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Deferral and Intimacy: Long-distance Romance and Thai Migrants Abroad

Andrew Alan Johnson, *Princeton University*

ABSTRACT

Aek's fiancée, Fern, was already married to a European man. But each month, she sent remittances back to Aek so that he could build them a home and rubber orchard in their hometown in northeastern Thailand. In the meantime, Aek waited for Fern to return. But in the time spent waiting, plans, aspirations, and even bodies changed. As Aek and Fern charted a life together, this deferred life grew more and more spectral. This article is an ethnographic study of the Thai male romantic partners of Thai women working abroad as sex workers or marriage migrants, and their engagement with the problems of impermanence and deferral. Via the "work of waiting" (Kwon 2015) of those left behind, I argue here that waiting is in tension with the impermanence of hopes, selves, and bodies. I ask: what does it mean to "wait," when what is promised, who promises, and the future date when promises are to be realized are each in flux? [Keywords: Thailand, Southeast Asia, marriage migration, sex work, waiting, migrant labor]

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Fern became engaged to her boyfriend, Aek, before she went abroad to marry a European[1] man, a customer at the snooker club where she was a hostess. While Fern lived in Europe, Aek waited back home in Isan (the northeastern region of Thailand). Even though she was married to another man, Fern insisted on describing herself as laying the foundations for a future together with Aek. She described her marriage as "work"—"I work as a white person's wife [*ku thamngaan*[2] *pen mia farang*]," she told me—and she sent home remittances, like any other migrant laborer. Fern told me that, once she had accumulated enough capital, she planned to divorce her European husband and return to Isan. Aek, in preparation, planted Pará rubber seedlings with Fern's remittances, hoping for profits once they matured. In the meantime, Aek and Fern would wait.

But in the process of waiting, plans and aspirations changed. Fern had a child with her European husband. The price of rubber crashed, making Aek's orchard worthless. Fern and Aek continued to promise themselves to each other during Fern's yearly trips home at the Buddhist new year, but when Fern went back to Europe, Aek wondered about the future. "Why would she come back here [permanently]?" he asked me, "Would you?"

Here, I look at relationships between Thai migrant women and their partners in rural Isan via three couples. While Fern had transitioned from working in the sex industry to being a transnational marriage migrant, the other women that I discuss were currently sex workers in Bangkok ("Nong") and in the Persian Gulf region ("Fa"). I call their (male) partners "In" and "Mon," respectively[3]. Aek, In, and Mon lived in a town that I call Ban Beuk, a village on the Laotian border that has long been a source of both official and underground labor migration. It was this issue of migrant work in Ban Beuk that I chose to study over eight months from 2014-2016. But as I spoke with In, Mon, and Aek, we realized our similarities. I, too, was working at waiting, as my partner and I taught in different institutions on different continents. We, too, were building lives always deferred, negotiating long-distance intimacy, and dealing with the problem of (im)permanence.

Here, I focus on the changes that people—those at home and abroad—undergo while waiting for a life deferred: for foreign marriages to dissolve, for rubber trees to mature, for looks to fade, for money to be "enough." In looking at waiting in this way, I draw upon June Hee Kwon's (2015) idea of "the work of waiting," the work undertaken by those back home who build lives supported by remittances from migrant labor, "sharing deferred temporality" (2015:480). In Kwon's work, her interlocutors send remittances

home so that another can lay the foundations for a life together, a life put off until an often ambiguous future moment. But I build upon Kwon by looking at the paradox of waiting: over the course of the years, those who remain, as well as those who leave, change. The "I" that promises "you" that there will one day be a "we" is not the same person when that time arrives. I argue here that this notion of migrant labor—especially informal labor—is not a goal-oriented journey with a fixed end date, but a fundamentally transformative process, often with a host of contradictory end goals. I ask: what does it mean to "wait" when what is promised, who promises, and the future date when promises are to be realized all shift? Here, waiting keeps possibilities open—for Fern and Aek, two such possibilities exist. One involves raising Fern's child with Aek in a luxurious river-side house in the midst of Aek's rubber orchard. And the other involves Fern remaining in Europe and not returning to Ban Beuk. Both futures "exist" owing to the ambiguity of the present (see also Han 2011). And in the process, this end goal increasingly enters the realm of fantasy.

Such is the case with the relationships that I describe here. In this light, I argue that Aek, Mon, In, and others in Ban Beuk work at waiting—accepting remittances, building homes, and preparing for a future life together—while at the same time considering the fragility of such relations and the mutability of their own and their partners' aspirations and desires. Time spent waiting expands, stretching across years and opening Isan lives to multiple new worlds while at the same time deferring them all. The present hinges upon this promised future, but a future that is but a promise.

