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Engendering discourses of displacement
Contesting mobility and marginality in rural Thailand

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ABSTRACT ■ In Northeast Thailand gendered patterns of labor migration insert rural residents into privileged sites of national and international progress; yet, migrants and their families remain marginalized within dominant constructions of contemporary Thai modernity and development. This article explores these lived contradictions of labor mobility through the ethnographic analysis of one sending community, focusing on local discourses of, and about, the gendered disruptions of migration. Struggles over shifting gender roles and meanings refigure the social displacements and economic disparities surrounding labor mobility in ways that tend to highlight individual problems rather than collective concerns or structural inequalities. Consequently, while labor mobility offers some valued avenues for contesting rural residents' exclusion from the benefits modelled by Thai ideologies of modernity, its accompanying gendered discourses reinforce as much as challenge existing patterns of marginalization.

KEY WORDS ■ migration, gender, modernities, global labor, rural-urban, consumption, hegemony

> . . . the vast majority of modern men and women do not want to resist modernity: they feel its excitement and believe in its promise, even when they find themselves in its way.
>
> (Berman, 1982: 313)

Powerful ideals of progress, development, and modernity represent deeply desired standards of well-being for many people in today's world. Although the content of such ideals (as well as their diverse vocabularies) are always variously imagined and locally constructed, the desires they evoke can retain a powerful attraction for individuals and communities even when their achievement is continually frustrated or denied. While variations of this dilemma characterize many forms of contemporary social experience, in this article I examine one particular form – labor mobility – and the tensions it produces in the lives and imaginations of people from one particular place – Baan Naa Sakae, a village in Isan, Thailand's impoverished northeastern region.[1]

Experiences of labor migration in Baan Naa Sakae exemplify the ambivalent, contested, and contradictory consequences that accompany the intersection of powerful globalizing processes in everyday life.[2] In Thailand, as in many similar sites of contemporary labor mobility, migrants and their sending communities encounter new or intensified relations of production and consumption shaped by expanding modes of capital accumulation and concentration. On a global scale, these processes promote the flow of investment into new sites of production and the parallel recruitment of cheap and flexible labor pools both within and across international boundaries (see Harvey, 1989; Sassen, 1998). At the same time, these structural transformations are often accompanied and sustained in specific localities by compelling discursive processes, including ideological models of 'modernity', or more accurately 'modernities'.[3] In Thailand these 'modernities' celebrate ideals of wealth, comfort, and commodified style that are encapsulated in part in the Thai phrase *khwaam pen thansamay*, 'being up-to-date'. The desirability of *thansamay* forms and practices reflects their links not only to privileged middle-class and urban Thai standards of living but also to even more distant arenas of global authority and privilege. In Baan Naa Sakae, new forms of geographic mobility take place amid proliferating images of these attractively 'modern' ways of being, yet few migrants are in a position to achieve the material or symbolic benefits that these promise.

As I argue below, these experiences of exclusion and marginality for Baan Naa Sakae migrants are partly encoded in local hierarchies of space and status. Specifically, migrants and others are identifiably 'rural' people (*khon baan nohk*); as such they occupy a space that is 'outside' (*nohk*) key arenas of Thai national authority and privilege – the nationalist state, commodity capitalism, globally inflected mass media – all of which are most powerfully centered in the capital city of Bangkok. However, the complex material and social realities of migration cannot be explained by these conventional status hierarchies. The lives of residents in Baan Naa Sakae (as in rural communities throughout the nation) are deeply embedded in relations of

production and structures of authority that cannot be categorized as distinctively rural or urban, traditional or modern, local or global. Rather, their labor mobility highlights the convoluted and difficult intertwining of global geographies of labor and capital with, on the one hand, state-based projects of national development and, on the other, locally meaningful norms, identities, and social relations.

One consequence of these complex ideological and material entanglements is that migrants and others in Baan Naa Sakae confront a continuing gap between constructed desires for Thai standards of 'modernity' and 'progress' (the local definitions of which I discuss below) and at best the partial achievement of such desires in everyday life.[4] The resulting tensions are expressed in part through a discourse of gendered disruptions. Local struggles over unsettled gender norms and identities serve as a ready vehicle for displaced frustrations with Thai models of national development and the unfulfilled aspirations these evoke. As a result, however, the women and men I discuss here confront their position at the margins of national and global power in ways that simultaneously contest and reproduce these hierarchies.

More generally, then, this study takes up the challenge posed by the opening epigraph: the need to take seriously actual men's and women's passionate, ongoing desires for the promises of ideological modernities and related hegemonic ideals, particularly when those promises remain substantially unfulfilled. To do so, I argue, requires close attention to lived experiences of marginalization and the localized forms of contest and struggle that these entail. I offer this analysis, therefore, as an example of how ethnography can work to decenter hegemonic ideals and the moral and geographic hierarchies they sustain, while still acknowledging their power in the lives and imaginations of social actors. Such an approach may be particularly appropriate for investigating not only the limits of hegemonic systems (including ideological modernities) but also their sources of resilience.

In the following sections, I examine the material and discursive practices that accompany new patterns of labor mobility in Baan Naa Sakae. I draw on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in the late 1980s and early 1990s, during the peak years of Thailand's economic boom. This research involved intensive interviewing and participant-observation with migrants from various parts of Thailand working in Bangkok as well as a year of fieldwork centered in Baan Naa Sakae, a community of almost 200 households. In 1989–90, during the time that I lived in the village, two forms of labor mobility predominated there, each with a distinctively gendered dimension.[5] First, nearly three-quarters of all households were involved in rural-to-urban migration, primarily into export-oriented industrial jobs or domestic service. This movement engaged a large segment of the community's unmarried youth especially the young women, ages 15 to 25.

Second, close to half of Baan Naa Sakae's adult men between the ages of 25 and 45 had participated to some degree in overseas contract labor. They found work primarily as construction laborers either in the Middle East or in nearby Asian countries.[6] Both forms of mobility were relatively recent phenomena, having become widespread practices in the community during the decade preceding my research.[7]

As I have argued elsewhere (Mills, 1999b), the pursuit of non-agricultural wages in communities like Baan Naa Sakae both reflects a general dependence on cash income for everyday subsistence and, in turn, heightens local desires to achieve prestigious (largely urban-identified) standards of commodity consumption and display. Consequently, labor migration is directed by more than concrete material goals and needs – although these are clearly important. Of no less significance, however, is the discursive context within which migrants and those around them understand themselves and their experiences. From this perspective labor mobility engages villagers in a shifting discourse about the relative value of rural-versus urban-identified ways of life and the symbolic location of local and regional identities vis-à-vis national and international standards of 'progress' (*khwaam caroen*), 'development' (*kaan phattana*), and 'modernity' (*khwaam pen thansamay*).

I begin, then, in the next section, by exploring more clearly what these concepts evoked for people in Baan Naa Sakae and how they shaped the discursive space of local mobility. Part two examines the two gendered patterns of mobility in Baan Naa Sakae and how, in different ways, these engaged residents in the pursuit of *thansamay* styles and other means of contesting their exclusion from dominant constructions of Thai modernity and success. The third section takes up local discourses of gendered risk as these displace and refigure concerns about the economic and social disparities of labor mobility. Finally, I conclude with some reflections on the broader significance of this argument for future research.

Part one: the discursive space of mobility – moral and geographic hierarchies of value

Like many contemporary nations, the Thai state has legitimized its authority in part through the pursuit of nationalist projects of 'development' (*kaan phattana*) and modernizing 'progress' (*khwaam caroen*). The past half-century or more has brought about the rapid construction of critical national infrastructure and communication systems (such as electricity, rail and roadways, radio and television) as well as near universal extension of centrally administered rights and obligations of national citizenship (universal primary education, suffrage, military service, taxation, among

others). Nevertheless, the centralizing impetus of nation-building has not produced a homogeneous social body; rather, persistent practices and images – rooted both in state-based policies and institutions and in popular media and related forms of cultural production – articulate significant symbolic hierarchies within the national community. Some of these divisions mark out regional lines of identity; ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences; or distinctions of social rank and class status. However, among the sharpest symbolic boundaries are those distinguishing rural and urban people and places.

