

**By the Sweat of Other Brows:
Thai Migrant Labor and the Transformation
of Israeli Settler Agriculture**

by

Matan Kaminer

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Andrew Shryock, Chair
Associate Professor Jason De León
Professor Alaina Lemon
Associate Professor Daniel Nemser
Assistant Professor Scott Stonington

"I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom."

- Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

To Adam He said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

- Genesis 3:17-19

"Now, Ananda, when a monk or brahman says thus: 'It seems that there are evil kammās [karmas], there is the result of misconduct,' I concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'For I have seen that some person killed living beings, took what is not given, misconducted himself in sexual desires, spoke falsehood, spoke maliciously, spoke harshly, gossiped, was covetous, was ill-willed, and had wrong view. I saw that on the dissolution of the body, after death, he had reappeared in states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell,' I concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'It seems that one who kills living beings ... has wrong view, will always, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in the states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, in hell,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he says thus: 'Those who know thus know rightly; those who know otherwise are mistaken in their knowledge,' I do not concede that to him.

"When he obstinately misapprehends what he himself has known, seen and felt; and insisting on that alone, he says: 'Only this is true; anything else is wrong,' I do not concede that to him.

"Why is that? The Tathagata's knowledge of the Great Exposition of Kamma is different."

- Maha Kammavibhanga Sutta: The Great Exposition of Kamma (Thera 1993)

Dedication

My father would often stop to look at people working, say on construction sites. An impatient child, I usually wanted to keep moving, but he would insist that we linger for a little while and observe. When I protested that watching people work was boring, he replied, “you’re wrong, there’s nothing more interesting in the world.” I didn’t get it then, but I think I get it now.

This dissertation is dedicated to his blessed memory: Noam Kaminer, 1953-2014. May his soul be bound in the bundle of life.

Matan Kaminer

mkaminer@umich.edu

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-1212-3345

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Acknowledgments

I came to Michigan in the fall of 2012, four years into the Great Recession, a year after the Arab Spring, after Occupy and the Israeli “social protest” movement. Trump wasn’t even an orange smudge on the horizon yet, but a strong sense of political urgency was in the air at Michigan’s Department of Anthropology. This was unsurprising, given the tangible effects of the economic situation on the discipline. We new grad students had made it to a top school, so our chances were better than most in the horrific job market, though we could expect nothing like the clear path to tenure that our predecessors had enjoyed. We were particularly fortunate, even by elite university standards, to benefit from the struggles of previous generations of graduate student workers who had achieved a strong union, the Graduate Employee Organization, and a strong contract. Thanks to the union, everyone in my cohort enjoyed adequate funding, enabling an easier solidarity between us than existed among our peers in other universities, many of whom are still struggling to unionize.

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In Israel as in the US, I have been fortunate to enjoy the privileges of belonging to an elite institution – the Adi Lautman Program for Excelling Students at Tel Aviv University, which covered my tuition and a stipend as well as providing a quick route to a Master's degree. Many thanks go to The Program's director, Naama Friedman, to my mentors Ilana Arbel and Ran Hacoheh, to then-program coordinator Simha Menahem, and to my cohort-mates. At the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, which welcomed me with open arms, I owe special debts of gratitude to my thesis adviser, Dan Rabinowitz, to my teachers Adriana Kemp, Khaled Furani, Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, Nissim Mizrahi, and Ronen Shamir, to my dear friends Avi Goltzman, Maya Wallenstein and Mor Shilon, and to Administrative Coordinator Seffi Stieglitz.

Relocating to the US was perhaps the most difficult thing I have done in my life. I even dare say, despite the obvious differences, that some of my empathy for the plight of Thai migrants in Israel derives from the suffering I myself experienced as a (very privileged) transnational migrant. My father, Noam, was already ill when I left, but made his support for my studies crystal clear. So did my mother Smadar and my sister Carmel, who never once questioned whether I was right to leave home again and again as his situation worsened, though I often did. I will always be grateful for this, as I am for the selfless care they provided

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Getting no funding for the first year of fieldwork was not only a psychological blow; it would have made things impossible economically were it not for the support of my family and my late father's inheritance. It takes nothing away from my gratitude towards my family – indeed it is in keeping with it – to point out that in this, too, I am unduly privileged. If precarity makes anthropological careers available only to a moneyed minority, the discipline itself will be at fault, and will receive its karmic comeuppance. That said, I am grateful to the University of Michigan's Department of Anthropology for various forms of financial support and to the Social Science Research Council, the US Department of Education, and Rackham Graduate School at UM for providing me with the International Dissertation Research Fellowship,

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Note on Non-English Terms

In transliterating both Hebrew and Thai my main goal has been readability rather than accuracy. For Hebrew, I have used what Wikipedia (“Romanization of Hebrew” 2019) calls the “common Israeli” system, which is almost identical to the official Hebrew Academy system, minus the duplication of consonants with a *dagesh* and the macron below the *h* representing the letter *het*. I have left out glottal and guttural stops except where required to distinguish a succession of vowels separated by one from a diphthong, in which case both are marked with an apostrophe (as in the name Ya’ir); particles such as the definite article *ha* are separated from the word they are affixed to with a dash. I have transliterated Arabic using the same system. For Thai and Isaan, I have used the ISO 11940-2 standard of transliteration, omitting tone markers (ISO (International Standards Organization) 2019). For both Israelis and Thais who prefer a different Romanization of their names, I have respected their preference. I follow Thai usage in referring to Thai scholars by their first name and alphabetizing by first name. When referring to non-English terms I have attempted to retain the original morphology, using the plural suffix for Hebrew terms (generally masculine *-im*, feminine *-ot*) and no such suffix for terms in Thai and Isaan, which do not have grammatical number. For ease of reading, I use an italic font for all such terms (unless they are proper nouns). Wherever the linguistic provenance of an expression is not clear from context, I have used (H) for Hebrew, (A) for Arabic, (T) for Thai, (I) for Isaan and (E) to indicate that English wording was used.

Places in Israel/Palestine often have different names in Hebrew and Arabic and sometimes an additional one in English. For the most part, I have acknowledged this by giving

all relevant names upon first mentioning a place; afterwards, for simplicity, I have chosen one of these as seemed fit and stuck with it. Where there is a common English term, I have used it. Since the term “Arabah,” chosen in this way, is so central to the text, the logic may be worth explaining. This spelling is first found in English in the sixteenth-century Geneva Bible, and has rolled around in English-speaking mouths in this form at least since then; its Englishness attests to its antiquity and rootedness in the common imaginary that informs Jewish, Muslim and Christian understandings of the Holy Land. Using the Arabic *al-‘arabah* would be pretentious, given the acknowledged lack of Arabic-speaking voices in the text; nobody who calls the Arabah *al-‘arabah* was harmed in the making of this ethnography. But to use the modern Hebrew *ha-arava* would be to privilege the voice of the Israeli state and its nomenclature (Azaryahu and Golan 2001), a nomenclature employed very consciously in the service of colonization and state-building in the “wilds” (*‘aravot*) of the South. Finally, Arabah has the fortuitous advantage of being the closest of the available options to how the name of the region is pronounced in Thai.

Note on Anonymization

Of the many moral debts I owe, one is to the Sadot family, which trusted me enough to open its farm and its home to me for six months. While I hope that nothing I have written could offend the Sadots or make trouble for them, given the sensitivity of the subject matter I cannot be certain that this will be the case. Moreover, the Central Arabah is at once a small place where everybody knows everybody, and a very globally connected one where everyone has access to media old and new. While I have used a pseudonym for the community in which the Sadot family lives, anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the region will be able to guess easily enough which of its five *moshavim* has here been dubbed “Ein Amal.” If I were to content myself with the ethnographic gold standard for anonymization, the use of pseudonyms, anyone acquainted with the region could also surmise precisely which family it is that I worked for.¹ While I don’t think the Sadots would necessarily wish to hide any of the information divulged here, they have a right to privacy according to both the institutionalized “ethics” of the University of Michigan’s Institutional Review Board (Study ID #HUM00098440) and my own. While the former might be content with pseudonyms, I have taken the further step of

¹“Sadot” is the only pseudonymous last name in the text. Where people outside this family are referred to by their full names, these are the real names of public figures who do not require my protection.

fictionalization (De León 2015, 59–60). To honor another ethical debt, to my readers, I wish to explain this procedure.

The Sadots are, in essence, a real family with a real farm. However, several details about the family and the farm have been changed, in order to make it as difficult as possible for them to be identified on the basis of the text only.² None of these details are in any way pertinent to the argument I am making; moreover, wherever I have changed details I have done so with a view to remaining well within the range of what is common in the *moshav* and the region. The result is nothing like a composite or a “typical” farm in the region, whatever that might mean from a qualitative perspective. For example, with regard to one of the central issues under discussion — the personal side of the employer-employee relationship— I have good reason to believe that this farm was far from typical. But these are precisely the sorts of issues on which I have stuck closely to the truth as I perceive it. The details which have been changed are of the kind which, while making identification difficult, do not change any of the essentials as far as my argument is concerned.

² Readers familiar with farming in the Arabah may even spot some small impossibilities in the description of agricultural labor processes. Rest assured, these are intentional! Obviously, many people in Ein Amal were aware of my presence and of my work on the Sadot farm, and I have no way of keeping those people in the dark about the family’s identity.

Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnography of Thai migrant farmworkers in the Central Arabah region of Israel, their employers, and their kin in Northeast Thailand (Isaan). It argues that over the last thirty years, the cooperative communities (*moshavim*) of this region have come to rely on cheap, skilled, disciplined and tactful workers from Isaan not only for their economic viability but also for their politico-ideological reproduction. Chapter 1 details the history of the region preceding Israeli settlement and of the “labor settlement” movement, with special attention to the ideological twin pillars of “self-labor” and “Hebrew labor” and the accompanying affective orientation I call “exploitation anxiety,” as well as the settlement of the region by ideologically orthodox second-generation members of the movement. Chapter 2 is concerned with the history of Thai migration to Israel in general and the region in particular, utilizing previously unpublished diplomatic documents to argue that the Thai military’s interest in “frontier settlement” played a role in the beginning of the migration flow and that Thai migrants brought with them a paternalist idiom of hierarchical relations, based on a vernacular Buddhist conception of karmic reciprocity, which was at first acknowledged by the community before being pushed out of the public sphere and severely curtailed by changes in the recruitment process. Following a short Methodological Interlude reflecting on my own positionality in the field, Chapter 3 argues, based on my ethnographic experience as a worker on a farm in the Arabah, that the politically decisive difference between Thai workers and both Arabs and Jews is reproduced in large part at the scale of the farm. This happens both at work itself and through the day-to-day reproduction of labor-power in such activities as cooking and

eating; I also look at language, dress, and body hexis, and pay special attention to workers' achievement of a great deal of autonomy, paid for at the price of their social isolation. Chapter 4 looks at how difference is deployed to render Thai migrants politically neutral and practically invisible at the scales of the *moshav* and above. It describes the "migration regime" designed to ensure that migrants do not settle down in Israel, examines spatial and temporal patterns of segregation and practices surrounding consumption and sexuality, and argues that a commitment to "saving the face" of the host community entails migrants' cooperation in constructing themselves as an innocuous and barely visible presence. In Chapter 5, through the stories of a migrant whose marriage fell apart while he was in Israel and of another couple which has managed to stay together, I examine how kin at home, and especially wives, participate in ensuring that migrants work hard, consume frugally and remit generously, helping both to discipline their labor and to naturalize their difference from Israelis. In the Conclusion, I undertake a short reflection on the political implications of the ethnography of reproduction and the implications of its rupture.

Introduction

Wheels within Wheels: An Ethnography of Social Reproduction

The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel within a wheel.

- Ezekiel 1:16

This dissertation is an ethnography: its bones are real, specific places and the human beings who live in those places are its flesh. But its spirit is the social relations between those people and others, and its theoretical preoccupation is with the *reproduction* of particular formations of such relations. Its main claim is straightforward: over the last thirty years in the Israeli Central Arabah, the social formation known as the “labor settlement movement” has only been able to reproduce itself due to the establishment and stabilization of a flow of migrant labor from Thailand. But its chief interest is in *how* this transformation has been made possible, ideologically and politically as well as economically. In searching for the answer, my attention has been drawn to a rapidly proliferating constellation of other social formations, each of which depends on the others for its own reproduction. This interdependence is a source of both dynamic stability and potential volatility.

This ethnography also turns its sight directly onto a wheel which turns within many of these other wheels: the wheel of the capitalist production and circulation of commodities. The

cultivation and sale of vegetables, primarily bell peppers, supplies livelihoods to Israeli employers and their families and provides a lifeline for labor settlement. It also supplies livelihoods, at a much lower standard, for migrants and the families who dispatch them. But profitable production itself depends on the difference between Israeli employers and Thai workers, since it relies on the colonial ideology of labor settlement for state support as well as on the smooth functioning of the discriminatory transnational migration regime which provides it with a cheap and docile workforce.

I am not claiming that any one of these social formations *could not* reproduce itself without the others: some such formations are quite resilient and find new ways of reproducing themselves when the old ones become impossible. This is precisely what I argue has happened to the labor settlement movement, which the *moshavim* of the Arabah exemplify: when the Jewish labor force became too expensive for its needs and the Palestinian labor force too unruly, it seized upon the opportunities offered by Thailand as a source of skilled, economical and disciplined labor-power. The wheels in Ezekiel's vision have a clockwork aspect, but they are also part of a circular storm, a cyclone ringed with lightning; and the evanescent spiral of the cyclone is, at some moments, a more precise metaphor for the cycles of social reproduction than the mechanical action of interlocking gears.

My understanding of "reproduction" derives primarily from the galaxy of Marxist scholarship, but the term takes on such a plurality of meanings within this galaxy that some further elaboration is needed. Three or four strands of Marxian theory are central to my analysis. Of these, the most well-defined and prominent on today's intellectual scene is the corpus that has become known as social reproduction theory. Beginning in the 1960's and 70's, socialist feminists realized that Marx's theory of capitalist relations contained a massive lacuna,

since it assumed that the conversion of money wages into *labor-power*, the capacity of a sufficient number of human beings to do the work assigned them by employers, proceeded straightforwardly through the acquisition of commodities (Dalla Costa and James 1975; Federici 2004; Vogel 2013). These feminist scholars have demonstrated that the reproduction of labor-power –raising children who will become workers, day-to-day maintenance of those who are currently in employment or searching for it, and care for those whose working lives are over – depends not only on the wage but on a heavily gendered division of unpaid labor within the family. In recent years social reproduction theory has enjoyed a renaissance, becoming a centerpiece in the intellectual armature of a new, intersectional left in the academy and beyond (Bhattacharya and Vogel 2017). As such it has also paid close attention to the roles played by race and citizenship in the division of reproductive labor, especially in the context of migration (Bannerji 2005; Ferguson and McNally 2014).

Two Marxist anthropologists working in Africa in the mid-20th century, Michael Burawoy and Claude Meillassoux, were also independently alerted to the importance of the reproduction of labor-power by the phenomenon of regulated labor migration under colonialism. Both sought an explanation for the low wages paid to African migrant workers in the fact that their labor-power was reproduced under different conditions from that of white workers, in physically separated zones. Meillassoux (1981) placed an emphasis on the articulation between the capitalist mode of production under which such workers were employed and the non-capitalist modes of production which continued to provide for some of their needs; Burawoy (1976) stressed the importance of geographical separation in perpetuating differentials in living standards between such groups.

The above theorists are primarily concerned with the reproduction of labor-power, the process whereby the wage is converted, through purchase of commodities or exploitation of

unpaid labor, into the capacity of workers to go on working and the production of new workers. But just because people are able and willing to sell their labor-power to others does not mean that they once they have done so, they will deploy their ability to do work in a way satisfactory to the buyer. Profitable production depends on the instillation of discipline and obedience in the workforce: this is the theme of the reproduction of capitalist *social relations*, posed by Antonio Gramsci, set in these terms by philosopher Louis Althusser (2014), and explored by a long series of ethnographers (e.g. Willis 1977; Bourgois 1989). Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), a pioneering opus of what became known as "labor process theory," is a model for ethnographic exploration of how labor is actually extracted after the employment contract is signed, the focus of Chapter 2. Though not usually set in terms of "reproduction," the imposition of capitalist relations on non-capitalist societies is also a rich vein that has been excavated by anthropologists for decades (see, for example, Wolf 2010; Ong 1987; M. Taussig 1980; Li 2014).

My concern with the "socialist" Zionist labor settlement movement forces me to go yet further. Since its inception this movement has developed against what I call a capitalist ground, tying its own destiny, rhetoric notwithstanding, to the reproduction of capitalist social relations. But the colonial rule of difference (Chatterjee 1994) which the movement instituted, assigning differential rights of mobility and employment to Arabs and Jews, is not *reducible* to capitalism; indeed, at many points in its history the reproduction of one has been threatened by that of the other. Without denying the theoretical possibility of a colorblind capitalism, I draw on Cedric Robinson's (2000) contention that really existing capitalism has always been colonial and racial to show how in the Arabah today, as elsewhere, "race is the modality through which class is 'lived'" (Hall 1996, 341). Here I aim to show that the reproduction of labor settlement

and that of capitalist relations have been harmonized through the constitution of a human type, the *tailandi*, as phenomenally invisible and politically neutral.

What anthropologists of an earlier generation would have called “cultural contact” or “acculturation” (Ortiz 1995) has been central to the constitution of this new type. For decades now, anthropologists have been wary of “the culture concept” and especially of its use to marginalize, exoticize and otherwise “other” the vulnerable people we study (Clifford and Marcus 1986; R. Behar 1996). This danger can hardly be underestimated in my case: the cultural othering of Thai migrants is a central aspect of the marginalization which enables labor settlement to reproduce itself as if they weren’t even there; it thus forms an important part of the analysis. But this is not the whole story. Norms of interpersonal interaction, attitudes towards hierarchy, formations of family and gender, and practices of care for others and oneself – all well-known aspects of “culture” – in fact differ immensely between the Arabah and Isaan, and the ways that they differ are crucial to the reproduction of every one of the social formations under discussion.¹

Of course, these “cultures” do not meet on equal ground: one is the culture of those who give orders and the other is the culture of those who obey. In a historical irony which reverberates throughout the text, egalitarianism, informality and directness are brought to the encounter by the dominant party and respect for hierarchy, circumspection and tact are the gift of the subalterns. The resulting misunderstandings are sometimes funny, as in Boy’s inability

¹ Sheer distance offers me an opportunity to weasel out of having to define the *boundaries* of the “cultures” under discussion: in some cases, it is irrelevant whether the cultural forms I discuss are specific to rural Isaan, to Thailand, or to Southeast Asia on the one hand or to the labor settlement movement, to Israel or to “The West” on the other. When it does make a difference, I try to be more precise, but when it does not I use whatever label seems most legible.

to recognize that the man who came to pick him up “dressed like a worker” was his new boss; but just as often they result in insult and frustration for one side while allowing the other to bask in glib disavowal. If this were not the case – if “cultural differences” were not central to the reproduction of the exploitative processes detailed herein – I might be able to safely ignore them. As it is I feel a need to walk into this conceptual minefield.

Cultures – both labor-settlement Zionist ideology and Buddhist dharma (note the non-equivalence) – also supply me with analytical resources. In the former I identify a deeply inculcated affective orientation I call *exploitation anxiety*: a strong aversion to exploitation which is rooted not in empathy for the exploited but in concern for the moral integrity of the exploiter. While in a way this research is a protest against that orientation, a stubborn turning of attention back to the exploited, I wholeheartedly agree with the ideologists of the LSM (who are in a strong sense ancestors of mine, as I explore in the Interlude) that such a relationship is also damaging to the spiritual health of the exploiters. From Theravada Buddhist dharma, which I understand both as a substrate of my Thai interlocutors’ habitus and a valid socio-psychological theory in its own right, I take up the principle of karma, which minimally means that the intentional actions we undertake have consequences for ourselves, though we cannot always know in advance what form these will take.

The text proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 does a lot of introductory heavy lifting, some of it theoretical, most of it historical. It traces the history of the Arabah before Israeli settlement and the history of the movement which would settle it, up to the encounter between the two; it then follows the establishment of the first *moshavim* and their growth as latter-day upholders of the purity of self-labor. Along the way I clarify what I mean when I say that a movement which considered itself socialist was in fact working against a capitalist ground, a ground laid bare by the political and economic crisis of the 1980s, and explore the affective orientation I call

“exploitation anxiety.” Chapter 2 examines the arrival of Thais in the Arabah, using previously unstudied materials to argue that the Thai army’s interest in “frontier settlement” played an important part in the beginning of the flow. It then describes the fragile paternalist public culture which grew up in the Arabah in the 1990s with their active participation, and analyzes the reasons for the fading away of this culture in the 2000s.

Following a short Interlude describing my methodology and clarifying my positionality with regard to this field, Chapter 3 looks close up at the Sadot family farm, its beads strung together through the narrative of a working day. Its interest is in how work – both the productive work of growing vegetables and the reproductive work of migrants taking care of themselves – produces the kinds of difference which can then be taken up by Israelis to justify their structuring of their relations with these migrants. I look at how, despite the eradication of paternalism from public culture, workers maintain a paternalistic relationship with their employer while also retaining a significant amount of collective autonomy. This autonomy, coupled with the limited linguistic code in use on the farm and with divergences in sartorial style and body hexis from Israeli norms, all serve to throw Thais back upon one another, intensifying their isolation from surroundings.

Chapter 4 speaks of the ways in which this isolation is fashioned into political neutrality vis-à-vis the polarized ethnoscape of “Arab versus Jew” and worked into invisibility at the scale of the *moshav* and above. It begins by describing the migration regime migrants in Israel have to contend with, a regime constructed with a view to providing cheap labor while at all costs maintaining the country’s “demographic balance.” I then return to the *moshav* to look at informal segregation in space and in time; the swimming pool, which is off limits to Thais, and their refuge in the form of the “Thai shop” allow me to explore how the threat they might pose in the domains of sex and consumption are blocked off. After briefly discussing the exclusion of

migrants from the larger spaces of the region and the nation-state, I discuss how Thais' own acquiescence in their marginalization, out of care for the "social body" of the *moshav* and their employers, is both recognized and misrepresented by dominant Israeli understandings of their culture.

In Chapter 5 I return to the reproduction of labor-power from a transnational perspective, looking at how migrants' wives and other relatives at home contribute to it not only through the production of new generations of workers but also by helping to keep their migrant husbands on a virtuous path of steady work and steady remittance, a goal they share with employers. Through the stories of a transnational couple which broke up and of another one which stayed together, I discuss how the rule of karmic reciprocity, recognized by migrants and their kin and even, implicitly, by employers, contributes to the production of profits and the reproduction of labor settlement. Finally, in the Conclusion, I reflect on the ethical dimensions of exploitation anxiety, karma and reproduction and on what anthropology has to contribute to an imagination of their rupture.

This investigation begins and ends with an ethnographic situation rather than a succinct research question; hence its somewhat sprawling nature, its chasing of wheels that click within wheels, of cyclones feeding into cyclones, a chasing which ends where I had no time or inclination to go further. But along the way it provides something that might be more important than textual coherence: thumbnail sketches of relationships between human beings who, as ever, were not given the option of choosing the circumstances under which they entered into interaction. It was perhaps my greatest privilege, as an ethnographer, to be allowed to witness these relationships, which are often laden with dull alloys of exploitation, alienation and misunderstanding, but in which it is sometimes possible to discern, with work like unto the colour of a beryl, delicate filigrees of respect, solidarity, even love.

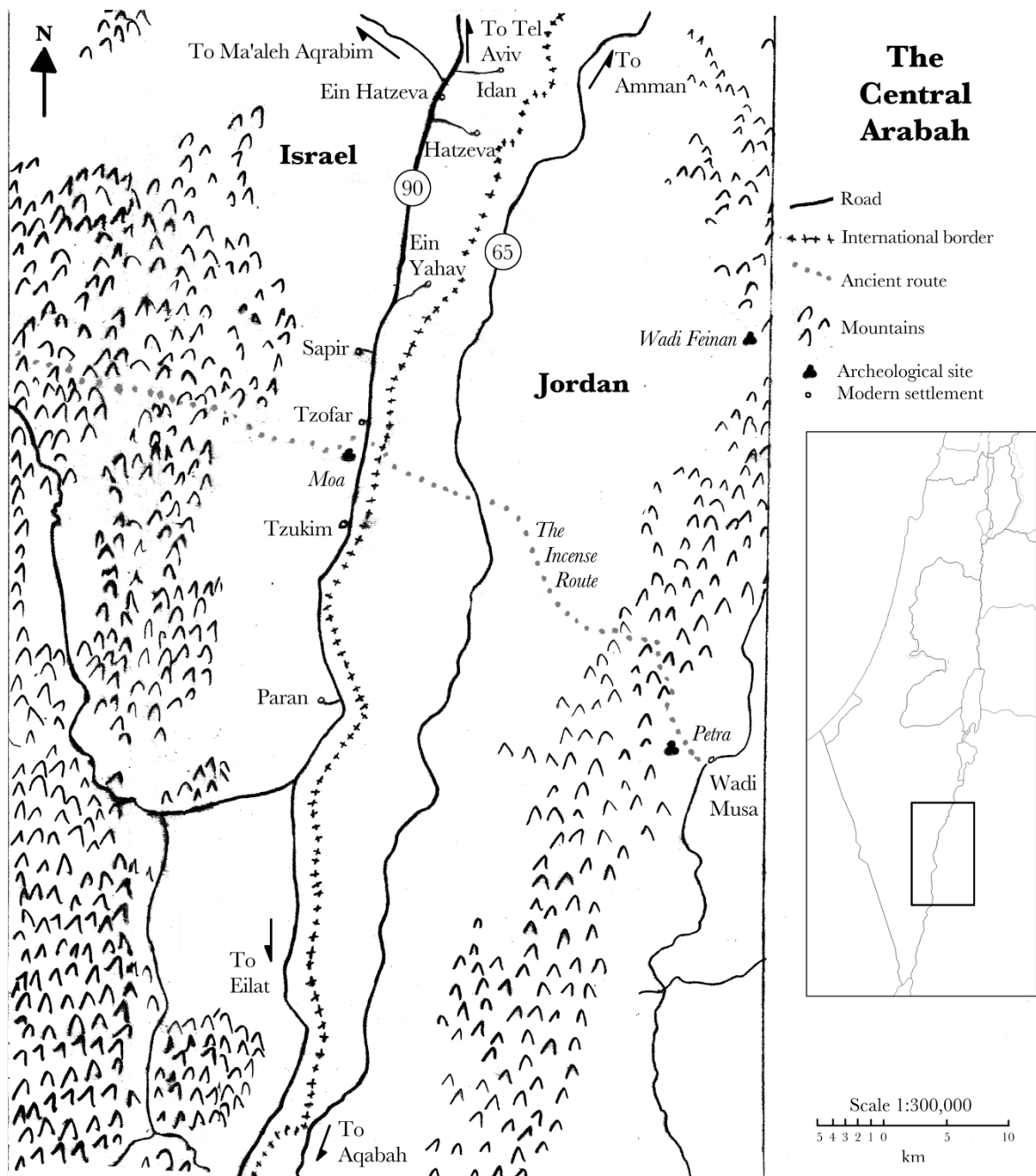


Figure 1: The central Arabah. Map by the author.

Chapter I

Building a Niche for Self-labor

They say you need to get your passport stamped at the Arabah Junction, after you descend the serpentines of Sdom. They say it facetiously, in the Israeli style of aggrandizement; after all it is only a two-and-a-half-hour drive from the country's urban heartland to the junction, and another two hours to the Red Sea port of Eilat, at the other end of the narrow rift valley. But the descent from the mountainous scrub of the Negev into this nether region, more than two hundred meters below sea level, does feel something like entering another country, especially if the sun is setting behind you and the mountains opposite are burning ruby-red as the lights come on at the gas station far below. Close by are two *moshavim* or cooperative settlements, Ein Tamar and Ne'ot Hakikar; both belong to the Tamar Regional Council. Turning right onto the Arabah Road towards Eilat, it is another thirty kilometers to Hatzeva and Idan, the most northerly *moshavim* of Israel's vastest regional council, the Central Arabah. It is another fifty kilometers to Paran, the southernmost *moshav* in the council. South of Paran lies the Eilat Regional Council; geographically similar, it is socially distinct, being organized in *kibbutzim*, or collective settlements, and dominated economically by the nearby city of Eilat.

In the wilderness prepare the way

The Arabah is part of the Jordan Rift Valley or Dead Sea Transform (DST), a tectonic gap between the Arabian Plate, which includes Jordan, and the African Plate, which includes

Israel and the West Bank. The western side of the rift, Israel's Negev massif (Naqab in Arabic), is creeping north of its neighbor, the Jordanian plateau. Thus, the ancient copper mines at Timna in Israel and the ones at Wadi Feinan, over one hundred kilometers north in Jordan, both exploited what 25 million years ago were the same seams. The plates are also pulling slowly apart, creating the world's lowest dry-land elevation on the gaping shores of the Dead Sea. But unlike the northern part of the Transform, which receives precipitation from the Mediterranean, the Arabah is hyper-arid. Storms arrive only a few times a winter; slightly more often, rain falls in the Negev and the dry creek beds which flow into the Arabah overflow with foamy brown water. At such times the Wadi¹ Arabah itself becomes an evanescent river, dragging dead branches ripped from the acacia trees that dot its banks as well as more dangerous flotsam: land mines from the period when the border was hot.

The name "Arabah" (see the Note on Non-English Terms for my choice of this transliteration) is an ancient Semitic one meaning "desert" or "wilderness". In a region where heat and lack of precipitation are the limiting climactic factors, it was used to refer to places too hot and arid for agricultural exploitation, and may be cognate with the word "Arab" – originally used to refer to residents of such areas (HALOT 2017). In the Hebrew Bible, it is a toponym generally understood to refer to the entire DST, or at least to the part of it beginning south of the Sea of Galilee (HALOT 2017). But the part of this zone in which fresh water is regularly obtainable from rain, springs, and the Jordan River is quite different from the southern part,

¹ In Arabic the word *wadi* has a more expansive sense, but in English (and in Hebrew) wadis have come to be "distinguished from river valleys or gullies in that surface water is intermittent or ephemeral [and that] wadis are generally dry year round, except after a rain" ("Wadi" 2018). In keeping with this usage, I distinguish between the valley of the Arabah – which lies between the ranges of the Negev and the Jordanian plateau – and the Wadi Arabah, a much narrower, ephemeral watercourse which only drains the northern half of the valley. The border between Israel and Jordan runs down the middle of this watercourse (Cerbero 2012).

which begins where the Jordan empties into the Red Sea. In the northern, fertile part of the valley, known in Arabic as the *ghor*, the combination of year-round heat and easily available water has enabled winter agriculture and engendered a pattern of seasonal but stable settlement (Shryock 1993, 53–56). The semi-sedentary Bedouin of the *ghor* and the inhabitants of its central town, Beisan, were driven out of what would become Israel in 1948 (Morris 2004, 180, 226–28, 316, 349), and those living in the part which had become part of the West Bank have been under the unrelenting pressure of Israeli settlement since the occupation of 1967. Under a semi-official plan authored by general and statesman Yigal Allon, the newly occupied Lower Jordan Valley was marked as strategically crucial for preventing territorial continuity between the dense Arab populations of the West Bank and the Jordanian massif and dotted with settlements (Y. Cohen 1972).

The most salient ecological difference between the Arabah and the *ghor* is in water availability. While both areas are extremely hot,² the former lacks the easily accessible water of the latter, and until state-sponsored irrigation facilities tapped the aquifer (see below), the most reliable watering places were a string of springs where floodwaters from the Negev would enter the rift, at (from south to north) Ein a-Dafiyeh (A)/Avrona (H), Ein Ghadyan/Yotvata, el-Amar, Ein Weiba/Ein Yahav, and Ein Husub/Ein Hatzeva (Zivan 2012, 130).

Due to these climactic conditions, until very recently the Arabah only sporadically served as a zone of permanent residence. Critical scholarship warns us not to make too much of this

² Temperature averages collected between 1995 and 2009 by the Israel Meteorological Service (2013) are as follows, from north to south: Tzemach, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee: 18.4 degrees Celsius in January, 37.7 degrees in July; Gilgal, in the West Bank *ghor*: 20.1 and 40.4 respectively; Sdom, just south of the Dead Sea in Israel: 20.9, 40.7; Hatzeva, at the north end of the Central Arabah: 19.6, 40.2; Paran, at a higher elevation at its southern end: 18.8, 39.2. Compare Tel Aviv: 17.6, 29.9, or Jerusalem: 12.8, 30.3.

fact: the assumption that only year-round residence and cultivation amount to a real connection to land has served as ideological cover for negating the rights of indigenous people to their territories, in Israel/Palestine and elsewhere (Weizman 2015). With this in mind, it is nevertheless clear that – with the exception of the Nabatean period (Hirschfeld 2006) – up to the establishment of Israeli settlements, farming in the Arabah was mostly seasonal and tailored to the needs of people passing through or to those who had come to the area for other reasons. The earliest of these may have been the people who mined copper in the rich veins of Wadi Feinan, probably the world's first systematic copper mine. The first regional power to evince an interest in the area was the Egyptian empire, which ran copper mines in Timna, near the southern tip of the Arabah, hundreds of years later (Hauptmann 2006; Adams 2006).

Much later again, in the Roman era, several important trade routes passed through the Arabah, including the all-important Incense Route. This caravan route was controlled by the Hellenized Semitic kingdom of the Nabateans, whose capital was at Petra, just off the Arabah and near where the Route crossed the valley at Moa, near today's *moshav* Tzofar (Jasmin 2006). After the rise, in the second century CE, of the Roman-sponsored sea route to Yemen which passed through the Gulf of Suez, bypassing Petra, the importance of the Incense Road declined (Hirschfeld 2006; Dolinka 2006). Comfortable winter temperatures made the area attractive for grazing camels, sheep and goats, and following the decline of the Nabateans, the Romans and the early Islamic rulers of Aylah (today Aqabah) (Whitcomb 2006), de facto control passed to the Bedouin herders whose rule over the arid edges of the Levant was only episodically contested by city-based rulers before the 20th century (van der Steen 2006; Bailey 2006).

Until 1949, when the western and eastern sides of the Arabah were severed by a hard border for the first time, human transit was generally across the valley. The beginnings of a shift

in polarity can be traced to the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869: by instantly making the shipment of goods by sea from Asia to Europe much easier and cheaper, the Canal fueled imperial interest in the development of alternatives, as well as in how these might be blocked (Mitchell 2011; Zivan 2012, 27). After taking over the area from the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the British Empire established a series of police stations along an ancient Roman route, descending from Kurnub in the Eastern Negev through the winding path of 'Aqareb (A)/Ma'aleh Aqrabim (H), reaching the Arabah at Ein Husub (today's Hatzeva) then cutting south to Umm Rashrash at the head of the Gulf of Aqabah. The British denied Zionist settlers access to the area, but invested little in either economic development or military fortification.

The border between Palestine and Transjordan had not been carefully demarcated south of the Dead Sea so long as the British Empire ruled both territories. But following the independence of Transjordan, the UN partition plan of 1947 assigned the great bulk of the Negev to a future Jewish state, including the entire Arabah west of the wadi. In March 1949, in Operation Uvda, Israeli forces conquered the southern Negev without resistance, expelling the Bedouin population (Zivan 2012, 142; Morris 2004, 527). Zionist interest in the area, focusing on Umm Rashrash as an important node linking sea and land in a route which might bypass the Suez Canal, had predated the war (Zivan 2012, 27). The efficacy of this land route is limited by the steepness of all passes leading out of the Arabah, but Zionist leaders correctly foresaw that it could become important in forging links between the new state and trade partners in South and East Asia. Ample funding and attention were thus devoted after independence to developing a Red Sea port at Umm Rashrash: the city of Eilat was founded in 1952, and its port opened in 1955. The road from Eilat to Beersheba through the Arabah and the switchbacks of Sdom was completed in 1967, making traffic between the region and Israel's

center a great deal more convenient and economical than if it had had to continue following the ancient route through 'Ma'aleh Aqrabim.³

The development of Eilat devolved strategic importance onto the frontier which now traversed the entire region from south to north. For most of its length, the newly completed Arabah Road passed near the unfenced Jordanian border; fearing "infiltration" and attack by Bedouin and Palestinians who had been deported over that border, the IDF placed the entire region under military administration, with army bases established immediately upon occupation at Ein Hatzeva, Beer Menuha, Yotvata and Paran and military permission required for movement through the area (Zivan 2012, 7, 24, 157).