Rubber Men

Isan is Thailand's poorest region. It is a relatively arid plateau, without the rainfall that feeds Central Thailand's rice-growing regions. Historically, this region has been majority Lao-speaking, and politically torn between Lao, Cambodian, and Siamese (Thai) kingdoms. After its formal incorporation into the modern Thai nation-state, Isan remained a center for political upheaval, from turn-of-the-20th century millennial movements (*phi bun*) to the Communist Party of Thailand (based very close to Ban Beuk) to the present-day anti-junta "Red Shirt" movement.

Ban Beuk is in some ways typical of the region. It is a fishing village of roughly 300 households on the banks of the Mekong and on the border with Laos. But despite its small size and seeming remoteness, it is profoundly

affected by global currents of change. New economic zones announced on the Thai/Lao border, new trends or varieties of cash crops, environmental disaster in the river after the completion of several Chinese hydropower projects across the Mekong, and political futures dominated by a military dictatorship antipathetic towards Isan, all have profound implications towards its future. Thus, contra the static, idealized image of the countryside that emerges in images in Lao-language country music videos (see Pattana 2006, also Williams 1973), Ban Beuk itself is being radically transformed by imaginaries and new currents of capital (see also Lopez 2015).

These currents of capital are gendered. In Ban Beuk, women generally ran shops or market stalls, whereas men fished in the Mekong or planted and maintained cash crops. Before the 1990s, men also often went abroad for work, or at least to the Bangkok region. This latter migration was colloquially termed "going abroad to Thailand" [*thiaw thai*], despite Bangkok and Ban Beuk existing within the same nation-state. From this perspective, Fern, Fa, and Nong give us, at first glance, a reversal of gender roles in the classic model of Isan migrant labor where men went abroad and women remained at home (see Mills 1995:268): now, the women leave and send remittances back home, and the men build the domestic sphere in anticipation of the women's return.

As Michael Peletz (1995) notes, constructions of masculinity must be seen as in dialogue with other systems: economics, exchange, etc. But even in the absence of a sexualized, adventurous migrant labor in the sense of thiaw, aspects of the kinds of Isan masculinity that Mills (1995) and Pattana (2013) describe remain: Mon, In, Aek, and others described themselves as canny entrepreneurs. For instance, Mon eschewed cash crops in anticipation of being the first to capitalize upon a (domestic) tourist boom to the Mekong region and courted Bangkok-based travel magazines and photographers, building a set of bungalows facing the Mekong that were filled during the cold season primarily with Thais from larger cities on driving holidays along the river.

In was similarly a self-styled entrepreneur. He worked land that belonged to his family (In was Mon's cousin), and his strip—a plantation that ran from the riverbank up the steep slope of the nearby hill—was primarily Pará rubber. In expressed little interest in working in Bangkok as his older cousin had. Times had changed now, and Isan laborers faced new competition: unskilled workers were outcompeted by cheaper Myanmar or Cambodian workers, and skilled workers by a previous generation of

migrants that had stayed in Bangkok. Instead, In saw himself as avoiding the stressful, hectic (*wun wai*) life of a migrant via skillfully riding the market for new agricultural cash crops.

This also involved managing Nong's remittances. These had been sent for years now, ever since Nong initially went to Bangkok to labor as a domestic worker for a wealthy couple—"Chinese people," in Nong's description, by which she means wealthy Bangkok-born Thais, many of whom have ethnic Chinese ancestry. Her employers were, compared to the stories of her friends also working as domestic workers, not the worst, but she made little money (approximately 1,000 baht [THB]/month—about $30 US) and described them as continually scolding her. The last straw came when she was asked to clean her employer's underwear and noticed that it was stained with menses. "[Giving me that underwear] was deliberate," Nong told me as we sat drinking with In, Fern, and Aek. "She knew that it was disgusting[4] and still made me wash them." After that, Nong quit domestic work and moved to sex work as a "bar girl" in a place frequented by Western men. There, she made in an hour twice what she had previously made in a month. Coming as it did after so long living on very little, Nong's new wealth went everywhere—to her family, to her friends, to alcohol, but, significantly, to In, with the promise that with this new influx of cash he could build for them something lasting.

But now this plan was in danger. Close to the time that In bought his seedlings, rubber prices were high—the record was 181 THB (about $5 US)/kg in February 2011. But as Nong and In waited for their plantation to mature enough to harvest, prices crashed, hitting a record low in January of 2016, 50 THB (about $1.50 US). Ironically, this length of time, from record high to record low, is precisely the amount of time that it took for In's trees to become ready to harvest. Now, although they are large enough, In is still waiting for prices to rise again. Over the pile of beer and whisky bottles that we drank while watching In's trees, he boasted, "I have a trick [to harvesting]. I won't tell [you]! But when the prices come back, [we / I] will be rich!"

