

# HUMAN CAPITAL

A publication by  
*Briarpatch Magazine*  
in collaboration with the  
MacKenzie Art Gallery



MACKENZIE ART GALLERY  
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## About *Briarpatch*

*Briarpatch* is an award-winning magazine of politics and culture. Fiercely independent and proudly polemical, *Briarpatch* offers original reporting, insight, and analysis from a grassroots perspective. As a reader-supported publication, *Briarpatch* is not just devoted to reporting on social movements – it’s committed to building them.

Since 1973, *Briarpatch* has been publishing committed journalism and critical commentary from its home in Regina, Saskatchewan, on Treaty 4 territory. Beholden only to its readers, *Briarpatch* defies the false consensus of the corporate media, adhering, as Avi Lewis says, to “independence and ferocity in equal measure.”

Opinions expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the *Briarpatch* board or staff.

## About the Exhibition

*Human Capital* presents work that offers insight into the impact of Canada’s immigration policies and history: how it treats humans as capital, and the role it plays in shaping the complex and contested the formation of a “Canadian identity.”

Canada, like most Western nations, has a long history of immigration campaigns that promise economic prosperity to both the state and immigrants. As a result, Canadian immigration policies have historically focused on maximizing economic contributions while minimizing disruption to the “fundamental character of the Canadian population,” as remarked by Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King in 1947.

Canada’s current, points-based immigration system, in place since 1967, attempts to provide a non-discriminatory framework for assessing individuals and collectives and directing them to strategic economic and geographic sectors.

Once inside Canada, new immigrants are expected to boost the country’s economy by producing more for less. The system has little regard for existing marginalized communities, as it continues to reinforce “Canadian values” with an ever-growing intake of immigrants, whose admittance is driven primarily by the economic demands of the country. For all these reasons, the exhibition asks: What else is lost when human potential is measured as units of capital?

*Human Capital* runs at the MacKenzie Art Gallery from 17 December 2020 to 18 April 2021.

To view and learn more about the exhibition, please visit <https://mackenzie.art/experience/exhibition/human-capital/>

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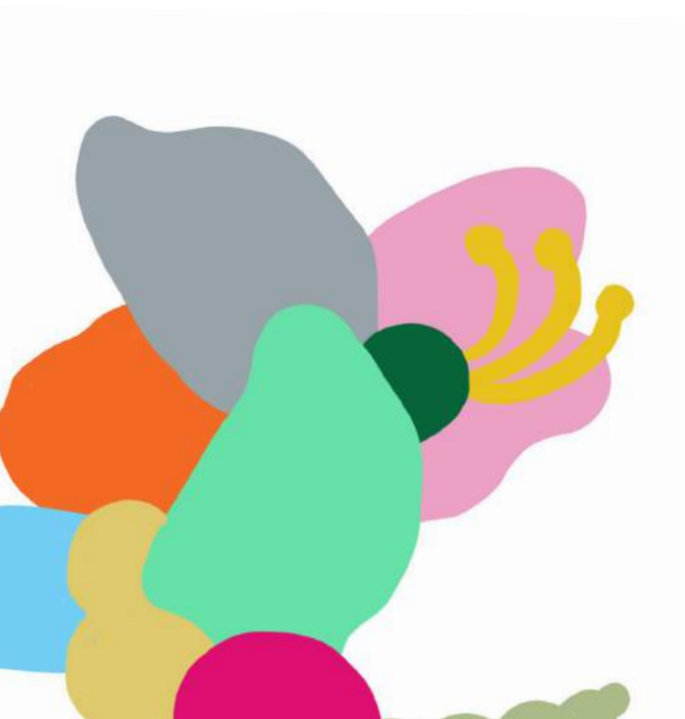
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# HUMAN CAPITAL

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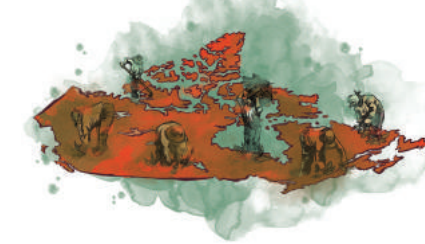


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# Human Capital and the Formation of Canadian Identity

—Tak Pham



*Human Capital*, 2020 - 2021. MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina. Photo by Don Hall.

