

# The fruits of our labour: an Avocado's story

by  
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**(NB to reduce the file size, this version of this dissertation includes no photographs)**

# Introduction

I can't begin at the beginning. I'm far too excited. I want to take you right to the heart of the matter. To the core. Get to your core. Your senses. Your feelings. Watch!

## *The beginning...*

December 2005

- ❖ Birmingham suburb of King's Heath: Fruit, plentiful. Vegetables, bountiful. Avocados, absent.
- ❖ Notting Hill, West London. Multitude of mock-French marché-style stalls set on large wooden wheels. Loaded with glossy fruit and vegetables, abounding with avocados. They always drew me. I would find my precious avocado here for sure. The crowning jewel of my king-sized salad.

Figure 1: Avocados abound in Notting Hill

Different streets. Different cities. Same country. The contrast got me thinking. 'Maybe its cos [sic] they're well expensive' was a friend's diagnosis on the contrast between locations. Maybe. Yet, I suspected there was more to it. What other tales lay beneath the hard, dark skin of the 'avo'? I was intrigued. I still am...

## *The end...*

I got to the root of it all. Or, more precisely, the branches. From the dusty fields of Dor, the ancient, Biblical, royal city where the Canaanites once roamed, to the halogen-lit supermarket shelves of my local Sainsbury's supermarket. This is the story of the life of the avocado pear and those helping hands that get my little friends to my dinner plate. From those who pluck them from branches upon high in Zikhron Ya'aqov, Haifa, Israel, through to yours truly, who just this lunchtime sliced through one's light green velvety flesh in my little student dwelling in Selly Oak, Birmingham, England. The same world, *connected*.

I've skipped rather a lot haven't I? I've started where I finished. The end. The very end. I'm sorry, I got carried away. I did warn you. Please, let me take you back in time and explain how this whole avocado adventure got going.

## **Me, me, me**

I intended to follow my avocados and report my findings. However, I got deeper into it, and the more people I spoke to, the more I became caught up in the subject. Entangled. Trapped even. Everything I wrote down felt so very personal. Every note, every jotting became a reflection of me - on paper. I was leaking and bleeding feelings, unable to distance myself from them. I am therefore writing as an 'I' and am addressing you, my reader, as 'you', the both of us living in a society that is 'ours'.

## The very beginning...December 2005

**King's Heath.** An arctic afternoon, crawling my way along this previously un-ventured (by me) high street of suburban Birmingham. Unable to acquire an avocado for the impending evening's meal, I was bitten, not by the cold, but something else. It was then that I could feel the nascent stages of this project unfold before my eyes. My thoughts became fixed, channelled, focused. I had been into at least half a dozen supermarkets and greengrocers only to emerge empty handed and frustrated. Why could I not find the fruit? Overwhelmed by exasperation, something had buried me. Disappointment lay all around; on the paving stones beneath my feet, on the spears of the nearby park's gate, and on the barren thorns within it. I found myself drowned in it. I was cascading through the universe and faintly falling. All I was after was an avocado, what was to become my precious avocado. And so the journey began.....

I started to pay attention, the avocado-barren landscape of the suburb having left me thoroughly unfulfilled. However, when I returned home to London, I was confronted with streets littered with these pear-shaped specimens of perfection. So I kept thinking. And reading. And looking:

The detective work began. No Selly Oak supermarket aisle was left un-browsed as I went on the avocado's trail. Countries of origin: Chile, Peru, Mexico, USA, Israel. Three different continents. One fruit...Different places, different spaces. I'd never even thought about it

**Figure 2: Avocado packaging labels from two major British supermarkets**

**Tesco Finest© Range**

**Sainsbury's Taste the Difference©**

'It's only food', you might think, yet 'economic realities and power remain important in many discussions of food consumption' (Winter, 2003: 505). Tracing the geographies of my avocado, constructed via trading links, organizations, cultural and economic knowledge and networks will hopefully convey to the reader the social and cultural elements of consumerism. The notion that people actually live and breathe within these structures and that the phases of production, distribution and consumption represent a network which links *us* to *them*. Looking at this conceptualises the complex and multi-stranded ways in which different types of nodes are connected, and how social and cultural elements are present in economic linkage. Who knows, our 'politics might radically change by doing this' (Cook et al, 2006: 660).

## January 2006

My metaphorical detective spyglass got bigger and I came across an article<sup>1</sup> from November 2004 about Palestinian protestors using bicycle D-locks and wire fences to blockade an Israeli fruit and vegetable company's distribution centre in Hayes, Middlesex. The company distributed avocados! The protestors aimed to highlight what they considered to be Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territories. They

<sup>1</sup> [www.labournet.net/world/0602/agrexco1.html](http://www.labournet.net/world/0602/agrexco1.html)

claimed fruit such as avocados were grown on Palestinian land, then sold and exported, with all profits going to Israel-owned businesses. They therefore argued that the company's activity in Palestine was unlawful, 'being ancillary to the crime of apartheid, war crimes and crimes against humanity'. The outcome of the trial was due shortly.

## 26 January 2006

The activists, charged with 'aggravated trespass and failure to leave land', were acquitted of all charges on a technicality. British Land Registry documents showed the company had built their entry and exit gates on other people's land so had no legal right to ask anyone to leave.

**Perhaps there was more to my green skinned little friends than I could gauge from their place on the supermarket shelf.** It might be that like David Harvey's grapes, my avocados:

*...sit upon the supermarket shelves...mute, we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation upon them or tell them immediately what part of the world they are from.*

David Harvey, 1990: 422-3

**I had only come across news of the protest by chance. But what if I dug a little deeper? Actually got involved, explored and investigated? Perhaps all sorts of issues were embedded in this tiny little fruit for which I have such a peculiar penchant. So I did. I got digging.**

## Research Aims

**I will show how my innocuous looking avocados *connect* you and me to people in highly diverse, distant geographical places. That these wonderfully tasting, inanimate objects laid out before us, in fluorescent strip lit, centrally heated supermarkets, have 'lives' involving people thousands of miles away.**

This involves actually following the fruit. Getting behind the promotional campaigns, behind the 'fetishism', defined by Hager Cohen (1997: 11) as:

*A commodity is a thing with a price. A fetish is a thing with a spirit. Commodity fetishism is the habit of perceiving an object's price as something intrinsic to and fixed within that object, something emanating directly and vitally from the object's core, rather than as the end result of a people and their labour.*

We're just one part of the process. The buyer or 'consumer'. But what of the 'shop and office workers, executives, traders, managers, farm workers' (Cook et al, 2006: 662). What of their stories? What of the potential issues and tensions along the way?

Perhaps behind that supermarket shelf of avocados which I gaze at so quizzically is the place where such things happen.

**If I must articulate my ideas, thoughts, hopes and visions into a few succinct points then I pose the following research objectives:**

- 1) To bring what are commonly perceived as ‘unrelated worlds’ together and highlight the myriad of social relations that puts my avocado pear on this shelf in Sainsbury’s or that stall in Notting Hill.
- 2) Reveal connections that avocados in the UK create between their consumers and their producers.
- 3) Explore any issues that may crop up as I make my way along the commodity chain of the avocado pear.
- 4) To enable you, the reader to enter ‘my’ world of avocados. I hope this will provoke questions in your mind about your place in the world and the various processes that occur in order to produce the things we consume. Tasty...

# Literature Review

## Written Style and Structure

Within the field of Geography, a variety of alternative writing styles have emerged. According to Bondi (1997: 247), 'the use of first person singular is now often used as a mechanism for maintaining an identifiable, overtly positioned, subjective voice within the text'. Such a style is particularly well suited to the ethnographic process in which I have collected a multitude of qualitative data. I will use the first person, alternating between this (academic) voice and that of **my own, personal feelings (bold)**. **I hope this will best allow me to illustrate how we - you and I, as consumers are living in the very same world as them, those who produce for us. Through this you will see that these are not two different worlds or 'worlds apart' (Marcus, 1995: 86) but one world.**

This narration style, known as 'insider' to 'outsider', is advocated by Lees and Longhurst (1995) and is one of a range of Post Modern writing styles (Cook, 1996). Anthropologists Clifford and Marcus (1986) consider that too often ethnographers are insufficiently self-conscious about their activities of observation. Therefore, it is only through the acknowledgement of ones subjective position within the research process that the true meaning of human activity can be illustrated (Herbert, 2000). This represents the development of the 'New Ethnography' which highlights the dangers of the narrator's 'situated knowledge' through raising the need of a self-awareness of one's own cultural and intellectual position. This knowledge is produced in specific circumstances and those circumstances shape it in some way.

The use of this method is given support by John Law (2004) who attacks current research methods, claiming that they don't simply describe social realities but are responsible, at least in part, for their creation. Law sees the constant search for clarity and meticulousness of modern methods as a significant problem. He believes the often termed, 'messy findings' are not the result of what critics dismiss as inadequate research but instead are reflections of aspects of society which are perhaps elusive, or multifarious. Hence, Law puts forward his 'Network Methodology' argument in which many aspects of real life are obscure and fleeting. In this light, if methods want to know and help to shape the world, then they need to 'reinvent themselves and their politics' to deal with the mess.

## Pedagogy – The art of education

A 'post-disciplinary' pedagogy emphasizing non-hierarchical, student-based knowledge, disciplinary interconnectedness, epistemological plurality, and material embeddedness is currently experiencing considerable support from academia within geography (Barnes, 2006). After all, the task of academic geography is to 'inform, challenge and conceptually re-wire people's understanding of the world' (Bonnett, 2003: 55). However, we must understand that geography can only achieve this through its relationship with its wider potential audience – i.e. the non-academic as well as the (existing) academic core. Consequently, I hope that my geographical

explorations will be accessible to the wider public and illuminate geography's role in their knowledge. My investigation of *connections* in the Middle-East responds to critical claims of a 'narrow focus' existing within geographical research 'which avoids uncomfortable questions about representing others' (Bonnett, 2003: 59). As a 'foreign example', my research will extend, build upon and contribute to the 'construction and naturalization' (2003: 59) of geographical knowledge beyond Anglo-American and European knowledge and simultaneously dispose of the notion that the rest of the world is not worth knowing about.