Rural-urban dichotomies establish a clear hierarchy between remote 'villagers' (*chaaw baan* or *khon baan nohk*) living on the agricultural periphery of the nation and 'up-to-date' (*thansamay*) urbanites, especially those in the capital city of Bangkok, Thailand's privileged center of political, economic, and cultural authority. At times these national-level constructions convey a nostalgic reverence for an essential Thai identity rooted in the agricultural past. Just as often, however, they highlight and legitimize the symbolic exclusion of rural residents from the social prestige and material benefits of Thailand's modern (i.e. urban) achievements. Similarly, nationalist aspirations for social and economic models associated with 'already developed' (*phattana laew*) regions of the globe further marginalize rural producers by extending these geographic hierarchies of value well beyond the Thai nation-state.

These symbolic boundaries – between rural and urban communities, between Thailand and international sites of development and progress – are deeply familiar themes to rural Thai audiences. Indeed, the subordination of rural areas to urban centers of power is hardly a new phenomenon in Thailand; it has been a component of regional political authority since at least the period of early state formation in Southeast Asia. However, the 20th-century consolidation of Thailand as a modern nation-state has promoted new ways of thinking about rural-urban disparities. In particular, these are now closely mapped onto contemporary Thai discourses of modernity and development. Being 'modern' in Thailand is perhaps best represented by the seductive imagery of the country's extensive media industries. These produce a steady parade of 'up-to-date' (*thansamay*) men and women located in attractively modern settings and engaged in activities that are predominantly urban and/or cosmopolitan in style and association. Although produced (primarily) in Bangkok, these images of *thansamay* Thai life are distributed nation-wide and have had profound effects on the self-imagining of rural Thai residents (Mills, 2001). In effect, to identify or be identified as 'rural' in Thailand engages powerful cultural oppositions and symbolic hierarchies that define rural communities in terms of their distance from standards of modernity, progress, and development both within the Thai nation and on a global scale.

Moreover, within the symbolic and geographic hierarchies of Thai national discourse no region has been more marginalized than the rural Northeast (Isan). Both mass media and state policy commonly portray Isan's ethnic-Lao majority population (*khon Isan*) as the most traditional, least developed, and most culturally unsophisticated segment of the Thai nation. When Isan villagers figure in popular media productions they generally do so as caricatures of the foolish peasant bumpkin or as domestic servants whose naïve actions or superstitions are a trial for their urban employers. Policy makers and official statisticians confirm the marginality of *khon Isan* by highlighting their region's status of underdevelopment: Isan consistently occupies the bottom rung in national socio-economic rankings, especially in per capita income (see for example, Jones and Tieng, 1999b: 40; also Medhi, 1993; Warr, 1993). Consequently, residents of Baan Naa Sakae occupied a doubly peripheral location within the geographic and moral imagination of the nation-state – both as regional *khon Isan* and rural *chaaw baan*.

Local attention to these hierarchies emerged in a variety of ways during my fieldwork. Whenever possible, and often paid for with migrants' wages, village house construction and remodeling incorporated manufactured elements associated with urban styles of architecture and considered attractively 'modern': for example, finished doors, glass windows, concrete pillars and blocks. Similarly, new technologies and mass market commodities – electric fans, televisions, refrigerators, motorcycles – represented tangible and valued markers of increased well-being and social status in the community. Desires for these and other urban-identified, *thansamay* styles reflected village residents' personal experiences as migrants as well as their exposure to the pervasive imagery of national television and popular media. At the same time, the commodified practices of Baan Naa Sakae residents also echoed aestheticized models of 'progress' promoted by the Thai state. As in other parts of rural Thailand, official 'development' policies in Isan often emphasize cosmetic measures of success. These programs imply a definition of development that relies at least as much on visible styles of display as on productive capacity or income generation. Examples include the periodic 'development contests' in which communities are judged and rewarded according to their achievement of aesthetic standards such as fenced and tidy house yards; painted village gateways; signs indicating household numbers and surnames; and the general repair and upkeep of community buildings such as the Buddhist temple or village school (see Hirsch, 1991).[8]

Even development projects that aimed to improve local infrastructure and other resources might not address substantive questions of equitable access and participation. This was most clearly illustrated during my research when Baan Naa Sakae was selected as the site for a demonstration

project to install a system of running water. Subsidized by a prominent non-governmental development organization, the project aimed to pipe water to most compounds in the village. Although the water was not clean enough for drinking, the piped service would enable participating households to reduce or eliminate daily trips for hauling use-water from local ponds. Yet, in order to secure access to these benefits, each household had to contribute an initial subscription fee and provide volunteer labor throughout the construction schedule, a period of several weeks. Many villagers – and especially the community leaders who had campaigned to bring the project to the community – welcomed the new service as a sign of increased community 'progress' (*baan rao caroen khuen*) even if for some the requirements for participation were a significant hardship.[9] However, many were much less enthusiastic about the new monthly usage fees they would have to pay when the service was completed. As with the initial subscription fee, residents were on their own to find the increased cash needed to enjoy this new form of *thansamay* convenience.

I will return in a later section to the internal disparities that this project highlighted among residents of Baan Naa Sakae. Here, however, I want to point to the way in which the piped water project as an example of local 'development' (*phattana*) reinforced consumption-oriented measures of 'progress' (*caroen*) and up-to-date success. Moreover, despite the arrival of piped water services, it was clear to all that life in Baan Naa Sakae remained well behind national (i.e. Bangkok) standards of *thansamay* living. For many the desirability of catching up (or getting closer) was clear. This was reflected in comments that I heard throughout my stay: 'Our village is not developed, it has no progress; not like in the city [Bangkok] or your country.' Indeed, some speakers invoked these comparisons with distant sites of modernity and development, at least in part to engage my sympathies (and if possible my assistance as a presumably influential foreigner) for community projects or other activities. At other times, residents used the same dichotomies but in reverse, to assert the moral superiority of village life – distinguishing, for example, rural 'traditions' (*prapheni*) of mutual aid and close kinship from the greed and selfishness of city people who 'live next door for years and don't even know their neighbors' names'.

A full examination of these discursive manipulations would require more space than is available here. What these few examples reveal, nonetheless, is the importance of rural-urban distinctions in Baan Naa Sakae as symbolic forms that could be deployed in different ways for different ends. The power of rural-urban hierarchies as moral as well as geographic oppositions persisted in local imaginations even as these points of comparison were also points of contested meaning. Seen in this light, the distinctions that Baan Naa Sakae residents drew between rural and urban, traditional and modern, underdeveloped and developed referred less to actual experiences of

isolation than to a sharp awareness of how their lives were inextricably linked to distant sites and centers of power, not least through labor migration.

In the remainder of this article I turn to a closer examination of the ways in which people in the community gave meaning to their engagement in these migration streams. I argue that for those moving as well as for those left behind labor migration represented a form of direct insertion within national and international hierarchies of value. Labor migration allowed village residents to engage symbolic and material sources of value closely associated with desired standards of 'being up-to-date'; yet these claims were rarely achieved in more than partial and limited ways. Moreover, the ability of some in Baan Naa Sakae to accumulate valued markers of *thansamay* comfort and status did little to alleviate the sharp dislocations that migration generated in many residents' lives. At least some of the resulting tensions were displaced on to local anxieties about unsettled gender meanings and relations, a process that I contend served to reproduce some of the same hierarchies of value against which rural migrants struggled in other ways.

Part two: gendered mobility and *thansamay* desires

As noted above, Baan Naa Sakae residents engaged in two dominant and distinctly gendered patterns of labor mobility. Of these two, the movement of local youth into urban wage labor was more closely linked by residents to migrants' explicit desires for 'up-to-date' forms of status and success. Both rural-urban migrants and those left behind spoke about the move to Bangkok as a response, at least in part, to the 'boredom' (*buea*) of village life. Local commentaries also stressed the economic obligations of migrants to help support rural kin but in fact only a few of the community's poorest households truly depended upon urban wage remittances to supply their daily subsistence needs. More often parents of migrant daughters and sons relied on these earnings to pay for periodic expenses (such as fertilizer, medicines, or school fees) or to make large (sometimes luxury) commodity purchases such as building supplies, a television, or other household appliances. Indeed it was quite common for both parents and children to admit that young people entered Bangkok employment not only to assist family back home but also to explore the imagined possibilities of urban adventure and modern excitement – 'to open the ears and eyes' (*hay poet huu poet taa*).

