with sex seemed to be associated with negative connotations.

To add complexity here, being homosexual, or my identity/Phet, seemed to be unrecognised at best and condemned at worst in Christianity. If, in the Bible, we all are sinners, being homosexual then is perceived through homophobic discourses to be moreso. Being gay

can be something bad, immoral, and sinful. These encapsulations have a tremendous impact on gays and YMSM's lives not only in the USA but perhaps everywhere in this world, including Tul and me.

*Back to my story with Tul. We walk a lot on Easter Day and are very tired. But I am also nervous as the time of confession is approaching. The last stop might be an Asian restaurant somewhere in Newhaven.*

In Tul's country, being gay and homosexual is more challenging as it involves the criminal law. Unlike the situation in many Western, Islamic or African societies, according to Jackson and Duangwises, there is no criminalising of transgenderism or homosexuality in Thai history. Gender/sex stigmatisation and exclusion in Thailand operate more at the level of cultural practices and discourses than at the level of the law (2017,11).

This makes me wonder out loud to you and my Examiners about virginity. Even the religious person, like the young Tul, or other gay friends, did have sexual intercourse before me. I know there are many factors when it comes to 'sex', including availability and opportunities. But what made me decide to refrain from it? I did partake in sexual things, but sexual intercourse was not permissible to me.

In this letter, I am tracing and connecting - being gay, homosexuality, Christianity and Thai education. But there must be, again, other messages and discourses that influenced and shaped the idea of sexual intercourse avoidance. It might be another religion that relates to gay/Kathoey. Jackson wrote in another paper that it is not possible to assume that simply because legal and some other sanctions against homosexuality in Thailand may be weaker than in the West or other Asian countries, it is necessarily any easier to live as a homosexual man there than in other societies (2016, 52). Life as a gay in Bangkok is perhaps not easy, Grandma. There were challenges.

Anyway, Grandma, when I arrive at my flat, it is a chance to confess my feelings to Tul. Sometimes, when I am excited, my speech can be stuttering and confusing. I am unsure if my declaration will be successful, but I would rather do it than end up regretting not taking the chance.

In reality, writing and sending this letter to you is no longer possible because you have gone to heaven. At least my Examiners can read and know your importance to me through this letter. Or perhaps you might have already read this letter from above with God.

I know you love God. So do I. Similar to some of YMSM's responses in Kubicek and colleagues' article, I hold the belief that God creates everything, even a gay, for a reason (2009, 618). I believe God still loves me, but some verses in the Bible are undeniably hurtful and cause many negative consequences for LGBTQ+ people like me. It would be great if you and I could ask God why.

Please pray for me, Grandma, for my success in love and in my doctoral thesis via all these letters. Next Easter, your grandson - me - will lay flowers on your tombstone.

Love you always,

**To: TJ and Kayle**

**CC: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: Gay, HIV and Buddhism**

**Dear my gay besties,**

H! I have been far from Bangkok's sky for 5 years now. I give thanks to the technology that allows us to text and chat online. Writing a letter to you might seem strange when we have instant messages available. However, this letter format has helped me explore my thesis. I have written to many, including my grandmother, a devoted Protestant. Now I am excited to write to you. My letter is not only between me and both of you, but my Examiners will also read it. I hope you will not mind.

Do you know what stories ignite my thesis? Well, you two were involved at the beginning, as mentioned in my first letter. Maybe you don't remember that moment, but it happened on 26 February 2020 in Edinburgh. Earlier that day, I texted you two about my plan to meet a guy who was visiting Edinburgh. And again, around 10 pm, I left a message (in Thai).

*'When you guys wake up, I have something to update'.*

*I sporadically check my phone while walking alone in the streets, in the Edinburgh drizzle. With the 7-hour time difference, it is around 5am in Bangkok. You guys might not have woken up yet. I am impatient to share a big update.*

*Around 11.15 pm, the first response came: 'Edok! (Thai exclamation) What is it about?' It was you, Kayle. I reveal the change in my status from that night. You two want detail.*

*01.36 Oh my god! How is it? Do tell?*

*01.46 Ahh! Congratulations! Finally, this day has come. This news makes me feel happier than winning a lottery.*

*03.32 Oh! How was it? I have butterflies in my stomach for you.*

You have been my gay friends in Catholic school from six until now. Sexual experiences are one of the topics we share and confide in each other. Who else can I turn to? Looking at your messages, you seemed excited that finally, I did it. My friends, my thesis is about virginity, and I am tracing back to why or what made me decide to keep and delay sexual intercourse.

My initial plan was to invite you two as my interviewees, but maybe a letter is a better way for this inquiry. Previously, I wrote about the guy I liked and the homophobic messages in the Bible, he told me about. In this letter, I shift to another religion, Buddhism. **Do you think there are negative messages in Buddhist scripture?**

You two and I studied together for twelve years in a Catholic school. It did not mean that all students must convert to Christianity. You two are Buddhists. Most Thai citizens (92.5 per cent), from the Department of Religious Affairs are Theravāda Buddhists (U.S. Embassy and

Consulates in Thailand 2022). So, Buddhist teaching is inevitably influential in Thai society and in my home.

To show you that homosexuality and gay Phet are related to Buddhism, I shall introduce the crux of the Thai Buddhist concept that we have learned, the karmic law. Peter Jackson, the renowned scholar, also explained its concept in English, which might help me explain it to my non-Thai Examiners.

*In Buddhist doctrine, karma is an impersonal cosmic law of ethical cause and effect, with moral actions leading to happiness and well-being, and immoral actions entailing unhappiness and suffering (2016a, 60).*

You two need to know that your friend, me, published a chapter in 2022 about Christmas and being gay in Thailand. In that chapter, I also wrote about the law of karma or *Kod Hang Kam* (กฎแห่งกรรม). It is used to explain physical and social differences among human beings. Karma accumulated in the present or even past life can determine the quality of the following rebirth; for example, being born into a wealthy or low-income family, or beauty and attractiveness might result from acts in a previous existence. I wrote this in my chapter.

*'Panu (I) could not fathom what karma or what things he had done in past lives that had brought him into this current world as a gay person (Sahassanon 2022, 45).'*

Reading my own writing, it seemed to me that my questions regarding my sense of self represented what society, especially Buddhism, said about being gay. Being gay is seemingly connected with karma.

In Peter Jackson's observation, Thai writers postulate the idea that the cause of homosexuality came from numerous types of sexual misconduct in a past life. For example, committing adultery, being a prostitute, or being sexually irresponsible towards a woman whom he impregnated (1995). Jackson reiterates in his other book that heterosexual adultery is considered to be a sinful cause that leads to the unhappy result of being born with homosexual desires in a next life (2016a, 60).

Being gay is believed to emerge from sinful behaviour. You might start to recognise, my friends, that the sexual misconduct in Jackson's work relates to the five precepts, a pivotal concept in Buddhism. Some foreigners or scholars might not be familiar with it. This concept was taught in our Thai school. Honestly, Buddhist scripture is very complex, and Thai laypeople, including me, might not understand it thoroughly. So, what I share might be the foundation of what I learned.

The Five Precepts or *Benja-Sila* (เบญจศีล) are the five moral codes of conduct. They are not commandments. According to Uthaphun, it is the way lay Buddhists undertake willingly without clear understanding, that pledging to these precepts would be good for themselves and society. These five Sila mean to abstain from killing (1st), stealing (2nd), committing sexual misconduct (3rd), speaking falsely and idly (4th), and lastly, consuming alcohol and intoxicants (5th) (2017, 118)

So, it seemed like the cause of being LGBTQ+ in this current life could be connected with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Precept - committing sexual misconduct. Do you believe in this claim, Kayle, TJ? I did, and I was not alone.

In 2021, Jan W. de Lind van Wijngaarden published a longitudinal study. This writer criticised Jackson's work. He observed there had been no further investigation in over two decades into Jackson's 1995 explication of Buddhist viewpoints towards Thai homosexuals, gays, Kathoey, etc. In de Lind van Wijngaarden's research, 25 young rural Thai same-sex-attracted high school men were interviewed 3 times from 2011 to 2012. In a chapter, 'Homosexuality: A Matter of Karma? Some Thai participants recounted what they were told or believed about karma and homosexuality.

*I was told by a fortune teller that in my previous life, I stole somebody's husband. So, in this life, I was born like this. Not as a 100 per cent Phu-chaai (ผู้ชาย or Man).*

*In the past life, when we were a Phu-chaai or a girl, and we did something wrong related to lust... In the end, the result will be presented to us, and in the next life, one has to like stay hovering between masculine and feminine. It is a kind of suffering" (2021, 36)*

So, the connection between karma and homosexuals exists, and this belief somehow is still perpetuating in Thai society. How can we know if it is true? Past lives and deeds are unfathomable. Nevertheless, this belief does exist.

You might be curious about where this belief originated. Earlier, I wrote about sex/sexuality education in Thai schools in a letter to my sister. Thai sexuality education, research from UNICEF found, focused mainly on the negative consequences of sex. One of the criticisms, then, is that sexual and gender diversity topics are neglected in Thai sexuality education. The UNICEF report was published in 2016. My friends, I believe back in our time in school, our Phets (gay or Kathoey, etc.) would have been far less addressed or not mentioned at all in sex education. The assertions that crucially perpetuate the idea of homosexuality and Karma in *Theravāda* Buddhism (เถรวาท) are embedded in the media, especially movies.

Do you remember the Thai movie called *The Last Song or Pleng Sut Tai* (เพลงสุดท้าย)? It was released in 1985, before I was born, and again later in 2006. It was the tragic story of a Kathoey (transgender) named Somying, a singer and performer who was in love with a man, Boonterm. Later, Boonterm fell in love with another woman and decided to get married. Brokenheartedly, Somying eventually committed suicide while performing in the last show on stage. Its ending was emotional and painful.

Pongpanit, a Thai researcher, listed many other Thai movies, including *Cheerleaders Queens* (วายบีม! เซียร์กระหึ่มโลก, 2003), *Beautiful Boxer* (2004), and others to argue that they have perpetuated the messages or reproduced the idea of karmic law from the past life, specifically sexual misconduct as the cause of being Kathoey or homosexuals. You might never watch all of these movies, but the karmic messages surround us. We and others might hear and connect it to ourselves to some extent.

Pongpanit drew on another Buddhist teaching from Payutto that cautiously warned not to believe that everything happens due to the old karma, that everything happened by God's hand and that everything happens without cause (1993 cited in Pongpanit 2013, 123). He introduced another Thai movie called *It Gets Better (Mai Dai Kor Hai Ma Ruk, ไม่ได้ขอให้มารัก)* which also has a Kathoey or transgender leading character. The difference, however, is that this Thai film ignored the link in Buddhism between the law of karma and being transgender or any LGBTQ+ (2013, 121).

I believe the point Pongpanit is trying to address is that it is old karma that causes being homosexuals as conveyed in movies seems to be an incomplete view. Besides, in the 21st century, the popularity of Thai Boy-Love Drama (BL) - the romantic relationship between two males - is strongly evident. The visibility and acceptance of Thai LGBTQ+ people seemed to be much better than when we grew up. The connection or ideas between karma and LGBTQ+ may have weakened though it may still circulate in Thai society to some degree.

By the way, I found both Jackson and van Wijngaarden's suggestions interesting. They both pointed out that attributing the causes of homosexuality to karma was seen as bad luck rather than as inherently sinful (2021, 35). Becoming gay, lesbian, or Kathoey originated from past misdeeds and was outside of conscious control, so it was more accepting or sympathetic. Do you think that is true?

Reading these writers' summaries seemed to imply that being gay or Kathoey under Buddhism is more tolerant or open than in Christianity, which views homosexuality, which I wrote about it in my 4th letter, as a sin. Jackson engaged with Theravada Buddhist scripture and wrote things that both of you, Thai Buddhists, and even I might never have known about before. If you allow me to write further, there were more than two Phets in Buddhist scripture.

Vinaya Pitaka, one of the three divisions of the *Tripitaka (Pra Trai Pi Dok, พระไตรปิฎก)*, the scripture of Theravada Buddhism, identified four gender types from which Buddhist monks must refrain from sexual relations. Apart from males and females, two other genders are written in Pali Ubhatobyanjanaka and Pandaka (Jackson 1998, 61).

So, it seems there is some recognition of those who are neither male nor female. Jackson's paper shows that these genders could be complicated and more diverse. Still, the key I learned from this paper is that Ubhatobyanjanaka is interpreted to define someone whose body combines both male and female biological characteristics. For Pandaka, it could be referred to as both transexual or homosexual in modern terms. Transexuals are people, men or women, who prefer either to dress and behave like a member of the opposite sex or with hormonal treatment and surgery. Homosexuals, as we know, are physically men or women who have sexual attraction towards people of the same sex (Jackson 1998, 67).

The most interesting part is that all Ubhatobyanjanaka and Pandaka seemed under the common term Kathoey (ibid). This is why, historically, Kathoey can be referred to as a man and a woman. Still, during the time we grew up, my friends, these terms were later used only for men, whereas females define themselves with others, such as Tom, Dee, and Lesbian. Kathoey also later came up with variances.

The last point that Jackson addresses is that in Tripitaka, there was a spectrum of views towards Ubhatobyanjanaka and Pandaka or Kathoey as the overarching Phet. It could range from compassion and tolerance to discrimination (1998). But then it seemed that Thai Buddhist writings became strongly anti-homosexual after the arrival of HIV/AIDs in the mid-1980s (1998, 83). That was not long before you and I were born. This is why there was more than one view towards LGBTQ+ in Thailand. The first stance is more accepting and tolerant, but the second, according to Jackson, seems more intolerant and rejecting, asserting that being gay came from the lack of moral control causing HIV.

Phra Ratchaworamuni, a monk, and Isaramuni's work pointed out that the derivation of homosexuality is from an excess of sexual drive or a lack of moral control over the sexual drive. If homosexuals learned sexual self-restraint, like the heterosexual population, they would cease to be homosexual. This claim stated further that because homosexuality is against the rule of heterosexuality, the result is AIDS disease (Jackson 1995). Put simply, there was a message through these writers in Thailand that the true origin of AIDS is homosexuality.

HIV transmission could occur with all genders, but it seems there is a strong link between this virus and gay/kathoey people. Rationally, the causes of HIV, apart from unsafe sexual intercourse, could be from the shooting of illicit drugs and sharing needles. Why were these messages written specifically targeting people like us? Another question is how the HIV/AIDS epidemic impacted Thai society and my life or, to be specific, a view of virginity which is my inquiry. Here is the story of what happened when you asked me to accompany you to that place.

### **Bangkok, 2013: To the Anonymous Clinic**

*I stand in front of the building with the landmark gigantic old beige water storage tower. It is the location of an anonymous clinic (คลินิกนิรนาม Klee Nik Ni Ra Narm). Although this centre is adjacent to my university, I have never been there.*

*You guys arrive. Very nervous. We greet each other and slowly enter the building. There is a need for HIV blood testing. You are seriously worried and overwhelmed. Perhaps it is your first time having a proper test. It is my first time that 'HIV' arrives in my friends and family's lives.*

To provide a general overview in this letter, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), HIV is a human immunodeficiency virus. This disease destroys people's immune systems (CD4 cells), weakening their defence against many diseases that people normally can fight. If not treated, this virus can develop into an acquired immunodeficiency syndrome called AIDS. This advanced stage of HIV encompasses many long-term and severe clinical manifestations, such as certain cancers.

The first HIV/AIDS patient in Thailand was reported in 1984. At the time of our visit, the number of Thai people living with HIV was approximately 450,000 with 8,800 newly infected patients (UNAIDS 2013, 12, 14). I looked at the data again at the end of 2021; around 520,000 people were then living with HIV, and approximately 6,500 were new HIV cases (Division of AIDS and STIs, 2022). Across the globe, the estimated number of people living with HIV recorded by WHO in 2022 was between 33.9 to 43.8 million.

*While waiting to be called by the staff, I sit staring round the waiting area. There is a wide range of people using these services, including men, women, gay or kathoey/transgender people, university students and white-collar workers. I couldn't know if they all come to check their blood status or to be prescribed antiretroviral medication. How are they feeling at the moment? Worried, sad, or simply neutral?*

If you ask me how I felt that day, a single master's student, a gay who had one ex-partner and whose most intimate experience has gone no further than hugging and pecking on my cheek; I was shocked, unprepared to accept how close this disease to me. Writing this letter, I know if anyone is active in sexual behaviours, like you all, then having a routine medical checkup and attending the health clinic is a necessarily cautious way of living. I was utterly innocent back then.

*We walk down the spiral stairs to the quiet room where the doctor would take the blood from both of you. It would take some time to get the blood test result, so we leave the building and head to the nearby park. We stand near the entrance gate and guess at how much risk we got from unsafe sexual intercourse. There are the bubbling ideas of anxieties.*

Nowadays, test results are quicker, and a self-HIV test can be done at home. There was no need to wait like we did in 2013. Do you two remember how you felt back then? This is what I vividly remember.

*'What if it is positive? What would I reprioritise in my life? Who would I tell, or what would be the next step?'*

*'What if the condom broke during activity? Or what if another person removed the condom without our knowing?'*

*One of you vow to have a buzz-cut hairstyle if it is negative. It is you, TJ. The waiting time for the unknown result seems to last forever. Your distress is clear. I am worried, too.*

Looking back at that moment, we were all so frightened about the epidemic of HIV and AIDS. You might not recognise the word, 'discourse', I introduced in my 2nd letter. In other words, we were terrified about HIV because there were messages circulated in Thai society about this virus. Two memories happened before and after our first visit to this HIV clinic that might show what knowledge about HIV/AIDS was/is in Thai society.

**Lopburi, 2010: To Wat Phrabat-Nam-Phu (วัดพระบาทน้ำพุ)**

*I visit this temple, the hospice for AIDS patients north of Bangkok. It is a class group visit in my undergraduate year. Some patients could walk and voluntarily share their experiences with visitors. Some are bedridden, their bodies are emaciated and almost withering to skeletons. It is a painful and unbearable for me to sit and talk with them without crying. Then visitors are invited to see their performance. After the show ends, the performers say*

*"Perhaps in your next visit, some of us might have already gone."*

It was devastating and heartrending for me to know that many AIDs patients, adults and children, had died and were cremated at this place. At that time, HIV/AIDS was painted as a deadly illness and societal problem. Alongside other STDs, HIV/AIDS was emphasised in the sex education handbook as one of the consequences of sexual intercourse, specifically unsafe intercourse. The images of HIV/AIDs symptoms and opportunistic infections were not pleasant. This disease is scary.

That visit to the temple was more than a decade ago. The HIV/AIDS situation in Thailand has significantly improved. In Sakurai and Sasaki's report, patients' health and life expectancy have got better with antiretroviral medication. Phrabat-Nam-Phu temple, therefore, changed its function from caring for the dying to looking after people who are living with HIV/AIDS (2014, 452-3). There is actually a wide range of such people, including HIV patients who have no relatives, entire families infected with HIV, and orphans whose parents died of AIDS. Some Thais came to the centre to reconstruct their lives, hoping they may soon integrate into the community again. The inevitable death sentence of HIV/AIDS, then, seems to have receded. Despite the improvements in managing their condition, some waver on whether they could leave this hospice or if people outside would accept them (2014, 458).

Back to our story, do you remember when the HIV results arrived and what happened to you all?

*I wait outside the doctor's room nervously. Then the door opens. I see a breath of huge relief from you guys. The worry has been lifted from your shoulders. So do I. Later on, blood tests become routine. Those anxieties or fears are always present but not overwhelming.*

My friends, what if the result had been positive? What would happen to us? HIV is not a deadly disease anymore, but the possibility of being positive was still frightening for us. Why? The answer is clear. HIV/AIDS, Simbayi and colleagues wrote, is perhaps the most stigmatised medical condition in the world (2007, 1823).

Have you heard about this term before? Historically rooted in Greek, stigma refers to a visible marking on the body, usually made by a branding iron. The mark is not always physical. It can brand 'someone singled out for public derision because of a sin' (Herek 2004, 14). Sin is called *Barp* (บาป) in Thai which means bad or wrong-doing. Stigma obviously has a negative connotation.

The HIV stigma, then, captures how people who live with HIV/AIDS are discredited due to social values about the condition (Spieldenner 2014, 17). A plethora of research articles, Thai and international, that I read seemed to confirm that acquiring HIV is perceived as socially undesirable and negatively affects the lives of people living with HIV (Apinundecha et al. 2007; Churcher 2013).

Your results were negative, but others were positive. With my background in counselling psychology, I decided to support them in the course of my Master's dissertation. By using cognitive behaviour group therapy, I aimed to give men who have sex with men (MSM) and who are living with HIV some tools to tackle depression or enhance their medication adherence. (Sahassanon, Pisitsungkagarn and Taephant, 2019).

You might ask me why MSM? This term could be gay, kathoey/transgender or straight men who work as sex workers. The HIV incidence in the MSM group is high among those who live in urban areas, including Bangkok, the capital city. I was also gay, so perhaps this was my support for my tribe, people who share the same and similar Phet with me and you.

My results found significant beneficial effects of therapy. HIV-infected MSM seem to report a reduction in low mood. What I omitted from my published article, however, is my own life experiences as a gay who witnessed the lives of Thai HIV-infected MSM. Here is the moment I first visited the HIV Foundation in the Eastern province of Thailand in 2015. When I look back, these experiences confirm to me how stigmatising this virus was in our country, my friends.

### Chonburi 2015: To the HIV foundation



*'I think this is the right way,' I tell my father while checking Google Maps.*

*'Are you sure it's totally safe?' My mother's voice is raised when the car approaches the bumpy, non-asphalt road after we turn left from the main road.*

*There is a long pause of silence while a car passes one of the houses*

where a white vinyl poster is attached to the balcony. **'Our community do not want this foundation to bring AIDs infected people into our community!'** is vividly written in black. The highlighted words were coloured red. *'This must be serious', I think.*

This local conflict became news in Thailand. It was covered on the People's Station programme by Onuma Kasetpeutpon on the Thai PBS TV channel. According to the report, local people in the community had held a referendum requesting the HIV charitable centre relocate to another place. The Thai Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS was invited to discuss ways to solve this conflict (2014).

*From the first contact with this Foundation and during the group work, I was told the residents had nowhere to go. Some have been rejected by their family members. Some decided to leave family and friends behind because they would not be accepted by others when disclosing their HIV status. The fear of being exposed by colleagues in the workplace also resulted in their quitting jobs.*

*"I had to quit my job because the company required my blood test. I ended up working only part-time. Why does society punish us like this...". This is one of my HIV group participants' responses.*

The responses seemed to resonate with the HIV/AIDS patients who lived in Phrabat-Nam Phu temple. They feared being rejected by society and even by their families. The vinyl poster I saw was stark evidence of public fear, disgust, and discomfort around this disease.

There are well-established policies and attempts to reduce stigmatisation and discrimination towards HIV people in Thailand (Rongkavilit et al. 2010). One route is through the

media. There was a popular Thai TV drama series called *The Hormones Seasons 3* (ฮอร์โมนวัยว้าวุ่น 3). The central character named Pala (พลละ), a shy boy, later revealed that he had HIV, which he acquired from birth from HIV-positive parents. Pala: I have HIV (พลละ ผมมีเชื้อ HIV ครับ), produced by GTH (2015), conveyed more accurate knowledge of HIV and AIDS, including the portrayal of his firm body without any symptoms due to his medication.

