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Race, Space, and Social Reproduction: The Spatial Organization of Racialized Labour in Italian Food Agriculture

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Raeymaekers, T. (2024). Race, Space, and Social Reproduction: The Spatial Organization of Racialized Labour in Italian Food Agriculture. ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING D-SOCIETY & SPACE, online first, 1-22 [10.1177/02637758241287339].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/997432> since: 2024-11-29

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1177/02637758241287339>

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Race, Space, and Social Reproduction

The Spatial Organization of Racialized Labour in Italian Food Agriculture

Abstract

This article addresses the question of migrant workers' exploitation from a feminist political economy and critical race perspective. Overall, my analysis promotes a reinterpretation of workers' exploitation beyond a narrow focus on labour and production, and towards a consideration of the active social differentiation and reproduction of the work force. Based on my analysis of Black African workers' conditions in the Italian 'tomato district' of Northern Puglia and Basilicata, I argue that recent anti-gangmastering reforms have recalibrated existing tensions between formalizing and informalizing workers' conditions, tensions that serve the double end of ensuring capital accumulation in agri-food production, while forcing racialized workers to take care of their social reproduction. Formalization, I argue, tends to drive a wedge between 'productive labour' and unpaid, 'unproductive' work, thus removing responsibility away from firms and state agencies to provide much-needed workers' welfare. Informalization, I argue, represents a particular racializing dynamic of externalizing the cost of social reproduction to the workers and their extended social networks, who, in this manner, indirectly subsidize parallel circuits of accumulation.

Key words: labour, migration, agri-food, Italy, racial capitalism, social reproduction

1. Introduction

This article is concerned with the racialization of migrant workers' exploitation in the context of an agricultural 'frontier' located in the Southern Italian tomato district of Northern Puglia and Basilicata (Provinces of Foggia and Potenza). While work in political ecology and cognate fields mobilize the terminology of the frontier to explain how capitalist advancement generates complex processes of agrarian change but also fundamentally reconfigures relations of production and reproduction (Lund and Rachman 2018: 419; see also e.g., Hall et al. 2011, Peluso and Lund 2011, Eilenberg and Cons 2019), the question who pays for the reproduction of farm work in contemporary agri-food supply chains has indeed become a central point of concern in political ecology scholarship and in critical agrarian studies more generally (for a discussion see He and Zhang 2022, Gillen et al. 2022; see also Taylor and Rioux 2018, Baglioni et al. 2022). My

contribution serves to amplify and enrich this scholarship, while also offering an alternative reading of these critical processes that consider social differentiation and reproduction more seriously.

The focus of my enquiry concerns a food enclave (or ‘district’) of 34.000 hectares used for the production of so-called *salsa*, or canned tomatoes, a mode of production that systematically exploits workers through in what has been termed the ‘corporate food regime’: the dominance of global corporations on the way we grow, distribute, and eat our agri-food commodities globally (see Friedman 2005, Dixon 2007, McMichael 2013, Cohen et al. 2023). While much research in this specific context has focused on the productive side (asking for example how labour is exploited, capital is mobilized, and states actively zone, channel, and network the agri-food enclaves: see e.g., Colloca and Corrado 2013; Gertel and Sippel 2014; Corrado, De Castro, and Perrotta 2016, Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone 2016, Avallone 2017), I choose to focus on the less ‘productive’ dimension: the policies, institutions and spatial mechanisms that determine why certain categories of people end up doing the jobs they do, and how their labour is socially and ecologically reproduced. This focus serves, on the one hand, to link critical geography scholarship on capitalist operations (see e.g., Mezzadra 2011, Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 2019, Easterling 2014, Grappi 2016, Cuppini and Peano 2019, Peano 2021) to what so far unfortunately has remained a marginalized focus on the dynamics of racial capitalism in the Mediterranean context and, in particular, the way Black lives tend to be narrated from the corners of well-trodden disciplinary frameworks (Hawthorne 2022; see also Woods 2002). Inspired by the debate around the critical racial injustices that underpin the historical development of capitalism, my broader goal here is to link the argument about capitalisms’ differentiability in this context – i.e., the insight that capitalist production articulates itself with and through other modes of production and reproduction – more directly to questions about race, racism, and Blackness¹. Particularly my engagement with the Black Mediterranean scholarship remains key for me to place contemporary infrastructures of labour segregation in the agri-food sector in what one scholar calls the “state of repetition” of subjected Black life through apparatuses of surveillance, containment, captivity, displacement, forced labour, and dehumanization in the Mediterranean context (Lombardi-Diop 2021, 5; see also Merrill 2018, Black Mediterranean Collective 2021, Danewid 2017, [anonymized] 2021, 2024, Hawthorne 2021, 2022). For this purpose, I stay close to Cedric Robinson’s definition of racial capitalism when he says that

“[c]apital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups.... These antinomies of

accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires.” (Robinson 1983: 2; Melamed 2015: 77)².

In the context I am writing, I take racism to specifically refer to those processes of abstraction that reproduce racial hierarchies, insofar as particular kinds of bodies are materially configured in ways that “feed capital” (Melamed 2015: 77–79)³. More specifically, I mobilize the notion of racialized surveillance to foreground the enactments of surveillance that reify boundaries along racial lines with the intent of differentiating the agricultural work force; while these enactments reify race, their outcome are often discriminatory and violent treatment (Browne 2015: 21, 32). Though Browne refers in the first place to Franz Fanon’s psychiatric analysis of the embodied effects of colonial surveillance practices on different categories of workers, I follow her invitation to analyse more precisely how these practices socially and culturally construct the racialized subject of the Black African worker. In so doing, such surveillance replicates social injustice, particularly with regards to Black African workers and the way they are constructed as a separate work force (that is, from white, EU workers). By interrogating racialization in this way, my study thus aims to complement existing enquiries into labour as a racialized commodity (Mbembe 2019, 2021) through the creation of what (Smith 2014) calls ‘threshold subjects’, whose labour is extracted while their lives are being actively disposed of and made superfluous (see also Prasse-Freeman 2021). The fetishization of the Black worker through such racial-spatial lines of distinction in my view not only serves to separate between the ‘productive and the ‘unproductive’ sphere (see also White 2020). But more concretely, it serves to take away responsibility from the state and from firms to provide much-needed social welfare which, instead, is deliberately externalized towards parallel, informalized circuits of accumulation that thus fill the gaps left by active withdrawal and abandonment. In particular, this withdrawal takes place through recalibrating the tension between formalization and informalization, which I will explain one by one in sections 3 and 4 of this paper.