### **Writing for everyone**

Geography allows us to address various ethnic, racial and national prejudices that undermine society. Indeed, 'it is needed now more than ever in a globalised world' (Stannard, 2002: 73). However, within cultural geography's new literature concerning consumption, one negative aspect is how 'very few recent studies highlight the basic socio-economic and political issues of inequalities which underpin and result from differential access to the process and places of consumption' (Atkins and Bowler, 2001; cited in Winter, 2003: 505). Moreover, the increasing use of technical terminology has made it difficult for academic geographers to locate themselves in relation to the wider public debate on geographical issues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are currently calls for academics to 'enable and encourage undergraduates to understand their university studies as a deepening of and challenge to their existing grasp of the global scene' (Bonnett 2003: 59). Geographers are encouraged to 'write more, write better, and write for audiences outside of academia' (Mitchell, 2006: 205). This call for 'effective public writing' involves work which 'addresses many of the same issues as academic work but with an entirely different tone or style from academic prose' (2006: 206). The provocation for such sentiments stems from the belief that within current academic work in geography too much time is spent 'looking inward, and not enough time looking out' (2006: 212). As a result:

*With few exceptions we write for each other and we do it with dense, turgid and usually mind-numbingly boring prose...it is imperative our writing...reaches a wider audience.*

Mitchell, 2006: 212

Mitchell's view is that we should focus on reaching out to learn from and educate those outside of geography's academic sphere about events and processes occurring worldwide, '...instead of worrying whether or not we have enough theoretical elbow room and who's policing whom...' (Mitchell, 2006: 212). Such a technique can produce deeply political work which can challenge normative assumptions about some of the most pertinent facets of modern life: issues such as nationalism, class, gender and sexuality for example. At the same time these works can serve to highlight the 'dangers of standardized ways of thinking, showing the inadequacies at the heart of passive acceptance of things as they are' (2006: 212). Writing through ones experiences challenges contemporary forms of knowledge because it taps into pre-existing common sense understandings and awareness and takes them in 'new directions' (2006: 207). Accordingly, through writing spaces can be created for thinking alternatively about issues that have been opened up.

Economic geographers also seem to be acquiring a growing taste for such methods, downplaying the significance of the 'economic' in their own field in favour of more socio-cultural discursive perspectives. Such a perspective can be found in the writings of Trevor Barnes who advocates a personal approach due to its 'plurality' – because 'there is never a single approach to understanding economic geography' and instead of being 'cordoned off, in small discrete topics', geography is 'everywhere'. (Barnes, 2006: 408). Provided the author has a deep commitment to cross boundaries, Barnes believes such work can spark intellectual creativity through which political empowerment can occur. Likewise, Amin and Thrift's (2000) 'call to arms' for economic geographers to break free from the shackles of ('narrowly specialised') 'mainstream' economics and fashion their own socio-cultural perspectives is based on the belief that economic processes are best understood in social and cultural terms (Amin and Thrift, 2000: 152).

There are doubters though! Martin and Sunley (2001) criticise the work of Amin and Thrift and state that such a perspective raises the possibility of 'reducing geography to superficial 'storytelling' reliant on a trendy and fast-moving jargon that 'constantly evades any rigorous evaluation' (2001: 149). Markusen's (1999) main complaint with this form of pedagogy is that it lacks clarity, contains only a vague methodology, and in terms of theory, lacks any substance and empirical evidence. Such doubts of its theoretical depth are echoed by Jon Goss (2004) who claims that ethnographic research is lightweight on theory and hinders the ability of the reader to involve themselves in 'politically meaningful action' (2004: 374).

## **Food!**

In Western societies such as ours, 'food has long ceased to be solely about sustenance and nutrition' and is instead packed with 'social, cultural and symbolic meanings' (Bell and Valentine, 1997: 3). It is a basic necessity for human survival. It shapes people's lives in profound cultural, ideological and economic ways (Goodman and Watts, 1997). There is encouragement for geographers, from academics and activists, to get more involved in exposing previously 'hidden' aspects of commodity production (Harvey, 1990; Hartwick, 2000). Indeed, given some direction, such investigations can provide 'a vivid and fleshy way into understandings of our multicultural pasts, presents and their power-soaked entanglements' (Cook et al, 2004: 22).

Much of the literature present on supermarket food packaging, emphasises *selling* places, and the image portrayed is generally unique to the region. Marketing therefore becomes crucial because constructions of quality will be interpreted, understood and consumed differently by individuals in different places and at different times (Ilbery, 2005). There are already strong links between products and places, so that 'almost any product which has some tie to a place, no matter how invented this place may be, can be sold as embodying that place' (Bell and Valentine 1997: 155). Will this be the case with my Israeli avocados?

Recent agricultural development is largely based on the use of intensive production techniques, which are underpinned by quality control conditions, from planting through to consumption. It is thought that those actors and agencies closest to the definition and implementation of quality conditions 'accumulate power in the food network' (Marsden, 1997: 177). It is suggested that this leads to a 'growing social and

economic differentiation in the region, with smaller producers prone to exclusion in globalised food networks' (Marsden, 1997: 177). Corporate retailers, in nations such as the UK therein develop their own regulatory systems that ensure dominance over the supply of main food products. These systems are highly competitive and vulnerable to consumer reactions, producing economic, social and environmental impacts on host countries.

### **Avocado = Commodity**

The commodity chain concept has a relatively long history and has previously been used in relation to a wide range of industries and commodities. It is understood as 'a network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity' (Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1986: 159). Increasingly, the concept of commodity circuits (as opposed to chains) has been put forward. This stems from a concern, mainly from human geographers, that the concept of a chain is too linear, too ordered and too concentrated on the 'simple metric of length' (Jackson, 2004: 9) as opposed to other issues such as complexity or transparency. By contrast, circuits have no fixed beginning or end point.

### **Commodity fetishism**

Through a Marxian interpretation of 'fetishism', most analyses of commodity chains have been focused on 'uncovering' the social relationships behind the production of a specific commodity. Whilst this can be extended to any commodity, it has been applied most commonly to food or other agricultural products (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002).

In recent years, the avocado has, through 'advertising, marketing and media specialists', become a much fetishised commodity, masking its origins and the social relations necessary to produce it' (Jhally, 1987: 49), with the ghost of human labour so 'thoroughly exorcised so that consumers need not give thought to their composition, or where, how and by whom they were made' (Jhally, 1987: 49). In advertising representations (Figures 2 & 3), avocados are presented as pure, the very embodiment of goodness and health, devoid of any 'fingerprints of exploitation' (Harvey, 1990: 422-23) that may exist in their production.

**Figure 3: A magazine advertisement for Sainsbury's avocados**

This marketing, which largely revolves around promotion of the avocado as a healthy, heart-friendly food, contains statements, often supported by authoritative research studies, which represent the '*fetish*', 'a disguise whereby the appearance of things in the marketplace mask the story of who fashioned them, and under what conditions' (Jhally, 1990: 50). Marx's view of commodities and their *fetish* sprung out of his belief that they appeared 'to relate exclusively to each other, hiding the fact that they are in actuality products of human labour and thus bring human beings into particular relations with each other' (Corrigan, 1997: 33). It is this which gives the commodity a 'fetishlike 'power' that is unrelated to its true worth' (Kopytoff, 1986: 83) and this

same 'power' permits commodities to 'draw a veil across their own origins' (Jhally, 1987: 49).

Consequently, my avocado is far more complex than the inanimate object that rests upon the supermarket shelf. Marx, in *Capital*, espoused the view of commodities as the 'vehicle for capitalist dominance' (Anderson and Gale, 1995) 'abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' (Marx, 1976: 163). He was particularly interested in the obscurities created by the commodity's *exchange-value*, as opposed to its *use-value*. It is these *hidden* social relations that occur in order to get the avocado to my dinner plate that particularly intrigue me. My research aims to clear up the ambiguity that Marx identified as existing between producer and the consumer of the commodity. In the marketplace itself, the commodity's exchange value has no 'politics' (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002: 6), with political power defined as the two-way relationship between a dominant actor and a dominated actor who adheres to the dominant actor's wishes (Weber, 1978 [1922]). Production-focused theorists, influenced by the works of Marx, see domination and power struggles as the product of the actions of capitalists who seek to extract surplus value by exploiting workers (DuPuis and Goodman, 2002).

The *fetish* acts as a 'veil', hiding exploitative social relations. As a result, consumers are passive as result of both their inactivity in the political sphere of circulation and their ignorance of the 'unequal power relationships that are obscured by the veil of the commodity fetish' (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002: 7). Consumers have an 'underdeveloped' consciousness, which will cease to awaken and therefore remain unpolitical – until they acquire the awareness necessary to express 'an effective challenge to the production system' (2002: 7) Currently, consumers are regarded as 'manipulable, blinkered individuals, whose political epiphany will come only if the scales of commodity fetishism can be removed from their eyes' (2002: 9). Consequently, and perhaps unsurprisingly, immorality is at the heart of modern consumption (Sack, 1992) with consumers ill-informed by retailers as to how they impact on those they are 'connected to through the webs of commodity flows' (1992: 200).