I will never stop being puzzled whenever someone asks me “where are you from?” It is not that I am offended by the question, but that I am not sure how to answer. Having moved to Canada at the age of 15, I have spent almost half of my life here; and despite having gone through many milestones – high school graduation, university, internships, minimum-wage jobs, a professional career, and many friends and lovers – a satisfactory answer is still hard to find, especially when I’ve moved every four or five years. The answer becomes trickier when one considers the colonialization and displacement of generations of Indigenous people on this land we call Canada, where I have chosen to settle.

Listing my previous residences in Mississauga, Ottawa, and Toronto feels like a disservice to the collective effort of decolonization that I have pledged with my work. On the other hand, an answer that gives my country of origin is also ungentle because I now share more values in common with my friends here in Canada.

In addition to its implied xenophobia, the question itself is not sufficient to capture the complexity and the multiple layers of global migration, a movement of people that began to accelerate with imperialism and continues apace with globalism. For well-intended and curious people, there are more respectful and sensitive ways to ask, “where are you from?” without dredging up generations of trauma, discrimination, and oppressions for members of marginalized communities.<sup>1</sup> And for well-intended settlers like myself, a better understanding of where my experience and story fit within the making of Canadian identity might provide a point of reference for my answer. Hence, the exhibition *Human Capital* can be perceived as my own process of trying to understand the history

<sup>1</sup> Tanvi Misra, “What You’re Really Asking When You Ask ‘Where Are You From?’” Bloomberg CityLab. October 26, 2015. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-26/how-the-question-where-are-you-from-comes-with-cultural-baggage-for-immigrants-and-people-of-color>

and legacy of the many waves of people who have come here before me.

In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau famously announced that while Canada has two official languages, “there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other.”<sup>2</sup> Effectively, the Prime Minister was asserting diversity and inclusivity as values core to the Canadian collective identity and initiating a period during which multiculturalism would become state policy. In contrast to the United States’ “melting-pot” approach to diversity<sup>3</sup>, Canadian multiculturalism implies a harmonious coexistence between different cultures, ethnicities, and languages, and an empowerment of ethnic minority groups. Economic theorists and social scientists who study and examine Canada’s economic and immigration policies suggest that Canada has had a long history of identity formation, during which it has strategically exploited ethnic labour by maintaining a moderate

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons. (1971). Debates. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Queen’s Printer. Retrieved from <http://www.canadahistory.com/sections/documents/Primeministers/trudeau/docs-onmulticulturalism.htm>

<sup>3</sup> A melting-pot policy is an approach to multiculturalism that seeks to attain social unity through a process of homogenizing diverse population.

level of negation and sublation<sup>4</sup> among minority groups.

Introduced at the onset of neoliberalism and continued under accelerated globalization, multiculturalism as a liberal ideology was used by subsequent governments to negotiate trade deals, develop policies, manage immigration and the economy, as well as bolster Canada’s image on the global stage as a country of – and for – immigrants. As a social fact, multiculturalism is now a reality in Canada, with roughly 20 per cent of the Canadian population – some 6.2 million people – foreign-born as of 2015. They have come from over 200 countries and speak 94 different languages.<sup>5</sup> Despite its diversity, Canada, like other western nations, utilizes a strategy of erasure to refine its ideal of national identity, which is far from one of multiculturalism. Taking a position on Canadian

<sup>4</sup> “Negation” and “sublation” are parts of German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel’s dialectics which is an argument process between two opposing thoughts, beliefs, or ideas. The logic seeks to reinforce the main thesis of the argument by exposing it to a contradictory idea (negation), which latter helps to synthesize the differences through another process called sublation. In this stage, the anti-thesis is negated in order to affirm the thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Elke Winter, “A Canadian Anomaly?” Revisiting Multiculturalism in Canada: Theories, Policies and Debates, ed. by Shibao Guo and Lloyd Wong. (Rotherham: Sense Publisher, 2015) 51–68

multicultural policy and its discordant practices, political scientist and historian Randal Hansen laments, “Canada has never had anything other than a rhetorical multicultural policy.”<sup>6</sup>