I believe this fictional character was intended to demystify HIV and AIDS and reduce the fear of this disease. The video clip on YouTube was praised and watched by over a hundred thousand views in one night (Voice TV 2015).

However, within the same year, 2015, a Thai TV series called *Puean Rak Puean Risaya* (เพื่อนรักเพื่อนริษยา or Dear Friend, Jealous Friend) was broadcast. One character in this series contracted HIV which progressed rapidly to the final stage of HIV or AIDS. Bedridden, the character was shown with rashes all over her body. She died in pain shortly after her friends' visit. The Thai Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS wrote to the series producers/broadcasters asking them to correct the extremely misleading information about this virus. The series was criticised for misinforming the stages of HIV and AIDS and ignoring the existence of antiretroviral medication that potentially prevents the progression of the infection. It seemed to reproduce the misunderstanding of HIV/AIDS and reinforce stigmatisation and discrimination towards people living with HIV (Prachatai.com 2015; Mgronline.com 2015).

I believe these two TV series represent the mix of messages and knowledge that circulate about HIV and AIDS in Thai society. Some provide more accurate and accepting views towards people living with HIV, but others perpetuate the notoriety of HIV/AIDS. There might be an effort to reduce stigma, but stigma is a phenomenon at the structural and social levels, so the individual's capacity to mitigate it is limited (Spieldenner 2014).

I have written a lot to you, my friends. But before writing this letter to you, I wrote in other letters that sexual intercourse seemed to be suppressed and avoided since school days through emphasis on negative consequences. HIV/AIDS arrived and added another layer of negative consequences from sex. Unplanned pregnancy might not be our concern among gays, but HIV was.

In 2024, people globally received antiretroviral treatment with viral suppression. Deaths from AIDS seem to have decreased significantly (Lancet 2024). In Thailand, according to the World Bank, the HIV/AIDS prevalence also dropped from 2.2% in the 1990s to 1% in 2022 (2023). Still, the prevalence in MSM, our tribe, is disproportionately highest compared to other populations (Yu et al. 2024). HIV and AIDS, from the past until now, I believe, still exist and, to some extent, are stigmatised. HIV-AID-related stigma is so frightening that it could turn our life, my life, upside down. By the way, have you heard of PrEP or Pre-exposure prophylaxis?

You two must certainly know. It is an antiretroviral medication that can prevent the acquisition of HIV for HIV-negative people (CDC 2024). We only take it daily or on demand, which would reduce the risk by 99%. Perhaps this medication could shift my perception of HIV/AIDS. Despite its benefit, PrEP uptake and adherence in Thai MSM is still 'suboptimal.' Yuen Jung Yu and colleagues interviewed young Thai MSM and health providers in Bangkok. What they

found is that some obstacles to using PrEP come from the fear of side effects and the stigma that PrEP users mean they are promiscuous (2024, 1129).

PrEP somehow might have its own stigma, but I wonder, Kayle and TJ, if PrEP (Pre-exposure prophylaxis) had been available since we were teenagers as it was officially free under Thailand's Universal Health Coverage in 2019 (Yu et al. 2019), what would have happened differently. Could it alleviate our fear towards HIV and AIDS? It might, but before that, it made sense why you, especially I, were scared of being infected by this disease. Would our family reject or hate us? It would be a nightmare.

Before I end, I would like to mention the **attitude toward sex in Thai Buddhism**. There is a split between monks or ascetics and laypeople, especially regarding the third of the 5 precepts that discourages sexual misconduct. Sexual intercourse between husband and wife is commonly accepted, but rape and sexual affairs with another person's spouse are not. However, for monks, sexual desire obstructs attainment of the religious goal of *Nibbana* (นิพพาน) or the end of suffering. Sexual misconduct is a severe offence for monks and automatically leads to expulsion (Yodthong 2020; Jackson 1998, 58-59).

This precept seems to say nothing to common people like us, but Jackson also raised the point that Thai Buddhism implicitly has an anti-sex attitude. Sex and sexuality, as we know in Thai, equate with *Tanha* (ตัณหา) or craving and desire and *Raga* (ราคะ) mean sexual lust. Even marriage, which seems to be endorsed, could be perceived as a stage of life for those who have not yet realised the absolute truth. No desire for sex is 'the end of suffering' (Jackson 1998, 61). It seems quite an extreme view.

Why do I mention this to you here? These writings suggest that ethical demands made for monks can overlap with layperson's lives- our lives. Again, they show that sex in Thai Buddhism seemingly leans toward the negative side. This idea might interplay with the idea of virginity maintenance. I will think about it.

In my first letter, to my Examiners, I wrote that in the USA, one of the virginity metaphors is the stigma. Some U.S. men and women believe that virginity is a stigma, an undesirable state, that needs to be shed. Virginity, in my own understanding, seems to be far from stigma, but HIV is bound to it. So, my friends, you recognise these positive and negative poles. Sex can lead to the HIV stigma, but being a virgin and refraining from sexual intercourse means no risk of receiving any stigmatised conditions. Virginity could prevent all these negative and unimaginable consequences of (reckless) sex.

What else is also related to the 'bad or sinful'? Us? You might recognise that there were antigay or katoey messages that circulated in both the Christian Bible and some Buddhist writings. They painted that being LGBTQ+, us, is more sinful, negative, or inferior and devalued whereas heterosexuality - man and woman seemed to be normal or, according to van Wijngaarden, implicitly seen as superior (2021, 35).

Reading this, my friends, it seems unfair for gays and LGBTQ+. In Christianity, why do we (LGBTQ+ or homosexual) seem to be sinners? In Buddhism, we are born as human beings who universally carry some past karmas. But why do some messages specifically associate homosexuals, gay or Katoey, with sexual misconduct?

It might look like I can criticise or question these presumptions. But don't get me wrong. I only started doing this when I crafted these letters about virginity. For most of my life I lived under the influence of these societal messages in a society that seemed to favour heterosexuals and condemn us. That is why I felt I was Gae Dam in Church and in my own home. In school, I had other black sheep friends. You two and the other gay, Kathoey, are my flock.

Saying thank you to you is not enough for what we have been through. After this thesis, I cannot wait to reunite again. Meanwhile, you all take care, party, or have 'fun' responsibly and safely.

Miss you two very much,

**To: Susan Granger**

**CC: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: Homophobia, Heterosexism, & Heteronormativity**

**Dear Susan,**

Hello, I hope you are doing well. We never met in person, but I have known you for several years. It was the counselling programme in Edinburgh that connected us. You sent me emails quite often, but I rarely did. This electronic letter, my doctoral thesis, could be the longest one I ever send you.

Do you remember Tul? He was the Asian gay I hung out with. We did not end up as romantic partners but, fortunately, we are still good friends. Perhaps I can share with you some other guys I met or dated in Edinburgh.

The reason I am writing this letter to you, Susan, is because you are also involved in my inquiry into virginity. So far in my letters I have written about sexual intercourse, virginity and related concepts from my own story. Both religions in my life (Christianity and Buddhism) were introduced and contextualised. The deeper I go, the more I realise that virginity inevitably intertwines with who I am, a gay and this Phet (เพศ), the conflating Thai term for gender and sexuality. My Phet does not carry much positive connotation. Why?

In my previous letters, I explained how I felt I was the black sheep that was different and alienated from others through sin or karma. It seems to me that my sense of self has been influenced by living with societal messages that portray the badness of being gay or Kathoey Phet in Thailand.

While reading articles and thinking about this perception, I encountered the term 'internalised homophobia'. This phrase caught my attention. I wondered if I had internalised homophobia. Does it resonate with my experiences or my sense of self?

Honestly, I had never previously recognised this term, internalised homophobia, in myself. We discussed about it once a year ago. This letter to you, therefore, is my vehicle to engage, again, with it and other related terms, Susan. My goal is to share what I reflected on or engaged with in my further reading. I encountered some confusion among the complexities. This letter might be academic, but it still has some personal elements. I hope you are content to hear my academic pondering, beginning with **internalised homophobia**.

I found this concept from Malyon's work in 1982 through Friedman and Downey (1995, 58). Internalised homophobia is the socialisation that involves internalising values, attitudes, and beliefs. Growing up in heterosexist and homophobic settings, children who later become homosexual adults are socialised in this environment, which leads to the internalisation of negative attitudes, beliefs or, in Malyon's words, mythology and opprobrium which characterise the current social attitude toward homosexuality (1972, 60). Malyon's homophobic work actually originated from Weinberg, who first coined homophobia in 1972, which will be elaborated on later.

David Mair stated that the internalisation of homophobia is a universal experience for gay people (2006, 60). Likewise, Friedman and Downey wrote that internalised homophobia can be a shared experience among gay and lesbian patients. It seems 'the universal in our culture' (1995, 91). Malyon (1972) mentioned that the attitude or belief towards homosexuality is based on society. Each person, from the West to the East or who was born in the 20th century or recently, consequently could experience these homophobic beliefs differently. The internalisation can vary even with my gay besties in the same city. At least, this phenomenon likely occurs to me based on my experiences written in these letters. Does internalised homophobia truly manifest in my life, Susan? How serious was it? Perhaps the novelty of these claims to me, or my disbelief in them, kept me searching and reading more.

Mair's chapter also briefly set out the common manifestations of internalised homophobia. It can be the inability to sustain intimacy within long-term gay relationships. People with IH might feel shame or hatred toward themselves, leading them to conceal or deny their sexual orientation. Avoidance of any contact or work with other gay people can be another sign. They could remain invisible by not talking about partners and try to 'pass' as straight (2006, 60). These are examples of internalised homophobia. I brought this understanding to discuss with you virtually in 2023, Susan. We didn't only talk about virginity. We also frequently explored other topics including my relationships or life in general.

At that time, in 2023, I was overwhelmed by this concept. It did not make me cry or feel sad, but I was reluctant to accept that I had internalised homophobia. Some elements of Mair's IH might match, but most of them did not. My hesitation was that my mom, sister, friends and colleagues were aware of my Phet/gender identity. I came out to them though not my dad. Also, I have not shied away from my Phet, a gay. Hatred towards myself? No!

Writing this letter to you now, I think I understand more why in 2023 I was so resistant, Susan. Newcomb and Mustanski published a meta-analytic review, and their report showed that IH, as a construct, was statistically correlated with many health-related issues. These problems among LGBTQ+ people include substance abuse disorders, mood and anxiety disorders, and suicidal attempts (2010). I rarely drank alcohol and had never attempted suicide. It seemed IH could not capture my entire experience.

Also, there were some criticisms around the concept of IH and homophobia in general. I hope you do not mind if I share their work briefly in our letter. One pivotal article I found is *Beyond Homophobia: Thinking About Sexual Prejudice and Stigma in the Twenty-first Century* by Gregory Herek. Even though internalised homophobia was not his focus, he invited me to engage more critically with the word 'homophobia'.

'Homophobia' was first defined by Weinberg as "the irrational fear, hatred, and intolerance of homosexual men and women." It was the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals (1972 cited in Herek 2004).

One of Herek's criticisms is the suffix of the word homophobia. From my psychological background, Susan, a phobia is defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) as an intense and irrational fear response to some particular objects, such as heights or spiders, which has an impact on an individual's life (American Psychiatric

Association 2013). It reminded me of the abnormal psychology class that my friends and I enjoyed, memorising types of phobia such as arachnophobia (fear of spiders) or acrophobia (fear of heights) etc.

Susan, are you familiar with any phobia? Our counselling and psychotherapy programme here in Edinburgh has never touched upon these psychopathologies.

Using the word phobia in homophobia raises questions. The first, according to Herek, is whether the individual's reactions when surrounded by homosexuals are similar to the response of someone with a fear of spiders. It might not be the same for everyone. Homophobia seemed not to be classed as a phobia by the American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization (Campo-Arias, Herazo & Oviedo 2015, 141).

The second question is that fear might not be the main reaction towards homosexuals. In my understanding, other feelings, for example, anger and disgust, might stand as the heterosexual's negative emotional reaction responses towards homosexuals (Herek 2004, 10).

Another point that I noticed is that the concept of IH seemed to be supported largely through measurements and questionnaires. IH became a construct that was assessed through a scoring scale and is related to other constructs. As I never tried to stop being attracted to men nor I do wish I could be sexually attracted to women, my score of IH would be low, Susan. The questionnaire might not capture how I or other gays feel or what we have experienced.

In my understanding, IH may be fall within the scientific/positivist paradigm. If this thesis had been conducted in the School of Psychology in Bangkok, it would have been unproblematic. While researching in Edinburgh at our school, however, I need to be more cautious about the paradigm.

Oh my god! I unexpectedly sprung the word 'paradigm' on you. I planned to write about paradigmatic frameworks in my supervisor's letter but perhaps this might be the right time to introduce it before continuing our conversation about IH. I need to write about where all my letters or my inquiry stand, in other words, **the paradigm of this inquiry**. But first, let me explain this complicated word.

According to Ponterotto's work, the paradigm is a set of interrelated assumptions about the world that offers researchers the conceptual framework for their inquiries. It guides me, the inquirer or researcher, to use the proper tools, instruments, people, and methods (2005, 127-128). This is what I learned during my first two years in Scotland. There are numerous paradigms in the world with different names and types. One of them is the positivism paradigm or scientific model, which is dominant in my school of psychology in Thailand.

There is an idea from Catherine Belsey that 'many people today are willing to give up the idea that there is a single, authoritative truth to be discovered and defended' (2002, 71). I believe what Belsey implied there aligns with positivism. There is only one true reality in this positivism paradigm or post-positivism (Ponterotto 2005, 130). Researchers can measure it. The reason I think internalised homophobia is treated more towards the positivist paradigm is that people's experiences could be identified and quantified into numbers - high scores or low scores. These scores may then be correlated with other measurements.

This also connects to the criticism of IH from Glenda Russell and Janis Bohan (2006) and Gust Yep (2002). Writing in a paper, the Case of Internalized Homophobia: Theory and/as Practice, Russell and Bohan offered me two main critiques of the traditional models of internalised homophobia. The first is the pathologisation of LGBTQ+ people. This view of IH indicates that maladjustment is within the individual (2006, 346). That is, the problem is located within a person rather than residing in the social and linguistic. It disregards the role of social change, and focuses only on the individual level (2006, 347).

Aligning with Russell and Bohan, Yep identified five problems with the conceptualisation of homophobia. One of them is the focus of homophobia - and if I can add, IH - at the individual level diverts attention away from the 'underlying social and cultural conditions that maintain fear, hostility and hatred towards people who are sexually different (2002, 167).

Another paradigm is 'constructivist-interpretivism'. In this paradigm, truth or reality is the property of the individual. It becomes a 'personal matter' and that 'the individual consciousness is where ambiguities are resolved (Belsey 2002,72). In Ponterotto's article, the constructivist-interpretivism paradigm aligns with the belief in multiple realities. Reality is subjective and constructed in the mind of the individual (2005, 129). What I or you experience, perceive or feel may be different, but both are true.

To consider Internalised homophobia in the second paradigm, it could be that my experience of IH and that of other Thai gays can be uniquely different. To understand these truths, researchers then use various types of interviews to access people's mind and experiences.

The poststructuralist idea is another step further away from constructivist-interpretivism. 'The subject', according to Belsey's summary, 'is an effect of culture, a result of the circulation of meanings in the symbolic order, rather than their origin. Subjectivity could be the place that reproduces the meaning rather than resolves them' (Belsey 2002, 72). I take that to mean what is in people's mind or what they believe is formulated by meaning and language. It looks beyond the subject or the 'I'. It seems connected to discourse, Wathakam, and Foucault.

If my focus is solely on my own experiences of IH and that of other gays and kathoeyes in my hometown, then the constructivist-interpretivism paradigm may be preferable. But my pursuit in this thesis is to understand the societal and cultural milieu that shapes my understanding of virginity and what has made me decide to refrain from sex or value virginity as a gay in Thailand. Using the literature about IH which is located mostly in positivist/post-positivist paradigm, I wonder, might not assist me. My inquiry aims to see beyond my sense of self. I need to look beyond the personal level of internalised homophobia. It is a decision I need to make as to which paradigmatic position I would adopt in these letters.

When You, Susan, and I spent around an hour discussing internalised homophobia. I shared my experiences, questioning if they indicated IH. If so, how have I survived it? You also shared other gays in the West who might experience IH, too. One particular gay, you shared, felt uncomfortable with his sexual orientation.

Looking back, it was a helpful meeting. I discovered something crucial I will write about further, perhaps in another letter. However, in that online meeting with you, my focus was solely

on me and my other gay experiences. Maybe we were not entirely in the right (paradigmatic) place, Susan.

The concept of IH, might be inferred from the internalisation of such homophobic, antigay messages or discourses that were visible in Thai society and culture. Then these messages, I suppose, are where I need to look closer, to look beyond self. It does not mean that my stories and experiences are meaningless. In these letters, my thesis, my stories, act as a bridge to connect something beyond the 'I', something societal and cultural. My paradigm then seemed to be in between constructivist-interpretivism and poststructuralism.

Susan, have you heard of autoethnography? According to Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bocher, the renowned autoethnographers, autoethnography is the genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural (2000). It starts with the self (auto), which means the researcher's personal experience. Then, it connects to the culture (ethno).

This method seemed to match my inquiry, from self/stories to society, didn't it? I shall write more about this methodology and how it came into this inquiry in detail in another letter. But now, let's get back to the concept of IH. To look beyond the individual level to the cultural aspect of IH. I found another word, Susan. Many scholars have come to use the phrase **heteronormativity**. Have you heard of it before?

At that particular point in my reading, I thought this was a new term, but it seemed familiar to me. The funny thing I found out later was that I had already used it in some of my writings in 2022.

That year, I applied for a counsellor-in-training post in an LGBTQ+ counselling agency in Scotland. As a professional doctorate student, I was required to complete a number of counselling hours. These are some parts of what I wrote in my application.

*... LGBTQ+ living in the heteronormative world, I understand how challenging it is to survive, thrive and endure with stereotyping, prejudice, and stigmatisation. Inspired by a person-centred approach, I believe the therapeutic relationship is the supportive environment I would like to provide for clients and facilitate their growth and potential.*

In that placement interview, I was nervous. I think I did well but unfortunately, I wasn't selected.

Susan, you can see that I already used 'heteronormative world' in the application form. I wonder what I knew exactly about this concept back then. Perhaps this concept could be used instead of internalised homophobia. Let me introduce this term to you.

According to Samuel Chamber, heteronormativity was first coined by Michael Warner in 1993, that society takes heterosexuality to be normative in terms of identity, practice and behaviours (2007, 663). Heteronormativity is also defined by Celia Kitzinger, a lesbian-feminist activist and scholar. Her meaning is, 'the practice in society, culture, organisations, and interpersonal relationships that reinforce or perpetuate the taken-for-granted presumption about sex, gender, family and/or relationship' (2005, 478).

Madison, a critical ethnographer, encapsulated the meaning as follows: 'heterosexuality is perceived to be the normal, legitimate, or natural sexual arrangement within society. Other sexual practices that do not fit with this dominant heterogeneous practice can, therefore, be perceived as deviant or amoral' (2012). Within her chapter, Madison used a quote from Chrys Ingraham. I found it very powerful. I share it with you here.

*Ask students how they learned to be heterosexual, and they will consistently respond with stories about how they learned to be boys or girls, women or men, through various social institutions in their lives. Heterosexuality serves as the unexamined organising institution and ideology (the heterosexual imaginary) for gender... Most important in these theories is the absence of any concept of heterosexuality as an institution organising structure or social totality (1997, 288)*

If you ask me, like Ingraham asked students, my answer would be the same. Before this letter to you, I wrote about Christianity, Buddhism, and sexual education, all of which seemed to provide the messages that man and woman or heterosexuality is the standard, the norm or the natural. Before I reflect further, Susan, there is another word to discover. Now what about heterosexism? Do you think there are differences between these two terms, Susan?

Heterosexism is mainly the ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatises any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, relationship, or community. The antigay messages and sexual stigma are perpetuated by heterosexism (Herek 2004, 16). It is the social bias that seems to reward heterosexuals and punish others (O'Brien 2014). There was an effort to differentiate between heteronormativity and heterosexism in Habarth's paper. Heteronormativity seems to be the cultural norm and force underpinning the normality of heterosexuality and the binary of gender. It is also an internalised process that is a prerequisite for sexual prejudice and discrimination. In other words, heteronormativity makes heterosexism possible (2015, 168).

Habarth's paper is the development of the heteronormativity questionnaire. I guess this is why she tried to differentiate these two concepts so as to be clearly defined and measurable between individuals. The complexity of the two concepts occurred because some authors postulated that heteronormativity could be thought of as underlying cultural ideologies that allow the existence of heterosexism (Habarth 2015; O'Brien 2014). However, some mentioned that heteronormativity is subsumed by heterosexism (Herek 2004).

So I have heteronormativity and heterosexism, Susan. Initially, I planned to use heteronormativity as the selected term for my letters. But when I met my second supervisor, Seamus Prior, he questioned my downplaying of homophobia. Now I got three terms. So, what do I miss in homophobia? Which one should I choose?

In my understanding, the criticism of homophobia is the highlight of fear over other emotions. It seems to pathologise a person. However, when I reread Herek's paper, I realised that when he coined homophobia, Weinberg did not suggest that homophobia represented a diagnostic category on par with other phobias (2004, 10). Weinberg purposely used the vocabulary of illness in homophobia to act as political and rhetorical tactics (Herek 2004, 11).

I realise that Herek's criticism of Weinberg came from the homage position. Homophobia has become an important tool for gay and lesbian activists, and its contribution is profound (2004, 9). The concept raised public awareness that it was a societal problem that led to individuals' negative reactions and prejudice towards homosexual people, and even self-loathing among homosexual people.

Once, I thought homophobia only represented the individual level, but I was wrong, Susan. It encompasses both societal and personal levels, from private thoughts and feelings to the policies and actions of governments and religious institutions. Heterosexism seemed to be synonymous with homophobia (Herek 2004, 11). In my understanding, it means that homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity are all connected.

The criticism of homophobia is that it is very broad. The word was coined more than five decades ago. That is why some, including Herek himself, tried to refine its meaning by proposing to keep homophobia to describe only individual attitudes and actions, and heterosexism for the wider culture (2004, 16). Kitzinger wrote this, which I found interesting.

*While LGBT activists are campaigning against blatant oppression and overt discrimination at the same time, all around us, a heteronormative social fabric is unobtrusively reweaved, thread by thread, persistently... (2005, 478)*

What I take from her is that overt discrimination like homophobia can be tackled. However, the nuanced concept or taken-for-granted presumption about sex or gender might still be perpetuated. So, it seemed that homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity seemed all to represent society and culture. So, what term do you think I should use in my thesis, Susan?

I need to be cautious in an additional aspect because all these terms were coined in the West, where you, and my Examiners probably live. There might be some similarities and differences with my Thai culture. Therefore, before giving you my own answer, there is another thought that I would like you to consider. This will hint at my answer and set the stage for the next letter.