The capitalist ground

The context in which the Israeli establishment now began to debate the merits of settling the Arabah was a capitalist one. To say this is not to make the simplistic case that the state was working to further the economic interest of a class of owners: indeed, up until the late 1970s, the Israeli bourgeoisie was weak and subservient to the state rather than the other way around (Nitzan and Bichler 2002; Krampf 2018), and at no point before the mid-1980s can the actions of the Israeli state be easily interpreted as directed primarily towards making the rich richer. Nevertheless, since its inception the mainstream of the Zionist movement had been fully invested in the notion – itself a historically novel one (see Polanyi 2001; Mitchell 2011) – that its projects could and should be evaluated in terms of a discrete, quantitative "economic

³ While significantly more convenient than 'Aqareb/Ma'ale Aqrabim, the Sdom descent remains a bottleneck for passenger and freight traffic. Ambitious plans have been made for a rail link between Beersheba and Eilat through Hatzeva, to be funded by Chinese investment (Barkat and Gorodiski 2018). The settlers of the Arabah have lobbied intensively for the project, as they have also done for an even more ambitious "Canal of the Seas" aiming to link the Red and Dead Seas (see Barkat and Gorodiski 2018; Koren 2018). These projects and other development plans in the Arabah are strongly opposed by Israel's environmental lobby (Shani 2017).

dimension.” While the settlement project leaned heavily on the philanthropic support of wealthy benefactors, the self-sufficiency to which it aspired was always formulated in terms of the production and profitable sale of commodities (Shafir 1989) – capitalist terms.

The hegemonic wing of the Zionist movement accepted these terms wholeheartedly. The terms “socialist Zionism” and “the labor movement,” by which this wing is often known, can thus be misleading. I prefer to follow Michael Shalev in translating a synonymous and widely used term, *tnu'at ha-hityashvut ha-ovedet*, as the “labor settlement movement” or LSM (Shalev 1992). This term has the advantage of highlighting the movement’s important commitments to labor as an ideological value and to rural settlement, without falsely imputing that it was hostile to capitalism as such.

Such hostility was not lacking at the outset, but it was snuffed in the labor settlement movement’s climb to hegemony. The LSM was a creature of the second wave of Zionist settlement in Palestine, which followed the establishment of plantations owned and managed by Jewish farmers but worked by Palestinians in the late 19th century. Unlike this first *aliyah* (Hebrew for Jewish immigration, literally “ascent,”) the Second Aliyah of the early twentieth century included a large number of destitute Jews of working age, many of whom had imbibed socialist as well as Zionist ideas in Eastern Europe. Upon arrival, they found themselves competing for agricultural jobs with skilled Palestinians, who often farmed some land for their own subsistence while struggling to pay onerous cash taxes, and were thus willing to work for lower wages. Organized in political parties and a trade-union federation, the *Histadrut*, these immigrants embarked on a “battle for labor,” demanding that Jewish farmers employ them rather than Palestinians, at higher wages (A. Shapira 1977; Shafir 1989).

The battle ended in the late 1920s with a class compromise which cemented the character of the LSM and the larger Zionist movement. The leadership of the World Zionist

Organization came to realize that large-scale Jewish immigration could not be sustained by private employment alone. In addition to funding public works projects, the WZO also undertook to buy land from absentee Arab landowners and turn it over to groups of immigrants supplied with the most advanced agrarian technology available (Penslar 1991). Two organizational models were made available to these groups. The first was the *kibbutz*, or collective settlement, in which all means of production, including land, were shared, and reproductive work such as child-raising socialized. The alternative was the *moshav*, or cooperative settlement, in which land was allotted to nuclear families for independent production, but machinery and marketing arrangements were shared. Settlers could choose whether to join or set up a *kibbutz* or *moshav* based on their political convictions, on the judgment of movement experts with regard to the requirements of location, or on personal predilections. While enjoying a variety of subsidies and protective economic measures, *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* were always committed to producing commodities for the market and measured their own economic success according to market criteria of earnings and losses.

The Zionist movement did not bring capitalism to Palestine unaided. The move towards capitalist relations – that is, away from subsistence economy towards the enclosure of land, the privatization of natural resources, profit-oriented commodity production and the deployment of wage-labor (Wolf 2010) – had begun under Ottoman rule, giving rise to an indigenous bourgeoisie. It was impelled forward by the development policies of the British Mandatory government, which the Israeli state was to continue in various ways (Gozansky 1986; Seikaly 2016), even as that state professed socialism through tones which grew gradually milder before disappearing entirely when the right-wing Likud took power in 1977.

Despite their subsequent roller-coaster history, for the settlements of the LSM as for the society around them capitalist relations have been a constant, a material and ideological

ground, their plans always took its persistence as given, and – with the possible exception of the employment of wage-labor, to which we shall return in a moment – it never set itself goals which contradicted this ground. The reproduction of capitalist social relations has its own requirements, foremost among them the imperative to accumulate surplus value by cutting costs and maximizing production. The reproduction of social formations, from the settler family through the single *moshav* to the LSM as a whole, may at times synergize with these demands of the capitalist ground, and at other times conflict with them; indeed, synergy and conflict may subsist side by side. In the next section I shall explore how, in the LSM's triumphant phase, the accumulation of capital and the exploitation of labor-power synergized with the movement's material interests while undermining the ideological conditions of its reproduction.

The roots of exploitation anxiety

The rural settlements established by the LSM in the 1920s and '30s were not only a means of putting Jewish immigrants to work. Expecting that the country might eventually be partitioned into Jewish and Arab states, the Zionist leadership saw itself as engaged in a race against time and the nascent Palestinian national movement, each aiming to claim as much arable territory as possible before the die was cast. In keeping with Ottoman agrarian law (still in force under the British Mandate) a doctrine evolved which tied the effective legal and military control of land to its cultivation (Kimmerling 1983; Weizman 2007). The proportion of the Jewish population of Palestine/Israel living in *moshavim* and *kibbutzim* would always be a small minority, and the center of political gravity remained closely moored to the urban center of Jewish population in Tel Aviv. Nevertheless, the parties of the labor settlement movement – including the rising hegemon, Ben-Gurion's Land of Israel Workers' Party (MAPAI), as well as the smaller Union of Labor (*Ahdut Ha'avoda*) and Unified Workers' Party (MAPAM) –

quickly went about constructing an ideology which regarded “pioneering” in rural settlements as the epitome of Zionist practice. The practice of what Gershon Shafir calls “pure settlement” was codified in the twin ideological pillars of *avoda atzmit* and *avoda ivrit*, “self[-supporting] labor” and “Hebrew labor,” respectively. Given the settlements’ purely Jewish composition, the second of these was strictly redundant, but the redundancy can be read as a redoubling of the obligation: settlers were enjoined not to hire wage labor, and *especially* not Palestinian labor.

Precisely because it was not an obviously self-interested choice for urban youth, “pioneering” could be construed by the parties of the LSM and their powerful youth movements as a regulative ideal, something to aspire to in defiance of one’s individual interest rather than a calculated, egotistical move. Sociologist Jonathan Shapira (1984) offers a Bourdieusian analysis of the “voluntarism” or “idealism” of the labor settlement movement in this vein, suggesting that what the pioneers gave up in economic opportunity they made up in symbolic capital, which could later be cashed in through various subsidies provided by the Zionist institutions and the state, or through placement in the proliferating state and para-state apparatuses. By defining itself on the basis of this renunciation, the labor settlement elite could differentiate itself both from bourgeois city-dwellers – who had the opportunity to renounce consumption and did not do so – and from the increasingly Mizrahi (see n. 4) working class, which was excluded from the opportunity to make that sacrifice.

Against such critical analyses, Boaz Neumann offers an “existential” account of the pioneers’ desire for the land. Despite his contention that this desire is “a primal, irreducible condition, a state of being that precedes need or purpose” (Neumann 2011, 3), it can be demonstrated from his own materials, culled from the private and public writings of early pioneers, that this desire was a deliberately inculcated ideology. As Kimmerling, Shafir and Jonathan Shapira all demonstrate, this ideology served concrete political purposes: to facilitate

the takeover of land and to justify the hegemonic role of the LSM. Instead of an ontology denying the force of this ideology, Neumann's account can be read as a phenomenology of its strongly embodied workings, which clearly included an erotic dimension (which he recognizes) as well as an aggressive one (which he does not).

The pioneering ideology played an important role in connecting the economic side of the project ("labor") to its strategic-territorial aspect ("settlement"). For the pioneers, as Neumann shows, agricultural labor played an essential role in *dissolving* the boundaries between recent immigrants and the land they had come to inherit (Neumann 2011, 50-54) as well as in *articulating* the boundaries between the land that would be theirs for perpetuity and that which would remain in the hands of the shadowy Arab enemy (Neumann 2011, 74-99). A famous aphorism attributed to settlement martyr Yosef Trumpeldor distills this process: "in the place where the Jewish plow plows its last furrow, there shall our border pass." The recently renewed but intense link between the people of Israel and its land was conceived of as taking root through the pioneers' offering up of their own bodily fluids. The shedding of their blood to "slak[e] the thirst" (Neumann 2011, 105) of the land was the most dramatic of these exchanges, but far more important, in many pioneers' eyes, was the prestation of sweat and tears (Neumann 2011, 56-57, 108-11). It was in this light that the pioneers read the biblical injunctions that "by the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread" and that "they that sow in tears shall reap in joy" – not as the wages of original sin or as an inescapable truth of life but as a stipulation of exchange: agricultural labor and its bodily indexes in return for livelihood and a permanent stake in the land.

If for the pioneers such direct intercourse was crucial to forming a direct bond with the land, it follows that the employment of Palestinians in agricultural work would be not only counter-productive but downright dangerous. Such arrangements were common in the

plantation-villages of the First Aliyah (the *moshavot*), which the pioneers viewed with horror: “The landscape was abandoned, derelict ... open to incursions by strangers who uprooted saplings and trees and stole property” (Neumann 2011, 94). While the Arab peasants’ love for the land they lived on was strongly disavowed, the possibility that they, too, might sanctify their bond with the soil through the carelessness and greed of Jewish planters had to be carefully avoided: “Only where the soil is manured with the sweat of the [Jewish] peasant will the land become nationalized. And only where the cooperative association owns the land which it cultivates is there a guarantee that it is not Arab sweat that manures and wins the land” (Oppenheimer 1914, 18; cited in Neumann 2011, 100–101).

In the disgusted reaction of the pioneers to “Arab labor” we can begin to trace the contours of an affective orientation born of their peculiar labor theory of (national) value, one I propose to call “exploitation anxiety.” For anti-capitalists, exploitation is wrong primarily due to its immiseration and degradation of the exploited, whatever their nationality; but for the labor settlement movement, exploitation (of non-Jews) was wrong primarily due to its effects on the (Jewish) exploiters, as it would deny them the opportunity to form an immediate and intimate link with the land, thrusting them back into the exilic condition of *luftmenschen* (“air people” in Yiddish), who made their living from “non-productive” pursuits. Overcoming this condition through labor was a strenuous, even superhuman pursuit (Neumann 2011, 123–25) and so long as “strangers” were available for exploitation, the possibility of a backslide into relying on the labor of others would continue to loom. A severe anxiety surrounded this possibility, expressed in a desire for “purity” that was at once strategic and ethical.

Under the British Mandate, opportunities for exploitation were severely limited by the high price of land and the antagonism of Palestinian neighbors. But with independence in

1948, the conditions under which the LSM labored changed drastically. On one hand, the vast majority of Palestinians were expelled, their fertile lands confiscated, nationalized and leased to Jewish cultivators (Khalidi 2006); on the other hand, a huge, cheap labor force was assembled, comprising both the remaining Palestinians, now subjected to military administration and condescendingly labelled “the Arabs of Israel” (*arviyei Yisrael*), as well as growing masses of Jewish immigrants from the Middle East who would come to comprise the Mizrahi⁴ community (Swirski and Bernstein 1993). The LSM was thus presented with unprecedented opportunities for economic success on the terms of the capitalist ground. The late 1950’s and early 1960’s were a period of rapid expansion: agricultural and industrial production were stepped up, with government support, to meet the demands of a growing population, and living standards rose as profits flowed into the coffers of the settlements (Elmaliach 2018, 71–89; Ben Zvi 2018, 102). Yet as Tal Elmaliach (2018) has shown for the National Kibbutz Federation, the most ideologically orthodox component of the LSM, “economic success” triggered ideological crisis: the shift to manufacturing, the rise in living standards, and the new reliance on wage-labor – especially Palestinian labor – all ran directly

⁴ Until World War II, the Zionist movement was heavily concentrated in Eastern Europe, where the bulk of world Jewry lived, and the vast majority of Jewish immigrants to Palestine came from Eastern Europe; the Jewish communities of the former Ottoman Empire and elsewhere in Asia and Africa were smaller and marginal to the movement. Only after the great reserve of potential settlers was annihilated in the Holocaust did the Zionist movement step up its recruitment efforts in the Middle East, and in the decade following Israel’s establishment – due also to the rise of Arab nationalism (Behar 2007) – the vast majority of Middle Eastern Jews immigrated to Israel. Here they were subjected to policies of compulsory proletarianization and settlement in peripheral areas (Tzfadia and Yacobi 2011), though not in the extreme periphery of the Arabah. The liturgical distinction between Ashkenazim (“Germans”) and Sefaradim (“Spaniards”) has, in Israel, become an ethnic distinction between those of European and Middle Eastern origin; the term “Sefaradim,” however, does not cover Yemenite and other Middle Eastern Jews, and political activists seeking to unite this group in defense of its culture and interests prefer the term Mizrahim, literally “Easterners” (Chetrit 2010), which I use here.

counter to the ideological tenets upon which the LSM had staked its claim to supremacy within the Zionist movement (Ben Zvi 2018, 121–23). The economic reproduction of the movement was now in conflict with its ideological reproduction – and not for the last time.

Responses to this ideological crisis and to the heightened exploitation anxiety which it incurred were varied.⁵ Some members of the LSM came to terms with the gap between ideals and reality, taking up a comfortable hypocrisy; others, especially the young, abandoned its settlements, taking up New Left politics or individualistic upward mobility in the cities (Elmaliach 2018, 194). Among those who continued to work in agriculture, a defensive attitude prevailed; many felt they had to defend themselves from the charge of being *freierim*, or “suckers” (Kressel 2010). But one group reasoned differently: if in the agricultural heartlands it had become too difficult to resist the temptation to exploit, the movement’s original principles could be put into practice in a new *terra nullius* where the manure of Arab sweat had not polluted the land.

The settlement of the Arabah

In working out what to do with the Arabah after independence, the new Israeli state faced a field of forces including the needs and desires of the Jewish population, now rapidly growing; security considerations, as understood by the army; and geopolitical pressures, felt strongly in this strategic zone. In addition to these demands, Prime Minister David Ben-

⁵ My analysis here relies heavily on Elmaliach’s book-length account, which offers an integrated analysis of the political-economic, ideological and party-political dimensions of the crisis in the National Kibbutz Federation. His analysis cannot be simply carried over into the *moshav* sector, which, unlike the *kibbutzim*, integrated a large population of Mizrahi immigrants organized in ethnically homogenous settlements established in the state’s first two decades (Sharon 2017) and largely avoided the internal upheaval experienced by the *kibbutzim* (Ben Zvi 2018). The basic contradiction between economic and ideological reproduction which Elmaliach highlights, however, remains relevant to understanding the background for the settlement of the Arabah by youth of the Moshavim Movement.

Gurion and his allies also felt an urgent need to furnish fresh ideological content to the hegemony of the ruling MAPAI over other parties within and without the LSM, as well as to ensure the ascendance of the state over all parties, including MAPAI itself (Kedar 2002).

Attempts to set up agricultural settlements in the Arabah took place sporadically throughout the 1950s. These failed experiments (Zivan 2012, 130–52) made it clear that precipitation in the region was not enough to sustain commercial agriculture; it was, however, known since the IDF's Corps of Engineers undertook a survey in 1949 that a vast but non-replenishing aquifer of ancient waters lay underneath the Wadi Arabah (Shacham 2012, 218). To draw up this alkaline water and make it usable for irrigation would require massive investment in drilling, pumping and treatment, and government experts in charge of settlement infrastructure were skeptical about the possibility of ever recouping the necessary investment (Amnon Navon 2012, 183–84). The resistance of the experts was broken by an alliance between a group of youth from the labor settlement movement and David Ben-Gurion, who had quit the premiership in 1953 but returned to it in 1955. Since 1948, Ben-Gurion had been concerned about two problems, for which he envisioned interconnected solutions. First was what he saw as the waning of the pioneer spirit among the younger generation in general and within the labor settlement elite in particular. Second was the need for settling the Negev in order to fortify and perpetuate Israel's control over its newly acquired expanses.

The dissolution of the LSM's armed forces, the PALMAH and Haganah, and their integration into the national military power, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), was the first manifestation of Ben-Gurion's strategy of *mamlakhtiut*, or statism (Kedar 2002). In time, the state and its organs were also to take over many of the functions hitherto performed by the LSM's parties, its youth movements, and its trade-union federation, the Histadrut. Rather than throw themselves into the challenges of state-building, in Ben-Gurion's eyes both the

movement and the government bureaucracy (which drew its cadres from the movement's ranks) were dragging their feet and obstructing the necessary work. Worse, these cynical actors were exerting a pernicious influence on the youth, steering them away from the idealistic path of the pioneer and towards the comforts of life in the prosperous settlements of the center and north.

A large part of this necessary work was the settlement of the Negev, including the Arabah. The Negev comprises more than half of Israel's landmass, but before the war it housed less than 5% of its population.⁶ After the war, the Bedouin remaining in the Negev were concentrated within a pale known in Hebrew as the *Seyag* or "enclosure" (Nasasra 2017). The southern half of the country, south of Beersheba, remained sparsely populated. As we have seen, most government, LSM and military actors did not see necessarily this as a problem: while agreeing on the area's strategic importance, the army felt it could defend it without relying on civilian settlements, and officials were against diverting precious funds to such risky projects.

Ben-Gurion thought otherwise. In line with LSM orthodoxy, he continued to see the frontier as a crucible for the creation of "new Jews" and foresaw moral as well as strategic danger in leaving the expanses of the Negev devoid of permanent Jewish presence. He saw the settlement of the desert as a way of pushing back against the degeneration of the pioneer spirit and the intransigence of the labor settlement leadership. As Prime Minister, he devised several

⁶ The last census carried out by the British Mandatory government in Palestine, in 1931, listed 51,082 residents in the Beersheba subdistrict, which covered the entire Negev less Gaza and its hinterland, out of 1,035,821 residents in all of Palestine. Of these, only 3,101 were "settled," mostly in Beersheba – all the rest being "nomadic" Bedouin. Only 17 Jews and 153 Christians were listed, also almost all in Beersheba (E. Mills 1932, 7–12). In late 1946, eleven Jewish settlements were rapidly established in the Northern Negev in order to pressure the UN to include the area in the planned Jewish state (Porat 1991).

schemes for the creation of new bodies – either entirely under the direction of the state, or state-LSM hybrids – which were to undertake the tasks of settling the Negev (Zivan 2012, 52–83). But for the duration of his first stint as Prime Minister, from 1948 to 1953, Ben-Gurion was spectacularly unsuccessful in getting any of these projects off the ground. Some, like the fishermen’s village in Eilat or the spiny rush farms at Ein Ghadyan, came to naught because they proved economically untenable; others, like the first attempt at settling Ein Yahav, fell into social collapse and even internal violence (Zivan 2012, 134–36, 151). Only at the southern end of the Arabah, in Eilat’s hinterland, did it prove possible to create stable agricultural settlements; these were to become the *kibbutzim* of the Eilat Regional Council.

After being pushed out of the premiership in 1953, Ben-Gurion “retired” to Sdeh Boker, a new settlement in the central Negev which refused to affiliate with any of LSM’s constituent organs. His little house in the desert quickly became a hub of political intrigue, attracting a number of figures hostile to the new government of Moshe Sharett. By 1955, Ben-Gurion had returned to the premiership and the Defense Ministry, and when a group of youth intensely committed to initiating agricultural settlement in the Arabah received no support for its project from subordinates, it was an obvious move to turn to him.

The Arabah’s first permanent Jewish settlement, Ein Yahav, was organized as an outpost (*he’ahzut*) of the NAHAL, or “Pioneer Fighting Youth.” The most successful of Ben-Gurion’s state-pioneering projects, perhaps because it also served the interests of the LSM (see Bar-Yosef 2013, 135–36), the NAHAL was a unit of the Israel Defense Forces composed of conscripts from the movement, who spent a large portion of their service in the establishment and running of paramilitary agricultural settlements, or “outposts,” in frontier zones, with a view to their eventual “civilianization.” Though quite controversial at times, and openly attacked by figures as eminent as IDF Chief of Staff, later Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan

(Bar-Yosef 2013, 138–39), throughout the 1950s and beyond the NAHAL held an attraction for the idealistic and pioneering-minded youth of the LSM.

The idea of establishing a NAHAL outpost in the Arabah was hatched by two young men of urban origin who had spent their teenage years together in Kfar Yehoshua, one of the oldest and wealthiest *moshavim* in Israel's north, Shai Ben-Eliyahu and Hagi Porat (Dromi 2010). The two toured the country in search of a worthy spot to settle, and eventually honed in on the failed experimental station and military base in Ein Yahav – “spring of hope” in Hebrew, a euphemistic rendering of the original Arabic *ein weibah*, or “spring of disaster” (Ben-Eliyahu 2012). Near the confluence of Wadi Raman (A)/Nahal Neqarot (H) and Wadi Arabah, the site had relatively good access to water but was difficult to get to: 125 kilometers from both Eilat and Jerusalem as the crow flies, this was one of the remotest spots in the country, distant not only from the metropolitan centers of Jewish population but also from the concentrations of Palestinian population in Israel's north and in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, whose labor markets were soon to be opened to Israeli employers with their occupation in 1967.

For Ben-Eliyahu and Porat's vision to become reality, much bureaucratic and financial support was needed, and as we have seen, the military and civilian bureaucracy could not see any strategic need for settling the Arabah.⁷ Using personal connections, the two managed to reach Ben-Gurion and to ensure his active support for the creation of their NAHAL outpost, overcoming the objections of these officials (Ben-Eliyahu 2012). In 1960, final permissions were

⁷ This estimation appears to have been borne out by subsequent events. Apart from a brief period during the War of Attrition in the late 1960s, when Palestinian guerrillas based in Jordan carried out a few attacks on the area, the Central Arabah has been spared the violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While I was carrying out my fieldwork, in late 2015 and early 2016, the rest of the country was racked by a spate of individual Palestinian attacks on Israelis, known in the Israeli media as the “*intifada* of knives.” There were no attacks in the Arabah and only distant echoes of the panic which had seized the center of the country could be heard.

received, and the first group formally settled at Ein Yahav. Within two years, the outpost was “civilianized” and temporarily became a *moshbutz*, a hybrid settlement form which served as a compromise between the settlers, most of whom hailed from veteran and wealthy *moshavim* like Kfar Yehoshua, Kfar Vitkin and Kfar Sirkin and desired to remain affiliated with that branch of the LSM, and the institutional actors who saw the *kibbutz* as the most appropriate format for settlement in such hostile conditions (Avi Navon 2012). The settlers had their way: Ein Yahav became a *moshav* and was accepted into the national Moshavim Movement. Following a national pattern in which settlements of the same type were grouped together regionally and institutionally in order to maintain political homogeneity (Applebaum 2014, 618), the settlements established following Ein Yahav were also organized as *moshavim*: Hatzeva in 1965, Paran in 1971, Tsofar in 1976, and Idan in 1980 (Eisenman 1994).⁸

The soldiers and newly demobilized civilians of the LSM⁹ who were to set up these *moshavim* were not, as far as I know, consciously motivated by a desire to escape from the temptations of a readily exploitable labor force. Rather, they were attracted by the romance of the frontier. They were enthralled by proximity to the raw, awe-inspiring natural environment, which contrasted sharply with the rain-fed valleys to the north whose features had been

⁸ One of these is the pseudonymous “Ein Amal” where my dissertation fieldwork took place (this fictional name means “spring of labor”). These *moshavim* are not the only settlements in the Central Arabah. Sapir (est. 1979) and Tzukim (est. 1983) are residential “community settlements”; Ein Hatzeva (est. 1960) is an idiosyncratic *moshav* of five families only; Ir Ovot (est. 1967), now abandoned, was a community of Christian or “Messianic” Jews. Finally, two Bedouin families with a long history of collaboration with the Israeli authorities live near Hatzeva. Without official permission for residence there, they are under constant threat of displacement (Regulsky n.d.).

⁹ Hatzeva was settled by “children of *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* from around the country, as well as graduates of agricultural schools” of the LSM (Eisenman 1994, 38); Paran by “youth of the Moshavim Movement and graduates of agricultural schools” (Eisenman 1994, 53); and Tsofar by NAHAL groups and “children of Moshavim and [graduates] of agricultural schools” (Eisenman 1994, 67). The youngest of the region’s *moshavim*, Idan, has a slightly different profile: it was founded by Jewish immigrants from the United States, some of whom had Israeli spouses (Eisenman 1994, 80–83).

softened by millennia of inhabitation and cultivation. They were inspired by the difficult living conditions and the Spartan spirit required to overcome them, excited to raise children who would work beside them in the fields and eventually take over as natural-born peasants. Unlike many of their peers, however, they were committed to the realization of the ideology on which they had been raised, and this did mean – first and foremost – refraining from employing Arabs. This is how one of the first settlers of Ein Amal put it to me:

For many years we didn't let Arabs in here. Today it sounds a little racist, but in those years there were grounds for it, ideological grounds because, in fact, we had conquered them. [...] We had expelled them from their lands, and here we are employing them as [...] our workers on their own lands. There's something immoral about it. [...] Many places in the country, *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*, were on Arab lands. And for many years the position was held that it's immoral to employ the people you have conquered and expelled from their lands, to employ them as workers. [...] The motto was: whoever works the land will in the end be its owner. That was the ideology. Not on racist grounds but rather on moral ones.

Whether or not the young settlers realized it consciously, striking out far from concentrations of Palestinian laborers hungry for work would make resisting the temptation to “let them in here” much easier. While the Bedouin of the Negev were somewhat closer, the state's policy of concentration also kept most of them well out of reach (Strom 2004, 52). The settlers of the Arabah expected and got massive support in terms of the capital necessary to cultivate in the desert, but they did not expect, and did not get, much support in the mobilization of labor (with the partial and important exception of foreign volunteer labor, to be discussed below). Only an exodus into the desert, it seemed, could keep the “pure settlement” pure. Yet as their own success turned the wilderness into a prosperous garden, the temptation of hired “foreign” labor would crop up again, and with it, again, the old anxiety.

Despite the authorities' initial reticence, once they had become a "fact on the ground" the settlements of the Arabah received enormous amounts of material support from the Israeli state and a panoply of para-state organizations – the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish National Fund, and the Jewish Agency – who are free to finance exclusively Jewish settlements, circumventing the legal strictures which prevent the state from openly discriminating between its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens. A quantitative estimate of the magnitude of this support over the years is beyond my reach here,¹⁰ but it is possible to give a qualitative assessment of these investments and the immense changes in the environment that they made possible.

The most crucial of state interventions has been in irrigation infrastructure. As mentioned, the Arabah receives little rain and not much more in the way of runoff. The springs and artesian wells used in the region before Israeli settlement could not provide anything like the amounts of water needed for commercial agriculture; for this it was necessary to locate deep, ancient, and non-renewing aquifers, drill deep into them and bring their contents to the surface. As water is sucked out of each of these aquifers, it becomes saline and silty, necessitating expensive repairs and eventually the drilling of new boreholes (Oren et al. 2004). Irrigation water, making its way through the highly alkaline ground into the aquifers, pollutes them with alkaloids and fertilizer, and as the reserves degrade, lower-quality water must be extracted and subjected to expensive, energy-intensive treatment in order to be fit for agriculture, not to mention drinking (Oren et al. 2004). Since the settlement of the Arabah, all investment in irrigation infrastructure has been underwritten by state and para-state actors;

¹⁰ Strom (2004, 45) gives a figure of 923 million NIS (2000 value, about 227 million US dollars), for the Central Arabah for the period from the mid-1970s to 2000. This includes grants for *moshav* infrastructure, including irrigation, and subsidized loans for means of production, but not investment in national infrastructure such as the Arabah Road.

today, the region is covered by a grid of wells, pipes and reservoirs capable, for now, of providing for its needs through periods of peak and slack demand (Shacham 2012). Given the extreme salinity and compactness of the local soil (reg, also known as “desert pavement”), this investment had to be complemented by the importation of sandy soil appropriate for growing vegetables.

Without water it would be impossible to produce vegetables, but without roads it would be impossible to deliver them to markets. Until 1967, when Route 90 was completed, the only way out of the Arabah and to the center of the country passed through ‘Ma’aleh Aqrabim, the old Roman route which remains unpaved. Using the new road, trucks can quickly bring the produce of the Arabah to the country’s population centers as well as to the ports of Ashdod, from which they are exported to Europe and even America. The road – fully financed by the state – does not only serve the *moshavim*: it is the fastest route to Eilat and has played an important part in the city’s development as a port and tourist destination. Nevertheless, without it commercial agriculture in the area would be unimaginable.

Finally, there is the state support provided specifically and concretely for agricultural activity. Until the 1980s, the labor settlement movement in its entirety enjoyed cheap, state-sponsored credit for farming and industrial activities as well as production quotas and other subsidies. The neoliberal “stabilization” program of 1985 and subsequent developments removed many of these direct and indirect subsidies, plunging the Arabah and the sector into financial crisis in the latter half of the decade (OECD 2010, 80–83; T. Navon 2010). Today subsidy is provided to the produce sector chiefly for research and mechanization, which it is hoped will reduce the need for migrant labor; the provision of illegally cheap Thai labor through the migration regime (see Chapter 3) can also be seen as a kind of subsidy, which undercuts the goals of the first. That said, the subsidization of capital investments – including

the development of new strains and techniques such as drip irrigation and the building of physical infrastructure such as greenhouses, which were important in the transformation of farming in the Arabah – has been of critical importance in allowing the region to prosper both in a protected national market and, later, in an unfettered global one.

A niche for self-labor

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the contours of an economic and ecological model which would enable the settlers of the Arabah to make an adequate living without violating the principles of self-labor and Hebrew labor were becoming apparent. Once augmented with water, suitable soils and the appropriate infrastructure, the Arabah manifested a competitive advantage: high temperatures enabled the growing of summer vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers in the wintertime. Out of season, in the protected national market, these vegetables at first drew prodigious prices: working hard in the cool months, local farmers made enough money to rest and recuperate during the hot, long summers when cultivation was impossible. Later to be emulated by farmers working in other hot areas like the western Negev, the settlers of the Arabah played a major part in forming the culinary expectations of Israeli consumers, who are no longer satisfied with cabbage and carrots in the winter but expect access to the fresh ingredients of the ubiquitous “Arab salad” year round.

The strongly seasonal nature of farm work and the commitment to self-labor¹¹ (bolstered, as we have seen, by the lack of available labor nearby) meant that at peak times a

¹¹ Despite the collective commitment to self-labor, outside labor, including Arab labor, was occasionally used in the Arabah. Both Bedouin from the Negev and Palestinians from the Occupied Territories worked in the *moshavim* during this period, but only sporadically and under strong moral sanction from the community. While this opprobrium was not enough to prevent their entry altogether, it was – together with the geographical hurdles discussed above – sufficiently harsh to make outright reliance on their labor impossible for local farmers.

considerable investment of labor was required of all members of the community. Women worked in the fields beside men, gaining respect and influence which they were later to lose (Shnider 2014). Children, too, spent time in the fields with their parents, lending a hand as soon as they were able. During this period, a superficial observer might have confused this hard-working family with A.V. Chayanov's typical peasants, who, in James Scott's paraphrase, "work unimaginably hard and long for the smallest increments in production" (Scott 1976, 13). But a closer look at the family cycle – a central method for Chayanov (1966, 53–69) – would yield the insight that these were not stable multi-generational households but nuclear families at a particular stage of their formation, each led by two young adults at the peak of physical capacity and supported by a well-endowed welfare state, including a robust public education system, and by voluntary arrangements of mutual aid. It was never quite clear what would happen when the patriarchs got old and their adult children grew more numerous than the space available for cultivation.

The figure of the foreign volunteer played an important role in the moral and political economy of the Arabah's *moshavim*. Drawn by Israel's global glory in the wake of the 1967 Six-Day War, young people from around the Western world developed an intense interest in the labor settlement movement's experiments in egalitarianism. As we have seen, in the two decades following the 1948 war the reality of the labor settlement movement tended to diverge even more from this ideal than it had before independence. Nevertheless, the image was upheld for a long time, and until the well-publicized atrocities of the First Lebanon War in 1982-3, tens of thousands of Western youth, both Jewish and Gentile, volunteered their labor in order to learn firsthand about life and work on the *kibbutz* and *moshav* (see Segev 2017).

Such was the commitment to self-labor in the Arabah that even the labor of volunteers was strictly regulated. Though at times their supply was copious, in the most orthodox of the

moshavim, Ein Yahav, only one was allowed per family until the early 1980s, when a second volunteer was allowed. Though discipline was not strict, the economic contribution of the volunteers was important; they did not receive a wage in return for this contribution, but the host family provided room and board and a small allowance. The arrangement – which was to cast a shadow on the later employment of Thai migrants – was a strongly paternalistic one. Volunteers ate at the family table and were lodged in the home. Usually single teenagers or twenty-somethings living with somewhat older couples and their young children, arriving with a willingness to learn, they could comfortably be slotted into the role of impressionable youths in need of direction. Regardless of the volunteers' own experience, which was not uniformly positive (see Addis 1991), local farmers could convince themselves that they were doing the volunteers and the national project a favor by taking them on.

The Arabah was thus able to prosper economically while respecting ideological strictures which had already been consigned to nostalgic memory in the rest of the country. Fittingly, the first signs that the honeymoon was over came with a political upheaval, the “turnaround” (*mahapakhi*) of 1977, when the hegemony of the LSM in Israeli politics was broken by the rise of the right-wing Likud. Menahem Begin's first administration cut taxes without trimming public expenditures or imposing monetary discipline, leading to inflation and eventually financial crisis; neo-liberalism emerged onto the Israeli political scene as a response to this crisis. The Emergency Stabilization Plan of 1985 was enacted not by the Likud on its own, but by a “national unity” government in which MAPAI, renamed the Labor Party and led by Finance Minister Shimon Peres, embraced the free market – in keeping with the shifting interests of its middle-class constituents (Nitzan and Bichler 2002; File and Ram 2004). As Labor became the party of the urban, Ashkenazi middle class and big business, the settlement frontier shifted into the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, where a new generation of

settlers called by a different name (*mitnahalim* rather than *mityashvin*), holding to a religious-messianic ideology and largely uninterested in substantiating their claim to the land through agriculture, became the vanguard of the Zionist settlement thrust (Zertal and Eldar 2005).

The Israeli public, by electing the Likud, had voted out labor settlement as an end in itself; the military, too, no longer found it strategically important (Weizman 2007, 77-85). The Emergency Stabilization Plan spelled further trouble for the whole of the labor settlement movement, but most vulnerable were the elements who had heretofore been able to uphold orthodox ideology with generous public support. The economic niche which the *moshavim* of the Central Arabah had been able to carve out for themselves was now quickly eroded. Barriers to international trade were lowered, bringing competition and lower prices; open-ended and expensive state investments in irrigation and other infrastructure were called into question. At the same time, the atrocities of the war in Lebanon were driving world opinion away from Israel and pushing away volunteers. Perhaps most important was the withdrawal of publicly backed agricultural credit. Given its seasonal character and its dependence on climactic vagaries, agriculture is unavoidably a risky investment (Mazoyer and Roudart 2006), and private financial institutions are usually wary of providing loans to small producers. Left to make their own deals with the banks, farmers were faced with a swift deterioration in the terms on which they could get credit (Rosolio 1999).

In the Central Arabah, the economic retreat of the mid-to-late 1980s took on the character of a social crisis. Regional and local cooperative arrangements for the use of equipment and especially for marketing had depended heavily on government-guaranteed credit, and as this credit dwindled the arrangements broke down, forcing neighbors into competition with one another. In 1988 the antagonism between the defenders of collective financial arrangements and those who wanted them abolished deteriorated into hostilities in

the region's oldest *moshav*, Ein Yahav, ironically dubbed "the *intifada*" after the Palestinian uprising which had broken out the previous year.¹² For a time it seemed that the Arabah's rural settlements were destined to become glorified rest stops on the road to Eilat.

If the region's farms were to survive in a global market, the comparative advantages of climate, capital investment, and high technical competence were not going to be enough. To this day no amount of research and development – in Israel or elsewhere – has made it possible for machines to efficiently replace the human hand in the delicate tasks of planting, pruning and picking. Vegetable cultivation remains one of the most labor-intensive of all economic sectors (Khan, Martin, and Hardiman 2004) – and hence, any vegetable farm exposed to the global market has one *sine qua non*: cheap labor.

Since 1948 such labor had been made amply available to the swiftly growing Israeli economy: first in the shape of the Palestinian and Mizrahi citizens of the state, and since 1967 in the form of the non-citizen Palestinians of the Occupied Territories. But the former were no longer cheap, and the latter had just risen up furiously, struggling for national freedom through workplace actions which ranged from rallies and strikes to the murder of employers (Farsakh 2005). As farmers dependent on Palestinian labor scrambled to survive, the settlers of the Arabah must have felt confirmed in their insistence on remaining independent of Arab labor. At the same time, they felt the need for cheap labor as acutely as anyone else. But where would it come from?