### **The contestation**

This notion of a veil is contested however. Jon Goss (2004) considers that an 'over-indulgence' in description of commodity chains has lead researchers to 'self-consciously reject political economy' (2004: 371). The commodity network concept has also been criticised for resembling something of a 'chaotic conception' (Jackson, 2004: 5) of little or no analytical value, merely analysing a 'virtually endless 'circuit of consumption' (Jackson et al, 1995: 205). Goss is 'not sure...that greater complexity in analysis of consumption will help consumers themselves to understand the process of consumption, much less to intervene in them' (2004: 373). Furthermore, there are others, such as Louise Crewe, who whilst conceding that this knowledge might have an effect, considers it distinctly confined to only 'a growing food elite' who are already knowledgeable about tracing the origins of their foodstuffs (Crewe, 2001: 631).

Yet perhaps commodity systems analysis is not a 'chaotic conception' but a 'rational abstraction' (Sayer, 1992:138). Andrew Sayer dismisses the former as something that

‘arbitrarily divides the indivisible and/or lumps together the unrelated and the inessential’ whilst the latter manages to ‘isolate a significant element of the world which has some unity and autonomous force’ (Sayer, 1992: 138). So whilst circuits may have no fixed beginning or end, this is due to the complex and shifting power dynamics between sites.

### **Importance of my research**

It is suggested that as consumers, we have the capacity ‘to weave together the natural, symbolic and social elements to create the commodity’s context and meaning’ (Sack, 1988; cited in Anderson and Gale, 1995: 202). Perhaps by taking you with me on my avocado chase I can show you that ‘we are not helpless, brainwashed dupes and can potentially take responsibility for our consumption’ (Anderson and Gale, 1995: 203). This stirs something within me, perhaps rousing the ‘strong emotions’ (Appundurai, 1981: 494) that food has the ‘capacity to mobilize’.

There are ‘connections between specific localities in the modern world system’ (Cook and Crang, 1996: 1) that need to be made, and this is what commodity chain studies do. In shall peer into the life of the avocado, highlighting the ‘day-to-day functioning’ of my little oval friends and their ‘paths of circulation’ (Marcus, 1995: 91-2). Such an exploration will open up a range of ongoing concerns within the discipline of geography.

Currently there is extensive work in the field of ‘popular geographies’, self-designated geographical knowledge and representation with a mass audience which is developed outside of the higher education community. Within this, some academics consider something of a crisis occurring, with representation seen as ‘intrinsically dated or politically suspect’ (Bonnett, 2003: 55). It is this which I wish to rectify and at the same time show that such work is of far greater value than merely ‘traveller’s tales’ (Bonnett, 2003: 55).

**My green fleshed little friend represents a window onto world, with far wider geographies than you might think. Heeding the calls of Michael Taussig, I will:**

*...neither resist nor admonish the fetish quality of modern culture, but rather to acknowledge, even submit to its fetish-powers, and attempt to channel them in revolutionary directions. Get with it! Get in touch with the fetish!*

Taussig, M 1992: 122

## Methodology

### Methods of data collection

#### Ethnographic approach

‘Plurality extends to methodology...one approach never captures everything’ (Barnes, 2006: 408). Accordingly, my fundamental reason for using an ethnographic writing style is to offset the possibility of you becoming a passive recipient of the work you are reading.

Ethnography is a form of ‘post-disciplinary’ study, in which

*...scholars forget about disciplines and... identify with learning rather than with disciplines. They follow ideas and connections wherever they lead instead of following them only as far as the border of their discipline. It doesn't mean dilettantism or eclecticism, ending up doing a lot of things badly. It differs from those things precisely because it requires us to follow connections. One can still study a coherent group of phenomena, in fact since one is not dividing it up and selecting out elements appropriate to a particular discipline, it can be more coherent than disciplinary.*

Sayer, 2003: 5

By using this style, you, the reader, are repositioned as an ‘active participant’ in my research journey (Behar, 1996; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

#### Confidence

**...I did it. ‘Quite literally following connections’ (Marcus, 1995: 8) Like Sarah Wrathmell’s (2002) Sri Lankan forage for the tea leaves from which her ‘cuppa’ was brewed. Like Helen Clare’s (2005) brave hunt for her Cambodian manufactured t-shirt and Lawrence Devlin’s (2005) lucid journey into bodybuilding’s dark trenches. These tales gave me the confidence to take up the trail of the avocado and present a written style resembling that of a personal story. Aside from these papers, various material on other similar journeys exists: a film on mange tout (BBC, 1998), and academic papers on commodities as diverse as papaya (Cook et al, 2004) and sushi (Bestor, 2000); all commodities. All followed through different sites of production and consumption. A similar approach will allow me to portray most vividly the essence of the lives of those who tend the avocado orchards, those who sit in the offices of packing houses and those who operate the conveyor belts on which the avocados are sorted.**

### **Where? When? How?**

I traced the avocado through various contexts of the commodity circuit by experiencing daily life in a number of Israeli kibbutzim involved with avocado growing. An ethnographic approach allowed me to embrace the ‘lived’ everyday experiences of situated people’s involvement with the avocado. I aimed to break down the barriers between ‘lifeworld and system’ (Marcus, 1995: 80-104) and in doing so employed Kopytoff’s (1986) ‘biographical approach to things’ in order to understand the processes which transformed this fruit from an object on a branch to a luxurious accompaniment to my salad.

My research was carried out during a two week visit to Israel in September 2006, comprising of stays at a variety of (five) different Kibbutzim in Western Israel. Research in Britain was conducted mainly from June to August 2006 when I was back at home, sifting through newspapers, magazines and supermarkets in search of information on anything and everything to do with the little oval specimens. The metaphorical path down which I ventured was smoothed greatly by Carmel Agrexco, the company responsible for the vast majority (70%) of Israel’s avocado exports.

#### **Text Box 1**

##### **AGREXCO**

Agrexco is Israel’s largest exporter of fresh agricultural produce. The company is 50% owned by the state of Israel, with the remaining 50% split equally between the country’s agricultural production board and the Tnuva cooperative, Israel’s largest food company. In the UK, Agrexco is best known under the brand name Carmel, with products sold in all the main supermarkets. The company was set-up 50 years ago as the Israeli government’s solution to surplus production. Ten years ago Agrexco was Israel’s sole exporter of avocados. However, since then, steps of deregulation have been taken to create an open export market. However, Agrexco is still dominant in this, accounting for 70% of the avocados exports from Israel.

Britain represents the largest sector of demand for avocados from Israel, with a 28% share (Namaani, 2006) of the export market. I believe my British nationality was a major advantage in getting co-operation from Carmel Agrexco. I feel the company made a tremendous effort to help me and went to lengths that literally astonished me. Not just Agrexco, but the farmers and kibbutz managers themselves showed me kindness of scale previously alien to me. In Israel, I was a ‘foreigner’. Whilst in some ways this may have hindered my discussions with locals, I believe this may also have had the effect of opening doors!

...And off I went. Along the chain, off at various different branches. Putting pieces together, making *connections*.

### **Participant Observation**

**Participant observation was a key component of my research in Israel. The kibbutzim on which I stayed, with their communities ‘unfamiliar’ to me, became the main site of such activity. The majority of observations I made in these communities were directly linked to *my* participation in people’s everyday lives. I was living and working with the people that I was studying.**

Within social research, participant observation is particularly common among anthropologists studying living communities and serves as a productive way of conducting cross-cultural data collection (Diskin, 1995). Furthermore, this method allows researchers to consider the perspectives of the people they are working with (Miller 2001: 231). It is thought this ‘continued attention to the most mundane and intimate aspects of people’s ordinary lives...can help us understand the big issues of twenty-first century politics’ (Watson & Caldwell, 2005: 2). I believe such an approach gave me the greatest opportunity to enable *you* to imagine *their* lives, the lives of the people I studied.

Participant observation is essential if research of an ethnographic nature is to be thorough (Herbert, 2000). Just as interviews analyse the words of people, so participant observation analyses actions as well. In prizing avocados from branches and watching those considerably more adept at it than I do the same, my understanding of the avocado production process and the lives of those involved in it increased. A touch unconventional perhaps. Indeed, there is ‘nothing stranger than humans observing other humans than to write about them’ (Bahar, 1996: 5).

### **Text Box 2**

#### **THE KIBBUTZ**

The kibbutz (the Hebrew word for "communal settlement") is a unique rural community; a society dedicated to mutual aid and social justice; a socio-economic system based on the principle of joint ownership of property, equality and cooperation of production, consumption and education; the fulfilment of the idea ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’. All kibbutzim began as agricultural communities. Returning the Jewish people to the soil and to nature was a vital part of the Zionist revolution. Partly due to the absence of traditional agricultural methods, and partly because of the possibility of a commune taking risks where a private farmer could not afford to do so, the kibbutzim have played a major part in diversifying and modernizing agriculture in Israel during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Barkai, 1977).

Interviews were a crucial part of my methodology. Interviewing allows the researcher to understand and put into a larger context the interpersonal, social, and cultural aspects of the environment (Erlandson et al, 1993: 85). Indeed, interviews allowed me to ‘make sense of individual opinions and lifestyles’ (Valentine, 1997: 112).

It is particularly important to have contacted a wide range of people as part of fieldwork preparation (Cook and Crang, 1995). Before departing the shores of Britain, my sole contact in Israel was Gabi Naamani, Carmel Agrexco's product manager for the avocado.

Mr. Naamani represented *the* crucial 'gatekeeper', the central figure in my 'wide network of contacts loosely based around the germ of (my) project' (Cook and Crang, 1995: 14). From here I intended to 'snowball for contacts'. Through staying in the various kibbutzim, I would inevitably meet various people involved and affected by the production of avocados. I was eager to speak to as many people as possible, at different places in the circuit, along various 'nodes and networks' to find out about their day-to-day lives. People were often surprised when it seemed that the essence of my speaking to them revolved around an apparent fascination with the avocado. Often, people were simply surprised that I was speaking to them at all.