**Have you heard the word *Thud* or *Tut* (ตุ๊ด),** Susan? You might not recognise it. Before I called myself gay in an all-boy Catholic school, I was called by this term. Among my non-heterosexual friends, some dream of wearing long hair and makeup, and some want to acquire a ripped six-pack. Others might be undecided about their identities.

In their paper, Sakol Sopitarchasak and colleagues found that their Thai non-heterosexual participants informed their understanding of gender/sexual identity. Thud or Tut is regarded as a young or immature Thai gay who looks or acts effeminately, whereas Kathoey can be considered transgender and behaves more properly than Thud (2015, 64). Duangwiset and Jackson identify the mannerisms of Thud in Thailand, including placing hands on the waist, pointing a foot forward like a female model walking on the catwalk, and using feminine interjections with a high-pitched voice (2021, 13-14).

So, Thud/Tut is like the young identity of someone like me and my friends (Kayle and TJ who I wrote to in my 5th letter) that seems to mismatch with the other boys and men. But why do I bring up this word to you in this letter?

In my 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to my Dad, I introduced the concept of biopower in Thailand. To be civilised in foreigners' eyes, Peter Jackson, an Australian scholar, observed the Thai State applied a new form of power over the bodies of all Siamese/Thai men and women. Apart from driving eroticism into the private domain, there was the state intervention that enforced an understanding of performing/being a Thai man and Thai woman (2003, 35). He paraphrased Foucault's History of Sexuality by changing some words to match Thai contexts.

*In Thailand, the stricter regime of control and mechanisms of surveillance have led to the transformation of gender into discourse and to garrulous attention, which has the Thai people in a stew over gender. Furthermore, the focus of this regime on controlling the surface imaging of representations of gender means that rather than intervening in the bodily effect of sexual pleasure Thai bio-power is concerned with manipulating the aesthetic effect of gender beauty. The distinctiveness of the Thai regime of bio-power lies in its focus on controlling the beauty of gender rather than prescribing, proscribing, the pleasure of sexuality... (2003, 36).*

The regime of homophobic power, according to Jackson, is not the focus of the Thai State, but the regime of gendering bio-power is. Jackson observed that Thai women were required to wear dresses, and all Thai men were required to wear trousers (2003, 37-38).

It is a long quote and might be hard to digest. My understanding is that the Thai norms of masculinity and femininity have developed in comparatively recent Thai history. Because of these norms, then, Kathoey, transvestites or transsexuals who cross-dress, become more visible. It could not be said someone is transgressive without the emergence of these gender norms.

In Jackson's words which help me, and hopefully you, to understand the point I make here, transgenderism or Kathoey has become more common in modern Thailand as the result of the remoulding of gendered subjectivities (2004, 40). A Kathoey identity seems to have been the first gender other than man and woman. Later, it began to be fractionated into distinct gay, lesbian, and other Phets.

The word Thud/Tut might be similar to the visibility of Kathoey. It is the identity of someone like me who transgressed the norm of a young Thai boy during his school years. In the Thai sex education curriculum when I grew up there were only two genders - male and female. Issues of gender and sexual diversity, fluidity and homosexuality are not mentioned or come under the rubric of sexual deviation (Thaweessit & Boonmongkon 2011, 50).

You might never hear the Thai term called *Phit Phet* (ผิดเพศ or wrong Phet), which denotes someone whose Phet deviated from the Phet you are born with. Thud/Tut and Kathoey are the boys whose demeanour and gestures contradict the norm. And how would any parents feel if they knew their son seemed to be in the wrong Phet? In my autoethnographic chapter, I have

written about my thoughts that emerged from time to time while living with my parents knowing that I was gay.

*Did I disappoint you that I might never get married to a woman or give you grandchildren? He (I) had not asked them directly (Sahassanon 2022, 44).*

To connect what I wrote, Thud/Tut or the black sheep metaphor came with apprehending that Thai boys/men and girls/women are the standard or normal. They are the white sheep, the majority of Phets in Thailand. It sounds like heteronormativity. Also, there were the messages in society and religions that other Phets including gay and kathoey, are something in-between, something that is deviant, inferior to heterosexuality. So, heterosexism is also connected.

In this thesis and these letters, I thought that I would need to choose between heterosexism or heteronormativity for my inquiry. But now I realise that heteronormativity, heterosexism or even homophobia stand firmly in their fields. They interrelate and my intention in this letter is not to supplant one term with another. My experience as a gay or Thud/Tut in Thailand or what I internalised or was imposed seemed to be the combination of heteronormativity and heterosexism. Do you agree with me?

Internalised homophobia might not be the phrase that resonates most with me, but internalisation of heteronormativity and heterosexism seems a better fit and represent societal, cultural or institutional messages that have created inequality between genders in my country

Before I draw the final thought of this letter, my Examiners might wonder who you are, Susan.

Who is this woman whom I can come to talk to and discuss both personal and professional matters in Edinburgh? A supervisor for counselling or a colleague? In the doctoral counselling program, I was encouraged to have therapy sessions as a space where I could reflect on any issues arising in client work or my personal life. So, Susan, this is how I met you. You are my personal therapist.

I am unsure if I ever told you this. During therapy, I jotted down how you responded to what I shared in a session, how I felt after hearing your responses and, if I were you, what I would say differently. I observed your counselling style, not to imitate but to inspire or help find my own counselling style. However, what I learned about being a counsellor from you is not my main point in these letters. Virginitiy is. Being your gay client, I pondered and reflected on my understanding of virginitiy in some sessions and in this letter. Virginitiy seems to relate strongly with my Phet amid the influence of heteronormativity and heterosexism in my country.

This made me think of my Asian gay client, Leo, in my second letter. He was one of the LGBTQ+ clients I worked with. Also, I think about other gay or lesbian and LGBTQ+ counsellors and therapists. Dominic Davies wrote that it is impossible for a person to grow up in society and not to have internalised society's negative messages about sexuality. The negative messages of homosexuality are pervasive in the West, and I believe in the East, too, in my stories. Becoming an LGBTQ+ counsellor or psychotherapist does not mean that the effect of heteronormativity or heterosexism stops or is removed from our lives. Therefore, Davies suggested that lesbian, gay,

and bisexual therapists ought to look carefully at their homophobic residues and defensive beliefs (2000, 99). I believe this include heteronormativity and heterosexism.

It is kind of funny, Susan, when I think about the time I applied for a doctorate in counselling and psychotherapy in Edinburgh. Here are some parts of what I wrote.

*There is a gap in the service for LGBTQ+ clients. For instance, their lifestyles, relationships, and problems are unique, making it easier for them to be misunderstood based on stereotypes. Developing LGBTQ+ research and practice in a doctoral programme will enhance my specialisation.*

It turned out that to enhance my specialisation in LGBTQ+ research, I started, not from others, but from working with myself as a gay. The virginity that I am inquiring about seems to be the effect of these negative messages in society. Perhaps it is worth reflecting if there are any effects of heteronormativity/heterosexism and homophobia in the context where therapists live and grow up that we might be unaware of. I am pursuing mine, and in the next letter, I will explore more of the actions of heteronormativity, heterosexism and the theories towards my life.

All in all, I contextualise the transition of internalised homophobia to heteronormativity to heterosexism, back to homophobia and briefly what that looks like in Thai history and context. I also touched upon the research paradigm here. It might not be your cup of tea, Susan, but it built the theoretical engagement in my thesis for the next letters.

Thank you for being my therapist who has been supporting me in Edinburgh,

**To: Sak**

**CC: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: Experiences of Heteronormativity before I met you**

Dear Sak,

I recognised my awkwardness when I began this letter - writing, deleting, and rewriting. How's your life? It has been 15 years since we met during our undergraduate studies in Thailand. Honestly, when I gathered some materials and stories for this letter, I planned to write it to my therapist. While I was exercising at the gym, your name surprisingly came to my mind.

Sak? Why? I asked myself but the more I think, the more I feel that having you as my addressee in this letter is the right choice. Of course, Sak is not your real name. But who are you? My Examiners who will also read this letter might wonder. Actually, you were already introduced in the first letter of my thesis. We both enrolled as undergraduates to study psychology. You became my first boyfriend.

In my last letter, I explored the paradigm of my letters and engaged at theoretical level with the concepts of heteronormativity and heterosexism that affect me, a gay in Thailand. In this letter, I continue by sharing my life and others' stories that simultaneously show how gay people like me and my friends were treated. It was my life before I discovered the field of psychology that captivated and inspired me to study and finally meet you. My Examiners who have been reading my letters like you might be perplexed now. This is not a love letter to my ex-partner, you, but one of the links that connects my quest to understand myself, and my thesis, virginity. The story I want you to hear is the time **I was sent to see a psychiatrist.**

*I am around the age of fifteen, a time of being a teenager. My mother suggested that I see a psychiatrist. She might have perceived that I was unhappy, so it could be good for me to receive extra support. At that time I was not open about being 'gay' to her. Following her suggestion, I met a female psychiatrist once. Without any explanation, I was referred on to a male psychiatrist.*

*Why was I referred on? It adds more mystery. I never asked her about this sudden change. It causes unease, and I wonder if the real reasons she sent me to see a psychiatrist were because of my Phet (เฟต).*

Well, Phet is the local conflating term of Thai gender and sexuality. If you were me, would you just ask? I guess the young me was too afraid to ask. The bigger question looking back, if my suspicion is true, is why, being gay, Phet required to see a psychiatrist at all.

In the previous letter, I wrote about how my life seemed to be under heteronormativity. If you only read this letter, you may be confused, Sak. The definition by Samuel Chamber in 2003 and quoted again in 2007 was written here.

*"Heteronormativity means, quite simply, that heterosexual is the norm in culture, in society, in politics. Heterosexuality points out the expectation of*

*heterosexuality as it is written into our world. It does not, of course, mean that everyone is straight (665).”*

What I said is that heteronormativity seemed to be the world in which we once lived and perhaps it is still influential to some degree in Thailand, Sak. That is why I felt my Phet was like a black sheep, deviating from others. Still, if we look closely at heterosexuality, it is when a man is sexually attracted to a woman, an opposite sex, and vice versa.

My mother encouraged me to go to the appointment with the psychiatrist. I wondered if it was because I was not attracted to women or if I seemed to embody the female character in a male body.

When I traced back to the origin of the term heteronormativity, Sak, I found the article that seemed to show that one word appeared to contain two broadly competing arguments. One uses heteronormativity to describe sexual oppression. The other, primarily based on feminist literature, ascribes to heteronormativity a process of oppression that describes gender and sexuality (Marchia & Sommer 2019, 276-277). To simplify to you and myself, the concept of heteronormativity can include the idea of gender as well. Within the concept of Phet, the way I use heteronormativity or heterosexism in my thesis goes beyond sexuality but includes gender.

*I arrive at the hospital in the evening after school. My mother is finding a space to park the car while I make my way towards the ward.*

You must know, Sak, that finding a parking space at public hospitals in Bangkok needs time and luck. Searching for a ward in a public hospital can be difficult, but I had already visited for the earlier assessment.

*I remember a staff member, presumably a clinical psychologist, asking me to do some tests. One of the tasks is to draw a man and a woman. I sketch happily, starting with the female character, and am told to describe what these people are doing. I forget the full conversation, but the description I give, in Thai, is, ‘A woman is waiting for someone, her lover perhaps.’*

At that time, I answered what came to my mind. But I knew I was worried about what analysis or interpretation they could draw based on my answer, Sak. Was the test explicitly related to my Phet or a regular assessment for everyone? I didn’t know, but this assessment might echo Chamber’s statement.

*The importance of the (heteronormativity) concept is that it centres on the operation of the norm. Heteronormativity emphasises the extent to which everyone, straight or queer, will be judged, measured, probed, and evaluated from the perspective of the heterosexual norm (2007, 666)”.*

I drew a woman first. I wondered if that would affect the interpretation - the teenage boy who seemed to choose effeminate characters? Could the reason that I was referred to meet the male psychiatrist instead be to exclude anything related to femininity? Something about me seemed to transgress the norm. Sak, I wrote about it in the second letter. It was Peter Jackson’s idea of Thai gender.

In Thailand, a regime of gendering bio-power remoulded the gendered subjectivities (2004). Masculinity and femininity in each Phet/Genders (Thai man and woman) was demarcated and existed as the norm. And that is how Kathoey Phet, who cross-dress, became more visible. Societal perception of Kathoey may vary, but what Peter Jackson noted from the academic journals that explored transgender, gay and homosexuals in Thailand from 1956 to 1994, is called the Dominant Anti-homosexual Paradigm. Numerous research papers aspired to identify the causes of homosexuality in order to devise interventions to cure it or prevent more people from becoming gay and kathoey (1997, 58-59). Jackson noted that during those times, attitudes to homosexuality in Thailand seemed to be tolerant but not accepting, while criminalising homosexual and transgender people seemed to be non-existent.

To 'cure homosexuality' makes me think of one of my gay friends during middle school. It is the same Catholic school where I studied for twelve years.

*My friend is an effeminate gay friend who went to the States. We were close, but after his return something is different. He proudly announces that he has been through some therapy in the States. His demeanour has dramatically changed. He speaks and acts like a proper straight man (Phu-chaai). Some of his unmanly mannerisms disappeared. Since then, our friendship changed.*

His change might be from conversion therapy. I didn't know but wondered if it was from therapy or if it was his own effort to change himself. I was sad that my friendship with him had faded. No one knew if his feelings towards men had shifted, now to prefer a woman.

So, Jackson's dominant anti-homosexual paradigm in Thailand might not be only about sexuality, but about the Phets that include both gender and sexuality. As I waited to see a psychiatrist, I was worried, Sak. Would they change me to like women or become more masculine. Or both?

I think it is time to introduce you and my Examiners to another scholar in addition to Foucault. Their name is Judith Butler.

**Who is Judith Butler?** They are an American philosopher and famous gender studies scholar. Like Foucault's, Butler's works never appeared in our psychology courses back then, Sak. Reading Butler's work by myself, I found their writing confusing, 'unwieldy and unnecessarily dense'. Butler's text is linguistically and conceptually demanding. Despite the acknowledgement that this writing style is their attempt to make it theoretical and philosophical (Salih 2002). Obviously, English is not my first language. While crafting the contents for these letters, I wrote about my struggle with Butler's work.

*I felt discouraged from incorporating their work into my letters. I thought I had insufficient knowledge to write Butler's theory down on paper. The word 'stupid' came to mind. I needed to take a deep breath and calm myself down.*

Sak, I am slowly breathing while writing this letter. Perhaps it is all right to be stupid. Well, I also took a deep breath to calm down when approaching the psychiatric ward.

*This psychiatric ward is on the second floor. On the first floor, I see patients or their relatives sitting and waiting for a call from the payment counters or to collect their prescribed*

*medication. I am worried, wondering what they would do to me or my Phet. Would I be prescribed any medication? I try to calm down. Hopefully, the medical staff behind those doors would not judge me.*

Back to Butler, you might wonder why I am inviting their work into our letter. I forgot to tell you that Judith Butler's preferred pronoun is 'they'. The reason is that their work captures the importance of norm and heteronormativity in terms of gender. This is Butler's seminal concept of gender:

*Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural source of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender (1999, 43-44).*

This quote is not easily understandable. Fortunately, some other writers, such as Peter Jackson, Samuel Chamber, and Sara Salih, became my academic helpers. To decipher Butler's statements, gender (man, woman, or other Phets) is the 'process' that continuously solidifies. Gender, in Butler's eyes, is a verb that shows continuity rather than a noun that seems to show stability or permanence. Salih opened the window of Butler's world by showing that Butler's interest is not in the individual or experience but in analysing the processes that the individual comes to assume is her or his position as a subject. Identity and subjectivity are constructed within language and discourse (2002, 10).

So, the becoming I or you regarding gender or Phet, according to Butler, takes shape under the regulatory or the compulsory framework. Perhaps this framework connects with the 'proper' gender and sexuality that Thai men and women were formulated and expected to incorporate.

The word heteronormativity, according to Chamber, is unfortunately not used or addressed in Butler's writings, but the heterosexual matrix is. Therefore, in Chamber's paper, he gave an account of the matrix through the lens of heteronormativity. He declared to other readers, including me, that it was not his intention to substitute the heterosexual matrix with heteronormativity or say that the heterosexual matrix is theoretically deficient (2007, 663). Interestingly, Marchia and Sommer's paper stated that Butler's idea about gender is seen as a forerunner of heteronormativity concepts (2019, 271).

Are you still with me, Sak? In my understanding, Chamber (2007, 663), Marchia and Sommer (2019, 271) provide the idea that there is a normative practice in law or more subtly from social expectation, peer pressure, and propriety to form dominant gender expression and constitute identity. The desire for the opposite sex is a set of rules to conform for everyone. Gender expressions or performances that are not 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'idealised femininity' are considered deviant or abnormal.

Heteronormativity, then seems to be a regulatory practice, a norm, that has the power to 'police' gender and sexuality. Being gay, Kathoey in Thailand at that time seemed to be against

the norm of Thai men and women, and I and gay friends were, to some extent, evaluated, judged and policed.

What about you, Sak? We came from the same generation. Being a Thai gay like me, did you experience being controlled and judged? Nowadays, Thailand's view towards people like us has changed dramatically. You need to know that there is even a critique of the pathologisation of transgender, same-sex behaviours and identity in research studies (Jackson & Duangwiset 2017).

Nevertheless, during the time my gay friends and I were growing up, this regulatory practice of the two Phet/gender and heterosexuality seemed powerful. Perhaps we might be affected to some extent by this 'anti-homosexual paradigm'. This might be the reason why I was there sitting among many patients in a psychiatric ward.

*Finally, my mom arrives. We both sit on the blue, pale green sofa. The nurse has been calling patient's names. I wait uncalmly.*

Honestly, I forgot what I did while waiting. Perhaps my mind was preoccupied about speaking with this professional. In hindsight, I wonder if my mom expected that therapy could change my Phet/gender. I did not want to change. I only hoped she would love me regardless of who I am.

Chamber also mentioned that the regulatory practice that Butler used came from Foucault. I do not doubt that Foucault's theory is related to heteronormativity. Power is the concept that, in my understanding, is the crux of Foucault's work. I have already introduced Foucault's biopower in another letter (the 2nd). In some paragraphs are needs to be written academically so my Examiners can read and engage, Sak. I would love to hear your thoughts. Now it is time for another form of power, **a disciplinary power**.

According to Chloe Taylor, Foucault's biopower and disciplinary power seem to intersect and overlap. Sometimes, discipline is included within biopower, or it is one of the two levels at which biopower works. Biopower - power over life - seems to focus more on the population. I believe the example of Thai bio-power and history can be found when our country historically re-gendered masculinity and femininity among Thai men and women (Jackson 2003). In disciplinary power, the related institutions, such as schools, prisons, hospitals, etc., are the places where this power focuses on the individuals and bodies (Taylor 2014, 44).

I believe one target of this type of power is the gay, Kathoey or Thai homosexuals who seem to deviate from the norm. One of Foucault's readers, Tamsin Spargo, wrote that homosexuality is pathologised as a perverse or deviant type that is suitable for treatment. They are a departure from the heterosexual norm. The homosexual 'was subject to discipline and marginalised and subordinating effects of social control (1999, 20)'. Spargo, I believe, wrote this statement from within the Western context where there was homophobic discourse and biopower. In Thailand, at least in my experience, the discipline is the normativity of the Thai genders (men and women). People who deviate are the ones who are disciplined. I am aware that being gay and Kathoey, even in Thailand, does not mean this type of power will discipline us in exactly the same way. You, Sak, and I might experience it differently.

I was unsure when we were in a relationship, whether we identified ourselves with these terms. From 1970 to 1980, Thai gay Phet/gender could be split into two types: Gay King and Gay Queen. Duangwises and Jackson noted, Gay Queen, *Gay Sao* (เกย์สาว) or effeminate gay, seemed to be placed in the middle of the gay and transgender spectrum. Transexual Kathoey is on the feminine end of the spectrum, while hyper-masculine gays are on the masculine end. Gay Sao can move and adapt their expression within masculinity and femininity (2021, 17). I was not interested in sex affirmation surgery. Some Kathoey might. Still, I was categorised in an effeminate gay group. Sak, in my eyes you are more masculine. Still, it might be that there were some disparities in the way you and I were treated or behaved.

One article that is tremendously helpful in connecting Foucault's disciplinary power and being gay is from Ellen K. Feder. Her chapter interestingly introduced the story of Nathan, a four-year-old boy who seems to enjoy playing like a girl. Using the theoretical lens of Foucault with the disciplinary power from his book *Discipline and Punish*, Feder portrayed Nathan's life and how he was treated, in other words, disciplined by significant people around him (2014, 58). Do you see any connection between Nathan's life and mine or other gay stories?

This is how I was introduced to another of Foucault's books, *Sak*. Gary Gutting described the most striking thesis of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* as that disciplinary techniques introduced for criminals can be used and become the model for other modern sites of control, for example, schools, hospitals, and factories. Prison discipline pervades all of modern society (2005, 81). This prison is called Panopticon, which is a new name to me.

The concept that Foucault wrote about came from Jeremy Bentham's design for prisons. This architectural annular building, a panopticon, has an elevated tower at the centre where the supervisor can view the cells containing the lunatic, patient, worker, or schoolboy (1977, 200). These prisoners literally and metaphorically cannot know when they are being watched and observed. As Gary summarised, Foucault explored Bentham's 18th-century design and moved beyond to other societal settings to show how the 'centralised disciplinary mechanism' impacts society and maintains power.

You know I always like metaphors. Feder's paper helped me to understand that disciplinary power and panopticon can be applied in many locations and contexts, including homosexuals and even Nathan's life. Feder suggested the people surrounding Nathan could be the 'apparatus in a panoptic structure to ensure what a proper gendered subject could be (2014, 59). Feder's work inspired me to see that perhaps my experiences are not distant from Nathan's at all. I might be one of the inmates who resides in this metaphorical panoptic structure of heteronormativity.

Looking at my own teenage story, Sak, I wonder if being sent to see a psychiatrist with a hint of gender and sexuality concerns shows that the way I am, gay queen or Thut (ตุ๊ด), was being watched and observed by my mother and soon by an expert in psychiatry. It reminded me of a TV show I watched when I was a teenager.

*My family and I enjoy watching a TV. It is our quality time. There is a TV show run by an effeminate gay celebrity whose mannerisms were like women. While watching, my mother stated in Thai, 'He will never successfully find his true love, only a deceitful one.'*

That might have come from her worry about me. She seemed to be indirectly telling me, 'Do not be like him'. Being gay and the love between gays is negatively evaluated, inferior or temporary compared to heterosexual love. I think it echoes with heterosexism. Now, I know it is untrue. But how could I ignore what she said? Inevitably, I was affected by it.

In the panopticon metaphor, there is a supervisor or a guard. The guard was not only my mother but some friends of mine taking turns at observing, whether in the home or at school.

You might have heard these Thai words before, Thud/Tut (ตุ๊ด) or Kathoey (กะเทย). These were colloquial expressions denoting young homosexual or transgender men. This derogatory term has the same meaning as the English terms, 'poofter' or 'faggot' (Jantharasakun 1985, 72).