¹² "Interview with Yuval Krok about 'the situation,'" *Be'eineinu* 99, 20 January 1989, p. 16.

Chapter 2

Exporting Frontier Settlement, Importing Migrant Labor

General Pichit Kullavanijaya was an odd candidate for the title of the savior of Israeli agriculture, and to this day his pivotal if unintentional role has gone unacknowledged. A graduate of West Point and veteran of the successful counterinsurgency campaign against the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), in 1985 Pichit was Commander of the First Army, a strong contender for Chief of Staff and then Prime Minister in Thailand's perennially military-controlled government. But just as the campaign against the CPT was winding down, Thailand became embroiled in the civil war raging in neighboring Cambodia. Together with the United States and China, Thailand supported the Khmer Rouge regime against the Soviet-backed Vietnamese and their Cambodian allies; following the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia in 1978, the Khmer Rouge and its allies were forced back onto the Thai frontier. Refugees inundated the border zone and mingled with guerrilla forces, who struck against the Vietnamese in Cambodia and were chased back onto Thai territory. By the mid-1980s, the frontier, one of the poorest areas in the country and a former hotspot for the Communist insurgency (Puangthong 2004), was threatening to spiral out of control.

The counterinsurgency campaign had been led to success by a military agency specially created for the purpose and granted sweeping powers, the Internal Special Operations Command (ISOC). Prudently ignoring the advice of its trigger-happy American advisors, ISOC had combined repressive measures with amnesty for surrendered guerrillas, cautious

agrarian reform, and generous development aid to the depressed areas in which the Communists had made the greatest advances (Saiyud 1986; Marks 1994). The Thai military, which has since the 1930s alternated between outright dictatorship and tenuous toleration for democratic government – always under the ultimate authority of the King and with his implicit support – had seen its involvement in civilian affairs as necessary for the country’s security, and it considered this policy vindicated by the success of the counter-insurgency.

As an up-and-coming, foreign-educated officer dealing with a new type of problem, it made sense for Pichit to look abroad in his search for military-led but economically and politically informed models for stabilizing territorial control, and it is not surprising that he alighted upon the Israeli experience with paramilitary agricultural settlement. In the 1950s and ‘60s, Israel had actively exported the NAHAL model to Third World countries (Africa Research Group 1969). Eitan Bar-Yosef has shown, with respect to the African experience, that the “NAHAL as export commodity,” widely considered a failure due to the vast differences between Israeli and African contexts, actually presented Israelis with an image of their own settlement project which they recognized with discomfort:

The Israelis claimed that the Africans refused to stay in the countryside and prefer to move to the city, but the same could be said of Israel. The melting pot did not function correctly in the African NAHAL, but in Israel too the NAHAL had become an elitist framework which highlighted the mutual alienation between [Jewish] ethnic groups. African rulers made cynical political use of youth projects, but the Israeli NAHAL too had been established to reproduce a limited group with a well-defined ideological outlook. [...] (Bar-Yosef 2013, 129)

This history may help to explain the reticence of the Israeli diplomats in the Bangkok embassy when General Pichit requested Israeli training and on-the-ground assistance for the creation of mixed military-civilian settlements near the Cambodian border. “Wherever we’ve

gotten into NAHAL [projects] we've had trouble," remarked one participant in a Foreign Office discussion on the subject.¹ Moreover, the diplomats had no desire to get Israel involved in the Cambodian conflict on the side of the genocidal Khmer Rouge. And yet they could not afford to alienate Pichit. His friendly attitude was a consequence of the long-standing military cooperation between the two states, each a key US ally in its region, but Thailand was also keen to maintain friendly relations with its majority-Muslim partners in the ASEAN bloc, Malaysia and Indonesia, and to refrain from provoking its own Muslim minority. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of Thai migrants were living and working in the Gulf states and remitting hard currency. As a member of the UN Security Council and in other international fora, Thailand often supported Palestinian and other Arab causes against Israel, prompting rage and frustration in the Israeli embassy. The deputy foreign minister of Thailand, aware of this frustration, wistfully suggested to the Israeli ambassador in 1985 that Israel might consider "employing Thai workers in development projects." Doing so, he suggested prophetically, "would make some flexibility in this area possible."²

Under such circumstances the embassy could not afford to disappoint and alienate a man who might soon be in a position to improve relations, not only on the low-profile military and commercial levels, which were already good and improving, but in the arena of high diplomacy where Israel needed allies. The issue was broached with the IDF, which was happy to take on

¹ "Meeting of Asia-Pacific Department with Avraham Cohen, former Israeli ambassador in Thailand," Minutes, 3 May 1985, File 8761/1-37, "Thailand: Political relations with Israel at Government Level, 1.4.85-30.9.85," p. 294, Israel State Archive Online. See also full file on "Thailand - Frontier Settlement Project, 4.86-3.88," File 9690/11-37, Ibid.

² "Conversation with Deputy Foreign Minister," Diplomatic cable from Ambassador Ya'akov Cohen to Foreign Office, 7 March 1985, File 8760/18-37, "Thailand: Political relations with Israel at Government Level, 18.12.84-31.3.85," p. 95, Israel State Archive Online.

the project, but the diplomats retained their doubts. Finally it was decided to say yes to the first stage of the program as suggested by Pichit – a crash course in “frontier settlement” for civilian and military Thai officials, to take place entirely in Israel, fully funded by the Thais – but also to clarify that at no point would Israeli advisers be active in the actual planning and construction of settlements on the ground in Thailand. The diplomats were willing to take a risk, gambling that budgets would run out and that, without on-the-ground Israeli assistance, the “Thai NAHAL” would never materialize; thus, the Israelis would be able to cultivate Pichit’s goodwill without risk of embroilment in the Cambodian conflict.³

The first part of the “Frontier Settlement Program” went off without a hitch; on May 24, 1987, a delegation of 25 military and civilian officials arrived in Israel to undertake the course, prepared by the Foreign Relations Department of the IDF. Over two weeks, they were taken to visit *moshavim* and *kibbutzim* in Israel proper as well as settlements in the occupied West Bank, Gaza Strip and Golan Heights. Israeli military and civilian experts gave lectures on the economic and strategic aspects of paramilitary settlement.⁴ After the return of the delegation, the files of the Bangkok embassy fall silent on the project, apparently confirming the success of the diplomats’ gamble that the project would founder. They had been successful – according to their own lights – in blocking an unruly movement of settlement practice from Israel abroad, but unawares, they had set in motion a transformation of the practice in Israel itself. To mature, this transformation required a number of further inputs. One of these was the impetus of

³“Meeting of Asia-Pacific Department with Avraham Cohen, former Israeli ambassador in Thailand.”

⁴“Settlement Group and Material on the Philippines,” Military Cable from Irit Atzmon, Foreign Relations Division, to Col. Ehud Gross, Military Attaché in Bangkok, 28 March 1987, File 9690/11-27, “Thailand – Frontier Settlement Project,” p. 13, Israel State Archive Online.

private, profit-seeking entrepreneurship. Another was a shift in state policy to allow mass labor recruitment from abroad. Broadly speaking, neither of these had anything to do with the Thai regime and its interest in the NAHAL, but both proceeded, for their first several years, under cover of familiar discourses of “volunteerism,” “training” and “development aid” which would not have been plausible without the military link and the ideological baggage with which it conventionally came.

The next mission from Thailand was composed of employees of the state-owned Agricultural Bank, who spent twelve months in the country beginning in November of 1987, divided between two *kibbutzim* and two *moshavim* (one of the later in the occupied Lower Jordan Valley). Vered Tours, a tour agency owned by businessman Uzi Vered, who had spent several years making business connections in Thailand, handled the logistics of the trip. In a telegram to Vered, economic attaché Ariel Kerem noted the “traditional connections between” the Agricultural Bank and the Israeli Foreign Office’s Center for International Cooperation, as well as “planned future cooperation” between the bank and the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture.⁵ According to a report on “Thais in the Arabah” composed by the Hevron family of Hatzeva, Uzi Vered was “charged with hosting the clerks, escorting them and attending to their every need.”⁶

⁵ “Training on a kibbutz for employees of the Agricultural Bank,” Telex from Ariel Kerem, Economic Attaché, to Vered Tours, 21 October 1987, File /9690-374, “Thailand – Political relations with Israel at non-governmental level,” p. 229, Israel State Archive Online.

⁶ Hevron Family, “Thais in the Arabah,” n.d., p. 2. This manuscript includes quite a bit of information on the first groups of Thais to arrive in Israel. Much of it corroborated by other sources and can thus be viewed as reasonably reliable.

Neither the archival record nor anyone I have spoken to have drawn any connection between the Frontier Settlement delegation and the Agricultural Bank group, though the Hevron family's report does.⁷ The two groups were different in a number of obvious ways, but some sort of connection is not implausible, given what Kerem called the "traditional connections" between the Agricultural Bank and Israel's Center for International Cooperation. It is probably no coincidence that in December 1987, Gen. Pichit visited Israel with three other officers, met with the IDF's Chief of Staff and other officials including the Defense Minister's Assistant for Settlement Affairs, and visited a NAHAL outpost, among other sites.⁸

According to the Hevron report, the next group – and the first one to work in the Arabah, in Moshav Paran – was composed of "49 Thais, including 10 villagers."⁹ I have not been able to find other traces of this group, but around this time groups of "trainees" or "volunteers" began arriving from Thailand at a rapid pace, as reported in a two-page report in the daily *Yediot Aharonot* on 7 June 1989. According to this report, at the time the "volunteers" numbered "400 people, mostly graduates of agricultural faculties ... here to gain practical training in agriculture." Uzi Vered, who receives ample credit for organizing the groups and is quoted extensively, "is anxious to clarify [that] this is an educational project of the first degree [...] there

⁷ The manuscript explains that since "Thailand has always had problems with guarding its borders, especially from smugglers and immigrants from the neighboring countries – Cambodia, Laos and Burma," its "rulers" have taken an interest in "the form of settlement in *moshavim*, *kibbutzim* and NAHAL outposts along the borders of Israel." The Agricultural Bank group's trip is described as being "for the purpose of training in *moshav* forms of organization," as composed of "9 clerks," and as spending a spell in a NAHAL outpost. "Thais in the Arabah," p. 2.

⁸ "Visit of Gen. Pichit, Deputy Commander of the Army of Thailand (21.12-24.12)," Letter from Ruth Cahanov to Deputy Chief of Asia-Pacific Branch, Foreign Office, 24 December 1987, File 9689/15-37, "Thailand – Political relations with Israel at government level," pp. 214-216, Israel State Archive Online.

⁹ "Thais in the Arabah," *ibid.*

is no intention to import a cheap labor force.” The report devotes special attention to a “very interesting” subgroup

of 39 demobilized officers and soldiers of the Thai army ... currently undergoing training in *moshavim* and *kibbutzim* in the north, close to the Lebanese front. When they complete their training, the members of the group will return to the frontier between Thailand and Laos, where they will establish agricultural villages, something like the Israeli NAHAL, in an attempt to fortify the border and prevent infiltration from Laos. The group is headed by a cousin of King Bhumipol Rama IX. This is Chi Diskarol Damlondr (28), an armor officer in the Thai army (Regev 1989).

This group may be the same as the third delegation mentioned in the Hevron family’s report, composed “of 50 demobilized soldiers [...] teachers and coordinators of frontier areas,” and supposedly “led by the deputy commander of the Thai Army” – perhaps a reference to Pichit’s visit to Israel around the same time.¹⁰ Arieh, a farmer from the Arabah who was involved in the importation of Thai laborers as a local official, also recollected in an interview that the first Thais who came to work in the area were soldiers directly linked to settlement efforts on the Cambodian border and to Pichit. Moreover, according to Arieh, Arabah farmers were involved in these efforts to a far greater extent than the Foreign Office presumably wished:

Arieh: They were working over there, trying to do something like our NAHAL here [...] each one [of the group] would get a house and a bit of land, and some training, and they were settled on the border with Cambodia. And I was there several times, to see what’s up and to help and advise them. [...] we saw that they had serious intentions, in the same style as us, [planning] to settle the border and populate [it.]

¹⁰ “Thais in the Arabah,” p. 2.

Matan: And the first people to come to [your *moshav*] were involved in this project on the Cambodian border?

Arieh: Some of them. [...] They were soldiers. They came as NCO's, or officers, or something of that sort. First of all, they didn't wear uniforms, and they were nice, nice people. [They were] a very dominant group, they used to do roll calls and drills. [...]

Matan: But the Israeli army wasn't involved in this business at all?

Arieh: No, not at all. Except for – we had General Pichit. [...] He was the one who gave his blessing. He would always ask me to give his regards to [then deputy chief of the IDF, later Prime Minister] Ehud Barak. He had taken some course in the United States with Ehud Barak. I imagine Ehud Barak wouldn't be too impressed. But General Pichit was there, we sat down with him.

Matan: And the people who worked for you went and settled in these villages afterward?

Arieh: Some did, some didn't.

Despite the preponderance of circumstantial evidence, the precise organizational link between the Frontier Settlement Program group and this delegation remains unclear.¹¹ On the other hand, the rhetorical link between Israeli settlement discourse and the vocabulary of employing migrants in farm work is unmistakable. Israeli hosts, Thai “trainees” or “volunteers” and the media colluded in framing the arrangement as an altruistic, patriotic endeavor intended to transfer settlement knowhow from Israel to Thailand, though Israeli diplomats were anxious about the possible outcomes of this knowledge transfer. At the same time, just beneath

¹¹ Erik Cohen (1999, 159–60) writes, without providing further references, that “the first Thais who came to agricultural settlements in Israel beginning in 1986 came as trainees and were categorized as volunteers [...] Among them were employees of the Thai Agricultural Bank and military men tasked with establishing new settlements along Thailand's frontiers with neighboring countries.”

the surface, another sort of transaction was being pioneered, a for-profit operation in which cheap and disciplined Thai labor would replace unruly Palestinians. One served as cover for the other, if not demonstrably as its immediate cause.

At a moment in which the ideological and economic conditions for the reproduction of labor settlement were once again in collision – across the country, but especially in the Arabah, where a high premium on ideological fidelity remained in force – this discursive shift presaged a political-economic upheaval. Thanks to the transfusion of labor-power it was about to receive, the labor settlement movement would be able to remain at once ideologically coherent and economically viable. Thanks to its own commitment to the capitalist world order and territorial control, the Thai military provided the LSM with a bridge from one stage to the other.

The Thai “trainees” and “volunteers” of the late 1980s and early ‘90s all entered the country on special visas tailored to such visitors. But the training they received was minimal, whereas their “allowance” in reality comprised a wage of about 250 US dollars a month – embarrassingly low by Israeli standards, but competitive for the impoverished Northeast region of Thailand, or Isaan, from which the majority hailed (E. Cohen 1999, 160, 165). By 1992, thousands of Thai workers had come to Israel for periods ranging from three months to over a year, under the auspices of the Moshavim Movement in partnership with Vered Tours. In the same year, the Labor Party returned to power under Yitzhak Rabin; his Minister of Labor, Ora Namir, a party stalwart faithful to the old ideals, had previously spearheaded a move to greater regulation through the re-classification of the “volunteers” as “foreign workers” (E. Cohen 1999, 160; Ash-Kurlander 2014b, 9). But in its move to end the *intifada* by signing the Oslo Accords with the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Rabin government was also planning to wean the economy off Palestinian labor (Farsakh 2002). The unprecedented “great lockout” (*ha-seger ha-gadol*) of the Occupied Territories, first implemented during the Gulf

War, was to be made permanent. Palestinians workers were to be replaced by guest workers from abroad in an orderly fashion, with each sector hosting migrant from a different source country. By this time, initially skeptical Israeli farmers had been convinced of the utility of Thai workers, and the choice of source country for agricultural labor was a foregone conclusion (E. Cohen 1999). In its last bastion in the Arabah, “self-labor” would soon be washed away like dead wood in a flash flood.

“They had just come down from the trees”: The paternalist nineties

The mass importation of Thai workers into Israel’s agricultural sector was part of a larger move by the new Labor government, whose strategy involved breaking the *intifada* by denying Palestinian workers access to work in Israel while embarking on a peace process envisioned to culminate with “something less than a [Palestinian] state” (Rabin 1995) and regional accords which would open the entire region to Israeli capital (Nitzan and Bichler 2002) . Migrant workers were to supply the labor requirements of two veteran sectors of the Israeli economy, construction and agriculture, as well as that of an entirely new sector, home elder-care (Kemp and Rajiman 2008). The construction sector never settled upon an exclusive country of origin for its workers, recruiting successive and overlapping cohorts of workers from Eastern Europe, Turkey, China and elsewhere. The eldercare sector, by contrast, was quickly dominated by mostly female workers hailing from the Philippines (Liebelt 2011); the feminine form of the ethnonym, *filipinit*, quickly became synonymous with such work, just as the masculine *tailandi* was to become shorthand for “farm worker.” Besides these regimented labor forces, the boom of the 1990s also attracted undocumented workers, mostly from Christian-majority countries in West Africa and South America, who entered the country on tourist visas and took on a variety of low-wage urban jobs, much of which had also previously been done by Palestinians (Willen 2007b; Paz 2009; Kalir 2010; Shapiro 2013).

By the time migrants began to arrive *en masse*, the Central Arabah was the only region of Israel which counted on agriculture as its main source of income, and no region was as totally transformed by the influx of new workers. From 1989 to 1999 the Israeli population of the Central Arabah fell from around 6,000 to 2,100, bouncing back to 3,200 in 2016.¹² In 2013, the first year for which I have been able to find accurate statistics, the *moshavim* of the Central Arabah employed 3,132 migrant workers – about half of the region’s population.¹³ Assuming the region followed the national trend (for which see Rajiman and Kushnirovich 2012, 13), we can estimate that the Thai population of the Central Arabah began to rival its Israeli population sometime in the late 1990s.

The influx of cheap labor power from Isaan radically transformed the agrarian economy of the region. From 1988 to 1999, the total area under cultivation rose 32%, from 15,711 to 20,767 dunams (5,131 acres) (Strom 2004, 25). Open-field cultivation was replaced with more intensive greenhouse production – the latter leaping from 3.7% to 40.7% of the total area under cultivation from 1988 to 1999 (my calculation from Strom 2004, 27), and water use almost doubled from 15,300 cubic meters in 1991 to about 27,000 in 2000 (Strom 2004, 13). The trend towards a replacement of the wide range of vegetables that had been produced for the local market with export-oriented monoculture, which was to prove disastrous in the next decade (Streckman

¹² The decline is probably due to the children of the first generation of settlers leaving the region when they came of age and were called up for army service; many of these did not return.

¹³ CBS (1990, 61, 2000a, 2000b, 2.41). This number is based on the “List of allocations for the purpose of granting permits for the employment of foreign workers in the agricultural sector” published yearly by the Interior Ministry (IIM 2012). The number of allocated permits cannot be taken as identical to the actual number of workers, given that a small number of workers are employed without a permit (see Chapter 3) and that not all permits are used. However, given that the above two quantities are small and might cancel each other out, and given the high resolution of the data (which is broken down by employer and locality), it can be considered a good proxy.

2014), was already apparent: over the same period, the share of peppers in the total cultivated area shot up almost five-fold, from 6.1% to 26.2% (my calculation from Strom 2004, 25).

Song, whom I met in her Isaan home in 2017, spent most of this period working for the Sadot family in Ein Amal. She came to work in the Arabah in 1991, aged 36, and stayed about ten years. Her husband had died of an illness, leaving her with two children, when she heard about the possibility of going to work in Israel from two men she met in the streets of Udon Thani, the nearby city. After a health check-up, a 50% down payment of 25,000 baht on the middleman's fee – which her mother financed by selling a piece of land – and a wait of 45 days, she was on her way. She arrived in Ein Amal on a cold winter day and set to work growing cucumbers and peppers. At the first farm Song worked on, she was the only Thai employee and recalls sharing lodgings with an Israeli woman and a European man (presumably both volunteers). Before her first year in Ein Amal had ended, Song asked to be transferred to the nearby Sadot farm, where two Thais were already working. Yehudit Sadot was running the farm, concentrating on flowers; atypically, her husband Roni worked off the farm, as a repairman, and her son Ya'ir was in the military. Song remembers having a comfortable, air-conditioned room to herself, and working what she considered easy hours: eight hours a day, six days a week with optional overtime on Saturdays. She recalls earning five to seven thousand baht a month and sending most of it home to her mother, who used the money to support herself (“to buy betel nut”) and Song's three children, and to do some repairs on their modest village house.

On the Sadot farm, the trend towards intensified production and competition played out as a generational shift in the mid- '90s, when Yehudit retired and her son Ya'ir took over the farm. Ya'ir shifted from flowers to vegetables and introduced other changes. According to Song, he

wanted me to work fast because he wanted more work done. He wanted to be rich like his friends. And he also argued with his mother many times. [...] They argued about the product. Normally, we would pick only good quality product and send it out to market, when I was working for Yehudit. But Ya'ir, he didn't care about the quality, he just wanted to send all the product to market.

By this time Song, as the veteran among the farm's seven Thai workers, had assumed the role of *balabay* or headwoman (see Chapter 2). In her recollection, Ya'ir recognized his dependence on her, calling her "big boss" and giving in when she insisted on upholding standards of quality.

The first migrants in the Arabah slipped into the slot previously developed for volunteers: like Song, they worked alongside volunteers, lived in lodgings that had been built for volunteers, and were at first distributed between farms at approximately the same rates – one or two per employer. Indeed, long after Thais had been declared ineligible for volunteer visas, *moshav* residents continued to use the Hebrew term for "volunteers," *mitnadvim*, to refer to their employees. Their conflation was also behavioral: farmers recalling this period told me that they at first attempted to treat their new workers as they had treated volunteers, inviting them to eat at their tables and to share social activities. Soon, however, the bosses realized that the migrants' culinary tastes and interactional norms were too different for this to work, and they dropped these expectations. Their workers, too, were more comfortable among compatriots, as Song's request to move to a farm with other Thai employees indicates. Finally, whereas volunteers had come to the *moshav* to soak up its ambience, the new workers came to make a living; unlike the volunteers, who were infamous for their rowdiness, the Thais tended to be hard-working, frugal and modest in their consumption and leisure habits.

Due to the lax enforcement of migration policy in the first decade, many workers ended up spending long years in the Arabah – often, like Song, a decade or more. About 10% of the migrants were women (Raijman and Kushnirovich 2012, 16), who often migrated with their husbands. Single female workers like Song found mates, sometimes on an explicitly temporary basis – “for emotional support, not for getting married,” in her words. In her opinion, farmers preferred employing couples because a partner’s presence would prevent men from “behaving badly” and lower the likelihood of conflict. During this period recruitment was officially in the hands of manpower agencies in Thailand and Israel, who worked in partnership. In practice, however, employers could request the recruitment of particular people through what was known as the “fax system” (Ash-Kurlander 2014b). By cultivating influence with employers, workers could obtain jobs for relatives and neighbors, building up their status in the home community and sometimes charging commissions or even becoming middlemen themselves (Kushnirovich and Raijman 2017, 18).

As a result, Arabah farming families like the Sadots developed long-standing relationships with extended families in Isaan, like Song’s. Every two or three years, Song would go home for a visit, which gave her a chance to renew local contacts. After a short stay, she would change her official name, acquire a new passport and return to Israel, thus circumventing the regulations meant to discourage migrants’ permanent settlement. Over the years she was able to secure employment for her daughter and son-in-law, as well as another young relative – an alcoholic she regrets vouching for – and, as she recalls, two or three more people from her village. Around 2001 she returned home at the behest of her daughter Nuu, who said she was getting too old to work so hard. Soon after, Nuu became pregnant and came home to give birth. After two months of recuperation she left her baby with Song and went

back to Israel; after another year, the couple came home and Nuu gave birth again.¹⁴ The family managed to save between one and two hundred thousand baht during their stay in Israel, but most of the money was spent on medical fees when Song was diagnosed with cancer, which still ails her.

Thus did Isaan kinship patterns become central to the continued flow of labor-power to Israeli farms, and thus did migration to Israel become essential to the reproduction of families in Isaan. As Eugene Genovese remarks in his influential and controversial history of slavery in the US, *Roll Jordan Roll*, the involvement of members of the ruling class in the reproductive relations of their subordinates, together with physically adjacent living, encourages the development of paternalistic relations (Genovese 1974, 5). Though the term is often invoked in anthropology, a working definition of paternalism is surprisingly difficult to find.¹⁵ For my purposes, paternalism is an ideology which justifies and structures hierarchical relationships on the basis of asymmetrical but mutual obligations that are modeled to some extent on kin relations – commonly but not necessarily the relations between parent and child. In stark contrast to the “disembedded” relations supposedly typical of capitalist employment (Polanyi 2001), paternalistic relations are heavily personalized and laden with affects such as love, gratitude, generosity, and loyalty (see Genovese 1974, 91). A fruitful discussion of paternalism can also be found in E.P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class*

¹⁴ After her second birth, Song’s daughter and her husband moved on to farm work in South Korea, while Song takes care of their two boys. Since they are now undocumented, they cannot risk leaving Korea; when I met the children, it had been seven years since they had seen their parents.

¹⁵ Goodell et al. (1985, 247) define paternalism, following Dworkin (1972), as “interference with others’ autonomy justified by reasons referring exclusively to their welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests, or values.” Since this definition does not refer to kinship, it is not useful for my ends.

(1968) and in his “Moral economy of the English crowd” (1971). According to Thompson, 18th-century English paternalism could be mobilized in defense of their customary rights by those whom it had cast in the role of dependent children; but as he points out cuttingly, it could not be seen as a shared ideology, “for the popular ethic sanctioned direct action by the crowd, whereas the values of order underpinning the paternalist model emphatically did not” (Thompson 1971, 98).

The paternalist relations which sprung up in the Arabah in the 1990s were quite different from English paternalism in this respect, since the cultural idiom in which they were framed was contributed by the subaltern party: this was paternalism “from below” (E. Cohen 1999, 189). Israeli farmers were gratified but also bewildered when their employees called them *ima* and *aba* (“mother” and “father” in Hebrew) in direct translation of a conventional Thai form of address to superiors (Herzfeld 2016, 37-49). Again unlike the “popular ethic” of the English plebeian crowd, that of Thai workers in the Arabah did not sanction “direct action by the crowd,” or even explicit demands for improved conditions. For example, when I asked Song whether she had ever known anyone to ask for a raise, this was her reply:

No, I never saw that while I was there. I didn't ask [for a raise], but they gave me one of their own accord. If we had asked, they wouldn't have given us anything. We just worked and let them see. [...] If the employers were satisfied, they would give us a raise of their own accord. If they were good, and we were good in return, the pay would rise.

Song's position – admittedly stated to an Israeli interviewer and acquaintance of her former employers – goes beyond a justification of hierarchy, suggesting a karmic logic which sees good behavior as bringing about good fortune (Stonington, n.d.). I will investigate the ramifications of this logic at greater length in the following chapters, but for the time being I would like to point out how the paternalistic idiom, which couches relationships of domination

in “warm [...] and friendly language” (Herzfeld 2016, 27), or in what Felicity Aulino calls “the violence of care” (Aulino 2019, 114-42) met the exploitation anxiety of Arabah farmers at an oblique angle. On one hand, the idiom of fictive kinship may have served to buffer the bracing impact of what Marx and Engels (2018, 15-16) famously described as “naked self-interest,” “callous ‘cash payment’” and “the icy water of egotistical calculation.” But on the other hand, insofar as the anxiety was rooted in the imperatives of an unmediated, physical relationship to the land and a purely Jewish community, paternalist intimacy with non-Jewish subordinates could only be a dangerous, corrosive influence. Certainly this is how the pioneer grandparents of the Arabah’s farmers would have seen it; their own younger selves would probably have concurred.

When Arabah farmers played the part of munificent patrons, then, their manner was somewhat stilted and stamped with the collectivistic and institutionalized labor settlement ethos. The official “volunteer coordinators” of the *moshavim*, almost always women, retained their positions as volunteers were replaced by migrant workers; together with the manpower agencies they devoted considerable energies and resources to organizing leisure activities for workers, including outings to see snow on Mt. Hermon in the occupied Golan Heights, to Eilat or the Dead Sea, or, on holidays, to parks where they would be treated to musical performances by singers and sermons by Buddhist monks, both flown in from Thailand for the occasion (E. Cohen 1999, 194; Bretsky 2001). These celebrations, organized at a regional or national level and financed by the agencies, were popular events at which Thai culture was packaged for the joint consumption of migrants and their employers, with live music, dance,

boxing and copious amounts of Western-friendly food such as papaya salad, grilled fish, soups, and stir fry.¹⁶

In interviews with me, farmers spoke of the '90s as a golden age and pined for what they remembered as the Thais “of bygone days” (*shel pa'am*), childlike primitives who had “just come down from the trees” and whose deference and gratitude were matched with a mythical capacity for work. Only a decade before, many settlers had voted against allowing their neighbors to host a second volunteer, fearing that this would sound the death knell for the settlement’s ideological purity; but now, as the average number of outside workers per farm rose from one to three to five and beyond, no alarms were rung. Why not?

Several factors may have been involved, including the disintegration of the community’s internal cohesion following the credit crisis and the ensuing collapse of mutual aid arrangements, which now promised great affluence to some farmers as others faced bankruptcy. This was also a time of rapid, disorienting change in other aspects of life in the Arabah: Israel’s peace treaty with Jordan, signed in 1994, turned the region from the frontier of a formally hostile state into a peaceful zone, with warming relations with Jordanian neighbors, an agreement that allowed *moshavim* to lease and cultivate fields across the border (Levita 2012; Cerbero 2012) and growth in the tourism industry (Slavin and Giladi 2012). Implicitly, the entire community was aware that it had only been possible to uphold its ideological scruples so long as the state was willing to underwrite them; following the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, though Labor governments continued to offer lip service to the labor settlement ethos, material

¹⁶ Bretsky (2001). See also Central Arava Regional Council, “We invite you to a celebration of the birthday of the King of Thailand,” Circular, 29 November 1993. Ein Yahav Archive.

support dwindled considerably. In the new state of things, the use of migrant labor was a *hekhrach bal yeguneh* – a necessity not to be deplored. Song, for her part, was encouraged by what she saw as a growing acceptance of the Thai presence over the course of her time in Ein Amal: “At first, they didn’t understand our way of life, what we eat. [...] The later groups of Thai workers had an easier time [...] because Israelis understood the Thai personality better.”

The paternalist idiom in which the new employment relation was couched, and the pliability of the new workers, probably played an important part in softening the shock of rapid social change in the Arabah. But despite the degree of carryover involved from the previous relationship to volunteers, this paternalism and the first glimmerings of a hybrid culture, like the joint celebrations of Thai holidays, ran against the grain of “pure settlement” ideology. The *moshavim* of the Arabah would never be willing to see themselves as anything but homogenous Jewish-Israeli communities. Unlike elements of Palestinian culture, which were inherently dangerous to the national project and could be integrated into Israeli culture only through aggressive appropriation (Hirsch 2011), *pad thai* noodles and *molam* music were perceived as exotic curiosities that could be consumed without danger of diluting this culture; analogously, farmers may have imagined that the paternalistic relationships they had developed with their workers could be deployed for profit-making purposes without making any serious impact on the social fabric of the *moshavim*.

These, at any rate, were the assumptions on which the nascent paternalism was based; and whether they were valid or not is in a sense a moot question, since that paternalism was to be rapidly quashed by developments in the political economy of migration and by the dynamics of the Israeli political scene.

Closed skies and bilateral agreements

The nascent paternalist culture of the 1990s was strongly dependent on the national migration regime¹⁷ that prevailed during those years. Under this regime, the owners of manpower companies in both Israel and Thailand were primary players and little stood in the way of their amassing considerable fortunes. The legal strictures designed to ensure that migrants would not settle permanently in Israel were a dead letter, as migrants changed their names and forged documents in order to come to Israel repeatedly and to bring spouses and other relatives with them. This was in the interest of the manpower companies and their networks of middlemen and moneylenders, who fostered connections to particular families and villages that provided them with a regular stream of reliable workers and debtors (E. Cohen 1999, 191), as well as in the interest of employers who used the “fax system” to gain leverage over current workers and access to a reliable stream of future ones.

But the vistas of a “new Middle East” in which national boundaries and agendas would no longer block the way of the enterprising to great wealth were not to be realized. Large segments of Israeli society were opposed to the neoliberal peace plans of the bloc led by Rabin and Peres’ Labor Party: these included the religious Zionist settlers of the Occupied Territories, parts of the military apparatus, and the majority of the Jewish, primarily Mizrahi working class. The opposing “peace camp” was a much more fragile coalition incorporating big capital, the primarily Ashkenazi middle class, and the Palestinian citizens of Israel (Peled 2004). Following Rabin’s assassination by a religious Zionist in 1994, state power oscillated between the two blocs – the Likud won the 1996 election, Labor in 1999, then Likud again in

¹⁷ See Chapter 3 for a definition of this term.

2001. By this time, the Camp David negotiations led by US President Clinton had broken down and the Second Intifada had begun, scuttling dreams of a new Middle East once and for all. The new prime minister, Ariel Sharon, and his Finance Minister, once and future premier Benjamin Netanyahu, seized the opportunity to win big business over to the right through rapacious privatizations and the demolition of the welfare state, which had been largely maintained through previous bouts of neo-liberalization (Peled 2004).

The new right-wing government's rhetoric on immigration was akin to that of its equivalents throughout the global North, taking up the tropes that immigrants were stealing jobs, engaging in criminal activities and destroying local culture (Yilmaz 2012), and adding to these the classic Zionist concern with "demography," that is, with maintaining a sizable Jewish majority (Lustick 1999; Yonah 2004). The right had no truck with exploitation anxiety: not only comfortable with deploying Palestinian labor, it turned the privilege of access to employment in Israel into a central pillar in its strategy for controlling the Palestinian population of the West Bank (Berda 2018). Historically opposed to the labor settlement movement, it had only a residual respect for "Hebrew labor" and no ideological compunctions about the use of migrant labor in agriculture. Under these circumstances, neither Sharon's round-ups of undocumented migrants (Willen 2007a) nor the promulgation of a "closed skies" policy minimizing the importation of new workers translated into any diminution of their numbers; rather, the early 2000s were marked by a deterioration in the political and economic status of migrants and a "revolving door" of deportation and importation (Kemp and Rajjman 2008, 117-25).

The new political alignment did, however, bring about significant changes in the migration regime as applied to agriculture, perhaps because it coincided with a series of corruption scandals involving manpower agencies and government officials, which reached a

peak with the imprisonment of former Labor Minister Shlomo Benizri. Beginning around 2004, the Interior Ministry began enforcing the legal requirements that had been a dead letter, bringing about a swift change in the composition and character of the labor force (Kurlander and Kaminer, n.d.). As it became more difficult for couples to migrate together, the number of women among the migrants began to drop, from 10% in 1995 to 6% in 2010 (Raijman and Kushnirovich 2012, 16); and as enforcement of the legal limit of five years' work in Israel began in earnest, veteran workers who had assumed important responsibilities on farms were obliged to go home.

In the Central Arabah, these changes met with a continuously growing demand for labor-power. As their integration into global markets was completed, the family farms of the region were exposed to brutal unit-price competition, and thus to the need to produce more, using more land, water and labor. The institutional architecture of the *moshav* discourages the concentration of land in fewer hands, but such a process nevertheless began – mostly indirectly, with prosperous farmers renting land from their retiring or bankrupt neighbors rather than purchasing it. But this did little to ease the downward pressure on prices exerted by the imbalance of power between a handful of wholesale buyers – both Israeli supermarket chains and exporters – and the myriad small producers. Competition was aggravated by a growing tendency towards monoculture of bell peppers, exacerbated after Spanish pepper growers were caught using illegal pesticides and temporarily banned from EU markets in 2007, generating windfall profits and ski vacations for farmers who had gambled right (Streckman 2014). In 2011, the government-run exporting concern Agrexco, which had countered the price-setting power of private exporters by representing growers in aggregate, collapsed and was privatized (Stein 2011). Finally, while the local economic situation was putting pressure on

employers to hold down wages, economic expansion was driving up the cost of living in Isaan and making those wages, even at constant levels, less attractive to their workers.¹⁸

Under these circumstances, the paternalistic culture which had begun to develop in the Arabah had little chance of survival, at least in public; as we shall see, its contours can still be traced in the relationships between workers and employers on individual farms. In the early 1990s, a typical farm in the Central Arabah might have had employed one or two Thai workers, sometimes a married couple, often for many years on end. Wages were high compared to those in Isaan, and migrants' desire to keep their jobs and secure openings for their relatives militated in favor of close relations of dependency on employers and their children, who would take over the farms as the first generation came of retirement age. By 2013, the number of workers had shot up to an average of 7.4 per farm (my calculation from IIM 2012), and as the number of women migrating dropped, the miniature communities of workers on each farm and the larger community of Thais in the *moshav* and the region became larger and more self-contained. Wages, as well, were no longer so high compared to those available in Isaan or in alternative migration destinations such as South Korea and Taiwan. Thus, structural conditions were growing less and less conducive to paternalism just as public expressions of paternalist relations, like the joint celebrations of Thai holidays, waned in opulence and visibility under the pressure of the bottom line (Kaminer 2016).

