



*“Slavery hasn’t ended,  
it has just become modernized”*

## **Border Imperialism and the Lived Realities of Migrant Farmworkers in British Columbia, Canada**

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### **Abstract**

Border imperialism is a powerful framework for understanding the ways that colonial states manage borders in order to restrict movement of migrants and secure neoliberal economic interests. The present commentary, based on research carried out in British Columbia, Canada, utilizes ethnographic data to highlight the impacts of border imperialism on the everyday lives of temporary migrant farmworkers. First, I discuss how Mexican and Caribbean migrants’ lives are impacted by displacement from farms in their ‘home’ countries. Next, I provide an overview of Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program and argue that it (along with other circular migration schemes) is a powerful weapon of border imperialism designed to construct migrant precarity and uphold deeply-held notions of “Canadianness.” Finally, I discuss the racialization and criminalization of migrant farm workers and present workers’ testimonials to demonstrate how these processes result in migrants’ exclusion from the nation-state and local communities. Ultimately, I argue that scholars and activists struggling for migrant justice must center the demands of workers in their activism.

## **Keywords**

migrant labour; racial segregation; criminalization; Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP); border imperialism; British Columbia (Canada)

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## **Border Imperialism and Temporary Foreign Migrants**

Border imperialism, as articulated by Walia (2013), is a broad analytical framework that identifies the processes colonial states employ to manage borders, restrict migration, produce labor precarity, and secure their own economic interests and those of multinational corporations. It is a useful theoretical tool when seeking to understand the global connections between neo-liberal economic policies, the dispossession and displacement of poor (often Indigenous) peoples, and the securitization of borders against migrants (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013; Springer, 2015; Wilson, 2017). It is also useful in making sense of the everyday lived experiences of migrant farmworkers in Canada whose lives are shaped by its forces.

Many of the elements of border imperialism as described by Walia (displacement, racialization, criminalization, precarious labour conditions) were themes that also arose in my discussions with migrant men and women in the Okanagan. Using border imperialism as a lens forces us to understand these experiences not as separate processes, nor as only local problems, but as integral parts of a much larger global capitalist project. As activists and scholars, it is imperative that we recognize the connections between people's subjective experiences and the larger, transnational forces that structure them. Without making this connection explicit, we risk viewing abuses faced by migrants as ultimately problems with national immigration or labour policies that therefore must have national solutions.

On the other hand, we must recognize that the links between the local and the global are incredibly complex. While tempting to view the relationship as unidirectional, with global processes trickling down to impact local experiences, the relationship is much messier, as others have demonstrated (Tsing, 2005; Inda and Rosaldo, 2007; Sassen, 2004). For example, sociologist, Saskia Sassen (2004) has argued that what occurs at the local level may in fact be constitutive of the global, for example local political actors and struggles contributing to the creation of global politics and subjectivities. My own work has examined this dynamic in relation to migrant women's struggles for reproductive justice in the Okanagan (Cohen and Caxaj, forthcoming).

Like border imperialism, other frameworks have examined the connection between unfree, racialized labour and global economic forces. Black radicals, for example, have pointed to the deep connections between capitalism and racial hierarchies in the Americas and in Europe (see for example Davis, 1983; Robinson,

1983; Williams, 1966; Morrison, 2017; Rodney 1972; James, 1963). More recently, scholars have theorized that unfree labour, including migrant worker precarity, forms part of a continuum of unfreedom linked to the desire of nation states and employers to maintain a flexible and compliant workforce. Strauss and McGrath (2017) for example, argue

[T]he case of the TFWP (Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program) directly illustrates how unfreedom in the 'private economy' is not simply a matter of bad employers tricking and coercing unlucky workers: unfree labour relations are systematically institutionalized by state immigration policies. This occurs in the context of unfree labour relations associated with production regimes in the global South, as demonstrated in recent research on GPNs, but also in the production of precarious employment in the global North along a continuum of labour relations that shades into unfreedom.

In a similar way, Walia's articulation of border imperialism exposes the connections between the global capitalism and the systematic subjugation of workers based on a number of criteria including a worker's race, country of origin, or legal status. When examining Canada's TFWP, it becomes clear that the solution to workers' inequality cannot be found by "fixing the system". As Walia states, "when we look at it [the TFWP] through a lens of border imperialism, it's the perfect system, it's actually serving the purpose it's meant to, which is to serve neoliberalism and maintain racialized citizenship." The utility of the border imperialism lens, then, is to force us to look somewhere besides the state for a solution to oppression. I argue that where we need to look is to the migrant workers who are impacted by the forces of border imperialism on a daily basis.