We can see Hansen’s criticism reflected in a statement about immigration addressed the House of Commons from former Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King on May 1, 1947. He remarked, “the racial and national balance of immigration would be regulated so as not to alter the fundamental character of the Canadian population.”<sup>7</sup> Considering the make-up of Canadian population at the time, the Prime Minister’s statement implies the Canadian government’s desire to maintain the predominantly Euro-centric character of the country’s population. Canada’s pre-1970 immigration policy was based on three guiding principles: population growth; contribution to the standard of living by promoting domestic economic growth and enhancing economies of scale; and the responsive selection of immigrants, so long as it corresponds

with the absorptive capacity of the economy and poses no change to the basic character of the Canadian population.<sup>8</sup>

To better understand the Prime Minister’s statement, social scientist Joseph Mensah explores the formation of the “Canadian identity” through the negation and sublation of Black experience in Canada. Employing a nation-immigration dialectic, which examines the relationship between a nation’s immigration policy and its identity imagination and construction as a framework, Mensah sets the stage with the pointed observation:

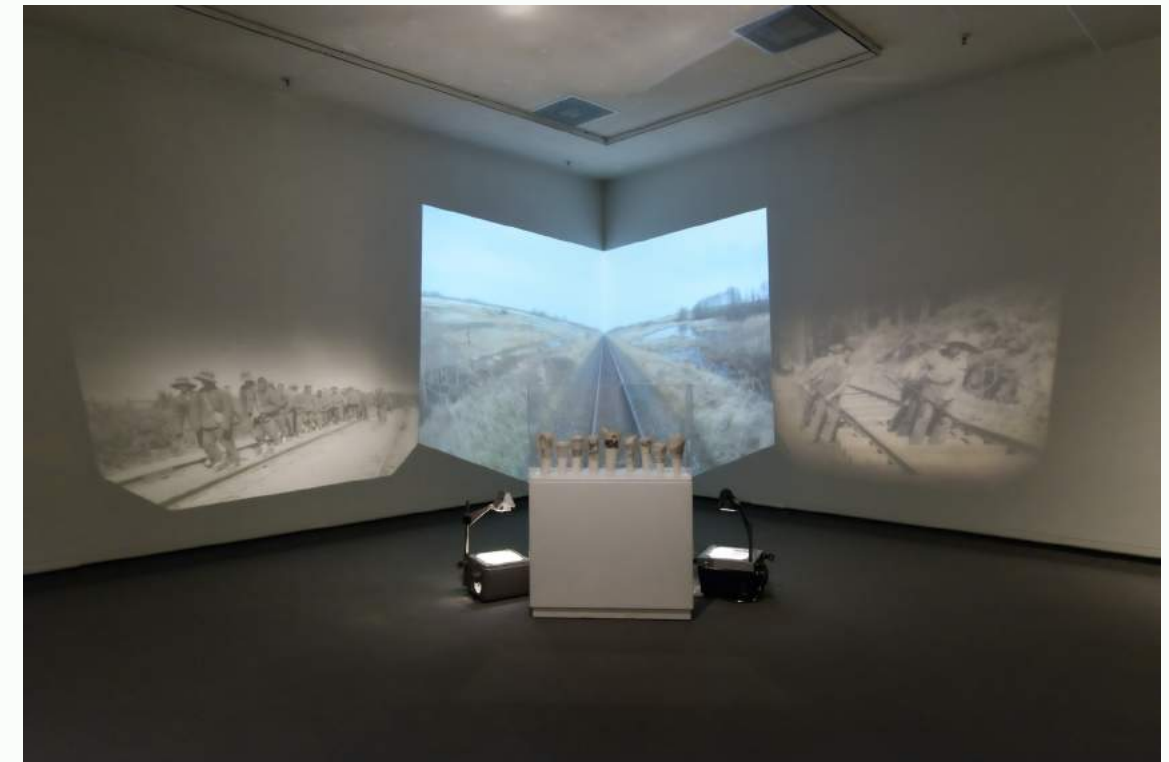
*Because of Canada’s image as an essentially White, Eurocentric society, Blacks in general, and Black, continental Africans often serve as the binary opposite of the ‘true’ Canadian in many identity-related politics and discourses – especially of the ‘us vs them’ variety – with other minority groups sandwiched somewhere between these two polarities.*<sup>9</sup>

6 Randal Hansen. 2017. “Why Both the Left and the Right Are Wrong: Immigration and Multiculturalism in Canada.” Politics Symposium (July). 712

7 Gerald E. Dirks, Controversy and Complexity: Canadian Immigration Policy during the 1980s (Montreal: McGill-Queen University Press, 1995), 10.