The analysis I present here is based on an extensive period of field work between 2014 and 2020, consisting of sixty recorded interviews with public administrators at various (municipal and regional) levels in the provinces of Foggia (Puglia) and Potenza (Basilicata), along with an uncounted number of unrecorded interviews with labour union representatives and antiracist activists, policy experts, journalists, and academics active in the domain of labour migration. Next to these interviews, I could rely on a detailed analysis of public records, specifically of newspaper articles and court cases about labour intermediation, in the region of Basilicata, thanks to my access to the database of the Associazione Michele Mancino in Palazzo San Gervasio. These formal and

informal interviews accompanied a further snowball sampling of contacts during four periods of participant observation and informal interviews in the informal labour settlements of Northern Basilicata. The research project also gave rise to a temporary collective (called MIC-C, The Margin of the Centre of Change: website: www.mic-c.org) as well as a theatre collaboration that involved a wider public engagement on the matter (amongst others a travelling exhibition and table game) with the Italian company *Cantieri Meticci*. In addition to interviews and participant observation, my research also involved a qualitative analysis of employment contracts, workers' residence, and political status for the period 2015-2016 based on data collected from so-called employment centres (CPIs) for the region of Basilicata.

In the next section, I will root my main thesis in the theoretical propositions that have emerged from the merging of some of this scholarship, before explaining in detail how these can help us understand the dynamics of workers' exploitation in Italy's tomato frontier beyond a mere consideration of their labour unfreedom in section three of this paper.

2. The Politics of Differentiating Agrarian Labour and Social reproduction

My involvement with feminist political economy and critical race studies has developed through a common interest both in the ways workers are segmented and stratified along lines of gender, race, and other forms of social differentiation, as well as their interest in workers' exploitation beyond the productive labouring process (particularly: Bhattacharyya 2018, Mezzadri 2019; for a wider discussion, see the chapters on labour and social reproduction in Taylor and Rioux 2018, Baglioni et al. 2022). Though the debate about social reproduction has not proceeded without disagreements (about which more later), feminist and critical race scholars tend to configure around their fundamental critique of Marxist orthodoxy and the idea that the spread of capitalism necessarily involves a full-fledged incorporation of all forms of work into the capitalist mode of production as 'labour', and the conglomeration of all social relations of production and reproduction around 'class'. Early Black Marxists, for instance, share with feminists a concern in how capitalism has developed historically by structuring its relations of production and reproduction around fundamental social inequalities, particularly between what have come to be defined as the 'productive' and 'unproductive' spheres of life (Battacharyya 2018: ix). Key here have been the contribution of Angela Davis (1983), Cedric Robinson (1983), Maria Mies (1986), and Silvia Federici (2004) for whom capitalist accumulation relies on the constant valorisation and de-valorisation of forms of life located on its edges (see also Melamed 2015, Kelley 2017, Saldanha

2019). For these scholars, the major endeavour is to explain how capitalism continues to be a key driver of differentially positioning human beings in relation not just to the state and the city, but to the profound geological and ecological transformations that have permitted modern capitalist relations to emerge and persist.

While this shared concern takes particular aim at the Marxist notion of the global “reserve army”⁴, it also comes with the acknowledgement that, in order to develop a common research agenda, we need an expanded notion of workers’ social differentiation and reproduction beyond the limiting concept of abstract labour. Simply, we need to ask ourselves, why such a disproportionate number of Hispanics, Blacks, and other non-white migrant workers form part of the global agricultural reserve army today; and which non-work-related institutions, procedures, and infrastructures are put in place so as to extract labour from the world’s “impossible” subjects (Ngai 2014) who continue to straddle between different forms of livelihood in the agrarian context (see also Federici 2004, 2018, Fraser 2014). This question is both relevant from a political and economic perspective as participation in these other, often informalized, economies does not only provide the means for material existence when an individual is not engaged in value-producing activities (and thus permits the workers to reproduce themselves), but it also confers a status separate from class position to workers and their support networks (see e.g., Thomas 1985, Besky 2014; for a discussion, see Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a-b, Gosh and Meer 2022; see also Brass and Bernstein 1992, Brass 2014, Bernstein 1997, 2010). A central inspiration here has been the work of Maria Mies (1986) and of Silvia Federici (2004), who in their analyses of capitalism as a patriarchal project, interrogate how the work of women and of others that are deemed ‘non-productive’ becomes encapsulated beyond the household.

Though some disagreement exists among feminist scholars around what exactly counts as value in the capitalist relations of reproduction, it is important to acknowledge the *adverse* type of *inclusion* that accrues to capitalist accumulation (Phillips 2011, 2013): as the dominant mode of production progressively subsumes reproductive work and transforms it into a direct or indirect subsidy of capital, an important contradiction unfolds, insofar as on the one hand, some forms of unpaid work are deliberately de-valued and excluded from the production process, while on the other hand, other types of reproductive work become either directly or indirectly incorporated within the money–commodity–money circuit of value (for a discussion, see Mezzadri 2019, Varella 2021). Mezzadri (2019: 33) refers to this process as the *externalization of the cost of social reproduction*: the strategies of social differentiation and spatial organization that systematically deploy the household,

the village, the community, as well as the forms of unpaid work that are systematically deployed as a subsidy to capital. In her view, this corrective serves both to counter the reification of the wage as the value rather than the cost of labour, and to distinguish between forms of unpaid work that are deliberately de-valorised and valorised through informal circuits (see also Breman and Van der Linden 2014, Barchiesi 2019).

In the critical agrarian scholarship, such observations have served, for instance, to foreground the many forms of unpaid work involved in the social and ecological reproduction of agricultural labour power while generating parallel circuits of capital accumulation that are typically informalized and illegalized. Such reproductive activities may involve subsistence agriculture, care-taking activities (including sexual forms of care⁵), housing, transport, and health services which, especially in the current constellations of global neoliberal government, are seldomly taken care of by states or firms (see e.g., Mies 1986, Federici 2004, Katz 2001, Baglioni 2015). Whereas in the past, the costs of social reproduction tended to be externalized to so-called countries of origin through a temporary circulation of the workforce both in South-South and in South-North trajectories (Meillassoux, 2022), in the context of today's industrialized agriculture, these activities are typically externalized to informal intermediaries and social networks which, in this way, not only fill the gaps of withering welfare policies, but, through this substitution, also generate parallel circuits of accumulation that further accrue to workers' exploitation⁶. After describing this institutional context in the next section, I will come back to these two main points about workers' formality and informality in more detail in the last section of this paper.

3. Formalizing Labour through Racial Surveillance

Formalization refers to the degree to which fixed rules and procedures dictate how employers and employees should behave in an organization, which may, of course, vary in scale (from a work floor to a global commodity chain). While the rules and regulations in this context refer more concretely to contractual obligations in terms of tax compliance and social protection (Goodman 2004, Muttersbaugh 2015), formalization policies may also serve other ends, such as increasing state presence in marginal segments of the economy, controlling informalized workers, and increasing tax benefits (for a discussion see Rosaldo 2021). In the case under discussion, I argue that formalization has been used a backdrop to introduce novel mechanisms of racializing surveillance into the agricultural labour market that aim predominantly at controlling and channelling the mobility of non-EU migrant workers.