Prior to arriving in Israel, I had ascertained, by means of email and interviews that the main places of avocado production in Israel were kibbutzim, though I knew little else about their operation or the extent to which the kibbutz communities were involved in avocado production. Accordingly, I had to be flexible and due to the very nature of ethnographic research which 'invariably changes as it proceeds' (Cook and Crang, 2007) 'flexibility' became my byword. I awoke every day with only a vague idea of who I might get the opportunity to speak to that day. Hence I had to seize every opportunity I was afforded. Consequently, my interview style also had to be flexible, because I was literally 'thinking on my feet'. Despite employing this somewhat laid-back approach to events, there were times when I had to be decisive, particularly when presented with the chance to visit certain sites and people. When speaking to people within the context of their everyday working lives, my participant observation approach was close to 'participant observation with the tape-recorder switched on' (Cook and Crang, 1995: 36) rather than any carefully mapped out, intricately planned, thoroughly investigated agenda. Such an approach created a non-threatening atmosphere which I felt brought about a more complete interaction, something a set structure would have made untenable.

### Individual and Serial Interviews

There was no set structure to the majority of interviews I conducted due to the context in which they were performed. Often this involved jumping, quite literally, into and out of pick-up trucks as I 'shadowed' avocado orchard managers around. The most productive interviews proved to be the ones conducted in environments familiar to the interviewees, where they felt most comfortable. Themes were often pre-determined and the interviews semi-structured, but always open-ended to allow for discussion to cross a broad spectrum. Many of my interviews were opportunistic, springing up when people happened to be nearby such as when on breaks. I use the term 'interviews' despite the fact that often these could have been mistaken by the naïve passer-by as idle chats, such was the conversational manner in which they took place. This informality meant that the people I was speaking to could elaborate and articulate more fully their feelings and avoided the possibility of them feeling daunted by the unfamiliar situation.

This more 'relaxed' approach enabled me to speak to a wide spectrum of people, something I feel a more rigid structure would not have permitted. It also gave me a greater feel for the entire commodity circuit of the avocado with its various networks, nodes and links. The downside of such an extensive interviewing methodology was that wading through reams of transcriptions after having listened to hour upon hour of audio tape meant coding, particularly in its embryonic stages, was a slow process.

### Group interviews

I was limited to only two group interviews during the course of my stay in Israel, on both occasions with avocado pickers. Although not an extensive element of my research, both occasions did enable interviewees to become more relaxed and proved conducive to opening them up. The informality of the settings no doubt contributing to the relaxed air – one, an evening of a few beverages in the bar of Kibbutz Magaan Michael and the other, a morning hunched over bowls of porridge in the canteen of Kibbutz Nasholim. Undertaking research in this context meant I did not stray outside of the interviewees' everyday lives, but instead remained within the context of their lived experiences. Helping *me* understand *their* lives better. On both occasions I sat back and simply observed the group discussions rather than attempt to lead the agenda. Again, seeing how *they* lived. Letting *them* reveal *their* 'own versions of events in own words' (Cook and Crang, 1995: 36). The advantage of such interviews was that previously 'shy' individuals were permitted the comfort of being around those who they *did* feel comfortable with. As a consequence they duly became more expressive of their thoughts and feelings to both members of the group and to myself.

### Audio Taping

The use of the digital audio recorder loaned to me by The University of Birmingham's School of Geography proved very useful. Its use meant I was not left with reams of hurriedly scribbled notes and could instead concentrate on the interview at hand, allowing conversation to flow between interviewee and myself. Despite previous anxieties, I found the device did not pose a problem for interviewees. More often than not they seemed to regard it as something of a triviality when I raised the question of using it.

In Israel, despite English being commonly spoken, accents were often so strong that on first hearing it was difficult to comprehend what was actually said. The facility to review spoken material eased this and allowed me to transcribe material accurately and understand better the responses of those I had spoken to. Occasionally I would utilise the device to record my feelings at a particular moment. However, this was often impractical when in the company of others. When it was being used to record ongoing dialogue with an interviewee, overlaying any thoughts on to it would have been impractical.

### Research Diary

I used this to scrawl down anything I observed and considered of interest. Recorded incidents ranged from an on-the-spot sacking at a packing house, to

the reminisces of Ronnie, a manager of one of the kibbutzim I stayed at. Not only did such an outlet allow me to detail aspects of my subjects' lives but it also gave me the facility to articulate my feelings on paper.

### Photography

Though an ethnographically important component of participant observation, at times, taking photographs made me feel somewhat like a tourist. I feared this might potentially undermine the academic nature of my study. Despite trying hard to 'fit in' with the communities I encountered, I found taking photographs certainly had the capacity to distinguish me as an 'outsider'. In order to guard against this, I often took photographs at the end of encounters, as I believe doing so beforehand may have altered the interviewee's perceptions of me.

### Secondary Data Research

The Institute of Grocery Distribution located in Hertfordshire, England made data available on avocado imports to Great Britain but no longer offered access to up-to-date research and press cuttings on avocado circulation within Britain. I was informed of the latest developments within the avocado industry by Mr. Naamani on my first day in Tel-Aviv, at Carmel Agrexco's headquarters. He provided me with comprehensive data on both Israeli and global avocado production. Though not imperative to my ethnographical study, knowledge of such quantitative data gave me a fuller insight into the avocado industry on a global scale, and a view of Israel's place within that global avocado system.

## Methods of analysis

### Coding

I used the method of coding because I really wanted to *know* my data and be able to establish key themes throughout my research. I employed the method of 'open coding' when organising interview transcriptions, as advised by Cook and Crang (1995). All transcriptions were typed out from audio recordings and subsequently formatted with room for annotations. The purpose of this was to identify recurring themes that came up in conversations. Though initially a complex task, this did become easier with the addition of a 'code map' (Jones, 1985; cited in Cook and Crang, 1995) which helped me link together certain coded areas of research and helped me make connections between people's lives – the precise focus of my study.

## Methodological Limitations

### Access

The following is advice from The Foreign Office on 12<sup>th</sup> July when I was I was in the process of making plans for my journey out to Israel.

### Text Box 3

**Foreign Office Travel Advice for Israel and The Occupied Territories**

*Still Current at: 12<sup>th</sup> July 2006*

*Updated: 10h July 2006*

- We advise against all travel to the Gaza strip because of the security situation. Despite the ceasefire between Palestinian militant groups and Israel, there continues to be frequent clashes between armed Palestinian groups and attacks on individuals, resulting in deaths and injuries.
- We also advise against all travel to the Gaza strip because of the threat of kidnap. The Palestinian security forces have advised us that there is a particularly high threat against British nationals. On 26 June 2006, Palestinian Security forces contacted the Consulate-General to renew this warning. British nationals have been kidnapped and held for up to two weeks in previous incidents, most recently in December 2005.
- We advise against all but essential travel to the West Bank. We continue to believe that terrorist groups maintain the intent and capability to kidnap foreign, including British nationals particularly in Nablus and the northern West Bank. There have been a large number of demonstrations in Ramallah and elsewhere since March 2006, some of which have turned violent.
- A high threat from terrorism and military activity in Israel and in the Occupied Territories remains. On 29 June 2006, a suicide bomber killed and injured several people in the Red Sea resort of Eilat. On 8 July 2006, Israeli military action in Gaza resulted in at least 20 deaths. Palestinian militant groups have since threatened attacks inside green line Israel. On 17 April 2006, a suicide bomber killed nine people and injured around 65 in an attack at the Old Central Bus Station in Tel Aviv.

**I was therefore forced to recognise that most of the areas in which the protestors (from the 2004 Agrexco UK case) saw ‘illegal’ activity taking place were also the most dangerous areas. Areas that the Foreign Office strongly advised me not visit. As a consequence of this I became highly dependant on Agrexco’s help in Israel to provide me with access to areas of avocado production in which I was likely to be safe. Though their assistance was considerable, by its very nature it had drawbacks. Multi-sited research requires selection of particular sites. In theory I had to select these sites. This potentially undermines the intended representative nature of them. In practice, Agrexco did much of the selection for me – posing the same problem of unrepresentativeness.**

**Access was also an issue on a micro level. Though not a major source of frustration, at times it was difficult to get ‘access’ to those ‘lower down’ the avocado’s production chain. Whilst Carmel Agrexco were particularly helpful and the avocado orchard managers themselves even more so, I often felt it was asking a bit much to expect to have another worker removed, albeit perhaps only briefly, from his/her daily tasks solely to talk to me. This dilemma inevitably affected who I researched and how I viewed them. I felt I was lucky just to be taken to the orchards themselves never mind being taken on what were essentially guided tours as well.**

**Time**

**The 2006/2007 avocado picking season commenced at the end of September, only days before the start of my university term. This meant my stay was confined to a period of only two weeks. Furthermore, the fact that I needed to visit a variety of (kibbutzim) sites, in order to fulfil the criteria of multi-sited ethnographic research, meant that I was at each one for only a brief period of time, perhaps**

**limiting my capacity to build up strong relations with those among whom I was living.**

**Selective disclosure**

**As a primarily English speaking nation, communication with people in Israel was rarely a problem, though occasionally misunderstandings did occur. However, these were generally rectified by review of the digital tape recorder. Occasionally, someone would be required to interpret, particularly in discussions with the avocado pickers who were almost always from foreign countries. In such instances it is quite possible some meaning was lost. Occasionally, the orchard manager would have to act as translator, perhaps disclosing only the information he deemed important or necessary.**

## Analysis

### *Tentative tracks*

May 2006

**Having obtained Agrexco's (responsible for 70% of all avocados exported from Israel according to company data) e-mail address from their company website, I instigate correspondence. I am soon referred to a series of people and to each one I outline my proposal. Eventually I get my man. The man in the (avocado) know. His name is Eitan Zvi, and his role is category manager for, among other things, the avocado!**

#### Text Box 4

**FROM: Freddie Abrahams  
TO: Eitan Zvi**

**Tuesday 16 May 2006**

Dear Mr Zvi,

I was advised to contact you by your colleague Terry Bryant. My name is Freddie Abrahams and I am a second year undergraduate reading Geography at Birmingham University.