8 Alan G. Green and David A. Green. 1999 “The Economic Goals of Canada’s Immigration Policy: Past and Present.” Canadian Public Policy/ Analyse de Politiques 20, No. 4: 430

9 Joseph Mensah. 2014. “The Black, continental African presence, and the nation-immigration dialectic in Canada.” Social Identities 20, no. 4-5: 287



Jeannie Mah, *Train: Les Arrivées*, 2013 Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Don Hall.



MIKAN No. 3402772, courtesy of Library and Archives Canada



Florence Yee, *Whitewashed*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Don Hall.

The negation of Blackness to affirm Whiteness is not something new. It has been a policy tool widely used by colonial systems to enforce supremacy over subjugated groups. For a dialectic to work, the contradiction between the “what-is” and “what-is-not” needs to be sustained. Mensah borrows an example from German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel whose master-slave dialectic suggests that the identity of the “master” (i.e., the Canadian nation-state) requires the presence of the “servant” (i.e., racialized immigrants). Thus, in the absence of the latter, as the material reference point, the self-awareness of the former is effectively challenged; but the process of national identity formation does not finish there.

The last stage of a dialectic – specifically a Hegel’s dialectic – is sublation, wherein a synthesis will embrace the antithesis by ways of its own negation. It is here the rhetoric of multiculturalism starts doing its work. In the nation-immigration dialectic, this appears in the material contribution that immigrants bring to the national economy by taking up labour-intensive jobs and exploitative tasks that would be considered unfit for white Canadians. Canada – and similar countries like the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom – can continue to build national wealth by benefitting from material contributions from the

labour of Black people and other people of colour, while simultaneously denying them the status of and the sympathy and rights reserved for white Canadians. The manifestation of negation-and-sublation can be observed not only in economics, but also in the common classification of identities, such as “African-American,” “Black-Canadian,” or “Asian-American/Canadian,” which exist without a corresponding category of “White-American/Canadian” in mainstream society. It is then this claim to whiteness that is synonymous with the right to be Canadian, a right denied to Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century,<sup>10</sup> Italians in early twentieth century, Japanese-Canadians from 1942 to 1949,<sup>11</sup> and Indigenous people since contact until today.

Canada’s current points-based immigration system, in place since 1967, attempts to provide a non-discriminatory framework for assessing individuals and collectives, and directing them to strategic economic and geographic sectors as opposed to maintaining the “Canadian characters” as seen in the 1947 statement above.

10, 11 See Tings Chak, “Absent histories of Chinese-Indigenous Solidarities,” and Mona Oikawa, “Cartographies of Violence” in *Model Minority*, edited by Chris Lee and Maiko Tanaka. (Guelph, Ontario: Gendai, 2015).

However, starting in the second half of 1990s, immigration under multiculturalism became more individualistic and neoliberal. Under the Liberal government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien from 1993 to 2003, multiculturalism was viewed as Canada's competitive advantage on the global stage. As Michel Dupuy, Chrétien's first Secretary of State for Multiculturalism, expressed in 1994, "Today, for more and more Canadians, multiculturalism means business. ... In facing the challenges of globalization, Canada must make the most of its internal globalization – the competitive advantage of a multicultural population."<sup>12</sup> Hence, coming to Canada is viewed as a "contract" between the hopeful immigrant and the State. Not only does an immigration petition require a tremendous amount of personal resources and investment, but the immigrant also needs to prove to the immigration officer that their migration would bring enough human capital to eventually yield an economic return to the state. In exchange, qualified immigrants will be granted a permanent residence in the country, and later a right to citizenship.