Before describing these specific mechanisms, however, I need to make a couple of observations concerning the social relations of production in the Italian agri-food industry. Next to capital concentration, which is not typical to Italy⁷, the country has witnessed a radical change in composition of the agricultural labour force over the past four-and-a-half decades, from predominantly Italian, and EU, to non-EU migrant workers. The percentage of migrant workers in agriculture has grown from 1 to 25 on a constant of 1.200.000 workers over twenty years (1989-2010). Today, over one third of Italy's farm workers are said to be 'foreign' (read: not having the Italian nationality), counting around 362.000, on a total of around 900.000. The majority of these workers come from EU countries (predominantly Romania and Bulgaria, of which a significant portion of *Roma*), followed by Morocco, India and Albania, and Sub-Saharan Africa (predominantly Senegal, Nigeria, and Gambia: FLAI-CGIL 2022). Within this segment, the number of so-called 'irregular' workers – i.e., those workers who do not have, or only partially work under, regular labour contracts – have increased from 100.000 to 230.000 in the past ten years (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2014, 2020, 2022). Such workers experience severe forms of workers' exploitation including non or partial contracts (which typically do not exceed the 180 days needed to benefit from pension and unemployment services), low wages, the absence of labour security, adequate accommodation, and sanitation. Additionally, a growing percentage of these so-called 'irregular' workers today are refugees and asylum seekers who increasingly depend on agricultural livelihoods all-year round to compensate for the lack of assistance from state-run reception infrastructures⁸. Though overall numbers are absent due to the difficulty of recording workers' statuses, two colleagues noted in 2015 how the gradual "refugeeization" – i.e., the gradual replacement of the agricultural workforce by refugees and asylum seekers - not only reflects a change of composition in the agricultural workforce, but also, and increasingly, a lack of willingness to sanction labour legislations and provide for labour market support (Dines and Rigo 2015: 15, Caruso and Corrado 2022). I will return to this point later.

Subsequent Italian government reforms have addressed the issue of labour abuse in agriculture through a combination of attempts at formalizing agricultural employment. I summarize these as digitalization, criminalization, and surveillance. Though some efforts have been made to establish a national certification scheme based on best practices⁹ – the main cornerstones of today's rural development policy are digitalized labour recruitment, the criminalization of gangmasters (in Italian: *caporali*), and the securitization of labour mobility through humanitarian surveillance. I will discuss these mechanisms one by one now.

Preceded by earlier labour market liberalization measures, the so-called Jobs Act of 2014 introduced a new system of digitalized agricultural labour recruitment in so-called *centri per l'impiego* (CPI), or employment centres. After having dismantled the state bureaus for employment known as *Ufficio di Collocamento* (UDC) in 2008, these CPI officially function as employment registration centres in the agricultural districts under the authority of the regional administration. It is here that employment contracts are formally registered and communicated to the labour Ministry. In practice, however, the CPI simply register the employment demands that are forwarded to them through the private employers' organizations or CAF (*centri di assistenza fiscale*). As a result, the former merely take note of a *fait accompli*: as the CAF work directly with the employers, they have no incentive to control whether labour contracts effectively represent the workers, whether they have been registered prior or after the workers have been effectively engaged on the job, and whether the labour-time the CAF report individually to the organization is the effective time that workers spend on the job. In this sense, the CPI undoubtedly constitute a weak instrument in contrasting illegal labour intermediation, as the CAF have no incentive to perform a control function in this regard. Instead, the introduction of this digitalized labour control has effectively introduced a new instrument of surveillance towards non-EU farm workers, as their registration with the CPI requires them to confirm their residence papers (the so-called *permesso di soggiorno*) under the threat of legal prosecution¹⁰.

In essence, digital worker registration thus tends to reproduce what Lyon (1994: 52) calls “digital discrimination”, or the “differential application of surveillance technologies”, where “flows of personal data—abstracted information—are sifted and channelled in the process of risk assessment, to privilege some and disadvantage others, to accept some as legitimately present and to reject others.” (see also Browne 2015, Glouftsiou and Casaglia 2022) Through its reinforcement of Italian immigration laws for non-EU citizens, this system has tended instead to reinforce the de facto sovereignty of employers over their workers – as it is through them that workers obtain their residence papers¹¹. At the same time, the new system favours maximum flexibility of available labour power, as the CAF usually report employment contracts only after labourers have been employed, and effective labour inspections remain scarce. As employers and labour unionists continued to tell me during my field work, it is indeed a public secret in agricultural employment circles that the registration of labour contracts with the CPI's practically serves as a guarantee for the employer to be unfettered by labour inspections, which means he can hire workers at his own will throughout the year or harvesting season¹².

To tackle the excesses of *caporale* labour intermediation, the Italian state has subsequently vowed to implement new measures that have made this practice a criminal offense: a first law was passed in 2011, and a second, in 2016, also includes the employer's liability. It is significant that these reforms came on the political agenda only after several mass migrant workers' protests against their massive exploitation, first in Rosarno, Calabria, in 2010 (after a killing and manhunt on African workers by youth gangs in the city) and then in Nardò, Puglia, in 2011 (after a public denunciation initiated by a group of migrant workers: for a discussion – in Italian – see Perrotta 2020). These new laws thus officially promised to counter labour abuse and protect the most vulnerable in the agri-food production chain¹³. Contrary to popular belief, *caporalato* is not completely illegal, but it involves the informal contracting of agricultural wage workers in return for a cut of workers' wages (which can go up to 50 percent), or on the quantity of harvested goods (known as *cottimo*, which is illegal in Italy). According to the main agricultural workers' union FLAI-CGIL, this form of Agromafia generates not less than 600 million euros a year (Agromafia generates between 14 and 17.5 billion euros if extended to the agri-food sector in general: Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2014)¹⁴. So, while his informal form of labour contracting does not totally eclipse workers contracts, it rather preys on the lack of state mediation between capital and labour by offering a substitute, in the form of a privatized protection that is typical of organized crime rackets (Gambetta 2003). Like any form of organized crime, therefore, it remains important to regard the regulatory space the *caporalato* infrastructure occupies as being actively “made and remade through direct and indirect exchanges and interactions between intermediaries and state actors” (Axelsson et al.: 2022: 594; see also Weiqiang et al. 2017, Allen and Axelsson 2019; Perrotta and Raeymaekers 2022). A string of labour union and media investigations since 2016 in fact demonstrate that the major forms of labour abuse are still inflicted by the employers (see e.g., Ciconte and Liberti 2018, Associazione Terra! 2021). Next to the 230.000 ‘irregular’ (non-contractual) workers, a significant segment of ‘seasonal’ (temporary) workers are only partially contracted through a combination of *caporalato* and state infrastructures. Particularly this latter type of labour abuse – which in the Italian context is referred to as ‘grey labour’ – permits the employer to save both on workers' pay and on social welfare contributions. The cited anti-*caporale* investigations show that this practice remains legion, and is often combined with other forms of abuse, like low pay, lack (or absence of) labour security and other types of serious exploitation.