¹⁸ Since the wages of Thai migrants in Israel are illegally low (see Chapter 3), there is no publicly available time-series of their evolution, but using the Israeli minimum wage as a rough and very generous proxy, one can arrive at an estimate. The ratio of the Israeli minimum wage to the average income in Isaan was 9.2 to 1 in 1995, peaked at 18.2 to 1 in 2001 following the Thai financial crisis of the late '90s, and has since dipped to 8.4 to 1 in 2015 (my calculation from NSOT n.d.; NII n.d.).

But the greatest single blow to the paternal status quo was yet to come. Under the pressure of human rights organizations, reform-minded technocrats in the Finance Ministry, and the US State Department's international campaign against human trafficking, in 2012 Israel and Thailand signed a bilateral agreement, the Thailand-Israel Cooperation (TIC), aimed at removing exploitative middlemen and reducing recruitment fees and the subsequent debt bondage (Ash-Kurlander 2014b). Under TIC, manpower agencies were cut out of the Thai end of the flow and replaced by an international non-profit contractor, the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The agreement was remarkably successful, cutting down these fees from US \$9,149 to \$2,191 in 2014 (Kushnirovich and Rajjman 2017, 18). But it also had additional effects: in order to destroy the ability of informal middlemen to take a cut, employee placement had to become completely random. Employers could not select their workers anymore, and workers were no longer able to secure employment for relatives and friends. In one blow, workers' main incentive to maintain strong, long-term personal relations with their employers was eliminated, and the mainstay of paternalist relations was destroyed. Today employers complain bitterly about "the new Thais," who they perceive as insolent and disobedient by comparison to the previous generation, even theorizing that the workers who come to Israel today are from cities like Bangkok, whereas in fact they come from roughly the same rural Isaan backgrounds as their predecessors.¹⁹

The rest of this dissertation analyzes the relationships which emerged from this new situation in detail, but its broad outline can already be sketched. Discipline on the job was to

¹⁹ Between 2012 and 2016, according to data furnished to me by the IOM office in Bangkok, 82.2% of TIC applicants gave a permanent address in the provinces of the Northeast (Isaan), and 10.8% gave addresses in the North. Only 5.8% came from the Central region, which includes Bangkok and its metropolitan area, and only 0.2% from Bangkok proper.

be maintained, but as Chapter 3 will show, due to the extremely rigid nature of the labor contract employers would be forced to concede a great deal of autonomy to workers as individuals, and especially as a collective; at least on the Sadot farm, some vestiges of paternalism continued to mediate these relations. In Chapter 4 I will show how at the level of the *moshav* the flirtation with a hybrid paternalist culture was eliminated and replaced with a disavowal of the Thai presence in the community, one in which the Thais acquiesce even as the size of their population and its economic importance continues to grow. Deprived of their main avenue of influence over employers as providers of reliable workers, kin networks in Isaan were cut adrift and marital relations rendered brittle – as discussed in Chapter 5. This is how the “other” in “the sweat of other brows” became the most salient feature of Thai migrants in Israel, an “other” so other that it could never be integrated into the settlers’ image of themselves and their community.

How I lost my job: A methodological interlude

Settling on this project rather late in the graduate-school process, I had some unrealistic expectations. I was still focused on what, in a previous research project (Kaminer 2011), I had naively called “worker consciousness.” With respect to Thai labor migration to Israel, I was particularly interested in the place played by suffering in this consciousness. Suffering did eventually come to play a role in my thinking – expressed principally in Chapter 4 – but this came very late in the game, and in a humbler capacity than I had envisioned. In my initial fantasy of fieldwork, I would form close friendships with Thai co-workers and spend long hours in deep conversation with them about how their Buddhist upbringing and class background provided them with skills for handling the pain that was their lot in life. This didn’t happen.

Probably the main reason was that my Isaan and Central Thai language skills never got good enough. Though I studied both languages and was certified at advanced level in the latter, I never became confident enough in my abilities to converse, and my limited conversations with co-workers were held in a code that hovered somewhere between farm pidgin, with its simplified grammar and Hebrew and English vocabulary (see Chapter 3), and Isaan dialect – probably closer to the former. But even if I had become fluent in Isaan and even if I had gotten much closer to my co-workers it might have been difficult to directly broach these issues. Isaan norms, as I subsequently learned, strongly discourage expressions of suffering, in contrast to Israel, where “blowing off steam” (*kitur*) is a common way to socialize, even with people one has just met (Katriel 2012).

Moreover, though I saw myself as staunchly on the side of the workers and against the employers (see Kaminer 2018b), I could not expect my colleagues to see me the same way. First, they did not necessarily think of the employment relation in the same antagonistic terms as I did; and second, despite my sympathy towards them – which I do not think they doubted – they probably always saw me as an Israeli first and a co-worker second. Any criticism of their living and working conditions could be understood as a criticism of Israel at large and of me in particular, and thus cause me loss of face. Even when I actively solicited such criticism, my interlocutors either refused to supply it or couched it in very careful terms.

All these issues cropped up in the interviews I held with co-workers in Ein Amal. These interviews took place in what I suppose was a rather unique setting: on one hand, when they took place my interviewees had already known me for six months or so, and some degree of respect and affection existed between us. But due to the lack of a common language, we had not had the chance to get to know each other well. Moreover, the interviews were short (between an hour and two), rather formal in tone if not in format, and held on the farm, where the boss's authority loomed large despite his physical absence and my assurances of privacy. My interpreter, Supang Lamphutha, navigated this difficult territory with charm and humor, in the best Thai tradition. But it was only in Isaan, with the indispensable support of my rock-star research coordinator Vorachai Piata, a.k.a. P. Mee, that I was able to establish a degree of intimacy with Daeng, a worker I had known in Ein Amal, as well as with Moon, whose husband had also been my co-worker and was still in Israel at the time, and with Song, who had worked for the Sadot family years before I met them.

I had also harbored some serious illusions about what relations with Israelis were going to be like in the field. In my previous experience as a workplace ethnographer, I was able to get a job with no questions asked. As a logistics worker in Ashdod I was somewhat unusual in age

and ethnicity, though this was not phenotypically obvious, and I was often assumed to be an immigrant from the former Soviet Union. But in the Arabah I was much more unusual. It's not that people of my background and age (32 at the time) never come looking for farm jobs; they do, and they sometimes get them. But these jobs usually consist in part of doing work that Thai migrants are excluded from, like logistical management and marketing, and in part of supervising them.

I wasn't interested in this kind of job: I wanted to do the same work the Thais did, for two reasons. The first was rapport: it was obvious to me that if I was to create any sort of intimacy with workers I would have to carefully avoid becoming their boss in any sense. The second was that I wanted to get as close as possible to the actual experiences they had to go through as workers. I wasn't totally naïve on this point; I realized that for a multitude of reasons – including my Israeliness, but also the brevity of my stay on the farm and its voluntary nature – I wouldn't be able to perfectly simulate their experience for myself, if indeed such a thing is ever possible. But one can get closer, and this was my goal. It was also important to me to be paid for my work, not so much because I needed the money (although this was a consideration, seeing as I had no funding for the first year of fieldwork), but because only this would place me in a truly subordinate relation to my employer. So long as I was only volunteering on the farm, the boss would not actually be my boss, and I would have acquire no firsthand experience of employee-employer relations.

I thus went about looking for a job “as a *tailandi*” – not my phrasing but that of my potential employers, when they realized what I was asking for. I started about a year in advance, and quickly got an affirmative response from a veteran farmer of Ein Amal, one of the last of the first generation still actively running a farm. “You'll work like a *tailandi* and get paid like one,” he promised gruffly, to my great satisfaction. But as the beginning of my fieldwork came near,

this farmer began to hesitate and eventually decided against hiring me. I can only speculate as to the reasons, but it may have been the second part of the promise that eventually gave him cold feet: paying me “like a *tailandi*” would have been illegal, after all, and while migrant employees are helpless to defend themselves against wage law violations (see Chapter 4), I might have made a stink. His other option – to pay me the legal minimum wage for clumsy, unskilled labor – would have proven unprofitable.

Be his reasons what they may, within a week I had found another job. My boss, Adi, was managing the farm on behalf of its owner while also working another job and was strapped for time. He agreed to my request to do the same work as the Thais when I had nothing else in particular to do; the additional tasks he gave me, checking electronic irrigation systems and filling fertilizer tanks, were not supervisory. But it quickly became apparent that he did want me to perform a disciplinary function. A few days into my employment, Adi asked me to spend the morning in a greenhouse with the farm’s Thai workers, but not to work beside them. Here is what I wrote about the experience in my fieldnotes that night:

Basically while they’re working I have four options: 1. to work beside them; 2. not to work at all; 3. to pretend to work; 4. to command them. 4 was ruled out by Adi when hiring me: “you will not manage the Thais,” and it’s something that I want to try explicitly to keep out of the bounds of possibility; 1. is my favorite in several senses: I feel that it’s best for my research, it helps me best to achieve rapport, and it makes time go by quickly and is often pleasurable. On the other hand, I do have a lazy tendency and I won’t normally work if not explicitly told to. I’m also worried that it might be seen [by the Thais] as goldbricking or overachieving. 2. is what I was told not to do today. It “sets a bad example” or puts the Thais in the mood of slacking off, from Adi’s point of view. [...] when I am explicitly prohibited from working with them, like I was today – he said “I prefer that you don’t do the dirty [lit. ‘black’] work – then it’s better than

what he wants, which is 3, pretending to work, but since I have no work, is actually prowling around and spying. Whether or not I tell him what I see, this is meant to have a disciplinary effect and indeed has one, with the necessary corollary of driving a wedge between me and them. This is going to continue to be a front line, and I have to make sure I handle it carefully – I don't want to risk relations with Adi.

Apparently I failed at handling that front line, since about two months into my employment Adi found a pretext to fire me. To fulfill my tasks at the irrigation computers and fertilizer tanks, I had been assigned a small all-terrain vehicle belonging to the farm. I was allowed to park it near the apartment I was renting, but only when I was home. When I was away from the *moshav*, I was to leave it in the farm's parking lot. Running late to catch a bus to Tel Aviv for an important family event, I once left the ATV in the public lot at the entrance to the *moshav*; when Adi called to confront me I confessed the truth and otherwise behaved honorably, but he was adamant that I had violated his trust and would not take me back.

In my opinion, as well as in the opinion of other Israeli residents of Ein Amal that I consulted, Adi's reaction to my misstep was overblown. I can only speculate as to his real motives; whatever they were, I found myself without a job or an alternative plan in the middle of the growing season, with no openings on any farm in the *moshav*. I was offered work at the local farm hardware outlet, but this would have taken me too far from the labor process I was interested in studying. With the help of some personal connections, I was able within a few weeks to secure a spot on the Sadot farm, where I ended up staying on for six months, but this was not a paid position: this time, I was a volunteer.

On the Sadot farm I made my own schedule – eight-hour days, beginning together with Ya'ir and the Thais at the break of dawn and leaving off in the early afternoon, five days a week. I worked far fewer hours than the Thais and could not approach their experience of fatigue.

Since I was volunteering, Ya'ir also had no real authority over me and, at first, insisted on asking me what I wanted to do every day. Eventually he agreed to allocate me to whatever jobs he needed done, like any other worker. Some of the time this meant that I was assigned tasks like taking orders from clients, which the Thais could not do, due to their lack of Hebrew skills. But most of the time I did what they did, alongside them, took breaks with them, shared their food, and often spent evenings with them as well. Under the circumstances, this was as much as I could expect, and I believe that it enabled me to achieve a measure of rapport and insight into their lives on and off the job, though the reader will be the judge of that.

The six months I spent on the Sadot farm in 2015 and 2016 are thus the methodological heart of this dissertation. On this job I was able not only to gain a close understanding of the labor process that is explored in Chapter 3, but also to find a vantage point from which to make the observations about in the *moshav* that form the basis for Chapter 4. After my time there was over, as the vegetable season drew to a close and the outside temperatures inched up to insufferable levels, I was glad to enter the air-conditioned archive of the region's oldest *moshav*, Ein Yahav, where I found a wealth of documentation that I was later able to supplement with papers from the Israel State Archive, interviews with Israeli players in the migration regime, and secondary sources; these together form the basis for Chapters 1 and 2. The relationships I forged on the Sadot farm were also the foundation on which I built my 2017 fieldwork in Thailand, where my most important findings are owed to Song, who worked on the farm long before I came there; to Daeng, who was my co-worker; and to Moon, the wife of one of my co-workers.

A final bit of personal reflection is necessary. I did not come to this research subject out of prior interest in either agriculture or Thailand. I was interested in work and wanted to do research at home, in Israel; the agricultural sector's double function, economic and ideological-

political, struck me as an interesting topic for study. Isaan-Thai migrants just happened to be the people doing the work in the sector, and as preparation I set about studying about them and learning their language. I had been interested in Buddhism and meditation before starting out, and my interest in dharma and understanding thereof have been greatly enhanced by acquaintance with a modern Buddhist society, an acquaintance which immediately dispelled many of the misconceptions I, like other Israelis, had had about Buddhism (see Loss 2010). But though I realized that my conception of the project as an investigation of suffering could engage with Buddhism, I had no clear vision of how to do this; indeed, I am still taking my first steps along this path.

This is not to say that I had no personal connection to the subject matter. Israel might be the only country in the world where the urban intelligentsia and the rural farming class are connected by close kinship links, by virtue of the elite positioning of the labor settlement vanguard (J. Shapira 1984). Both my parents were born on *kibbutzim*, and though my father's family was expelled for their Communist sympathies when he was still a baby, my mother only left her own *kibbutz* after she was denied the opportunity to go to university in her early twenties. Though both my parents rejected Zionism, this project has shown me how much of the labor settlement habitus survives in me, from a belief in the redemptive qualities of labor that I cannot shake despite my better judgment, to the horror of what living off the fruits of the labor of others might mean for my own moral integrity – the affect I label as “exploitation anxiety.” This is not a very explicitly “reflexive” dissertation, neither because I find myself uninteresting nor because I kid myself that my positionality is irrelevant, but primarily because there was too much else to write about. This is an ethnography about Isaan-Thai migrants, their relatives, and their Israeli farmer employers, but the sensitive reader will surely see how, as much as it is about them, it is also about me.

Chapter 3

On the Sadot farm: Producing Vegetables and Reproducing

Difference

In a famous passage from *Capital*, Marx dramatizes the divorce of the sunlit public sphere, “the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham” where labor-power is freely exchanged for money, from the infernal capitalist “abode of production,” where naked domination rules and the worker, having freely concluded a contract to sell his labor-power for a wage, has “nothing else to expect but – a tanning” (Marx 1990, 279–80). This is better read as a critical, even satirical presentation of the bourgeois world-view than as a description of reality. In real life, no insuperable barrier separates the workplace from the world outside, and remarkable continuities present themselves on both sides of the gate. On one hand, the sale of labor-power is often far from freely contracted, especially when those selling it lack citizenship rights or belong to an oppressed racial group. On the other hand, the “tanning” seldom proceeds smoothly: as Marx realized (see Marx 1990, 643–54) and as Burawoy (1979) and others (Ong 1987; Bourgois 1989; Shehata 2009) have shown, the actual extraction of waged labor, like the extraction of obedience to authority elsewhere, depends on the complex, shifting mix of coercion and consent which Antonio Gramsci (1971) called “hegemony.”

Moreover, what happens at work doesn’t stay at work; and what happens outside it doesn’t stay outside either. The capitalist labor process is organized around the *production* of commodities, but continued production depends on the *reproduction* of particular social

relations, which production itself also impacts upon. This is particularly true of agricultural labor in the *moshavim* of the Arabah, which are governed by an ideology – waning, but still strong – that invests powerful meaning in farm work. This chapter is concerned with the ways in which the labor of producing vegetables, indispensable to reproducing Israeli settlement in the Arabah from an economic standpoint, also contributes to its ideological reproduction.

In the *moshav* there is no strict spatial separation between work and non-work spaces. The private homestead, originally planned to contain the settler family's residence and a space for logistical and processing work, now houses the farm's workers as well, while its fields are spread among those of other settlers, fanning out from the residential nucleus of the community and often reaching miles away from the homestead. The division of labor between this chapter and the next is thus not a division between the sphere of work and its outside, then, but between scales: here I focus on the level of the individual farm, where both the labor process and the maintenance of labor-power take place, and in Chapter 4 I “zoom out” to look at relations from the scale of *moshav* and up. Though in both chapters my focus is on the reproduction of *difference* – the triple difference between Thais, (Jewish) Israelis and (Palestinian) Arabs – this process works differently at these two scales. On the farm, a private business whose highest priority is profit, countervailing forces are often tolerated so long as production proceeds smoothly. At higher scales, the corporate interests of the settlement movement and the nation, as understood by the institutions which purport to represent them, take the front seat.

This chapter takes the structure of a working day on the Sadot farm as its narrative form. It rises with the sun, taking an imaginative look at the balance of forces animating the boss, Ya'ir Sadot, and then shifts its gaze to the flurry of work which his workers must get done before heading out for their paid work in the fields. I follow them into those fields, where I observe how they struggle to maintain some collective power over the rhythms of the labor

process, and discuss the role of the limited linguistic code used on the farm in isolating them from Israeli society. Then I enter the sweltering greenhouse, where differences in body hexis and sartorial practice make themselves most obvious, before heading home, exhausted, at the end of the day. Cultural difference as a force of production and reproduction haunts the chapter. To what extent is such difference real and effective, rather than an ideological pretext for repression and exploitation? As ideology, difference will come into its own in Chapter 4, but its hardly innocent nature is close to the surface here too.

Morning

We start at 6:00 on a January morning, when the sky is still dark and the air chilly. If one looks away from the floodlights ringing the fenced perimeter of the *moshav*, into the desert, the constellations are blindingly clear. In the east, the steep mountains over the Jordanian border loom black against the navy-blue sky. As the light grows, the mountains will begin to take on the dark red hue suggested by their Hebrew name, “Edom.” Within the *moshav*, too, lights are coming on.

One’s first impression of the Sadot farm, which lies close to the perimeter fence, will differ greatly depending on the direction of approach. Coming from my rented apartment further within the *moshav*, I walk through a pedestrian lane from which the desert has been banished. Here dogs and cats roam under leafy trees, along lawns and flowerbeds, all generously fed with water sucked from the salinizing aquifer by formidable pumps. From this path a trail branches to the front door of the Sadot family house – a spacious four-bedroom whose kitchen windows look onto a small private yard on the opposite side. The house can also be approached from that direction, from a peripheral ring road whose outer edge is dominated by a featureless, scrubby stretch of wasteland. This is the route the trucks take on their way to the packinghouse and refrigeration room where loads of vegetables await. Both the newish

family SUV and the beat-up pickup used for work are parked here, next to the tall, broad metallic structure of the packinghouse that looms over the house.

A bit further along the ring road stands a tall metal shed which shares a corrugated metal roof with the packinghouse. Two tractors are parked here: the ancient Massey Ferguson and a new, cherry-red Yamaha. Behind the shed there is a small, uncovered space with a picnic table and overflowing trashcans in which a brilliant-feathered rooster might be foraging. Crates of empty beer bottles line a short hallway, opening to the right onto a kitchen where rice cookers stand next to heavy-duty gas ranges on stainless-steel tables encrusted with spattered cooking oil. At the end of the hallway is the workers' living room, featuring two castaway sofas, more empty bottles, and a clutter of cigarette butts, waste paper and food debris. At the end of the room sit the television, a tower of jerry-rigged speakers, and a microphone for karaoke. Doors open off this room to small bedrooms that house two to four residents. Another door opens to the right, giving access to dirty shower stalls, toilets with broken seats, and an outdoor area hosting a washing machine and laundry lines.

The planners of the *moshav* envisioned the farm household as an amalgam of integrated but distinct economic functions – residential and agro-industrial – to be carried out by the farming family according to an age- and gender-based division of labor (Shnider 2014; Chyutin 2016); hence the inclusion of an operational area within each homestead. Nowadays, the spatial distinction separates not only functions but human groups: Ya'ir's wife Miri and their children do not enter the quarters, except on special occasions like Thai holidays. The workers stay out of the family home, though they are invited into the back yard on other special occasions, such as a worker's going-away party.

While severe, the separation between the Sadot family and their Thai workers is not hermetic. In fact, Ya'ir and his family are regarded as relatively close to their workers. When

Ya'ir's son Uri celebrated his bar mitzvah, the farm's Thai and student workers (see n. 5) were not invited to the religious ceremony, which took place at the *moshav* synagogue during work hours, but they were welcomed at the evening party in the decorated packinghouse, and participated enthusiastically, dressed in their best clothes, though they lacked a clear sense of what was being celebrated. Uri himself is a regular in the quarters, often asking Mike, the youngest of the Thais, to make him *pad thai* or spring rolls – tourist food that the workers never prepare for themselves. Mike himself displays many features redolent of a teenage Israeli boy: long-haired and baby-faced, excited by Manchester United and motorcycles (but also by cockfights), he is treated affectionately by Ya'ir and especially by Miri, who is on distant terms with most of the other workers.

Freest to move around the farm are the male Israeli workers, David and myself: in the morning we are encouraged to come into the house to make ourselves coffee and a snack, and in the evening we often make our way to the workers' quarters for beer and karaoke.

The cares of a family man

It might be 6:10 by now. Miri and the children are still sleeping deeply in rooms darker than the desert, but in the kitchen the lights are on and Ya'ir is drinking his black Arabic-style coffee, not boiled patiently in the traditional manner but mixed hastily with hot water, forming a thick sediment at the bottom which gives it its Hebrew name *botz*, "mud." Ya'ir is fifty years old, a father of three and employer of nineteen. At this moment, as he sips his coffee and stares out the window into the well-kept yard and the stark metal of the packinghouse behind it, his mind is probably on how best to fill the orders for vegetables that he needs to deliver today.

Although they may be far from his thoughts at the moment, both past and future generations haunt his actions. Like his neighbors, peers, and competitors, Ya'ir is concerned with conserving the legacy bequeathed to him by his parents, which he hopes to pass on to his

children. The *moshav* has not accepted new outside members in years, but members have a right to have one “continuing son” accepted into the community as a homeowner and farmer.¹ As a “continuing son” to founding members of the *moshav*, Ya’ir’s responsibility is not only to his parents but to the community and the legacy of the entire labor settlement movement. In a way he would be failing all of them if he were to stumble financially and give up cultivating. Granted, if Ya’ir were to stop farming, he could rent his allotted land to a neighbor, but the rent would fluctuate with the price of vegetables on the European market. Moreover, unlike farmers in central parts of the country, Ya’ir cannot bank on the prospect of his land being re-zoned for residential use and snapped up by developers (Yisha’ayahu 2016), nor can he assume that the value of his home will rise as the suburban real estate market continues to overheat (Mirovsky 2017). His responsibilities to the next generation, then, weigh at least as heavily as the debt he owes to his forbears.

Like most kids on the *moshav*, Ya’ir’s daughter and two boys are uninterested in farming; as the local cliché goes, “they don’t even know where to find Dad’s fields.” Like most parents in the community, Ya’ir accepts his children’s predilections. He suspects that the future of Israeli agriculture lies in concentration, corporatization and mechanization, and that family farmers like himself are on the way out. With regard to the next generation, Ya’ir’s concern is not to reproduce a particular occupation or lifestyle, but a class position: as *ahusalim*² of LSM

¹ *Ben mamshikh*; in standard Hebrew, the masculine gender is the default. The possibility of a “continuing daughter” inheriting her parents’ membership in the *moshav* (she would be a *bat mamshikha*) is not precluded, but in such cases the farm is usually managed by the son-in-law.

² Baruch Kimmerling coined the acronym *ahusal* for Ashkenazi, secular, socialist and liberal – the sociological lineaments of the LSM and the veteran Israeli elite more generally (Kimmerling 2001). While this ethno-class group may have lost its monopoly on political power, it still dominates the ranks of the upper middle class.

extraction, his children have cultural capital that gives them a head start in the mobility game, but unlike their maternal cousins, they will not inherit an apartment in central Israel. To remain middle-class, they must deploy their cultural and social capital through education and military service, and Ya'ir's hopes and anxieties for them are concentrated in these fields.

The tension between the demands exerted on Ya'ir by past and future generations is a permutation of the tension between ideological and economic reproduction to which the entire movement has been subject, and to which Thai labor has provided a solution. But while the ties connecting him to the preceding generations are largely ideological and emotional, they have a material dimension as well: like all other farmers in the Arabah, Ya'ir depends on state practices which are justifiable only in terms of the national role played by the labor settlement movement, and like all his neighbors, he is invested in maintaining a public face that harmonizes with the movement's image of itself. While nobody is any longer sure what room there might be for this image in the country's future, in the present farmers feel the need to galvanize public opinion not only in their hearts but in their pocketbooks.

Ya'ir's pocketbook is also subject to much more immediate stresses. I had no access to the Sadot family budget or business books, but insofar as this farm is like its neighbors, its finances are subject to considerable uncertainty. Integration into the global market means that Ya'ir's profits fluctuate wildly, beyond control or prediction. A few of the factors that have affected fortunes in the Arabah over the last few years include the discovery of prohibited pesticides in the product of Spanish competitors, US and EU sanctions on Russia and a subsequent decline in demand there (Streckman 2014), and the ongoing, unprecedented strength of the Israeli currency (Biedermann 2017). The intense competition among Arabah farmers since the collapse of their cooperative marketing arrangements compounds this volatility, producing rapid cycles of boom and bust. As a vegetable farmer, Ya'ir has few avenues

for mechanizing his labor process and increasing productivity. For reasons I will explore later in this chapter, he also has little hope of boosting productivity through intensified discipline and greater control over workers. Short of abandoning agriculture altogether, two avenues are left to him for securing his profit margin and ensuring his children's future: employing more workers on more land and keeping their wages as low as possible. In other words, to reproduce his family and to best fulfil the role assigned to him by the labor settlement movement, Ya'ir must lean into the character of the figure historically most reviled by that very movement: the capitalist, employing cheap, copious, and degraded "foreign labor."³

Figure 2: This caricature, printed in a local Arabah newsletter in the late 1980s, features a stereotypical moshav farmer – complete with "tembel" hat, bushy moustache and Histadrut membership card. The satirical punch is provided by the caption, which reads simply "Capitalist."



Men without women

While Ya'ir is concerned several different kinds of reproduction as he sips his morning *botz*, his employees are engaged in reproducing the immediate conditions of their own ability

³ The Hebrew *avoda zara*, literally meaning "foreign labor" and used in that sense as well, is also the standard Jewish term for "idol worship," carrying a strong connotation of danger to the nation due to its association with the destruction of the First and Second Temples and the end of Jewish sovereignty (see Kemp and Rajzman 2008, 95).

to work a ten-to-twelve-hour day in their boss's greenhouses, open fields and packinghouse. One of them has been up for half an hour, cooking the glutinous rice (*khaw niaw* (I)) which Ya'ir provides free of charge, by custom (E. Cohen 1999, 174). Now that the rice is ready, it is ladled into wicker baskets that will keep it moist and chewy for the rest of the day. The men take turns preparing their *kap khaw*, "with rice," the various meat, fish, and vegetable dishes that each prepares for himself but shares with the others. They do their best to approximate the village cuisine of Isaan with ingredients available at the local "Thai shop" (see Chapter 4), and the funky aroma of *plaa raa* (fermented fish paste) in hot oil spreads out of the kitchen, blanketing the yard and mingling with similar smells drifting from nearby farms.

Like other male migrant workers around the world who live on their own, Ya'ir's Thai employees find themselves newly responsible for the work of everyday food preparation and housekeeping, what Michael Burawoy (1976) calls the "maintenance" side of the reproduction of labor-power.⁴ In Isaan, cooking is primarily women's work, but men who cook are not stigmatized. In Israel, many Thais take comfort and pride in their cooking. In this they are much luckier than the Ethiopian student-workers, also all men, who had never entered a kitchen before coming to Israel, and are now reduced to eating rice with a sort of egg-and-tomato stew they have improvised on the spot.⁵ In Israel for only about six months, the

⁴ While absent from the Sadot farm, women form about 5% of the Thai migrant workforce in Israel today, and encounter special hardships, including sexual abuse (Wexler 2013; Bsoul 2016). As detailed in Chapter 2, beginning about 2004, the tighter enforcement of regulations intended to prevent permanent settlement, including a prohibition on the joint migration of married couples, has brought about important changes in the pattern of migration and the division of reproductive labor.

⁵ Students from around the Global South are brought to the Arabah for programs of varying length that combines work and study at the regional Arava International School for Agriculture Training. These programs and others like them around the country have come in for heavy criticism, with students and human rights NGOs alleging

Ethiopians are also far more disciplined than the Thais in their pursuit of maximal earnings: thrifty in consumption, they are eager to work as many hours as possible, usually asking Ya'ir to let them work on Saturdays, when the Thais are off. The Thais, while also aspiring to earn overtime, are glad to have one day off a week, and are much more relaxed about spending.

This difference between Thai and Ethiopian workers fits into a pattern identified by Bonacich (1972, 550–51) as characteristic of split labor markets: the tighter the temporal limits on the opportunity to earn a comparatively high wage, the more workers are willing to forgo “maintenance” activities like eating well and resting in order to maximize their wage. The difference between students and Thais in this sense is only one of degree. The Thais, too, settle for a lower standard of living in Israel than what they would be willing to countenance at home, consoling themselves with the temporary nature of the hardships they endure; for them as for the Ethiopians, reproduction is a complex relationship between temporalities: circumstances that can be accepted for a short time may become impossible to endure in the longer term, while the goal of permanent mobility – the dream of buying a business or getting a child into a lucrative public-service job – may justify suffering that would not be tenable for short-term gain (see M. Taussig 1980, 93–96; Johnson 2018a). And as we will see in Chapter 5, people who have different roles in the reproduction of migrant labor-power have different perspectives about which tradeoffs are acceptable.

While the workers of the Sadot farm seem to have the culinary side of maintenance down, the hygienic situation is less encouraging. Standards of cleanliness, of course, are

that they constitute fraud and human trafficking at worst, a front for illegal labor importation at best (Yaron and Breiner 2019). The students I met on the Sadot farm and around the Arabah did not express serious criticism of the program, but evaluating it was not within the scope of my research.

culturally variable and change over time (see Burke 1996), but in even the poorest households in Isaan women generally sweep the house on a daily basis and outdoor squat toilets are frequently washed out with plenty of water. Here the tiny rooms which house the workers are relatively tidy, but the public spaces, including the living room and “front yard” – really the edge of the tractor shed, adorned with an old picnic table – are normally a mess. The Western-style flush toilets are broken, often stopped up and almost always filthy. The hygienic situation on the farm may be, in part, a sort of tragedy of the commons; as anyone who has ever lived with roommates knows, once a common living arrangement settles into a cycle of neglect, things can quickly spiral out of control (see Onion 2002). But to a great extent, this state is a predictable outcome of the severely limited temporal and spatial resources which the Sadot workers have at their disposal: fifteen men are crowded into a small living space that has to suffice not only for sleeping and eating but also for cooking, laundry, and recreation. With workdays at least ten hours long, cleanliness predictably becomes a lower priority than it is at home, when it does take place, about every other Saturday, cleaning is directed by the workers’ leader or *balabay*, Daeng, whose authority extends over reproductive as well as productive labor insofar as it is carried out collectively.

The role of the *balabay* – I discuss the etymology of the term below – is liminal, an uncomfortable middle position between workers and management. The most important variable in determining eligibility for the role is seniority on the farm: this fits in both with the norm in Thailand, where age and its proxies are central to the structuring of hierarchies (Aulino 2014, 427 n. 15; Herzfeld 2016, 48) and the exigencies of work on the farm, where skill is learned on the job. Daeng was formally selected by Ya’ir, but the boss is aware that he serves at the pleasure of his colleagues, who could make his life hell and force his resignation if they did not accept him. Short, wiry, constantly harried, Daeng is something of a mystery to me at this point

(we will learn a lot more about him in Chapter 5). The role does not entitle him to extra wages or any other material perks, though he seems to take pride in his close relationship with Ya'ir as well as in the respect he is afforded by the other workers.⁶ It is clear that they perceive him as their legitimate head, with authority not only over the labor process, but also over the organization of collective reproductive labors like cleaning.

By 6:20, Ya'ir has finished his coffee and is making his way to the tractor shed. The workers, done with cooking, scoop the hot food into tupperware boxes, shuffle into their shoes, light their cigarettes, and file blinking into the yard. The sun is still behind the mountains, but the stars have gone and the sky has turned a dry, steely blue. As the workers look on, Ya'ir addresses his instructions to Daeng, informing him of the orders to be filled during the morning – further orders will probably arrive before lunch – so that the workers can be divided into teams and loaded on the pickup and the two tractor-pulled flatbed trailers. The old Massey-Ferguson's engine turns several times under Dii's skilled hand, then coughs and hums. The Yamaha makes no trouble. The workers grab their 5-liter styrofoam containers full of ice water and climb onto the trailers as they leave the yard. The work day begins.

⁶ In her recent ethnography of migrants returning from Israel to Isaan, Shahr Shoham comes to slightly different conclusions. She finds that the employer usually appoints “one of the workers who has basic knowledge of English” to the position of “head of the workers,” and that the role sometimes entitles its bearer to extra benefits. Interestingly, she recognizes that one of the job's major attractions consists in the opportunity it provides “to become more familiar with the employer through constant communication,” a familiarity which one former holder of the post formulated in paternalistic terms: “after I was there for a long time the other employers didn't think that I am a worker, they say [sic] I was the son of my employer.” Her conclusion that “[t]his structure ... created further isolation and stronger hierarchies between the employers and the rest of the employees, resulting in almost a lack of direct communication between them” thus leaves the “head of the workers” himself – who is in constant and direct communication with both parties – in an ambiguous liminal position. See Shoham (2017, 45–46); see also n. 9 below.

Autonomy in the fields

I have referred above to Marx's dramatized presentation of the descent from the rarefied public sphere of contract into the horrors of the claustrophobic "abode of production" where labor is extracted, and to the limitations of this presentation. Indeed, as Ya'ir's workers make their way from the farm to the greenhouses where they will spend most of their day, the *mise-en-scène* seems reversed: when the tractor exits Ein Amal's eastern gate, with a fresh wind rolling off the sparkling mountains ahead, the workers seated on its trailer bed are certainly not leaving any wide-open sphere of freedom and equality. On the contrary, as they putter away from the quarters in which they were packed for the night into open fields miles away from the *moshav's* residential center, the prevailing sense is of expansion, even relief at being left alone for the day, among countrymen. The tractor makes its way now along a dirt path between greenhouses and through an open gate that is locked several times a year, when the Wadi Arabah floods; on the other side of the dry, rocky bed, meters from the Jordanian border, is Ya'ir's "far field," where the group will plant tomato seedlings throughout the morning.

Chances are, Ya'ir will not be seen. At 8:00, his veteran Israeli worker Ya'el will come by in the pick-up to relay further orders; she and Mike might exchange some good-natured shouting (a very Israeli and un-Thai mannerism he has picked up), but that will be the extent of "discipline" for the day. Ya'ir rarely visits the fields unless he has some specific business there. This hands-off approach will upset my friend David upon his promotion to Ya'el's position in May, when she leaves the farm. It is worth jumping ahead in time to hear his complaint in order to gain a greater insight into the balance of power in the fields.

David was never personally interested in lording it over the Thais. Having recently completed his army service, however, he had a somewhat rigid respect for hierarchy; thus, when, not long after his promotion, Ya'ir called David at about 11:30 AM with instructions for

the Thais, he expected to be obeyed. A new order had come in, and the workers were to postpone their lunch break in order to pick another few boxes of vegetables. David got in the pick-up and rushed over to the field; when he arrived, the tractor's engine had already started and the workers were sitting on the flat trailer in back, water containers in hand, on their way home to wolf down some leftovers – breakfast is their main meal of the day – and nap in the air-conditioned trailer until work resumed in the afternoon. David relayed Ya'ir's instructions to Dii, the tractor driver, but Dii refused, shaking his head and stepping on the gas. David, frustrated, tried to insist but was ignored. Worse yet, when he called Ya'ir to tell him what had happened, the boss told him to leave it alone; the order would have to go unfilled.

That day, David discovered that the job he had thought of as “work manager” was really nothing of the sort. As both of us had been aware for months, the Thais managed their own work, led by Daeng and more ad-hoc team leaders like Dii. Collectively, they knew the work much better than any Israeli employee, and while their deference to us was real enough, it was rooted exclusively in their recognition of our superior status as locals. We were not their managers; from Daeng's perspective, as he explained to me later, we were white-collar employees in charge of paperwork and marketing who occasionally joined them in the field. Any instructions we relayed from Ya'ir would be just that: instructions relayed from Ya'ir. Whether they obeyed them or not was Ya'ir's business and theirs, not ours. In this, they were in agreement with the boss, who chose not to retaliate when they refused an order in defense of their right to a full and timely break.