<sup>12</sup> Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Christina Gabriel. *Selling diversity: Immigration, multiculturalism, employment equity, and globalization*. 2002 (Peterborough, England: Broadview Press) 116.

However, not all immigrants share this same experience.<sup>13</sup> Immigrants face more barriers and longer wait times the further their experience is from the benchmark of a Canadian experience; in other words, this process discourages immigrants from non-English speaking "developing" countries. The neoliberal attitude embedded in Canada's migration management affects not only those immigrating, but also those who are already living here. Recalling the process of sublation described in Mensah's "nation-immigration" dialectic, the government's ranking and assessment of incoming migrants results in two opposing categories of labour: complementary and substitute. Each has an economic impact on the local economy where the migrant chooses to settle. In their 2018 study of the impact of immigration on economic growth in Canada and smaller provinces, economics professor Ather H. Akbari and researcher Azad Haider observe that, if the immigrant's skills are complementary, the overall productivity of the locale will improve, resulting in enhanced output; on the other hand, if the immigrant's skills are substitute and displace existing workers, wages for "native-born labour" will fall despite the overall expansion and growth

<sup>13</sup> Elke Winter, "Rethinking Multiculturalism After its "Retreat": Lessons from Canada. 640



Brian Jungen, *Untitled*, 2017. Installation View. Photo by Don Hall.



Brian Jungen, *Untitled* (detail), 2017. Courtesy of Denis Walz. Photo by Don Hall.

to the local economy.<sup>14</sup> It is in smaller population provincial areas that the local economic objectives come into conflict with the federal idealism of multiculturalism as a competitive advantage. It is also here the distance between “us” and “them” become further exaggerated, resulting in the alarming surge of nationalist movements in rural Canada.

The University of Ottawa sociology professor Elke Winter proposes in her 2015 analysis of Canada’s multiculturalism that ethnocultural diversity is rarely an obstacle to strong national identity and solidarity. However, this ethnocultural diversity is not to be confused with multiculturalism, which in its operation maintains an arbitrary social fragmentation where different groups of people are assigned to certain social categories “characterized by unequal resources, opportunities, and life chances.”<sup>15</sup> The process encourages the valorization of cultural diversity as well as equity and integration, wherein the dominant group appears benevolent in extending their hospitality, their values, and their resources to others. The multicultural

“we” within which certain immigrants are integrated exists only in relation to multiple third categories of “other” against which the former group is held up as a model minority. We can see manifestations of model minorities within diasporic Asian communities in the United States and Canada, whose proximity to whiteness can only be maintained if they also participate in anti-Black racism<sup>16</sup> and, to a certain extent, disregard the welfare of Indigenous communities on Turtle Island.

For all these reasons above, this project comprising a group exhibition of seven artists at the MacKenzie Art Gallery and this online *Briarpatch* publication, poses a question to the visitors and readers, “what else is lost when human potential is measured as units of capital?” The severity of the effects of this neoliberal outlook on human potential varies depending on one’s proximity to whiteness. The further away you are from the thesis of a Euro-centric Canada, the more you are disenfranchised by the state’s system. For members of racialized communities, the triangulation of thesis-antithesis-sublation creates

intra-community conflict as a means to reinforce the idealized Canadian identity that is perpetuated by the country’s imperial history, while also preserving its “good guy,” inclusive, tolerant, peaceful image globally. It is also important to reiterate that this project is more than just a critique of the legacy of Canadian immigration. It would show a lack of diligence to single out Canada when the issue is a global epidemic that encompasses not only the social domain, but also humanitarian, environmental, and economic ones as well. Therefore, the project *Human Capital* is here to recognize, confront, and uncover the system that has been enabled, the stories that have transcended it, and the people that lived and survived under it.

14 Ather H. Akbari, Azad Haider. 2018 “Impact of Immigration on Economic Growth in Canada and in its Smaller Provinces,” *International Migrations & Integration* (19), 134

15 Elke Winter, “Rethinking Multiculturalism After its “Retreat”: Lessons from Canada. 641

16 Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the ‘Model Minority’ Stereotype. And It Creates Inequality for All.” *TIME*. July 06, 2020. <https://time.com/5859206/anti-asian-racism-america/>

**Tak Pham** (he/him) is a Vietnamese art curator and critic based in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, Treaty 4 territory, the original lands of the Cree, Ojibwe, Saulteaux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation, where he works as Assistant Curator at the MacKenzie Art Gallery. Pham is the curator of the exhibition *Human Capital*.