In what follows, I present the stories of migrant farmworkers as they describe their experiences with displacement from their homes, family separation, migration, and life in Canada. I argue that these experiences may be better understood by applying the lens of border imperialism. I begin with a discussion of methodology, specifically how the data I present here was collected through a combination of activist work and formal and informal interviews with migrant men and women. I then move on to a discussion of global neoliberal economic practices that have displaced so many people from the Global South, making migration to Canada seem increasingly more appealing. An examination of Canada's agricultural migration program follows. In this last section, I present stories of migrants who describe enduring racial segregation, racist aggressions, and criminalization during their time in Canada. I argue that these experiences are not anomalies, but rather deeply-rooted processes which serve to mark migrants as 'foreigners' and deny them full legal entitlements and protections in Canada. I conclude by asking how the concept of border imperialism can help activists and scholars interested in fighting for migrant justice devise better strategies. Ultimately, I argue that while understanding the struggles of migrants through the

border imperialism lens demands that we look beyond the state for solutions (Walia 2012), we must not underestimate the positive impact that changes to state policies (specifically full legal status) could have on temporary migrants.

## Methods

I began building relationships with Mexican farmworkers on the unceded traditional territories of the Syilx and Secwepemc peoples<sup>1</sup> in 2010 when I returned to the region after being away for nearly a decade. In 2013, Elise Hjalmarson and I founded *Radical Action with Migrants in Agriculture* (or RAMA), an anti-colonial migrant<sup>2</sup> justice collective that supports migrant farm workers in their struggles for dignity, community, and justice. My work as a community organizer with RAMA has facilitated contact with hundreds of migrant workers from the Caribbean and Mexico who come to the Okanagan each year, the majority through Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). Along with other RAMA organizers, I have now spent four years building relationships of trust and friendship with these men and women and have become integrated into their social networks even while they are at home during the winter months. The stories of migrants included in this paper were collected as a part of an ethnographic research project that I began in 2014<sup>3</sup>. The project has involved hundreds of hours of ethnographic shadowing on farms as well as formal interviews with migrants about their lives in Canada. In total, I conducted 22 semi-guided, audio recorded interviews in either English or Spanish lasting from between 45 minutes and 2 hours. The present commentary, based on this work, presents the voices of these men and women and describes how the concept of border imperialism can aid in understanding their experiences and in shaping the strategies of activists who work alongside them.<sup>4</sup>

## Global Displacements

My family has always farmed, for generations. Corn, beans, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, we grew everything. My dad still grows a few things, but now it's only for the family. We can't make a living doing that anymore. In 2000 we had to sell the majority of

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<sup>1</sup> The Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, Canada

<sup>2</sup> Following De Genova's (2002:421) analytical practices, I favor the use of 'migrant' and 'migration' rather than 'immigrant' and 'immigration' in order to disrupt the "implicitly unilinear teleology of these categories (posited always from the standpoint of the migrant-receiving nation-state, in terms of outsiders coming in...)." This practice also serves to criticize the dominant national myth that immigrants leave the 'Old World' and its way of life and come to a land full of opportunity with hopes to settle there permanently and become 'Americans' (or Canadians, Europeans, Asians, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> This project was funded in part by several Grants in Aid from Okanagan College.

<sup>4</sup> I have changed the names and identifying details of all of the migrant men and women in order to shield them from retribution from employers or consular and state officials.

our land. We only kept 10 acres and I had to move to the city to find work to support my family. First, I was in Monterrey, then I was in the States for a while, working on a pig farm in Georgia. But I got tired of always being afraid that ‘la migra’ (immigration officials) would catch me. My brother was already in the SAWP, and he told me to try to get in too, so I went to the Ministry of Labor and signed up. That was in November. They called me in March.... Yes, it’s hard being separated from my family, but I can earn more in one day in Canada than a whole week in Mexico.

–Sebastian, migrant farmworker from Michoacán, Mexico

Sebastian’s story is illustrative of one of the key processes that characterize border imperialism—the displacement of poor, often Indigenous, people from their homes, a continuation of the violent dispossession of the Indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere that began during European colonization (Manuel and Derrickson, 2015; Frideres, 2011; Wright, 1992; Fisher and Coates, 1988) .