Here is a continuity with older men, who, as we sat drinking on a bamboo platform on the roadside, spoke vividly about the excitement of their work in places like Taipei or Singapore—work that, while risky and often exploitative, held at times an air of adventure. As Mary Beth Mills (1995) notes, this adventure (*thiaw*) contains a sexual dimension. Pong, a fisherman in his 50s, upon learning that I was an anthropologist, bombarded me

with questions about the sexual habits of women in the countries where he had worked, hoping to explain encounters that he had had (questions I was not equipped to answer). But in Ban Beuk today, as in Mills's Ban Na Sakae (1995), this notion of masculine, sexually-charged, adventurous entrepreneurial exploration is reversed. Women are the ones who go abroad and learn to live in the city (as Fa does) or communicate in another language (as Fern and Nong do). But the normalcy of female migrant work in Ban Beuk marks a change from earlier, pre-1997 crisis models of migrant work and gendered expectations. Mills's case describing a panic in the early 1990s, when the increasing outflow of female labor and corresponding drop in male migrant labor led to a fear of emasculating "widow ghosts" —modern, sexually-aggressive female ghosts that would attack and kill men in their sleep—has little relevance now. Twenty years and a shift in Thailand's economy later, Mon and others here do not show such a sense of (almost-literal) castration anxiety.

What they do show is a reimagination of thiaw as an engagement with risk and an immersion in new realms of possibility. Rubber could make one rich, so long as one has the right "trick" to use with it. One can still engage with the world, even at home, via the market. But, as In's concern over his rubber orchard indicates, this idea of masculine self-transformation via women's remittances was in flux.

Informal and Intimate Economies

During my fieldwork period from 2014–2016, the male-dominated productive spheres with which In, Mon, and Aek engaged were in crisis: upstream dams had destroyed fisheries, and, as with In, cash crop prices were so low that few men bothered to maintain their rubber trees. A military coup d'état in 2014 caused a sharp drop in the international segment of independent tourists Mon sought. Along with this decline in local sources of income was an increase in the relative importance of migrant labor. In contrast to the massive outflows of migrant labor abroad or to Bangkok during Mon's father's time, as well as the wave of female factory labor in the 1990s (Mills 1999), much of this labor was in the informal sphere and can be interpreted as a reaction to the economic crisis of the 1997 and subsequent IMF-directed economic restructuring. Women's jobs in Bangkok factories have now largely moved to migrant workers from neighboring Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) designed for this

purpose (Kusakabe and Pearson 2012). Indeed, a new SEZ was planned for the Laos border an hour's drive downstream from Ban Beuk.

"Informal" here refers to a number of industries that exist outside of official recognition. Motorcycle taxi drivers from Isan, for instance, exploded in number as informal labor flooded the Bangkok market (see Sopranzetti 2014, 2017). "Informal" here refers to a number of industries that exist outside of official recognition: factories run with day laborers, construction workers paid under the table, sex work, domestic labor, and night watchmen, among others. Claudio Sopranzetti (2014, 2017) documents the explosion in numbers of motorcycle taxi drivers from Isan as the 2008 economic crisis in turn led to a boom in undocumented work. All of these forms of labor are precarious in the sense of lying outside of assurances given by the state or formal contracts with employers, although Thailand does not entirely fit the model of a crumbling welfare state that other scholars of precarity (Allison 2013, Funahashi 2012, Muehlebach 2013) highlight. While factory labor is on the decline for Isan, the world of unregulated work has always been present.

For women in Ban Beuk, work in the informal economy occasionally meant the sex industry, which, both in Bangkok and abroad, is an industry that relies primarily upon Northeasterners (see Lyttleton 2000). This was certainly the case for Fa and Nong, just as it had been for Fern (prior to her marriage). But seeing Fa and Nong's work through the eyes of their partners back home complicates the predominating image of sex work in the academic literature—literature that remains focused primarily upon the sites where commercial sex transactions take place (cf. Bishop and Robinson 1998, Wilson 2004, O'Connell Davidson 1998), with a few exceptions (Thompson et al. 2016; Cohen 1982, 1986, 1993). In this, perspectives such as Mon's or Aek's are largely lost—as is a perspective upon women's lives outside of these spaces.[5] In addition, left unexamined here is the ultimate fate of remittances; my data here suggest that money sent by even long-term clients (relationships approaching marriage or an otherwise romantic ideal) goes not only into the woman's daily needs, but is also mobilized toward her own aspirations back home—that may (or, in my cases, may not) include the foreign client.