*Human Capital*, 2020 - 2021. MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina. Photo by Don Hall.



DIASPORAHAHA

# The Human Labour of Building Canadian Identity

—Zviko Mhakayakora



*Human Capital*, 2020 - 2021. MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina. Photo by Don Hall.

We live in a world that relies heavily on the migration of families and individuals. What sacrifices would they have made to get to these lands of opportunity, to seek a better life away from ‘home’? What are they running from – or better yet, what are they running toward? In search of answers, I look at the exhibition *Human Capital*, which features works by Aleesa Cohene, Chantal Gibson, Brian Jungen, Jeannie Mah, Esmaa Mohamoud, Florence Yee, and Shellie Zhang. Curated by Tak Pham at the MacKenzie Art Gallery, the exhibition explores the legacies of Canadian immigration policies and

practices and the overlapping histories of marginalized groups in Canada, and addresses pressing questions such as: who are the beneficiaries of colonial legacy? When thinking about immigrant populations, how are they setting up communities to feel at home?

There is immense complexity to why and how people migrate; that makes me wonder: is home a physical space? When we leave our place of birth, are we giving up a piece of ourselves in the hopes of gaining something new elsewhere? Immigrating, especially when moving from a so-called developing country to the so-called developed world, makes it hard for one to return. Cultural erasure, loss, and distillation occur with every passport stamp. As each day passes, migrants move further away from home, from our identity and sense of belonging. When immigrating to a new community, there are trade-offs that come with integration. When I moved to Canada at the age of 18, it was to Ottawa. I quickly set up systems of communication to keep in contact with family, in an effort to reclaim the sense of belonging I was losing. As I navigated my way through the culture shock, the extreme winter that my body wasn’t used to, and a school system different from the British structure I’d experienced growing up, I often felt nostalgic. I grew up in a place where there is a limit to the level

of success you can reach. My parents worked hard and made sacrifices to ensure that my potential would not be restricted, and that I would flourish in ways they did not have the opportunity to.

However, that dream that my parents had for me did not come easy. The exhibition *Human Capital* brings attention to the many requirements you need to meet if you want to move to Canada. In 1967, Canada was the first country in the world to introduce a points system that allows immigrants to gain points for language fluency, education from institutions recognized by Canada, skills, and work experience, among other criteria.<sup>1</sup> The higher your points, the higher your chances of receiving an invitation to apply for a permanent residency, and subsequently a Canadian citizenship. The system sounds equitable in theory, but in practice it is rife with unfair biases. Poignantly illustrated in artist Aleesa Cohene’s seven-minute video entitled *All Right*, the immigration experience is particularly jarring for marginalized folks – especially those who have been portrayed as “Others” in Canada’s historically Eurocentric view. Combining footage from immigration officer training videos, horror movies, and news

<sup>1</sup> Boyd, M. and M. Vickers. 2000. “100 years of immigration in Canada, Canadian Social Trends.” Statistics Canada Catalogue, no. 11-008: 8.

broadcasts, Cohene interrogates the “forces of global capitalism[,] a lack of self-awareness and knowledge about what Canadian citizens are taught to fear and why we fear it.” The “Others,” or the feared, are often immigrants who moved for a chance of better lives for their families in Canada. Historically, immigrants are often met with ethnic and religious anxieties and prejudice, ironically from other settlers. This includes internalized racism within diaspora communities, belief in negative racial stereotypes, and an unconscious acceptance that white folks are ranked above BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour). The type of microaggressions I faced when I arrived were around basic things such as my accent, and the fact that I could speak “good English” – bearing in mind I’m coming from Zimbabwe, another former British colony. These mundane statements have gone a long way in establishing systemic barriers that work against BIPOC immigrants. Cohene’s work exposes the policies that have historically been placed to admit mostly white European immigrants to Canada. Domineering over the static background noise, the voice of an immigration officer is heard saying that his “role is to keep the rascals out.” Who are the rascals he is referring to?