*At Catholic school when Thud friends and I walk around or when some male students are angry or annoyed by something, they shout these names to us. They seem to get something from insulting us. I never ask how other gays and Kathoey felt or thought when hearing these pejorative terms. Some ignore them or shout insults back. Some might not mind being called these names. I convey nonchalance, but I am hurt.*

Sadly, but true, Sak, I think it strengthened the idea that my Phet, gay, Thud, was wrong. It is not only me or people I know of, but there are other Thai gays, Kathoey, that have experience of the heteronormative looks and disciplines. Thai researcher, Sakol Sopitarchasak and colleagues, published an article, Victimization against Non-heterosexual Male Adolescents in Bangkok: A Qualitative Study, in 2015. At school, there were verbal remarks (anti-Thuds (ตุ๊ด)). Any students who talked with, or were close to, someone who is Thud or Kathoey also might be called Thud as well. Also, there are incidents of physically touching the bottoms or chest (2015, 70-71).

Not everyone behaved in this bullying way. Other students were friendly and kind to people like us. It would be unfair to only speak about the negative side of schoolmates. In the same paper, Sopitarchasak and colleagues also reported interviewees' accounts that there was no physical abuse in the school but for some being gay or Kathoey came with the consequences such as being rejected for scholarships, or being deselected as an elected student council member due to the concern they might bring shame to school (2015, 70-71)

Feder wrote that disciplinary power, according to Foucault, is the assignment of subjective positions. Individuals are 'allotted roles in a social world, and these positions give many possibilities to exercise power (Feder 2014, 59). In my understanding, power does not reside in the individual but in the roles that were given. I believe these positions include being student peer, parent, teacher, or psychiatrist and they seemed to have the power to discipline and control people like us, Sak. They could be the 'guard' in the panoptic apparatus of gender - heteronormativity. There is another story of one of my close gay friends at school who also received this heteronormative discipline.

*One of my gay friends is unexpectedly sent to another school. Other gay/Thud friends and I are shocked and saddened by his sudden departure. This transfer happened after my friend's parents had a meeting with the class teacher. I don't know exactly the words that were used, but in summary they knew that my friend is gay or behaves differently from other boys in school, his effeminacy, to be specific. His parents, at that time, seemed very disappointed.*

Perhaps, this was another example of the heteronormative panoptic guard. The teacher observed my friend and passed on his observations to his parents who took action to prevent or stop their son from being gay and Kathoey.

It seemed terrifying, Sak that being gay or katoey could cause such exclusion. All these mockeries from friends, the rejection of rewards from school and the parental intervention perpetuate the message that heterosexuality, or being a masculine man and feminine woman, is the norm. In Foucault's terms, in this panopticon, it is the hierarchical observation and normalising judgment through which gay/kathoey friends, and I were not only observed, but also disciplined and punished as our Phets were against the norm. I wonder if my mother was informed of my Phet/gender from a class teacher. Perhaps she was. Now, let us go back to my story.

*I enter the consulting room. There is a patient's couch and the psychiatrist's desk. It wasn't like the classic picture I saw of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis class. The psychiatrist, a middle-aged man, greets me. He seems kind. I take a deep breath before sitting on the chair next to him. We start the conversation.*

Before I continue, Jackson had some criticisms about Foucault's panopticon. He used the Thai regime of image concept to argue his point. Earlier, I wrote about the Thai State's power that created the gendered subjectivities of Thai men and Thai women. But it was not only about Thai gender. In my 2nd letter (to my father), I discussed how, to be civilised, the Thai state also pushed eroticism, including sex or sex talk, into the private domain. It created a split between public and private. The public representation or a regime of image was affected and surveilled, whereas the private domain was untouched.

This is why Jackson stated that it created a significant private social and cultural space for 'heterodox beliefs' and 'non-normative sexualities' in Thailand, whereas in the West, non-normative behaviours or sexuality were expunged in the private as well as the public domain (2004, 201). Jackson then proposed that Thailand, our country, has never known a hegemony of the panoptic model of power or the power of surveillance that Foucault used to formulate subjectivities (2004, 208).

In my understanding, Sak, with a separation of private and public domain, Jackson believes that the panoptic power of control might move across but is unlikely to reach to the core of being. Homosexual behaviours that are kept private seem possible in Thailand if they do not cause any disturbance to the norm in the public domain. These are the differences between the West and Thailand. However, in my friends' and my stories, you could see that the effeminacy among Thai gay/Thud might cause some reaction in the public domain because my being who I am seemed to transgress the norm of Thai boys. It might make Foucault's panopticon applicable and valid during the time I was growing up and affected my sense of self or the core of my being.

Perhaps you, Sak, who embodied more masculinity, could evade that kind of Thai surveillance, making private homosexual acts possible. Your being might not disturb the calm of the Thai image like me, an effeminate gay. My story cannot fully represent you, Sak or even other

gays, kathoey in Thailand. In this letter I wrote what my experiences looked like or what I witnessed.

*Around half an hour later, I leave his room with another appointment for the next month. It turns out that my psychiatrist is kind. He listens to my worldview without judgment and does not convince me to change my gender/sexuality. I am not prescribed any medication. That relieves me tremendously. My mother is asked to have a word with my psychiatrist. Perhaps they talk about me.*

At that time, I did not ask what they discussed. I probably did not want to open up a conversation about my *Phet* and hoped to keep it private. My mother also did not say or ask anything. A decade later, when I came to Edinburgh, I came out to her.

Talking about Edinburgh also **reminded me of my gay client in Edinburgh, Leo**. He was an Asian gay client that I worked with in Edinburgh. His name might be new to you.

*During our therapy, Leo once mentions that other friends bullied him due to his sexual orientation. Most of his family members accepted his being gay when he came out, but his father was very disappointed. It seemed to him that he could not be the son that his father expected. Leo has tried to communicate with his dad, but it was futile. They have stopped talking since then. Family members told him to wait, and someday, he and his father could speak to each other again. Leo says he and his father were not close and felt he did not lose anything.*

In the session, I recognised that he had tried to reconcile with his father, but I wondered out loud to him if Leo's *not-losing-anything* words came from a part of him hurt by rejection. Is it a way to console himself or protect himself from being hurt?

Sak, you might recognise that there was a parallel between me and Leo. We both seemed to grow up with the effect of heteronormative and heterosexist messages. Leo is not Thai. But being bullied by friends and his father's disapproval appears to represent how people around him felt strongly that being gay and homosexual is unacceptable and unbearable. Perhaps, they are metaphorical panoptic guards of heteronormativity in Leo's life. And somehow, he had to live and endure this distant relationship with his father.

As an Asian gay, I could not imagine, Sak, what would happen to my life if one of my parents stopped communicating with me due to my *Phet*. My mother only sent me to see a psychiatrist. If I come out to my father, like Leo did, would he reject me. Is waiting the only possibility? What else could I do as a counsellor for Leo, and as a gay who also lives with a panoptic guard of heteronormativity.

Russell and Bohan evocatively wrote that in therapy, when the focus is on changing individuals or seeing the individual as the problem, the social order is left unchanged or unexamined. They encourage counsellors to try bringing the political into psychotherapy (2006, 354). I wonder how to bring it into my therapy room with Leo. What else could I facilitate for Leo to live under the effect of heteronormative and heterosexist messages that might surround his life and significant people? Or how can I, a Thai gay, tackle these societal messages in my life?

It is a big question, Sak. Perhaps this thesis is my inquiry into understanding the effect of these messages towards myself and my experiences, specifically regarding virginity. To let my Examiners know, you and I were in a relationship at the age of twenty with no sexual intercourse. I held my virginity, and we did not initiate any sexual acts beyond a kiss on my cheek. Why? Because of the experiences of being gay? I think one of the answers relates to the words I proudly said to that psychiatrist I met in Thailand.

*'I know I am gay, but I am aware of the boundaries or propriety of what I choose to do or not to do. I know how to behave myself. I give the psychiatrist some examples. He listens and seemingly agrees.*

Well, this might be why my being gay was not an issue to that psychiatrist. In the next letter, I will unfold this further, and illuminate all this entanglement of sexual intercourse, virginity, effeminate gay and heteronormativity/heterosexism.

Writing this letter in 2024, you must have heard that Thailand's House of Representatives has voted to legalise same-sex marriage. If the Senate also passes this bill and it is finally endorsed by the King, then we can get married by the end of 2024. I mean you, your partner, and all LGBTQ+ people in Thailand.

Despite our relationship lasting only a year, I was and am still grateful for the time we shared, Sak. I was told that gays could never find true love. We might need to be critical about the word 'true love'. But you once proved to me that people like us can find love and be loved. Thank you for disproving this heterosexist belief to me, Sak.

Hopefully, I will meet him one day and wish me luck,

**To: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: Virginitly: The Cloak of Kon Dee/Good Person**

**Dear Examiners,**

Sawatdee Krub! We meet again. To be accurate, you have read all my electronic letters to my significant addressees. I initially crafted this letter for my mother or *Mae*, but it didn't feel that it belongs to her. My supervisor and I found it too academic and complicated. Instead, I believe you are the right addressee.

I have explored in my letters to many people why I refrained from sexual intercourse and held the value of virginity. Virginitly has received massive criticism for oppressing women, but the young me had never questioned it before or analysed its relationship with the religious, cultural, and societal elements in Thailand that I have raised and delineated in my 3rd – 5th letters.

In the seventh letter to my ex-boyfriend, I invited you to see how my Phet, a gay, in Thailand has been disciplined and controlled through the Panopticon metaphor. It might be recognised in other countries and cultures. According to Foucault, here is the crux of the Panopticon.

*He who is subjected to a field of visibility ... assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself a power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his subjection (1997, 202-203).*

According to Johnson's paper, under the influence of the Panopticon prisoners/inmates eventually internalise the gaze of others to the point that prisoners/people become 'overseers' (2023, 4). What does it mean here?

To explain to you and myself, I wonder if the experiences of being bullied and ridiculed, and the idea that being gay, Thud or Kathoey compared to straight men seemed wrong, inferior, and unaccepted, becomes learning by repetition. It is connected with heteronormative and heterosexist culture. I then internalised all these looks and messages that formulate the belief that being gay is not the norm- a black sheep- of the Thai gender. My sense of self deviated from other family members or church members. Douglas Haldeman's reflection on himself as a gay male psychotherapist resonated with my experiences.

*We have all come of age in a culture that makes us feel bad about who we are; most of us have at one time or another felt the sting of antigay hostility'. It seems we are affected to some degree by the 'heterocentric culture (2010, 179).*

In my understanding, heterocentric culture ... might echo the concept of heteronormativity, or the way society values heterosexuality, and the norm of male and female gender. I mentioned this especially in my 6<sup>th</sup> letter. Living in this society somehow inevitably causes gay people, LGBTQ+ including me, to feel bad towards our/themselves.

You might be curious now how gender/sexuality and Phet relate to the main inquiry, virginity. I believe this letter I am writing to you, my Examiners, will bring us back to the beginning of why I so valued virginity. The more I reflected and wrote about it, the more vivid this memory became. It relates to my mother and the phone conversation between her and her best friend since I was young.

*Our two families have spent time together during many summer breaks. We are close. My mother's friend often telephone for a very long conversation. She seems to confide in my mother by bringing up any issues or stories to discuss. My mom, I believe, is a very supportive friend.*

*One of the serious issues is that a son of my mother's best friend has been interested in being a woman, behaving like Kathoey and wearing makeup and women's clothes. I have to speculate somewhat because I don't hear both sides of the conversation. My mother's responses give me a glimpse of who and what they are discussing. At one point I overhear my mother say to her best friend:*

*"He [friend's son] could be anything he wants, at least only be a good person" or in Thai "Kao Ja Pen Arai Kor Dai, Kor Kare Pen Kon Dee Kor Pore (เขาจะเป็นอะไรก็ได้ ขอแค่เป็นคนดีก็พอ)".*

I am unsure how the young me who was worried about being gay felt at that moment, but the words must have had an impact on me. That is why they appear in this letter.

To continue, I shall invite you to learn more about this term, **Kon Dee or a good person**. In Thai, a good person is called Kon Dee (คนดี). This expression can be heard at any societal level or institution in Thai society. People who grew up in Thailand, my family, and my friends must have heard it and its importance repeatedly. The way we use this term is very wide, but for you as non-Thai, I collected some proverbs that highlight the value of being a good person (Kon Dee) in Thai society.

The first one is *Kon Dee Tok Num Mai Lai Tok Fai Mai Mai (คนดีตกน้ำไม่ไหล ตกไฟไม่ไหม้)* which translates into English as 'good people do not fall into the water and do not burn in the fire'. This proverb means there will be help or rescue for good people in dangerous or harmful situations.

Another one is *Kon Dee Pee Khum (คนดีมีคุ้ม)* or heaven protects the good) means the spirits will guide, protect, and support good people.

These Thai proverbs that I grew up with produce an idea that being 'good' is valued in Thai society. In my letter to my gay besties (5<sup>th</sup> letter), I wrote about Thai Buddhism, which is related to the concept of Kon Dee, especially the concept of Karma. Good deeds bring good consequences, and bad deeds bring dire ones. This is taught everywhere in my country within the family, and in schools and religious institutes. Even in the media.

In countless Thai novels, films, and TV series, bad people (*Kon Mai Dee, คนไม่ดี*) end up suffering after they try to steal away someone's partner, or cheat, or commit corruption. Karma always comes to serve the good deeds with rewards and praises, the bad deeds with eventual punishments and sufferings. Within that 5<sup>th</sup> letter, if you remember, there were even some Thai Buddhist doctrines that mentioned that the reason for being born gay and Kathoey came from

past sinful lives. And I believed that. In all the letters, you might also recognise that it was not easy being gay or Kathoey when I was growing up.

Now let us go back to my mother's statement: "He (read, me) could be anything he wants, at least only be a good person.

What exactly did the young me think hearing those words? Could it imply that gays, Kathoey and other Phet, who are against the norm of heterosexuality could be granted acceptance by being 'good'? Being good or Kon Dee seemed to be a desirable or admirable quality. Does my mother's statement offer a place for people like me in this society? Or if I or any gay and Kathoey friends are good, will we be loved and accepted like she said to her friend about her son?

If you remember, I wrote about HIV and its stigma in the 5th letter. One of the characteristics of stigma, according to Herek, is that it can engulf the entire identity of the stigmatised person. It does not create social disapproval of only one aspect of an individual but 'trumps all other traits and qualities' (2004, 14). Sexual stigma, then, is the shared knowledge of society's negative regard to 'nonheterosexual behaviour, identity, relationship, or community (Herek 2004).

I bring up this broad term stigma to show that perhaps being gay or Kathoey in Thailand might be less severe because Kon Dee's conditionality. Despite being gay or Kathoey, you can be accepted and loved. The status of being gay does not engulf the whole sense of self.

You might ask further if the young me who heard this conversation knows what kind of character or personality would be categorised as 'good'. Perhaps the answer could be drawn from what I had absorbed from Thai society about the idea of being good.

To refresh our memories, I wrote in my 7<sup>th</sup> letter about the moment between me and my mother while watching a television chat show. My mother saw a Thai effeminate gay on television. She muttered that he would never find true love. His name was Doctor Seri Wongmontha. Peter Jackson, the research scholar I have frequently quoted in my letters, mentioned Wongmontha in one of his papers. This Thai flamboyant, effeminate gay man, according to Jackson, publicly acknowledged his sexual interest in masculine young men. Still, others seemed to admire him due to his intelligence and success.

*If a woman or non-masculine male exhibits a sufficient number of other status and prestige symbols - such as education, wealth, intelligence, success in their field, dignity and wisdom in old age - then these may be sufficient to grant them an honoured place in Thai society (2016, 61).*

The young me had never read Jackson's work at that time, but it was evident that this effeminate person received some form of social acceptance from others. This echoes my experiences, too.

*Each year in my catholic school, there are times that the students who receive an excellent grade point average (GPA) will attend the Certificate of Academic Excellence ceremony. All parents are invited to come to witness their children lining up to receive the certificate from the head of the school. My parents never miss it.*

*I am always excited about this annual ceremony. Flanked by my parents and younger sister, I hold the certificate in my hand, smiling happily at the photographer.*

The students with top grades are called ‘*Dek Rien Dee*’ – เด็กเรียนดี. *I was proud to be known by this term.* Dek means children, and Rien Dee means good at academics. Perhaps this is the status of being ‘Kon Dee’ in school. Despite being gay/Thud, this academic success from good grades, certificates, or scholarships made my family and teachers proud of me. I felt accepted and recognised.

It is not only having good grades in school, my examiners. Being good includes something more. Kittirat Pluemjit used focus groups and reports in school to understand the preconceptions and discourse relating to morality in Thai schools. Pluemjit's result was interesting because teaching morality or morality projects in school do not include the words ‘good student’, but when she interviewed teachers, they revealed that their perception of morality imbued the idea of the good student (2023, 45-46).

One of the characteristics they defined in a good student is ‘without the exhibition of problem behaviours.’ Problem behaviours, for example, included late attendance, rudeness, lack of order and responsibility, drug abuse, and violent conduct. These behaviours were undesirable, or bad, for teachers and the school community. (2023, 46).

To be the (gay) student who is good/Dee, therefore, not presenting any misbehaviours to other friends and teachers, can you all speculate what might good student characteristics relating to sex?

In the 3rd letter (to my sister), I wrote about sex education. You might recall that sexual intercourse in school was discouraged and caused many negative consequences. If we connect that letter with Pluemjit’s work, what would you think the young me would do to remain a good student? Sexual or sexualised activity in school would be avoided. A good student should concentrate on studying. To impregnate a girl or have sex in school would risk being seen as a bad student. Engagement in sex during school came with negative consequences. Teachers or family would be utterly disappointed in me. Sex seemed to be ‘bad’ both in school and at home.

Looking back, the young me was strict with rules and did not break any. In order to be accepted as gay, being good seemed to be compulsory. Well, it appears somewhat restrictive. Right? I was not alone in this involvement of the Kon Dee concept.

In the chapter ‘Tactics for living and growing up’, de Lind van Wijngaarden enlisted the self-initiated tactics for Thai same-sex-attracted men. One of the tactics is, unsurprisingly, ‘being good.’ When I read this chapter, I was heart-wrenched that other Thai gays or Kathoey experienced this Kon Dee condition like me.

Drawing from de Lind van Wijngaarden’s interviewees, homosexuality is somehow a ‘failure or ‘personal defect.’ Being good or being ‘extra good’ compared to others is the hope that young gay men can gain ‘additional respect from significant others and the society that they live in. Being good means success in school, career, and financial independence. Being good brings pride and draws admiration. Their sexual preference as gay or homosexual might become more ignorable (2021, 79-80). One of the Thai interviewees says:

*They say, 'You don't do anything bad.' All the time, I build fame for my family name; I progress all the time. So, they do not dare to criticise me ... I mean, I am (gay), but I am also a good person (2021, 80).*

Being good seemed to be the way or pattern for Thai people like me. What Jackson and de Lind van Wijngaarden wrote seemed to confirm to me that the message of being Kon Dee or, if I can say, a good person discourse, seemed to permeate Thai society. It had an impact to some extent on Thai gays or any Thai LGBTQ+, including me. The characteristics of Kon Dee might be defined differently or uniquely among Thai person though good grades in educational institutes or success in any field seemed to be common.

Back to my mother's statement. I believe the young me tried to be good in his own way, by giving no problems at school and having good grades. What he wants, and so do I, is to be loved and accepted by people who are important in life. Distancing and refraining from sex during school then seemed to come from the fear of being bad person. But, when I reached puberty and beyond, interest in sex grew. I gained more knowledge of sex among gay men but, still, I continued **refraining from sex and keeping my virginity in adulthood**. How does being good relate to my *Phet*, or virginity?

If you remember Jackson's work about the Thai State that highlighted the norm of heterosexuality for Thai men and Thai women, you might also see that there are different expectations for men and women. Traditionally, a good Thai woman, or *Kunlasatree* (กุลสตรี), is defined by proficiency and sophistication in household duties. They behave with graceful and pleasant manners. In the conservative view of sexuality, they are expected to be inexperienced in sex and to be virgin. Most Thai men traditionally expect wives to be sexually inexperienced, though, now sexual freedom extends to more Thai women (de Lind van Wijngaarden 2021, 57). In my 4th letter, to my grandmother, I explored the symbolism in Christianity of the Virgin Mary, and premarital virginity.

However, de Lind van Wijngaarden also wrote that good masculinity typically encompasses 'authority, courage, self-assurance, physical and emotional strength and sexual prowess' (2021,66). Virginity is not endorsed in the same way for Thai men. Sex seemed to be less restricted.

I grew up with these societal views towards these two genders. But why does the idea of being a virgin hold such substantial value for me as a gay who has a male body? You might have begun to anticipate the reasons from what I wrote in previous letters. I think I have an article to share with you first.

Thomas Guadamuz wrote about reproducing heteronormativity among same-sex attracted Thai men. He pinpointed that heteronormative culture has tremendous power and influence in the many dimensions of society, including laws, morality, and mainstream culture. It has power and effect on the secondary culture or homosexuality in Thailand (2017, 265). One of the heteronormative influences is through the concepts of husband and wife or *Phua-Mia*- ผัวเมีย (261).

The idea of husband and wife (man and woman) affects gay cultures where there are two men in a romantic or sexual relationship. Do you remember the terms Gay King (เกย์คิง) and Gay

Queen (เกย์ควีน) or Gay Sao I introduced earlier? Despite having male bodies, some gays seem to take feminine roles in the private world or in public, whereas others exude more masculinity. The Gay Queen was identified by feminine characteristics and being receptive in sexual intercourse like a woman/wife or Mia. In contrast, the insertive Gay King was regarded as expressing masculinity or Phua (2021, 6).

When I and Sak, my ex-partner, were in a relationship. Sexual intercourse did not occur. If it had happened, I would have taken a receptive role as a Mia. Inspired by Butler's work, Duangwiset and Jackson wrote about the process of gendering, specifically among Thai gays.

*When Thai gay men enact effeminacy, they are practising gendered acts in which their body is a site of citation and reiteration of femininity. The gender acts are materialised through their body with feminine language, feelings, and mannerisms (2021, 20)*

The heart of Duangwiset and Jackson's work, I perceive, is that each Thai gay man has his distinctive mix of effeminate and masculine performances, and the use of gender acts differs in each situation.

Looking back on my journey of writing these letters, if I were gay but very masculine and not expressing effeminacy, I probably would not have been bullied. Gay Sao, and Kathoey, based on Duangwiset and Jackson's writing, seemed to experience more bullying than masculine gays (2021, 14). So, it seemed that my behaviours and gestures portrayed effeminacy and seemed repeated and iterated in my body. My sense of self, then, is my sense that I am gay Sao who embodies or leans more toward feminine roles.