Marjorie Muecke (1992) touches upon this issue in dealing with the role of sex work in northern Thailand, where expectations of filial piety—where daughters are expected to support aging parents—override the social stigma attached to sex work, especially in light of increasing environmental

and economic pressure placed upon rural livelihoods and subsequent increasing dependence upon cash remittances. It is a theme reinforced in other studies of female migrants that argue that women's remittances are focused more upon supporting a family back home (Le Mare et al. 2015) owing to cultural pressure upon women (as opposed to men) to do so. In a similar manner, I place sex work in its regional, familial, and economic context, but I also look at "the family" beyond parents and children. The remittances that Fern, Nong, or Fa send back go towards a possible future; not only an economic one, but also a romantic one. Additionally, while Muecke attempted to evade the stigma of discussing sex work with women's families "back home" via drawing upon NGO's data, here, my methodological approach towards male partners, as well as my focus upon sex work as a form of migrant labor (rather than the explicitly sexual dimension) allowed me to address these otherwise difficult topics.[6]

Internationally focused sex work in Thailand (as in the case of Fa, Nong, and Fern) is often characterized by its "open-ended" nature—relationships with foreign clients may transform into longer-term arrangements—even marriage (see Thompson et al. 2016, or Groes-Green 2013 for an African example). Elsewhere in Ban Beuk, the fact that many marriage migrants were previously sex workers (see also Thompson et al. 2016) was only hinted at: in casual conversations, for instance, parents might say that "[our daughter] worked at a bar in Bangkok," or "[my sister] met [her husband] playing snooker"—all situations that were assumed to be commercial sex work (but left unsaid). For many, while sex work carried with it a stigma, the benefits that sex workers' remittances brought to a community more than made up for the hint of scandal.

In Ban Beuk, the only other Caucasian (*farang*) resident was just such a client-turned-husband. He was a European man and former sex tourist who was married[7] to a local woman. While he claimed to have settled down with his wife, he missed the sex tourist scene and intended to build a foreign-oriented brothel on the banks of the Mekong, although at present he had only cleared the land and poured the foundation for a few bungalows. His home was pointed out to me by Aek as one of the "Caucasian houses" (*ban farang)* that dot the Isan landscape, places where a foreign spouse's funds have built relatively luxurious accommodations, and the kind of home that Aek and Fern said that they would build.

There were many other women who had married and emigrated abroad to places including Australia, South Korea, Europe, Malaysia, France, and

Canada—a stunning number of out-marriages within a relatively small town. Their remittances were important to the town's economy and they embodied a certain kind of cosmopolitan possibility. Elsewhere, as Jennifer Cole (2014) observes for Malagasy migrants in France, the fantasy of being a foreigner's wife is one that implies transforming into a wealthy, successful, and urbane woman—a lifestyle that clashes with the realities of lower- or lower-middle-class French lives. Especially in Isan, lower-class marriage migrants that are identified as *mia farang* (wife of a Caucasian) are caught in a contradiction: she at once finds herself an upwardly mobile provider for her Thai family, but also subject to the lower end of both a Thai hierarchy of value (between Bangkok and the Northeast, for instance) and an international one (between ethnic Europeans and Thai marriage migrants) (Esara 2009, see also Patcharin 2013).

This mismatch between local, national, and global hierarchies of value may highlight why Fern did not present herself as a potential immigrant assimilating into new European society, but rather as a kind of migrant laborer intending to return to Ban Beuk. She was not climbing an international ladder, or even a domestic one, but had her sights firmly on the locality. Indeed, recall how Fern described her role as mia farang as a kind of labor (*tham ngaan*) and her ultimate goal as relocating to Ban Beuk and building a "Caucasian house"—not necessarily with her Caucasian spouse. Marriage migration was, in the way that she spoke to Aek and me about it, a kind of intimate labor aimed at refashioning herself and building a new identity in Ban Beuk itself. Here, Fern seeks to return—at least one possible return—from international migration transformed.

Here, I should pause to address the love triangle between Fern, Aek, and Fern's European husband. In Ban Beuk, Fern clearly disregards any attachment that her husband may feel toward her, their child, or their marriage. He is a source of money—at least in the way that she represented him to me. This may seem callous of her, and may fit into the worst stereotypes of such marriages in Thailand and abroad. But it is important to suspend these judgments. Additionally, I am not a party to the details of her European marriage, and there may be other complicating factors. In conversations with other marriage migrants from the Northeast, many expressed frustration with European spouses, citing problems like alcoholism, domestic abuse, or other undesirable aspects of their lives in Europe. I should note here finally that Fern should not be taken as emblematic of all Isan marriage migrants. Instead, my intention in telling Fern's story is to

focus on how Fern's plans for a future with Aek ironically involves marriage with another man in another country. It is this digression that I examine—and how it opens up a realm of a deferred, futural possibility, but one that exists for now in the space of fantasy.