While labour migrations from rural to urban areas in Mexico and other places in the Global South began long before the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the implementation of the multi-national agreement in 1994 accelerated the displacement of farmers from their homes and plunged millions into poverty (Weisbrot et al., 2014; Walia, 2013). A 2014 report on the effects of NAFTA in Mexico, funded by the Center for Policy Research, found that nearly five million Mexican farmers were displaced, unemployment rose significantly, and over 14 million more Mexicans were living in poverty in 2012 than in 1994 (Weisbrot et al., 2014). After 20 years under the trade agreement, “the end result [for Mexico] has been decades of economic failure by almost any economic or social indicator” (Weisbrot et al., 2014).

This economic failure, in which Mexico’s entry into NAFTA played a significant role, has made labour migration one of the few choices available to poor Mexican men and women desperate to provide their families with a better life. Enduring separation from family is seen as an unfortunate consequence. José, a migrant father from Sinaloa, Mexico, talks about the effect years of forcible separation has had on him and his family:

My children don’t really know me. When I came for the first time, I thought it would be for one or two seasons. But now I’ve come for 6, and things just keep getting worse in Mexico. And my children have grown up without their father. But hey, what option did I have? I could have stayed with them without being able to provide what they needed, or I leave them and I can send them to a better school, buy them better clothes, give them a better life, no?

José’s dilemma is illustrative of how the violence of displacement, integral to the project of border imperialism, plays out in the lives of poor people throughout the Global South. Mothers and fathers face an impossible decision: to remain with

their children and have little hope of rising out of desperate poverty, or to leave them, migrate north, and attempt to provide them with more opportunities. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2004), in their study of migrant nannies, maids, and sex workers, assert that the “choice” to migrate is not a choice at all, but rather a form of coercion rooted in increasing global inequality:

Women choose to migrate for domestic work. But they choose it because economic pressures all but coerce them to. That yawning gap between rich and poor countries is itself a form of coercion, pushing Third World mothers to seek work in the First for lack of options closer to home (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2004, 27).

Like the nannies, maids, and sex workers interviewed by Ehrenreich and Hochschild, SAWP participants are forced to leave their children to seek work in the Global North. No family members (including spouses and children) are permitted to accompany farmworkers to Canada, despite the fact that most participants are parents. In fact, one of the requirements for entry into the program (at least in Mexico) is that an individual have dependants, a requirement interpreted by migrants and scholars alike as a method for ensuring workers return home after their work season. Whatever the intention of this requirement, it results in the forcible separation of families for migrants like Jose. Nearly every farmworker I spoke to described leaving their families as the most difficult part of their annual migration to Canada. Children and other families left behind also endure the impacts of long-term separation from loved ones. While visiting Mexico in December 2015, I interviewed Teresa, the wife of seasonal worker who lives in a small village in Michoacán, Mexico. When asked about the impact of migration on her community, she replied:

During the season, my town empties of men. They all go to the United States or Canada to work. And here we remain. The women, the children, the old people.... What consequences does this have? Well, our children grow up in broken families, in broken communities.

Teresa went on to describe children in her village experiencing depression and anxiety, suicide attempts, and substance abuse. She felt these were direct consequences of having no male role models, and growing up in broken families<sup>5</sup>. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2004, 27) have stated that children are often the invisible victims of global labour migrations: “Given the prevailing free market ideology, migration is viewed as a ‘personal choice’. In this sense, migration creates not a white man’s burden but, through a series of invisible links, a dark child’s burden”.

The forces of border imperialism create the conditions that result in the economic devastation in the Global South—displacement of farmers like Sebastian,

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<sup>5</sup> Teresa’s opinion on the impacts of a lack of male role models does not reflect the author’s opinion.

and the coerced migration of millions. Another process central to border imperialism is the “entrenchment and reentrenchment of controls against migrants who are...forced into precarious labour as a result of state illegalization and systemic social hierarchies” (Walia 2013, 38). While migrant farmworkers do hold temporary legal status in Canada, seemingly excluding them from the category of “illegal”, their legal status is precarious and temporary, and migrants live in constant fear of deportation. While a comprehensive theoretical untangling of the categories of legal status falls outside of the scope of this paper, it is enough to note that in practice, it is often of little import whether or not a migrant has temporary legal status in Canada—their deportability renders them precariously employed in much the same way as undocumented migrants. Migrants’ legal status is, in other words, always inconclusive, incomplete, and partial. This conclusive ambiguity creates space for the disciplinary power wielded by the state, employers, and fellow migrants themselves (De Genova, 2002). As Basok et al. (2013) have shown, very few migrants have to be deported each year for these mechanisms to be effective—the potential of deportation is sufficient to ensure even these migrant workers, legally employed in Canada, feel disposable and remain compliant.