To explain my reason for writing to you: I am formulating plans for the research of my dissertation which will be submitted in my final year (2007). For this, I will be looking at the interconnected nature of production, distribution and consumption of the Avocado Pear. I am well aware that your organisation is a major player in this field. As it happens, I do (perhaps oddly!) have a particular personal fondness for eating the fruit in question and hence my topic selection. Without wishing to bore you with the intricacies of my proposed study, I have enclosed the abstract of my proposal in the attached file.

Having seen this, your colleague Mr. Bryant felt that you would be the best person to help me. I am hoping you (and Agrexco?) may be able to point me in the right direction in terms of contacts, resources etc out in Israel.

My university term ends in mid-June, and I would be able to go to Israel any time between then and the end of September.

I do hope you can help me and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely  
Freddie Abrahams

**Having made the journey from my home in London to Agrexco's UK headquarters, in Hayes, on the outskirts of the capital, I meet Mr. Zvi. He describes his role, his typical daily schedule, the people he deals with, but most crucially of all he gives me a name. A contact. *The* contact. Someone actually out there, in Israel! I leave the premises with a small white card bearing the e-mail address of one Gabi Naamani. My big hope of a helping hand in Israel. My only hope...so far. So I got writing...**

**Text Box 5**

**FROM: Freddie Abrahams**  
**TO: Gabi Naamani**

**Wednesday 21 June 2006**

Dear Mr.Naamani,

I was advised to contact you by Eitan Zvi after a recent meeting with him in Agrexco's London offices.

To explain my reason for writing to you: I am a university student soon to enter my third year. The subject of my final year dissertation is the Avocado Pear - the interconnected nature of its production, distribution and consumption....

.....  
.....  
.....

I do hope you can help me and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Freddie Abrahams

**FROM: Gabi Naamani**  
**TO: Freddie Abrahams**

**Monday 26 June 2006**

Dear Freddie,

If I understood you correctly, you would like to follow the Avocado route from the orchards to the shelves.

You are most welcome to visit Israel for this purpose.

The best time is mid September when we are starting to pick the new crop.

Let's be in contact near this period in order to settle the details.

Regards,  
Gabi Naamani

**FROM: Gabi Naamani**  
**TO: Freddie Abrahams**

**Tuesday 3 July 2006**

Freddie,

Please come to our office on Monday 25.9 (on your free time between 09:00-12:00): Ha'hashmonaim St. 121, Tel-Aviv.

I'm in the 2nd floor.

Schedule for the day and arrangements for the other days will be done later.

Regards

Gabi Naamani

## ***Artillery and anxieties***

June – July 2006

Media reports of a conflict between Israel in Palestine in Gaza. Kidnappings! Gunfire! Tanks on the Gaza strip. Explosions! Missiles!...

...Israel and Lebanon enter military conflict. Air strikes and artillery! Rockets and mortars!

**The conflict created a storm of doubt in my mind about the feasibility of my intended trip. How could I even contemplate going over to Israel when such hostilities were occurring? Would I be in danger? Certainly the authorities thought so. I began to doubt whether I could go through with it.**

**I was impatient. I was itching to get this journey under way but I found myself at a crossroads. It was mid July and missiles littered the skies over the very land I was intending to travel to. The start of the new avocado picking season was only a few weeks away. All those e-mails, all that time. Wasted? I gambled. I booked a flight for mid September, hoping all the hostilities would be over by then. And so my hopes rested with leaders of nations at conflict. The weeks went by and my fingers were remained crossed...**

August 2006

United Nations (UN) broker ceasefire. Conflict formally ends on 8<sup>th</sup> September when Israel lift naval blockade off Lebanon, less than a week before I am due to fly out. The relief! **Even if not filled with confidence, I felt I could go ahead with the trip. Indeed, I was determined I would.**

## ***On the road***

September 2006

Central Bus Station. Jaffa Road. Jerusalem, Israel

**Horns honk, cranes crane, motorists menace. The wheels roll on and the creamy white stone of Jerusalem deserts me. I'm on my way. Green hills adorn the surrounding landscape. Lush valleys permeate. Young men, seemingly more tender in years than even I, sit stiffly in the surrounding seats, bespectacled and studious. On their laps rest heavy-looking, black, steel machine guns, a sinister juxtaposition to their juvenescence and also a reminder of my previous anxieties about coming here. Welcome aboard Coach # 17 - Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. Here I go, venturing forth to Tel-Aviv and a few more crucial steps on the path to my precious avocados. Come join me, follow me, following.**

Office of Gabi Naamani. Floor 2, Carmel House, Tel Aviv, Israel.

**My contact. *The* contact. Finally. After three months of correspondence we meet. Mr.Naamani is my key gatekeeper in Israel. As Agrexco's avocado 'product manager' he is responsible for the fruit from beginning to end – “from field to shelf...in terms of logistics” as he puts it. He has to know a lot. Many different**

people in different places, “many things more than just how to market and sell the fruit.”

*...I need to know all the people! who make it....who grow it...I am the co-ordinator. I must co-ordinate a lot of systems, growers and buyers. When there are problems I am the one who needs to find solutions. For example, over and under production of the avocado. I must do certain actions at such times.*

**Figure 4: Carmel House, Ha’hashmonaim Street, Tel Aviv, Israel.**

Mr.Naamani is therefore a crucial part of the avocado’s commodity circuit – he has to provide the growers with feedback from the buyers – pander to their needs. *My needs. Our needs.*

Agrexco is a transnational corporation. It has ‘branches’ in nine different Western European countries. These branches have to be receptive to each country’s individual culture, economy, demographic situation and consumption patterns. Mr.Naamani cites the example of persimmons in Germany. Traditionally the fruit had no market there, yet the influx of Turkish migrants has sparked a significant demand for it. Agrexco do send containers elsewhere but Western Europe is, by quite some distance, their main market. Accordingly, that is where the majority of their products are destined for.

Gabi states that Agrexco merely provide “marketing services” to the growers, *their* “customers” and therefore they never actually *own* any of the avocados. In Gabi’s eyes: “Agrexco never actually own the product, (we) simply ensure a price for the grower whose product we sell.” Every Thursday, Gabi sends the growers a “minimum advanced price” with the condition that if Agrexco get offered more money for the avocados by the supermarkets (such as Sainsbury’s or Tesco), the growers will receive this surplus. If it so happens Agrexco receive a lower price than they had predicted, the grower is not affected.

New avocado plantations are on the rise, with the avocado industry growing markedly since 2000. Most kibbutzim are now ‘run like businesses’, in contrast to the past where little financial administration existed. The industry in Israel is also unique, as Gabi told me:

*...in contrast to other fruit and vegetables in Israel which are mostly run by private companies, 90% of the avocados exported in Israel are grown in Kibbutzim like the ones you will see. The remaining 10% come from private enterprise.*

#### **Kibbutz Magaan Michael, Zichron Yaakov, Israel.**

“Sorry, I got a bit delayed. Hello, you must be Freddie. I am Sha’char, nice to meet you” he calls out from the seat of his well-worn utility vehicle. This is Shachar Sha’ched, avocado manager at Israel’s largest kibbutz, Magaan Michael, population 1,200. My ire at having cut short breakfast only to loiter aimlessly for 36 minutes waiting instantly dispelled by the man’s impeccable

charm and earnest manner. I hop into the truck and we roll up the dusty tracks towards my first avocado orchard. A myriad of thoughts cascade through my mind – all the anxieties, all the doubts I had held previously would soon be dispelled. I was doing this for real! Following the thing. My thing! Going to its home, to the trees, to branches from which it hangs.

**Figure 5: My first avocado tree**

We head off down the road for a couple of minutes or so and pass a bare patch soon to be the site of a new avocado plantation. Shachar explains how the patch has replaced a former banana tree field:

*With bananas, you need much labour and the distribution is limited...only for domestic market. Also, there are more difficulties to sell it...when there is problems with the governments, it is difficult to sell across the border.*

A few minutes later Shachar slows down, takes a left. Then a right. And we arrive. The orchard. Here they dangle. Off tall trees, arranged in neat rows in a vast, open field. In the foreground, a crane navigates its way up and down the rows of trees with its operator stretching to prize those avocados that are ready for the next stage in their lives. Man and machine, in perfect harmony.

**Figure 6: Marquez, a Mexican, operates the crane**

In the increasingly capitalist society in which you and I live, a feature of industrialisation has been the displacement of man with machine. With advances in technology, manual labour has become increasingly superfluous (LeHeron, 1993). Interestingly though, the development of technology is not cutting numbers of jobs in the avocado industry in this region of Israel. Quite the opposite in fact. A new experiment is being tested out here (and in a “few other kibbutzim”) involving new technology which trims the tree canopies, keeping them at constantly low heights. As Shachar confirms, this means cranes do not have to be used.

*...we do not need to use the machines any more...they go wrong so people are better...they do not get broken (laughs). If the experiment goes well we do not need the cranes... I will have to get more people to pick...*

This new scheme also does away with the notion that ‘labour-saving innovations by agribusiness mean that numbers employed are reduced, with many becoming de-skilled, part-time or seasonal’ (Ilbery & Bowler, 1996). However, it is conceivable that potential environmental degradation caused by such agricultural practices render the process unsustainable.