Why do Thai farmworkers – among the most marginalized and disenfranchised in Israel – enjoy such a degree of autonomy at work? Seeing as migrant farmworkers picking fruit and vegetables in the US are subject to draconian disciplinary practices (Thomas 1985; Holmes 2013; G. Thompson 2017), we can rule out anything inherent in either the work itself or their

status as non-citizens as an explanation.⁷ Rather, their autonomy hinges on a peculiarity of the migration regime, which will be explored in detail in the next chapter. This system binds workers to their employers, making it quite difficult for either side to terminate the arrangement (Kemp and Raijman 2014). Barring extreme circumstances (usually a well-documented, gross legal violation by one party or the other), migrants and their employers are stuck together for five years. The disciplinary tool of dismissal, available to employers in the typical capitalist labor market, is thus unavailable to employers like Ya'ir Sadot for regulatory reasons.

But this cannot be the entire story. Since the “discipline of the sack” is denied them, farmers might be expected to rely on piecework and other incentive schemes to extract labor, as US agribusiness corporations do to squeeze more work out of their own migrant workforce (Thomas 1985; Holmes 2013), but such schemes are rarely used in the Arabah. A local farmer interested in integrating technological advances into agriculture told me that several of his colleagues were exploring systems for monitoring individual productivity that could easily be used to calculate piece rates; since then, one of these initiatives, PickApp, has begun publicly advertising its services (see PickApp n.d.). My interlocutor, however, was skeptical about the potential of these schemes, stating baldly that the Thais “would never accept them.”

Piece rates, writes Michael Burawoy in *Manufacturing Consent*, represent an attempt by management to extract more labor in a given amount of time through the manipulative use

⁷ Comparison with US agriculture also makes it possible to analyze the organization of the labor process on Israeli farms as a function of the size and organization of the farm unit itself, which differs greatly in the two countries. American vegetable farming is an industry of “factories in the fields,” dominated by large agribusiness corporations (McWilliams 1939; Thomas 1985), while Israeli agriculture is small-scale. The (political) reasons for this have been partially covered in Chapter 1.

of individualistic incentives. After employees have increased their pace in response to these incentives, management can reduce them, locking in a more rapid pace as the new norm in a sort of ratchet maneuver. In the factory where Burawoy worked – where Donald Roy (1953) had worked twenty years earlier – workers collectively instituted a practice called “making out,” an informal cap on work pace intended to block this sort of ratcheting by management while still enabling workers to adjust their pace and their income according to personal preferences – a compromise between solidarity and individualism (Burawoy 1979, 46–76 and *passim*). If piecework is rare in the Arabah because migrant workers “wouldn’t accept it,” and if their employers know it, one probable reason is that the stable, self-organized and socially isolated community of workers on each farm is much more cohesive than the workforces of factories in the US in the 1950s or the 1970s and industrial farms there today: here, solidarity trumps individualism without a fight.

Workers’ autonomy is also enhanced by the difficulty of supervising them. The small size of farms makes the hiring of supervisory labor expensive, but as my experience with my first boss shows, some employers are willing to pay its price. The real problem is that Israeli workers, like Ya’el, David or me, inevitably arrive for short periods and usually lack agricultural experience; there will always be Thai workers who are more skilled and knowledgeable about the work, and as a cohesive group, speaking a language the supervisor does not understand, the workers will always be able to outsmart her or him. Piece rates, like any other method of control, could easily be subverted. From this perspective, projects like PickApp may be seen as an attempt to mechanize not the labor of the workers, but rather than of expensive, unreliable and unskilled Israeli supervisors; it remains to be seen (perhaps in a future research project) whether an app cannot be hoodwinked just like a human supervisor can. Under these circumstances, “good” employers like Ya’ir – and my interviewees all agreed that he was a good

boss – are better off placing their trust in their employees’ honesty and drive. When I asked Daeng what motivated him and his colleagues to work hard despite the lack of sanctions at the boss’s disposal, he answered: “We have enthusiasm. [...] it’s not something that can be taught. When the boss feels good, we feel good.”

This formulation is remarkably similar to Song’s, who said (see Chapter 2) that if employers “were good, and we were good in return, the pay would rise.” The logic here, as already mentioned, alludes to the vernacular Buddhist conception of karma, which sees meritorious actions as leading reflexively to felicitous results in relations with both non-human and human agents (Stonington, n.d.). When applied to hierarchical relationships between humans, as legitimized by Theravada Buddhism (see e.g. Tambiah 1976), the principle of karmic reciprocity results in a paternalistic ethos, in which both subaltern and dominant parts of the “social body” have roles to play and obligations to one another (Aulino 2019, 114–42). Bad behavior on the part of either party will eventually bring about deleterious effects, but the maintenance of the social body’s “face” is everyone’s responsibility (Aulino 2014). Nobody has the right to demand redress through aggressively direct behavior and speech of the kind which Israelis value as “straight talk” (Katriel 1986), and which Thais consider highly offensive.⁸

Ya’ir seemed to know this well. Mild-mannered and soft-spoken for an Israeli, I never knew him to raise his voice to a worker. In the light of Thai norms it is also easy to understand his decision to back down in the face of Dii’s refusal of David’s order – which he must have

⁸ Erik Cohen, writing in the late 1990s, came to similar conclusions: “Our impression is that the direct employers, after a short period of experimentation, generally refrain from close supervision of their Thai employees. The employers have found that the Thais are reliable workers [...] close supervision or pressure to work faster alienate the workers and damage their relationship with the employer. As a result many work providers grant them independence at work and in many cases leave them alone to work in the field or in packing facilities” (E. Cohen 1999, 183).

realized was itself an unusual breach of David's face and his. Though he was certainly kept occupied by other duties, a Thai sort of tactfulness may have been what led Ya'ir to refrain from any sort of surveillance, implicitly recognizing the high value his workers placed on what I have called autonomy and Claudio Sopranzetti's interlocutors call freedom, *itsaraphap*. Adun, an Isaanite living in Bangkok, explained the term's meaning to Sopranzetti by comparing a previous job in a factory to his new occupation as a motorcycle taxi driver:

I like my job because it is a free job. They offered to take me back in the company I used to work for, but that job in Bangkok is bad for a countryman [sic] like me. The boss always looks down on you, always orders you around, always insults you. The last place I worked, the boss's son kept insulting me, shouting at me: a twenty-year-old kid with no experience, just out of university. I could not accept that. So I am happy now; I am my own boss.

(Sopranzetti 2017, 73)

If this attitude is prevalent among men of rural Isaan origin, as Sopranzetti suggest that it is, it is quite clear why Ya'ir's workers would cherish their autonomy, defending it against encroachments like David's while also generously repaying Ya'ir for the trust he expressed by providing it. This they did not only by keeping up a steady pace of work, but also by taking a proactive approach to any problems they encountered in the greenhouses, such as burst water pipes or pest infestations.

Language and the labor process

At 9:00, work stops for breakfast. Inside the greenhouse, it is already getting hot; outside, fleecy clouds dot the sky and it is still cool, so we set our dishes out there on some discarded netting. The colorful plastic boxes filled with *kap khaw* are set on a flattened piece of cardboard to be shared; the Thais have no interest in any of the foods that I can cook, so my contribution is normally fruit – today, a bunch of bananas. While we are eating, Daeng gets a call from Ya'ir. He puts his phone on speaker mode so he can keep eating, and I listen in. When

we finish our break, Ya'ir says, we are to join Dii's group in another field, where the season's first peppers are being picked.

The conversation between Ya'ir and Daeng proceeds in a language that they call "English," though little of it would be immediately comprehensible to a native English speaker. This language, or rather, linguistic code (Hymes 1968), features a simplified syntactic structure as well as a great number of Hebrew and Thai loanwords. Its phonology and the selection of such loanwords point to an accommodation of both Hebrew and Thai verbal habits. Thus, for example, the word for "eggplant" is not taken from the English term, whose <gpl> consonant cluster would be unpronounceable to a Thai speaker, or from the Thai *makhreua*, whose final diphthong would be difficult for a Hebrew-speaker to produce, nor even from the singular Hebrew *hatzil*, whose final / would not work for a Thai speaker. Rather, the form selected is the Hebrew plural *hatzilin*, easily pronounceable by the Thais, whose language does not possess a singular/plural distinction.⁹ Grammar was also massively simplified: for example, the pronoun "somebody" was used in interrogative constructions ("somebody pick *hatzilin*?") where standard English would use "anybody."

These features, together with the code's very limited context of use – neither Thais nor Israelis speak it outside of work – make it possible to classify it as a nascent pidgin (Thomason 2001, 157–95). I cannot be sure whether the pidgin spoken on the Sadot farm is *sui generis* or whether it resembles that spoken on other farms in Ein Amal and the area. While migrants have few linguistic interactions with Israelis other than their employers, they might conceivably pick

⁹ To be perfectly accurate, the initial consonant of the Hebrew word is not an /h/ but a voiceless velar fricative, [x] (see Note on Non-English Terms). However, Hebrew speakers are used to this sound being pronounced as [h], for example by native English speakers, and have no trouble parsing such a pronunciation.

up some “English” from Thais on other farms. Interestingly, Thais in Israel share at least one vocabulary item unique to them: the mild expletive *sombae*, which literally means “pickled goat” in Isaan. In a visit to an experimental training camp for workers about to depart, I observed those with friends already in Israel teaching their peers this word as a kind of preparation. David and I also made liberal use of the term to express our day-to-day frustrations on the farm, and other Israelis I met who have worked with Thais were also familiar with it.

On the Sadot farm, language is one of the forces of production (Irvine 1989, 255) and its limitations place limits on the relations of production. Both employers and workers list the lack of a common language as one of the frustrations of working together, and employers mention the ability to communicate freely as one of the few advantages of employing Israelis. All in all, however, the “English” pidgin spoken on the farm seems adequate to its uses and is learned by everyone.¹⁰ Israelis, who generally speak English well, pick it up faster than Thais, who generally come to Israel with little knowledge of the language.

The lack of a locally spoken language is one of the major constituents of Thai migrants’ isolation in Israel. In this context, it matters both that English is widely spoken in Israel, and that farm “English” is not English. Boy, for example, learned to speak and read the code well enough to prepare orders for shipment from written slips. But when he needed to give instructions to a friend who wanted to “run away” from a *moshavin* in another part of the country

¹⁰ Irvine (1989, 251) remarks that “within the linguistic system the study of directives (requests and commands) is especially relevant, because it concerns the verbal management of the flow of goods and services in an economy. [...] in conspicuously task-oriented situations, speech coordinating the tasks is often reduced and simple compared to speech of other kinds, or speech in other settings. (The reduction and ‘simplicity’ of linguistic form in pidgins and trade languages originating in labor or market settings might be relevant also.)” Incidentally, Ludwig Wittgenstein begins his philosophical investigation of language by imagining a workplace language which includes only such directives (Wittgenstein 1968, 3 ff.).

to come and work in Ein Amal, he was unable to understand the English schedules on Israeli transport company websites. The friend was about to pay an exorbitant sum for a taxi when Boy came to me for help; I quickly found a cheap solution via bus, though I do not know if the man ever came to Ein Amal.

As scholars have recognized (Park and Wee 2012; Gerhards 2014), English skills are a form of “linguistic capital” around the world, including both Israel and Thailand. But despite the well-intentioned illusions of some employers, including the Sadot family, speaking “English” rather than Hebrew with their workers does not result in the latter accumulating much in the way of such capital. They return to their homes as they left them, on one of the bottom rungs of the global working class. In this they are distinct from both the Filipina and South Asian eldercare workers who come to Israel already speaking English (Liebelt 2011) and from East African asylum-seekers (Kalir 2015) who gain fluency in Hebrew and often English while living and working in Israel's urban centers. The linguistic isolation imposed on Thai workers plays an important role in trapping them in farm work, no doubt contributing to the very low rate, relative to other migrant groups, at which they manage to escape into undocumented and better-remunerated work in the cities (see Chapter 3).

In its peculiar etymology and patterns of use, the term *balabay* is particularly interesting: at one and the same time, it “denote[s a] force ... of production” – the name of a position within the labor process – as well as “index[ing] the relations of production” (Irvine 1989, 251) through its provenance and reshaping. The term derives from the Hebrew *ba'al habayit*, literally “owner of the house,” a term of Biblical antiquity still commonly used to refer to persons of authority. Together with *balagan*, meaning “mess” or “disarray,” it is one of the first Hebrew words learned by migrants of all nationalities, in such stock phrases as “don't make *balagan!*” which constitute what Alejandro Paz (2009, 118) calls “jargon Hebrew.” But together

with its adaptation to Thai phonology as *balabay*, this word has acquired a narrower meaning on the Sadot farm, referring not to Israeli farm owners, but to the leadership role described above.

Despite the crucial role played by the *balabay* in managing the farm, there is no standard Hebrew term for his position.¹¹ Far from implying that these headmen lack importance in the context of the individual farm, this absence reflects a collective disavowal of the internal hierarchy on farms as a reality which might be worthy of discussion and even managerial theorization. Unlike slave-owners in the antebellum American South, who developed a copious literature on the management of slaves (see Roediger and Esch 2014), employing standardized terms for intermediary positions, such as “driver” (see also Genovese 1974, 365–88), the genres of discourse used by Israeli farmers and their organizations are bereft of any discussion of farm labor organization. This may be an effect of exploitation anxiety – the enduring disavowal of labor-settlement farmers’ role as “capitalist” expressing itself in a paucity of discourse which could be downright detrimental to their immediate interest. In any case, in this terminological vacuum it is not surprising that workers – who may have heard the boss referring to their headman as *ba’al habayit* in a humorous way – would pick up this term to reflect their respect for the position and the man who holds it.

¹¹ The former migrants interviewed by Shahar Shoham used the Thai *hua naa*, meaning “chief, head, leader; appointee” (“หัวหน้า” 2019) for the position the Sadot workers called *balabay*, and *balabay* for the employer, in line with usage elsewhere in Israel (pers. comm.).

Body markings

We finish breakfast, clean up, and go off, each to his own shady corner – one to nap, one to call family in Thailand where it is already afternoon, one to check his Facebook feed, one to watch cock fights on Youtube. At 9:30, someone's phone alarm goes off, and we make our drowsy way to the Massey. It starts up noisily and takes us to our next destination, a twenty-minute ride to a field at the opposite end of the *moshav*. When we pull open the drop-down plastic gate of the greenhouse, a gust of hot, humid air escapes. The pleasant weather outside is no match for the netting that traps heat and moisture indoors, making it possible to cultivate summer vegetables in winter and dehydrate the unwary visitor within the hour.

To my mind, the best way to prepare for heat and sun is to wear short, loose clothing that lets the air circulate and the sweat evaporate; in this, I am a typical *ahusal*. Jewish Israelis, and especially Ashkenazim, value the bronzed skin which indexes an active, outdoor lifestyle; the suntanned look is specifically associated with the labor settlement movement.¹² Photos from the early days of Israeli settlement in the Arabah (Figure 2) show young settlers working with only shorts to their bodies, in a clear visual contrast to both antitheses of the *ahusal* figure, the orthodox Jew and the Arab, who are stereotypically clothed in long garments.¹³

¹² Appreciation for suntanned skin does not necessarily translate to an appreciation for naturally dark skin, which is often negatively associated with Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians (Biton 2011), though the difficulty of telling the acquired from the innate introduces an indeterminacy into Israeli ideas about skin tone.

¹³ Israelis of this group often think of short clothing as “natural” for the hot Israeli climate. The assumption is challenged by the fact that indigenous Palestinians traditionally wear long clothing, not to mention the very high rates of skin cancer in Israel (Sella et al. 2015). Anthropologist Tamar El Or has written on the aesthetics and politics of skin exposure in the case of “biblical” sandals (El Or 2012) as well as on the sartorial production of difference in Palestinian and ultra-Orthodox women (El Or 2010).

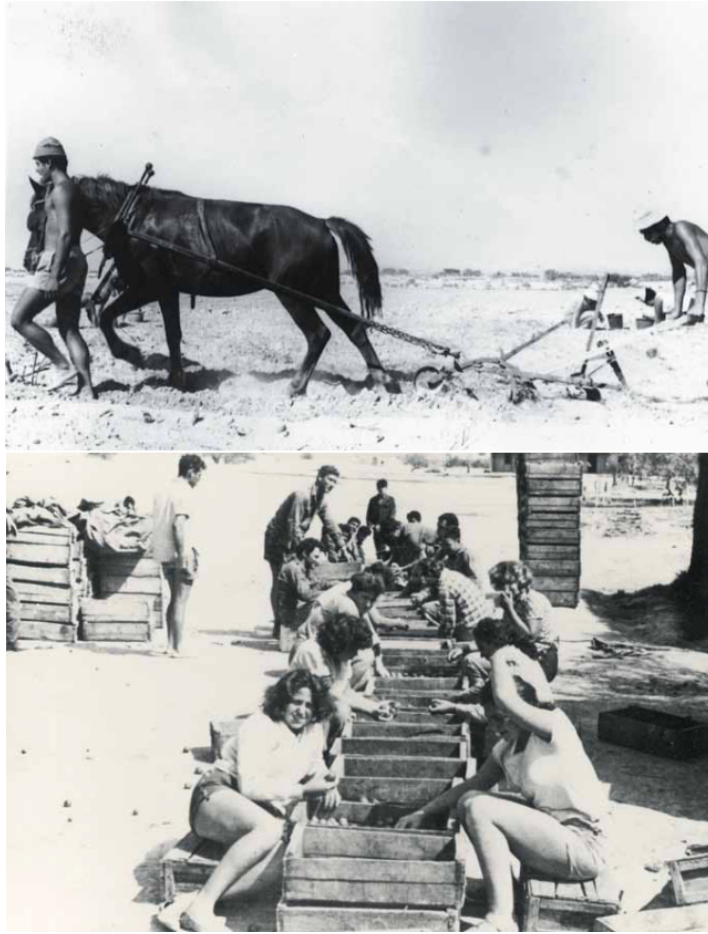


Figure 3: The minimalistic dress sense of early settlers in the Arabah. Above: Plowing; photo credit – Ein Yahav Archive. Below: Sorting cucumbers; photo credit – Abraham Kedem. Both photos reproduced from Navon (2012, 189).

Thais, in contrast, value a light skin, which indexes a life spent indoors, away from the fields. In contemporary Thailand, the archetype of both female and male beauty is the light-skinned European or East Asian, as opposed to the “black” (*dam*) type associated with Isaan, Malay and African bodies (Esara 2009). My co-workers perceived exposure to the sun as affecting the skin’s color and consistency not only in the short term, by tanning it, but also for the irreversible long term, by creating blotches and wrinkles. In recent years, Israeli attitudes have moved closer to Thai ones in response to the epidemic of skin cancer; as Figure 3 shows, Israeli workers now wear long pants and hats to minimize the dangers of exposure. But we can still be easily told apart from our Thai colleagues, who will usually also be wearing a long-sleeved shirt (often in two layers) and a broad-brimmed hat, much as they would doing similar

work at home; often, they will also cover their faces – minus the eyes – with a repurposed T-shirt or a mask.¹⁴ Even standing still, then, Thais cut a very “foreign” figure; seen from afar, to the Israeli eye they resemble swaddled mummies rather than people.

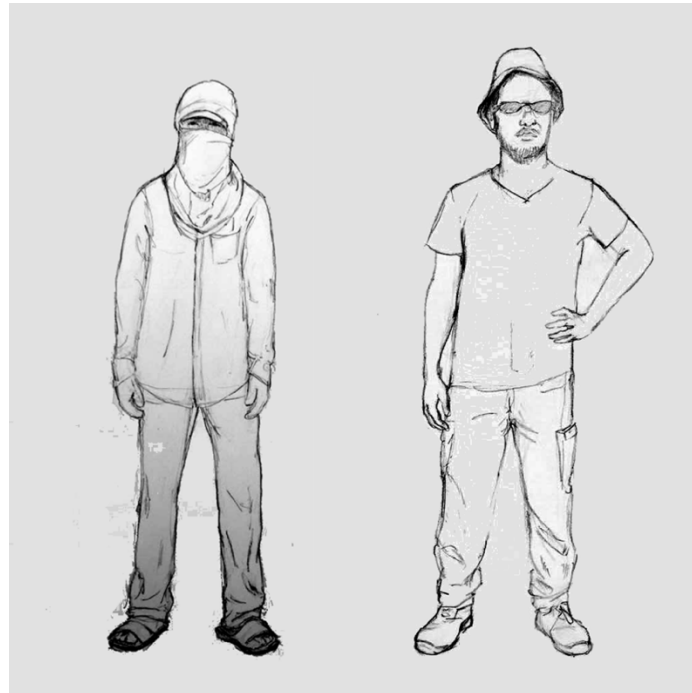


Figure 4: A Thai (left) and an Israeli dressed for farmwork. Illustration by Alma Itzhaky.

What Marcel Mauss (1973) calls “body hexis” joins dress sense and skin color in creating visual difference between Israeli and Thai workers. Any casual visitor to the greenhouse could observe obvious differences in how we approached the work. For me, planting was the most difficult task on the farm because of the low height at which it is carried out. Ya’ir purchases

¹⁴ The question of the functionality of these get-ups for the climates in which they are worn is difficult to answer. According to Hanna and Brown (1983, 270), the optimal choice for heat loss in hot-dry climates such as the Arabah is long, loose-fitting clothing, while in hot-humid climates like Isaan it is best to wear “the least amount possible” (Hanna and Brown 1983, 271). Ironically, each group seems to have adopted the clothing best adapted to the other’s habitat, but looked at diachronically, things are more complex. Until recently men doing farm labor in Thailand wore only a loincloth, and the indigenous people of the Negev and Arabah, the Bedouin, traditionally wear long, flowing robes. Taking into consideration not only heat tolerance but long-term skin health, which requires protection from the sun as well as from irritants like pesticides, covering up as fully as possible would appear advisable. On balance, then, the contemporary Thai outfit seems optimal for work in the Arabah – if one feels comfortable in it, that is.

tomato and pepper seedlings in large styrofoam trays, each containing about two hundred units; the trays are watered before planting and are quite heavy. The task of planting consists of moving while carrying one of these trays along, plucking a seedling at a time from the tray while taking care not to rip the plant from its roots, reaching down every twenty centimeters or so to a pre-punched hole in the earth, placing the seedling in the hole, scooping earth over it and then gently tamping it down. This labor process demands spending a great deal of time close to the ground while moving steadily ahead.

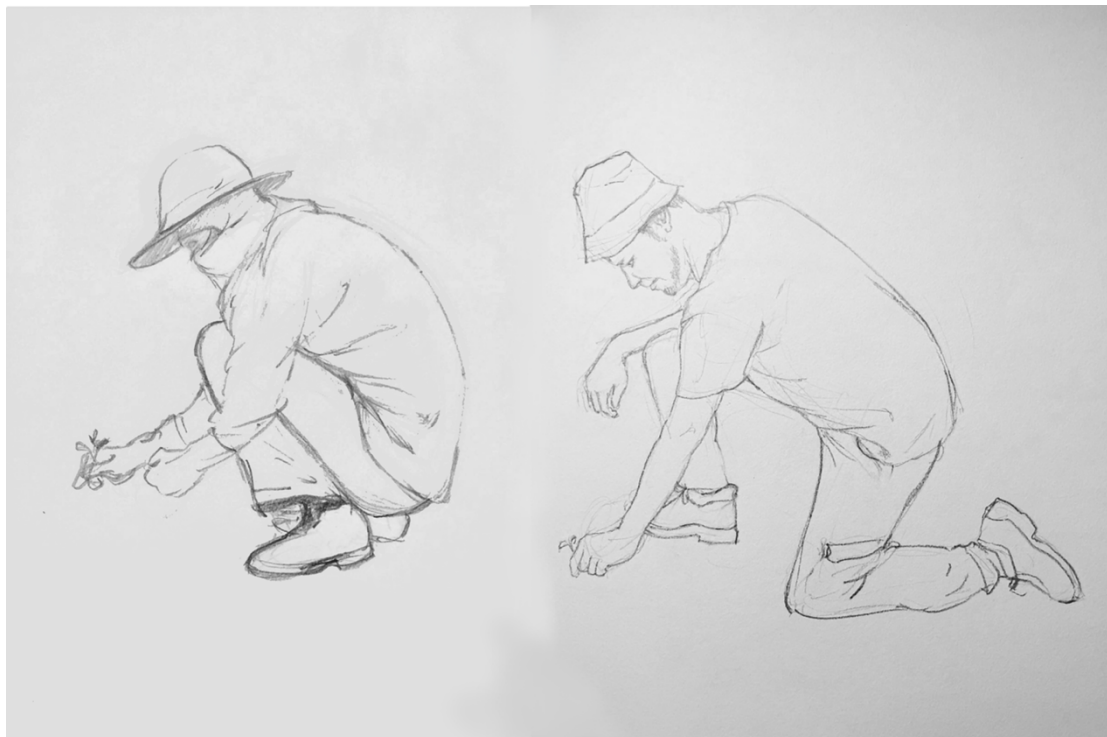


Figure 5: A Thai worker (left) and an Israeli worker engaged in planting. The Thai is crouching; the Israeli worker is kneeling. The planting tray, usually carried in the free hand or placed on the ground, is not pictured. Illustration by Alma Itzhaky.

The ideal bodily position for achieving this, if one has developed the necessary skills for it, is the crouch or deep squat (postures 114 and 127 in the typology designed by Hewes (1955)). A stable crouch enables one to work carefully close to the ground and get up easily to walk to the next hole. It is not the only position in which it is possible to work at ground level: alternatively, one can bend one (posture 126, Ibid.) or both knees (postures 102-4) to the ground, as I do (see Figure 5). Kneeling is a demanding and inefficient position to get in and

out of; it also cakes my pant legs with mud, causing discomfort and embarrassment. Towards noon, I grow tired and start crawling forward on my knees. My colleagues would never dream of saying anything but when we break for lunch, I feel a pang of humiliation for emerging from the same work so much dirtier than them.

In the West, and particularly in Zionism, the upright stance is valorized (Gilman 2014) and the postures like the deep squat associated with primitiveness and animality, and therefore denigrated. In Thailand, as in other Asian countries (Hewes 1955, 238), squatting is normative, and often used in situations where Westerners would prefer to sit, for example for eating. The muscular capabilities developed over a lifetime of squatting allow the Thais to carry out ground-level tasks such as planting without touching any part of their body to the earth except the soles of their feet, with a minimum of discomfort and back pain and while keeping themselves clear and clean of the dirt.

A final difference, which becomes more and more pronounced as the day wears on, is one of pace. After lunch, in the suffocating afternoon heat, I plant perhaps one row of tomatoes for every three completed by a Thai co-worker. Clearly, the difference is in part one of experience: both employers and employees agree that it takes at least a year, with its full annual round of agricultural tasks, to achieve an adequate level of skill for the work. Nevertheless, both parties also think of Thais as particularly fit and capable for agricultural labor. When I asked workers in interviews why they thought Israeli employers preferred to hire Thais, some replied that, being agriculturally skilled and accustomed to hot weather, Thais could do the work

better than Israelis. These characteristics were also mentioned by a representative of the Ministry of Employment at the orientation for departing workers I attended in Bangkok.¹⁵

Employers had a more complex and – given the lack of specialist discourse on agricultural labor relations – surprisingly uniform theory about the pace of Thai labor. The farmers I interviewed remarked that this pace differed from that of both Jews and Arabs, not necessarily in speed but in the aspects of steadiness and care. Workers of the latter two groups may start out working quite fast, but by midday they will have worn themselves out. From then on, their work is slow and careless, and potentially damaging to product, plant and greenhouse infrastructure. Thais, on the other hand, start out working relatively slowly but will maintain a steady pace throughout the day while taking care not to cause damage.¹⁶ Their steady pace ensures predictability and enables planning.

The distinction which groups Jews and Arabs together in contrast to Thais is notable, since in most other senses the two are starkly opposed: hired Jewish labor, mostly of middle-class youth before or directly after their army service, is highlighted in local public-relations efforts and subsidized through a government-subsidized employment scheme titled simply “Hebrew Labor,” while the labor of Bedouin Arabs is organized informally and temporarily

¹⁵ According to the data I received from IOM, 97% of TIC applicants indicated they had at least one year of experience in agricultural work, with an average of 9.04 years experience. However, of 5,654 applicants who indicated what crops they had experience with, 33% had only farmed rice and 86% noted some exclusive combination of the top four crops on the list, which include corn, tapioca and sugarcane in addition to rice. Of these, only corn is grown in Israel, and not in large quantities. We can surmise that the importance of experience, recognized by both employers and workers, lies not in knowledge of particular tasks but in more generalized capabilities – like body hexis and pacing.

¹⁶ Cf. Cohen (1999, 183): “Employers have found that the Thais are reliable workers, who persevere at work and carry it out carefully and responsibly but at a slow pace.”

through labor contractors who mobilize a workforce with no legal protections and is considered a much more severe breach of LSM ideology than Thai labor.¹⁷ In line with this ideology, employers imagine that their Arab workers are envious, resentful and prone to theft and sabotage.¹⁸ Jewish workers, by contrast, are seen as impatient and insolent, wanting “to manage the farm themselves;” despite the great differences between them, then, both Jews and Arabs are suspected of wanting to take their employer’s place in one way or the other. On the other hand, Jewish workers of urban background are seen as not having been socialized correctly for such work, unlike either Arabs or Thais.¹⁹

While this evaluation is rooted in real differences of background between Jewish, Arab and Thai workers, it also reflects the view, touched upon in Chapter 1, which sees Jews and Arabs as antagonistically united by a passionate struggle over the land, competing over its affections through offerings of sweat, tears and blood. This ideology, with its double prescription of “Hebrew labor” and “self-labor,” suspects that both Jews and Arabs aspire to an immediate relationship to the land – to ownership. Thai migrants have no place in this ideological scheme; without knowing much about their notions of the value of land and work, their employers are free to imagine them as possessing a natural predilection for monotonous, backbreaking labor in someone else’s service.

¹⁷ Ya’ir Sadot hired Bedouin laborers from time to time, but I never had the chance to speak to them or learn much about their experience at work.

¹⁸ See Taussig (1991, 242–54) for how farmers of a dominant race-class fraction fantasize themselves as victims of their laborers’ resentment, through a similar redoubling of perspectives.

¹⁹ One farmer told me that as a rural person, he felt an affinity with Thai workers which he did not share with urban Israelis. This is surprising, seeing as the Israeli “peasantry” is probably the most socially proximate to the urban, educated middle class of any farming stratum in the world; this farmer himself had close kin in the city.

Employers see this supposed predilection as deriving from two social facts: their employees' upbringing in poor rural areas, which has supposedly prepared and inured them for hard farm labor from an early age;²⁰ and their "Buddhist culture," which is seen as fatalistic, accepting of hardship and social subordination as karmic retribution for past sins. One employer from the occupied Golan Heights went so far as to explain to me that Thais treat repetitive work as "meditation."²¹ While this last belief is fanciful – meditation is not common practice among lay working-class Isaanites and I never met workers who took any active interest in it, much less anyone who considered work a meditative practice – but there is a troubling kernel of truth here nevertheless. As we have already seen and as will continue to see, Thai workers do understand their hierarchical relationships with employers by way of a cultural logic which enjoins them to work hard and refrain from making demands. What the farmers' ideological construction misses, even if they recognize it in practice, is the paternalistic setting of this karmic logic, which also obliges *them* to treat their employees with consideration and respect.

Evening

Sometime between three and four in the afternoon, the temperature in the greenhouse mysteriously drops. A sort of second wind allows me to pick up my flagging pace for one last run of work. Soon the light is too weak for planting; we return the unfinished trays to their gray

²⁰ Compare A. V. Chayanov (paraphrased by Scott 1976, 13), who argued that peasants in land-poor regions can work "unimaginably hard and long for the smallest increments in production." Isaan is land-poor, though it has only become so recently; the region's "land frontier," or limit of cultivation, was reached in the mid-1980s (Rigg, Salamanca, and Parnwell 2012, 1474). For discussions of the political and cultural implications of land availability in Southeast Asia, see Geertz (1963), Scott (2009), and Li (2014).

²¹ The use of Orientalistic tropes to cast racialized migrant workers as "spiritually" fit for their labors is also a feature of the employment of Indian programmers in Germany (Amrute 2016, 104).

metal frame on the trailer bed, which the tractor has hauled to the center of the greenhouse, and hop on for the trip out. When we reach the gate, I slip off the trailer to open it, ensuring the flap doesn't snag on the tip of the frame, and jump back on as the tractor clears the doorway. Outside the greenhouse the wind is blowing and the temperature is dropping. Soaked with sweat, I pull on a sweatshirt and huddle close to the other workers, who are sitting cross-legged on a pallet in the center of the trailer. I sit facing east to the mountains bathing in the intense ruby light of sunset. Later, in my room, I will struggle against fatigue to write my fieldnotes. But right now I feel good, and I think my fellow riders do too, relaxing their aching muscles, anticipating dinner, a beer, perhaps a call home, some TV, and bed. The best part of the workday, by far, is its end.

Following the daily round from the quarters to one field, then another, then back home, this chapter has shown the porosity of the partition separating the "abode of production" from the world around it. It has demonstrated how the labor process – its organization, its language, its associated sartorial and hexic practices – all help to reproduce migrants' isolation from the *moshav* around them and Israeli society more generally, and thus their difference. Though by and large involuntary, this isolation is also the paradoxical outcome of a balance of power in which workers grasp for autonomy and construct a relationship with their employer based as much on norms of appropriate hierarchical relations brought from home as on locally prevailing ones. In some respects, the Sadot farm is a microcosm with its own rules, where Ya'ir's concern for profits combines with the strictures of the migration regime and with his decades of experience working with Thais to provide the latter with a modicum of what they might call *itsaraphap*, freedom to do things the way they like, spared of the disciplining Israeli gaze. But this boundedness helps to reproduce the difference upon which the segregated community depends, in ways which will become clear in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Neutrality and Invisibility in Ein Amal

We now leave the scale of the farm, zooming out to the scales of *moshav* Ein Amal, the Arabah region and the nation-state of Israel. As I have already noted, this is not exactly the same as leaving the gates of the abode of production, since the farm is both a residential and an economic unit and since it is geographically non-contiguous, spread over some kilometers, between the homestead and the fields, which are separated by public spaces. This is, however, a move from the private realm, in one of the word's senses, into the light of the public sphere. While common in the 19th-century imaginary in which Marx participated critically, the sense in which the workplace is "private" is not trivial when viewed through the intellectual lenses prevailing today. In feminist readings, for example, the privacy of the family home can serve to conceal scenes more horrific than any on display in the factory (Adelman 2004), and it may be precisely because of its adjacency to and close congruence with the family unit that the Arabah family farm remains "private," not only in the legal sense but in the sense of an intimate space whose insulation from public scrutiny is legitimized and respected. As we have seen in the previous chapters, paternalistic relations ideologically modeled on the family, banished from the public space of the Arabah, have managed to survive within this private space, as do a measure of autonomy and collective organization, all strongly influenced by Thai norms. But the only Thai flag I ever saw hoisted in the Arabah was flapping atop a flatbed trailer hitched to a tractor, taking workers home after a day in the fields.

Everywhere outside the workplace, including that mobile and unusually visible workplace, the flatbed trailer, things are very different. It is not that Thai migrants do not bring their cultural norms into play when traversing and interacting with this space. Rather, as this chapter will show, the bashful discretion which they display in these interactions can be interpreted as corresponding to the very Thai norm of “saving face” – with the face in question being that of the *moshav*, a community to which they both do and do not belong. This is a complicated feat to pull off, because the face which this community presents to the national community remains invested in the idea of “Hebrew labor.” The actual insignificance of this labor is a public secret in Taussig’s (1999) sense, a fact which everybody knows – within the community and outside it – but which may only be admitted publicly in certain, cautiously guarded contexts, while images which dissemble and disavow it are preferentially disseminated, even flaunted.

This dissembling or disavowal, in which the Israeli and Thai residents of Ein Amal collude, is practiced through two closely interrelated mechanisms which I call neutralization and invisibilization. As the reader will recall, labor settlement ideology valorizes and even heroizes “Hebrew” labor while positing Arab labor as a dark double which endangers the national project precisely due to its equally strong claim to the land. Within this ethno-nationalist ideology there is absolutely no room through which non-Jews, especially poor, conspicuous non-Jews like Thai migrant workers, might wiggle into the community; on the contrary, if their presence becomes too obviously persistent it can only be judged as a “demographic threat,” that is, as essentially equivalent to an Arab presence. Hence the importance of maneuvering them into a neutral position with regard to this binary. As in the popular Israeli children’s story in which a green man living in an all-green world suddenly comes upon a blue man and aggressively asks him “what are you doing here?” (Geffen 1978),

migrants too are obliged to answer: “Me? I’m from a different story”. The various forms of difference generated at the scale of the farm, which we have explored in Chapter 2, help them to produce and substantiate this answer.