An examination of Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) offers an illuminating case study of how immigration controls migrants result in migrants’ extreme precarity.

### **Canada’s SAWP and Migrant Worker Precarity**

Large scale displacements and the precarious conditions into which migrants are cast are not coincidental but rather foundational to the structuring of border imperialism.  
(Walia 2013, 41)

Mass displacement and worsening economic conditions in Mexico and other countries in the Global South have resulted in the creation of a large pool of poor people, desperate for employment, and willing to migrate to find it. An increase in the number of migrants, however, has not resulted in countries in the global north opening their doors to allow them in. As neo-liberal economic policies have swept the globe and lessened restrictions on the flow of goods and capital across borders, migrant labour has not enjoyed the same lessening of restrictions. On the contrary, the past 30 years have seen an increase in border controls, detentions, deportations, and the rise of managed migration schemes (Walia, 2013; Klein, 2007; Sharma, 2001). And, as Sharma (2001, 417) notes, these increasing controls have not served to curb the numbers of international migrants because the restrictive measures “have been taken largely in *how* people are able to cross borders—not whether they are able to cross or not.” In other words, as states have cracked down on “illegal” migrations through detentions and deportations among other methods, participation in managed (circular) migration schemes such as Canada’s migrant worker program and the US’s H2A and H2B visas have increased. These circular migration programs aim to fill ongoing labour shortages

in low-skilled sectors such as agriculture, but ensure intensive state oversight and regulation of migrants' legal rights and entitlements.

An examination of Canada's Temporary Migration Program illustrates how migrant-receiving countries have structured *how* people cross borders in order to ensure a disposable, precarious, and nearly unending pool of workers. Labour shortages in Canada were once filled by the recruitment of new, permanent immigrants, but increasingly since the 1970s, the federal government has turned to temporary migration programs instead. The TFWP, (Temporary Foreign Worker Program, previously the Non-Immigrant Employment Authorization Program or NIEAP) was established in 1973 under then Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, and was heralded as a program that would strengthen the market system and allow employers to access a large and flexible pool of labour and remain competitive in an increasingly global market (Sharma, 2001; Swanson, 2001). While the Canadian government and employers continue to laud the TFWP as being largely successful in its aims, scholars and advocates have documented the problems with the program from the perspective of the workers, arguing that the program has created a large and vulnerable temporary labour force with unequal access to basic freedoms and protections (see Basok, 2002; Basok et al. 2013; ESDC (Employment and Social Development Canada), 2016; Hari, 2014; Lenard and Straele, 2012; McLaughlin, 2009; McLaughlin and Hennebry 2013; Paz Ramirez 2013; Preibisch, 2012). Despite these criticisms, and despite modifications to other streams of the TFWP in recent years, the agricultural stream has remained largely unchanged since its creation.

The SAWP is the main agricultural stream of the TFWP and is co-managed by the Canadian Federal Government and the governments of Mexico and 11 countries of the Caribbean. In 2016, approximately 40,000 SAWP workers came to Canada, the majority to farms in southern Ontario (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2016). British Columbia, a late joiner of the SAWP, received over 7,500 workers in 2016, approximately half destined for the Okanagan Valley, and the other half for the Fraser Valley.

SAWP workers have virtually no access to permanent status, labor mobility, or social services. Furthermore, they are obliged to live in employer-provided housing, which almost always means on-farm. Their work permits are tied to SAWP-approved employers and transfers are almost impossible to secure, making them essentially bonded laborers. SAWP workers are dependent upon their employers to give them positive reviews in order to maintain their place in the program, which serves to heighten the power imbalance between employers and labour as well as deter complaints. SAWP workers endure poor housing conditions, a lack of safety training, and they have no chance to appeal a decision by their employer to terminate them.