Whether collected on cranes or on foot, the avocados are put in big crates that sit at the end of each row. When all the avocados have been picked for the day, the crates are gathered together at the entrance of the orchard ready. Later in the day they are hauled onto a large truck destined for the region’s packing house.

**Figure 7: Destined for the packing house**

Having entered the orchard, stooped beneath the trees, gazed up at the branches, now I wanted to find the picker. On Maagan Michael, the majority of workers are young, foreign students who have come to Israel for five to six months to learn Hebrew at the 'Ulpan', the intensive language school at the kibbutz.

Sha'char: *"Mornings they work in the fields and in the afternoon when it is too hot, they do their studies."*

Freddie: *"And where are they from? The pickers?"*

Sha'char: *"I have one from Australia, one South Africa and two come from Mexico."*

**To think: An avocado, purchased in my local Sainsbury's in Selly Oak, Birmingham could have been picked by an Australian or a Latino in Israel? Different people. Different places. Connected.**

*"Mate! I'm dying for a s\*\*t, there's no f\*\*king toilet paper!"*

**Welcome Tim. A 26 year old from Mosman, Sydney, Australia. We pick him up en route to the canteen for the morning pit stop. Tim is your, or rather my, stereotypical 'Aussie'. Heavily built, tattooed shoulders, thick beefy forearms, sandals and all. Had he a can of beer I would have sworn this was the desolate Australian outback, not a dusty field on the Mediterranean coast.**

**Figure 8: Australian Tim rummages through the bushes**

**Tim is engaging. Amiable. Relaxed. As I said, he's Australian.**

Freddie: *"How long have you been here?"*

Tim: *"aww...bout 5 months now. Yeah, it's pretty good."*

Freddie: *"What brought you here? It's pretty random, bumping into an Australian picking avocados in Israel isn't it?"*

Tim: *"I dunno mate, I study at the Ulpan, it's the school here. Learning Hebrew before I go into the (Israeli) army next year."*

Freddie: *"Oh ok, so you're Jewish then?"*

Tim: *"Yeah mate, not like big into it but yeah, I'm Jewish. I was 25 when I came over here. I've done Europe and all that lot. I just fancied doing something a bit different. Doing something a bit different with my life, something worthwhile."*

**The canteen. Tim peels off from Shachar and I, leaving the two of us to sip strong black coffee which allows me to proceed with another informal interview. It transpires Shachar has visited England before. Once, in January 2006. To Birmingham no less, to visit the headquarters of *Minor, Weir and Willis*, a packer and distributor of fruit. The middlemen, or link, between Agrexco and the supermarkets where we buy our avocados. He did not pay for the trip. That was taken care of by Agrexco. It was their way of keeping him in touch with the *customer*, their way of keeping him *connected*. On the trip he heard how supermarkets were "after something different...to stay ahead of the competition." To meet customer demands. *Our* demands.**

**Jumping back into the truck I slip in a question about war, specifically about its impact on his avocados. However, apparently “war is nothing here”, particularly as in June and July (when the most recent conflict occurred) picking had not yet begun for the new season. Furthermore, the kibbutz, and the entire region for that matter, was out of the way of the conflict zones.**

**We enter another orchard. As we drive around its perimeter my adrenalin levels soar! A group of headscarved Arab women, baskets in hand, picking avocados along the lines of low cut trees. “This is one of the experiment fields...you see, no machines!”**

**Figure 9: Female Arab pickers**

Freddie: *“These women are Arabs yes? They work for you?”*

Sha’char: *“Yes, why not. These women may work from erm...now, the start (of the picking season) to perhaps May, when we finish. They are from Faradis...it is a village close (to the kibbutz)...an Arab village.”*

Nature dictates the length of the avocado’s growing season yet can be viewed as little more than a material landscape formed by the process of production and consumption (Raven, 2000). This element of Nature-society geography illustrates how the human and biophysical worlds interact and affect one another and how environments shape and are shaped by human and non-human processes (Dickens, 2004). Such interactions include not only the manner in which humans impact nature, but also the way in which nature affects society by enabling or constraining economic activity, demographic mobility, and cultural relationship exchanges (Cole, 1992). Nature-Society studies are of growing importance to the discipline given the widespread concerns that the human species is now transforming natural systems on a global scale through climate change, tropical deforestation, desertification, the pollution of our oceans, and urban sprawl.

**Shachar’s office**

**This small makeshift corrugated steel hut is located in the corner of the same plot of land where we encounter the female Arab pickers. As we make our way inside, my host receives a call on his mobile phone which serves to occupy his attention. I take advantage of the lull in activity and approach the women who are now a couple of hundred metres away outside. As I get nearer, I am greeted by wide smiles all round. “Hello” I chirp. They smile sweetly back. Then, nothing. Not a word of English between the five of them. They glance back and forth at one other then at me. What stories did they have to tell? I could only return their smiles, trying hard to conceal my feelings of disappointment. I turned around and trudged back to the office with thoughts of ‘what ifs’ reverberating in my mind.**

Back at the office. Shachar still on the phone. Amongst the piles of dog-eared papers attached to the notice board appears a familiar logo. That of Tesco. It is the company’s certificate of conformity that has been awarded to Shachar and his team. Next to this hangs the EUREGAP (‘The global partnership for safe and sustainable agriculture’) certificate. Another adherence to Western demands. This ‘certificate of

conformity' recognises adherence to standards and procedures for the development of good agricultural practice (GAP). More links. More *connections*.

**Figure 10: Office of Shachar Sha'ched, Maagan Michael, Granot, Israel.**

**Figure 11: EUREPGAP® and Tesco certificates adorn the office noticeboard**

### **Ronnie, Kibbutz Nasholim, Haifa, Israel**

**Meet Ronnie, a stocky, heavily built man, in his 50s, manager of the neighbouring but far smaller Kibbutz Nasholim. He tells me he and Shachar are "co-operative, not competitive... (we) share information."**

The first orchard he takes me to has something of a story behind it. It sits on land which, until the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, was Arab occupied:

*Arabs in some places of Israel believe that the Jews threw them off this land, after the (19) '48. This is not correct...the Jews knew that the Arabs would say bad things if they took the land, so they did not want to take it. But later, the government gave them the land. The 'post Holocaust' Jews and the Jews who had been thrown out of Morocco, Syria, moved in to live here...on this land of kibbutz Nasholim. But you know, there are Arabs in Gaza who think this land is rightfully theirs...when you ask them where they're from, they say 'here', this land, not the place they sleep at night.*

**Yet Ronnie believes, in general, Arabs in Israel are happy:**

*...they feel safer. Yes, they think that the Jews get more from the state but they are happy. This morning, you see I speak with Arabs. I have Arab friends. I will take you to Faradis and you will see, there is no trouble. Ok, you watch CNN (Cable News Network) and you see 'bang bang bang!' You see a story. They sell you a story. It is not always this way.*

**He also provides his own insight into Arab culture and what he considers to be the social problems it faces. He tells me of an Arab who has been working for him for 15 years yet throughout this time his wife has remained at home.**

*...this is always the way with Arabs...the man at work, the wife at home...how can there be progress? There must be two peoples working if the child should go to university.*

## **Labour Transition**

**Avocados need hands. To pick them.**

**“The workforce in agriculture in this country is very old...it is becoming more old”, Ronnie tells me. A theme which I hear again and again during the course of my stay. The ageing workforce has led to a growing dependency on migrant workers. As Moti Ben Tal, a 56 year old avocado orchard manager at Kibbutz Maanit, a small 60 ha kibbutz, tells me:**

*...young people move away...things will change a lot in the next 15 to 20 years...become more like a business. The government, they try many things...but even if I offer of a (Israeli) man 30-40% more, they still do not want to come. Now we are dependent on people from outside Israel.*

**Figure 12: Ethiopians Meles Seyum and Newaya Marian (left) sweep the floor of the Granot packing house while Nirut Suksumkit (right) from Si Racha, Thailand picks avocados at Kibbutz Nasholim, Granot.**

Indeed, Near (1997: 357) describes ‘a deep sense of unease’ within Israel at the demographic statistics which reveal how ‘an un-precedented number of kibbutz-born youth were not returning to the kibbutzim after their army service’. He puts this down to ‘the crisis of the younger generation’ which ‘resulted in great part from the widespread lack of faith in values of the kibbutz or in its economic future which came to the surface in the mid-1980s’.

**Ronnie reveals a deeply sentimental side when reflecting on how the last ten years have seen his kibbutz change into what increasingly looks like a business, reflected by the steady loss of student workers. Decline in this form of employee started when issues about efficiency arose. He reflects passionately, slipping into a reverie about “...young people, young girls...” of times past. He then provides an insight into the way kibbutzim have enlightened people’s ideas about other cultures and nationalities:**

*In the past, people from the kibbutz (Kibbutz Nasholim) didn’t want young people, students from Germany coming to work on the farm because of the history...but then they realised that they should encourage them to come...so they could see for themselves that Jews are good people and not like their parent’s generation saw them.*

Certainly Krausz (1983: 1) is convinced of the value of kibbutzim in terms of enlightening people’s ideas about the world they live in: ‘the kibbutz is recognized throughout the world as an important laboratory for the investigation of problems and issues of perennial concern to the social sciences.’

Ronnie believes the same principles could be applied now, with the Arab population to ease hostility between “Jews and Arabs”, “Israelis and Palestinians”:

*There is no trouble here. No difficulties. But in other parts, we should welcome Arabs so they can see we are not all stubborn like the politicians, that we are just humans who want to live our lives in peace.*

We part ways shortly after 5pm. He hands me a large, bulging sack of avocados that he and one of his staff had earlier gathered up for me. I slip back to my bunk in the kibbutz with his nostalgic, romantic thoughts swimming through my brain.