Although migrants worked long hours in Bangkok for low pay and limited benefits, exploitative working conditions deterred few from leaving Baan Naa Sakae. Young unmarried men and women in the village were

eager for the wages they could earn as industrial laborers or domestic servants. With a cash income of their own, they hoped both to assist rural families and to explore new forms of personal autonomy and 'up-to-date' entertainment and commodity consumption. Nevertheless, as I have documented elsewhere (Mills, 1999b), this was often a much more difficult balancing act for migrant daughters than for sons. Gendered patterns of socialization encourage relatively high levels of personal expenditures by young men (e.g. on cigarettes and alcohol); consequently many Baan Naa Sakae parents were satisfied if migrant sons earned enough to support themselves even if they did not contribute substantially to household needs. Similar behavior by young women, however, was received much more critically. Responsible and industrious daughters were expected to save their wages and make regular contributions to the family income.

At key moments, however, young migrants' desires to help rural kin and enjoy the pleasures of *thansamay* consumption could converge as when daughters and sons brought home with them newly acquired, high-status commodities (televisions, radios, electric fans, etc.) as gifts for rural kin, or helped to finance the construction of stylish new homes for themselves and their aging parents. Such projects often required many months, if not years, of careful saving and planning on the part of migrant workers who rarely earned more (and sometimes less) than the basic minimum wage; in 1990 the legal minimum wage in Bangkok was 97 baht or just under US$4.00 per day.[10] Such low wages when combined with high urban living expenses meant that migrant youth were often reluctant to commit all their urban resources toward rural household projects. Many strove to control both the timing and amounts of their contributions to family at home. The result for many Baan Naa Sakae parents was a sharply felt reduction in their own authority (see also Mills, 2001).

Furthermore, parents and adolescent children alike understood that an urban income and unsupervised leisure time presented attractive possibilities for romantic or sexual experimentation. Indeed, opportunities for casual dating and other forms of peer-group entertainment were important aspects of the 'up-to-date' pleasures that drew young women and men to urban employment. In general, however, parents in Baan Naa Sakae were much more concerned about the potential perils of urban romance for migrant daughters than for migrant sons. And their fears were acknowledged by many of the young women I knew in Bangkok who sought to postpone serious relationships and marriage as long as possible even as they also flirted with urban romantic possibilities (Mills, 1998). The risks involved were clear to all. While migrant men might have multiple sexual relationships with little fear of embarrassing or burdening kin at home, women's sexual experimentation could entail more serious consequences. Most young women working in Bangkok could point to a co-worker who

had been abandoned by an urban partner. In Baan Naa Sakae, the difficulties of several such young women were well known: each had had to leave a young infant in the care of grandparents, while she returned to work in the city to support her child.

In light of these gendered and economic tensions surrounding youth out-migration, I was surprised one day during an early visit to Baan Naa Sakae when Pho Man, an assistant to the village headman, told me: 'Here in our village we are renowned (*chue siang*) for migrant labor.' Initially I was puzzled by his evident sense of pride. Usually my questions about migration evoked at least somewhat more ambivalent responses, especially when it involved the unsupervised mobility of young unmarried women. However, I soon discovered that Pho Man's claims for the 'renown' of Baan Naa Sakae workers referred to the more lucrative possibilities of overseas migration. Here the community did stand out, at least locally, for the scale of its participation.

At the time of my research nearly one-half of all adult men (aged 25–45) had been or were still involved in some form of overseas contract labor. The destinations of Baan Naa Sakae men were diverse: including both the oil-rich nations of the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iraq, Kuwait) and, especially in the late 1980s, the booming economies of regional Asian neighbors (Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and later, Taiwan). Jobs in Bangkok might yield monthly or more periodic remittances of a few hundred baht (perhaps US$40–50) but international contract labor typically provided monthly payments of several thousand baht, transferred directly to bank accounts in Thailand. Remittances of 5–10,000 baht per month (US$200–400) were common. Unlike urban jobs, then, overseas employment could effect a rapid and startling transformation in the material circumstances of successful migrants and their families.

Despite the potential for high earnings, Baan Naa Sakae men's pursuit of overseas employment was rarely explained in terms of desires for new experiences or 'modern' standards of success. In contrast to the open associations made between youthful out-migration and the pursuit of *thansamay* urban-based styles and pleasures, the movement of local men into overseas labor was almost always discussed as the fulfillment of normative gender roles and household obligations. Men's decisions to leave for two to four years of contract labor were typically represented as the efforts of poor but responsible husbands and sons seeking to 'improve the lives' (*hay chiiwit dii khuen*) of their families.[11] However, it was also obvious that the substantial earnings of successful international migrants enabled them to bankroll much more effective claims to the commodified symbols of 'up-to-date' status than was possible for migrants earning only Bangkok wages. Equally important, the globalized movement of Baan Naa Sakae men contrasted sharply with dominant images of Thai national development and

Bangkok-based modernity. As travelers to distant and cosmopolitan realms, migrants countered dominant state and media representations about where and by whom 'development' and 'progress' could be achieved.

According to Ay Khong, a man who in the mid-1980s had spent four years working for a German construction firm in Iraq:

> People from Baan Naa Sakae have gone all over the world. Northeasterners (*khon Isan*) are good workers, hard-working. Foreigners all want to hire us. They say that Thai workers are the best.

This comment exemplifies the way that many Baan Naa Sakae men intertwined references to local, regional, and national identities when speaking about their work abroad. Their remarks reflected an awareness not only of pejorative stereotypes about backward peasant producers but also of their subordinate status as *khon Isan*, members of an ethnic-regional minority. For Ay Khong and others in Baan Naa Sakae, overseas labor contracts opened a new avenue for contesting these images. Individual migrants spoke with satisfaction about the skills they had acquired (mostly as drivers of large vehicles or in varied construction trades). They expressed a sense of achievement in having negotiated the difficulties of cross-cultural communication, picking up bits and pieces of different languages, and broadening their knowledge of the wider world. These new skills and experiences were meaningful in part because they were acquired in the prestigious realm of international travel and technology. In other words, as rural villagers from a peripheral region, they were fully capable of achieving standards of 'up-to-date' competence set not merely by Thai (i.e. Bangkok) employers but by even higher-status foreigners.

Beyond the cachet of cosmopolitan travel and worldly knowledge, migrants' most effective means to counter dominant images of 'backward' Isan villagers lay in their increased purchasing power. Like recipients of Bangkok-based wages, international migrants and their families most often used their earnings to finance new forms of consumption; overseas migrants often did so on a dramatic scale. For example, in 1990, after completing two years of a four-year contract in Libya, one man returned to Baan Naa Sakae for a two-month visit with his family. On his first full day home he made a trip to the local market town. There he purchased, among other items, a gas-stove and refrigerator, rare luxuries in Baan Naa Sakae. He also bought lumber to complete repairs to his father-in-law's house (where he and his wife also lived) including a large wooden door with prominent locks. Altogether in one day he spent nearly 20,000 baht (about US$800) or more than six times the monthly earnings of an urban factory worker at the time.

Migrants often made such dramatic purchases soon after returning home from a lengthy contract.[12] Typically these expenditures focused on housing

and household furnishings. The new or refurbished houses of returned overseas migrants often boasted 'up-to-date' architectural features, such as an enclosed concrete-block ground floor (in contrast to conventional village homes built on wooden pillars), shuttered glass windows, or machine-tooled woodwork. In only a few cases did Baan Naa Sakae migrants invest substantial portions of their overseas earnings in new income-generating projects. These included a half-dozen village men who each purchased a large freight truck upon their return home; they then supplemented household farm income by hiring their services out to haul large loads. In another case the wife of an absent migrant used his overseas remittances as start-up capital for a small store selling food and sundries to neighbors out of the enclosed ground floor of their home. More commonly, however, overseas migrants returned to their former livelihood as rice farmers and small cash-crop producers. Despite their worldly travel, migrants were not in a position to transfer the productive power of international development into village life.[13]

This feeling was reflected in the joking comments of one group of village men celebrating the return of a migrant friend. He was one of the community's few long-term overseas migrants with nearly 10 years of contract work to his credit. Curious, I asked what work he had been doing while away but before he could reply, his friends proclaimed laughingly: 'he's been studying abroad for his doctorate' (*pay rian 'doctor' caak nohk*). Their equation of overseas contract work with the elite practice of study abroad was no doubt inspired by my presence (as a 'foreign student') in the community. Nevertheless, the humor of this remark relied upon a broader awareness of the ironies that underlie rural men's experiences of overseas employment. Migrants who travel overseas enter into a space identified with the advanced knowledge and skills of 'being developed'. Like a 'foreign doctorate', these experiences should impart a degree of status to migrants; yet, upon their return the men knew that any such claims would receive little recognition within the wider Thai society. Instead they returned to a nation that continued to view them as poor, backward *khon Isan*.