Finally, there are a number of extra-legal mechanisms farm owners use to ensure the compliance of their workers. These include confiscation of passports,



overt and covert surveillance, and the imposition of curfews, no visitor policies, and no drinking policies. Together, the policies of the SAWP, and these extra-legal mechanisms serve to divide Canada's work force into a two-tiered hierarchy of laborers—citizen workers and incredibly precarious migrant workers.

Many of the migrant men and women I interviewed (as well as those who I have spoken to informally) described the SAWP as 'modern day slavery', a characterization echoed by Walia (2013, 69). Moises, a grandfather from near Mexico City summed up what many of his fellow SAWP workers also articulated:

The housing is undignified, but when we complain about the conditions to the boss, he says 'why are you complaining, in Mexico you live in huts and sleep on the floor?' The boss yells at us, harasses us to work harder. I am not allowed to leave the farm without asking permission. I am not allowed to go find another job no matter how badly I'm treated. Slavery hasn't ended, it has just become modernized (*La esclavitud no se ha terminado, solo se ha modernizado*).

Temporary farmworkers like Moises who have likened their experiences to slavery are not being overly dramatic, they are expressing their fundamental lack of freedom. They feel coerced into migration because of a lack of opportunities in their home countries. And once in Canada, their freedom is constrained by the legal and extra-legal mechanisms of the SAWP that dictate many aspects of their daily lives including where they live, who they work for, when they can leave the farms, and even their relationships with other workers. This un-freedom highlights an integral element of border imperialism: that the rules of circular migration programs like the SAWP are utilized like weapons to mould workers into an incredibly vulnerable yet compliant workforce.

## **Racialization and Segregation**

### ***Race, the SAWP, and Canadianness.***

Without being explicitly labeled as such, the SAWP and other programs that separate citizen workers from temporary migrants are creating racialized hierarchies. Migrants deemed ideal for permanent status or citizenship are often highly educated, practice a profession the Canadian government deems as "high-skilled", speak English, and/or have a significant amount of capital to start a business venture or invest in the Canadian economy. Disproportionately, migrants that meet these requirements come from countries in the Global North or are from the wealthiest families in the Global South. On the other hand, SAWP workers and other migrants deemed as suitable for temporary status only, are those with the lowest levels of education or whose qualifications are not recognized in Canada. Some do not speak English and many come from countries in the Global South devastated by neo-liberal economic policies. Without using overtly racial terms to determine inclusion or exclusion, the criteria for permanent versus temporary status

are essentially proxies for race and class—two categories inextricably linked. The dichotomies of permanent/temporary, inclusion/exclusion stress the foreignness of migrants and the perceived nativeness of Canadians, that subordinates foreign workers even while it upholds the rights of citizens (Sharma, 2001; Paz Ramirez, 2013; Walia, 2013).

In her seminal study on parliamentary debates at the time of the establishment of Canada's TFWP, Sharma (2001) argues that the creation of the category of migrant worker was inextricably linked to the ongoing construction of Canada's identity and nationhood. Furthermore, the creation of the category 'migrant worker' (an implicitly racial one), served to mark some people as "those who belong" and others as "those who do not", justifying differential rights for each group. The relationship between nation-building and the legislated inequality of migrant workers is succinctly put by Sharma (2001, 418):

Continued reference to protecting the "nation" and by extension those seen as "belonging" to it, allows those working within the apparatuses of the Canadian state to reorganize the labour market in Canada by recruiting workers categorized as "non-immigrants" (or in the vernacular, as "migrant workers")...I argue that the acceptance of the oppositional categories of citizen/migrant worker helps to secure the organization of "difference" within Canada, where difference does not mean diversity but inequality.

Migrant workers often talk about feeling out of place in Canada. David, a 35-year-old migrant from Tampico, Mexico stated: "I have been coming here to Canada for 12 seasons now, 8 months each year. I don't feel at home here and I don't feel at home in Mexico anymore. I don't feel like I belong anywhere." While he did not explicitly tie his feelings of non-belonging to race, David's words communicate this sense of difference described by Sharma, one that has deep historical connections with racial othering and the conflation of Canadianness with whiteness. Sharma's work had demonstrated that people's consciousness about who 'belongs' and who does not shape not only legal entitlements, but also pattern social relations within the nation, which may ultimately affect the wellbeing of migrants. In the Okanagan, like in other regions that host seasonal farm workers, migrants like David report suffering from depression, anxiety, insomnia, and alcohol and drug abuse. While determining the root causes of these health issues is complex, the consequences of social exclusion such as a lack of social support network, social and geographic isolation, and discriminatory treatment on the farm and in the wider community certainly play a role (Holmes, 2006; Mysyk, England and Avila Gallegos, 2008; Arcury et al., 2012).