### **Tales from the Packing House**

Once the avocados have been picked, put into crates and transported they arrive here. Granot Packing House.

**Figure 13: Map to show location and catchment area of Grenot Packing House**

**Figure 14: Granot Avocado Packing House, Granot**

A labyrinth of conveyor belts, wires, pipes, shoots. 42% of the country's avocados pass through here (Naamani, 2006), with the region's other packing houses accounting for another 24% (Sha'ched, 2006). Here the avocados are washed, waxed, sorted and packed up in boxes, destined for distant shores. The facility also advises farmers on the latest developments, growing techniques and packaging procedures, all in an effort to maximise production levels. Essentially, the facility acts as the ‘middle-man’ between the farmers and Agrexco and is one of the largest and most sophisticated packing houses in Israel.

**Figure 15: The labyrinth of conveyor belts**

A co-operative owned by approximately 40 kibbutzim, the Granot packing house has, since 2001, the been running a scheme whereby it invests money in kibbutzim, essentially renting a portion of their land for a period of time (15 years). In this period they take responsibility for planting and growing the avocados, with profits split 50:50 between kibbutz and Granot. After this period of time, both plants and profits are returned to the kibbutz for good. Investment within a socialist practice. Change is occurring....

I am immediately struck by the number of women around. According to Mr.Ettinger, the floor manager of the operation, there are currently 40-50 women working on the lines, with up to 100 employed in the height of the season.

**Figure 16: Female employees tend the conveyor belts checking for quality**

||

**Figure 17: Female employees sort the avocados according to size**

The mix of ethnicities also strikes me. Ashenafi, an Ethiopian, sweeps the floor around the pallet making machine while Seksan, a Thai, sporting a faded dark green Carmel Agrexco baseball cap, operates one of the fleet of forklift trucks.

As I make my way around the complex, I meet Ehud, the computer control systems manager. He controls the speed of the conveyor belts that move the avocados and handles the numerical data as they move through the facility. He then puts this on the packing house's website.

A siren! The conveyor belt grinds to a halt at 12.30pm. Lunch. It transpires, due to the infancy of this, the new, season there is an insufficient amount of avocados today so the workers, who will receive a full day's pay, are told to come back tomorrow.

After eating, Ehud's offers to take me wherever I wish, so I ask to see where he lives - Kibbutz Bahan, half an hour's drive away. Earlier he had mentioned that avocados were grown here also, though what intrigued me was the fact that the kibbutz, despite exporting avocados to Europe, did not currently use Granot's facility.

### **Kibbutz Bahan, Emek Hefer**

For each and every one of his 48 years (bar the compulsory years spent on military service) this has been Ehud's home. Here the kibbutz operates its own private packing house, a minute version of Granot's. Microscopic even.

It has one single conveyor belt. Granot has eight. Ehud tells me that it processes "as many avocados in a year that Granot does in a day." The staff here are unmistakably different both in number and ethnicity. Taking photos I feel very wary of offending the Arab women workers. They pack the avocados into pallets, their headscarves a stark contrast to the mandatory white fishnet hats worn by the women at Granot. Eidor, the Israeli floor-manager, whose role it is to supervise the day-to-day running of the operation explains that his manager who is an Arab picks his staff from the women in the nearby (Arab) village in which he lives. All arrive every morning and leave every afternoon in the same mini-bus.

**Figure 18: The packing house at Bahan and its single conveyor belt**

The stickers on the avocados read 'Guri' where previously I had only seen 'Agrexco'. The kibbutz used to use Granot as their packing house until five years ago, when financial circumstances made this untenable. As a result, the kibbutz decided to build their own facility. They sought out a man who had experience in building packing houses and it turned out he was looking for a new venture...Bahan proved to be it. M&S, who "pay very well but have very strict procedures", once bought their avocados from here. Until recently that is. In

February 2006, visiting companies (he mentions “Tesco, M&S, maybe one other”) were unimpressed with the facility’s “dirty” appearance. “They are not interested in working with us until we build a bigger and better facility”, Eidor tells me.

There are Thais picking in the field here. They had been doing likewise in Magaan Michael and Nasholim too. According to Gabi, there are “almost 19,000 who work in Israeli agriculture”. These people, according to Moti Ben Tal, are “wonderful, dedicated, very honest.” Indeed, Shachar lauded praise on them: “they are vital...without them you would not have your avocado.” Every single kibbutz manager I spoke to regarded them as industrious, reliable and perhaps most significantly, “loyal” workers. Apparently, government regulations allow them to stay and work in Israel for a maximum of five years. “They are the best”, Ronnie tells me. Amir Ashkenazi of Kibbutz Shefayim sees them as “...very intelligent and very hard working, work-aholics...they want to work every hour available, even Saturday!”, Saturday being the Sabbath, a holy day and traditionally a day of rest among Jews and in Israel.

One late evening in the one bar on Shefayim I got the chance to approach a group of four Thai men, congregated around the pool table. Aged between 25 and 35, their English was limited. One, Tana Suwan, spoke at best broken English, but I could decipher his words. At the end of a typical day picking avocados he earns extra money tending the gardens of residents of the kibbutz. A typical Saturday might involve milking cows on the kibbutz’s dairy at 4am, after which he picks avocados from 6am until 2pm with some more milking again at 7pm. The vast majority of the money he earns is sent home to Thailand “for family”. Unlike many of the other workers, the Thais are keen to work during the afternoon – an unbearably hot time of the day for most. With such a schedule one might suspect elements exploitation but it doesn’t seem so here. The smiles from the four men beam out at me: genuine and sincere. “They earn the same (salary) as Israelis with all the same social benefits” Amir later informs me. The Thais pay only a ‘symbolic amount’ for renting a house in the kibbutz, “about 100 Shekles per month” (the equivalent to about £12). It also transpires that the government regularly check their living conditions to make sure that what they are provided with is up to certain standards.

Near (1997: 355) outlines how the economic system in Israel is ‘increasingly fragmented, with a growing number of professionals working outside the kibbutz, and little compunction about employing outside workers’. Furthermore, my findings would support Near’s (1997: 357) assertion that: ‘In little more than ten years the kibbutz movement has developed from a group of centralized and more or less similar federations to a loose pluralistic association of communities.

### Thieves

“The thieves...the Arabs steal tools and tractors!”

Moti, another farmer operates with Agrexco, opens up a window onto the conflicts he encounters with local Arabs. The thieves he refers to come from “surrounding Arab villages” and have links with drugs. He tells me how years ago fences around his avocado fields did not exist:

*...there was no requirement for them...but now it is sad...just to see an Arab, he may be innocent, but if he is near to the farm we become suspicious...it is not a good feeling...everything closed...not nice.*

He cites the example of an occasion two years ago in which a tractor was left alone in the avocado field we are stood in. Twenty minutes or so later, it had been stolen. Now everything has to be locked up. The ugly, electric fence that surrounds us stops similar things happening again.

## Set for sail

### Port of Ashdod

The warm air of the Mediterranean. Fresh. Like my avocados. Destined for Marseille, France. Today is Thursday 28 September and the very first day of avocado exports for the 2006/2007 season. Agrexco charter two ships. Vast, imposing vessels capable of transporting 4,200 tonnes of produce each. They operate on a cyclical schedule. As one ship leaves here on a Thursday to arrive at Marseille on the following Monday, the other departs Marseille and makes its way back to Ashdod, via Valencia in Spain and Haifa which is further North up the Israeli coast. Once the outgoing ship reaches Marseille, the avocados are unloaded and trucks then distribute them to places all over Europe, as far North as Scandanavia. I am taken around Agrexco's depot by Mordechai, its manager. He informs me how the port's location, close to Israel's main transport arteries means the possibility of developing new routes in the future should prove very beneficial for his company. The port is also situated near the industrial and production centres of the country, as well as to Tel Aviv, the commercial centre. He also leaves a rather dark note when he tells me of the terrorist suicide bomb at the port in March 2004 which killed ten people. This no doubt explains the stringent 45 minute security check I, as a visitor, have to endure en route from the depot to the ship itself. Once there, he passes me over to Eli, Agrexco's "shipping coordinator" who guides me around the vessel's cooling chambers, and talks me through the various intricacies of the ship's design. For example, the deliberately high ceilings which allow greater quantities of pallets to be stacked on board. Agrexco don't own these ships. No, these are the property of Ofer Brothers, a vast Israeli shipping company. More links, more nodes, more connections.

Eli, responsible for the fruit from the time it reaches the depot to the time it is unloaded off the ship in Marseille is deeply passionate about his work. He tells me how the physical process of transporting food is "easy", but to maintain its-shelf life is the challenge. There is no mistaking the steely intensity in his eyes when he tells me "this is food...people eat it!" such is the pride with which he invests in his work.

Figure 19: The Port of Ashdod (left) and Agrexco's chartered ship (right)

And away my avocados float...

### **Back home**

Once home, it was time to piece together the missing elements of the avocado's commodity circuit. Before I left Israel I had acquired the business card of Matthew Glancy from Gabi at Agrexco's headquarters in Tel Aviv. "He's very important for us" Gabi told me at the time.

**Figure 20: The business card of Matthew Glancy**

Mr. Glancy, a Scot, is a category manager, responsible for the avocado, at *Minor, Weir and Willis*, an independent produce company. Based in of all places, Birmingham. Perry Barr to be precise. Only minutes away from the avocado barren expanses that inspired this journey in the first place. I made short trip to meet him one morning soon after I returned from Israel.