At the same time, overseas migrants' ability to lay claim to national standards of progress and development through commodity display were by no means guaranteed. Baan Naa Sakae residents readily acknowledged that the social prestige and material benefits made possible by labor mobility could be attained only by overcoming significant risks. Nearly one in five Baan Naa Sakae men involved in overseas migration reported at least one instance of fraud – perpetrated either by unscrupulous employers or employment agents. Their complaints included faked visas and travel documents, arriving abroad to discover no job had been arranged, and outright theft by agents who absconded with clients' fees. Moreover, the plight of

victims was often exacerbated by the substantial debts they had taken on to secure an overseas job.[14]

Employment agents charged hopeful migrants a service fee, said to cover plane fares, passport and visas, as well as the cost of arranging employment. Although these fees were low in the initial years, by the mid- to late-1980s agency fees had risen to more than US$2000 (and these continued rising in the 1990s).[15] To raise such large amounts most prospective migrants in Baan Naa Sakae had to borrow, sometimes from local banks but most often from informal lenders at interest rates of 5 percent per month or more. These debts required most migrants to spend at least six months and sometimes a full year or more working solely to pay off what they owed. If fraud or other problems prevented the migrant from getting or completing a contract then the debt could become a more serious long-term burden. As a result, some migrant households reported that their earnings from overseas work were just enough to break even overall. Others were never able to recoup their losses. In one such case, Pho Som was cheated four times trying to get an overseas contract; he and his wife, Mae Tim, lost all their rice fields and water buffalo (the original collateral for loans) and even had to sell their house and compound in the village. When I met them Pho Som and Mae Tim lived in a small shack that they had built on land lent to them by a relative; they subsisted on irregular day labor and remittances from their two teenage daughters who had found factory jobs in Bangkok.

Few Baan Naa Sakae households suffered such severe financial setbacks in their pursuit of overseas employment; however, the heavy debt load was a real and ongoing source of distress for many. The anxiety that surrounded their financial gambles was compounded by the potential for physical injury or even death. While I was living in Baan Naa Sakae one local man was killed (in a traffic accident) while working in Israel; later I learned of at least two other men who had died while working abroad. Several others returned ill or seriously injured (including the son of the village headman who lost the use of an arm).

Even successful returned migrants admitted to the dangers they and others had faced. These were perhaps most acute in the reflections of those Baan Naa Sakae men who had gone overseas in the early- and mid-1980s to work in Iraq during its war with Iran; most had worked on road building crews near the Iraq-Iran border and recalled bombs flying overhead, some of which landed near or among work parties (although none of the Baan Naa Sakae men were themselves killed or injured as a result). Had they known about the war before taking the job? I asked. To my surprise, almost all admitted that, yes, they had known of the war but what else were they to do, they explained: 'Isan people are poor, so we have to go where there is money.' 'Yes, we knew about the conflict but we're poor and the money

was good so we went.' And in the words of another migrant: 'Yes [I knew about the war] but I am poor. If I die, I die but if I didn't go I wouldn't earn any money.'

Here the concerns of Baan Naa Sakae migrants reflected an explicit awareness of their 'underdeveloped' and 'backward' social and economic standing relative both to the sites they had encountered overseas and to Thai national standards. As one recently returned migrant stated even more clearly: 'If I were from the West or from Bangkok, places that are already developed (*phattana laew*), then I wouldn't have to go overseas.' In other words, as a villager (*chaaw baan*) and Northeasterner (*khon Isan*) his relative poverty and lack of 'development' compelled him to run risks that urban elites and others – those benefiting most from Thailand's economic boom – had no need to face.

Nevertheless, despite cases of serious injury, fraud, and even financial failure, overseas migrants and their families rarely complained about unfair or exploitative circumstances. Similarly, the low wages and poor conditions of urban wage work only rarely prompted rural migrants in Bangkok to engage in organized forms of critique or protest. Only a handful of Baan Naa Sakae youth had access to a union or other labor rights organizations during their time in Bangkok; those who did risked dismissal and other forms of harassment if they took up labor activism.[16] Without effective institutional means to contest workplace inequities, few urban or overseas migrants had any clear avenues through which to address such concerns. More often distress over specific instances of unfair treatment or dangerous conditions in the workplace was subordinated to workers' long-term goals of upholding commitments to rural kin and community.

Instead, whether working in Bangkok or overseas, most migrants perceived the hardships and difficulties of their employment as unfortunate – even unfair – but largely unavoidable. Thus individuals were 'unlucky' (*chook raay*) if they encountered 'mean-hearted' employers or cheating agents. But, unless they could find another position or were ready to return home for good, most migrants felt they had little choice but to endure (*tong thon*) exploitative conditions, rather than to contest them directly. Certainly, others' experiences of misfortune did little to stem the outflow of labor migrants from Baan Naa Sakae heading either to Bangkok or overseas. Migrants and their families might acknowledge the inequities and risks they faced but they did not sustain a critical analysis of these. Instead, the tensions that resulted from Baan Naa Sakae labor mobility emerged more readily in an idiom of unsettled gender and household relations. These concerns took several forms; in the next section I explore how this gendered discourse tended to give special weight to the dangers that labor mobility, especially by women, posed for local men and masculine claims to authority.

Part three: gendered displacements and relocations

The gendered patterns of mobility in Baan Naa Sakae reflected local incorporation into much wider networks of political power and economic extraction. A wide literature now documents the gendered ideologies and hierarchies that play a crucial role in the recruitment and disciplining of labor around the world, resulting in what many observers have called the increasing 'feminization' of global labor (Marchand and Runyan, 2000; Sassen, 1998; Standing, 1989).[17] These patterns of feminization relate to the noted preference for cheap and predominantly female workers in many sectors of low-skilled manufacturing and service industries world-wide; they also describe the international flow of labor, involving both men and women, into insecure (and ideologically subordinate) forms of employment that help to sustain high standards of living in the world's most privileged economies.

The employment options available to migrants from Baan Naa Sakae clearly echoed these gender dynamics in global patterns of labor mobilization. Yet the globalizing forces and related structural conditions that channeled local forms of mobility were not readily apparent to most village residents. Rather, local attention focused more immediately on the directly felt strains of absent family members, and the subsequent reworking of expectations and obligations between parents and children, husbands and wives, men and women. The perceived dislocations of labor migration in Baan Naa Sakae were more tangibly bound up with its gendered disruptions.

It is important to note here that gender systems always operate on multiple levels: as systems of dominant meanings and symbolism; as structured social roles and relations; and as lived experiences of personal identity. Because these different dimensions of gender are rarely if ever isometric, gender systems are never entirely static; instead they engage social actors in the ongoing construction, negotiation, and reworking of dominant meanings and identities in everyday life. Nevertheless, because they involve potential transformations in gendered forms of power and hierarchy, these are rarely smooth or uncontested processes.[18] In Baan Naa Sakae the discursive struggles that surrounded labor mobility offered strong evidence of these conflictive and contradictory dimensions in local gender meanings and role expectations. For example, conventional gender norms worked both to encourage and to raise concerns about new forms of mobility by local women and men. As I argue below, these contradictions were most clearly acknowledged in the case of unmarried women's rural-to-urban movements. Nevertheless, local constructions of masculinity were also challenged by the vulnerability that men confront in overseas employment and the need to counter the potentially feminizing consequences of such

experiences. Ultimately, however, local concerns about the gendered disruptions of mobility tended to focus attention on the failures of individuals rather than broader structural disparities. In doing so, local constructions of the gendered risks of migration served to normalize masculine claims to privilege and authority, while also helping to obscure real and expanding material inequities within the village community.