Guadamuz's writing about Phua and Mia is clearly connected to homonormativity. I believe you must have heard it before. This term, Duggan wrote, is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions. It instead upholds and sustains these norms in any society and any culture, including the homosexual world, where it will be judged (2002, 184). Bersani also proposed that the construction of human bodies is almost impossible not to associate with dominance and subordination, which also fuses with the construction of male and female (1987, 213). Perhaps this is why I, an effeminate gay and some other gays in Thailand, follow the traditional role of Mia or wife in Guadamuz's work by being receptive to sexual intercourse. Being insertive, then, seems incompatible with who I was.

The demarcation between masculinity and femininity of being gay was created in which an effeminate gay seems inferior compared to the masculine – top- gay. It was not only me who thought this way. There is a simplistic understanding of power in the gay community in which the tops had the power and the bottom unfortunately did not (Hoppe 2011, 209). The differences in bullying experiences might be one piece of evidence. But is it totally accurate? This division between masculine (top and penetrate) and feminine (bottom and being penetrated) is questioned by Jonathan Kemp.

Kemp's *The Penetrated Male* is not an easily digestible book if I can be honest. Still, what I took from his work is that the penetrated male body, which is equal to the feminine body or the anus is equivalent to the vagina, can be metaphorically unstable and illogical (2013, 11). Why? Kemp challenged the idea of masculinity, which is perceived as impenetrable, in control

or self-contain by drawing from stories by Wilde and Huysmans, for example. The eyes, mouth and ears are the main orifices, a symbolic anus, that male experiences the submission to another male (2013, 74).

From my understanding, masculine males' eyes can penetrate from 'the male gaze' or through speech, but simultaneously, the objects observed, such as a female, can command or inspire attention. Also, the mouth is the area of the body where things can be put. The ears, specifically, are the senses where Kemp shows that to be a man or masculine is through the submission of discourse. Therefore, some of these bodies' parts can penetrate or be penetrated, which can mark one as feminine. This submission to another male, Kemp wrote, is 'always already coterminous with getting fucked (2013, 74)' which destabilises the gender norms between feminine and masculine. Kemp's inspiring work makes me start to grasp the idea that for gay men, penetration and being penetrated can occur regardless of masculinity/King or femininity/Queen.

The masculine and feminine among gay men is complicated. A gay queen like me could metaphorically and literally penetrate and be penetrated. Bersani clearly warns gay men to resist being drawn into mimicking this warfare between men and women (1987, 218). He taught me that to replicate these heterosexual dynamics as top vs bottom or King and Queen would lead to power inequality (1987, 213). Sexual and relational practices between gays can be uniquely different, can't they?

Interestingly, Thai gay kings and queens nowadays, according to Duangwises and Jackson, have become old-fashioned because they denote a masculine/feminine binary in gay sexual relations. Sexual roles have become increasingly delinked from gendered expression (2021, 7). In my understanding, this means Thai gays with either effeminacy or masculinity might be able to perform all sexual roles (insertive and receptive acts). However, Guadamuz's paper undeniably showed that some Thai gay couples continue the specific roles of Phua-Mia.

Honestly, I could perform both sexual roles (insertive and receptive). No one can limit my sexual role. But at that time, I seemed to be fixed with the receptive role of a Mia in a gay relationship. If I look back, the submissive role and being at the bottom were automatically and uncritically given to me. I could not conceive if I could prefer other sexual or positional identity apart from receptive anal intercourse. I and my virginity were tied to being at the bottom.

Hoppe interviewed gay bottoms presumably living in the USA and found that this positional identity reflects the preference for receptive anal intercourse (2011, 200). However, there is one participant in Hoppe's research paper who significantly questioned the conceptualisation of bottom that it;

*...can be separated from body-location indicators: it is not simply a shorthand for someone who prefers receptive anal intercourse, but rather an expression of his desire for producing pleasure in his sexual partners (2011, 199).*

When the sexual partner experiences pleasure, then it brings joy and pleasure to the bottoms, creating the circuit in their dynamics. This perspective is so novel, but I want to think out loud with you and ask myself if my identity truly aligns with it. If I enjoy producing pleasure

and receiving pleasure from my sexual partner, would I be comfortable with being versatile instead or if an effeminate gay can be a top?

As I wrote earlier, in Thailand, there is the traditional masculine and feminine, which structured male-male sex relations. Storer (1999, 148), who conducted research about discursive and sexual practice in Bangkok- my hometown- came across the term called Kathoey *Siap* (กระเทยเสียบ, a katoey who penetrates another man). Sao Siap (สาวเสียบ) is another similar term I have heard before. These terms, according to Storer, challenge the traditional masculine-feminine opposition in male-male sexual relations. Still, they are perceived as 'incredulity', which Storer suggested is not widely known (1999, 149). This term could be an uneasy fit for many gays, including me, because it resists the norm of effeminate gay men, katoey or Thud. We (I and perhaps some Thai gays) were supposed to be penetrated, not the opposite. It confirms how homosexuality can be mistakenly perceived as another 'additional choice' under the heterosexual order where it would not challenge it (Warner 1991, 5). The norm of heterosexuality has influenced homosexuality. My uncomfortable feeling towards it might be the evidence representing the fixed boundary of masculinity and femininity in Thai gay relationships.

What I am writing here is a new perspective. Still, on that night in February 2020, as you have read, my subjectivity had been attached to a feminine role, combined with another critical layer of being a good person. If being a virgin seemed to be praised and valued in Thai culture and in Christianity for good women, then, it could be applicable to effeminate gays like me that I am a good effeminate gay. I held my virginity like Thai females because it is socially and traditionally sound and good.

Reading this so far, you might observe that virginity even for Thai women may be more flexible nowadays. In my 3<sup>rd</sup> letter to my sister, there is a clash of discourses between traditional and liberal values towards virginity that Thai women need to negotiate and decide when to lose virginity. I chose to keep my virginity after my undergraduate, and master's degrees until I reach the age of thirty during my doctoral degree. Why was it delayed?

According to de Lind van Wijngaarden, some Thai gays in his work try to be 'extra good' compared to others with the hope of gaining 'additional respect from significant others.

*(Being good or extra good) ... at the same time, it may raise the expected standard of behaviours and achievement in other life domains, putting pressure on homosexual or transgender children that are not normally placed on heterosexual sons (2021, 80).*

My attention is drawn to the word 'extra good.' In the 5th letter if you remember, I wrote about the anti-sex attitude in Buddhism. Sex and marriage are acceptable for laypeople, but for Buddhist monks, sex seemed to be prohibited and is a 'source of suffering'. I wonder if the young me held virginity firmly because of its extra good status. I, a layperson, seemed to behave like a monk or ascetic to maintain the status of an extra good person.

My examiners, I think the complicated reasons why I maintained virginity and refrained from sex until I reached the age of thirty revolve around being Kon Dee, good or even extra good. One of the events that helped me connect *Kon Dee*, being gay, and virginity in all these letters -

my thesis - is a personal therapy session with Susan Granger. I wrote to her in the 6th letter. In one session, I shared with her my life experience as a gay and the way to be a good person. These are some of my therapist's responses.

*'You use it like a cloak. I will wear this cloak and be good and not take a wrong. It is a strong inner sense of survival ... You were a clever boy, a man. You figured out how to live by being good, by not losing virginity to others...*

That is how the metaphor of **The Cloak of Goodness/Kon Dee** emerged in that session. A cloak is a loose outer garment, likened to an outer garment and something that envelops or conceals (Merriam-Webster, s.v.). Perhaps the cloak reference came from Harry Potter.

I can suggest a further connection, the HIV stigma, that might interrelate with being gay or homosexual. You, my examiners, could see that HIV had notorious consequences and discrimination toward HIV-infected people, especially gay men. I vicariously encountered the effect through my group therapy from my master's dissertation, the time I escorted my gay friends to the HIV clinic and the messages about HIV that circulated in Thai society that I wrote about in my 5th letter.

HIV seems incompatible with the condition of Kon Dee, a cloak. It was negatively perceived, and it could affect my life. Being gay might be bad and inferior, but it might be worse with HIV. Metaphorically, it might tear up the cloak entirely. Perhaps HIV preventive medication could protect this cloak. A study by Hayes and colleagues on gay men in England about the psychological impact of Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) found that it can reduce HIV-related anxiety among gay men. The medication gave gay men the 'extra peace of their mind' or the sense of relief during and after sex (2023, 5). The less anxious gay men are, the more present and intimate they feel with their sexual partner (2023, 7). Likewise, I would feel much safer in sexual intercourse with this medication. But before the existence or convenience of PrEP prescription, maintaining virginity had become the 'extra good' element that could not be lost easily from the 'extra bad' of HIV. This might be another layer why I was scared to potentially lose love and acceptance from others which is what I always yearned for. And I seemed to wear this metaphorical cloak of Kon Dee, which perhaps existed even before I went to see a psychiatrist.

In case you forgot, in the 7th letter, I recounted when I met a psychiatrist during high school. While my mother was waiting outside the therapy room, I told the psychiatrist that I knew how to behave myself and not go beyond the acceptable boundaries. Those boundaries, I said, might be where the definition of a good person is contained. I was already wearing the cloak of Kon Dee when I saw the psychiatrist. It had already become part of my sense of self.

In de Lind van Wijngaarden's research, being good/Kon Dee for Thai homosexual participants is one of the tactics which seem to be conscious and voluntary. Looking back at my stories now, it seems that I consciously determined to be a good gay person in the manner I told the psychiatrist, but I wonder if it is true.

The more I discover poststructuralism and critical theorists such as Foucault and Butler, the more I question and think beyond the 'I' who takes action. Richardson wrote that language is 'not the result of individuality' but constructs the individual's subjectivity, which is historically

and locally specific (2000a, 8). When talking about language, it connects with Foucault's concept of discourse or *Wathakam* (วาทกรรม) introduced in my second letter.

Drawing from Foucault, Simon-Maeda explained that discourse is the practice that systematically forms the objects of which they speak. The importance of discourse is that 'certain groups of people and institutions (social, political, religious, medical, etc.) come to regulate the discourse that normalise our ways of thinking and acting in this world.' Language seemed to gather itself together by the socially constructed rule in which some statements are allowed to be made and others might not (2011, 12).

The answer I gave to the psychiatrist in my 7<sup>th</sup> letter or the language I used might not entirely come from me. Perhaps it originated from the Thai societal institutions through school, religions, and society that perpetuate Kon Dee messages, and which gradually produced who I am or want to become. I reproduced and maintained its discourse until it became my conscious choice. I choose to be good or even extra good in many ways including virginity because being gay or *Thud* was socially produced as bad under the heteronormative panopticon.

By the way, have you heard the term *Kunla Gay* (กุลเกย์)? I guess you may not. Me neither. Jackson introduced Natee Teerarojjanapongs, who coined this term. The decent gay man is described as the gay man who earns acceptance of his sexuality by contributing positively to his family and the wider society (2016, 95).

Kunla-gay was coined similarly on the model of the terms *Kunlabut* (กุลบุตร or Decent son) and *Kunlasatree* (กุลสตรี or Decent woman). For local people, Kunla-, a Pali prefix, generally means 'good or decent.' It means that if you are a good son, daughter, or gay, you can gain respect and acceptance from the family and society.

Duangwises and Jackson, however, seemed to disagree with the idea of good gay or Kunla-Gay in terms of sexuality. They wrote that Thai gay men came to understand their masculinity and sexual feelings without any anxiety about whether they were a 'good gay person.'

*[Good gay] Never gained significant traction or influence among Thai gay men. Being gay in Thailand's consumer culture is not a matter of sexual morality, as is the case in heteronormative discourses, but rather stresses the eroticisation of masculine body images (2021, 75).*

I believe my life and experiences as an effeminate gay, at least, is at variance with their position with my determined effort to be a good gay in many ways, including the maintenance of virginity. Because of the knowledge I absorbed and experiences I encountered, that being gay is wrong or sinful, I feared my beloved people could feel disappointed, unaccepting of me and even reject me if I am 'bad.' This might be why I did not challenge about virginity. Having it as a cloak, seemed to keep me safe and maintain the goodness in me.

Before I end this letter, hopefully, you will allow me to say; if there is goodness and good gay, then the badness or bad gay is also manifested. It seems to align with Warner's writing that it is less possible to think of oneself as normal without thinking that some other kind of person is

pathological (1999, 60). Being normal and pathological, or goodness and badness, go hand in hand.

Warner, the writer of *The Trouble with Normal*, mentioned the gay and lesbian movement where being gay was stigmatised. To fight for rights, there was a campaign to produce respectability among gays. The essence of gaining respect and redeeming gay identity was to repudiate sex (1999, 42). The sex that is normal, natural or good seems to be created, for example, being monogamous in pairs, in a relationship, in private, in procreative sex and vanilla, etc. (1999, 26).

I believe Warner's crucial point is that there is the existence of redemption for being gay or the fight against stigmatisation, but then some kinds of sexual practices were shameful. There was an effort to purify the conduct of other gays to become normal and then stigmatise those people in the gay community who were against the norm (1999, 32). The more people stand further from the norm, or respectability, having too much sex or sex that is too deviant, then these gays deserve to be ashamed. Warner wrote clearly that the dignified homosexual-gay- feels ashamed of every queer who flaunts his sex and his faggotry (1999, 32).

How does this relate to my thesis? Reading Warner's work helped me see that to be a good, effeminate gay who values virginity, sex before marriage is discouraged. Casual sex, therefore, was not an option even for gays like me. Does it mean casual sex is to be the bad or shameful gay? My perception seems to echo the idea of an 'attack on the promiscuity and gay lifestyle', which leads to HIV and AIDs and instead idealises the value of monogamous relationships (Duggan 2002, 182). Virginity could also be included in my 'normal or good' view.

Do you remember Leo, my client introduced in the 2nd letter? His presenting concern is non-monogamy. I initially felt non-monogamy could be questionable because it could be against the norm. Discussing about monogamy and non-monogamy might be beyond the scope of my thesis, my examiners, but the thought seems to confirm where my position stood. Being sexually inexperienced or a virgin is good. Premarital virginity is valued in Buddhist and Christian doctrines. This might be one of the reasons that I kept my virginity even though I was in a relationship with Sak. Perhaps I wanted to wait until marriage though marriage had been impossible in Thailand until the beginning of 2025. Holding the goodness and Kunla gay sexually, I felt shocked or uneasy towards those who have deviant or promiscuous sex.

My definition of a Thai term, Kunla Gay, coined by Natee Teerarojjanapongs, might not relate seamlessly with how Warner wrote about 'normal' gays in the West. Still, my life stories in this thesis are evident that there was a split between respectable or normal, versus shameful gay and queer. I had tried to behave as a good gay, a virgin one, wearing the cloak of Kon Dee. The elements in this cloak seemed to emerge from the heterosexual norm and the desire to be loved and respected as a Thai gay man. But then that implied there would be someone whose behaviour was far from decent.

To end this letter, who I am, and my choice to be good/ Kon Dee especially regarding virginity is formulated by the societal or cultural messages that I have recounted and discussed in all the letters I have written. It came in multiple layers. Sex was discouraged at home and in my school years. Virginity instead was admired and valued in Thai society and religions. HIV is

stigmatised. Simultaneously, experiences of being gay Sao, and exposure to religious doctrines showed and produced that my Phet is bad.

The brief statement I overheard, 'He could be anything he wants, at least only be a good person' provide the clear message, a condition, that being good promise love and acceptance. The cloak of Kon Dee, then, is the interweave of what is 'good' in society that was worn by me. It derived from what my mother said to her best friend. It became who I was that the young me or the adult I tried so hard to be a good/extra good gay. And it was what I told my psychiatrist.

Well, some knowledge or messages must have gradually shifted my decision to the point that I decided to take a risk by losing my virginity at the age of thirty. If I hadn't changed, the moment described in my first letter to you and this whole thesis would never happen. But as I wrote to you in the first letter, after meeting that guy I was hesitant and wavered in my decision en route to his hotel room. The stake was high, but I chose to follow him. The final decision could relate to the 'clashes' among how long and how much I needed to be extra good, getting older, or new attitude to safe sex. That might all be beyond the scope of this current thesis.

Writing this letter to you, I hope illuminates the entanglement between my *Phet*, sex, virginity, religions and the heteronormative society and Thai culture from many previous letters. I think I found some clarities. However, I wonder if it is fair for people like me. Some gays or Thai LGBTQ+ might be affected to some extent by this 'condition' of Kon Dee. We are bad so we ought to be good. I need to write or think critically about the statement I heard from my mother? Honestly, I wanted to speak about this insight to her.

Earlier I mentioned that therapy with Susan was one of the supportive moments of this virginity inquiry. Another essential element is the writing process in all these letters. For the next letter, I shall invite you to see how my writing journey began, why it is a letter, and who I decided should be the first addressee.

Looking forward to CC more letters to you,

**To: Jonathan Wyatt**

**CC: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: The Electronic Letters Writing: Process and Journey**

**Dear my thesis supervisor,**

Hello, I hope you are doing well. Finally, it is time to write to you. Well, that may be rather misleading. Why misleading? All the letters encapsulated my journey to understand why virginity was maintained and cherished by me, a Thai gay from Bangkok. These letters would not have existed unless I had started writing to you, my supervisor, in 2021. Each letter that you and other addressees receive here was crafted and structured meticulously from my writings to you over three years.

So why am I writing to you specifically in this letter, Jonathan? You might be curious. The answer is in Ellington and Ellis's statement.

*When we pretend that research processes smoothly, we provide inaccurate and deceptively simplistic maps for those who read our work... the writing of accounts of our work also reflects an embodied, messy process that is inextricably bound to the final products of our research (2008, 453).*

According to them, most researchers omit missteps or report on the distant process when writing the research. Inspired by this quote to be more honest and transparent, I would like to convey what the process of crafting this thesis was like. Why the letters? Why autoethnography? What obstacles have I encountered? I owe you and my Examiners many explanations.

Now, the important question is how can I do justice to the three-year journey for you? My starting point, I believe, began with the term 'autoethnography', which was introduced briefly in my 6th letter. I had encountered the word a decade ago before I came to Edinburgh. It even preceded my virginity inquiry.

**In 2013, Faculty of Psychology, Bangkok: Autoethnography**

*I am having a conversation with a group of friends. We talk about a female lecturer who was on study leave for a doctoral programme – the same situation as I am now. Someone mentions that her chosen methodology was autoethnography. At that time, I was studying for a master's degree in counselling psychology. I frown, "What exactly is that?"*

Counselling psychology students, Ponterotto wrote, are taught to execute tightly controlled experimental studies, use inferential statistics to test the hypothesis, and interpret its result to explain, predict or control phenomena (2005, 128). That is where I came from. Perhaps I was indoctrinated, similar to what Bochner wrote, 'into the belief system of empiricism with the uncritical commitment to the mechanism and reductionism of the positivists' spectator theory of knowledge with its emphasis on objectivity, detachment and neutrality (2013, 51)'. My research trajectory and paradigm at that time, I believe, aligned with

the scientific practitioner model. In other words, the positivist or post-positivist paradigm, which I explored in my 6th letter.

*Hearing that enigmatic word, I try to dissect it. Auto probably means 'self', so if it means studying about self, whose self? Compared with meta-analysis or randomised control trial (RCT) research, I wonder whether this methodological term is credible in academia. That conversation faded from my memory. So did the word.*

At that time, autoethnography was incompatible with my research endeavour. Everything started to change when I finally enrolled in a doctoral degree in counselling and psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh six years later, in the autumn of 2019.

*Between Counselling and Research 1: Approaches, Issues, and Debates (BCR1) is one of the courses in my first semester. I come very early to Old College on Tuesday mornings with excitement and some nervousness. I heard that many tutors teach the course, but the course organiser is Jonathan Wyatt. Luckily in small group discussion, he will be my group facilitator.*

Who knew that a few years later, you would become my thesis supervisor? The main objective of BCR1 was to revisit the philosophical foundation and assumptions regarding research/inquiry and the different types of research paradigms. Imagine someone like me from psychology, aligning mostly with post- or positivist paradigms, coming to this class. How would it be?

*In that room I am so confused as it is against what I have been previously taught. What I have learned about research, reliability, validity, or the questionnaire to measure, etc., seem to be criticised and located in the 'experience-far.'*

According to Liz Bondi and Judith Fewell, experience-far is the distance from 'such feelings and subjective states' between researchers/counsellors and clients. 'Experience-near' instead honours and fosters lived experiences and being in relation to ourselves and others (2016, 6-7). It took me some time to relearn that science and its philosophical roots are not the only path to conducting inquiries. There are more paradigms to be explored and embrace by way of 'Experience-near.' One of them is autoethnography. This term was in the limelight again.

In the BCR1 lecture, you clarified the definition of autoethnography from Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bocher. Autoethnography is 'the autoethnographic genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural' (2000).

Gradually, I started to understand that the self (auto) means the researcher's personal experience. Then, it connects to the culture, 'Ethno'. 'Ethno', I believe, comes from ethnography, where researchers strive to understand or describe a particular social/cultural group. Adding the prefix 'auto' created the change within which to conduct this inquiry. Boylorn and Orbe stated that it turns the ethnographic gaze inward but retains the outward gaze for the larger context wherein self-experiences occur. "Autoethnographers research themselves in relation to others" (2016, 17). Discovering this methodology was startling. It stirred one disappointing memory when I was a novice lecturer at a Thai University.

## **In 2018, in University, Bangkok: Researcher vs Researched**

*One of the lecturer's job descriptions is supervising an undergraduate's senior project. As a new lecturer, I take a co-supervisor role and let other colleagues lead. Monthly, my colleague and I meet a group of students whose phenomenological project is about Thai gay men's experiences of being bullied victims.*

*In one meeting, one student asks, 'Is it possible to include you [me] as one of the interviewees in the project?' 'My previous experience would be academically beneficial' That is my thought. I turn toward the main supervisor. My excitement and willingness to take part is clear.*

*"Including Panu's story might not be appropriate." The answer is given.*

Everyone, including me, agreed and decided not to use my personal story. Regarding epistemology or the relationship between the 'knower' (the research participants) and the would-be knower (the researcher), the positivism or the postpositivism paradigm highlights that the researcher may have some influence on the subject being researched. Independence between researcher and subject, and objectivity are essential in the research process (Ponterotto 2005, 131).

Phenomenology focuses on subjective experience (what people think, feel, or experience) from the perspective of key informants (Harper 2012, 89). There must be distance or a line between researchers and what they are researching. Including my story might cross this research line. It was an understandable decision but disappointing to me. The disappointment lingered until I learned about autoethnography.

Although autoethnography has multiple meanings and characteristics, the concept that binds them all is the use of personal experience to examine cultural experience (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis 2013, 22). The line between 'the knower' and the 'would-be knower' is blurred. This methodology allows me, the researcher, to narrate my own stories or experiences. This new idea excited me. Autoethnography seems to challenge the 'canonical ideas' about how research should be conducted (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 274). Without a clear topic or issues to inquire about or a full understanding of underpinning philosophy, I felt passionate and determined to apply autoethnography in my doctoral thesis.

As a novice autoethnographer, I am full of curiosity and doubts. I have basic questions like the ones Kitrina Douglas and David Carless ask, 'How can I include myself?' and 'Which stories?' (2013, 94). There are tons of stories that can be written.