Invisibility goes hand-in-hand with neutrality. To be politically innocuous, worthy of neither praise nor blame, is already to be halfway invisible in such a polarized ideological field. But whereas neutrality is something that Israelis must construct with regard to a field of which migrants are only vaguely aware, invisibility is something the Thais help to construct as they pick up, with a finely tuned tact brought from home, on none-too-subtle cues which the equally tactless Israelis scatter profusely. Furthermore, if neutrality is an effect produced primarily through intentionally disseminated textual and audiovisual artifacts, that is, through a public culture generated exclusively by Israelis, invisibility is a product of the “imponderabilia of everyday life,” of the aspects of culture implicated in “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997) which simply cannot be produced without the active participation of the Thai half of the local population.

Things get more complicated (especially for me) when “Thai culture” is temporarily de-invisibilized, brought out of obscurity in carefully controlled ways in order to further the smooth reproduction of Thai-Israeli relations at all scales – from the farm to the nation. Unlike many ethnographers who must juggle the “offstage” and “on-display” aspects of their subjects’ lives (Shryock 2004c), I am bothered not by the disparity between the two but rather by their uncanny similarity. Without subscribing to the implicit social theories which underlie these presentations, I cannot in good faith disagree with many of the characteristics which such interventions ascribe to “the Thai personality,” at least as it is manifested in most interactions with Israelis, including deference to authority, eagerness to please others and meticulous attention to the surface aspects of social interaction. It is not only that I have witnessed these

characteristics myself; they are also ubiquitous in the writing of other anthropologists on Thailand, some of whom are at least as uncomfortable as I am about the situation this puts them in.¹ As a writer and activist aspiring to promote just and equal treatment for Thais in Israel, as well as an anthropologist who believes this is better served by presenting them in all their complexity rather than painting the kind of upbeat multicultural display Andrew Shryock calls “Identity 1” (Shryock 2004a, 296–99), I am committed to the de-invisibilization of all (well, almost all) relevant aspects of “Thai culture.” But at the times when it seems my expertise might be used to reproduce their oppression – a quick dip into the limelight which will only serve to push them more securely back into the dark – I do get worried.

Perhaps a sort of tonic against this sort of cooptation, I begin the chapter with a sketch, chock-full of dismal detail, of the draconian and often mean-spirited regime to which Thai migrants in Israel are subjected by the state and a constellation of allied actors. The migration regime mediates between the state’s interest in preventing the emergence of a “demographic problem” and employers’ need for cheap labor by making the latter responsible for preventing their workers’ permanent settlement in the country. I then return to the *moshav* to discuss patterns of informal temporal and spatial segregation. I utilize the loci of the pool and the “Thai shop,” respectively, to discuss how possible flashpoints of sexuality and consumption are defused. After returning briefly to the regional and national scales to observe how thoroughly neutrality and invisibility have been achieved at these levels, I end with a discussion of how the

¹ See Jackson (2004) for a thorough and reflexive review of anthropological observations of the “distinctiveness of Thai forms of power,” and Aulino (2019, 130–32) for a discussion of the challenge Thai culture poses to egalitarian-minded anthropologists.

migration regime enlists cultural difference for the reproduction of subordination by examining the contents of a cultural competence brochure directed at employers.

The migration regime

Since it opened its gates to global migration flows in the early 1990's, the Israeli state's declared objective has been to prevent the permanent settlement of non-Jewish immigrants at all costs (Kemp and Rajiman 2008). While politicians sometimes pay lip service to the rights of migrant workers (see Bennett 2013), in practice legal protections for migrants rights are routinely and flagrantly flouted; rather than an oversight by officials neglectful of their duties towards Israeli and foreign workers, the abandonment of migrants to extreme exploitation can better understood as an indirect subsidy (Shauer and Kaminer 2014) meant to indemnify employers for the cost of the restrictions imposed on them by the regime. Subsequently, workers themselves bear the brunt of these costs: in addition to the suffering engendered by having to leave home for a faraway country where they will do hard labor for years on end, they must swallow the injury of illegally low pay and substandard living conditions as well as the insult of being cordoned off from any form of social participation which might conceivably encourage permanent settlement. Their contractual obligations are most draconian in this regard, barring migrants from engaging in marital relationships or having children in Israel and denying them the right to choose their place of residence and employer. The same contracts, and the law, also promise Thai workers a minimum wage equal to that of their Israeli counterparts, occupational safety and health protections, decent living conditions and freedom from sexual assault. But while the former stipulations are enforced to the letter, on pain of deportation, the latter are violated regularly and with impunity.

The lives of Thai migrants in Israel are governed not by the rule of law, but by what researchers call a "migration regime." According to one sociological definition, a regime is a set

of “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area,” in this case migration (Krasner 1982; in Boucher and Gest 2015, 2–3). This set is an emergent outcome rather than the direct result of one actor’s planning, though the asymmetries of power between these actors certainly influence its contours. At the national and trans-national levels, the Thai-Israeli migration regime is today made up of a bewilderingly large array of actors. Following the 2012 bilateral reform, the recruitment of workers in Thailand was taken out of the hands of for-profit intermediaries and placed in those of the non-profit International Organization for Migration (IOM), an intergovernmental organization providing migration-related services to states around the world (Pécoud 2018). On the Israeli side, manpower agencies retain a residual role, handling bureaucratic and disciplinary issues. A quasi-non-governmental organization, the Center for International Migration and Integration (CIMI), is tasked with oversight. A veteran independent human-rights NGO, Workers’ Hotline, with which I have cooperated closely, advocates and lobbies on behalf of Thai migrants and provides free legal advice to migrants; several other NGOs take a more circumscribed role, and the Thai embassy also affects an interest in workers. The interests of employers are represented by umbrella organizations including the Moshavim Movement, the Kibbutz Movement and the Farmers’ Federation of Israel, as well as the state Ministry of Agriculture. Immigration law is enforced by the Ministry of the Interior’s Population and Immigration Authority (PIBA), and occupational health and safety regulations are (theoretically) enforced by the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services.

Despite its internal complexity, which is covered exhaustively in the work of Yahel Kurlander (Ash-Kurlander 2014a; Kurlander 2019), the regime confronts migrants as unitary and darkly predictable. Thus, in 2016, the legal minimum wage was 25 New Israeli Shekels an

hour (US \$6.33 at January 2016 rates), 31.25 NIS (\$7.91) for overtime between eight and ten hours a day, and 37.50 NIS (\$9.49) for each of the next two hours – with work of over twelve hours a day prohibited.² The workers I knew were aware of this, but they also knew well that the prevailing wage in Ein Amal was much lower, around 18 NIS (\$4.56) per hour and 22 NIS (\$5.56) for all overtime, including on days that stretched much longer than the law allowed.³ Deductions of dubious legality were made from their wages, and peripherals such as pension payments usually denied. Of the nine officially stipulated annual vacation days for Thai holidays, only four were actually observed: the King's and Queen's birthdays (5 December and 12 August), the calendrical New Year, and Songkran, the Thai New Year (13 April). Health and safety regulations which require that employers provide proper masks and other protective gear for work with pesticides and let workers shower after such work were widely flouted, with possibly serious effects on workers' health (Kashti 2017). Similarly, the few female workers could not expect to be protected from sexual harassment and assault by employers and fellow workers.⁴

Workers on different farms in Ein Amal, in constant communication with each other on weekend get-togethers (see below) and through social media, were well aware of the

² See NII (n.d.) for minimum wage rates and BOI (n.d.) for exchange rates.

³ My anecdotal figures are corroborated by those of Kushnirovich and Rajjman (2017, 27–28), based on a survey of 25 Thai migrants in Israel carried out in 2016. They found that the average worker earned 4,792 NIS a month after taxes, worked 9.3 hours a day, and had 3.7 days off a month (thus working 26.74 days in an average month). From this I calculate an average hourly wage – including overtime hours – of 19.27 NIS.

⁴ Given the trust vested in me by my employer, I did not see fit to actively collect data pertaining to the legality of employment practices on the Sadot farm. The findings in this section are, in the main, based on earlier quantitative and qualitative research I undertook with Noa Shauer of Workers' Hotline (Shauer and Kaminer 2014) and on the public sources referred to, but my participant-observation data are in line with these, with the exception of the data on sexual harassment and assault of women workers, as I did not meet any female workers. For additional evidence on the violation of wage laws as well as on living conditions and other violations, see HRW (2015) and Kushnirovich and Rajjman (2017). For sexual assault and harassment, see Wexler (2013) and Bsoul (2016).

uniformity of wage and safety standards across the *moshav* and elsewhere in the region. Implicitly recognizing that in practice these standards were set by the migration regime rather than the letter of the law, the workers I knew judged employers as “good” or “bad” not by the wages they provided, but rather by their demeanor towards workers and the degree of trust they fostered.

In contrast to its bald-faced neglect of labor law enforcement, since the institution of the “closed skies” policy at the turn of the millennium (see Chapter 2) the Israeli government has taken a tough stance on the enforcement of the laws and regulations intended to prevent the settlement of migrants, which had previously been a dead letter (Kemp and Rajjman 2008; Ash-Kurlander 2014a). On its own terms, this move has been entirely successful: the number of Thai migrants living in the country without documentation is very small⁵ and the number who have settled permanently and legally through marriage with Israelis is negligible.⁶ The success of the policy, however, has depended on a delegation – an outsourcing, so to speak – of the policy’s enforcement, placing the responsibility for migrants’ actions squarely on the shoulders of their employers.

⁵ According to a report by PIBA and CIMI, in September of 2016 there were 21,618 documented or “regular” agricultural workers in Israel, almost all of them from Thailand. Only 648 workers who had previously held permits for farm work were currently in Israel without a permit, less than 3% of the documented population. Compare this to 26% in the caregiving sector, 14% in agriculture and 25% among “expert” workers (my calculations from PIBA and CIMI 2016, 7–8).

⁶ I have been unable to find data on the number of Thais living in Israel legally by way of marriage to Israeli citizens. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is very rare, at least among male migrants; my interlocutors in the Arabah knew of only one who had gained residence status through marriage to an Israeli woman. Somewhat more common are marriages of Thai women to Israeli men, usually formed through the men’s tourism in Thailand (this is not necessarily “sex tourism” in the strict sense, but see Bruker (2007) for that phenomenon). Due to their bilingualism and legal status in Israel, some Thai women married to Israelis, or divorced from them, take up intermediary positions in the migration regime, for example in manpower agencies or human rights organizations.

The juridical basis for this outsourcing was laid in the 1990s, in the arrangement which “bound” migrant workers in the country to a particular employer (Kemp and Raijman 2008, 90–98, 2014). Since that decade, employers have been assigned a yearly number of “visas” – that is, a quota of workers – based on the size of their holdings and the crops they cultivate. In theory, the state has reserved the right to dock this quota when workers left their employers or overstayed their visas since this time, but in practice violations were roundly ignored. Beginning at the turn of the millennium, the government’s new “closed skies” policy entailed a crackdown on passport fraud, which had heretofore commonly enabled Thais to enter Israel more times than legally allowed and to migrate together with spouses and other relatives. At the same time, quotas were intentionally tightened to create a labor squeeze (Kemp and Raijman 2008, 123).

As the flow of Palestinian labor dried up even further due to the Second Intifada and the subsequent lockdowns of the Occupied Territories, which lasted from late 2000 to 2004, the sanction represented by the docking of visas became more economically damaging for employers. By imposing it, the government effectively turned employers into enforcers, willy-nilly transforming them into pillars of the migration regime. Legally speaking, of course, employers have not been granted powers of law enforcement, such as the power to impound passports, to regulate workers’ freedom of movement or to forcibly deport them. In practice, however, employers have avoided the economic costs of losing a visa by arrogating these powers to themselves, surveilling their workers’ movements and applying

pressure to “runaways” to return to their former workplaces.⁷ The violation of workers’ rights to freedom of movement and contract, thus, is just as prevalent and as structural a part of the regime as the violation of their rights to the minimum wage and to standard living conditions.

In the interest of controlling the migrant population, then, the state has imparted to the migration regime an extreme degree of rigidity, which makes it very difficult for workers to change their workplace; at the same time, it makes it almost impossible for employers to dismiss their workers. An employer who wishes to let a worker go has two alternatives. One is to make a formal request to send the worker back to Thailand. Such a request will not be accepted on grounds of incompetence alone; it is usually granted only when a worker is suspected of a crime. The second option is to find another employer willing to take the worker off his boss’s hands; however, other employers will usually be unwilling to use up one of their “visas” on a worker considered problematic. In practice, workers themselves usually initiate such exchanges by leaving their employers to become “runaways” or “fugitives” (*barhanim* (H))⁸ at another farm where they prefer to work, whether because they have relatives or friends there, because relations with the boss are better, or because more overtime can be had. The situation is then regularized by the two employers, often through the intervention of the manpower agency contracted by one or the other.

⁷ In the early days of the “closed skies” policy, it appears that illegal practices such as passport confiscation and even the kidnapping and forced deportation of workers were common (Efrati 2005). According to Workers’ Hotline (pers. comm.), who mounted a campaign against such practices, and Human Rights Watch (2015), they are not prevalent anymore.

⁸ Thai workers in Israel are not slaves but belong to a different category of unfree labor (Calvão 2016). That said, Israeli officialdom’s casual use of slavery-redolent vocabulary – *kvila*, usually translated as “binding,” literally means “chaining” – is astounding.

The role assigned to farmers by the migration regime is doubly contradictory. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the near-impossibility of sacking workers and the collective cohesion forced upon them by their segregation give them a considerable degree of control over the labor process, which has economic costs for their bosses. In this sense, employers would be better served by a more flexible labor market, which would enhance their freedom to choose workers as they see fit through the deployment of social networks in Isaan and to fire incompetent or insubordinate workers at will. This interest can be, and is, expressed in the language of classical liberalism: employers who adopt it see both TIC and the policy which punishes employers for their workers' infractions as examples of punitive government interventionism (Shauer and Kaminer 2014, 11). But the severe restrictions on their workers' freedom of contract and movement also entail economic advantages, which compound the indirect subsidy afforded by the non-enforcement of labor law. In a freer labor market, wages would probably rise, since the prevailing wage in the Arabah is not only lower than the legal minimum, but also far lower than the prevailing wage for unskilled work in competitive parts of the labor market. This differential, pocketed as profit by the bosses, would be impossible to sustain if workers were able to sell their labor-power to the highest bidder even within the agrarian sector, never mind the entire national economy.

The farmers of the Arabah also find themselves embodying conflicting positions insofar as they are both individual businessmen and members of a community whose collective identity remains invested in the ideology of "pure settlement" and in denying membership to non-Jews on either equal or unequal terms. Their representatives loudly support the state's objective of preventing the permanent settlement of migrants, publicly highlighting their own commitment to making sure no Thai is left behind. Thus, in a lobbying document arguing for the enlargement of employment quotas, the Central Arava Regional Council (2006, 4) declared

that “the behavioral norms characteristic of workers in the Arabah, unlike other parts of the country, do not include intermarriage, childbirth and lengthy periods of illegal residence in the country.”⁹ This is not simply a matter of outward-facing rhetoric; while some employers do enable valued workers to overstay their visas and continue working without documentation, farmers share in the general anxiety about the danger that Thais might settle down in the community, and grant this privilege only rarely.¹⁰

One method for understanding this situation can be extracted from the parallel Marxist analyses developed by Michael Burawoy (1976) and Claude Meillassoux (1981) in the context of labor migration under racist and imperial regimes in sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-twentieth century. Both writers observed that wage differentials between itinerant black and permanent white workers were sustained by legal and ideological systems which segregated the two groups at work and their families at home. Burawoy developed the distinction, which I have already used, between day-to-day “maintenance” and intergenerational “renewal” to discuss these two aspects of the reproduction of labor-power. Proceeding from the loose assumption that the wage must cover the costs of both aspects of reproduction, Burawoy showed that wage differentials could be upheld only so long as the renewal of white and black labor-powers was separated in space to prevent the reproductive costs of the two groups from growing closer through the use of common infrastructure and the adoption of similar

⁹ The allusion to “other parts of the country” seems not to refer to Thai farmworkers elsewhere, but to other migrant groups, which have been targeted as “demographic threats” in the last two decades. See Shapiro (2013); Kalir (2015).

¹⁰ Their hesitation to do so does not result from fear of legal sanction. As explained above, the state’s only effective means of coercing employers into making sure that their workers do not overstay their visas is the threat of docking one “visa” from their quota of workers. Since in such cases the farmer continues to employ the worker in undocumented fashion, this penalty is vitiated.

consumption practices. Maintenance of labor-power posed a greater challenge, since in many sectors – construction, services, and fresh food farming – production and consumption could not be geographically separated. Here institutionalized systems like apartheid and Jim Crow played their roles by segregating activities such as food preparation and recreation, in order that black labor-power might be stably maintained at a lower price and a cheaper quality. Meillassoux proposes a model similar to Burawoy's, with two important differences: first, he theorizes the possibility that the labor-power of migrant workers is reproduced in part through non-market activities like subsistence farming (Meillassoux 1981, 95), and second, he raises the grim possibility that the wage does *not* actually cover the costs of maintaining and renewing labor-power; in such cases of "over-exploitation" labor-power is not actually reproduced but depleted, as migrant workers and their families are gradually pushed into destitution (Meillassoux 1981, 127-37).¹¹

The question of whether migrant labor-power is in fact being reproduced or rather unsustainably extracted will be deferred to the next chapter, in which I look more closely at what the remittances of migrants can and cannot buy back home. For now the analyses offered by Burawoy and Meillassoux can help us better understand the harmonization of what I have heretofore characterized a bit simplistically as employers' ideological and economic interests. If

¹¹ Another influential theory of "split labor markets" was proposed by Edna Bonacich (1972), who suggested that such markets were the result of a compromise between politically powerful sectors of the working class and capital. While there is ample evidence for such a dynamic in historical situations such the white labor movement's push for Chinese exclusion in the US West in the late 19th-century (Bonacich 1972, 555) and apartheid South Africa (Bonacich 1972, 556) as well as in the early history of the LSM (Shafir 1989), Israeli trade unions have been weak for decades, since before the mass importation of migrant workers began, and have not played any important role in the design of the migration regime they face.

Thai migrants were to permanently settle in the Arabah and raise families there, rather than living in barracks where much of the maintenance of labor-power is taken care of communally, cheaply and efficiently, the costs of renewing labor-power would rise steeply.¹² But even if their families were to stay in Thailand, the adoption of Israeli-style consumption habits by migrants would lead to a rise in maintenance costs; in either case there would be strong upward pressure on wages. The reproduction of difference emerges from this analysis as necessary not only for the ideological sustenance of labor settlement but also for its economic viability. True, workers have been able to achieve a degree of control over the labor process as a result of their segregation, an autonomy with costs which employers are loath to bear; but as this autonomy is coupled with isolation, it contributes to the production of difference and thus, indirectly, to the reproduction of their bosses' profits as well as of their way of life.

I was already thinking along these lines while doing fieldwork and was glad for a chance to test my ideas on a farmer who once picked me up one day as I was hitchhiking from Ein Amal to another settlement in the Arabah. Upon hearing about my fieldwork objectives, he immediately offered that I come to his farm, on yet another *moshav*, to undertake some applied research. The questions that were bothering him were startlingly similar to the issues I was

¹² Many employers, and some researchers (E. Cohen 1999, 202), hold that Thais “do not wish” to settle down permanently in Israel. The migrants I spoke to about the topic tended to agree, but treated the question as a wildly hypothetical one, as they realized that such a possibility was not likely to ever materialize. Shoham’s interlocutors were more willing to entertain the scenario: one remarked that “many, many people would like to move then. All the villagers here will go there.” According to another, it would be good “if this was possible because it’s better than in Thailand, the government can govern the people very well; unlike in Thailand we are indirect slaves for the government.” The political stakes were clear to another interviewee, who remarked, “I am not sure the Israeli people will accept Thais. Israeli people have a lot of money, they are the employers, and we are just workers. [...] If they will employ Israelis they will have to pay them more money, this is why they hire Thai workers” (Shoham 2017, 66–67).

mulling over. Why, he wanted to know, were his workers sending less and less of their money home, and spending more and more of it in Israel? Increasing drunkenness was one result, but he seemed more disconcerted by such practices as the keeping of pet dogs. How could they afford to feed them, and why would they want to, given that this wasn't something they did at home, and how could they be talked out of it? Eager to test my intuition, I asked Eitan if he thought the problem was that the Thais wanted to become like Israelis. "Yes!" he agreed. "That's exactly it."

Saving the Arabah's face: Segregation and avoidance

Timothy Pachirat's ethnography *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (2011) deals with the ways that marginalized people and the stigmatized jobs they do are hidden away from those who enjoy the products and profits of their labor. The Nebraska slaughterhouse in which Pachirat did his research alongside migrant workers was ensconced in both material and legal layers of protection designed to deflect inquiring eyes. The situation in Ein Amal is both similar and different: here too, the people doing the labor are marginalized — for the political and economic reasons detailed above — but the work itself is neither stigmatized nor hidden away, nor can it be so long as this remains a settlement dependent on agriculture for its livelihood and legitimacy. This situation requires a subtler "politics of sight" than the one discovered by Pachirat, a politics in which marginalized workers must actively take part if it is to successfully achieve its goals of neutralization and invisibilization. The forms of difference produced by the labor process and the migration regime on their own are not enough.

In this section, I show how the segregation of time and space is achieved at the scale of the *moshav* as well as (more briefly) at the regional scale of the Arabah and in the yet larger space of the Israeli nation-state. Two sites — the pool and the Thai shop — will be the foci of a

more sustained discussion, enabling me to delve deeper into two spheres which are closely tied to the reproduction of labor-power and sources of potentially problematic visibility and non-neutrality: sexuality and consumption. By and large, the segregation of these spheres is informal, enabling Israelis to imagine that it is mutually agreed, but the reality is less convenient. In this reality, migrants are motivated by Thai norms of hierarchy which demand that they participate in “saving the face” of the community: where the maintenance of this face demands their invisibility, they do their best to become invisible. The presentation of the community as a purely Israeli one, free of exploitation anxiety, thus requires the cooperation of those it wishes to exclude and ignore. A tension is drawn between the community in the analytical sense¹³ — which must include Thai migrants, since they are actively involved in the work of reproducing it — and the community which defines itself through their exclusion. The partial resolution of this tension, through a very partial construal of “Thai culture,” will be discussed in the next section.

As we have seen in Chapter 3, private holdings in Ein Amal are discontinuous: farmhouses, operational areas and workers’ quarters are clustered closely together on small homesteads in the center of the settlement.¹⁴ Fields are assigned based on a principle of equal quality, such that a farmer like Ya’ir may have greenhouses in several locations around the

¹³ My reference to “community in the analytical sense” harks specifically back to Max Gluckman’s “Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand” (1940). Gluckman argued for an analytical conception of community which would include members of racial groups which the hegemonic ideology would conceive as belonging to different communities: “That Zulu and Europeans could co-operate in the celebration at the bridge shows that they form together a community with specific modes of behaviour to one another. Only by insisting on this point can one begin to understand the[ir] behaviour” (Gluckman 1940, 10).

¹⁴ In some *moshavim*, and most *kibbutzim*, migrant workers are all housed together in one segregated neighborhood rather than spread out on their employers’ homesteads (E. Cohen 1999, 189).

settlement, sometimes as far as five or six kilometers from the homestead. Workers transiting to the fields and back on slow-moving flatbed trailers hooked to tractors must make use of roads that pass through the center of the *moshav*, becoming visible in its most public spaces.

But just because the workers are visible doesn't mean that many Israelis are there to see them: work is structured in order to make optimal use of the cool hours and limited by the darkness of night. The workday begins at sunrise and ends at sunset, though work in the packinghouses - some of which are in the operational areas of the homesteads and some in an industrial zone on the outskirts of the *moshav* - can go on into the night. During the broiling days of the long summer work stops during the hottest hours of the early afternoon. Thus, Thais can be seen moving through the streets very early in the morning, in the evening, as well as - in the summer - around noon and again in the early afternoon, on the way to their siesta and back. The movements of the non-farming population of Ein Amal take place at complementary hours: they leave for work and school in the mid-morning and return in the mid-afternoon. Figure 1 represents this diurnal segregation schematically. As it shows, with the exception of a certain amount of overlap on winter afternoons, the different rhythms of Israeli and Thai work on the *moshav* have the effect of putting each one out of the other's way.

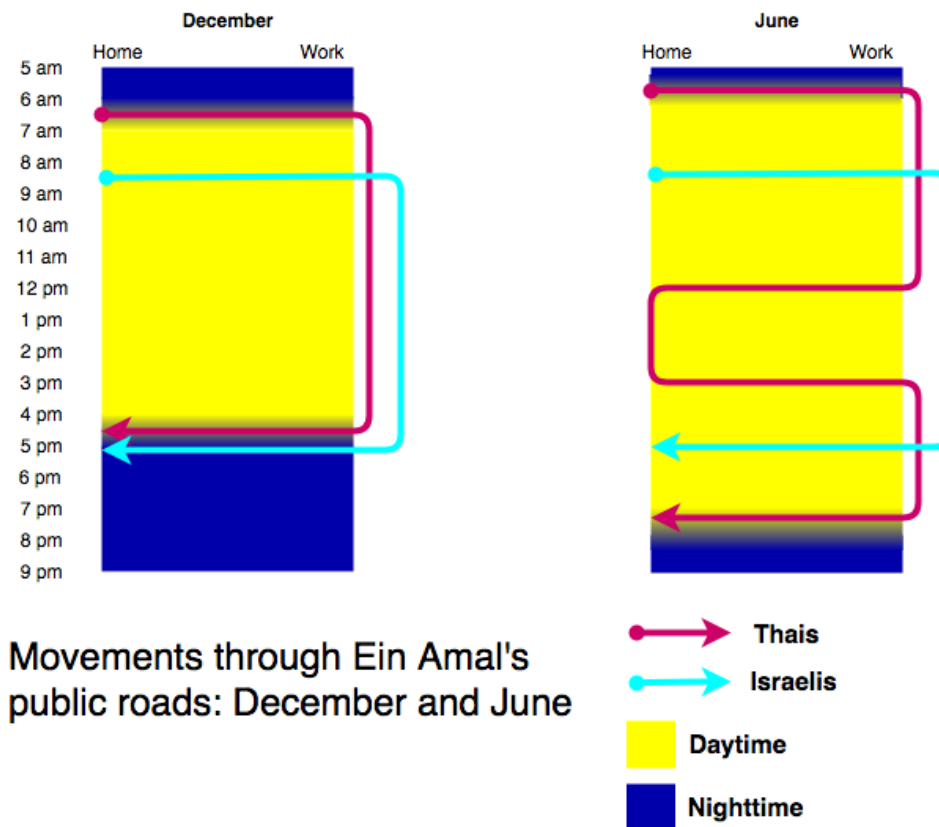


Figure 6: Thai and Israeli movements through Ein Amal on a diurnal scale

At first glance, this result is fortuitous. But a closer look reveals the power relationships involved. The work and school day of the Israelis is unaffected by seasonal variations because it takes place indoors, where air conditioning makes for pleasant weather year-round. Work is generally limited to eight hours, the standard workday imposed by the legal premium on overtime and the division of reproductive labor which requires women to adjust their workday to childcare needs (Shnider 2014). The workday of Thai migrants, conversely, is limited by climactic factors, but not by either the law or the need to renew the supply of labor-power – a task carried out by their kin in Isaan (see Chapter 5). Farmworkers labor out of doors; hardy and determined as they may be, they simply cannot work during the hottest hours of the hottest months, when temperatures in the greenhouses rise above 55° Celsius. Given both the general shortage of manpower and the illegally low price of their labor-power, employers are generally happy to grant overtime and the workday is almost always over ten hours long.

Thais do, however, have time off in the evenings and on Saturdays.¹⁵ When they and the Israeli residents of Ein Amal are off work, opportunities for more intensive interaction arise, and in these contexts informal segregation comes into its own. Much like the individual household, the entire *moshav* can be schematically divided into spaces that are perceived as belonging to Thais and others pertaining to Israelis. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the domestic space where the most intimate reproductive functions of the Israeli family take place is off-limits to Thais. So, too, is the most intimate of public spaces, where erotic attractivity is displayed and the theater of courting takes place – the swimming pool.

In many *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*, the swimming pool is the center of social life during the long summer; indeed, luxurious swimming pools have become a symbol of the labor settlement movement's aristocratic status, since urbanites and especially the Mizrahi residents of the nearby development towns were deprived of such amenities until much later (Ashkenazi 2017). The adoration of the near-naked, athletic settler body, which we have touched upon in Chapter 3, achieves its zenith with that body's characteristically active repose at the pool. This is particularly true of swimming pools in the Arabah, which are landscaped as verdant, shady oases set against the grim browns and yellows of the scorching desert. During the hot months in Ein Amal, the pool draws Israelis of all ages, most prominently parents with small children, teenagers and young Israeli workers like David.

¹⁵ Saturday is the mandated day of rest for Israel's Jewish population, and generally speaking for Thai workers as well. Legally, non-Jews in Israel may select either Friday, Saturday or Sunday as their weekly day off. Given a choice, I imagine Thais might prefer to take Sundays off, since public services in general and transport in particular are unavailable from Friday afternoon until Saturday evening. But here again, the law is one thing and the regime is another, and in practice Thai workers have no choice as to their day off. It is more convenient for employers to have their workers rest on the same day as they do, and here again their immediate interest goes hand in hand with the regime's interest in curtailing workers' freedom of movement and their opportunities of interacting with other Thais and with Israelis other than their employers.

I never knew a Thai to go to the pool. In an interview, my colleague Boy insisted that in the past Thais had gone, but in his four years at Ein Amal he had never set foot there. Workers in another *moshav* in the region told me that Thais were prohibited from entering the pool, though I never found any official evidence for this either there or in Ein Amal. Apparently, like the boss's house, the pool did not have to be officially forbidden for local Thais to feel that it was off limits to them. Whatever the reasons for this, Israelis were unperturbed by the Thais' absence from this most visible of social spaces in the *moshav*, where sexuality was on legitimate display.

More broadly, the sexuality of Thai men appeared to the Israelis I spoke to as at once an issue and a non-issue, a topic of both anxiety and disavowal. For example, Ya'ir's wife Miri told me that she preferred her teenage children to drive, rather than walk, around the *moshav* at night "because a lot of men are around."¹⁶ On the other hand, her father-in-law Roni praised the virtues of Thais in comparison to workers of other nationalities by telling me that with any other group, "there would be much more trouble" of a sexual kind. Note that Miri framed her worries as being about "men" rather than Thais, whereas Roni spoke specifically about Thais as sexual non-troublemakers. Like her peers, Miri was never shy about generalizing about

¹⁶ Miri's comment raises the intriguing possibility that Thais are perceived as more threatening at night, and especially when drunk. Cohen (1999, 179) writes that "though Thais and farmers generally live their after-hours lives separately, their physical proximity has begun to show Israelis a different side to their employees, when these remove the protective façade of a quiet, obedient worker: it turns out that they often get drunk and subsequently make noise, fight and even hurt each other physically; sometimes they secretly pilfer chickens, fruit or vegetables from their employers, and hunt [wild] animals. The positive impression the Thais initially left on their employers has gradually been tarnished by these discoveries; as one [Thai coordinator, see Chapter 1] commented: it turns out that there are 'daytime Thais and nighttime Thais.'" On the other hand, I spent a few nights drinking with the Thai workers of the Sadot farm, and though I certainly experienced a loosening of deference norms, including erotic advances, I never heard reports of a Thai engaging in anything approaching harassment, sexual or otherwise, of any Israeli. This is not a proof of absence, but my impression is that the perception of threat was rooted in drunkenness itself, which is uncommon and frowned upon in LSM contexts, and in the subsequent loosening of inhibition which produced a suspicion that the Thais were "hiding their true face."

Thais, so this is hardly a case of self-imposed political correctness; rather, I think her views can be seen as converging with Roni's insofar as the sexual threat posed by the large numbers of single, male migrants living in Ein Amal is mitigated, rather than heightened, by their Thai nationality. But Thai men could not be perceived as sexually non-threatening without their cooperation in the form of what, by Israeli standards, is perceived as extreme timidity around local women. This timidity is not for lack of theoretical interest on the Thais' part: my co-workers often expressed to me their appreciation for Israeli women and even asked, apparently in jest, if I would set them up with my female friends. However, when several of my co-workers did have an opportunity to meet some of these friends at a birthday party I held, they acted shy and did not make any "moves."

A unique perspective on the issue is offered by migrant songwriter Sanya Hitakun, whose song about "falling in love with an Israeli woman" appears in an English translation by Phaksornkan Thongkam in Shahar Shoham's thesis, *Pickers and Packers: Translocal Narratives of Returning Thai Agriculture Labour Migrants from Israel*.

I know I'm just a Thai worker, exposing to the sun (working under the sun) and having dark skin

And I'm not brave enough to court you

I'm just a dark skin migrant worker

Looking at your white face

It's so pretty like a peeled egg (you're perfectly white and beautiful)

But look at my back, it's all striped and sloughed

Some of them can be healed but some can't

Just like a cow's back

I want to get close to you

But I'm just afraid that your beauty will be gone (get stained) because of me

Yet staying away from you makes me feel discouraged

If my Jewish friends know, they will laugh at me and tease me
I'm afraid of being laughed at and teased that the dark boy falls in love with Farang girl
So I have to love you secretly because I don't want to hear the things they say
I'm afraid of people comparing you like a swan but I'm just like a crow
That's why I'd better not tell you and court the daughter of Jewish people (quoted in Shoham
2017, 80)

As even this short quote evinces, the song is a goldmine of insight on the interaction of gender, race and class relations between Thai migrants and Israelis, which I do not have the space to do justice to. Here it will suffice to point out the protagonist's acute awareness of the way the color and texture of his skin indexes a lifetime of exposure to the sun at work and thus inferiority to the "perfectly white and beautiful" face of his beloved. Rather than rejection by the woman herself, what he fears is the derision of his Jewish¹⁷ companions, the result of impudently besmirching the woman's face – "staining her beauty" – and with it, the face of the *farang* or white community that she belongs to.

Romantic relations between a Thai migrant and an Israeli woman would, of course, be conducive to the man's permanent settlement in Israel, which we have already established as a possible source of "demographic" anxiety. But the threat to the Jewish community's face goes further than this, as Sanya clearly perceives. As in other colonial contexts (Stoler 2012), in Israel too, men of the colonized community – in this case the Palestinians – are imagined as hyper-masculine and insatiably attracted to settler women, and the latter are anxiously suspected of reciprocating their affections (Bloom Cohen 2016). In Israel, again as in most such contexts,

¹⁷ *Yiw* in Thai. Migrants often use the term interchangeably with "Israeli."

the colonizing group is racialized as light-skinned and the colonized group as dark. Publicly visible romantic relationships between dark non-Jewish men and Jewish women are indeed perceived as a violation of the Jewish community's face, and trigger organized violent reactions (Engelberg 2017). In refraining from declaring his love to his "Israeli woman," Sanya is accepting not invisibility – he appears in almost all of the photos featured in the song's Youtube video (Sanya 2011), in most of them holding a variety of Israeli women in an amicable embrace – but neutralization. His is a blunt affirmation of his inferior position in the racial hierarchy and the correlative prohibition of sexual initiative towards women of the superior racial category.

Finally, the work of politically neutralizing Thai men's sexuality is smoothed along by global racial ideologies which helped to frame Asian men as docile and asexual in the Israeli mind long before they became a common sight in the country. In the Atlantic world, where Asian "coolies" were often imported to break the resistance of black and indigenous populations to violent and exploitative relations (Lowe 2015), and where the men of the latter groups were often imagined as hyper-sexual threats, the former were conversely constructed as effeminate or homosexual (Chua and Fujino 1999; Shek 2007). As I argue elsewhere (Kaminer 2018a), in Israel this global racial imaginary has long been present but has taken a back seat to the locally dominant scheme of racialization, in which the main opposition is between the Jew and the Arab. As the number of non-Jewish, non-Palestinian migrants in the country continues to grow, the two schemes are drawing closer together, with white supremacy making an appearance beside, and in support of, Jewish supremacy. As the black man, in the form of the East African asylum seeker, joins the Arab man as a threatening sexual presence, the Atlantic trope of the sexually unthreatening Asian man becomes more discursively available to Israelis.

Most other public spaces in Ein Amal were also marked as Israeli, if not to the same extent as the pool. For example, the complex of administrative buildings at the center of the *moshav* included two facilities which served Thais – the clinic and the office of the “coordinator for *tailandim*,” the municipal officer responsible for some aspects of migrant welfare, neither of which employed any Thai speakers. The mobile falafel stand, which reached the *moshav* once a week and presented a major culinary and social attraction for the Israeli population, especially the youth, was also never frequented by Thais.

The one major exception to Israeli domination of public space within the *moshav* was the playing field, which was shared equitably, even communally, between young Thai and Israeli men. Many Thais spent free time, especially on Saturdays, playing soccer and *takrau*, the Southeast Asian “kick volleyball.” A well-heeled, veteran worker, respected by the Thai population of the entire *moshav*, would periodically organize tournaments pitting one farm’s workers against another’s, and even run-offs featuring the best teams from each *moshav* in the region. These tournaments were taken seriously, and workers expected their employers to donate uniforms bearing their logo, for the greater glory of the farm.¹⁸

Such elaborate projects presumed free access to *moshav* playing fields. I do not know whether this resulted from a conscious decision by the *moshav* authorities or from a lack of Israeli demand for use of the facilities, but Thai use of the playing fields was generally approved of, and Israelis would sometimes congregate to watch them play soccer and especially the more exotic and spectacular *takrau*. Pickup soccer in the evenings and on weekends was probably

¹⁸ See Pattana (2014) for a detailed description of Thai migrants’ soccer tournaments in Singapore, where employers are also actively involved.

the most integrated pastime in the *moshav*, regularly featuring spontaneous games with mixed teams of Thai and Israeli men.