A variety of factors entered into local constructions of labor mobility as a source of gendered conflicts. Rural Isan is similar to other regions of Thailand in that norms of masculinity and femininity do not mark out rigidly segregated forms of behavior or exclusive authority. There are considerable areas of overlap in the everyday activities of men and women. Both have important economic roles within the household. Matrilocal residence preferences, combined with bilateral kinship and equal inheritance practices, also tend to give women access to supportive social networks and material resources throughout their adult lives. However, gendered roles and meanings do mark out some different spheres of activity and prestige several of which (including Theravada Buddhism and the patriarchal exercise of state and military power) privilege masculine claims to status, knowledge, and authority. These latter have also historically included most forms of geographic mobility.

A number of conventional Isan beliefs and practices link spatial mobility with the acquisition of knowledge (including sexual knowledge). For example, varied forms of 'adventurous travel' (*pay thiaw*) have long been important avenues to masculine maturity and status in rural Isan (see Kirsch, 1966). In the past these ranged from trading caravans and other forms of itinerant trading to travel with friends to court the women of neighboring communities; men might also travel as a result of military conscription or for religious training as Buddhist monks or novices at distant temples. With the exception of time spent in the monastic order, these periods of mobility also represented opportunities for men to acquire sexual experience – either through informal courtship or the purchase of commercial services. In Baan Naa Sakae, men's entry into new forms of labor migration was viewed as entirely consistent with these historic avenues of masculine adventure and worldly travel. By contrast, independent migration by young unmarried women had no historical precedent and instead contravened long-standing ideals of youthful femininity which emphasize more limited spatial autonomy and the public maintenance of physical-sexual boundaries to preserve a modest reputation (Mills, 1999b: 100–3; see also Van Esterik, 2000: 208–9). However, expanding urban job opportunities and high rates of mobility among young rural women have challenged these conventional gender roles; wage employment gives women access not only to cash income but also to new forms of knowledge and experience in the city, something many women themselves openly desired and valued.

For young Baan Naa Sakae women the independence they gained through mobility was one of the most attractive components of urban work, a chance to escape from conventional gender restrictions and familial supervision and to engage in forms of behavior and personal autonomy more readily available to young men. While at one level women's wage employment is understood as gender appropriate, as a way to fulfill their obligations as dutiful daughters to assist parents and kin, at another level it is much more troubling. It represents a clear transgression by young unmarried women into historically masculine arenas of social practice and agency. In particular, the association of spatial mobility with active sexuality means that, both symbolically and in practice, urban employment offers many young women forms of autonomy that include not only claims to *thansamay* status and adventure but also enhanced control over their own sexual behavior.

As noted above, the inability of parents to supervise the sexual activity of absent daughters was a critical element in local concerns about the gendered dislocations of labor migration. To some degree these worries reflected a general awareness of Thailand's large commercial sex trade and the possibility that local women might take up sex work particularly in the aftermath of a romantic betrayal (and loss of virginity); however, I found no evidence that any Baan Naa Sakae women were employed as sex workers during my research. Moreover, women in industrial jobs were not immune from difficulties, as was clearly demonstrated by the few local women whose romantic liaisons in Bangkok had ended badly; several young mothers in this situation eventually returned to Bangkok factory jobs but with the burden this time of supporting a child. In effect, regardless of their occupation, migrant women's sexual behavior was a frequent subject of local gossip. Speculation about possible liaisons was common and I was asked several times by worried parents on my return to the village from a trip to Bangkok, if their daughter 'had a boyfriend' in the city. On occasion, parental fears and neighborly gossip received dramatic confirmation when a young woman returned home accompanied by her chosen mate. Such an event eliminated the possibility that her parents could negotiate a respectable marriage payment (made by the groom's family to the bride's parents) or host a wedding celebration; while poorer households might welcome the chance to avoid the latter expense, more affluent families clearly regretted the social embarrassment. At the same time, many parents worried about the long-term stability of a relationship contracted in the city in the absence of community guidance and supervision. Their fears underlined the extent to which women's labor migration – though enabling their entry into privileged sites of Thai modernity desired by men and women alike – carried with it a level of moral and material vulnerability that their male counterparts did not share.

The symbolic displacements accompanying women's mobility involved not only their pursuit of new forms of *thansamay* autonomy but also their entry into arenas of historically masculine privilege and (sexual) agency. Viewed in this light, the pride expressed by men in their achievements as overseas migrants raised the stakes in local mobility and upheld the superiority of men's status through their greater geographic range of experience and travel. Nevertheless, assertions of masculine pride could do little to erase the fact that young unmarried women's steady and often enthusiastic recruitment into urban labor markets represented a continuing erosion of rural men's privileged and historically exclusive status claims to spatial mobility and related spheres of (sexual) experience and knowledge.

Meanwhile, the refiguring of international mobility as a source of masculine pride also served to displace possible concerns about the potentially de-masculinizing aspects of men's overseas employment. Migrants' assertions of pride as intrepid and able workers in high-status sites of globalization may also be read as a reversal of the loss of (masculine) control and authority experienced abroad. Contract laborers typically occupied a social and legal position of subordination in the host country (i.e. as members of a dependent 'feminized' work force). Their time and activities were subject to the potentially arbitrary and unchallengeable authority of foreign states and employers. Upon their return, Baan Naa Sakae men could rework some of this vulnerability by emphasizing manly achievements and daring (overcoming odds, facing down hardships and risk).[19] While abroad, however, the day-to-day conditions of overseas workers were often socially and emotionally difficult. Migrants found themselves in circumstances over which they had little if any control, dependent on the good will of translators, employers, police, and others for their continued well-being. This resulted, I believe, in a reluctance among many former overseas migrants to discuss their time abroad in anything other than generalities, a phenomenon I thought unique to their conversations with me until it was confirmed by the comments of wives and other family members.[20]

These unacknowledged threats to masculine authority contained in both women's increasing mobility and men's overseas experiences gave rise to a form of gendered discourse that circulated in Baan Naa Sakae during my fieldwork, mostly in the form of unsubstantiated rumors. These stories shone quite a different light on the gendered risks of geographic mobility. In particular, local representations of mobile women as sexually active and potentially promiscuous suggested that migration could release powers of female sexuality that were particularly dangerous to men. Clearly some of these concerns drew upon popular knowledge about Thailand's commercial sex industry. Although I found no evidence that any women from Baan Naa Sakae were employed as sex workers during my research, men and women

in the community were aware of this as a possibility. Despite the fact that many Thai women in the sex trade maintain ties with rural families to whom they often provide important and valued income, the occupation itself remains highly stigmatized. Moreover, within the national imagination, sex workers are closely associated with social disorder and disease (see Jeffrey, 2002). For example, public health posters and televised announcements to promote condom use often warned about sexually transmitted disease in ways that identified sex workers as vectors of illness and (with growing AIDS awareness in the 1990s) potentially fatal sources of infection.

Against this background, the potential or actual ability of women to gain sexual experience through migration easily took on more sinister tones. In Baan Naa Sakae these negative motifs revealed themselves in several popular tales about women's infidelity to their husbands.[21] One type of rumor that circulated in various forms during my time in the community focused on brides who ran off with the marriage payment a few days after the wedding (leaving the husband behind). Several such stories recurred in village gossip about failed marriages, all of which involved men whose brides were from other (sometimes quite distant) communities.[22] Even more distressing rumors circulated about wives of overseas workers who spent their husband's remitted wages on lovers, or ran away with their savings. These rumors circulated throughout the time I spent in Baan Naa Sakae, despite the fact that no specific cases had actually occurred in the community. Only one instance that I heard about involved a Baan Naa Sakae man (but his identity remained unclear to me and the story may well have been apocryphal); while working abroad he received a letter from a neighbor warning that his wife was misbehaving. He quit his contract early – thereby losing a valuable bonus payment – and returned home only to discover that the letter had been written out of envy, to 'make trouble' (*haa rueang*). His wife had been faithful all along. In most cases the stories were attributed to vague sources and may on occasion have been reinforced by sensational stories in the Thai press. Nevertheless, public rumors about the sexual infidelities of migrants' wives gave a sharply gendered twist to the risks of overseas migration, transforming migrants' pursuit of high overseas wages from a financial gamble into a threat both to family life and their own masculinity.