The narrative that Fern expressed while sitting with Aek was one that echoed that of international labor migrants more so than marriage migrants, in that she did not talk of a permanent movement from Thailand to Europe, nor from rural to urban. Rather, the movement she proposes is circular. Many scholars' references (Le Mare 2015, Thompson 2015, Skeldon 2012, Soimart 2015) point towards Isan migrant labor as an example of "circular migration," a system wherein the labor migrant does not (or, in the case of states such as Singapore or the Gulf, cannot—see Pattana [2014]) remain, but seeks to return to his or her point of origin made into a new person. This certainly seems to be the circumstance in Ban Beuk, where men working abroad often use money gained by migrant labor in Singapore, Taiwan, Israel or other places to build cash crop plantations, bars or restaurants, hotels, or other capital investments, and adopt high-ranking social positions upon their return. Such circularity is one possibility for Fern, Fa, and Nong. But the very idea of "circular migration" as a return to an origin point is problematic. The Ban Beuk to which one returns is not the same. Despite the rhetoric of "home" that echoes in the discourse of migrants, Ban Beuk is as much in the current of global capital as any other place. And, in addition, both those who stayed and those who left are transformed. Rather, all points on the "circle" have been revealed to be shifting, impermanent.

The Problem of Impermanence

"Which one of these two women is more beautiful?" Mon asked me with a conspiratorial smile, flipping between two images on his phone. One picture, with the grainy quality of a screenshot captured from a video call, showed a tanned, Eurasian-appearing woman with a high nose and big eyes looking alluringly into the camera. The other, clearly taken locally on the banks of the Mekong, showed a woman with pale skin, epicanthic folds,[8] and a huge smile in a sweatshirt and knit cap. Mon handed me the phone as I handed him the bottle of rice wine that he and I, along with a small group of men, were passing around. It was a typical enough night. As we sat drinking on a bamboo platform alongside the Mekong road, the men had been recalling their experiences working abroad to compare the

relative beauty of the women in different countries. It was a way to kill time (see also Pattana 2014).

The question that Mon posed was one that recalls hegemonic norms of female beauty in Thailand (about which scholars have already written, Mills [1995], Hesse-Swain [2006]). It is a question that recalls issues of class, region, and colonialism and how they impact aesthetics of female beauty. While television and movie actresses were often of mixed Thai/Caucasian ancestry (*luk khreung*), since the rise to prominence of the Chinese–Thai middle classes (*luk chin*) in the 1990s and the popularity of East Asian television dramas and pop music, an East Asian appearance has increasingly become seen as desirable in Thailand. This was how I interpreted Mon's question: was I (and by extension all foreigners) old-fashioned (and thus Western-oriented) in what I looked for in a romantic partner or trendy (and thus East Asia-oriented)? In some ways, it was a question that reflected shifting geopolitics, as Thailand moved out of the shadow of the US in the 1990s and into a region dominated by East Asian influence. But Mon's was a trick question.

Before I could answer, Mon shouted, his voice overly loud in the still night, "They're the same person! My fiancée [*faen*].[9] This [indicating the second photo] was her before [plastic surgery], and this [indicating the screenshot] is her after." Mon and I flipped the photos back and forth in silence. It was hard to see the resemblance between the two photos. He abruptly put his phone away, smile gone. "I liked her better before," he said. "She did it because it helps her business. Her customers, Arabs [*khon arab*],[10] like it."

Fa had been living in the Persian Gulf region for five years. Both Fa and Mon moved to Bangkok in their young adulthood and worked in the underground economy. Then, five years ago, Fa took a job as a masseuse in the Gulf, and Mon returned home to build a rubber plantation using Fa's remittances. It was privately acknowledged, but not publically said, that Fa's job in the Gulf involved sexual services. Before they went separate ways, Fa agreed to return to Ban Beuk later, once her looks had faded (Mon: "when she is too old and no one but me wants her"), where they would get married. But later, Mon expressed his doubts. "Fa has tasted life in the city now and she doesn't want to come back to these boondocks [*chonabot*]. I like it here. But there's nothing to do; people aren't fashionable."

Here, Fa is not the same as when she left. Her tastes and desires are different—even her face has been altered to the point where it is not easily

recognizable. The return point of her circular migration in terms of her previous goals (to live on Mon's rubber plantation and run his riverside hotel) is no longer an aspiration. What's more, Ban Beuk itself has changed, in both Mon's and Fa's eyes. What was appealing is now "chonabot."