In Heewon Chang's autoethnographic chapter, she encouraged autoethnographers to conduct research analytically and carefully by providing a distinctive stage of the autoethnographic process. The first stage is making a decision on topic and method. The selected topic many autoethnographers chose could be drawn from professional interest or personal experience (2013, 110). But my questions remained. 'I do not know.'

The answer given in Douglas and Carless's chapter, perhaps given to me too, was from many, including Laurel Richardson and Harry Wolcott, who quoted, 'You have to start writing... Get something down, and don't start judging or editing it before you finish it (2013, 94)'.

Richardson's work introduced me to the phrase 'writing as a method of inquiry'. Her crucial statement is that 'writing is a way of finding out about yourself, and your topic'. It is also a way of knowing- 'a method of discovery and analysis' (2000b, 923). Richardson wrote this moving passage, and I want to quote it here for you and my Examiners.

*'I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it. I was taught, however, as perhaps you were too, not to write until I knew what I wanted to say until my points were organised and outlined (2000b, 924).'*

Her statement captured my departure from the traditional way of writing. I started to write about issues I found interesting or passionate about. I was unsure what direction my writing would take me. Looking back, I can say that I wrote to find my research topic, which hopefully connected with autoethnography. This is how my inquiry truly began.

### **In April 2021, Edinburgh: Virginité, The Meadows, and The Letters**

*At the school conference, postgraduate students present their current research progress. Many Asian students' inquiries, I observe, are about love and relationships that go even further, into the sexual elements. I even choose to attend those presentations. Discussing and researching these topics could be sensitive or culturally taboo, I think but I am drawn by it. I need to write something down. I wrote/typed 'What do I really want to inquire? Love? What about love?*

In that monthly writing, I wrote down many stories, including my first relationship with my first partner, my unrequited love and the overview of being a gay virgin. It was the first time that the mystery and disappearance of the condom box in my house appeared in the writing. This story is in my letter to my father. It turned out that the desire to write more about virginité and sex seemed persistent. It won over other topics.

The research topic, then, seemed to be settled, but the remaining question is what I would like to find out about virginité. The concept and its territory were vast. In hindsight, it was the writing process again, Jonathan, that showed the way. Months after months turned to years after years. I engaged with some literature and discussion about sex and virginité and sent writings to you until September 2023.

*That month, you and I decide to meet in your office near the main library. The spiral staircase leads me to your door. It becomes the place to meet for supervision when the outside weather is too cold, windy or pouring rain and it is inconvenient to walk in the Meadows, the huge park behind the University's main library. The Meadows was the usual place where you and I discussed the progress of my inquiry.*

*During this meeting, one of your reflections is, 'I wonder if you will keep this style for your final draft.' You tell me to take time to think further.*

But what style do you mean? I ask on behalf of my Examiners. In each monthly writing, there was an introductory section I started with 'Dear' and the person whom I wrote to, mostly you, Jonathan. And at the end, I use the words, for example, 'looking forward to hearing from you'. The main body contained what I encountered, read, and wrote that month. Undeniably,

this style looked like they were letters. It was unclear at that time where this writing style came from or why I wrote this way. In this letter, I hope this question will be clarified.

The first answer that came to my mind was your chapter, *Frank and the Gift, or The Untold Told: Provocations for Autoethnography and Therapy* (Wyatt 2020). You included surroundings, café, and people and their actions. I felt like I was invited to witness your lived moment, a delicate process of what is in your mind.

Another resource was Laurel Richardson's *Field of Play*. She wrote that in academic writing, the narrator suppressed their own voice and adopted the all-knowing, all-powerful voice of the academy. It was stripped of human subjectivity (1997, 18). Instead, Richardson wrote, 'We are always present in our texts no matter how we try to suppress ourselves (1997, 3)'.

Inspired by you and Richardson's work, what I wrote in the writings about virginity and related concepts departed from my past academic work. These voices were less hidden and not written from afar and above. I brought myself, an 'I', more into the texts. Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis pinpointed that, unlike more traditional research methods, autoethnographic writings disclose secrets and make history known. It presents an intentionally vulnerable subject (2013, 24). I wrote and shared my memories and life stories with you.

Some stories I drew from my published autoethnographic chapter 'Christmas Past and Present: A Phet Tee Saam Lamb's Search for Their Flock' (2022). It was a part of the book in which Jason Holmes and Edgar Rodriguez-Doran, editors, presented the ordinary stories of gay men. In my chapter, I explored Christmas celebrations and reflected on my experiences of love and friendship in the quest to understand my gay identity. Some of those stories, such as being gay, and concerning Buddhism, Christianity, and the black sheep are rewritten in these letters.

Even though I drew on the same stories, I agreed with what Laurel Richardson wrote that in writing, there is no such thing as getting it right – only getting it differently contoured and nuanced (2000b, 930-931). Each time, the stories were written differently. Perhaps so was the narrator. I also wrote from different times, perspectives and, perhaps, different discourses. With the new discourses or understandings, stories could be reinterpreted, such as being Kon Dee that I told the psychiatrist on that day and what I look back (7th and 8th letters).

The writings I sent to you, Jonathan, were a whirlpool of emotions in laying out my own vulnerable stories. My writing style became more personal and intimate, and that resonated with letter-writing. Chris Stamper elaborated on using letter writing in a qualitative inquiry. He suggested that letter writing seemed useful for exploring sensitive topics such as infertility, self-harm, or cancer (2020, 179). David Barton and Nigel Hall wrote that writers can narrate their experiences, describe situations, offer explanations, and so on through letters (2000, 1). It reminded me of my relationship with letter-writing since elementary school.

*In Thai subject, the teacher instructs me and my friends how to write a letter, specifically a personal one. We are encouraged to practice by writing letters to school friends during the summertime. I select the green writing paper decorated with a forest theme, my favourite colour, on which I write what I did and enjoyed during that time to one of my close friends.*

Nowadays, letter writing is an old-school way to connect with others but personally it symbolises the classic and intimate way of communicating with someone dear. I occasionally wrote letters to friends who left to study abroad. Perhaps this is how, when writing about personal experiences around virginity for my doctoral thesis to you, the letter format organically emerged.

I know that my monthly writing wasn't written by pen on actual paper. Instead, I typed it in Microsoft Word and attached it to an email. I felt reluctant to claim that this was writing a letter. Barton and Hall argue that letter writing can occur in many forms, including postcards, memos, and electronic mail (2000, 1). Stamper stated that the handwritten letter subtly provided a more personal feel or a wealth of rich data that could not be produced through email (2020, 182). I agree that these electronic letters might not be entirely personal, but they still capture some intimacy.

The further element that makes my writing connect with letters more is the routine they create. For Stamper, letter writing in research is how participants write letters to researchers, and researchers write back to explore participants' thoughts and feelings further. This process is called correspondence (2000, 178). In our routine, I wrote – typed - these letters and emailed them to you, Jonathan. You did not write back, but you opened and read. Then, we had a meeting where you responded verbally to me. Here is what I wrote in June 2021

*In the Meadows, we talked about sex and virginity while other pedestrians were passing us by. I remember one who look at us curiously and with some surprise as I talked about this sensitive topic with my research supervisor! I felt self-conscious, maybe embarrassed. But in a positive sense. Well, after that memorable conversation, I was encouraged to dig further and explore the territory of the virginity of LGBTQ+ in my research.*

You corresponded verbally in the Meadows or your office during supervision hour. Then we went our separate ways. I restarted the letter-writing process based on the things we discussed which then became the content of the subsequent letter. This pattern continued. Sometimes I needed your guidance on where my letters/thesis should go, however, I felt I already knew your answer even before you said it. In my mind, your answer would be to 'trust the writing'.

In your Interval chapter, Towards Creative-Relational Inquiry (1): Take it to Heart, you introduced readers to the term, writing as inquiry. It is 'so open-ended, so inviting, so free. See where it goes, it calls, see what writing opens up; trust it, and allow it to take you where it wills. (Wyatt 2019, 44)'. Your writing and presence as my supervisor encouraged me to have faith and 'allow writing to think towards what I am unable to imagine (ibid)'.

Writing seemed to answer my curiosity. It may look like our letter-writing-and-reading routine was consistent and smoothly built up in my inquiring work. In reality, I faced struggles and challenges in this 'so inviting and so free process'. They echoed what you, Jonathan, cautiously warned about the possibility of losing faith in writing or disallowing writing to think. There were times that I struggled in writing and even the time that I almost abandoned the letter-writing format.

## **In January 2023, Edinburgh: A Struggling Supervision**

*After the meeting, I feel stunned. Uncertainties and doubts are exploding in my head. I am not there with my supervisor, you, despite us both leaving the office and walking towards the city centre.*

What happened in our meeting on that day? I was given feedback to be more cautious and critical when using assertions from articles or research in letters. With my psychology background, I referred to the knowledge produced in those articles, adopting what they found without much of the writer's voice or being mindful of the context or location of that source of knowledge.

Laurel Richardson wrote that in postmodernism writers do not have to play God, 'writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal, atemporal, general knowledge'. The position of postmodernism instead allows writers to have partial, local or historical knowledge without claiming to know everything (2000b, 928). Autoethnography is inspired by postmodernism. Therefore, drawing or using the research articles that came from the neutral, impersonal and objective position, I need to be mindful of what its truth has claimed.

That time, I took your criticism to heart. It threatened not only the way I write and read but also my subjectivity. I was trained this way. The feedback stopped my writing for almost two weeks. I lost the confidence to write because I have doubt if my writing is critical or good enough for you and a viva voce. I even thought I would sarcastically send you our next letter with only 100 words. Fortunately, I did not.

'Writing only 100 words, I thought, would be counterproductive not to yours but to my inquiry. Tul, a guy I wrote about in my 4th supported my belief in my ability to write by saying, 'He (my supervisor- you) noticed and criticised you (me) because he knows that you could write it better!'

Muncey's statement, which I found soothing, stated that 'writers are people who write, who are not a special person with hidden magical powers, who only sit down at the keyboard and write, and the rest is practice and having something to say' (2010). Muncey's and Tul's words helped me find a way back into writing. I do not have magical powers. What I could do was to keep writing and being reflective of what I wrote in these letters.

Another time I struggled was due to the freedom of writing. Allowing the writing to take me also left me with concerns and doubts. I forgot what writing I had done and felt unsure of what was next. I felt lost in the piles of letters and stories.

## **Interweaving letter: The Forgotten and The Not-Knowing**

Many letters/writings I wrote and sent to you were stored in the research supervision folder on my laptop. Sometimes, I forgot whether I have already written about these stories and summarised those virginity-related resources before. Sometimes, I felt stuck, not knowing what to write or inquire about further for this thesis. I wonder if you ever forget what you have produced in your writings.

To tackle this forgetfulness and stagnation, I created an interweaving letter in some months. Rereading previous letters, I wove or connected those materials altogether. Looking back, they reminded me where I was in this inquiry and helped me to ponder out loud with you which direction to take next. These interweaving letters were crafted from time to time. Once, in July 2023 I felt stuck. I had been writing for two years.

*I grab a blank A4 pad with a pen and sit at the working corner. I sketch the keywords from the letters I wrote in 2021. I select words and draw arrows to indicate connections or directions. Some keywords are highlighted to show their importance. A sketchy and messy mind map emerges. Later, I scan this mind map and paste it on Microsoft Word with some images representing those keywords.*

*There are numerous personal stories and concepts like virginity, internalised homophobia, religions. Postmodernism and poststructuralism briefly emerge. When I see this mind map, I think of what Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis wrote for novice autoethnographers.*

The autoethnographic writers need to reflect on and interrogate the nuances of the experience to illuminate more general cultural phenomena and cultural practices. It is always more self- and socially conscious. Without interrogating the cultural phenomena and practices, the writer writes autobiographically (2013, 23).

You might also recognise the names of key theorists in a mind map I attach here. For example, Foucault or Butler were not addressed much. The connection between their work and all these letters was still flimsy. This is why, after seeing my mind map, I felt it was necessary to try engaging with and writing more about the philosophical root of autoethnography and the cultural elements that relate to virginity.

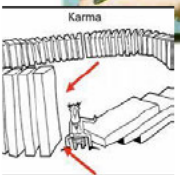
The mind map helped you and me see where this inquiry could continue. In the next meeting, you lent me Catherine Belsey's *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (2002) from your office bookshelf. Reading it, the familiar but difficult-to-read names Foucault and Butler emerged from the pages. This led me to other books about Butler's or Foucault's work, for example, *Power/knowledge and Panopticon* by Helen Feder (2023), Sara Salih's *Judith Butler* (2002) and numerous Peter Jackson's works. All these resources helped me digest those original and convoluted concepts. Also, it led me to connect my virginity stories and being gay with Thai cultural institutions deeper with disciplinary power, panopticon and heteronormativity etc.

The feeling of not knowing and the use of interweaving letters became the process that help me engage more with theories. It helped me make sense of the cultural experience. My letters were enriched and developed.

By the way, I still owe you and my Examiners an explanation of why I stayed with the letter-writing style. Obviously, I have kept it. But why? The answer lay in the last struggle at the end of 2023.

Butler Butler identities  
Melina

Post modern  
Post Structural



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Hook up

Thailand

Pandora Box



HIV

metaphor  
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Sex  
Taboo  
true

Gay MAN

Family  
Born Good  
people is Enough

Good Student  
Academic  
Values  
school  
Bully  
offensive GAY

MAINTAIN Good

Cloak of Gas there

manifests

Protection  
trap / limit  
opportunities?

Virginty (+)

Sex  
Subject

Internalized homophobia  
hetero norm  
sexual stigmat



Therapy

Person  
Social



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resist  
the limited  
I'm Good Enough  
I can be bed

## **Panicked month and Layered Account**

That month I abandoned the letter style entirely and restructured it back to the conventional research paper. I rewrote and labelled each section with, for example, an introduction, literature, methodology, etc. I seemed to give up on the new style of writing. The letters disappeared.

You, Jonathan, mentioned a time you also lost faith in writing, for example under pressure or when the deadline is approaching (Wyatt 2019). The deadline for a thesis also scared me. Perhaps retreating to what I already know about writing might rescue me. Under pressure, I seemed to lose faith in what had brought me to a letter style and the benefit and compatibility the letter format has brought to my inquiry were forgotten.

What I forgot is Carol Rambo Ronai's term 'Layered Account'. It is a postmodern ethnographic technique that draws on many points of view and presents them to the reader as representations of lived experiences, handing readers layers of experience (1995, 396). The layers Ronai created as a child abuse victim came from the conception of self, subject and object, fantasies, theoretical thinking, and statistical data.

Unknowingly, I created layers when I wrote a letter to you incorporating personal stories and theoretical thinking. In this way, I believe my thesis would be more engaging to read. Another benefit of layers is that it creates space for multiple layers of consciousness.

Do you recognise this term? 'Multiple layers of consciousness' is used in the Ellis and Bocher's definition of autoethnography. In the journey of this inquiry, I learned that in postmodernism self or subjectivity, according to Goodson and Gill, is no longer perceived as fixed, unitary and essentialised. Self is always subject to deconstruction, decentred, and multiple. Identity also shifts constantly through time, audience and perception (2011, 8). It aligned with Foucault's discourse that I wrote sporadically in these letters and also Robert Mizzi, who highlighted the importance of plural consciousness when writing a story. A single voice is critically perceived as a 'monologic' discourse, whereas dialogic discourse involves multiple identities, desires, and voices in each person (2010, 6).

From Mizzi's, and Goodson and Gill's work, I learned that I embodied multiple voices and selves. At different times and places, my subjectivity could shift and change from discourses. Perhaps this is why the letter format lets me layer my voices and subjectivities and go back and forth between the different 'I', for example, *the younger me in the stories* and the 'I' who is writing each letter, etc. Letter writing and its layers, then, seemed to be compatible with autoethnography.

In addition, it is also connected with reflexivity. According to Simon-Maeda, reflexivity is claimed to be one of the crucial concepts by postmodernist theorists and a 'buzzword' for autoethnographic enthusiasts (Anderson & Glass-Coffin 2013, 72). Simon-Maeda quoted Charlotte Linde on the nature of reflexivity in 1993.

*Reflexivity in narrative is created by the separation of the narrator from the protagonist of the narrative. It permits the narrator to observe, reflect, and correct the self that is being created. The act of narration itself requires*

*self-regard and editing since a distance in time and standpoint necessarily separate the actions being narrated from the act of narration (1993, 122)*

In my understanding, there is a bridge between what I narrated in the past and what I looked back on, reflected and wrote about in different times and spaces. This is why in letters I use italic and regular fonts to denote the multiples of 'me'. The letter also is the dialogue between me and other addressees, you, as well. This is what letter writing and its layers provide that might have disappeared in that panicked month. Adam and Holman Jones stressed the importance of writing and storytelling to craft a good representation (Graphy) (2018, 143). Letter, then, is the artful aspect of my writing in this thesis.

Initially, you were the sole addressee of all these letters, Jonathan. But what if I wrote to different addressees? That sounds interesting. I would like to invite others to witness and engage in the dialogue with me in these letters and the whole journey. Perhaps I was also inspired by Kent Ono, who convinced other researchers to write in letter style, where he wrote to his mother and his academics (1997, 119). Here is Ono's statement, which I found thought-provoking.

*The funny thing is, sometimes it's difficult talking about what I do in the academy to you [mother] and what I do in my personal life to the academy. There have to be ways to do this, to highlight the overlapping aspects of our existence, don't you think? I want to use a voice that successfully speaks to two very different audiences at once, even if in different ways (1997, 117).*

I want to craft these letters not only professionally but also personally. After rereading all three years of writing, I assembled, recrafted and structured each letter continuously with different purposes. I began with my virginity loss and invited you to see how sex was understood in house and school. The religions, genders/sexualities, and being gay in Thailand were narrated with theories. Then, I connected these pieces together. This letter is about the writing process and later ethics. The addressees in each letter also organically emerged in my mind, including family members, close friends, my therapist, my Examiners, and, last but not least, you.

I wondered how to write to different audiences simultaneously because emailing these letters to a different person might appear disconnected. This is where the idea of sending each letter to a different addressee but also copying in my Examiners occurred to create continuity.

The three years of letter writing have now transformed into these intensive 11 letters. I know that when typing in electronic format, you might not see any doodles or underlining like a handwritten letter could provide. These electronic letters were crafted as if I were writing an actual letter. I hope my Examiners, while reading it, will engage to some extent in dialogic communication with me in the way I wrote those monthly letters to you, Jonathan.

All in all, I am grateful for our supervisory journey. You are the first and always the important reader, in your words, 'a silent reader', who reflected and dialogued with me. I will miss our supervision strolls in the Meadows in Edinburgh, where we walked around and raced for an unoccupied bench to sit on and talk about my letters. It was enjoyable and productive.

Thank you for everything,

**To: Panu Sahassanon**

**CC: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: Writing with care**

**Dear Me,**

Well, who could have thought, at least at the beginning, that I would write to you or myself? Hi! In a previous electronic letter, I captured the journey of crafting this autoethnographic letter-writing that connects sex, virginity and a Phet, a Thai gay. However, another crucial part that must be narrated to you and our Examiners is about ethical considerations. Do you remember the moment you prepared the ethical form in 2022? This is some of what you wrote, Panu.

*Writing about ethics in autoethnographic research, Tullis noticed that some scholars might perceive that 'doing autoethnography seems an easy solution to the social, political and regulatory hoops through which researchers have to jump to conduct human subject research. It might be perceived as an easy way to 'side-step ethical review process to recruit and engage with participants' (2013, 244).*

*On the contrary, I sense from the beginning that doing autoethnographic work could be more challenging than other methodologies. Writing/creating autoethnographic work invites my own stories and vulnerabilities into the texts. There will be more uses of 'I', and more intimate exposure as I research myself as a primary research focus. Autoethnographic research, Tullis warned, may lead to increasingly complex ethical dilemmas (ibid).*

Looking at these paragraphs, I am quite impressed because, at that time, all the writing was still in the embryonic stage. I was not clear what should be included in an inquiry about virginity, or what form the final thesis presentation might take. At that time, autoethnography and writing as a method of inquiry were novel and located in a different paradigm. Also, the ethics in autoethnography statement was written prospectively. You tried to prepare this ahead of time. Over a few years this inquiry took shape, shifted, and grew. Here I am writing back to you.

Why - since the self is no longer perceived as fixed or unitary but as multiple? Writing this ethical letter to me in the past sounds useful. It will combine the procedural ethics you planned in 2022 that you drew from some helpful chapters in the Handbook of Autoethnography with what exactly happened relating to the ethical considerations I encountered along the way. What you, Panu, wrote earlier about ethics might not fully capture the ebbs and flows of our ethical process. Hernandez and Ngunjiri named it 'ethics in practice' (2013, 270). There was always something unfathomable and unexpected.

Without further ado, I will start with the customary ethical consideration you and I might have been familiar with. It is to Do No Harm.

## **Confidentiality, Consent and Complication**

Tullis highlighted the value of protecting participants' identities and keeping confidentiality. It is an essential part of ethical research. Tullis suggested many strategies to protect those who appear in autoethnographic research, including using pseudonyms and altering demographic information (2013, 250). Inevitably related to confidentiality, Tullis also encouraged writers/autoethnographers to explore informed consent, a bureaucratic formality in research.

You, Panu, brought up these concepts first in the ethics form. In other qualitative research procedures you and I experienced, informed consent and confidentiality seemed to be the ethical standard when reaching out to potential key informants. Unlike other qualitative methodologies, when autoethnographers attempt to tell stories, we inevitably find that these situations implicate others (Hernandez & Ngunjiri 2013, 263). Autoethnography raises a unique question of how to protect or ask for consent from those who are not absolute strangers but relate to our life stories, in this case, those addressees we wrote to in letters.

The first person you thought of and wrote on the initial ethics form was the guy you met on that pivotal night. That moment with him was mentioned in the first letter to set the stage for this virginity inquiry. You planned to discuss with him the experience, feelings, and thoughts you had around that moment. Later, when I discussed this with our thesis supervisor, Jonathan Wyatt, it turned out, being a one-night stand, it might not be necessary to reach out for consent from this person.

Still, I felt uneasy about not informing him. Why - you and our Examiners probably ask? Despite being only a one-night stand, this entire thesis could not have emerged without him. Reflectively, we owed him gratitude and wanted to inform him of his contribution.

However, I am also aware that this guy is already in a relationship. To inform him about the sexual night almost five years ago that became the beginning of our doctoral thesis would make me, you, feel ethically relieved but would it cause him any nuisance or conflict with his current partner?

Ellis introduced the concept of relational ethics or ethics of care. These ethics require researchers to be responsible towards intimate others because these people are not strangers but people with whom researchers have relationships (2004, 4-5). With Ellis's writing, I decided not to reach out to him to protect him and his relationship. I believe this is more ethical. I decided it was justifiable to use a pseudonym and alter his demographic. Do you agree with my decision?

Autoethnographers, according to Hernandez and Ngunjiri, start projects not knowing exactly who will be implicated in the work. However, when stories unfold and letters emerge, autoethnographers need to decide whether to tell them we are writing about them (2013, 271). Other gays involved in the stories were my gay besties, TJ and Kayle (5th letter), my ex-boyfriend-Sak (7th letter), and my gay friend, Tul (4th letter to my grandmother). Here is what happened when their names appeared in our stories/letters, Panu.