But the most dramatic (and unusual) expression of the gendered tensions evoked by mobility took the form of a region-wide 'hysteria' during which villagers feared attacks by malevolent, sexually voracious, and deadly female spirits – *phii mae maay* or what I have called 'widow ghosts' (see Mills, 1995). For a period of several weeks in early 1990, residents of Baan Naa Sakae and throughout Isan feared these marauding female spirits who could come to men in their sleep, killing them to take as 'husbands'. The

rumors of widow ghosts were triggered by news reports that during the past few years several hundred Thai men working overseas (mostly in Singapore) had died inexplicably in their sleep – a condition associated by medical authorities with some male Southeast Asian populations, also known as Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome. Elsewhere I have argued that the image of sexually voracious female spirits seeking 'husbands' among Isan farmers (and later seeking female companions and friends as well) gave expression to deep-seated feelings of rural vulnerability and socio-economic stress (Mills, 1995). The imaginative power of widow ghost attacks for people in Baan Naa Sakae, and throughout Isan, relied upon a potent symbolic mix: linking regional and rural identities with perceived and actual risks of new economic practices (especially labor migration) and the recognition of growing household tensions as these new sources of livelihood challenged conventional expectations about gender and generational roles. Widow ghosts, by mimicking and distorting women's geographic mobility into a demonic and threatening force, crystallized local concerns about risk, inequality, and vulnerability in the pursuit of modernity and national development.

Like runaway brides and unfaithful wives, marauding widow ghosts model shocking, horrifying reversals of gender and household norms and desired social relations.[23] In doing so, widow ghost attacks represented the dangers of Thai modernity as generalized problems, concerns shared by *all* rural residents. Moreover, widow ghosts and other rumors focused local fears on disrupted gendered roles and highlighted the dangers these posed both to household stability and to the personal dignity and authority of men. As I outline below, the generalized and gendered dangers invoked by these discursive themes of village life displaced tensions arising from other sources of strain in Baan Naa Sakae. First they downplayed the significant moral and material risks borne by women as a result of their own or others' labor mobility; second, they emphasized conflicts internal to rural households thereby shifting attention away from the effects of widening economic disparities within the local community.

Relocating risk

Popular images of mobile women as threatening to men obscure more common realities of gendered risk and suffering in the course of labor migration. Although fraud and injury are real risks for men seeking overseas employment, the long-term burden of these dangers are at least equally carried by women, especially wives. In general, it is the wife of an overseas migrant who must struggle at home to make ends meet, at least until the initial debt is paid off and she must continue to do so if her husband fails

to complete his contract, or is cheated, injured, or killed while working abroad. These burdens are given little recognition within a local discourse which constructs men's entry into overseas contracts as 'responsible' (*raphitchop*) husbands and sons, and presents women as dangerous and selfish predators. Furthermore, images of men's responsibility and women's malevolence offer a vision of social relations that opposes another popular construction of Thai masculine behavior as 'irresponsible' (*may raphitchop*) and selfish (*hen kae tua*) particularly in relation to female partners. Indeed doubts about masculine reliability underpin the discursive construction of rural-urban mobility as morally risky for women. As noted above, young women working in Bangkok are considered more vulnerable than men to the moral and material risks of urban romance and sexual experimentation. This is linked to the widespread belief (confirmed often enough in practice) that men 'like to play around' and are more likely to neglect or abandon partners, particularly in the absence of close community or supportive kin networks.

These dangers also operated at another level, in terms of the potential of geographic mobility to increase local exposure to new vectors of disease, particularly the global HIV/AIDS epidemic. Few in the village imagined that mobile men, whether in Bangkok or abroad, would remain celibate throughout their sojourn. Both single and married men were assumed to make some use of commercial sexual services during their absence, a practice considered normal and appropriate, of little, if any, moral consequence. It should be noted here that at the time of my research local concerns about and knowledge of HIV/AIDS were rudimentary at best; some national campaigns for AIDS education had begun by the late 1980s but were not well understood and their impact remained unclear in Baan Naa Sakae. Nevertheless, migrant men's sexual adventures posed serious risks for their wives or future marriage partners if they became infected with HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. By realigning the gendered disruptions of mobility away from concerns about men's unreliability and emphasizing the sexual dangers of (and to) promiscuous women, local discourse normalized conventional patterns of men's sexual behavior and obscured the longer term risks these could pose for others, including women who had never left the community. In addition, rumors about unfaithful wives and dangerous female spirits undermined women's legitimate concerns that husbands or potential partners might not behave 'responsibly' (whether in sexual or economic terms) during their time in the city or overseas.

In short, for men labor mobility tended to expand already existing forms of masculine autonomy – both economic and sexual; for young women urban wages and mobility represented a much clearer departure from normative gender roles and offered less secure claims to critical material

resources. Indeed, another ethnographer of the rural Northeast, Andrea Whittaker, sounds a sharp cautionary note regarding the long-term effects of gender inequities for rural women in the cash economy. Historically, Isan women have had significant claims to and even control over material resources in rural communities. In the present, daughters still enjoy equal inheritance rights with sons; however, in the past women were sometimes the sole inheritors of land, while men were expected to gain land through marriage or by pioneer settlement. Women's rights to property were strengthened by the dominant practice of matrilocal residence at marriage; many women remained throughout their lives in the same communities or even the same compounds with close maternal kin. By the late 20th century, however, lower pay rates for women (both in rural and urban wage work) and the growing importance of cash income over productive resources, such as land, for household livelihood have meant that:

> the material basis of women's position in Isan is being eroded. In the past Isan women mediated the land, labor and inheritance, and hence the means of production. Within the cash economy, women find themselves with lower status in their relationships with men and separated from their traditional sources of economic and social support. (Whittaker, 1999: 52)

Labor migration to Bangkok might allow young rural women to pursue new forms of economic and sexual agency but this required a delicate negotiation with their continuing roles (and self-perceptions) as 'good girls' and 'good daughters' (see also Mills, 1999b). Others might benefit from a husband's successful overseas gamble but the risks this entailed for women who remained at home (especially in the event of a failed contract) received little public credit. On the whole, women's potential to gain from their own mobility or the overseas employment of male family members remained hemmed in by the continuing power of gender inequalities, sustained in part by a discursive field that emphasized mobile women's dangers to men and undermined the legitimacy of women's desires to participate in new domains of spatial knowledge and sexual experience.

Muting inequality

Gendered anxieties about labor mobility focused local attention on contested relations between women and men. In so doing, the emotional salience of gendered idioms also deflected attention away from widening class fractions within the rural community, local inequalities that helped to motivate continued labor mobility but which migration had also served to exacerbate. Although leaving Baan Naa Sakae was commonly portrayed by migrants and others as an effort to escape the poverty of rural life, this

stance failed to acknowledge the fact that villagers did not all experience 'rural poverty' from an equal standpoint. In fact, migration opportunities tended to benefit those who were already more affluent.

This was particularly clear in the case of overseas mobility. While every migrant faced the possibility of death or injury, wealthier families often had sufficient assets (land and livestock) to minimize the financial risks of overseas employment; such households also were more likely to have clear title to their lands and therefore have easier access to the less expensive credit offered by banks. Consequently these richer households (approximately 20 percent of the village) were unlikely to be reduced to abject poverty if they were cheated or if the promised earnings from a contract did not materialize. For middle-rank households – another third of the village, those who had some land or other assets but who had could get credit only at the high rates charged by local merchants – the gamble of overseas migration was considerably greater. Nevertheless, several years of successful employment might consolidate their standing in the community and give them the resources to compete with their wealthier neighbors.

By contrast, the high costs required to secure overseas work meant that a good third of the village, members of Baan Naa Sakae's poorer households, were excluded from the start. Such households, while many owned and farmed small amounts of land, were often dependent on rural wage work for day-to-day needs. Even if they were able to raise the fees required by employment agencies, these families could rarely afford to forego the daily earnings of an adult member during the many months it might take to pay off the debt. These families also were more likely to depend upon the much lower earnings of rural-to-urban migration – particularly wages of adolescent children – to help with basic subsistence costs. In comparison, wealthier village households tended to view the earnings of sons and daughters working in Bangkok as supplementary income that could be pooled toward larger or longer-term consumption goals – whether for 'luxury' commodities such as televisions, or for periodic household needs, such as school supplies for younger siblings or a variety of small household improvements.