### ***Racial Segregation on Farms and in the Community***

Systems of segregation that at a national level reinforce Canadian identity, are also reproduced on a smaller scale on farms in the Okanagan. One way this manifests is through racially segregated work crews and tasks. Martin, a migrant

from Michoacán, Mexico lives and works on one of the Okanagan's largest orchards:

Our work crews are always divided up by race—all the Jamaicans work together, the Mexicans together, and the Canadians together. They [the supervisors] say that it is a question of language, but I think they don't want us talking to each other too much. The boss told me they don't want us talking with the Canadian women pickers. "We are here to work, not to start relationships," he said.

In addition to efforts made by farm supervisors to keep racialized groups working on different tasks and sometimes on different parcels of land, Martin's account alludes to the racist, paternalistic, and heteronormative attitude of his supervisor who attempts to control the social relationships between his employees. This heteronormative attitude of employers in the SAWP program has been documented by others (Horgan and Liinaama, 2016; Preibisch and Encalada Grez, 2010; Preibisch and Binford, 2007; Narushima and Sanchez, 2014). For example, Horgan and Liinaama (2016) have shown that the structure of the SAWP, as well employer enforced farm rules act to socially quarantine workers and "bolster heteronormative models of masculinity through homosociality" (14).

Other migrant farmworkers have described the segregation of living quarters on farms and orchards in the Okanagan. Mario, a young father from Mexico City, describes the conditions on his farm:

The Mexican workers, we live in the bunkhouse. It was constructed a few years ago. It is pretty crowded, but it is clean and new. The Jamaicans, they live in the shacks and trailers around the property. Some of the buildings are so old they are falling apart.

RAMA organizers verified Mario's account of segregated housing; however, the workers did not want us taking photos of their accommodations for fear their bosses/landlords might find out. The situation on Mario's farm is not unique. Farmworker housing, especially on the larger farms, is often racially segregated, with the worst housing usually allotted to the Black workers. On one farm in the central Okanagan, workers reported that bathrooms and showers were segregated by race. Martin, Mario, and other workers' accounts suggest that the creation of racialized hierarchies on farms may form part of a suite of employer tactics used to divide workers and pit them against each other in the interest of greater productivity. These accounts add further evidence to the observations of others (Preibisch and Binford 2007; Sztewich, 1991; Paz Ramirez 2013) that race has always been fundamental in structuring if and how workers are included into the Canadian labour force.

Segregation extends beyond the farm to the wider community as well. The requirement that migrants live on-farm, their long working hours, and lack of access to transportation, combine to create racially segregated communities in which Black and Latino migrants are restricted to very few, and often hidden

spaces (Paz Ramirez, 2013; Hjalmarson et al., 2015). This segregation can be understood to uphold the racialized hierarchies created by the SAWP and more broadly the logic of global border imperialism, which depends upon maintaining large groups of racialized peoples in isolated and precarious positions, thus ensuring their ‘flexibility’ and productivity (Walia, 2013, 67; Hardt and Negri 2000).

### ***Racist encounters***

Caribbean and Mexican farmworkers I interviewed described enduring more hostile, racially-tinged encounters such as being yelled at or told to ‘go home’. Eduardo, who works on a farm that edges a busy road, told me “they yell at us when we are working [in the fields]. ‘Go back to Mexico’ they yell”. When I pressed Eduardo about why he thinks people do this, he said that Canadians think migrants are stealing their jobs. “But our boss can’t find any Canadians who want to work in the fields anyway. Those that he does hire last one, maybe two weeks. One guy only lasted a day!” Eduardo expressed anger that Canadians are not grateful for the work of migrant workers. “Without us, all of the crops would rot in the fields”.