The only public or semi-public spaces in the *moshav* which were properly encoded as belonging to Thais were the two shops catering specifically to them, known to Israelis as *tailandiyot*¹⁹ and to Thais simply by the English word *shop*. Some differences could be noted between the *shop noy* and *shop yay* (“small” and “big” shop in Thai respectively), each privately owned by a different Israeli and operated by Thais: the *shop noy* was small, dim and run by a couple who were, by Thai standards, extraordinarily surly and impolite; my Thai colleagues agreed with me that it was worth taking the time to travel to the *shop yay* to get better deals in a more congenial atmosphere. Yet the two shops were quite similar in that, in addition to offering a large selection of culinary merchandise imported especially for Thais and generic groceries, like alcohol and cigarettes, they also served as recreational spots featuring billiard tables and shaded spaces for drinking and socializing. Israelis like me frequented the Thai shops, especially at hours when the local supermarket was closed, but we had to adjust our sensibilities to sights such as tightly packed live fish and pigs’ heads, both displayed in makeshift buckets made of recycled paint canisters.

These Thai shops were quite different in ambience and function from the supermarket, which – despite sporting some signage in Thai – was a markedly Israeli space which Thais generally avoided entering. One colleague at my first job, for example, had a hankering for

¹⁹ Sing. *tailandiya*, a compound noun composed of *tailandi*, “Thai person” + suffix *-iya*, used for businesses, like the English “-ery.” I do not have much information on the ownership or management of these shops. Since Thais are not allowed to work outside agriculture, the legality of the arrangement is dubious, and I thought it best not to inquire too much.

white bread, and asked me to purchase it for him in the supermarket. The issue could hardly have been one of price – he could easily pay the subsidized price of 4.5 shekels (around \$1.25) for a loaf, and indeed offered to. When I asked him why he did not go to the supermarket to buy the bread himself, he shrugged shyly and refused to answer. I raised the issue of the supermarket in an interview with Ya'ir's worker Mike, who also never entered it despite living much closer to it than to either of the Thai shops. Mike ruled out any simple economic explanation: the prices of commodities available at both the supermarket and the Thai shop were higher in the latter. Rather, he explained, he and his friends preferred to shop there because the owner had an arrangement with Ya'ir to deduct his workers' expenditures directly from their wages, such that they did not have to carry cash. Rather taken aback, I asked Mike if it was difficult for the workers to receive cash advances from Ya'ir. Not at all, he said, but it was better not to, since if workers like himself had cash they would fritter it away.

Mike's view was counter-intuitive to me, since I tend to see credit as more conducive to careless consumption than cash, whose waxing and waning are more materially palpable (Lemon 1998; Bolt 2014) and therefore ostensibly more manageable. But Mike was reasoning in terms of a different moral economy, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. In this economy, the highest moral value is granted to remittances, a form of money which remains virtual until withdrawn from the bank in Thailand; next come the necessities of life, which, however difficult to define, can be purchased either at the Thai shop or through the employer's mediation, as cell phones and other expensive electronics often were. Finally, there were the illicit or semi-licit pleasures which Thais in Israel procured from one another – including gambling and drugs. These latter could be bought only with cash, or through highly risky informal loans.

Mike, as the reader will recall, was the “baby” of the farm, the youngest of the workers. With no wife or children to take care of at home, both the Sadots and his colleagues considered him prone to wasting money and in need of benevolent direction by his superiors. Mike supported this view, gratefully accepting both Miri’s affection and Ya’ir’s tough love; thus, it is not surprising that he would reiterate his commitment to a paternalistic moral economy by presenting the expensive and exploitative consumption enabled by the Thai shop as more virtuous, precisely because it minimized his own freedom to waste and maximized his employer’s control over his consumption. As we shall see in Chapter 4, other workers and their relatives at home agreed that this paternalistic control was conducive to their own well-being. For my purposes here, however, two points are important to emphasize: first, that Mike interpellated his boss, Ya’ir, as responsible for his workers’ welfare far beyond the bounds of the farm and their employment contract, implicitly accepting the cost differential between the shop and the supermarket as the price of his benevolence. The second is that this paternalism operates – and could only operate – through an institution that caters specifically to Thais, further consolidating their segregation from Israelis, a segregation that is in no way “separate but equal,” but intentionally separate and *unequal* – an inequality that is, remarkably, taken up and even championed by those it discriminates against.

In Chapter 3 we saw that the fields, which ring around the *moshav* and take up considerably more space than its built expanse, are experienced as a space of Thai autonomy.

The fields, however, are themselves surrounded by the wilderness of the Arabah,²⁰ which is traversed by the highway connecting the Red Sea port of Eilat to the center of Israel (Route 90) and the parallel, unpaved “Peace Road,” which passes much closer to the border and is used by locals for trips between the *moshavim* as well as for agricultural purposes. This road is also often used by Israeli tourists as a scenic route, as it passes through a varied and often breathtaking landscape as well as through kilometers of dreary greenhouse wall and scrub. This larger space is an Israeli-dominated one. The Israelis of the Arabah cleave to LSM tradition in their love of the *tiyul*, or scenic hike (see Ben-David 1997), sometimes brought up to date in a wide range of technologically advanced forms of movement-as-leisure, including off-road cycling and motorcycling, ATV and SUV tours, hang-gliding and flying light airplanes.²¹ In recent years, “adventure” tourism incorporating such pastimes has become a growth industry as the region seeks to diversify its economy away from agriculture (Slavin and Giladi 2012). It should be noted, however, that Thai culture also valorizes traveling for fun, or *pay thiaw*, especially for men (Mills 1997, 38); among the few regrets that any migrants felt free to express to me about their time in Israel the most common was the lack of opportunity to travel and see the country (see also Shoham 2017, 47). In Isaan in particular, hunting and eating wild mammals, birds, reptiles and insects is also a pleasurable and economically important

²⁰ See Shani (2015, 2017) for a thorough account of the battle between agriculture and the environmental movement over space in the Arabah.

²¹ Unfortunately, Arabah locals are not known for their devotion to safety, and from anecdotal observation it appears that the region has an unusually high rate of death by accident, much of it during leisure activities. Together with the high number of traffic accidents on Route 90, this mortality adds to a certain “Wild West” mystique of danger, recklessness and tragedy in the Arabah, going back to the 1950s, when several groups of young people undertook a dangerous journey to reach the ancient city of Petra across the Jordanian border (Rabinowitz, n.d.).

activity; in Israel it is expressly forbidden and Thais are stigmatized for endangering ecosystems and eating locally taboo kinds of meat (E. Cohen 1999, 186; Avieli 2017).

I did see Thais out and about in the Arabah, picnicking at scenic spots or visiting friends in other *moshavim*, but far less often than the local Israelis. This was not surprising; whatever their wishes, it is simply too time-consuming and expensive for Thais to move around the expanses of the region, where *moshavim* are dozens of kilometers apart, as much as they would like. Their access to cars and motorcycles is very limited, and employers generally do not allow the use of tractors for personal trips, though they are sometimes surreptitiously appropriated. On their day off, Saturday, buses are not available; taxis charge exorbitant prices which Israelis would never consider paying. Hitch-hiking, common among Israelis, is not much availed of by Thais.

As we rise in geographical scale, then, from the farm to the *moshav* to the region, the spaces in which Thais feel comfortable moving fade into insignificance. As the region fades into the country at large, the transition is complete. On the farm and especially in the fields, as we have seen, Thais have some spaces of autonomy; in the *moshav*, there are spaces which, while not autonomous or equal in size and standing to those belonging to the Israelis, are nevertheless recognized as legitimately theirs; at the regional scale their very presence becomes precarious and marginal, and at the national scale they are wholly ignorable, just as the regime to which they are subjected has intended.

Building the Potemkin *moshav*



Figure 7: The cover page of “Tools for effective work in a multicultural environment with workers coming from Thailand: A brochure for employers and work managers in the agricultural sector” (CIMI 2017).

In 2017, CIMI, the quasi-NGO tasked with oversight under the TIC agreement, published a booklet titled *Tools for effective work in a multicultural environment with workers coming from Thailand: A brochure for employers and work managers in the agricultural sector* (Figure 7). After a short introduction, the brochure delves right into pronouncements on Thai culture, which, it says

places great importance on maintaining dignity[*] and avoiding causing others to lose face[*] at any cost. Insulting someone in public is unacceptable in Thailand and must be avoided. In Thailand it is customary to show great and special appreciation for people in authority, especially older people with a respected role ... Thai culture aspires to a state of

balance, calm and self-control. Thais do not express feelings in public, especially feelings of anger, sadness or disagreement.²²

For me there is something uncanny about this text: I feel almost as though I could have written it myself. Indeed, I was consulted on it, and didn't find much to criticize about the above passage. Critical anthropological reflections on the "culture concept" often emphasize the work of construction, the artifice and ulterior interest that are usually presumed to be involved in the objectification of culture, in the movement from everyday, imponderable, habitual, offstage culture "in itself" to the entextualized icons and smug generalizations of spokespeople, tour guides, cultural competency handbooks, and – of course – insufficiently critical anthropologists (see Shryock 2004b). What then am I, as critical as a critical anthropologist can be, doing nodding along to a text whose express purpose is to smooth the course of what I consider abhorrently exploitative employment relations? What role does the reification of culture play in naturalizing oppression when the "pre-reified" culture of the oppressed has already, as we have seen, done much of the work of naturalization?

One place to begin is by noting the separation of spheres and scales. CIMI's handbook is addressed to employers and is concerned almost exclusively with life inside the farm unit. As Chapter 2 has shown, with regard to the labor process and their personal relationships with workers, employers like Ya'ir have much to gain from adapting themselves to Thai norms of paternalistic relations, as the booklet explicitly recommends:

²² CIMI (2017). As if to emphasize their academic provenance, the words "dignity" and "lose face" appear both first in Hebrew and then, in parentheses, in their English form. For "dignity" the brochure uses *kvod ha'adam*, a legalistic construction used, for example, in the name of Israel's "Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty"; for "to make [someone] lose face" it uses a still-current Talmudic idiom (Tractate Bava Metzia 59a) which literally translates as "to make [someone's] face turn pale."

the employer is seen as a patron, that is, an adult responsible for the workers, much like a father [...] Thai workers will find it hard to work faithfully if their employers do not care for their needs and show an interest in them.

The handbook only makes one (eminently reasonable) recommendation touching upon public life:

workers from Thailand will appreciate an employer's expression of interest in their culture and invitations to participate in events or holidays of the Israeli community [...] It is also possible to visit during workers' holidays and contribute to their activities, for example by [...] providing sports equipment.

The writers of the CIMI brochure have good reasons not to concern themselves further with the public sphere, the direction of which is beyond the organization's mandate and beyond the power of the individual farmer to which the booklet is addressed, though not beyond the power of farmers as a collective, certainly in the Arabah. Out of a tactical interest in getting a sympathetic reading from employers, they are probably also wise to avoid any mention of workers' legal rights, which CIMI does advocate for in other contexts. But the right to be visible in the public sphere and the right to bear rights as a political subject are, of course, intimately related (Habermas 2008). Thus, whatever their tactical justification in the case of the CIMI brochure, the effacement of Thais from public space and their neutralization as potential members of the community protected by legal rights reinforce each other strongly.

But while they may acquiesce in their exclusion from the physical, "IRL" public sphere of the *moshav*, in the alternative, virtual public space of Facebook groups and pages addressed to them, where the language is Thai and Isaan rather than Hebrew or English and pseudonyms provide anonymity, migrants' anger at the violation of their rights is manifest. In 2018, together with Adi Behar of Workers' Hotline, I hosted a three-part web series, titled *Cheewit nay Israel* or "Life in Israel" (T), in which we offered to answer any questions migrants might have

(Kaminer, Green, and Behar 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; see also Kaminer 2018c). Following my experiences holding a Q&A session at an employee training in Isaan in 2017, I expected some lighthearted or general-interest questions; but almost half of the questions had to do with wages, in the broad sense (including workman's compensation and taxes), and most of the rest were also work-related (see Figure 8); none were about public life. Most respondents seemed painfully aware that their legal rights were not being respected, and many of their comments had a bitter, cynical tone. For example, in response to a worker who wrote that "90 percent of workers are not paid according to the law," another answered: "The Thai government has said in a statement that in fact less than 5 percent are paid below the minimum wage. Unfortunately, we happen to be employed by this 5 percent of employers!" adding "555555," online slang for laughter.

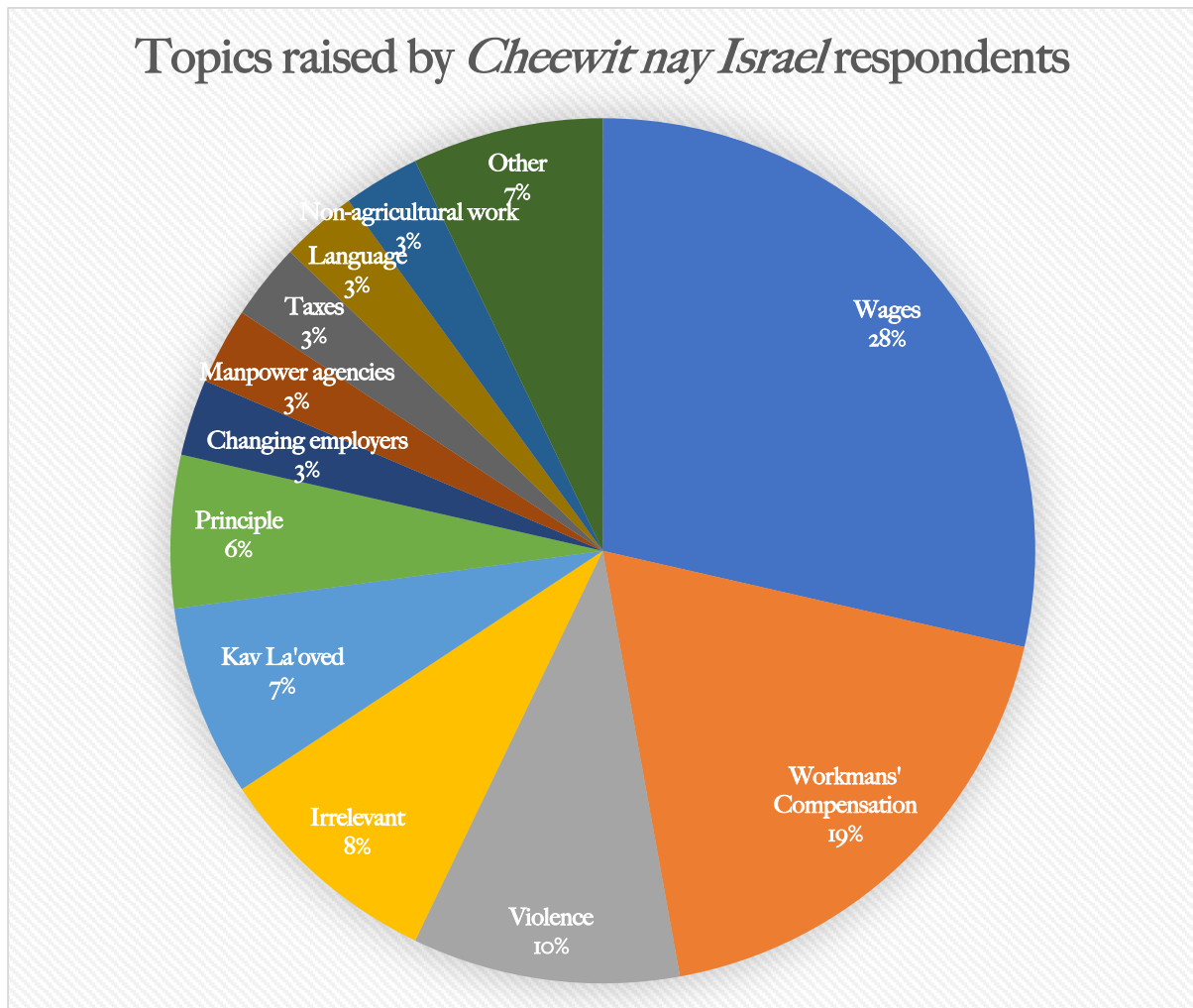


Figure 8: Topics raised in the 63 responses to the online request for questions for “Life in Israel.” N=70 (some responses included more than one concern).

This collective bitterness – in 2016, *all* of the Thai migrants polled by Nona Kushnirovich and Rebecca Rajiman (2017, 23) reported known violations of their contract – coexists with what the CIMI brochure calls “balance, calm and self-control.” But if, as the brochure also says, Thais refrain from expressing feelings “of anger, sadness or disagreement” only “in public,” then the farm would seem to be a “public” space, as would interviews with me, in which such feelings were not much expressed; Facebook groups with tens of thousands of members, on the other hand, would be private. This is an odd conclusion. Without

contradicting the reasonable simplifications of the CIMI brochure, Felicity Aulino usefully explains the relationality involved in “balance, calm” and the non-expression of feelings:

The Thai social body, generally speaking, comprises various parts, all of which have their place based on the rules of social hierarchy. Only certain individuals can act as the “face” of that body, directing its movement, at any given time. The “attention to” this collective requires the active surmising of these various roles and one’s own place in the group, a set of perceptions engaged whenever multiple people are gathered together; the “care of” this body then occurs in the maintenance of harmonious relations and the proper following of whoever is in the lead at any given moment [...] Thai social interactions abound with instances of indirectness and a glossing over of tensions for the maintenance of surface harmony, a way of behaving in public and semi-private arenas that de-emphasizes the individual as such and continually re-inscribes hierarchical positions between people (Aulino 2014, 417).

The question of how attention to the social body works out on social media is fascinating, though not one I can weigh in on. But taking Aulino’s emphasis on relationships into account, an obvious difference between Ein Amal and Facebook is the presence in the former, and absence in the latter, of dominant Israeli actors.²³ Issues like the non-payment of minimum wages, which cannot be broached in the presence of Israelis, can become the object of shared dialogical humor when they are not perceived as being around.

Cheewit nay Israel offered me a rare and welcome glimpse into a realm of discourse where migrants’ anger and frustration at exploitation and hypocrisy could be expressed, what

²³ This applies to relations within the farm and the interviews I conducted there as well as to public interactions in the *moshav*. I did appear in the video inviting questions for *Cheewit nay Israel*, but I spoke (broken) Thai rather than English or Hebrew, and we took questions in Thai and Isaan.

James Scott (1990) might have called a “hidden transcript,” though it was not very carefully hidden. This transcript’s greatest virtue, for my purposes, is that it enables me to push back against the image of a seamlessly harmonious social body wherein Thais humbly accept their inferior role – an image projected by the migrants themselves as well as by reifications of culture like the CIMI brochure. This transcript – “discreet” would probably be a much better name for it than “hidden” (see Mitchell (1990) and Gal (1995) for conceptual problems with the notion of the hidden transcript) – also enables me to de-exoticize the situation. After all, hegemony by definition depends on the public acquiescence of the dominated to their domination, and as I have argued elsewhere (Kaminer 2018b), there are many situations in which subalterns collude with their superiors to dissemble the coercive nature of their relationship to outsiders, including ethnographers, as well as to themselves.²⁴ In this case, too, I might speculate that Thais’ highly developed talent for this sort of dissembling might leave them more freedom to act differently when circumstances permit than is available to Israelis of labor settlement background, trapped in our romantic ethos of sincerity and “straight talk” (Katriel 1986, 9–33).

²⁴ See Kaminer (2018b). Workers’ motivation to care for the social body is encouraged by the Thai wing of the migration regime: in the orientation for departing workers which I attended in Bangkok, employees of the Ministry of Labor repeatedly stressed workers’ duty to their compatriots to represent Thailand honorably while abroad. See Klima (2002, 31–52) for attempts by the state to interpellate Thai citizens into responsibility for maintaining the nation’s image in the context of tourism and international relations.



Figure 9: Invitation to the Arabah Open Day, "Israel's biggest agricultural exhibition."

What is unique about the *moshavim* of the Arabah is not the exploitative relations taking place within their boundaries, but the importance locally attached to concealing these relations, for the ideological reasons I have explored at length. It may seem a bit extreme to call the employment of Thais an "open secret" – after all, it is something most Israelis know about. Nevertheless, the face these settlements assertively present to the outside world, even and especially when the issue is agricultural work, is a purely Jewish face (see Figure 9) and must remain so if their ideological reproduction is not to fly off the track.

Building this local version of the fake model villages built by Grigory Potemkin for Empress Catherine the Great is a complex undertaking, requiring the participation of the whole community. And by this I mean the *whole* community "in the analytical sense," including the very group whose unimportance, if not whose non-existence, the whole charade is designed to demonstrate. The migrants' dexterous performance should not lull us into forgetting that it

is fundamentally coerced and that, in fora where they feel free to do so, they are liable to express dissatisfaction and even anger at their plight. Keeping that in mind, though, we can pause to appreciate the skill with which they do their work: not only the paid work of producing vegetables, but the unpaid face work which reproduces their own presence as neutral and invisible, thereby saving the face of the Arabah.

Chapter 5

The Transnational Reproduction of Labor-Power and the Management of Suffering

As we have seen, over the past generation Israeli settlements in the Arabah have become dependent on the flow of cheap, docile and productive labor-power from Northeastern Thailand. The reproduction of this labor-power depends on a constant input of unpaid labor on the part of migrants' kin in Isaan, in its intergenerational aspect – the production of new workers to replace those who have finished their tenure in Israel – but also in its quotidian aspect of maintaining workers' ability to work. Workers, relatives and employers all recognize that the family trouble engendered by long-term transnational migration can cause workers to lose their motivation, cutting into profits and remittances and triggering further trouble. Here again, as in the “private” space of the farm explored in Chapter 3, it is the Thais – both in Israel and back at home – who set the paternalist framework of relations, and savvy employers like Ya'ir who accept their terms.

The chapter begins by setting the scene for the reproduction of labor-power in rural Isaan, arguing with other scholars that in this region migration is not an avenue of upward social mobility but rather one of a limited number of methods for preventing downward mobility. I then turn to the life stories of three Isaanites: Daeng and Boy, who worked besides me, and Moon, Boy's wife. Daeng's marriage fell apart while he was in Israel, triggering a spiral of anger, despair and drug abuse which he was able to escape in part due to Ya'ir's paternalistic

intervention. Moon and Boy's relationship has held up, but they have paid a heavy price – in money and suffering.

In this chapter the political-economic problematic of reproduction comes within striking distance of thornier ethical questions as the reproduction of the rural working-class Isaan family itself comes into focus. Though divorce and the fear thereof are a source of great anxiety and suffering, labor-power can be reproduced even as marriages fall apart. The multi-generational Isaan family is more resilient than marriage, its weakest link. This evaluation is neither an indictment nor an endorsement; the difficult question of how ethnography might inform moral judgment and political action will be kicked down the road, to the dissertation's Conclusion, but one thing will become uncomfortably clear – the ethical web in which Arabah farms are ensnared cannot be snipped at the Israeli border. Strong strands stretch over the ocean, connecting it to smoky fields of sugarcane and ramshackle houses on the faraway Khorat Plateau.

A region of migrants

Isaan — a modern term derived from the Sanskrit for “Northeast” — is climactically, linguistically, culturally, politically, and economically distinct from the rest of Thailand. On the south and west this flat, semi-arid plateau is bordered by a succession of mountain ranges; towards the northeast, it tilts gently toward the great Mekong River which forms its border with Laos. The inhabitants speak a variety of dialects closer to Lao than to Central Thai and identify themselves as *khon lao* (Lao people) as well as *khon isaan* and *khon thai* (Streckfuss 2012). Prior to the 19th century, the region was not tightly integrated into any of mainland Southeast Asia's “mandala states” (Tambiah 1976) but was ruled by local aristocrats who paid tribute to competing centers, sometimes to more than one simultaneously. The Siamese state began consolidating its control over the area in the late 19th century as France encroached on

the area from the east. Following the Siamese-French War of 1893, with Britain's support, the lone non-imperial state in the region consolidated its control and the Mekong became the international boundary, which it remains today despite the ethnolinguistic continuity along both its banks (Winichakul 1994).

As a region of Thailand (as Siam was renamed in 1932), Isaan has been politically peripheral and much neglected by the Bangkok-based aristocratic and military elites that run the state. The region has been a hotspot for protest movements and insurgencies, from the *phuu mii bun* revolt of 1901-02 (Keyes 1995, 158) to the Communist insurrection of the 1970s (Keyes 1995, 164-65) and later to the Assembly of the Poor (Missingham 2003) and the Red Shirt movement that brought tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra to the premiership in 2001, only to be ousted in the latest of a series of military coups in 2006 (Sopranozetti 2012).

While it remains the country's least developed and most repressed region, Isaan has seen a great deal of socio-economic upheaval in recent decades. Since the 1950s, a growing population, the exhaustion of land reserves, and debt have pushed Isaanites to migrate, at first primarily to the Bangkok metropolitan area (Rigg, Salamanca, and Parnwell 2012; Keyes 2014). During the Vietnam War the city of Udon Thani near the Laotian border became a major base for the US army and transportation infrastructure was improved, facilitating movement into and out of the region. After the war, seasonal migration to Bangkok was increasingly supplemented by longer-term migration to other parts of Southeast Asia and farther afield, particularly to the Gulf states of the Middle East (Keyes 2014). In the 1980s women also began

to migrate in large numbers (Mills 1999), though to this day more than 80% of outgoing migration is male.¹

The migration flow from Thailand to Israel, whose beginnings were described in Chapter 2 from the Israeli perspective, was rooted in a network of rural middlemen and urban manpower agencies that had been established for the purpose of placing migrants in other countries, mostly in East Asia and the Persian Gulf (Thanapauge et al. 2010b). For at least the last twenty years, the most common destination for labor migration from Thailand has been Taiwan, although the number of migrants deployed there has steadily decreased over this period. Singapore's importance as a destination has also declined, while migration to South Korea has grown greatly, recently surpassing Israel and Japan – both of which have retained a steady flow since the 1990s.² Among the Isaanites I met, there was a general consensus that Taiwan and South Korea were preferable to Israel as migration destinations, since they featured similar wages for easier work under less isolating conditions (see also Supang Chantavanich 1999; Shoham 2017, 47–51).

The precise impact of the 2012 TIC reforms (see Chapter 2) on these networks is not yet fully understood, but recent scholarship shows that by randomizing the selection process, the reform has effectively cut out the middleman, greatly reducing if not entirely eliminating the frequency of fraud and slashing fees (Kushnirovich and Rajjman 2017; Kurlander 2019). The lower cost may be encouraging people of lower economic standing and educational attainment

¹ My calculation from Harkins (2019, 20). The cited figures are for Thailand as a whole, but are probably representative of Isaan, which sends the majority of migrants. 82.2% of Thai migration to Israel is from Isaan (see Chapter 2, n. 31).

² The summary in this paragraph is based on my calculations from the national-scale figures in Sciortino and Sureeporn (2009, 17) and Harkins (2019, 20).

to apply for work in Israel, especially as the South Korean alternative requires a high school diploma and a language qualification, which in turn requires expensive language courses (Kim 2015; Seo 2018).

Gender and family formations

It is tempting to say that gender relations in Isaan (as in Thailand and even Southeast Asia more generally) are more egalitarian than they are in traditional “Western” societies.³ This was certainly the first impression that I, a man of “Western” background, gained from observing and participating in interpersonal interaction: generally, the women I met in Isaan were gregarious and opinionated, in sharp contrast to the shy and reticent men. The relatively high status of women is a common theme in older anthropological literature on the region (Reid 1988; Andaya 2007), though recent scholarship, especially feminist scholarship, has questioned its accuracy (Yeoh 2016). As in most parts of the world, in Isaan women are expected to shoulder the great bulk of reproductive labor without compensation (Mills 1999; Mare, Promphaking, and Rigg 2015) and exposed to gendered violence (Saito et al. 2012). Like Israel or the US, Isaan is without a doubt a patriarchal society, in the sense of a society whose fundamental structures depend on the oppression and exploitation of women by men.⁴

³ Anthropological writing on gender in the region has to walk the fine line between treating features of “Western” society as a universal norm, thus “othering” Southeast Asian social structures, and refusing to spell out these features, thus leaving aspects of these societies unintelligible to readers who might unconsciously assume the universality of “Western” norms. It seems to me that most writers on the topic lean too much towards the second strategy, and as a corrective I seek to speak clearly, even categorically, about difference. This does not entail accepting the notion that the actual or desired readers of anthropological texts belong to a homogeneous, static “Western” society.

⁴ Non-binary gender identities are common in Isaan: most prominent is the *kathoey*, or male-to-female transgender, category (Käng 2012). I met a few *kathoey* migrants in Israel, though I did not have the opportunity to converse with any. Non-heterosexual sexual identities and relationships are also prevalent in Isaan, as elsewhere in Thailand (Wilson 2004), but did not play an important part in the lives of any of my informants to the best of my knowledge.

Nonetheless, gender and family structures in Isaan sport features which help women maintain their footing in the gender struggle, including bilateral kinship, weak marriage, gender-neutral inheritance practices, and matrilineal, multigenerational families. Generally speaking – due to the flexibility of the structures, exceptions are common – Isaan women maintain the pivot of their lives in their parents’ homes and villages. If they migrate, they expect to return home when their parents grow old and require their assistance; if they have children they cannot take care of due to the demands of wage labor, they leave them in their mothers’ care and remit income to contribute to their upkeep (Mills 1999). These children are considered to belong to both their parents’ families, but in cases of divorce and conflict over custody, children usually stay with their mothers. Similarly, both sons and daughters can inherit at their parents’ discretion, but daughters are often rewarded for their care by inheriting more (Vanwey 2004, 745).

Men, especially working-class men, lead a more peripatetic existence, “free to migrate largely unencumbered by domestic responsibilities ... socialized to be independent, self-determining individuals” with looser ties to natal families and villages (Mare, Promphaking, and Rigg 2015, 289–90). Though only men can bestow their parents with the merit (*bun*) generated by monkhood (Keyes 1984), due to their reliability daughters are considered more economically valuable, and the rationale behind the demand for bridal payment (*khao sin sot*) is one of economic compensation for the daughter’s lost services (Mills 1998, 312). Despite their greater access to a much-coveted freedom (see Chapter 3), if men are not to end up alone in old age – a fate most women do not have to worry about – they must be careful to cultivate paternal relationships with younger people (not necessarily their biological children) who will feel obligated to honor them with their care in turn (Stonington 2011).

Finally, among the working classes in Isaan and elsewhere in Thailand the bond of marriage is relatively weak. Many marriages are not officially registered, no-fault divorce can be initiated by either partner, and conflicts over common property and child custody are usually solved informally (Esara 2012, 213). Sexual promiscuity is expected and even encouraged in men, and wealthy ones sometimes take second “minor” wives (see Bao (2008)). Female promiscuity, unlike male “rakishness,” carries opprobrium, but divorcées and women who have had extra-marital sex are not shunned and even those known to have undertaken sex work or partnerships of convenience are not necessarily at a disadvantage in finding new relationships (Mills 1998; Johnson 2018b).

Daeng’s story

Daeng’s tenure on the Sadot farm ended shortly after mine, and I met him again twice in the spring of 2017: once where he was working, in Sukhothai Province in Northern Thailand, and again in his home village in Khon Kaen Province, in central Isaan. Though not far from the Friendship Highway, Isaan’s main thoroughfare, the village was only reachable by an unpaved road; as is customary, Mee and I were hosted in the front yard, surrounded by chicken coops, rather than inside the one-story, dirt-floored home. Daeng was born here in 1981. His parents left the village shortly after, and he was raised by his maternal grandmother as the youngest of her six children. He spent six years of his childhood as a *nen* or novice in a temple, where he was schooled and fed, lightening the load on his desperately poor family. As a young man, he found work in a shoe factory near his home village and got engaged. But in order to marry, Daeng required a bridal payment, and realized that he could not amass the needed amount – about 150,000 baht – while working at the shoe factory. When he met a recruiter looking for potential migrants to Taiwan, Daeng seized the opportunity; after a short interview

in Bangkok, he was sent off to an electronics factory on the island, where he made about 23,000 baht (roughly \$700) a month.

After more than two years, when he had saved the amount required for the bridal payment, Daeng returned to Isaan and married his fiancée. He spent six more months at the shoe factory, but by this time he had realized that he was a “person who likes challenges” (*khon mak thaathai*), in search of new experiences (*prasopkan*), and when another recruiter came around, this time looking for men interested in working in Malaysia, he willingly forked over the 45,000-baht fee. But Malaysia was a mistake; the work, in carpentry, was hard, and he was cheated of some thirty or forty thousand baht in wages. Immediately upon his return, he paid 70,000 baht to a recruiter who promised to get him a job in Israel, but the job never materialized, and the recruiter disappeared. In the meantime, he returned to the shoe factory, where he progressed to a supervisory position; the owner even sent him on a three-month trip to train workers in a sister factory in Vietnam. During this period, he became a father, and despite his promotion, his wage was still “only enough for living, not for saving.” When he won 200,000 baht in a lottery, this money, together with the last of his savings from Taiwan, went towards the 350,000-baht fee that finally got him to Israel.⁵ He arrived in Ein Amal in July 2012. The farm to which he was assigned was failing, and he was often hired out to other farmers in the *moshav*, including Ya’ir Sadot. Daeng took a liking to Ya’ir, who was patient with his workers and took care to explain tasks carefully. As the work on his farm dwindled, and with it

⁵ This figure is immense even by the exorbitant standards of the pre-TIC migration regime. Daeng repeated it several times, but given that the interview was held more than seven years after the events discussed, it is possible that he erred with regard to the sum.

his income, he asked a friend who worked for Ya'ir if he might be able to secure a spot for him on the Sadot farm. After eight months' wait, he was transferred.

Before his migration, Daeng's marriage had been happy, and he felt no particular concern when he left home. He sent all his remittances to his wife, who used them to purchase farm land, a car, and a house. When their child was old enough, she went to work at the factory where Daeng had worked, where he arranged for her to work in the department he had supervised. But when he came home for a three-month vacation, after several years in Israel, he felt that something was wrong. While out walking with him, his wife hung back and would not let him hold her hand. His suspicion grew when she declined to answer incoming calls on her phone; when he asked who was calling, she insisted it was "just a friend." After his return to Israel, their relationship grew even colder. His wife would never answer phone calls, and text messages rarely. One night in 2015, he hacked her Facebook account and confirmed his suspicions: his wife was carrying on an affair with a mechanic he knew from the factory. "Aren't you afraid your husband will find out?" asked the lover asked in one of their text exchanges. The next morning, after breakfast, Daeng called his wife; this time she picked up. She admitted to the affair and refused to break it off. "If you can't take it," she said simply, "let's break up."

In our first interview, on the Sadot farm shortly after I had finished working there, Daeng didn't go into detail about the affair and its aftermath, and I didn't push him. But when we met again in Isaan, he was candid: discovering his wife's infidelity had sent him into a tailspin. Previously he had been a model worker and husband – closely related roles, as we shall see. But on that day in May, exhaustion and despair fell upon him suddenly. Switching to his limited English, he described his emotional state as "fire in my heart." He had asked Ya'ir for a

vacation, so he could go home and confront his wife; justifiably worried that he would kill her, the boss refused. Daeng turned to “ice” (E), or methamphetamine, to alleviate his pain.⁶

Daeng stayed on the farm for another year, until the end of his contract, but the wind had gone out of his sails. This year included my time on the farm, when he was noticeably jumpy and sullen, though I did not know the reasons for this at the time. Daeng no longer wanted to be *balabay*, resenting the extra work he had to do with no compensation, and claims that he did his best to shirk the role.⁷ When Ya’ir suggested that he stay on illegally after the end of his contract, he refused and went home to his adoptive mother (and biological grandmother), to whom he had sent remittances over his last year in Israel. When we spoke, he had not yet attempted to initiate contact with his ex-wife in order to see his son; he was still afraid of how he would react to seeing her. When he started a new family, which he planned to do soon, he would be sure enough of his self-control to attempt contact.

Things were looking up for Daeng when I met him in Thailand. After his return, he got a job driving a truck and delivering animal feed. But he had to carry an unlicensed gun for protection, and once he was pulled over by police and had to pay a large bribe to stay out of jail. Subsequently he joined his brother, who ran a small business cleaning septic tanks with a

⁶ I never encountered methamphetamine during my time on the Sadot farm, where alcohol was the visible vice, but when we met in Thailand, Daeng insisted that “ice” was quite common, both for recreation and to give workers energy to work. He identified “ice” as a social problem, mainly because of the way it drained incomes, including his own; but he saw no ill effects on his health and insisted that he had no trouble kicking the habit when he returned home. However, he did tell Mee and me disturbing stories about paranoid behavior and a suicide triggered by the drug. The widespread use of *yaa baa*, a mix of caffeine and methamphetamine, has been documented among Thai workers in Israel for many years (Ifergan 2012); according to Daeng, pure meth began eclipsing it in popularity around 2015.