What, then, is "waiting" in this context, when things have moved on? Nothing here—aspirations, desires, even the body itself—is static. While the realization of the "we" has been deferred, those involved have changed so much that the "we" as first imagined is no longer possible. The intimacy that Mon lives over distance is an intimacy with an *image* of Fa—not the Fa that *is,* but one that has already passed. Significantly, the background image on Mon's phone was of the "old" Fa. Thus, Mon's intimacy is one shared with something immaterial—his and Fa's "we" is something spectral. Thus, the waiting that Fa and Mon do is not waiting at all. Instead, it is a construction of an image of surety in the face of impermanence. Waiting, here, is a fantasy staged to make the unforeseeable bearable, an imagined-to-be pause that allows us (here, I include myself as one also "waiting") to imagine that pleasure deferred today will amount to something better tomorrow. It is a condition where one lives on the promise of this future.

The Return

When Fern came back for Songkran, the Thai Buddhist new year, she threw a hell of a party. Because Aek still lived in his parents' compound, Fern rented one of Mon's riverside tourist bungalows for two weeks. She came accompanied by her year-old son (via her European husband), whom she left in the care of Mon's sisters and other residents. In the meantime, she and Aek, along with In and Nong, set up on the verandah of the hut and drank for a week straight. They began at around 9 a.m. with bottles of whisky and soda and went until the mid-afternoon, when they would take a break and sleep for a few hours and then resume in the evening until late at night. Occasionally they would cajole one of the neighborhood children into driving a motorcycle to the market to pick up some food, and sometimes the largely happy reunion degenerated into arguing. These fights often became violent; In showed me a deep gash in his side, a scar from a knife-wound suffered during a drunken fight last year.

The excess that Fern brought upon her return was not random. Rather, it was a display of wealthy homecoming familiar to many migrant workers. At Songkran, one returns from abroad or Bangkok dressed as well as one can

and showers relatives and friends with gifts and parties as a way to mark a new, changed status and to solidify one's new, wealthier rank in the community. That said, the alcohol-fueled and explicitly extramarital nature of Fern's return raised some eyebrows amongst older community members. After a drunken, machete-wielding man charged into the group of revelers believing that his wife and her new lover were drinking with the party, many in Ban Beuk quietly cautioned me to steer clear of Fern's bender.[11]

During the week that Fern was present, Fern and Aek discussed their plans for the future. Seeing Fern's son fussed over by a group of older women, Aek suggested that her child would be happier in Ban Beuk than in Europe, as "here, he's surrounded by good food, beautiful nature, kind people," whereas in Europe one lacked such a sense of cohesion and wholeness. At another time, Aek expressed concern that he had heard that Europeans (*farang*) severed all ties and communication with their parents upon turning 18 (an idea I heard repeated elsewhere in the community). He stressed that such was not going to be the life for Fern's son; while Fern's son would be welcome to sever ties with his farang father, in Ban Beuk, he was enmeshed in a system of kinship. But some days later, he expressed his doubts about these self-assured statements. Aek asked me about life "in white countries" (*mueang farang*), expressing (as Mon did) his doubt that Fern would really want to return to a place like Ban Beuk. At other times, he would shrug helplessly when asked about his plantation and conclude, "for now, the only thing to do is drink."

Drinking here is significant. It is not work in the sense of taking Fern's remittances and fueling them into the deferred future, but rather what one does while one waits—waits for the afternoon to cool so one can fish, waits for ones rubber trees to mature, waits for rubber prices to rise again, and waits for Fern's European marriage to dissolve.

In this waiting, the end point remains spectral. And, as Aek's comments indicated from time to time (and also, I think, indicated in In's boastfulness about his coming riches), it very likely might not come, and the reason for its failure to manifest would not be the unknowable fluctuations in global capitalism (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1999) but the fundamental instability of human desires. Fern, respecting Thai (and Lao) linguistic calls to know one's "time and place" (*kaalateesa*—see Van Esterik [2000]) by not bringing up unpleasant or confrontational topics (like the idea that she might seek to live with her European husband), speaks of her permanent return as a certainty. But, as Mon and Aek both indicate, this certainty is

haunted by the idea that people, with time and distance, are mutable—they might love another, they become parents, and, as Fa's appearance indicates, their very bodies might change.