While perhaps not explicitly racial, comments such as those described by Eduardo, imply that visibly Black and Brown people working in the fields could not possibly be Canadian, again conflating Canadianness with whiteness. This also illustrates Walia’s (2013, 62) point that “racialization enables the conditions for racial stereotypes to be inscribed onto racialized individuals as an *inherent* marking of their racial community”. Eduardo’s experiences (and similar ones endured by others) demonstrate that the simple fact of being a racialized farmworker means you are automatically labeled as “foreign,” and assumed “you do not belong here”.

These representations of migrant farmworkers (along with other temporary workers and new permanent migrants) as foreigners and not belonging are utilized by the nation state to justify exclusionary policies, surveillance, and outright violence (see Walia, 2013, 64; Sharma, 2001). For SAWP workers in particular, representations of their *inherent* differences are used to justify their exclusion from full legal, social, and political rights. The examples included in this section further demonstrate how borders operate beyond the actual site of the border, and are at work within our communities enforcing segregation, white-supremacy, and precariousness.

### **Criminalization**

The stereotype of Black and Brown farmworkers as ‘foreigners’ or ‘others’ is not the only one that has begun to take hold in the Okanagan. Racialized farmworkers are increasingly stereotyped as actual or potential criminals by employers, community members, law enforcement officials, and the media. Criminalization, or “the deliberate construction of migrants as illegals and aliens” (Walia, 2013, 53) is inextricably tied to deeply-embedded ideas that members of

some racial groups are more likely to commit crimes (Mirchandani and Chan, 2001). The criminalization of migrants, in conjunction with the process of racialization, is integral to the efforts of the state to manage populations as well as continuously construct its own national identity. This criminalization may take the form of being “punished, locked up, and deported for the very act of migration...Migrants are not seen for their actual humanity but instead as problem to be prevented, deterred, managed, and contained” (Walia, 2013 53-54). While distinct from the experiences of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, the experiences of temporary migrant farmworkers demonstrate that criminalization extends to ‘legal’ migrants as well. While criminalization of migrants and others takes many forms including incarceration, intimidation by police and other officials, forced separation from family, and other forms of violence, criminalization often occurs in more subtle forms such as through discourse and rhetoric.

The conflation of temporary migrant and ‘illegal’ migrant (both state-produced categories), has long been part of public discourse and popular discourse. In the US, the figure of the ‘illegal’ migrant has been associated with the racialized inscription ‘Mexican’ since the early 1900s. Before this time, ‘illegal’ and ‘undesirable’ migrants were commonly associated with Asians—especially Chinese and Japanese (Molina, 2006; Wong, 1989). Despite the relatively short time that Mexican migrants have been coming to British Columbia as farmworkers (since 2004), they already contend with public discourses, hostile encounters in the community, and media accounts that portray them as potential criminals or ‘illegal’ migrants. These discourses are often associated with conservative politics in Canada and tend to revolve around the assertion that temporary workers are “stealing” jobs from citizens, or are taking unfair advantage of social services. These arguments continue to perpetuate the contradictory stereotypes of Mexicans (and other racialized migrant groups) as being simultaneously deceitful and lazy (see Hill, 2008 for discussion). The persistence of such discourses highlights the pervasiveness of race-based discrimination in Canadian institutions and society and the strong links between racialization and criminalization.

SAWP workers, while technically ‘legal’ migrants, live under the constant threat of deportation due to the rules of the program that allow employers to terminate (and therefore repatriate) a worker at any time without cause and without any opportunity for appeal (see Basok et al. 2013 for discussion). Several farmworkers I interviewed said their fear of deportation under the SAWP was reminiscent of their experience working without papers in the United States. Efraín worked without papers in North Carolina for 4 years before coming to Canada. He explained:

When I got into the [SAWP] program I was happy. I thought, I won't have to be afraid to go out anymore, like when I was in the United States, I pretty much only went to work and back home, and I always was afraid of getting picked up by la migra [US

immigration officials]. Now I've been coming to Canada for 6 seasons and I'm still scared. I'm not worried that they [Canadian immigration] will come get me, but I know that if I piss off my boss, he can send me home whenever he wants, and there's nothing I can do about it. Is this better? I don't know.

Migrant farmworkers also described being profiled and harassed by Canadian law enforcement officials. Valentino, a vineyard worker in his late 40s, originally from the Yucatan Peninsula, discussed his frequent encounters with the police in the North Okanagan:

We are often followed by the police when we are walking downtown or riding our bikes to the store. A few times they have stopped us and gone through our backpacks. We weren't doing anything wrong. I don't think they would have done this if we weren't Mexican.