The final dynamic I wish to discuss concerns the securitization of labour. Discursively, this new security dynamic has been centred around a ‘new slavery’ paradigm, which can be summarized like this: since “seasonal workers” in retail agriculture can be considered as “modern slaves”, the

abolition of these new forms of slavery needs to address the root causes of their exploitation, which are the criminal gang masters whose operations are concentrated in the informal labour settlements, or ghettos, where, according to humanitarian organizations and labour unions, tens of thousands of migrant workers continue to mix with illegalized migrants and asylum seekers (MSF 2016, 2018, Placido Rizzotto 2014, 2020, 2022, Giovanetti et al., 2021). Next to eradicating these ghettos and their structures of lawlessness, therefore, what is needed is a new humanitarian framework that saves the victims from their perpetrators and puts them on the path of modern, formal, labour (for a discussion see Howard and Forin 2019). It goes without saying that this framing is fomented by a particularly racialized depiction of the African worker – illustrated by the continuous stream of mass media, labour union and government images and imaginaries – as the epitome of “the new slave” (see also Black Mediterranean Collective 2021). It is in fact no coincidence that the new policies to eradicate spaces that are informally inhabited by Black African workers such as the rural ghettos of Southern and Northern Italy are becoming the object of massive eradication and destruction, as it is here that the politics of rural development planning are played out in practice. While some of these policies have deep colonial roots, they also tend to reproduce a figure of the needy, but not yet civilized subject who will likely end up reproducing the backward practices of survival when not saved and modernized (a strategy that has also been defined as “blaming the victims”): inherent to these politics of pity and shame we find a kind of objectification (Manzo 2008), a tale of victimhood that fundamentally deny people their humanity, as it reduces the complexity of their lives to one-dimensional accounts of suffering: “In this respect, the humanitarian, modern abolitionist gaze should itself be seen as a form of fetishization, constructed by looking at people rather than with them, and abstracting them from the messiness of their contexts.” (Howard and Forin 2019: 595).

In socio-material terms, this objectification has tended to develop in a pair with what I would call a politics of securitizing labour, which, more concretely, proceeds through the state’s attempts at channelling non-EU migrant workers’ mobility through the political technology of territorial residence and a network of camp infrastructures. Article 9, paragraph 1 of the anti-*caporalato* legislation voted in November 2016 says that in order to improve the working conditions of agricultural workers, measures will be adopted for their “logistic accommodation and worker support,” including “experimental methods” of labour placement that will be territorially implemented. Particularly in the context of Italy’s declared ‘refugee crisis’ after 2011 (the year war broke out in Libya and EU borders were subsequently closed off¹⁵), these experimental methods involve, more concretely, the establishment of provisional housing facilities for so-called

‘seasonal’ workers¹⁶. Typically, these temporary labour camps (usually tent camps or other types of provisional accommodation) are concentrated around major agri-food enclaves and are erected and dismantled momentarily in concurrence with the harvesting of agricultural commodities. Since 2011, provisional tent camps – managed by the Italian Red Cross – have been built amongst others, in Calabria’s Goia Tauro region (famous for its orange plantations), northern Puglia and Basilicata (during the tomato harvesting season in July-September), Piedmont’s fruit region around Saluzzo, and Sicily. The combination of ghetto evictions and temporary camp infrastructures that seem to form the fundament of the state’s infrastructural response to labour exploitation continues to raise fundamental questions with regards to the sustainability of legislative and policy frameworks, which, on paper, should protect human rights and prevent employer abuses, but in reality, insert a securitizing logic into an already humanitarianized model of labour market governance (see also Dines and Rigo 2015).

In Basilicata, the anti-*caporalato* intervention was guided by a Task Force for Migration. Established in 2014 – the same year the Jobs Act was voted – it brought together CGIL, Caritas, the Red Cross, and the regional councillor for migration in consultation with local town councils around the official purpose of eradicating the *caporalato* hierarchy. From day one, their main objective became to systematically erect, maintain, and govern a series of temporary reception centres for non-EU migrant workers (the majority of whom had West African nationalities, particularly from Burkina Faso), to formalize labour contracts through the CPIs (see above), and to eradicate some of the biggest ghettos in the region, which the director of the Task Force continued referring to as the “ATM’s of the *caporalato* industry”¹⁷. The main task of the humanitarian organizations under the Task Force was to identify, register, and watch over seasonal farmworkers. For this purpose, they developed a sophisticated surveillance system through which, whenever a worker turned to the NGO for assistance (which was pretty frequent, given the lack of any material support), the operator inserted the latter’s identities in its database, which was later shared with the police and with the Red Cross. A final but crucial element of the system was to oblige workers in need of renewing their residence papers to register in the official labour camp ran by the Red Cross. This included signing an information sheet with the camp’s internal regulations, which detailed opening and closing times after and the prohibition of alcoholic beverages¹⁸. While the opaque manner in which the Red Cross operated the camp site remained a source of concern throughout my field work (for instance, the camp manager told me he could not share aggregated date of camp dwellers for reasons of privacy¹⁹), I was struck by the particularly militaristic manner in which the camp space was organized. Workers were divided in different compartments according to their

“ethnicity,” the manager told me: “to avoid conflicts between culturally diverse populations.”²⁰ The decision was apparently motivated by a short skirmish spurred over the access to drinking water between two groups of workers in another camp, which was however quickly resolved, several workers told me privately later. Nonetheless, both the manager as well as regional and local authorities continued to invoke the threat of insecurity to tighten control over the space. Things finally came to a boiling point when workers turned their anger at one of the camps and destroyed some of its material infrastructure in 2016. While the camp managers explained this as yet another episode of uncontrolled violence, several workers later explained their reaction to a national news report (*Striscia La Notizia*) as a sign of frustration with the failure of the management to provide them with the promised residence papers. As this renewal constituted practically the only motivation to settle – even if temporarily – in the camp, this episode illustrated quite well the failure of the regional authorities to meet their promises in terms of worker security.