Conclusion—Impermanence and Possibility

Work on migrant labor, and especially global capitalism's "intimate relations" (Constable 2009) needs to take account of the effect of precarious and gendered labor upon the ways that intimacy is constructed and imagined. Intimate relations at home become less certain and more speculative, opening the space for hope as well as anxiety. Thus, I question here the idea of migrant work as a principally economic path toward a particular goal, one oriented with the aim of sending remittances "back home." Literature on migrant sex work, for instance, remains overly focused upon sex workers *as sex workers* and leaves their lives outside of sex work unexamined. This perspective raises the question of who belongs in a family and what does "back home" really mean, when prospective family members (e.g., Mon) fade from view and home (i.e., Ban Beuk) has ceased to feel homely? As I show here, a future and a family deferred becomes the horizon through which the very idea of belonging must be re-examined.

Mon prepares for Fa's return to Ban Beuk, but also imagines a future where she lives in Bangkok without him. Aek discusses the merits of raising Fern's son in Ban Beuk (with him) versus Europe (with the European husband). In describes the riches that will come when he is able to deploy his "trick," the good rubber prices return, and Nong comes back from Bangkok. But these futures are speculative, just as the futures of Ban Beuk, the Mekong fisheries, Aek's and In's rubber plantations, and Mon's riverside hotel. Each is fraught with the promise of future happiness or future calamity, and these promises ride upon the present moment's state of indeterminacy. Rubber prices might just recover. Fern's husband might just die and leave her his savings. Fa might return from abroad and settle down in Ban Beuk (as, indeed, she did for a few months in 2016—but then went back). The problem is, in a way, a particularly Buddhist one—specifically, a problem of impermanence.

In her look at Buddhist understandings of emotion in Northern Thailand, Julia Cassaniti (2006) focuses on the idea of impermanence, *anicca*. In contrast to a division between lay understandings of Buddhism and that practiced by the monkhood, Cassaniti sees the understanding of impermanence

as permeating village life even outside of the temple. Impermanence is liberating; the realization that all will eventually disappear helps to alleviate the angst of those undergoing life-altering changes as these changes, too, will pass. As Cassaniti's interlocutor puts it: "Impermanence is when you want or need something but you can't get it. Don't think about it anymore" (2006:69). It is an attempt to reduce the stakes of "the possible" —to hold out hope, yes, but also to negate the impact of failure.

For Cassaniti, impermanence is liberating, but how comforting is the knowledge of impermanence to Mon, Aek, and In? Even as they promise stability to their overseas partners, impermanence haunts their discourse: the instability of love, migrant work, crop prices, and of personal identity were constant topics of conversation. As Mon's discourse indicates, Fa, via her absence, becomes—even physically—a different person. Mon's statement: "Fa and I will marry [*hao si taengwiak*]" points to a future—indeed a "we" (*hao*) that may not be, and his statement, "we are lovers [*hao pen faen kan*]" points to a "we" that only exists within his mobile phone. The image of Fa that Mon treasures is not Fa today—one might say that the relationship that Mon holds with Fa is with the Fa that he remembers and imagines will return, not with the Fa that is presently. Similarly, Aek and Fern's fantasy about living together and raising her half-European son in a large "Caucasian house" ignores—"do[esn't] think," to use Cassaniti's interlocutor's words—about her European spouse. As their lives have diverged, their life together shifts into the realm of fantasy.

Here, waiting and impermanence emerge as opposites—one waits for an end point that may not last, for a "we" that might not be, as the "I" and "you" change. "Waiting," here, is the maintenance of the fantasy of intimacy despite its obvious spectrality. It is made possible via deferral—that is, if the light of certainty would annihilate these fantasies, deferral keeps them alive. The work of waiting becomes the work of sustaining a fantasy of a shared life even in the face of impermanence. Thus, imagining lives deferred is an activity like drinking—one seeks pleasure for a time in spite of the impermanence of loves and lives. ■

Endnotes:

[1]Here, I am being deliberately vague. Given the sensitivity of the topic discussed, I will only refer to general regions (e.g. "the Gulf" or "Europe") to add a further layer of anonymity upon my—already pseudonymed—interlocutors. Aek and Fern as I present them here could be one of any number of similar couples across Isan.

[2]This is Central Thai, although Fern spoke with Aek in Lao, the local language in Ban Beuk. The Lao here would be "*het wiak*." Fern, more than any other Ban Beuk resident, addressed me in Central Thai.

[3]These couples were all heterosexual. There were a few transgendered women in Ban Beuk and one man who described himself as gay. For a more in-depth look at Thai gender relations, see Jackson (1997).

[4]The conflict may have been regional. Especially in Thailand's North and Northeast, menstruation is considered spiritually polluting in ways not shared by Central, Southern, or Sino-Thai communities (see Johnson [2014] for a Northern Thai example). All at the drinking table (men and women alike) agreed that cleaning another person's menses-stained underwear was far worse that cleaning underwear stained with feces.