**Figure 21: Minor, Weir and Willis headquarters, Perry Barr, Birmingham**

Freddie: "Mr. Glancy, what is the function of your company in terms of avocados?"  
Mr. Glancy: "We pack and distribute them. They get delivered to us here by lorries and we pack them up, 3-packs, 4-packs, singles, whatever, and then send them on to the supermarkets."  
Freddie: "Which ones, like, say, for example, the Sainsbury's in Selly Oak?"  
Mr. Glancy: "Ay, yeah and a bit further than that (laughs). We're in a prime position here, centre of the country. It's an ideal location; we send fruit and veg all over the country, England and Scotland"  
Freddie: "So what's the route of the avocados once they come off at Marseille? I thought they get unloaded at Marseille and come by truck here"  
Mr. Glancy: "Not for this place. The avocados get to Marseille but they're unloaded on to other ships for us. They come into us at the ports over here"  
Freddie: "Over here? Ports in England?"  
Mr. Glancy: "Aye, over here, Tilbury, Sheerness"  
Freddie: "And what happens when they come here?"  
Mr. Glancy: "We usually have to ripen them. So we have chambers. They circulate hot air and condition the avocados so they're ripe by the time the customer buys it, or a few days later. Then we package 'em up, or put them into display trays...like the ones you see in Tesco and Sainsbury's."  
Freddie: "And apart from Israel, where else do you get them from?"  
Mr. Glancy: "Wherever...Chile, Peru, California, South Africa. Depends on the time of year where I source them. Wherever I need to go to meet the client's demands."  
Freddie: "And is it just supermarkets you deliver to?"  
Mr. Glancy: "we do a bit to Greencore. Greencore and Solway Foods. They're sandwich makers, you know, like Pret (Pret A Manger). They make sandwiches for them. M&S too, a few others as well...in fact, I think they're (Greencore) probably the biggest sandwich makers in the UK"

**Gosh, a lot of information. A lot of places. And more tangents – not just in their natural state on supermarket shelves, but contained within ready made**

**sandwiches. Insulated by tomatoes and lettuce. Imagine the myriad tales a sandwich could tell...**

**As the interview draws to a close, I ask Mr. Glancy if he had ever heard anything about the protest at Agrexco back in 2004. He hadn't. I asked him if he knew anything about disputes over land on which avocados are grown, or any other fruit and veg for that matter:**

*...not really...as I say, we get the avocados in, we package 'em up and move them on to the supermarkets. At the end of the day our clients are concerned about three things: availability, quality, and service. That's the bottom line.*

The consumer's world attempts to create the impression that it has little or no connection to the production cycle and its places. It hides or disguises these extremely important connections' (Sack, 1993: 22-3). Indeed,

*The distance food travels to get to our plates, and the sheer complexity of the food system, inevitably means that the biographies of the foods we eat are rather opaque to us.*

Cook, Crang and Thorpe, 1998: 164

And maybe that is *the* bottom line.

## Conclusion

*Dissertation supervisor's office. First morning of my final year.*

“Get writing” he says. So that’s what I did. That’s what I’ve done. Painted the picture, made *connections*. *Made sense of things*. The third and final stage of the study, having initially gained access and then lived among those involved. After all, this *has* all been about *connections* and indeed, ‘it matters which ones get made’ (Haraway, 1991). So that’s what I’ve done. Reattached lives to commodities. Lives of producers. Lives of consumers. And lives in between.

I had presumed this final discourse would be *it. The end. Over*. That I was *done*. Rewritten, revised and perhaps a touch sentimentalised. After all, I’d walked across the fields, down the orchards, and reached up for the branches. But recently something happened and perhaps something has proved to be out of my reach...

December 2006

Another afternoon in Birmingham. As bitterly cold as that day back in 2005 when this whole escapade began. Swap suburb for city centre. Leaflets distributed in the public thoroughfare:

Figure 22: Palestinian Solidarity Campaign’s leaflet

Surreal. Honestly. Surreal. Can you imagine it? I’d travelled over 2000 miles to hunt down my avocados and here they were in a West Midlands city centre, confronting me with the sort of issue that inspired this venture.

**‘Don’t buy Israeli apartheid’**

...screams the headline. The image: an orange, some dates...an *AVOCADO!* Clearly something is still going on. The movement not as latent as I had thought. Indeed, it confronts me. Stares at me. Through me. Eyes race across the text, sentences leap out and grab me by the jugular. Accusations abound - ‘lives destroyed’, ‘stolen land’, ‘racist systems’. From the moment this study began, I knew that my little avocados were more than just food, but never did I envisage them as a symbol of occupation!

Perhaps I was finding myself, as Thompson (1995: 233; cited in Thrift et al, 1997: 187) states:

*...not only to be observers of distant others and events, but also to be involved with them in some way...called on to form a view about and take a stand on, even to assume some responsibility for, issues and events which take place in distant parts of an interconnected world.*

Yet in my findings – not a stain, not even a single spec of such immorality. To find out more I can only listen to voices. Voices of those that accuse. See life through the eyes of other’s, just as you have seen life through mine.

*War on Want*, a global poverty action group regards Palestine as a country in the grip of a humanitarian catastrophe. The campaign's report *Profiting from the occupation* claims that 'Israel is tightening its noose around Palestinians living in the West Bank through the continued expansion of settlements'. Yet conflict between Israel and Palestine is nothing new. The two countries have been clashing with one another since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Conflicts such as this are a prime cause of poverty worldwide (*War on Want*, 2006). Chris Ormond of the *International Solidarity Movement*, a pro-Palestinian direct action group, sees a paradox though: that not everyone is made poorer by war. He regards western companies such as Agrexco as actively supporting Israel's occupation of Palestine and therefore complicit in the "violation of Palestinians' human rights". He brings up the issue of water. The intensive agro-industry which produces avocados requires considerable amounts of water and he sees the high consumption levels in settlements as particularly threatening to Palestinian residents. According to Lena Green, Palestinians are denied access to the irrigation water housed above them in cylindrical towers, and have to take tractor carts to the nearest wells they are permitted to use, often a distance of more than 20 kilometres.

Ormond, who has himself taken part in non-violent civil resistance to the occupation of Palestine told me:

*...all the big high street names are directly involved in these projects. You realise, they actually contribute directly to the misery of Palestinian people... this is going to keep going on for years until something is done.*

He is referring to British supermarkets such as Tesco, Waitrose and Sainsbury's who, he claims, sell produce grown in settlements that are illegal under international law. In spite of this, these supermarkets sell their avocados under the label of 'Made in Israel', concealing the fact that they are actually produce of territories outside of Israel's boundaries. This means that an avocado grown in Palestine is likely to appear as 'produce of Israel' when presented to you and I on the shelf of a British supermarket.

**Figure 22: Carmel Agrexco's company logo (left). Avocado packaging labels from two major British supermarkets (centre and right).**

The *Palestinian Solidarity Campaign's* chief grievance with Agrexco is that the revenue they generate from exporting avocados could and should go to Palestinians. It is this export revenue which, according to the group, is so important to the people of Palestine's economic sustainability.

Green (2006) sees the difference in lifestyles between those in the settlements and those in the Palestinian communities as "part of the global domination of the all-powerful force of capital and its warriors, the transnational corporations" rather than "one of Jews against Muslims, or Islam against the West". Because of this, she considers that "indigenous people, who live sustainably, primarily from their direct environment, are under attack all over the world". Perhaps then, the cost of my avocados is far higher than I have ever imagined. Far higher than any number of coins or bank notes could cover. A cost found in the suffering of people.

Production-focused theorists, influenced by the works of Marx, see domination and power struggles as the product of the actions of capitalists who seek to extract surplus value by exploiting workers (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002). Marx insists that political power is found in the sphere of production only. The power to shape society is therefore dependant on control over the sphere of production and the capacity to transform the relationships between worker and capitalist in the immediate labour process' (Goodman and DuPuis, 2002: 6)

**But I don't know do I? I can't be certain can I? These are only other people's views. The leaflet urges against the purchase of Israeli produce. All of it. Particularly my dear avocados. The impression it gives is that all Israeli produce and therefore all avocados are the product of immoral action. This isn't true though. The land on which I ventured was responsible for 66% of the avocados exported from Israel (Naamani, 2006). On this same land I did not see or hear of a single gun, a drop of blood, or even a single tear. No fear existed here. No suffering. And yet this leaflet is asking me to boycott ALL Israeli produce because perhaps, at the very most, a third of Israeli avocados are produced out of immoral activity. And so if you and I, and your friends and my friends and everyone else looked at these leaflets and took the information at face value, accepted it and then acted on it, what would happen? What of the lives of the innocent, moral, wonderful individuals that showered me with kindness? Why should these people's livelihoods suffer because of the actions of others?**

So there's the 'conclusion' for you. Not very tidy is it. Not very 'finished'. A bit messy? Yes. Probably. That's intentional. I've tried to keep things open even after you read my last words. So that you realise that these problems are still very much alive. But have I done enough? Did I go far enough? To lift that 'veil'. So that you can see more clearly? I wrote this story because I wanted to find something out, like Laurel Richardson (2000, 924): 'to learn something that I did not know before I wrote'. And I did. I hope it has raised a few questions, opened up a few spaces for you to occupy your thoughts with. Though perhaps it will take someone braver, more intrepid than I to get to the heart of the matter.

It's about time to go. My thoughts are turning to slicing then scattering slivers of avocado. Tossing them amongst the tomatoes, the olives, the lettuce. Admiring the kaleidoscope of colours. The countries colliding. In a bowl. On a kitchen top. In a student dig. In Birmingham. Maybe you don't even like avocados; maybe you've never even tried one. Maybe you never will. Or maybe you have and are indifferent. That's not really the point, but perhaps now you see how innocent-looking fruits and vegetables, such as my avocado contain more than vitamins or chemical compounds. They have stories wrapped up in them and people who can tell them and can perhaps shed a lot more light on the world than you or I had ever previously thought possible.

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