Poorer households were consequently at a double disadvantage; not only were they excluded from the most lucrative form of labor mobility, but also their greater dependence on urban wage income for basic needs meant they had far less cash to compete with overseas migrants' dramatic consumption practices. The stark contrast between the stylish new houses of many returned migrants and the much less attractive homes of poorer households visibly emphasized the gulf between those in the community who could claim to be living up to commodified images of Thai progress and those who still lagged well behind national standards of appropriate 'modernity'.

Instead, for poorer village residents, overseas migrants' claims of poverty rang hollow. The latter group's assertions of impoverishment failed to acknowledge the extent to which access to new forms of status and wealth were not and had never been shared equally within the community. Yet migrants encoded their pursuit of a 'better life' in terms that evoked a generalized experience of poverty and underdevelopment common for all rural *khon Isan*. Much like the cosmetic and consumption-oriented models of 'progress' that shaped local experiences of 'development' (such as official contests and the new piped water system), this discourse of shared pride and danger as *good workers of Isan* invoked ideals of community solidarity that implied a unitary rural experience. At the same time that such assertions sustained individual claims to achievement as 'responsible' men and worldly travelers, they also worked to normalize dominant representations of a homogeneous rural population, an image that was further supported by the generalized fears of widow ghost attacks. This stance of common rural pride and shared regional vulnerability, particularly in the face of widow ghost attacks, offered poorer village residents limited ground from which to generate an alternative vision. Overseas contract labor provided some villagers with the means to contest their exclusion (as *khon baan nohk* and *khon Isan*) from the benefits of Thai national 'development'; however, local discursive constructs about the gendered risks of mobility failed to acknowledge how migration had also sharpened material inequalities within the community.

Conclusion

I want to turn now from the discursive dynamics of labor migration in Baan Naa Sakae to some concluding thoughts. First, however, let me note that I do not claim that the ways in which Baan Naa Sakae residents experienced labor mobility and negotiated its contradictions are representative of all rural communities in Thailand. Different communities are enmeshed in their own unique configurations of mobility and occupational networks which may shape the challenges and opportunities of labor migration in varied ways. For example, the data I have does not address the meanings of mobility in communities where women are involved in overseas employment nor where there is substantial recruitment of women into the domestic or international sex trade. In addition, the experiences of migration in Baan Naa Sakae reported here reflect conditions in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Specifically, they do not address the impact of the economic crisis that began in 1997.[24]

While grounded in a particular place and time, this analysis of labor migration in Baan Naa Sakae nevertheless offers a specific demonstration

of the more general problem with which this article began: How do people negotiate the conflicts inherent in everyday encounters with globalizing processes? How do they respond to the dilemmas generated by the unattainable promises of ideological modernities? The geographic dislocations of overseas migration and rural-urban mobility allowed some members of Baan Naa Sakae to renegotiate their marginality vis-à-vis Thai models of development and progress. These challenges – expressed most effectively in the language of commodity consumption and display – represented tangible and sometimes dramatic claims to inclusion within the material and symbolic promises of modern Thai society, of 'being up-to-date'. Yet, in other ways these assertions of inclusion reproduced the same moral and geographic hierarchies of exclusion within the rural community by confirming the failures of others to achieve the same standards. At the same time, local attention to gendered conflicts channeled the frustrations generated by structural inequities and expressed them in terms that highlighted individual material and moral failures (i.e. lapses in appropriate gender and household relations). The emotional salience of gendered tensions produced by labor migration made these an obvious and accessible focus for Baan Naa Sakae residents struggling with the uncertain benefits of Thai national 'development' and their own marginal status within the nation-state. However, the gendered and homogenizing discourse of local vulnerability offered no clear link with or resolution to the persistent structural and ideological forms of exclusion that position rural residents of all sorts at the periphery of national and global centers of power and wealth.

This does not mean that a more critical stance could not emerge nor that villagers might not participate in other more direct challenges to dominant structures of power. Peter Vandergeest (1993) has shown how struggles to resist state or capitalist encroachment on common property prompted villagers in Southern Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s to mobilize public protest. By openly claiming their 'legal' rights as equal 'citizens', these rural residents turned dominant discourses of national identity to the service of local interests. In similar fashion, since the mid-1990s, thousands of rural producers in Northeast Thailand have participated in marches, rallies, and other occasions of open protest against unwanted and environmentally damaging 'development' projects, such as large hydro-electric dams and commercial forestry projects (e.g. Bello et al., 1998; Lohmann, 1991). In recent years, many of these events have taken place under the NGO-sponsored banner of the Assembly of the Poor, a title that openly asserts the marginalized status of rural poverty in explicit challenge to urban and state-identified centers of power and greed. Within the exclusionary discourse of Thai modernity and the hierarchical structures of national development policy, all rural producers share a common (marginal)

location, opening the way for potential common cause.[25] Nonetheless, to the extent that the structural constraints of labor migration focus attention on household-based consumption practices, they may, as in Baan Naa Sakae, exacerbate community divisions rather than create possibilities for collective action. Similarly, if the tensions generated by these internal divisions are relocated on to concerns about individualized and gendered failures they are also less likely to become avenues through which more critical and collective responses can arise.

These tensions and discursive displacements surrounding labor migration in Baan Naa Sakae point to the larger problem of how to generalize about the ways that local communities confront processes of social and economic transformation rooted in wider (national, regional, global) structures of power and authority. Scholars of hegemonic systems argue that slippages between dominant meanings (such as the promises of ideological modernities) and the realities of everyday life (e.g. the failures to achieve such promises) are both inevitable and important points at which new meanings and modes of action can emerge. Nevertheless, encounters with these lapses and inconsistencies within structures and ideologies of domination are as likely to produce limited or partial critiques as they are to produce open and collective opposition (Williams, 1977: 130; see also Roseberry, 1989: 45–8, 75–6).

In Thailand, dominant images of *thansamay* modernity, development, and progress construct sharp divisions between rural and urban settings, and between local, national, and international sites. However, these oppositions are readily contradicted by the lived realities of citizens' physical mobility and by their material and cultural aspirations. These disjunctures offer critical space in which it is possible to struggle over dominant meanings and even to construct new forms of identity and social practice. But the outcome of these struggles is by no means predictable. In Baan Naa Sakae residents' encounters with the limits of dominant models of Thai modernity and progress find expression in gendered discourses of displacement which serve more to reproduce than to challenge existing patterns of marginalization. What, then, can such encounters tell us about not only the possibilities for counter-hegemonic practices to emerge but also the constraints that subordinate groups must negotiate as they confront persistent conditions of marginalization and inequality?

Although my argument explores the discursive dynamics of labor mobility and marginality in one specific community, my interests here reflect more broad-based directions in recent ethnographic research. In particular, this study forms part of a growing body of scholarship investigating contemporary experiences of marginality and the varied structures of authority and hegemonic discourses that shape these worldwide. To this end, ethnographers are examining (among other things) the interaction of

peripheral groups and identities with ideological nationalisms and nation-state building (e.g. Gupta, 1998; Nugent, 1997; Sharp, 2002; Tsing, 1993); capitalist modes of development and commodity consumption, and their related (and multiple) discourses of modernity (e.g. Brenner, 1998; Ferguson, 1999; Hansen, 2000; Spyer, 2000); as well as varied structures, practices, and forms of mobility associated with patterns of globalized capital and labor mobilization (e.g. Freeman, 2000; Gill, 1994; Ong, 1999; Parreñas, 2001; Silvey, 2000), to name only a few. Ethnographic research of this sort illuminates the contradictions posed by multiple discourses of 'development', 'progress', and 'modernity' operating within and across local, national, and international scales of reference. Ethnographers may be especially well-situated to assess the complex ways in which local and global points of reference intersect (and clash) in the lived experiences of the different peoples and communities we study. We must also ask under what circumstances can these clashes promote alternatives to refigure power from the margins? How often do contests over positions within dominant hierarchies of value serve to reproduce the same hegemonic terms of opposition? A key task of ethnography today is to trace out how and why local assertions of value in the face of marginalization *may or may not* produce effective challenges to lived experiences of subordination.