The way the two apparently opposing frames, of humanitarianism, and of security, neatly joined together in the Migration Task Force’s operation can be explained by the increasingly racial dimension of Italian labour market policies had been adopting in the context of the country’s, and the EU’s, unfolding border crisis. In line with the wider shift toward a securitization of migration (Huysman 2000), it is both interesting and worrying to see how humanitarian agencies in this context assumed a role that became increasingly associated with population control, state repression, and bureaucratic power through their implementation of procedures that directly aimed at channelling these migrants’ movements through a system of state oversight (see also Ticktin 2017). What is even more striking is that these organizations justified their racist treatment by insisting on the migrants’ inferiority as hapless victims that somehow needed to be saved from their own inferiority. In my interviews with NGO workers, they all insisted that directing vulnerable workers through a modern and efficient bureaucratic infrastructure would ultimately ensure their inclusion in the state’s territorial system of rules and laws. Particularly the residence paper (*permesso di soggiorno*) assumed a central role in affirming the state’s territorial sovereignty over migrant bodies in this regard. That said, humanitarian workers persistently explained away their bureaucratic in merely technical terms. As Irus Braverman highlights in another context, of Israeli border technologies in the Palestinian territories, however, the technologies that are being depicted as a “more human” and “more civilized” way to manage human flows in this way risk to become part of a normalization, indeed a naturalization, of subjugation and abject violence. The threat of violence in this context is never made explicit but is rather an implicit consequence of racializing surveillance, particularly in the way formal, material infrastructures push the boundaries of control

toward an outside space that is located off limits, beyond the protective realm of official state infrastructures (Braverman 2011, 267). This double mechanism—of bureaucratic power and often implicit (and at times explicit) physical violence against those subjects the state identified as the objective of humanitarian rescue—constituted the cornerstones of to what I would call the racial surveillance of labour in Basilicata's agrarian economy.

4. The Social Reproduction of Racialized Labour

The last issue I want to develop concerns the social reproduction of the agricultural labour force, which tends to be radically different according to worker's (EU, or non-EU) status. Workers with EU nationality typically travel back and forth between Italy and their homesteads, thus enabling a diversification of their livelihoods that make them competitive on the agricultural job market (Perrotta 2014). This circular labour migration dramatically came to the fore during the Covid pandemic in 2019-2020, when Italian farmers' associations frenetically called the government to open so-called 'green corridors' to temporarily ship Romanian and Bulgarian workers to the country at the height of the agricultural harvest. Non-EU workers not having this advantage, they have to take care of their own reproduction through often illegalized networks of labour mediation, remittances, and self-care, even if they work all year round (Ippolito et al. 2021). Frequently, this leads to a situation whereby male members of diversifying household move around to earn wage income that is supplemented by the women who stay behind while engaging in subsistence and market activities and taking care of the next generation of migrant labourers who will be forced to leave the homestead with their coming-of-age. Though this has been a persistent pattern in Africa since colonial independence (and in some ways also before that: see Meillassoux 1980), the corporate food regime has added another dramatic layer to this phenomenon. I can give the example of Burkinabè (Bissa) men from South-eastern Boulgou Province, who now make up the majority of seasonal farm workers in Basilicata: while a first generation started moving from this Province to the Italy since the mid-1980s in the search for temporary jobs (a phenomenon which, by the way, precipitated as a result of racist closures in Ivory Coast and Libya in the 2000s), their agricultural employment in Italy only can partly compensate for the loss livelihood at home, as women – who typically take care of the children and of other forms of livelihood provision – now face the double noose of growing labour precarity, and of proceeding climate crisis. Though my research has not involved a visit to the Sahel region, literally all my male Burkinabè correspondents in Basilicata reported that their work in agriculture served to supplement incomes of their families either in Italy (especially to those men who were involved as industrial workers in the North of the country but, as

a result of border and factory closures, increasingly faced unemployment) or abroad. The expert literature makes it clear that the combination of closing opportunities for agricultural wage work at home, an increasingly repressive border regime in Europe, and the visible effects of various (climate and armed) crises on local agriculture South of the Sahel will become a central concern in the next decades to come. Some of these effects can already be read from the changing patterns of class and gender diversification Boulgou households are experiencing now²¹.

Given the many constraints they face, African workers like the ones I met in Basilicata thus have few options but to flock together and seek to carve out a collective space of mutual support in the ghetto. In that sense, it must be emphasized that the ghetto has dramatically changed its composition as a result of Italy's, and the EU's new border regime. Until 2011, more or less, ghettos were largely transient, informal fugitive spaces where workers try to reconstitute their bodies and sense of identity in a context of institutional racism. Since 2011, the policies of forced eviction and racialized surveillance have transformed these into more desperate places where a mixture of stranded asylum seekers and refugees seek to make a livelihood alongside established – and often ethnicized – gangs of migrant farm workers who all suffer from increased criminalization and racialized surveillance. This is also the case in Basilicata, where the active erasure of the main Burkinabè dominated settlement of Boreano in June 2016 by regional authorities ironically bolstered the grip of the Italian Agromafia on the informal labour market: whereas previously, the district accommodated a decentralized network of ethnic enclaves, with Ghanian, Malian, Sudanese and Burkinabe workers living alongside each other along the Basilicata-Puglia boundary, the annihilation of these settlements left only few of them intact. Unsurprisingly, it is here that a white-dominated, Italian *caporalato* hierarchy has succeeded in consolidating itself around a single group of gangmasters (see also Perrott and Raeymaekers 2022)²². The combination of racialized surveillance and abject displacement has led to a situation where the lives of non-white, non-EU workers is actively made just liveable enough for capital accumulation to ensue on the back of their labour and of their social reproduction activities.

Yet while the academic debate appears fixated in rather orthodox terms – between scholars who see in the ghetto a space of resistant sociality or, in contrast, of lawless criminality (see e.g., the contrast between Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto reports, Perrotta 2014, and Peano 2021), I argue that in order to get a full picture of how capitalist relations of production and reproduction coalesce in this production enclave, we also need to consider the important value-generating aspect of those reproductive activities that are not directly subsumed through formal capitalist development. One

important factor to take into consideration here, to reiterate Mezzadri's (2019) argument, concerns exactly the kind of *exchange value* that is generated through informalized channels of capital accumulation. This value does not involve labour (or the surplus value generated through labour-time), but rather the value that is extracted from informalized (unrecorded, unofficial) – means of workers exploitation. A central point of attention here for me concerns what Mezzadri calls the externalization of the cost of reproduction: it regards the question who pays for the production and reconstitution of workers' bodies, including their health, housing, retirement, as well as other forms of care (including sexual care). This question requires us to somehow deconstruct the metaphorical category of the plot in today's globalized labour mobility context: while in the villages 'back home' women usually take care of subsistence (and, therefore, assume the cost of reproducing labour power as surplus value), two other locations become central in a second process of added value generation: the agro-town and the ghetto. On the one hand, one should say, the ghetto substantially remains an ambivalent space. While it serves as a safety valve for mobile workers and a decompression chamber for capitalist employers, it is also a matter of fact that in order to gain access to employment, to health care, to legal advice, to housing infrastructures, and to residence permits, ghetto dwellers are invariably obliged to pass through the *caporale*, who consistently fills the infrastructural gap left by retreating states and capitalist firms. It goes without saying that these services often come at a high cost. To buy housing materials (tubes, plastic sheeting, mattresses, and other equipment) for the construction of migrant ghettos, but also for local transport (around 5 euros per round trip), a fake residence address (3-400 euros), but also to formalize (or partly formalize) labour contracts, gangmasters continue to play a central role in their mediation between the spaces of production and labour reproduction. Extrapolating these numbers, and knowing Southern Italy alone employs around 30.000 workers for picking tomatoes every year, we know we are talking about a multi-million business. Shocking as it sounds, this number corresponds exactly with the dynamic I discussed earlier: in a context characterized by a severe crisis of reproduction, and thus of acute labour shortages and the need to be competitive on a global stage, *Agromafia* networks fill the requirements of agri-food firms who need to mobilize workers quickly, and flexibly, while not willing (or not able) to pay for the cost of their reproduction.