⁷ When I interviewed BOy in May 2016 he claimed that there was currently no *balabay* on the farm, though Daeng was still “officially” holding the post. At the time I was bewildered, but in retrospect this seems to have been a recognition on Boy’s part of Daeng’s disinclination to continue performing the role.

specialized truck. Because other operators had monopolized the trade in his home province, Daeng and his brother had to work far afield, in Sukhothai Province in the country's north, where they rented a half-finished house, sleeping in a tent in the living room to avoid the mosquitos. The money was good – about 30,000 baht a month, comparable to what he had earned in Ein Amal – but little remained of the fruits of his labor in Israel.

Moon's Story (and Boy's)

When I met Moon in 2017, she was residing in her natal village together with her mother, a sister and their children, all living in three closely adjacent houses on the same lot. Pooling its income, the family managed to furnish the mother's house, on whose patio we were hosted, with modern amenities including a tile floor and washing machine, but debt hung heavily over their heads and cropped up constantly in conversation. Though she was now living at home, Moon's life had been anything but sedentary. She had held a wide variety of jobs, lived all over Thailand, married three men and given birth to five children, but continued to exude youthful energy. The love story between her and the much younger Boy is unusual, but not surprising once you have met her: she is a clear-sighted, sharp-tongued woman who knows what she wants and does what she can to get it. Yet in her own appraisal, she and her family have not been lucky. Their life, like Daeng's, has been a succession of difficult choices, culminating in Boy's long sojourn in Israel away from her and their children, the youngest of whom he had yet to meet when I visited.

The second of five children, Moon left school at age 13 for textile work in Bangkok, earning a paltry 300 baht per month. Living conditions were bad, the food insufficient, and she missed home, so she quit after only seven months and returned to her village, catching a ride with some relatives heading home for Songkran. After a month or two at home, she found a new job in a market stall in Nakhon Ratchasima, the nearest big city (also known as Khorat),

where she worked for a year before returning to Bangkok for a slightly better-paying factory job. There, at 16, she met her first husband,⁸ an affluent 23-year-old from the northern province of Chiang Rai who had an office job in the city. He promised to take care of her and her family, but after going home with him, she found that he was addicted to womanizing, alcohol and gambling. She went home to give birth to her first son, whom she left with her mother, then returned to Chiang Rai, where she gave birth again, to a daughter whom she left with her husband's parents. Moon then convinced him to return with her to Bangkok, where she could work and send money home to both their families. She found a lucrative quality control job in a factory, paying a generous monthly wage of 10,000 baht; but the husband, moving back and forth from Bangkok to Chiang Rai, loafed, spent her money on drink, and eventually turned violent.

Moon had had enough. When her husband was away, another man would come around; he was also from an affluent background but worked hard as a farmer and salesman of agricultural and irrigation supplies. Moon collected her daughter from Chiang Rai, left her first husband, and set up with this new man. Together they accumulated money and were able to buy two new cars, in which they both traveled long hours for work and family obligations; soon her third child, Ton, was born and deposited with his father's parents in Petchabun Province, in the north. But Moon's second husband's relatives conspired against her, convincing him to leave her for another woman. He disappeared with the four-year-old Ton

⁸ Marriages in Isaan and elsewhere in Thailand are not always legally registered; a religious ceremony or even co-residence can suffice for the community to recognize a couple as married (Mills 1998, 329 n. 12). While more specific terms exist, the word most commonly used to describe romantic partners, *fien*, can be the equivalent of "spouse," "boy/girlfriend," "fiancé/e," or "lover" (see Esara 2012, 213). Moon considered herself married for the third time, so I refer to her former partners, the fathers of her older children, as ex-husbands.

and stopped answering her calls; eventually his relatives told her he had moved to the south of the country with his new wife.

Devastated, Moon borrowed some money to give her mother for the two older children's needs and retreated to a temple, where she intended to serve as a nun (*mae chi*; see Buswell and Lopez 2013) for a time. But she could not stop crying, and the monks refused to induct her into the order with a head-shaving ceremony; instead, she spent her time taking classes at an adjacent vocational school. After a month and a half, Moon was ready for action. She stopped home to see her mother, then drove to Petchabun, where she interrogated Ton's teachers and other villagers about his whereabouts. Piecing together the information they provided, she went straight to the village in southern Thailand where the family had relocated and reconnoitered until she found their house, near the local temple. She hid behind the temple wall and bided her time.

The next day her chance arrived. Ton was playing on his own in the front yard. When she approached him, he took fright and called his father, who came out of the house. A tug of war ensued, ending only when a relative of the new wife took the child away. The next day the quarrel began again; this time, Moon and her ex-husband's new partner came to blows, the latter even drawing blood. After some villagers intervened, Moon feigned resignation and begged to be allowed to spend an hour with the boy before she left, just "to caress him and eat noodles together." But the moment Ton was in her car, Moon locked the doors and sped away to Isaan, still bleeding. Her ex-husband called to berate her, but never tried to get the boy back. Single again, Moon returned to her home district, where she worked both as a factory operative and an independent furniture merchant. She bought a car, but a season of floods ruined her business and pulled her into debt. While continuing to work in quality control at a car parts importer, Moon decided to migrate in order to settle her debt and started language studies in

order to qualify for a job in South Korea. At the end of the course, she accompanied some schoolmates on a merit-making trip to a village in a nearby district, where she met Boy.

Though it belongs to the same province, Boy's village is much smaller and more isolated than Moon's. When I visited with Moon and her younger children, elders could still remember times when elephants marauded in the surrounding forest and the only road out was infested with tigers. Both of Boy's parents are natives of the village, where they cultivated rice and cassava. His father spent some time working in Bangkok, but never went abroad; on his only attempt to do so, a planned trip to Brunei, he was defrauded. Boy, the second of three children, left school at 15 and worked a succession of factory jobs in the Khorat metropolitan area until he met Moon at age 18.

It was love at first sight, but only on Boy's end. The stricken youth began visiting her at work every week. Moon, 32 and wary, suggested that she could "love him like a big sister," and at first Boy accepted her offer, but as their friendship deepened, he confessed his desire and even kissed her in public, a very daring act. Moon refused to sleep with him and warned him off, making sure he was aware of both her children and her debts. Boy insisted, begging his mother in tears to ask for her hand. After holding out for a few months, his parents relented; filled with compassion (*hen jay*, literally "seeing [his] heart"), Moon agreed to the marriage.

After a three-month engagement, they were wed in a religious ceremony. Moon duly conceived her fourth child as Boy was conscripted into the army. She missed her opportunity to go to South Korea because of the pregnancy, so on his return from the military they hatched a plan to travel together to Israel, where many people from Boy's village had worked. Together with some of his relatives, they met with a recruiter who promised them jobs in return for a fee. But this recruiter was a con man who managed to embezzle over 100,000 baht from the couple; when he demanded another 20,000, Moon grew suspicious and went to the police, who

confirmed that the couple had been cheated. Her story became a *cause célèbre*, and Moon appeared on several television shows to tell her story. The cheating middleman was apprehended, but her money was not recovered. The episode left the growing family in even greater debt, with creditors threatening to repossess Moon's mortgaged house.

The failed furniture business, commonly shouldered child-raising expenses, and the fraud to which they fell victim together all contributed to the debt which pushed Boy onto the plane bound for Israel. Like other young people in his village, he would have preferred to go to South Korea, where work is easier and pay better. He enrolled for work there too but was first selected for work under the new Thai-Israel Cooperation scheme. He decided not to keep waiting while the family's debt mushroomed and took his chance on Israel.

Boy was picked up at the airport by representatives of the manpower agency which had placed him; upon first arriving in Ein Amal, he mistook his shabbily dressed boss Ya'ir for a worker. His first year was stressful:

The workers who had come before me said many things that made me anxious. Sometimes, I didn't understand the work process; sometimes, the employer pressured me, asking me if I understood him; if I didn't understand, I would get yelled at.

But when I met him, near the end of his five-year term, Boy was spending about half of his time in the farm's refrigeration room, making up orders from English-language forms filled in by Ya'ir and the Israeli workers. He had picked up far more English, including reading and writing, than the average worker and was especially qualified for this work. He also preferred the refrigeration room because it enabled him to stay out of the sun, but despite his relatively light workload, Boy was the most critical of all my interviewees. He thought the wages paid on the Sadot farm were unfairly low, as the work was so tiring. When I raised the employer talking-point that migrants are interested in working "as much as possible" in order to gain overtime

wages and asked whether he would prefer to make more money working the same number of hours rather than taking overtime, he chuckled in a way that made me realize the stupidity of the question.

I realized there was something special about Boy's relationship with his wife long before I met her. Whether he was packing vegetables or resting after hours, his phone would usually be propped up somewhere in the room, a video call to Isaan open on its screen, with Moon visible on the other end doing her daily rounds. This level of everyday, technologically-mediated intimacy (see Madianou and Miller 2012) was certainly exceptional for the farm; though many of the other migrants called home regularly, none were in such intensive touch with their wives. When I did meet her, Moon made no effort to disguise the fact that this constant contact was partly due to her suspicion and need to keep Boy in line. Thus, when asked about why they had initially wanted to migrate together, Boy explained that they could make more money that way; but Moon was clear that she "was afraid that a woman would deceive him because to me he [seemed] young, so I wanted to take care of him by myself."

This mix of jealousy and concern was quite typical of Moon's attitude to Boy. She took it particularly badly when, a few years back, some "girls from Myanmar" (probably student-workers, see Chapter 3, n. 5) had been employed on the Sadot farm. They had been talking on the phone when she heard female voices and demanded that he turn on his camera so she could see who was there, but he refused, kindling her suspicion. By the time we met, she was assured that Boy had "proven himself," and shifted the focus of her concern to his health, and specifically to a chronically runny nose. But whatever the focus of her surveillance, she attempted to recruit everyone who knew Boy to her aid, including his co-workers, his employer and myself.

Isaan families and the reproduction of the migrant stream

Many Israelis who come into contact with Thai migrants nurture the notion that “when they go home they are millionaires.” Even employers who have visited their former workers in Isaan, no doubt encountering the dirt floors, outside bathrooms and sparse interiors that I encountered there, often repeat this contention. This may be an attempt to avoid the guilt associated with the unsurprising truth that wages that can only support a low standard of living in Israel do much the same in Thailand; a half-willful naiveté about the ostensible mystery of currency exchange rates sometimes contributes to the obfuscation. But the fantasy also conforms to the common perception of migration as an exceptional experience that sets lucky migrants apart from their neighbors.

This perception, to be blunt, has no basis in reality. Migration, whether internal or transnational, is a mass phenomenon touching families all over rural Isaan (Rigg and Salamanca 2011). Many Isaanites spend large sums of money and a great deal of energy trying to get abroad, and many spend much of their adult lives away from home, commonly migrating to several different locations in succession. The cost of living relative to returns from agriculture has grown greatly over the last thirty years, and expenditures that a generation ago were negligible, such as schooling, now weigh onerously on local households (Rigg, Salamanca, and Parnwell 2012, 1475). The trend towards financialization that increasingly forces workers around the world to rely on debt in order to maintain their standard of living falls especially heavily on rural Thais with no access to bank credit, who must resort to local loan sharks who charge especially high rates (Klima 2006). Migration itself is almost always debt-financed, such that much of the “opportunity benefit” of migration (the difference between what migrants earn abroad and what they could have earned at home during the same period, minus the costs of

migration) is swallowed up by interest payments (Sciortino and Sureeporn 2009; Sudarat and Rzonca 2014).

The possibility that migration and its consequences have been integrated into the way of life of rural Isaan has also been raised by a team of sociologists in an incisive mixed-methods study of the so-called “middle-income trap” (Mare, Promphaking, and Rigg 2015). In line with my own experience and with the authority of quantitative data, the authors conclude that migration in Isaan is not a pathway to upward class mobility but rather a move to stave off economic deterioration. Nevertheless, the authors hesitate to conclude that the Isaan villagers they study feel “trapped” by the situation.

The “trap” trope, originating in the discourse of development policy, encompasses several assumptions about growth, inequality, and other economic variables that neither Isaan villagers nor the anthropologists who study them may share. But shorn of the negative connotations of the term “trap,” the argument may be re-conceptualized as a question of the *reproduction* of social formations. Here there is no controversy. As the authors put it:

The village continues to function, if not thrive, as a result of the returned migrants. We can speculate that without migration and return, these villages would be less sustainable communities. [...] it is seldom that the migrant experience leads to new economic activity; not only do returnees return to their villages, but they also, largely, return to their old lives. (Mare, Promphaking, and Rigg 2015, 302-3)

Rather than ask if Isaan villagers feel “trapped,” we may ask a more focused question: what is the relationship between migration from Isaan to Israel and the reproduction of Isaan families?

Social reproduction theory, militating against the sexist dismissal of reproductive work, tends to emphasize the dependence of capitalist production on this unpaid labor, which takes place outside the workplace. This emphasis is crucial to the overall argument of this

dissertation, which insists that the existence of agricultural settlement in the Arabah depends on a continued flow of cheap labor from Isaan, which itself depends on unremunerated labor supplied by migrants' kin – most prominently by the wives, mothers-in-law, and mothers who assume responsibility for raising their children, generally in that order. Farmers and other Israelis blind themselves to this truth by fantasizing that migration is an exceptionally lucky break that enables workers and their kin not only to reproduce their labor-power but also to break out of their class position, a fantasy relying on the racist and sexist devaluation of the reproductive labor involved.

Yet just as production depends on reproduction, so does reproduction depend on the wages afforded by participation in production: the two cycles are integrated. One defining feature of a capitalist society is that the vast majority of the population – the proletariat – is deprived of the means by which it might subsist without being employed by capitalists (Wolf 2010). Thus the reproduction of formations which might predate capitalism, including the family, becomes impossible without the wage and the commodities it can buy. And while Israelis might be oblivious to the contribution of the reproductive labor undertaken in Isaan to their livelihoods, migrants' kinspeople are acutely aware of the contribution of productive labor in Israel to their own survival. This is the backdrop against which Moon says that she would rather Boy stay in Israel as long as he can, despite her concerns for his health, because when he comes home, her oldest son will have to leave school. Once the flow of remittances stops, as it inevitably will, with it goes any hope of higher education and upward mobility for the youth.

As the stories related in this chapter have shown, the rural working-class Isaan family is a multi-generational institution centered around women and resilient in the face of marital breakup. The economic costs of divorce are formidable: ex-husbands like Daeng lose savings

and investments, while ex-wives have to find ways to raise their children without the income they had counted on. Nevertheless, divorced women manage to raise their children, with the help of their families, while divorced men can go home to their own mothers; both can search for new partners. But if a harmonious family life is not necessary to the intergenerational renewal of labor-power, it nevertheless plays an important role in the day-to-day maintenance of that labor-power. If the material labor of this maintenance – cooking, cleaning and the like – has to take place in Israel, its affective or emotional side is undertaken transnationally, through attentions of the kind Moon lavished on Boy. When the bond is betrayed, as it was by Daeng's wife, a range of de-stabilizing emotional responses, from depression to barely controllable rage, threatens to drive the worker off the rails of gainful employment.⁹

Karmic reciprocity and social reproduction

Though some ritualized grumbling – *haun, neuay, phuat lang* (“hot,” “tired,” and “backache” in Isaan) – often took place in the greenhouse, it was hard to get migrants to expand on their suffering in interviews. Most of my co-workers declined to expand even on their physical discomfort, much less to talk about emotions like the sadness aroused by long absence from home, sadness of the kind expressed in the *luuk thung* music many of them listened and sang along to (Pattana 2009). It was, however, possible to hear them speak of the effects of suffering on “workers” in general, a figure from which they maintained some distance. The migrants I spoke with understood the abuse of alcohol, gambling, and drugs as triggered by

⁹ In “The gender distinction in communization theory” (2012) P. Valentine argues that social reproduction theory has yet to integrate gendered violence into its analysis. I cannot undertake this task here; nevertheless, it is important to point out that jealous rages like Daeng's are not simply *reactions* to marital breakdown, but also *weapons* serving to hold that relation together through repressive violence.

the “problems” (*panhaa*) they had to grapple with. This was not an outright denunciation of such pastimes: a few beers after work, more on the weekends, and the occasional game for money were standard and played an important role in the sociability of the farm’s mini-community as well as in my ability to build rapport with some of its members. But some people drank and gambled more heavily and more often than others, with direct effects on themselves and their surroundings: they got into fights, lost money, and missed work days to hangovers.¹⁰ Their colleagues interpreted such excesses for me as both proceeding from and contributing to these migrants’ unhappiness, usually due to worrying (*khít laay*, literally “thinking a lot”) about family, money, or both.

During a discussion of sudden nocturnal death (*laay taay* – see Mills (1995)), which was rather abstract since no one in Ein Amal had died this way for some time, Boy described a tangled web of causes which might conceivably lead to such deaths:

I don’t know, I’ve never seen it happen here. From what I see, these days, Thai workers drink, and go to bed late so that they don’t get enough sleep. They do exhausting work. Sometimes they sleep until late because they watch movies and listen to music. Some drink. Some gamble. They gamble all night, so they don’t get to sleep. The next day, they go to work. This might be the cause.

Boy’s description of how suffering may lead to more suffering and eventually to death – a bad death, far from home (Mills 1995; Stonington 2012) – is commonsensical. It also happens

¹⁰ Betting was usually on “high-low,” a simple game with dice, and sometimes on soccer games. Some migrants raised cocks and I heard rumors of Isaan-style cockfights being held in Israel, but I never witnessed one (see Zuckerman (2018) for an in-depth discussion of gambling in a similar cultural context in Laos). Incidentally, almost all the workers I knew smoked cigarettes, but if this was ever treated as a problem, it was only due to the expense involved. As related above, I had no knowledge of methamphetamine use on the farm until Daeng raised the issue with me during my visit to Isaan.

to cohere with the Buddhist vernacular notions of karma we have already explored in the domain of employee-employer relations. Here the karmic cycle is internal to the individual worker: if he meets suffering with conditioned, addictive responses, it will spiral into more suffering. But there is also an interpersonal cycle: for example, low remittances may cause a migrant's wife in Isaan to suspect and mistrust him, which might cause him to worry. To distract himself, he might drink, gamble, stay up late, waste money, miss work or work badly, anger his boss, and have even less money to remit in the future, restarting the spiral with added inertia. Buddhism offers a way out of this vicious cycle: the Eightfold Path of dharma, which leads to equanimity and equilibrium. None of my interlocutors discussed dharma with me in this context, but their ideal of calm composure, the *jay yen* or cool heart which Daeng ascribed to Boy, is a very common vernacular equivalent of the dharmic ideal of equanimity (Cassaniti 2014).

From this point of view, the vicious cycle is actually a sort of centrifugal spiral, in which suffering multiplies and the various relationships that make life possible — with employers, with co-workers, with family — all break down, leading to dissipation and even death. By contrast, the cycle of virtue really is circular: if it is maintained, relationships will become stronger and more stable. This applies to marital relationships like Moon and Boy's, which Moon saw as "proven" by her husband's constancy over time and through hardship, but also to the employment relation. As we have seen in Chapter 2, when I asked Daeng why he and his colleagues worked hard despite Yair's laxity, he explained that when "the boss feels good, we feel good." Meritorious action lessens suffering, leading to a smoother path and even fewer difficulties in the future.

A striking affinity begins to appear here between the cycles of social reproduction we have been discussing and the cycle of karmic reciprocity. From migrants' perspective, the

reciprocal and co-constitutive exchanges which have delineated analytically – of productive labor for wages, of remittances for reproductive labor, of obedience for paternal care – take on an affective and ethical charge. The good worker and husband is one who does his duty vis-à-vis his employer and wife; the reverse is also true, but the correct response to violation and disappointment is not retaliation, which would bring about further suffering and destabilization, but forbearance and perseverance, which can help to put the relationship back in order. On one hand, this is a powerful method for taking responsibility over one's own fate. But on the other, much like the ideologies identified by critical thinkers in the West as “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009) and “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011), it absolves and even sanctifies the ground of capitalist and patriarchal relations by turning the reproduction of those relations into an ethically praiseworthy act.

Wives and employers unite?

The “good” worker's effort to maintain his own labor-power through frugality, sobriety and hard work is a conscious effort to harmonize his actions with the interests of both his employer and his family. The boss has an interest in workers putting in long hours at work, so as to maximize production and profits, and in keeping their consumption strictly limited so as to minimize the disruption of production by alcoholism and other addictions and to prevent the sort of leisure-time behaviors which might destabilize the rule of difference between Israelis and Thais, as discussed in Chapter 4. Dependents in Thailand are also interested in maximizing their migrant's work time, so as to enlarge the wage bill from which remittances can be drawn, as well as in minimizing his consumption so as to leave as much of that wage as possible available for remittance. Kin and employers have a common interest in retrieving “runaway” workers, who often cut off contact with family when they abandon their legal employers, as well as in keeping workers sexually inactive, the former for reasons of marital

prerogative and maintaining their monopoly over remittances, and the latter in order to maintain the colonial rule of difference and its associated sexual taboos (again, see Chapter 4).

The female relatives of workers I met recognized this commonality of interest between themselves and their husbands' employers. Moon told us that she had made a habit of calling Ya'ir about once a year to inquire about her husband, sounding as distraught as she could in order to pressure him to make Boy toe the line. In return, she received Ya'ir's assurances in farm pidgin (see Chapter 3): "Boy *naun* [sleeps (T)], Boy *thamngaan* [works (T)], no lady (E)." Not entirely satisfied with these reports, she also asked me to get in touch with Ya'ir to inquire after Boy's health and petition to have him stay longer than legally allowed. When I did so, via text message, Ya'ir ignored the second request; but his reply to the first showed familiarity with the concerns of workers and kin, as well as intercultural frustrations with which I could identify:

I talked to him yesterday because he seemed a little down. I asked if there is any problem, if he misses [home]. He said his leg muscles ache sometimes. It's hard to reach him. I think he's addicted to some computer game. It's true that his nose runs a lot but in that respect [he] seems much better.

When in a later conversation I asked Ya'ir to tell me more about his contacts with workers' families, he denied that such contacts were of any importance. This disavowal may have reflected our own shared norm: in Israel, as in the US, an employer's interference in his employee's family affairs would be frowned upon. But the migrants I knew, like their relatives, recognized a different norm; when I asked them about this sort of intervention, they indicated that they welcomed it, just as Daeng retrospectively justified Ya'ir's refusal to let him go home early for fear that he would attack his wife, and as Mike opined that it was better for Ya'ir to disburse his wages to his family at home and the shop rather than pay him in cash (see Chapter 4).

This is not to say that workers on the Sadot farm conflated their own interest with that of the boss. As we have seen in Chapter 4, workers can be caustically critical of their exploitation in safe fora; Boy, too, was quite clear that he did not see the wages paid on the farm as fair, and that he worked long hours only because the hourly pay was so meager. Obviously, more money and more time off would lessen his suffering and that of his family; these would probably be the most effective steps towards keeping him within the virtuous cycle of health, happiness and hard work. But they were not on offer, and he was not inclined to protest, as this would endanger his relationship with Ya'ir. Similarly, when Moon inquired about the workman's compensation owed to Boy at the end of his term, I stressed that he might have to speak to Workers' Hotline, a labor rights NGO, in order to make sure he got his fair share. She replied that he would be loath to anger Ya'ir by doing this.

These recognitions of conflicting interests – part of what in Chapter 4 I called a “discreet” transcript rather than a “secret” one – sheds a light on the labor involved in reproducing what Peter Jackson (2004) calls the “Thai regime of images”. Neither Daeng nor Boy nor Moon nor Song naively believes that “when those we have obligations towards feel good, we feel good” is an accurate description of reality; each of them knows otherwise from bitter experience. Daeng, by his own lights, had been a good worker and husband up until the moment his wife left him. This misfortune threw him into a spiral of suffering, although he was able to get his bearings back with Ya'ir's paternalist aid. Boy, too, remained a faithful husband and worker. Nevertheless, his family could not escape the burden of debt and the consequent economic deprivation, nor could it overcome the pain of separation, though he and Moon had achieved confidence in their marital bond.

Like the Potemkin *moshav* of Hebrew labor and Thai invisibility whose conjuring-up was described in the previous chapter, the happy confluence of interests between employers,

employees and kin is not a given, but a state of the “social body” that must be worked towards. These interests are multifaceted, but they are also economic facts, drawn against the ground of capitalist commodity relations in both Israel and Isaan. Thus, while Jackson is right to observe that Thai images “attain their significance from their relationship to other politically and culturally prestigious images,” it does not therefore follow that, in a spurious distinction, they are “political artefacts *rather than* economic products” (Jackson 2004, 206, emphasis added). They are both.

Affect and ethics are central aspects of reproduction. So, too, is temporality. Each of the various cycles described in this dissertation has its own periodicity, from the day-to-day maintenance of labor-power to its inter-generational renewal, from the short-term emotional ups and downs experienced by individuals to the equally unpredictable rhythms of intimacy and suspicion in their relationships, from the daily dance of avoidance on the roads of Ein Amal to the much slower shifts in the political legitimacy of the labor settlement movement. These temporalities make a difference. For example, at the daily or weekly scale the tensions experienced by migrants and their spouses have one effect on agricultural production – causing workers to “think a lot” and resort to behaviors that may in turn affect their productivity. On a scale of years or decades, these tensions may make Israel a less attractive destination for migration and cause the stream of migrants to dwindle.¹¹ But capitalism is short-termist: profits need to be accumulated quickly lest competitors take over, even if in the longer term this will cause the sources of profit to run dry. Reproduction in the short term may undermine

¹¹ The availability of other migration destinations adds to the significance of this possible effect. If Israel's reputation as a good place to work deteriorates while other destinations proliferate, farmers may eventually find themselves facing a shortage of recruits.

reproduction in the longer term, and this is as true of migrant labor-power, as in Meillassoux's concept of "over-exploitation" (Meillassoux 1981, 127-37) as it is of the much more obvious case of the natural environment (see J. W. Moore 2016 for the analogies and links between the two).

In my use the concept "reproduction" is analytical, not ethical. To say that one social formation depends on another for its reproduction or even that a formation is endangering the reproduction of some resource on which it depends and thus, in the longer term, putting its own reproduction at risk, is not to claim that the reproduction of the formation is, in itself, either a good or a bad thing. Nevertheless, an ethical question haunts the discussion: what are the moral and political consequences of realizing this fragile interdependence between production and reproduction, economics and politics, the Arabah and Isaan? This is the question I will take up in the concluding chapter.

Conclusion:

Anthropology and the Politics of Rupture

Allow me to backpedal a little. When I say that for me the concept of reproduction is analytical, not ethical, I mean that to talk about the reproduction of a social formation is not to posit that formation or its reproduction as good or bad in a moral sense. But as we have seen, the reproduction of many social formations does depend on the enlistment of the people involved into upholding particular ethical orientations toward those formations – whether positive, as in the case of the paternalistic ideology regulating migrants’ attitudes toward labor relations, or “merely” neutral, as in the case of the labor settlement movement’s construal of Thai as opposed to Jewish or Arab labor. The analysis of reproduction does contain an ethical pitfall, then, since the unwary analyst might accidentally stumble from describing such reproductively necessary ideologies into justifying them.

I do believe, as should be clear to the reader by now, that the current form which the employment of Thai migrants in Israeli agriculture takes is highly immoral, and I should like my work to be useful in finding ways to rupture rather than facilitate its reproduction. Rather than bringing in a spanner from the outside and throwing it in the works, I would like to search for elements of an immanent critique in the wheels within wheels whose spinning has been detailed; I would like to try to find ways in which these wheels can be halted, taken apart and reassembled to create a rather different machine. Two of the wheels which have been identified

here are the affective orientations of exploitation anxiety and karmic reciprocity, brought into the works by Israelis and Thais respectively. Perhaps something can be done with them?

Eric Cazdyn (2015) argues that the revolutionary possibility of rupture is at the root not only of Marxism but also of psychoanalysis and Buddhism. Both can be useful in reassembling this machine. Let me start with exploitation anxiety, the discomfiting suspicion that exploitative relations do damage to the spiritual integrity of the exploiting party. This anxiety can be read psychoanalytically, as a symptom, and the labor settlement movement's various feints to avoid its consequences might be understood as attempts at repression which can never fully succeed. But exploitation would not be exploitation without the suffering of the exploited, and cure, the revolutionary horizon of psychoanalysis, can only be achieved when the "kernel of the real" (Žižek 1989), in this case the suffering of the exploited, is confronted and transformed. It is not the desire to avoid exploitative relations in itself that is the problem; the trouble begins when it turns into hostility towards the exploited subject, who is then punished, as by the direct violence of expulsion and military occupation meted out to Palestinians or by the indirect violence of neutralization and invisibilization foisted upon Thai migrants. In all its forms, the violence generated by exploitation anxiety prepares the ground for further oppression and exploitation, which in turn produce further disavowal and further violence. A therapeutic approach along psychoanalytical lines would ask how exploitative relations can be transformed into equitable, voluntary and egalitarian ones rather than reproduced through disavowal, distancing and repression.

Dharma can do its own critical work on karmic reciprocity. Up to here I have been concerned with this orientation primarily as a force for stabilizing hierarchical and inequitable relations, driving subaltern subjects to give their all to their social betters, expecting reciprocity but claiming no right to redress when such reciprocity is not forthcoming. I have described this

logic as positing a binary choice between angry and resentful reactions to misfortune, which trigger a spiral of suffering that can lead to family breakup and even death, and calm, and measured, acquiescent reactions which keep things moving along in a virtuous circle. The service rendered to the reproduction of the various hierarchical social formations described in this dissertation is obvious. But in Buddhism there is a third, radical option, which is neither an outward spiral of proliferating suffering, nor a cycle which seeks merely to maintain a manageable degree of suffering, but an *inward* spiral which, through ethical action and right view, mitigates and refines suffering all the way to the final horizon in which it is extinguished altogether: awakening or enlightenment, *nirvana*.

What might happen when put these two retooled wheels together again? What do we get when we put the realization that the best remedy for exploitation is an egalitarian transformation of relations in touch with an affirmation of the possibility that suffering can be gradually eliminated through mindful practice? We get an ethical orientation that sees Thais, Israelis, Palestinians and others, employers, employees, bystanders and kin, as inextricably *interdependent* and potential partners in a project of collectively realizing the freedom to which they all individually aspire: and we get it not by importing it from the outside, but by drawing logical conclusions from ethical orientations already present in the field.

Awareness of interdependence and of the possibility of revolutionary transformation is a powerful antidote to the ideology embedded in what I have called the capitalist ground, the fiction that the exchange of commodities can plausibly be understood as a series of well-defined and discrete encounters by which the success of an individual, a community or a project might be measured. It is particularly ethically incumbent to push back against this fiction when the commodities being exchanged are money – the one absolutely necessary commodity in a world where it has become impossible to produce for one's own needs – and labor-power, a

commodity which essentially consists of giving one's assent to domination. Reproduction as an analytic is also ethical in this sense, as a criticism of the immanent capitalist ideology which Marx (1990, 163-77) calls the "fetishism of the commodity."

The political implications are daunting of course. Is it really possible to reconfigure relations in the Arabah such that the interdependence of the various beings involved would be celebrated rather than disavowed and set on an equal footing rather than an exploitative one? Who knows. Perhaps not. But the philosophies of rupture – psychoanalysis, dharma, Marxism – insist on not foreclosing this possibility, though as Cazdyn (2015, 207) notes, they each have watered-down, blunted forms which give up in advance on their radical promise: limited social-democratic reformism for Marxism, conventional psychotherapy for psychoanalysis, and, for Buddhism "gratuitous spiritual practice or limited liberal-humanist critique. Giving up in advance is also what Zionist pioneers did when they let their socialism curdle into a separatist reformism predicated on the related assumptions that the capitalist ground is immutable and that the egalitarian good life can only be possible within a strictly policed physical and social space. And anthropologists who would limit themselves to giving policy recommendations to a state which proceeds along the same assumptions is an accomplice to this giving up.

I speak from experience. In 2014 I co-authored a report with Noa Shauer, then coordinator for agricultural workers at Workers' Hotline, in which we framed the Israeli state's neglect of Thai migrants' right to the minimum wage as an indirect subsidy to farmers, which we calculated as adding up to half a billion NIS per year (Shauer and Kaminer 2014). In retrospect, there is something off about the idea of a "subsidy," since this money is not disbursed by the state from tax revenues but stolen from workers. Nevertheless, it helped us to make a rhetorical point, which was precisely that we had no objection to agricultural subsidies, which

are common throughout the global North (OECD 2010). Our humble suggestion was simply that the state finance such subsidies through taxation rather than allowing employers to take them out of the pockets of impoverished migrant workers. But since then, the state has only grown more shameless has only grown more flagrant: last year, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came out in support of exempting migrant workers from the protection of Israeli labor laws (Vitman 2018), regularizing the very robbery we had gently suggested should be stopped.

Though our approach was unusual, Shauer and I are hardly the only actors who have demanded the enforcement of labor law in the Israeli farm sector: a string of official and academic commissions have recommended enforcement as a way of ensuring that migrants do not drive down wages for Israelis (Kurlander and Kaminer, n.d.). What these policy proposals have in common is their implicit rejection of Thai migrants as potential members of the political community. Even the proposal Shauer and I made posited them as subjects worthy of protection by a morally and legally equitable polity, but not of political membership in it. These proposals, with their implicit recognition of the legitimacy of the state's "demographic concerns," reinforce rather than challenge the assumption that an equitable community must vigilantly limit and police its own membership, the cynical view that an equal ethical commitment to everyone amounts in practice to a commitment to no-one. This is the truncated horizon of social-democratic reformism, conventional psychotherapy and gratuitous spiritual practice, a vision which gives up on the world outside the nation-state or the individual as a desert, a wilderness, an Arabah, turning inward to tend a carefully demarcated and guarded greenhouse – the aquifer and the acacias be damned.

Perhaps the most serious and sustained attack on this anxious, defensive orientation in the Israeli/Palestinian context is the movement for democratic decolonization, which has

achieved some traction among Palestinian and Israeli intellectuals. The bilingual collection of speculative short fiction, *Awdah* (Gardi and Al-Ghabari 2013), which imagines what the return of Palestinian refugees might look like in a variety of modes ranging from the ironic to the utopian, is an impressive exemplar of imaginative work in this vein. But heretofore this imaginary has been staunchly “binational:” there is room in it for Arabs and Jews but not for people of other origins. Keeping in mind that the migration regime encountered by migrants in Israel is disturbingly similar to the *kafala* system in place in Lebanon and the Gulf states (Gardner 2010), the prospect is raised of a polity which includes Palestinians and Israelis, perhaps by finally recognizing the Palestinian claim to autochthony so anxiously disavowed by the LSM, but continues to exclude and exploit migrant “others.” What might a democratic decolonization that welcomes everyone look like?

“Foreign Hebrew labor,” a design project by landscape architect Adi Elmaliyah (2017), can give us an inkling. By asking how communities in the Arabah might be redesigned to better accommodate the needs of Thai migrant workers, and by suggesting the erection of attractive housing developments, designed with reference to vernacular Isaan architecture, Elmaliyah provides an innocuously radical vision of a region where the Thai half of the population has as much of a “right to the *moshav*” (cf. Harvey 2012) as the Jewish half, a right expressed through the built environment. One might go further and ask what the Arabah might look like if the Bedouin expelled from it to Jordan and the Seyag in the years following Israeli independence (see Chapter 1) were allowed to return and also welcomed into integrated communities. Such imaginative interventions go beyond the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology and the textual boundaries of this dissertation. But in my opinion anyway, anthropology is better used as a provider of materials for such utopian imaginaries than as a policy-paper-producing handmaiden of the ethnonational state.

One last note. I have touched here and there on the non-human environment, though I cannot pretend that it has been a central concern of this ethnography. The interchange of materials between that environment and human societies is an essential metabolism that the latter ignore at their peril (J. M. Moore 2014), and in leaving it out of the analysis I have been complicit. The degradation of water sources is an urgent danger to the reproduction of agriculture in the Arabah (Oren et al. 2004); global warming, too, is sure to be devastating in a region which already stands at the very top of the temperature range for viable human habitation. In the face of such urgent challenges, my call for an anthropology which serves a utopian political imagination rather than the prosaic world of state policy may seem frivolous. But in the era of extreme climactic conditions which is already upon us, the temptation to put up walls to protect the lucky and shut our eyes to the horrors outside will become much stronger, much more corporeally pernicious to those left out and much more spiritually degrading to those walled in. Certainly, we will need policy, and lots of it, and anthropologists might have an important part to play in designing it. But we will have to ask, policy for whom? And anthropologists will have at least as important a part to play in insisting that policy simply cannot content itself with caring for a nationally delimited population in a nationally delimited territory. We are interconnected, whether we like it or not; but turning a blind eye to this will be our ruin.

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