[5]Another significant oversight in many of these aforementioned studies is an over-attention to international sex work, rather than that geared to a domestic clientele. Here, my data do not help, as Fa and Nong worked in internationally oriented circuits. Among my male informants in Ban Beuk, some visited brothels run and staffed by Laotian syndicates, both on the Thai and on the Lao side of the border.

[6]One limitation of my data lies in the fact that my interactions were primarily with the male partners: Mon, In, and Aek. While I met and spoke with Fa, Nong, and Fern, I never did so alone and cannot claim to speak for their aspirations unfiltered by the presence of their partner. To do so would have been methodologically problematic for a male researcher of a similar age. Additionally, for obvious reasons, I did not communicate with Fa or Nong's clients nor with Fern's European husband.

[7]I do not mean to imply that all or even most foreign spouses in Isan or even in the region where Ban Beuk sits began in a commercial manner. See Esara (2009:420).

[8]An epicanthic fold is a part of the eyelid present in some populations, primarily in East Asia. While in East Asia (and amongst upper-class Thais) many women and some men undergo plastic surgery to remove the fold via making a higher nasal bridge, among many in Thailand the presence of an epicanthic fold marked one as ethnically Chinese and thus—in theory—wealthy.

[9]The word faen*,* derived from the English "girl/boyfriend," can mean anything ranging from "lover" to "spouse." I translate it here as fiancée owing to Mon's future plans. Because of the diversity within English terms for "romantic partner," I stick to the Thai here.

[10]The expected term here would be the (moderately offensive) *khaek,* a term along the same lines as *farang* (European), *jek* (Chinese person), etc. Mon, significantly, does not use this term, although he readily used farang, as I show below.

[11]I highlight this caution to bring to light potentially distracting slips that we may make in looking at the excess of Fern's return. The first is to side with these well-meaning cautions; to imply that Fern's party, with its violence and alcohol abuse, was somehow pathological or not typical of Songkran homecomings. Underlying this view is an urge to present Ban Beuk in a positive light versus the economic, social, and environmental disruption the community faces, and to combat the too-pervasive stereotypes of Isan villagers as uncouth peasants that pervade the Thai press. From an academic angle, those seeking to present models of rural community cohesion and solidarity (Chatthip 1999) might also see a focus on violence and alcohol abuse as emphasizing undesirable or pathological elements (sometimes classed as "foreign" or "capitalist") rather than positive ones.

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Foreign Language Translations:

Uciis que exero ent, te omnihit, si acerit as volore liquatem quam, quis ipsam conseres eatem corem rem quos es incim ullabore ligendendem ut quas conseque volupit, alis que veroria spictem poritae ipsaperessi doluptatur molest arum ides in nobitat vel illa int rerererrum qui ilibeat atusam reperecatur, ut laut dundundio optiunt lam non res aut landusa et intibus nimus qui odit hiciatur atur? Elicipicab iur se natquis in exerita iusandae coresequid mincium que moditia dolenihit et quia peribus quiasse quatur suntini musandesto voluptatet autem sus mo illuptas mincil magni dit lab ipsam nam dolori remquame eum consequiam eius, sim latem acearuptatia cus sequaeria volorep raerro quam hit adis sunt, quibus perias eturi tem et officim laccumquunt etus non cus simaion num quistis atur sitatem quo qui consequi od moloritatur, cus nonesto berum quas quamet de denduciet as ex everferem is des porum fugitio nsequae ctoratio cus audae plamustius quid quam, invent rerroreperis est late sum libeatum aut harum quia dolut fuga. Xerchitate et maximil ium doluptae consequam re num la cus alis ea dem quate etur aut verfera tquame porest magnatio. Or magnati odignis quodi qui ommo ma pa vellique cone eumet harum as aut molore, num est, asimetur sus et elitatur? Pudi tent odion consequid et velessimus, odit dis sit explam es molorrum imus mo cum qui omnient laceritae comnihitatem fuga. Itamus, sus doloreictet hil endae pro moluptis explatiam nobis dist aborerit ad es ad qui dolora nobis dunt quunt debist unt vel is sus ped etur solum volore vid et audae mos ad quam id quam, occae pari dolupid eriores ciisimusa vendiae nobit harumquodic tem facius solent dolorum sus a debitatet dolenecab ilique nulloribus, consecu ptatessequas restempore volores suntis ium aut ommodion nobitaturit, sim excescitatet utem il illes sam si volent, a invenes dem ullore, quae dolupti sitas et ea as aut plabo. Nam audipsam volor maximossinus re nime nisserferum qui is cones milla cum, si aspis re delictur sunt endit, volupta tionsed mod eturem fuga. Nam dunt as atquo blam, ant ut