City of Strangers
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A year before my first trip to the Arabian Peninsula I was part of a team of researchers and ethnographers exploring the impact of the offshore oil industry on the families and communities of southern Louisiana. In this large and multifaceted project, one of my principal assignments was to immerse myself in the world of the men at the bottom of the oil sector’s occupational hierarchy—the roughnecks and roustabouts who work on the rigs, platforms, and yards scattered across southern Louisiana and its coastal waters. I made my home at a down-at-the-heels motel next to the highway in New Iberia, Louisiana, where these roughnecks and roustabouts would stay, drink, and spend much (and oftentimes all) of the money they had just earned from two weeks of work offshore. During my first few days at the motel I was surprised by the smell of Indian food wafting through the courtyard, and after some investigation I found and befriended a group of eight Indian men living in two of the rooms. Trained as welders in a renowned shipbuilding city in India, these men had paid exorbitant fees for the right to come weld in the shipyards of southern Louisiana for two years under the United States’ H-visa system. Two months after their arrival, they were let go by the fabrication company that had brought them to the United States. They and their families continued to carry the astronomical debts held by the labor brokers back in India. Holed up in the motel and desperate for work, they had become “illegal” immigrants.

I bring up this episode to reinforce the point that although the cultures and societies described in this book are both distant and different from the American one, the problems, dilemmas, and exploitation generated by the transnational movement of labor are not consigned to Bahrain or the
other Gulf states. Even the kafala has analogies in the American context: the men I met in southern Louisiana were, like the men I encountered in Bahrain, legally tied to a single employer and, simultaneously, burdened with a transnational debt. When framing the ethnographic study presented in this book, then, the reader should keep in mind that these problems, and the structural violence evident in these foreign workers’ experiences in Bahrain, are not a unique product of Arabian culture or society. Rather, attempts to systematically control and govern the transnational movement of labor become particularized to the contexts in which those flows take place. The arrangement of inequality and the justification of exploitation are articulated through the particular experiences of the peoples and societies that deploy that governance. The Arab ideal of hospitality, the gender norms for the region, the historic kafala system, the relations of the tribe—these become the tools by which the Bahrainis grapple with and govern the transnational flow of labor to their island.

Structural violence is a versatile concept, and I recognize that its application here is a departure from the norm. A more standard use of the concept would focus on the considerable constellation of forces that push Indian men and women out of their homes to seek work in the Gulf states. Although the forces pushing the men out of India certainly merit more attention, I have kept my focus squarely on the arrangements in which these transmigrants become enmeshed once they arrive in the Gulf. In more theoretical terms, I use Eric Wolf’s notion of structural power, and particularly his focus on the power exercised in the orchestration of settings and relations, to connect the seemingly disparate forces that shape foreign workers’ experiences in Bahrain. I envision this path as one that reveals the mechanics of structural violence, and one that demonstrates how these structural arrangements produce the interpersonal violence that peppered the lives of the men and women I came to know.

What, then, ought to be done about this situation? One of the overarching purposes of this book is to better inform those directly concerned with the policies, laws, and practices that manage and govern the flow of transnational labor to the Gulf. For many anthropologists, and particularly for those with no penchant for brands of the discipline that operate under the banners of public anthropology and applied anthropology, further recommendations may seem audacious and misguided. I, however, do not count myself among them.

First, the kafala system ought to be dismantled or significantly altered so that workers can legally and swiftly leave the employ of abusive or otherwise
problematic sponsors. This move is perhaps already under way in Bahrain. In early 2009, the minister of labor and social affairs announced plans to “scrap the sponsorship system” in August of that year. Details remain scarce, but reports suggest that the plan is much more tailored than a wholesale plan to scrap the sponsorship system: in essence, the state will now control the right of workers to switch employers. Before 2009, sponsors themselves had to accede to any change in sponsorship. Under the new plan, the Labor Market Regulatory Authority will hear petitions or otherwise govern the movement of workers between jobs. These proposed changes have been spearheaded by the progressive and occasionally combative minister of labor and social affairs, Dr. Majeed Mohsen al-Alawi. He has faced increasing resistance to the proposed changes from citizen groups, Parliament, and most directly, from the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

This resistance merits discussion, for in the debates surrounding the proposed and upcoming changes, the forces and parties who directly benefit from the exploitation of transnational labor have become apparent. In essence, for the first time the positions of the proponents of the status quo have been articulated in Bahrain’s public sphere. Although these debates are both ongoing and evolving, several parameters can be identified from the initial arguments. Perhaps the most comprehensive contention of the opposition suggests that the proposed changes will significantly undermine the competitiveness of the Bahrain labor market. The changes will make Bahrain increasingly unattractive for business and therefore undermine the kingdom’s position in the global political economy. In this argument, the ongoing exploitation of the foreign labor force is a necessity rendered by the neoliberal environment and Bahrain’s ascendant position in that system. Within this larger contention, many more specific arguments about the potential impacts of the changes have been articulated. Business leaders, for example, have expressed grave concerns about the potential theft of confidential information as workers move between companies. As one group of fishermen argued, the proposed changes “will have a huge impact on fishermen’s livelihoods. Fishermen waste a lot of time, money and effort to teach their laborers the craft. Now, they can just leave with all that knowledge and cause the fisherman big losses.” Business leaders also contend that the freedom to move between jobs will allow workers to “blackmail” employers—to, in essence, “impose their terms and conditions” on employers and, problematically, to “leave companies at their own will and according to their wishes.” Opponents have also argued that the impact of the proposed changes will largely be borne by small businesses
and entrepreneurs, and will most certainly result in higher unemployment among the citizenry.³