While much ink has flown on the function of the ghettos – which, even by maximum estimates, host a few tens of thousands of workers – a more interesting dynamic in my view today involves the changing demographics of Italy's agro-towns: the villages and small towns, which economically (and morally) depend on industrialized agriculture. In the 'tomato' district of Puglia and Basilicata, I have noticed, towns like Cerignola, Orta Nova, and Stornara (Puglia), and Venosa, Lavello and

Palazzo San Gervasio (Basilicata), have witnessed a dramatic increase in non-Italian residents. In 2017, for example, the demographic registry (*anagrafe*) of Palazzo, Venosa and Lavello – in the heart of Basilicata’s tomato ‘district’ – reported, respectively, 400 non-Italians among a population of 4,600, 450 among a total of 12,000, and 1,100 among a total of 13,700 inhabitants (representing 8.6 percent, 3.75 and 8 percent respectively). While these numbers may look provisional to make any foregone conclusions, they still indicate a trend that is interesting for another couple of reasons. For one, and as one mayor wittingly noticed, this rural migrant residency represents a clear support for public infrastructures like schools, and hospitals, especially in the rural backwaters of like Northern Puglia and Basilicata, which continue to be hit by massive emigration of Italian residents, so that, in substance, without the migrants these infrastructures would simply cease to exist²³. In sum: no ‘Made in Italy’ tomatoes are possible without migrants, and no Italian towns without the non-white workers. Secondly, the social distribution of labour and welfare between Basilicata’s agro-towns also demonstrates an unequal exchange between production and reproduction.

Based on a close analysis of CPI statistics the Osservatorio Migrant Basilicata obtained (the data that report workers’ contracts) for the harvesting season of 2015-16, three interlocking dynamics can be discerned: (1) despite the dominant narrative, workers are socially integrated in the agricultural firms: they return to the same work place every year, while their work is constant (a majority report one to two contractual employments for a period of four months); (2) migrant employment in agriculture remains characterized by a high level of precarity, characterized by a close to minimum formal employment (54 percent of workers declare a contract of a maximum of thirty days, which is the minimum length established to be entitled to unemployment income and pension benefits); (3) here continues to be a vast discrepancy between the official and the actual place of stay of seasonal workers: although vast majority declare to have their *domicilio* (temporary residence) in the production area of Northern Basilicata during the tomato season, nearly eighty percent declare to live in either the “ghetto” or in “campagna” (literally: the countryside, so out in the open), while only 7 percent declares to live in one of the temporary migrant reception centres that are built and abandoned every year in concomitance with the harvesting season; (4) a final factor concerns the contrast between the place of stay and the place of employment of seasonal workers: Lavello, where most tomato district enterprises are located, produced three times more contracts than the other main towns of the area, Palazzo San Gervasio and Venosa. In crude terms, this means that Palazzo and Venosa take on the social reproduction cost of the labour invested in firms in Lavello. More concretely, therefore, these numbers reconfirm that even if so-called ‘seasonal’ migrant labour is publicly depicted seen as an indispensable factor of Italy’s agri-food

productivity, the non-waged work invested in reproducing this labour force is deliberately made expendable and superfluous through active strategies of social differentiation and spatial dispersal.

Overall, these data stand in sharp contrast with the interpretation of labour unions and humanitarian organizations, which continue to ascribe the informality of migrant farm work to the seasonality of agricultural production: contrary to all-year workers, they claim, seasonal laborers prefer to stay in the ghetto, where they can cut corners and remain invisible to the state. Under the surface of state policies that continue to criminalize both gangmastering networks and informal ghetto settlements considered as insalubrious, dangerous, and unhygienic, what emerges instead is a structurally embedded system of adverse incorporation of these workers by the Italian state and agricultural entrepreneurs, who prefer to subcontract labour reproduction costs to the informal space of the ghetto while reaping the benefits of migrant precarity through the imposition of so-called grey labour—that is, the temporary employment of workers who remain deliberately secluded from their social and political rights.

5. Conclusion: Just Liveable Enough

In this article, I have proposed to turn around the question about workers' unfreedom and exploitation in the corporate food regime from a focus on labour towards a focus on the social differentiation and reproduction of the labour force. So far, critical agrarian scholarship in this domain has tended to concentrate on the question of workers' exploitation from a perspective of labour, in sum, on the (un)freedom that results from the surplus value that is extracted from their work time on the job (see e.g., Colloca and Corrado 2013; Gertel and Sippel 2014; Corrado, De Castro, and Perrotta 2016, Molinero-Gerbeau and Avallone 2016, Avallone 2017, Pradella and Cillo 2021). Whereas this research can tell us a lot about the way the value of labour is "adversely incorporated" (Phillips 2011, 2013) into the commodity chain, and, consequently, on the resulting "disposability" and "expendability" of labouring subjects (Smith 2014), we should ask ourselves how workers end up in the places and jobs they do, in other words: what are the actual policies, bureaucratic procedures, and spatial mechanisms underpinning agricultural labour markets that permit states and agricultural firms to accumulate capital and distribute welfare in a specific time and place. Particularly in the agrarian context, where a disproportionate number of non-white, non-EU workers end up in what Marxist scholars continue to define as the global reserve army of surplus (or 'seasonal') workers, we necessarily need to look at the institutions and practices that are not strictly related to the organization of production. Indeed, Black Marxist scholars and feminist

political economists invite us to look at what Achile Mbembe (2004) calls the spatial organization of racialized labour, i.e., the way in which ideology and spatial planning effectively accrue to keeping the boundaries between differently valued forms of life. While in this context, Mbembe writes, on the one hand, Black life is ideologically constructed as superfluous and naturally doomed to self-destruction, on the other hand, specific bioregulatory policies and infrastructures are designed so as to ensure the constant flow of its indispensable labour to the sites of production. I employ the terminology of racial capitalism, and particularly of the Black Mediterranean, to make sense of this tension in the tomato plantations of Northern Puglia and Basilicata.