Valentino was distressed by the frequent police checks and had stopped going out in the evening, choosing instead to buy his groceries early in the morning. Many other migrant men I spoke to described being viewed suspiciously by white community members in the streets and by shop keepers in businesses: "People are scared of us. They will cross the street so that they don't have to walk by us on the sidewalk," one man told me.

Media reports on migrants often perpetuate their criminalization. Illustrative of this is how the case of four missing Mexican farmworkers was reported in the local media. On July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Castanet, a popular online news source in Kelowna BC, ran a story headlined "Foreign Farmworkers AWOL" (Handschuh 2015)<sup>6</sup>. The short article was taken in large part from an RCMP press release and stated that a month earlier four Mexican farmworkers had gone missing from a farm in the North Okanagan. Citing the RCMP spokesperson, the article stated that the men had likely either gone to work on another orchard without authorization, or attempted to cross into the United States. The article further stated that Canadian Border Services Agency and U.S. Homeland Security had been notified of the men's identities, implying that if the men had attempted to cross the border, it would have been illegally. In addition to this information, Castanet published the names, birth dates, passport photos, and passport numbers of the missing men, a clear violation of the Personal Information Protection and Privacy Act.

In other articles reporting on missing individuals, Castanet reliably included physical descriptions to aid the public in identifying the missing person<sup>7</sup>. No such

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.castanet.net/news/Vernon/144469/Foreign-farm-workers-AWOL>

<sup>7</sup><http://www.castanet.net/news/Kelowna/147694/kelowna-woman-missing>

<http://www.castanet.net/news/Kelowna/164998/kelowna-woman-missing>

<http://www.castanet.net/news/Kelowna/167848/maritimer-missing-in-valley>

information was provided for the four missing workers (other than mug-shot like photos). The article focused largely on the men's "temporary" and "foreign" status in Canada as well as potential criminal acts they may commit. Clearly, the motivation for running this article was not a genuine concern for the migrants' wellbeing, or to assist the public in finding them. It was purely a story about the presumed criminality of four Mexicans and a reinforcement of the "illegal" narrative. It was a call to the community to find fugitives, not missing people.

The criminalization of migrants is yet another example of how the processes of border imperialism manifest themselves in the lives of migrant farmworkers. A framework of border imperialism demands that we view the aggressions, racist media portrayals, and profiling by law enforcement officials endured by migrants not as individual and un-related incidents, but as parts of a constructed and deliberate system inextricably tied to other processes such as global economic policies, mass displacement, border securitization, and the maintenance of nationalist identities.

## **Conclusion**

By highlighting the voices of migrant men and women, I have attempted to show that the processes of border imperialism can be seen operating in their everyday lives. While migrants themselves may not always (or only) conceptualize their experiences in relation to broader economic or social systems I feel that for scholars and activists, border imperialism provides a conceptual bridge to understand the linkages between localized experiences and global processes. Further, the lens of border imperialism forces us to not fall into the trap of blaming workers' oppression on a few bad employers or a broken immigration system. It exposes criminalization, racialized hierarchies, and worker precarity as integral to the border imperialist project. This fact, when considered together with migrant workers' everyday experiences, demand that the fight for migrant dignity and justice go beyond the level of the nation state. The ultimate aim must be to eliminate all colonial borders and border restrictions (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright, 2009; Walia 2013, 2012).

However, migrants' experiences also urge us not to forget the incredible power the state has in structuring their lives and the conditions under which they live and work. In nearly every formal interview I conducted, migrant men and women said that acquiring permanent status and/or having their families with them were their main desires. Tania, a single mother of two sons, expressed this well:

All I want is to be able to have my sons with me here. They say that if we had our families with us, we wouldn't work as hard, but I don't think that is true. I would work harder. I would be less distracted, and I wouldn't be so depressed thinking of them at home in Mexico.

Access to permanent status would have immediate and positive impacts on the everyday lives of migrants; it would allow them greater access to social, political, and legal rights, labour mobility, and the right to remain united with their families. And so, our efforts must be two pronged: On the one hand, continuing to engage in broader movement against colonial borders; and on the other, building relationships with migrants, listening to their experiences, and foregrounding their demands for permanent status, social inclusion, and full labour protections in our activism and scholarship.

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