These contentions represent a significant rhetorical shift in the defense of the sponsorship system. As Longva (1997) observed over a decade ago, the sponsorship system was conceived and defended as a cultural practice that bonded foreign outsiders to members of the indigenous social matrix. Citizens, in sponsoring foreigners, took on the obligation for their well-being and responsibility for their behavior and actions in local society. The recent debates over the proposed changes to the sponsorship system in Bahrain, however, abandon all pretense of traditional and cultural justifications for the sponsorship system. Instead, we are left with a purely economic argument: disrupting the status quo will empower workers, thereby mitigating employers’ ability to exploit this foreign workforce and handicapping Bahrain’s position in the regional and global economy. In making their case, opponents of the proposed changes also clearly articulate a perspective on basic labor rights substantially removed from that of the dominant Western discourse. The idea that laborers should have the freedom and right to depart a particular employer is portrayed as unique, as an undeserved “extra privilege,” and as a disruptive and unbalanced change that heavily favors foreign workers.⁴

Opponents have forwarded a variety of options, alternative plans, and conditions intended to preserve the position of sponsors amid the proposed changes. The lower house of the Bahraini Parliament, for example, is seeking a clause requiring workers to complete one year of service before being allowed to switch employers.⁵ Others have suggested that the sponsorship system should be managed by the private sector.⁶ Much of the argument, however, centers on the criteria by which the Labor Market Regulatory Authority will adjudicate requests from foreign workers to switch jobs. Considering how the courts handled Vijay’s predicament (described in chap. 4), or how recent quarrels between housemaids and their sponsors have been settled (Strobl 2009), it seems clear that establishing a legal process for laborers to petition the state for permission to switch employers is, at best, one small step toward abolishing the sponsorship system and the structural violence it produces.

Improving the conditions for foreign labor in Bahrain will also require that existing laws be comprehensively enforced. For example, it is against Bahraini law for sponsors to hold the passports of the laborers they sponsor, yet nearly every laborer I spoke with was without his passport. Similarly, nonpayment of wages was an extraordinarily widespread practice in the
The enforcement of existing laws should encompass significant fines and other punishments, all of which should be deployed in a transparent and public manner. Finally, these changes and protections need to extend to those foreign workers in the household; a universal set of labor rights ought to cover all foreigners employed in Bahrain. Embarking on these recommendations would reinforce Bahrain’s position at the vanguard of progressive change in the Gulf.

These recommendations closely resemble those now being promoted by the institutions and trans-state organizations concerned with labor and human rights in the GCC, but their implications ought to be fully considered. In the penultimate chapter of this book I argued that the kafala, the social segregation characteristic of all the Gulf states, and the arrangements that marry the private sector to the foreign labor force are all facets of the citizenry’s and the state’s strategic response to the global and neoliberal system to which their national aspirations are tied. The recommended changes to the labor market, combined with those already under way, would mark a significant step in the erosion of the forces and arrangements that insulate the citizenry from the logic of the system from which they seek to profit. The same forces and arrangements indicted by a rights-based perspective preserve an alternative and local social system with a distinct logic of its own. Altering the system by which “foreign matter” is governed and controlled will reverberate deeply in Bahraini society.

When I discuss my research, colleagues often point out to me that Bahrain is an exceptional place in the context of the GCC states. The implication behind these contentions is that the structural violence I describe is unique to Bahrain and attenuated or altogether absent in the neighboring countries. More research, and particularly more ethnographically grounded research, is needed before this contention can be properly addressed. And Bahrain is different in ways that play a role in the lives of the foreign laborers who toil on the island. Unlike the other states of the GCC, Bahrain has a Sunni leadership who rule over a Shi’ite majority composed of both the indigenous inhabitants of the island as well as the more recent Persian arrivals. The citizenry is ethnically heterogeneous, and definitely more fractious and divided than its neighbors. Moreover, Bahrain lacks the spectacular wealth of many of the other GCC states. Bahrain’s public sector can no longer accommodate the majority of the working citizenry, and members of the middle class are increasingly pushed into direct competition with the foreigners in their midst. These shifting political and economic realities are one of the engines driving the structural violence
described in this book, and together they distinguish Bahrain from its neighbors in the Gulf.

At the same time, however, Bahrain has much in common with its neighbors. The kafala remains ubiquitous in the Gulf states, for example, and it is the coincidence of this arrangement with the motive of profit that forges a space conducive to the violence I’ve described. And like the neighboring states, Bahrain and its citizenry continue to struggle with the ramifications of rapid development, the cultural heterogeneity of the many peoples at work on the island, and the preservation of a social and cultural identity amid an era of extraordinarily rapid change. Bahrain’s exceptional qualities, and particularly the presence of a middle class increasingly marginalized from ethnocratic logic of the public sector, are better understood as a glimpse into the future of the wealthier neighboring states. While the populations of the Gulf states continue to grow at astonishing rates, petroleum remains a finite resource. The frictions of Bahrain are not unique or peripheral to the experiences of the other GCC states. Rather, contemporary Bahrain provides us with a portrait of the frictions that occur when the oil runs out.