Finally, then, this discussion points to the need to theorize labor mobility and other experiences of marginalization in new ways.[26] To do so it is necessary to acknowledge the dilemmas of Berman's 'modern men and women' but also to move beyond these: to identify how different experiences of marginality are encoded in specific discursive practices and symbolic struggles. By accounting for the role these discourses play in the production and contestation of hegemonic meanings and relations of power, it may be possible to assess their potential for generating new (and possibly counter-hegemonic) forms of identity and social practice. Moreover, I would suggest that struggles over gendered beliefs and discourses may prove productive foci for these investigations. As in Baan Naa Sakae, the material, emotional, and symbolic power of gender relations can make these a particularly potent arena for playing out and negotiating tensions generated by transformations in other dimensions of social and economic life.[27] Whether the results reproduce, refigure, or openly challenge forms of domination, the task of ethnography remains critical: to examine such processes in their specific and varied local contexts. In sum, to think about the mobility of labor in relation to ideological modernities and globalizing capital requires us to investigate not only structural relations of exploitation, extraction, and subordination but also the different constellations of social and symbolic (including gendered) meanings through which people make sense of lived experiences. Only in tracing these complex intersections will we be able to untangle exactly how those who contest their exclusion

from privileged standards of 'modernity' and 'progress' can be entangled in the reproduction of these same hierarchies of value.

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Notes

1 Baan Naa Sakae is a pseudonym as are all names of migrants and other village residents referred to in this article.
2 Although I do not use the term itself, Philip Kelly's definition of 'globalization' as 'a set of material practices entwined with a discourse … [that] itself has material consequences' (1999: 386) informs my discussion here; as does his call to unpack the complex and intersecting scales of analysis often obscured by blanket uses of the often problematic and poorly defined concept of 'globalization'.
3 A wide range of studies explore the diverse and contested ideals that characterize locally constructed 'modernities' world-wide. See for example Brenner (1998); Ferguson (1999); Hodgson (2001); Pred and Watts (1992); Rofel (1999); among others.
4 Patricia Spyer (2000) employs the phrase 'modernity's entanglements' in the title of her book to describe the complex globalizing forces and desires that shape the lives of remote Indonesian islanders and their marine trading networks. The disjunctures between desires for and achievement of idealized 'modernities' are by no means unique to Thai experiences of migration; see Lawson (2000) for a related discussion of Ecuadorian migrant narratives. See also Ferguson (1999) on Zambian migrants and Silvey (2000) for a case from Indonesia.
5 I have discussed both types of migration in greater detail elsewhere; on youth out-migration see Mills (1999b); on men's contract labor see Mills (1995).

6 At the time of my fieldwork in Baan Naa Sakae and the surrounding area, no local women were participants in overseas contract labor; this form of migration was generally viewed as an option only for men. Nationally, however, women do join international migration streams – usually as domestic servants or in varied sectors of the commercial sex trade (see Jones and Tieng, 1999a).

7 Such extensive involvement in labor out-migration was by no means uncommon in rural Thailand at the time of my research. Nevertheless, every community established its own networks of labor recruitment resulting in locally specific (and often quite varied) patterns in occupations, destinations, and duration of migrant sojourns.

8 Hilhorst (2001) describes similarly cosmetic definitions of development in a Philippine Igorot community and their deployment by local elites.

9 For some families, especially those who relied on agricultural day labor to make ends meet, giving up many days of potentially paid work to supply the labor component of the water subscription meant forgoing badly needed subsistence income. For additional discussion of this incident see Mills (1999b: 58–60).

10 In 1990, young women from Baan Naa Sakae employed in Bangkok factories earned a base rate of about 2500–3000 baht monthly (US$100–20). Wages for young men from the community were sometimes a little higher (3000–4000 baht, or US$120–60), particularly if they were employed in more 'skilled' positions, for example, as guards or drivers, jobs generally available only to men. See discussion of Bangkok industrial wages in Mills (1999b: 119–22). US dollar equivalents reflect 1990 exchange rates.

11 This discourse of masculine responsibility and impoverishment in overseas migration obscured a number of tensions associated with men's overseas sojourns – a topic I take up in greater detail in the following section.

12 Significant bonuses were often used by employers to entice workers who have completed their contracts to sign up for another period of employment.

13 Nor were these patterns of expenditure unique to Baan Naa Sakae. Surveys of Thai overseas migrants in the 1980s and 1990s have consistently reported that commodity purchases were more common than investment in productive resources (such as land, agricultural inputs or machinery – see Jones and Tieng, 1999b: 42; Sumalee, 1984; Witayakorn, 1986: 332).

14 Jones and Tieng (1999a: 42) report continuing instances of fraud involving overseas contracts in the 1990s but suggest that rates of fraud were particularly high in the early- to mid-1980s.

15 For example, Jones and Tieng (1999b: 44) reported some overseas contract fees paid in the mid-1990s at over US$5000 (160,000 baht) although these were extreme.

16 See Mills (1999a) for a discussion of migrant workers in Bangkok who are active participants in Thai labor activism.
17 For overviews of the literature on gender and global labor, see Mills (2003) and Ong (1991). The introductory essays to Hodgson (2001) and Marchand and Runyan (2000) also offer useful discussions of the intrinsically gendered dynamics that underpin modernities and other globalizing processes more generally.
18 I am especially grateful here to Henrietta Moore's (1994) insightful theoretical reflections on the complex ways in which gendered systems operate as well as the ambiguous consequences that gendered contests can produce.
19 Margold (1995) notes similar dynamics of pride and distress in the experiences of Filipino men returned from working as contract laborers in the Middle East, whose time abroad both confirmed and challenged a strong masculine identity. In a related study, Osella and Osella found that men in Kerala, India view overseas employment – despite its risks – as a necessary step toward full adult masculinity, in other words, to become responsible and marriageable householders upon their return – see Osella and Osella, 2000). Similarly, some working-class Chinese Malay men have made overseas work experience a key element of successful and locally authoritative masculine identities (Nonini, 1997).
20 The alienating and de-masculinizing effects of overseas contract work are more fully documented among Filipino migrants. Several studies report that men (and, in increasing numbers, women) often feel deeply marginalized within the host society as members of alien ethnic and (sometimes) religious minorities (see de Guzman, 1993; Margold, 1995; on Philippine women, see Parreñas, 2001).
21 I do not wish to imply that tales of conjugal conflict including women's infidelity are new to rural gossip or Thai folklore. The tensions of marriage and gender relations have long provided fruitful material for popular culture of all sorts in Thailand (as in many societies). Nevertheless, the contemporary significance of the rumors and stories discussed below has to be assessed in relation to the lived context of those who hear and convey them, specifically in relation to the dramatic and recent shifts in rural patterns of labor mobility.
22 See also Chris Lyttleton (1999). Lyttleton's work suggests to me one possible source of such rumors. It may be that (at least in some cases) the rapid dissolution of the 'marriage' was intended all along and the payment of bridewealth was in fact a 'fine' for sexual improprieties.
23 LeeRay Costa and Andrew Matzner (2002) identify a similar reversal of lived gender hierarchy in Thai comic books – a format that is widely read by adults. Domestic violence is a significant motif of the humor presented in these books but instead of male abusers the violence portrayed is that of wives beating husbands, usually to limit their participation in

masculine peer-group activities (drinking circles) or to prevent potential infidelities.

24 It is not clear to me what impact the crisis has had on labor migration from Baan Naa Sakae, although I would be surprised if it has not continued at least to some degree. Nationally, the economic crisis may have slowed migration streams into urban industry but they have not dried up. Furthermore, the devalued Thai baht makes international wages even more desirable under the current economic climate and certainly underlies the Thai state's continuing interest in promoting labor exports as a source of foreign exchange earnings (see also Jones and Tieng, 1999a, b).

25 I cannot say if the geographic dislocations of labor mobility are linked directly to these instances of rural political struggle; elsewhere I have argued that experiences of labor mobility do play a role in the political mobilization of some rural youth in Thailand's small urban labor movement (Mills, 1999a).

26 On this point see Silvey and Lawson (1999) whose suggestions regarding the theorization of migration in geography are of broad interdisciplinary relevance.

27 Like gender, other symbolic systems such as race, ethnicity, or religion, may provide similar arenas for contestation and displacement (and ones that may intersect with gendered struggles) by linking intimate personal and group identities with structured social roles and moral norms.

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