More specifically, I propose to resolve the tension between workers' indispensability and superfluity in the Mediterranean agri-food regime through a focus on social reproduction. What matters here is the way in which workers are socially and politically constructed so as to make their lives *just liveable enough*, in other words, amenable to labour extraction. Building on Mezzadri (2019) and Browne (2015), I argue that, in the current context of anti-gangmastering reforms, workers' persistent exploitation results from the combination of formalizing production, and informalizing social reproduction. Inspired by a pervasive humanitarian concern around new forms of slavery, which tends to reconstruct workers as victims to be saved from their own backwardness (Howard and Forin 2019), the formalization of labour has had the direct intention to control labour mobility in the agricultural production sites through new, racialized forms of surveillance. The digitalized recruitment and the establishment of official labour camp infrastructures that have been introduced for this purpose, however, have rather diverted responsibility away from the State and from agricultural firms in providing workers' welfare. While labour is actively reframed in humanitarian terms, workers have to take care of their own social and ecological renewal through ever-more stringent boundaries of territorial residency and contractual engagements with their employers. Informalization, on the other hand, serves to externalize the cost of social reproduction – in other words, of the activities that effectively reconstitute workers' bodies and their ability to provide their labour to the production of agri-food commodities – towards the agricultural work force. In the case study context, these include housing, transport, sanitation, as well as various forms of care (including sexual care), all of which are typically concentrated in the diffuse locations of the home and the workers' ghetto.

Instead of incentivizing social welfare, the new anti-gangmastering reforms thus have tended to externalize the cost of labour reproduction to what I call a 'constitutive outside' space that remains functional to the reproduction of these workers as labourers and, in so doing, provide an indirect

subsidy to capital. This externalization thus tends to consolidate workers as ‘threshold subjects’ (Smith 2014: 2020) whose labour is extracted while their lives are being actively disposed of as superfluous and expendable. A focus on social reproduction can help us understand more specifically how such lives are not simply disposed of or rendered deadly but made just liveable enough so as to make them amenable to capital accumulation. The separation between informalized non-waged work and formal rural employment is, in my view, quite central to the current debate about labour-power in the agricultural sphere as it contributes simultaneously to the reduction of labour costs and the risk of mounting class struggle by actively carving up rural labour markets along racial-spatial lines of distinction.

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Endnotes

¹ The list of inspiring literature is potentially long here. I particularly refer to Stuart Hall's concept of articulation (1980) which, in different forms, has been taken up by Hawthorne (2019), McKittrick (2013), Melamed (2015), Pulido (2015, 2017), Miapyyen and Bozkurt (2022), Ralph and Singhal (2019), Saldanha (2019), White (2020), and Dorries, Hugill, and Tomiak (2022); see also McKittrick and Woods (2007), Noxolo (2022), Hawthorne and Lewis (2023).

² My quotation here should be read both in relation to Cedric Robinson's identification of the Black Mediterranean as that place where Black captivity was associated to the capitalist organization of production on the plantation, in his book *Black Marxism* (1983; see also Hunwick 1992, Curtin 2012). Robinson originally coined the term "racial capitalism" in the context of the active destruction of black economic institutions during South Africa's apartheid (Leong 2013). Robinson's work aimed to re-historicize and develop the concept of racial capitalism to understand the entire history of modern capitalism (Kelley 2017): "No matter the quality of local genius, apartheid South Africa did not invent itself. It was an incubus in all those racial regimes that preceded it; from ancient Greece to the modern Americas," he wrote (Robinson [1983] 2005, 10).

³ The full quotation comes from Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002: 16): "Racism is a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories. Racism functions as a limiting force that pushes disproportionate costs of participating in an increasingly monetized and profit-driven world onto those who, due to the frictions of political distance, cannot reach the variable levers of power that might relieve them of those costs. Indeed, the process of abstraction that signifies racism produces effects at the most intimately "sovereign" scale, insofar as particular kinds of bodies, one by one, are materially (if not always visibly) configured by racism into a hierarchy of human and inhuman persons that in sum form the category "human being."

⁴ To overcome its permanent overemployment crisis and prevent the work force from uniting against labour exploitation, capitalists and state regulators need to resort to a set of extra-economic means to force this relative surplus population into becoming a reserve army for capitalist ends, Marx (1976: 915) wrote (for a discussion, see Akram-Lodhi 2010a-b). A central issue in this debate concerns the agrarian reproduction crisis: since farmers communities around the world have become gradually dispossessed from the land over the past one-and-a-half century, capitalism can no longer prey on their social and ecological reproduction to overcome its recurrent crises of overaccumulation, so the narrative goes (see Araghi 2009). Thus, corporations and states need to resort to temporary employment programmes, guest worker contracts or other legal mechanisms that constrain farm workers to offer their labour power "at the will" of agro-capitalist firms – and, in the process, bolster a permanent feature of unfreedom in contemporary agrarian labour markets (Brass 2011; for the Mediterranean area, see Avallone, 2017; Colloca and Corrado, 2013). In the US, a famous recruitment mechanism of migrant workers has been the *bracero* programme, which has undergone numerous modifications over the past decades (see e.g., Thomas 1985, Holmes 2013). In the European context, migrant workers are increasingly being mobilized through externalized forms of labour recruitment, for example by interim bureaus (in France and the Netherlands, for instance: e.g., Décosse 2016), through return contracts with private agencies, which obliges workers to return home after their contract is suspended, which is the case in Spain (e.g., Hellio 2016, Komposch, Schurr and Escriva 2024), or through other forms of temporary engagement, like in the UK (see e.g., Rogaly 2008, Clark 2013) and Sweden (Hedberg 2021; for a global discussion see Anderson and Ruhs 2010, Strauss 2012, Cross 2013, Martin 2016, Mieres 2017, Bastos et al. 2021).

⁵ I build here on Irene Peano's (2021) definition of care labour as an ambivalent form of often unrecognised and only partially commodified labour: while sex work can be understood as a commodified but often illegalized (and therefore, unrecognised) form of care labour that serves the reproduction of male labour power in some contexts, sexual intimacy may also be understood more broadly a reciprocal, gift-like exchange that exceeds commodification. Peano relates care labour to the agro-industrial production process in that it particularly generates the desire for such services in the areas where labour power is reproduced (i.e. in the rural slums or *ghettos*), whilst keeping such care distinct from other commodities.

⁶ A parallel research strand in this domain concerns the analysis of so-called migration infrastructures, which, in the agricultural sector, have permitted states to externalize the cost of labour reproduction and to re-route the mediation of agricultural employment to migration networks (see Weiqiang et al. 2017).