For TJ and Kayle, you planned to interview them about virginity, so they were aware beforehand and agreed to be included in this inquiry even before it shifted to the autoethnographic letters. When the 5th letter emerged, I realized it was not only my story, but I also exposed their vulnerabilities regarding HIV. I felt more responsible for their privacy and safety.

After sharing the progress of the thesis, TJ and Kayle were happy to be written to, including mention about those HIV-related moments. They even asked me to use their nicknames in the letters, saying they were glad to be a part of our thesis. I believe you would feel touched by their responses. In the end, I negotiated with them to find less identifiable names that they were satisfied with.

Sak's name, his pseudonym, came when narrating the experiences of being Thai effeminate gay in the 7th letter. Sak and I have maintained a respectful friendship, so reaching out to him would not be an unwelcome surprise. With this in mind, I contacted him, saying that he was one of my addressees with whom I shared my experiences of being gay, and it would touch upon our previous relationships. He gave clear permission by saying, 'Do not worry, you have my full consent'.

The last gay friend was the one I introduced in our grandmother's letter (4th). At that time, when submitting the ethics form, you, Panu, did not know him yet. He knew about this inquiry and also was the one who supported me during the time I doubted my capacity to write. Without hesitation, he agreed to be mentioned in a letter and even chose his own pseudonym, Tul, a favourite character in the Thai gay series.

You can see that autoethnography requires delicate ethical consideration, but altering names and demographic detail was manageable. What about family members? Writing about/to family members makes me think of Ellis's writing, warning autoethnographers just to wait until you are writing about family members and loved ones who are part of your story (1999, 672). It was challenging.

### **Ethics with Family**

Well, Panu, the first family member is our sister. The material I wrote about sex education in Thailand make me think of her to be my addressee. I informed her of the format of letter writing and that I would omit her personal details. Despite my intention to protect her confidentiality, and even though she agreed to be written to, Lapadat's and Ellis's writing raised a reconsideration.

When autoethnographers use their own name in their inquiry, it is difficult to protect the identity of the researcher's family members (Lapadat 2017, 593). Ellis also gave a common scenario: when a known researcher writes their own story, especially in a small town, community members could identify others in the researcher's life. Nevertheless, using pseudonyms for places and names cannot wholly conceal intimate others' identities (2007, 11-12).

Bangkok is a vast and heavily populated city. Still, I cannot guarantee to conceal the identity of my intimate others. By using my real name in all the letters and this inquiry, people

who know me or our family could identify my sister. Also, I wonder how she would feel if I shared some of my intimate experiences with her.

I told our sister about its limitations. She was OK and aware that the focus of the stories was on my experiences of being a Thai boy versus a Thai girl and the different expectations regarding gender or sexual norms. So far, the relationship with our sister is solid, and I am more open about my sexual life to her. Our sister and we are around the age of thirty, which is mature enough. Do you think I should send her this letter? She might be interested. Well, at least she might be, which is impossible for our late grandmother.

We never thought of writing to our grandmother (4th letter). You might think that because she passed away, this could allow us to evade informed consent. After rereading Hernandez and Ngunjiri, we might be wrong. Their chapter touched upon writing about those who are deceased. They raised the potential dilemma of representing them or whether the loved one would be pleased or disappointed with their portrayal (2013, 269).

In the autoethnographic chapter you and I published in 2022, we wrote, 'Although she (grandmother) was physically missing, her warmth and love remained within me, like a Winnicottian good internal object (Sahassanon 2022, 41). What we wrote in the 4th letter about confessing love, or being gay and Christian, showed our trust and value in her. That letter is written lovingly and sincerely. Our grandmother, I believe, would be happy with her portrayal in our letter. While rereading that letter, you might smile like I did.

The second letter also mentioned and addressed our father, but unlike my grandmother and sister, I was unsure about whether I should discuss this inquiry with him. In other words, how could I be ethical when writing to and about our father?

In one Facetiming with our mother in 2024, as usual, I told her to pass on to him as he was sitting near her that I (Panu) was inquiring about virginity. Unsurprisingly, our father questioned if virginity still exists, especially for men. I did not argue with him but continued by saying that my inquiry would include some experiences and stories about how I grew up in our country. He questioned how a researcher could write about their own stories, like I did before knowing autoethnography and other research paradigms. I did not explain him this possibility. I promised him that I would write with 'respect and care.' Through the iPad's screen, he nodded.

Our Examiners might find that what I told our father was not fully open, but I think you, Panu, know it was the best I could do. Why? I have not come out to him yet. I couldn't explain things further as it might involve disclosing my Phet/sexuality.

In Tony Adam's paper, he intentionally did not share what he wrote about with his father. Adam's stories were about being gay and their relationship. Showing his work to the father was not possible as it might damage people and relationships (2006, 720). Likewise, some day when I am finally ready to come out or when he seems to be more open about being gay, like Adams, I would like to share all my stories with him. As for now, his permission to be mentioned in my stories seems to be sufficient and proper for our current father-and-son relationship. I hope our Examiners will agree with my decision.

Allen-Collinson wrote that the selves of autoethnographers and participants coalesce, unlike previous research trajectories in which we know that ethical considerations apply to others. The autoethnographer has dual and challenging roles as a member of the social world under study and also a researcher of that same world (2013, 282). Therefore, **ethics is also for us, Panu**. We need to protect ourselves.

Etherington wrote that what is autoethnographically written can be a 'powerful medium for something private, secretive or even shameful' (2007, 609). It opens the vulnerability of revealing yourself (Ellis 1999, 672). When you chose autoethnography as our methodology, Panu, you seemed aware of this delicate complication. Writing about virginity might be something novel and take an emotional toll. You wrote on the ethics form that if the writing process creates unpleasant emotions, you will try to be attentive to these emotions or seek a therapist as a space for support and containment.

Do you know what actually happened? You and I rarely use therapeutic sessions to reflect upon this struggle or discomfort when revealing about sex and virginity. Instead, therapy has been used to process and explore about virginity and its connection with heteronormativity or internalised homophobia. Surprisingly, therapy helped us engage deeper with our thesis. Our therapist became the addressee in the 6th letter with a pseudonym, Susan Granger. Susan is a common name in the UK, and Granger comes from a female character in Harry Potter, Hermione Granger. This name represents how I value her wisdom and support.

Our therapist chuckled after I told her about the letter and agreed to be called by that name. She gave me - us - a blessing to write to her and agreed that I could show her some parts of her letter.

I also wrote about one of my clients, Leo, about sex, being gay and heteronormativity. Before contacting him, our supervisor helped me reflect further on the consequences and risks of contacting a finished client. Like the guy with whom we were involved sexually, I wondered if, after a year, it might feel like an intrusion for Leo or cause him discomfort. Would it do harm?

Leo and I ended therapy on good terms, but time changes and people change. However, he seemed to appreciate the counselling sessions we worked on together. Panu, it was a tough decision. In the end, I emailed him, informing him about his inclusion in my inquiry for reflections about being gay. I also mentioned ways to protect his identity. He might never reply, but at least it felt right to let him know.

A week later, Leo responded with appreciation and giving permission. I was glad and relieved. Leo briefly shared where he was up to now and wondered where he could find this thesis. I replied to his email and gave him some snippets of what I wrote.

The plan to protect ourselves, Panu, brought me to write ethically for others, including my therapist and client. Another person who broadened my view is our critical friend, David Carless. He was assigned by the counselling and psychotherapy programme at the University of Edinburgh to provide feedback or suggestions. I believe you, Panu, were the one who met him. Carless read some of our initial writings, such as the collective letter. One of Carless's specific responses was that he felt as if he was there in the hotel room. He wondered if the details were too graphic or too revealing.

Initially, opening up about this personal and sensitive matter felt good and liberating. Tullis offered thoughts by asking questions if it is ethical to perform or present texts that involve profanity, nudity, fake weapons, violent behaviour, simulated masturbation, and pornography (2013, 255). With an ethic of care, Tullis warned autoethnographers to be mindful of how to be ethically responsible for the readers. Yes, Panu. After rereading Tullis's chapter, I pondered Carless's comment. He was one of the readers. In all these crafted letters, our Examiners and addressees are our ethical responsibility. You and I, Panu, need to ask ourselves if any stories in the letters might be too disturbing for them.

Ironically, when thinking about the readers and addressees, it circled back to ethical consideration for ourselves, Panu, as the writer who reveals many personal stories. Virginia Braun (1999) gave me a crucial point to consider if there were negative consequences of inquiring about sex and virginity. Many researchers, including feminist ones, Braun stated, found that research about taboo, private or sensitive topics can be problematic. Researching in this particular realm can cause difficulty and create stigma among researchers. Researchers might suffer from the 'slings and arrows of ridicule and delegitimation (1999, 367).'

Fiona Murray, one of the lecturers in the counselling and psychotherapy programme, wrote about her experiences at a conference, where she was introduced as the 'climax' of the panel presenting her work about Online Gonzo Pornography (2017, 112). Like Murray, I wonder what the addressees, Thai colleagues, students and Examiners reading these letters - our thesis - about sex and virginity, would say or criticise about us? What conscious or unconscious assumptions would they hold about us? Some terms came to my mind, for example, 'a 30-year-old-virgin gay researcher', or 'obsessed sex researcher and vulgar academic'. Or they might be positive, like 'trailblazer' or 'challenger in sexual topics.' Who knows, it might be both. The big question is whether we can handle unpredictable responses. You and I cannot control how the others or our Examiners will interpret these stories - our thesis. I think you and I can, but what about the future us?

Ellis recognised that once stories have been presented and published, writers cannot take back what had been written (1999, 672). Lapadat wrote aesthetically that the text persists, frozen in time, even though the autoethnographer's life and his or her perspective can change as time goes by (2017, 594). Can you imagine, Panu, that these letters will stay here for a decade, two decades and beyond? Anderson and Glass-Coffin wrote that autoethnography resists finality and closure. There are possibilities for the future (2013, 78-79). Our future life is still open and uncertain, but the stories in these letters would be here 'frozen'. Life goes on, and our research interest or perception about virginity could shift and change. This could be the disparity between the text and our life itself. What are you thinking about this, Panu?

Wholeheartedly writing about virginity, gays, and Kon Dee condition in my thesis via letters is our brave and fascinating decision. I believe it would be beneficial and outweighs the undesirable and unfathomable possibilities of our autoethnographic letters. But to protect the future 'us' from overexposing ourselves and significant others implicated in letters, I, therefore, reread every letter and edited by omitting some unnecessary details and adjusting others.

Reading all the stories again and again, I am satisfied with what I chose to reveal and what to conceal. The stories still gave the flavour of the experiences without unnecessarily

overexposing ourselves and others. Hernandez and Ngunjiri wrote that it is possible, and sometimes desirable, to tell the truth without telling the whole truth to protect those implicated in our stories (2013, 271) and perhaps ourselves, I will add here. I believe the future 'us' in 5 years or a decade from now would still be proud of our work and considerations when reading all these letters. I hope you feel the same.

Before I go, you might also recognize that I skipped one last important person who appears throughout previous letters. It is our mother. I have spoken with her, but it is more than checking the ethics. It was a heart-to-heart conversation, and it would be the perfect way to end all these letters and this virginity inquiry in the final letter.

I enjoy writing to you, Panu. We both tried to write this thesis ethically. You and I have grown and changed in this long journey especially during the drafting of these letters. We discovered more about virginity and how Kon Dee affected who we were/are. We finally questioned it. Well, there is always more to learn, but now it is time to say goodbye.

Thank you for everything & looking forward to writing to you more (but not in this thesis),

**To: My Mother**

**CC: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: Critical in Autoethnography and Kon Dee: The End**

**Dear Khun Mae,**

This is not a first draft of the earlier letter to you about my thesis, Mom. I want you to be along with me and my examiners in our finale. In the ethical letter, which comes before this one in my thesis, I intentionally omitted details about you and kept them for this letter. Why? Before I answer, do you remember that moment during a regular Facetime between Bangkok and Edinburgh, Mom? I call it a heart-to-heart.

*I eventually decide to bring up the topic of how to ethically and appropriately include you in my stories/letters about virginity. I begin by saying that it is related to my thesis process.*

*“Yes, I remember. What is it all about?” You ask while sitting in your living room. You seem relaxed which is not how I feel.*

You might not know that before this conversation happened, there were many processes leading up to this talk with you. One of them is writing this thesis - all these letters. Writing led me to find the topic - virginity. The topic in turn invited me to write in a letter format in which I could layer personal and academic elements. It connected me to autoethnography as my methodology. Put simply, autoethnography connects the researcher’s personal experience - my experience - to Thai society and culture. But before we talked, writing these letters also gave me another essential keyword which neither you nor my Examiners might know.

### **In August 2023, Edinburgh: Critical Autoethnography**

*After reading my monthly letter to him, my supervisor, Jonathan Wyatt, as always, responds. He says, ‘Your work is connected with critical autoethnography.’*

*Critical! I speak to myself in my room, wondering why my supervisor has decided to add this term to the auto-ethno-graphy. What does he mean by critical? I believe I must frown upon.*

This supervision made me explore more about this specific term and its connection with my letters. A month later, I wrote back to him about what I found. Robin Boylorn and Mark Orbe offered a pivotal statement for critical autoethnographic writers to follow.

*We talk about autoethnography as a critical method by using three features of critical theory, which include: to understand the lived experience of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination (2016, 20)*

They also referred to Madison’s work on critical ethnography, which shared some similarities with the concept of critical autoethnography. Madison provided the rationale of

critical ethnography and probed some key phrases for further explanation, including ‘ethical responsibility’ and ‘resist domestication.’

Critical ethnographers are ethically responsible for ‘addressing processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular domain’ (2012, 5). Ethnographers will put effort into changing the conditions that limit some groups of people, challenge the ‘status quo’ and ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions which might be operating under some powers or controls, and eventually bring better equity and freedom. Resist domestication means that a critical ethnographer will use knowledge to access those voices whose stories are restrained, confined, and limited. They ‘contribute to emancipatory knowledge and discourse of social justice’ with the aim to move from ‘what is’ to ‘what could be’ (2012, 6).’

From these long academic sentences, it seemed to me that critical autoethnography relates to stories that seek to explore conditions that limit or control some lives. Do you start to see some connections, Mom? It is okay if you do not. Now, let me go back to our talk.

*I begin slowly and nervously. “Do you remember you said these words with your best friend?” I asked. I recite the original statement in my memory: ““You can be anything you want, only be a good person.” I’m checking to see if you remember it.”*

Looking back, the hesitation and nervousness I had that day came from the first time I disclosed these secrets to you. You and I had never talked directly about it before. I was unsure how it would go. This statement, written in my 8th letter, is perhaps the crux of my thesis or why I held my virginity tightly.

*“Maybe ... I think ...” You seem unsure and recall the moment you brought me to the psychiatric ward in a hospital.*

Well, that is also written about in my 7th letter, Mom. It was the first time you confirmed - came clean to me - that you contacted a psychiatrist because you worried about my Phet/Gender. In that moment, one of our mysteries was resolved! My hunch was true. You continued.

*“But the psychiatrist told me that your son (me) ‘causes no trouble to others, so why do you have to worry about his sexuality?’ It might be my own concern.” This is what you tell me, Mom.*

*“Causes no trouble?” I ponder. Initially, it seems unproblematic, but a glimmer of uncertainty arises. I respond, “Perhaps the psychiatrist’s response came from what I told him in his room that I knew the boundaries of what to do and not to do ... I have just realised that the boundary of Kon Dee might be a double-edged sword.”*

Then, I started to explain my effort to be good/Kon Dee in academia and how that message, ‘being a good person/Kon Dee,’ influenced my maintenance of virginity. Well, the things I told you at that time came from recognising the metaphorical cloak of Kon Dee, emerging throughout the letter-writing process with my supervisor since 2021. Do you remember you felt confused. You asked me?

*“But... what is the negative side of being good?”*

Mom, there is generally nothing wrong with 'Being Good or Kon Dee.' Without undertaking this inquiry and these letters, I would not dispute it. But I saw something mischievous there. I am not the first one to question it, Mom. Other Thai people have questioned or criticised how Kon Dee was used with people like me. I will tell you about an encounter that also helped me prepare my response to you.

### In June 2023, The Pride Month Talk.

*I was invited by a school of psychology staff member to give an online talk called 'Pride Month and Psychological Perspective'. The discussion with two other experts would be about the LGBT pride parade, the same sex legal marriage process in Thailand and other subjects. I am not very confident about public speaking with impromptu questions. Still, I accepted the invitation. The talk goes on for an hour. Towards the end, Doctor Utain Boonorna, one of the guest speakers, comments on the upbringing style in Thailand. He said in Thai:*

*"Some parents might keep telling us (LGBTQ+ children) that you can be any gender/sexuality you want but at least only be a good person." Hearing him saying that, I freeze.*

*He continues. "This is not truly beneficial for LGBTQ+ children as it is still conditional. What is the definition of being good/Dee? Why don't the parents say, 'you can be anything you are genuine with yourself and be happy with life'?"*

*When it is my turn, I respond to him excitedly. "Your comment is such a crucial message for my thesis."*

My inquiry/letter had been formulated at that time. Kon Dee was an important idea, but it was unclear how to relate it to my virginity inquiry. Now, it was clearer.



Another example came afterwards from one of my Thai friends with whom I discussed my virginity inquiry. They forwarded this Twitter screenshot in Thai to me about a blind Thai news reporter who got fired because a video was leaked of him drinking alcohol. Some complained that his behaviour ruined the image of disabled people. One respondent asked:

*"Why do LGBTQ+, disabled people or any marginalised group need to prove themselves so freaking hard to have space in society. Is it because of the discourse 'You can be anything you want, only be a good person?' They can be anything they want because they are HUMAN!"*

In my understanding, Mom, drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes are not illegal in Thailand, whereas driving while intoxicated, for example, is definitely against the law. The video clip of public drinking was cast as 'not good character'.

From both examples here, Mom, it seemed that the Kon Dee statement might not be limited to Thai LGBTQ+ populations but could also be applied to other marginalised groups. Would someone born as a heterosexual or straight Thai man or woman, be fired after being exposed on social media for drinking alcohol? That is why later in our heart-to-heart and ethics talk, Mom, I responded by asking you in Thai instead.

*“If parents have a heterosexual or straight son/daughter, would that statement be equally applied to them? Or it does appear only for a child who seems to be non-conforming with the Phet/gender/sexuality norm?”*

What I did not explicitly say is that if I were a straight boy, would you have said the same about me as you did about your best friend’s son? Honestly, I was worried that you, Mom, might feel cross and think I was arguing. Whenever Thai children talk back, it is regarded as disrespectful to parents or someone older. My intention was only to explain and question. I continued.

*“Being good is not bad or wrong, I agree. But do you know, Mom? It seems that my sense of self is somehow a collection of Kon Dee/good people drawn from everywhere. I was afraid of being seen as bad in other people’s eyes. And it’s not only me, but perhaps some other people like me (Thai LGBTQ+) also got affected from being Kon Dee, too.”*

At that time, my insight was drawn from my own experiences and other research papers throughout this inquiry. There are other Thai gays who try to be good/extra good in order to be accepted in Thai society.

My experiences via this thesis told me that there was something wrong about being gay or Thud. These Phets seemed to be bad, sinful or inferior that’s why being good or extra good came to compensate me for being a ‘bad’ gay. Being gay but good gave me what I needed: love, protection or even something called power.

This letter is my opportunity to share another memory in school with you.

*One of my male classmates is being berated by the teacher about his talking and not paying attention in class. His behaviour is annoying and disrespectful in the teachers’ eyes. While reprimanding the student, the teacher refers to me.*

*“Look at him [my name], why can’t you be a well-behaved student like him?”*

*Keeping my head down to avoid eye contact, I feel awkward and did not appreciate my teacher’s comparison. But I could not deny a feeling of pride. Despite being gay and feeling inferior compared to straight males, I am perceived favourably by the teacher as a good student.*

This memory captured that in this heteronormative society and gender binarism that I wrote, being good or Kon Dee gave me, a gay, some power. Being a good person, a good student and a good virgin gay, I seemed to find a safe place in the society of Thai straight men and women. Kon Dee’s characteristics echo the status and prestige symbols that allow people like Dr Wongmontha, whose Phet/gender is against the norm, to have an honoured place in Thai society (Jackson 2016, 61). Do you remember him? You mentioned him and his problem in love life to me.

Teachers accepted me, and friends needed me. So did my family - you. It might explain why I rarely challenged or questioned the idea of being Kon Dee - your statement- or of virginity that I held, Mom. Staying safely in the good gay position, I hardly doubt the hegemony or the normality of heterosexuality.

Nevertheless, to be good and extra good might discourage me from doing anything that would risk ruining the image of a good person. People subjected to this discourse are pressured to be good. It comes at a price, Mom. I wrote before that being Kon Dee is metaphorically like a cloak. I was afraid to go beyond the frame of being good. This cloak gave me power and love, but it also covered and imprisoned me. I was strict and conformed to the rules like a prisoner of being good.

Mom, does it seem fair to be limited to this condition? That heart-to-heart talk between mom - you- and gay (son) - me- and writing all these letters as part of my thesis perhaps is a route to address these subtle conditions that might still exist in Thailand. They work when being LGBTQ+ was perceived negatively. To write academically, I think this is a way to criticise how the power of heteronormativity exists and can control and constrain some Thai LGBTQ+ lives with Foucault's and related theories.

I wonder if you think that making this subtle conditionality known aligns with Madison's 'ethical responsibility' and 'resist domestication'. My inquiry in these letters, I believe now, leans toward critical autoethnography. This might be why my supervisor suggested this term to me. My letters brought a critical element to my inquiry. I believe you have started to understand me because of your response.

*"I never realised it (Kon Dee conditions) before, and I never want you to over-pressurise (Kod Dun) yourself to be too good a person".*

Honestly, I am unsure how much you understood of what I shared. But you have started to grasp the idea that the concept of Kon Dee was imposed as a condition and that it connected to my decision to maintain virginity until I ended it at the age of 30 in Edinburgh. It was how my thesis began. This is why, in terms of ethics, I needed to discuss it with you during this crucial talk.

It is impossible to keep the relationship between you and me (mom and son) in the zone of anonymity when writing my stories in these letters. Like Ellis's writing, autoethnographers' relationships should be protected as much as possible, and it might necessitate omitting or changing some details of the stories while maintaining the essence. I need to make choices about what should be told and what needs to be omitted (2007, 6). Therefore, some details about your and my stories in these letters have been altered.

Do you remember, Mom, when I explained about the letter that I planned to write to you and the stories between us? Later, I changed that 8th letter to be to my Examiners instead. You teased me by saying that our mom-and-son stories were utterly terrible.

Despite making a joke, you must see that it is something not to overlook. I felt that I needed to reassure you by telling you and writing here that what I wrote about our mother-and-son relationship did not come from a reprimanding or accusing position. Thinking of that

overheard phone call and what you said then, I do not blame you, Mom. I am only thinking/writing out loud. The things I describe about you in all the letters, including this one as a thesis, I hope can **benefit and contribute something to others.**

My thesis/letter writing started with the value of virginity I held. The maintenance of my virginity is one of the manifestations of what might be considered good or Kon Dee. I was unsure if other Thai effeminate gays share the same value or intensity about virginity. They might, but with different life events they could find partners. Each Thai LGBTQ+ person or subjectivity is unique and formed differently. Being good/Kon Dee can also be completely different, or can share some similarities, among gays in Thailand.