⁷ To provide some numbers here: over a period of 23 years, the share of Italian agricultural supplies to supermarket retailers has grown from 44 per cent (1996) to 75 percent (2018) – mirroring similar trends in Spain, France, Greece, and Morocco (Gertel and Sippel 2014, Corrado et al. 2016, Rye and Scott 2018). This is particularly the case for Italy's famous canned tomatoes, of which the country produces the five million tons every year, a volume which represents 50 percent of the European and 14 percent of the world's total volume. While salsa tomatoes for export are produced across the country, the transformation remains concentrated in a few processing companies in the area around Salerno (Campania) and Parma (Emilia Romagna). A significant demonstration of capital concentration in Italian agriculture also is the so-called used agricultural surface (*superficie agricola utilizzata*: SAU), i.e., the terrains utilized for production per agricultural firm, which has expanded from 5.3 hectares in 1990 to 11.1 hectares in 2020 (year of the last census), while the number of agricultural enterprises has dropped from 3 to a little above 1 million in the same period (data from istat.it).

⁸ Two additional factors contribute to the precarity of migrants' status in this respect: the denial of residence papers to asylum seekers, which grew from 60 to 80 percent of presented cases in 2015-2019, and the steep decrease in direct migrant assistance, which continues to characterize Italian legislative efforts. Besides a new substantial cut in migrant host centres, the new Ministerial Decree, proposed by Premier Giorgia Meloni in 2023, provides for the expulsion of migrants who lie about their age (particularly when concerning minors), as well as the additional erection of new detention centres for to-be expelled migrants.

⁹ The most famous certification in this regard is certainly the quality agriculture network. This network, established by law no. 116/2014 under the then Minister of Agriculture Maurizio Martina and subsequently modified by the so-called *Anti-caporalato* law (L. n. 199/2016), is currently the main operational tool managed directly by the State which recognizes an "ethical certification" to farms that comply with the rules. At the moment, less than 6.000 companies participate. In parallel, there are other voluntary certification chains, such as the NoCap network directed by former labour union activist Yvan Sagnet.

¹⁰ The public recruitment of migrant employees in Italy continues to occur predominantly through the so-called *Decreti flussi* (decrees for the determination of migrant flows), which assign specific quota to each economic sector each year. In addition, the Bossi-Fini Law (2002) assigns the responsibility for migrant recruitment directly to the Italian employer. Concretely, this means that migrant workers may only physically come to Italy after such invitation has been endorsed, and they lose the right to territorial residence (*permesso di soggiorno*) in the absence of a formal employment contract. This clause does not apply to asylum seekers, who have the right to work three months after presenting the asylum claim. In this case, the renewal of residency papers passes directly through the *Questura* (Police Headquarters) of the territory where the claim was presented.

¹¹ Paraphrasing Cedric Robinson (1983), one could redefine this situation as a form of feudalism incorporated within the capitalist mode of production, as employers become the sole responsible for guaranteeing their employees' wellbeing through a combination of privatized contracting (either through local employment centres or through gangmasters) and racialized securitization.

¹² Another consequence of the Jobs Act has been the gradual decrease of labour inspections, resulting from budget cuts and diminishing personnel. The major institutes INAIL and INPS have witnessed a decrease from 1232 to 1004, and from 350 to 246. Certain regions where labour abuses are rife, like Calabria and Basilicata, have only a handful of inspectors, who, in addition, complain of mounting red tape and surveillance of their work.

¹³ The new legislation has undoubtedly led to an increasing number of legal cases, as sixty-six Italian prosecutor's offices currently investigate the phenomenon of *caporalato* at various levels. The total number of open investigations on the matter is 834. The 2016 law has certainly contributed to the increase in judicial cases: while the previous report of the Placido Rizzotto institute (from 2020) spoke of 458 open investigations, 249 occurred between 2022 and 2023, while another 127 refer to previous years. Another important observation though is that 80 percent of current denunciations come from people with a regular residence permit. If the law had the intention of protecting the weakest, this data essentially highlights the opposite. Equally significant is the fact that the denunciation of *caporalato* abuses still predominantly falls on the shoulders of agricultural workers, who, in the case they decide to engage in such judicial action, have been observed to face even more risks of abuse and retaliation from the part of their exploitative employers (for a discussion of this socio-judicial aspect, see Rigo and Caprioglio 2021).

¹⁴ A local anti-racist organization, Osservatorio Migranti Basilicata, estimated that for the unique tomato campaign of 2017 in northern Basilicata (the approximately 1.000 hectares concentrated around Palazzo San Gervasio, Lavellò and Venosa), the capital gains from illegal labour intermediation – i.e., the 'cut' *caporali* subtract from migrant wages – were around 820.000 euros (Osservatorio Migranti Basilicata 2018). Clearly, this is money employers do not pay to their workers, and so it constitutes a direct form of surplus extraction. At the same time though, this capital does not flow to the firm, but, on the contrary, leads to the growth of a parallel, illegalized circuit of exchange directly financed through the worker's labour-time.

¹⁵ I have no space to develop on the dramatically changing EU border regime since the so-called 'refugee crisis' caused by NATO's intervention in Lybia. For a discussion see İşleyen and El Qadim (2023).

¹⁶ Additionally, the national plan for reconstruction after the covid-pandemic (the so-called PNRR) has allocated another 200 million euros to rehabilitate and construct temporary infrastructures for the housing of migrant workers, but, despite a permanent stakeholder dialogue (known as the *tavola anti-caporalato*) at national level and planification at several regional levels, this promise has so far remained dead letter, as reported by several media outlets in 2024.

¹⁷ "Migranti stagionali, Simonetti: Prepararsi alla campagna 2017," basilicanet, October 31, 2016.

¹⁸ NGO worker 1, interview by the author, August 22, 2016; labor union representative, interview by the author, July 5, 2016; NGO worker 1, interview by the author, August 22, 2016; labor union representative, NGO worker 2, interview by the author, February 27, 2017; demographic registry, interview by the author, February 19, 2017. This last information was further corroborated with seasonal workers.

¹⁹ Interview by the author, August 28, 2017.

²⁰ Idem

²¹ Labour migration from Boulgou to North Africa started in the mid-1980s, but has been precipitated by trade liberalizations in Ghana, which destroyed the import-substituting industries (amongst others of tomatoes) that provided wage work opportunities for Bissa until the early 2000s (Auvillain and Liberti 2016). Hazard (2004) and Wouterse and

van den Bergh (2011) already highlighted that circular labour migration from Boulgou has intensified a significant social stratification in Bissa society: while poor households use such migration to supplement meagre income from agricultural activities, and in some cases is leading to re-peasantization, a rising middle class of Bissa entrepreneurs uses their connections to migrant remittances to buy land and employ others through contract farming – which tends to reinforce proletarianization (for a wider discussion of changing West African migration patterns see Flahaux and De Haas 2016, Kaag et al. 2019). These ambivalent dynamics should alert us against using binary categories of distinction between for example ‘peasants’ and ‘labourers’ in the context of agrarian change (Douwe Van der Ploeg 2008, Bernstein 2010).

²² For a more detailed history and archaeology – and to acquire a sense of the social materiality of the ghetto in this region, I invite the reader to visit the project website <http://archaeology.mic-c.org/>

²³ Interview, 6 February 2017.