In all these letters, I mapped these societal, cultural or religious structures from my life and my stories. Kent Ono wrote that when people are silent too often, we might lose the ability to speak out in defiance of mistreatment, and what we say could help others (1997, 115). Mom, I believe what I say and write here could benefit other Thai LGBTQ+ children and parents who come across this thesis to be critical regarding the taken-for-granted concept of Kon Dee in our society and the idea that being LGBTQ+ is bad.

Society is not static. It is changing. Thailand is evidently now more open to gender and sexuality diversity, but the Kon Dee's statement and conditionality could still be out there and affect some lives explicitly and implicitly. It would be from the effect of heteronormativity where other Phets are not fully accepted. I think this is when these incidents of being good occur and exist.

Well, this unique conditionality might not be limited to the Thai context. Anna Marie Smith wrote a chapter in 1997 about the time in the United States when homosexuals (gay or lesbian) were accepted into the military or religious institutions with some conditions. These conditions were to be closeted, disease-free and monogamous, for example. Smith called these people good homosexuals who know a proper place in society, whereas homosexuals who flaunt their homosexuality, spread disease and corrupt children etc. would be perceived as the dangerous queer (1997, 221).

Mom, I am aware that my Examiners might be concerned about Smith's writing, which was almost thirty years ago. Also, the good homosexuals in the USA in 1997 and what I wrote about being good/Kon Dee in Thailand must be different. However, it seems to me that these were conditions that society and culture imposed on homosexuals in order to be accepted and loved. Is that familiar? Conditions to be good manifest differently in other cultures or subcultures. Still, a good gay represents the norm within homosexuality, which I touch upon in the 8th letter to my examiners and the epilogue.

Lastly, I wrote about Leo, my gay client, in my 2nd and 7th letters. Why am I mentioning him again in this letter? One of the topics Leo shared in the therapy room with me was his hobby of being a standup comedian. From time to time, he mentioned how he was stressed with performing until the point that he considered taking a break from it. He recognised that he was competing with other comedian friends and that could be, in his words, 'cut-throat.'

In a session, Leo and I touched upon his competitive tendencies, not limited to his comedy performance. Leo was proud when his career in his day job progressed, or he got

promoted, but at the same time, he could be stressed and worried when there were obstacles or issues at work. He shared that being gay in school, he was ridiculed and teased by other friends. He felt inferior, and there was a drive to do better, be better in his career, or even do better in his hobby. He yearned to do better than others. In that session, I wondered out loud with him that the need to be better is for whom? Is it from Leo's father who rejected his identity, himself, or others?

In this letter, I am bringing up Leo's case again because it seems to be related, to some extent, to my inquiry. I am aware that Leo might never have been told, 'You could be anything you want, at least just be a good person', like me or some Thai gays. Leo is not Thai but comes from elsewhere in Asia. In the session, it seemed that Leo's competitiveness did come partly from the sense that he needed, or pressured himself, to do something better to be accepted, valued or admired, as his gender/sexuality seemed to be against the norm.

Leo's issue is absolutely not related to my thoughts about virginity, but the theme of the conditionality of being 'good' and 'extra' good to have the proper and respected place in society as being gay or LGBTQ+ was there. Would you agree with my observation, Mom? Kon Dee might be one of the racialised and gendered conditions of worth, coined by Chantler (2005, 250), that was generated through social context and has impact on gay or LGBTQ+ people's behaviour or emotions. Counsellors or therapists who might read all of these letters might be mindful of these conditions of worth that could manifest in their clients, especially in people who might be a minority or against the norm.

I hope this thesis will be helpful for anyone who comes across all these letters intentionally or accidentally. For me, all the monthly writings with my supervisor since 2021 that have been crafted into 11 letters have paved the way to understand the origin of why I held my virginity so high and its connection with being a good gay. Letters led me to have a crucial talk with you, Mom. It was a powerful moment between us.

From these letters and our talk, I felt something lifted. I recognised where this Kon Dee condition came from and how it affected my life including virginity. Mom, I lost it at thirty, I do not wish to lose it earlier. Virginity, one element of the cloak, has served its purpose to be 'extra' good. Being good is still part of myself or my subjectivities. But I do not need to use or wear this cloak so tightly anymore. Perhaps, other LGBTQ+ Phets need to be aware of the power of socio-political powers that affect our understanding of selves. Our Phets are not and do not need to be perfect.

Mom, I am glad we talked. Our relationship has become closer and stronger since then. Thanks! to this thesis and all the letters. My Examiners need to receive my gratitude, too, Mom. They will read and engage with all these letters and are also parts of my journey.

It is the right time to finish this letter and submit all these letters for the viva voce. I will add the abstract of this thesis and my acknowledgements later. After all, this is a doctoral thesis. You can skip it, Mom, but my Examiners might need to see it.

I hope all these letters I have written will be mementoes for you, our family and friends, my Examiners, all addressees, other LGBTQ+ and me from the past, present, and future. Wish me luck, Mom.

*Kob Khun Krub*

Panu Sahassanon

**To: My Examiners**

**From: Panu Sahassanon**

**Subject: Epilogue: After the Viva & Virginit**

**Dear Examiners,**

It has been a few months since our almost 2-hour viva voce in Edinburgh, which was filled with nervousness and excitement. Your engagement with all my letters, and inspiring questions in that room was memorably intense but fruitful. Here, I craft this new letter as my response to your comment. **It is time to revisit virginity.**

In the first letter I wrote, if you remember, how I was adamant that the loss of virginity would occur from penile-anal intercourse. In my mind, other different erotic acts do not affect the status of being a virgin. According to your feedback, my view of virginity seemed to be mechanistic, sex-centred and transactional. While rereading the letter even before the viva, I recognised that I was not reflective enough about where this understanding came from. Alas, I simply took it in or believed in it.

Hille, Simmons and Sanders' online survey research identifies a definition of sex among the asexual community or people who never or rarely experience sexual attraction. They found that all behaviours involving the genitals or anus, with or without penetration, could be defined by the asexual community in this research as 'sex.' Over 90% unanimously define penile-anal and penile-vaginal penetration as sex (2020, 818). You may be curious to know why I bring up this article. Their research clearly showed that many people on the ace spectrum define sex as similar from the gay men in Huang's (2014) and Averett's (2018) research papers that anal penetration with another man is the key sexual act of virginity loss. Obviously, this might be another impact of the norm of heterosexuality, which permeates other populations, and has become the norm for some homosexual people, including me, as you witness in this journey. I found this quote from Watson profoundly resonating with my stories.

*You don't think of yourself as repressed until after you have made a break with repression even standard sexualities (matrimonial heterosexuality) require not just free choice but the public accessibility of sexual knowledge (1999, 8).*

Writing these letters and having a viva with you, my examiners, I have gathered insights and explored the condition of Kon Dee/good gay that shaped my decision for so long to refrain from sex and hold my virginity. Also, you would recognise that my subjectivity, a gay, was aligned with effeminacy under the dynamics of eroticisation between passivity/submission and activity/dominance in males and females (Kemp 2013). As an effeminate gay, my sexual behaviour is, perhaps socially, defined to be penetrated. Without the vagina in my body, the anus seemed to be the closest orifice which, thanks to your challenge, I started to realise, that the keyword for homosexuality or gay is diversity. It could create unforeseen kinds of love, desire and relationships. This is why the idea that the anus is equal to the vagina could be illogical (Bersani 1987). There was the repression within myself to the norm of female sexuality and vagina sex. Love and sex in gay men, I wonder, can be radically different. So can virginity.

Do you remember Averett and colleagues' article exploring virginity among LGBT people in the USA that I discussed in the first letter to you? Some of their participants viewed virginity as a concept outside the LGBT community. Coming out, instead, was the 'single-most important rite of passage' (2014, 275). Likewise, some of my Thai gay friends, with whom I share my research

progress, disputed the idea of virginity, thinking that this concept was not applicable to them. Clearly, the subjectivity of Thai gay men could be uniquely produced. Some might internalise the norm of heterosexuality. I could not deny the value to me of virginity, but now I wonder what could be redefined or reconsidered about virginity. How can I extend this heterosexual concept, especially dominant in application to women? In other words, how can I queer virginity? Queering is at odds with the normal, the norm, no matter whether that norm derives from the 'dominant heterosexuality or gay/lesbian identity (Spargo 1999, 40). My inspiration or the new discourse comes from nowhere but your work, my examiners.

Edgar Rodriguez-Dorans published an article about gay men's identities, questioning that the popular representation of gay men/gayness could be equated with sex. One of Rodriguez-Dorans' participants said that 'you (gay men) can have sex every day if you are not picky' (2020, 108). This view seemed to be limiting. It gradually dawned on me that my understanding of virginity was attached tightly to sexual acts or penile-anal penetration.

This is why Rodriguez-Dorans drew the differences between sex and erotic from Octavio Paz's work (1997). Sex, as a primal fire, can be experienced by all 'nonhuman species.' But eroticism is the finer fire that feeds on desire and seduction (2020, 108). Also, Rodriguez-Dorans introduced Lorde's concept of eroticism, that erotic is the lifeforce, the creative energy in our lives, work, and love with the capacity for joy. Sadly, the erotic seemed to be feared and downgraded to only the bedroom (1984, 26-27). Likewise, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, Greenfield wrote, are rhetorically reduced to simply bedroom beings (2005, 311). There is a vivid quote from Lorde that has moved me.

*To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a Kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us (1984, 27).*

In my understanding, erotic is supposed to be sharing, not using. Between the sharers, this enjoyment could be physical, emotional, psychic or intellectual (Lorde 1984, 26). This concept makes me reflect on that pivotal night in Edinburgh with that guy. I wonder if I used that guy to experience sexual intercourse and the loss of my virginity. Perhaps, for him, it was to satisfy his sexual desire. Undeniably, I was physically attracted to him, but do I have a sense for, or love for, that guy? Were we using or sharing the feeling of joy on that night?

Rodriguez-Dorans then mentioned the limitation of sexual orientation that fails to describe individuals holistically and reduces them to a sexual aspect (2020, 109). The author drew another term, the relational orientation, coined by Derek Greenfield. He proposes that relational orientation is the desire for intimacy or life-affirming relationships, not merely the desire for sex (2005, 312). The representation of LGBT individuals would be more open and holistic. For gay people, then 'we were given sex, we also asked for love'. Sexual encounters, Rodriguez-Dorans suggested, would feel different when shared with other gay men whom we know well and have feelings for (2020, 109-110).

Perhaps, that night, I delineated from the first letter, my examiners, could be sexual virginity. What if it happened with someone I yearn for intimacy and togetherness- for example, Sak, my ex-partner in the 7th letter, or Tul, a guy mentioned in the 4th, etc.? Those moments with them would be closer. It might be in the realm of relational virginity.

If you remember Hoppe's writing that I mentioned in the 8th letter about the bottom gay men's narratives. There is a possibility of separating between being a bottom and the body-location indicators (Hoppe 2011, 199). The positional identity (top or bottom) in gay men could relate to pleasure production. From these relational and erotic lenses that encapsulate beyond the sexual, would 'virginity' be reconsidered I ask myself, to be the crucial moments of the first time with people with whom I share joy. The list of 'first time' events can be limitless- for example, the first date, the first movies to watch together, the first trip, or the first time that person and I hold hands, hug, kiss and other intimate and sexual behaviours.

Why do I list these behaviours? You might be curious, my examiners. Kemp's *The Penetrated Male*, introduced in the 8th letter, in part, is another reference. He troubled the idea of masculinity as impenetrability by providing that penetration did occur in other orifices, including eyes, mouth and ear, for example (2013). I was drawn particularly to the ears and its discursive penetration. Kemp wrote.

*To be masculine is only possible through a submission to discourse that marks one simultaneously feminine and consequently destabilizes the very gender norms it attempts to install/inscribe (2013, 109).*

The subjectivity is generated from the discourse, a concept that I have learned a great deal about from this thesis. Kemp connects this process with the penetration of the body where the ear becomes a channel for conception (2013, 107). The conversations I have with the date from the movies, concerts, intimate moments or the dialogues between us would be the space to share our worldviews, life stories, experiences and pleasures. Who I will become, the emergence of my subjectivity, is inevitably influenced by my date's discourses or vice versa. I think this could imply metaphorically that we both 'penetrate' each other's subjectivity through these events.

Also, I drew some ideas from Bersani's *Is Rectum A Grave*, in which he touched upon the concept of *jouissance*. It is the feeling of intense pleasure (Kemp 2013, 51), but for Bersani, it seems to be the ecstatic suffering that human beings experience 'beyond the certain threshold of endurance (1987, 217). In my understanding, anal sex, for Bersani or sex in broader terms, is not about reinforcing the self or identity, but it can undo the self or shatter the psychic structure. To undo the self makes me connect back to Kemp's discursive penetration and Lorde's eroticism. Is it possible to say that when discourses through life events, where we both enjoy each other's company, penetrate me and my date, we become the site of invasions? This penetration, according to Kemp, can carry the charge of fascination. Partners or dates, I believe, have the capacity for us to be fascinated with or fall under their influence or spell and thereby to lose control (2013, 111). I am unsure if it could be simplified, but my subjectivity or my life would be undone and changed in those moments with my date through his spoken words and voice.

How does it sound, my examiners? Honestly, I enjoy viewing virginity this way. Still, I recognise some worries. Why? The submission to discourse can appear as a site both of pleasure and anxiety because there are uncertainties (Kemp 2013, 112). I could not fully know what would have changed by my future date and his 'penetration'. It can be fearful, but it also can be exciting.

Stacy Holman Jones drew Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004) that 'I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is the enigmatic traces of others.' Holman Jones uses this

quote with the implication of the father in the author's life (2016, 229). I believe this quote can inevitably connect with other people in our lives, and it seems to echo the idea that dates or partners, apart from family members who come into our lives — my life — could leave fascinating traces and changes within my subjectivity.

Well, I am looking forward to meeting and getting to know 'him' and to exploring our 'virginity'. Understanding virginity in this way might be more relational and queering compared to my previous transactional or sex-centred belief. I believe this would, like many queer theorists' desires, trouble the normal or the norm. Or, to be specific, it is to question the idea of masculinity and femininity, the penetration and being penetrated among gay men and the sex-centred virginity. Penetration now can occur in sexual, erotic and discursive ways.

This new knowledge would resist the taken-for-granted idea that virginity loss occurs only once in a lifetime, which is frequently conveyed through media that virginity, once lost, can never be regained. An Australian gay participant in Brown, Ramirez and Schniering's research about love and relationships proudly stated that the traditional rule of relationships does not bind gay men. It is up to us to make it work (2013, 32). I believe it would apply to the concept of virginity as well, as I am writing and rethinking it now.

Virginity could be expanded and multiple. Multiple virginities had already been mentioned by Averett, Moore and Price's qualitative research among gay men that virginity loss can occur from any new sexual acts (2014, 269). I somehow align with their work, but my adjusted multiple virginities would not end with that guy in 2020 or be restricted to a bedroom situation. It has now moved to whoever I feel romantically and relationally connected with and any places that person and I could share a togetherness with. In those times we 'penetrate' via orifices that include more than the anus, my virginity, then, can be exchanged. Virginity was once used to protect the good gay, but now it would be an ongoing process that changes my sense of self. This idea may be novel, but hopefully, other LGBTQ+ individuals who come across this thesis might also gain another perspective on virginity.

Before I go (again), **here is my recapitulation of these letters' contributions.** From the beginning of my journey to write all these letters, I, a gay man from Thailand, brought up my virginity experiences and explored the societal and cultural aspects that shape its significance and the decision to hold on to it until the age of thirty. The value of virginity and the negativity of sex also relate to the sex talk in therapy, where I initiate the reflection point on how uncomfortable counsellors are, especially the counsellors whose sex talk can be a culturally taboo subject. The concept of virginity can be criticised not only for females, but it could also be expanded and redefined for LGBTQ+ people like me, which I have written about in this current letter.

The journey of writing these letters led me to witness the influences of heteronormativity/heterosexism in my hometown when I grew up. My main 'food for thought' - a phrase I learned from my therapist, Susan Granger - for anyone who encounters my letters is, then, to be reflective of the effect of those negative messages towards us - LGBTQ+ people, both counsellors and clients.

The condition of Kon Dee, or the good gay, for example, plays a significant role in my life to be accepted and loved by significant others. Virginity was one of the 'good' aspects of my subjectivity. The LGBTQ+ counsellors are worth exploring if they have an unaware residue of these societal conditions and these discourses within themselves. At the same time, it would

be helpful for a counsellor to be mindful of these conditions that have occurred in the lives and impacted their LGBTQ+ clients.

Susanne Gannon quoted a statement from Cavarero that I always love: Despite having similar life stories, the writer's story is never a reader's story. The writer's uniqueness is exposed to a reader's gaze and consists in an unrepeatable story (2013, 237). My life story as a (once) virgin Thai gay and the impact of heteronormativity/heterosexism upon me could not be the same with others LGBTQ+. I hope you and others can read these letters, engage and reflect on their own lives. I hope it will be beneficial in some ways.

All references I have used in the entire thesis and some recent additions from your resources will be listed and acknowledged. No words can express my gratitude for your engagement with my thesis letters. Hopefully, my long-awaited doctoral degree will be awarded, and the graduation ceremony will bring me back to Edinburgh with its cold breeze or snow soon.

Thank you with all my heart,

Panu Sahassanon

## ABSTRACT

This part is the abstract of my doctoral thesis or the electronic letters I have written to many addressees. In case someone else comes across this abstract, Sawatdee Krub.

My thesis and the letters I wrote are about virginity, a controversial concept that receives much criticism. However, the maintenance of virginity seemed to be important to me, a gay from Bangkok, Thailand, until I reached the age of thirty when I decided to lose it. Why is virginity valued, and sexual intercourse to be refrained from and discouraged? This thesis aims to understand this phenomenon through letter writing.

But why letters? You might be curious. These 12 electronic letters represent the whole journey I had engaged in virginity since 2021 when I wrote - typed - monthly explorations to my supervisor, Jonathan Wyatt. Inspired by Laurel Richardson's writing as a method of inquiry, I began my journey by including stories, articles, and literature that relate to sex and virginity. Another essential element is autoethnography. This methodology uses the researcher's personal experiences and connects them to the culture, disclosing self-stories and vulnerability and then creating a format that retrospectively looks like writing a letter to someone close. It encompasses both personal and professional elements.

This autoethnographic letter format provides the space to reflect by going back and forth between past and present, academic and personal selves, and between myself and other addressees, you, for example. Therefore, I kept this format and recrafted all monthly letters to be written to significant others, including my family members, gay best friends, therapist, supervisor, Examiners, and even myself.

The first letter began with the story of the night I lost my virginity. Then, each crafted letter was written to trace back and understand what societal and cultural elements in family, school, and the wider society - Thailand - seemed to affect the understanding of sex and virginity. The secrecy of sex talk, sexuality education in the Thai educational curriculum, Buddhist and Christian doctrines and HIV/AIDS were narrated in respective letters. Attitudes during the time I grew up seemed to discourage sex. Virginity was valued. The plot seemed to thicken when it connected to my Phet (Thai gender and sexuality) as a gay.

Being gay or kathoey (Transgender men) was tolerated but not accepted in my childhood and young years. I brought you to witness the heteronormativity/heterosexism and the hegemony of two genders in Thailand. Like me, the other Phets/genders seemed to be against the norm. Panopticon, disciplinary power, and poststructuralist thinkers were engaged to show how my gay friends and I were bullied and disrespected, which crystallised in my 8th letter of the idea of being a good person or Kon Dee in the Thai context. This keyword encompassed desirable and admirable qualities of Thai society that guaranteed safety and love for Thai gays. Virginity or refraining from sex seemed to be one of the manifestations of being Kon Dee. Metaphorically, it was like a cloak gathered round me.

Thai gays might experience the condition of Kon Dee differently in their own life. Still, this condition/discourse needs to be recognised, reflected on, or challenged by gay people or Thai LGBTQ+. Perhaps not only gay people but family members, counsellors, or general readers, both Thai and internationally, may also benefit from engaging with these letters reflectively and critically. These letters could be helpful for gender/sexuality equality. I hope you will enjoy this letter/thesis.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Well, another important part is the acknowledgement. I have always loved this quote from Helen Keller: 'Alone, we can do so little, but together, we can do so much.'

The reasons I selected this quote are twofold. First, it reminded me of the essence of letters and autoethnography. Personal stories, my stories, that I shared throughout these letters always implicated other people. They co-exist in the stories. Writing a letter requires both a writer and a receiver. Secondly, the whole doctoral thesis and all these letters can only be complete with the contribution of other people who support, suggest, and pass on the knowledge that has shaped this inquiry. So does my life and subjectivity.

I would like to show appreciation and gratitude to those represented in my letters. I wrote to my family members, including Dad, Mom, sister, and grandmother. Regarding my other relatives, thank you for supporting me while I have been away from Bangkok.

My letters were written to/about my gay best friends, Kayle, TJ, Tul and my ex-partner. Their support and involvement in this inquiry is crucial. I am grateful too for my classmates and friends in Edinburgh including Pandora, Inyoung, Shin, Alice, Cassie, Tianmu, Perry, Joel, Daniel, Sarah, Peck, Noon, P'Amp and others. They were the academic space where I can discuss and exchange knowledge to scaffold my doctoral thesis and be the social support during a challenging time during my study. Also, my Thai friends, J'Bow, Cake, P' Pla, TGIF, and ACT gang are my supporters who helped me carry on this thesis and life in Edinburgh. The faculty of psychology at Chulalongkorn University sponsored my study here and my colleagues, AJ'Tle, AJ'Gib, AJ'Kla, Sam and other tutors/professors also inculcated my knowledge from undergraduate to postgraduate.

These letters also include Leo, my client. His life and stories shared in the counselling room have become a reflection point for me which has also benefited this inquiry. My therapist is also another space to deepen my idea around my thesis. Another person is the guy on that pivotal night. Because of him, my story and all this inquiry can begin. Also, all books and articles that I read, borrowed and downloaded and the theorists and writers are my resources that provide knowledge for this inquiry.

My supervisor, Jonathan Wyatt, the first receiver of all these letters, also plays an important role here. Without him and his open mind, all these creative and novel letters I have now written to many, including you, could not have emerged. David Carless, my critical friend, Seamus Prior, my second supervisor, and John Forsyth, my proofreader, are important readers who provided thought-provoking questions and comments that would enhance my letters and ensure that my letters in English can be read with fewer errors and inconsistencies.

Lastly, you, my Examiners. Your thoughts and questions will be helpfully stimulating and challenging at the same time. I am nervous and excited to send this to you. Still, it will strengthen my thesis.

The letters, like me, are not perfect, but I hope they are good enough to be assessed and engaged with.

Kob Khun Krub.

**Panu Sahassanon**

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