While Cohene's video evokes questions, further into the exhibition the curator offers a response. Stretching over a 10-foot section of a wall, artist Shellie Zhang's sparkling vinyl mural, *It's Complicated*, shows how immigrants use humour as a coping mechanism to process questions about their backgrounds, like "where are you from?" and "why are you here?" The word "diaspora" was originally used to refer to the involuntary mass migration of populations from their indigenous territories, however, it has since been updated to include those who move willingly.

Zhang combines two separate words – "DIASPORA" and "HAHA" – to create a visceral statement that brings up complex memories and experiences associated with migrating. Understanding language is empowering, and Zhang uses humour to make her work approachable. Zhang says, "It's Complicated re-envisioned the generalization of diasporic communities as a unifying term, which celebrates multifaceted journeys and stories." The history of immigration to Canada is a history of white hegemony. Painful examples in Canadian history are Humiliation Day,<sup>2</sup> which remembers

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Kay Lee, "'Humiliation Day': July 1 has added meaning for some Chinese Canadians." CBC News. June 29, 2017.

the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923, and the Head Tax of 1885. The tax was introduced to limit the entrance of Chinese immigrants even after 6,500 Chinese immigrant workers (that we know of) had risked their lives to complete the Canadian Pacific Railroad<sup>3</sup> – a national project that not only connected the two coasts, but also bolstered a unified identity. Human capital is valued until it is not. The standards by which people are valued are not even set by the Indigenous stewards of the land, but by generations of colonizers who have left their own distinct imprint on the physicality.

As a recent resident, it staggers me to learn of the trauma and damage of Canada's colonial past. South African Apartheid was based on the Canadian residential school system. This directly affected my home of Zimbabwe, a neighbour to South Africa. The legacy of colonialism continues to be realized in Zimbabwe; and one example of this is in education. Had I not gone through a school system that offered a colonial curriculum, I would likely never have had the opportunity to immigrate to Canada. This curriculum, whether intentional or not, has contributed to cultural erasure. As I learned more

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<sup>3</sup> "Building Railway." Chinese Legacy BC: History. The Government of British Columbia.

about Canadian history, I started seeing similarities in my experiences and the experiences of those around me.

Colonial systems are set up to erase, hide, and alter histories in order to continue exploiting and marginalizing local and imported workers. To look deeper into the case of Black labour here, the exhibition displays a series of three large-format photographs, *Deeper the Wounded, Deeper the Roots 1, 2 and 3* by artist Esmaa Mohamoud. Mohamoud interrogates the commoditization of Black athletes in organized sport, while paying homage to the histories of resilience and resistance within Black communities. The photo series features two men wearing football jerseys in distinctive African wax prints. They turn their backs to the viewers to reveal that their capes are made of thick chain links. Despite the chains visibly weighing them down to the fields in which they stand, the two men remain upright. Their heads look to a horizon beyond view. While the sportsmanship, dedication, and the hard work that goes into being an athlete are aspirational, the human capital of Black bodies is an intangible asset that has been and continues to be commoditized. Learning and unlearning these realities provides a way for us to take inventory of our understanding of identity and define a collective stance. From

my point of view as a new settler, it is equally as important to learn about BIPOC histories, to untangle history from the Eurocentric view. In her work, Mohamoud contextualizes the everyday experiences of Black folks, showing the beauty of Black bodies and cultures, and the resilience that has existed throughout many generations. The role of Black labour continues to be a topic for discussion today.

I have given up many things in exchange for integration and belonging in Canada, however, I understand the sacrifices my parents and those before me made for me to be where I am. In "Home," author Warsan Shire writes, "you have to understand that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land." This statement rings true for many people who leave not of their own free will. I left Zimbabwe of my free will (and privilege) with the intention to return. Since then, I have realized the differences I can make in my family's lives by being here and not back there. It is not an easy thing to balance your own personal need to feel a sense of belonging while also ensuring that the place you call home continues to survive in the ways in which you remember. Without works such as those in *Human Capital*, we would not have ways to reconnect with what we have left behind. The human capital goes

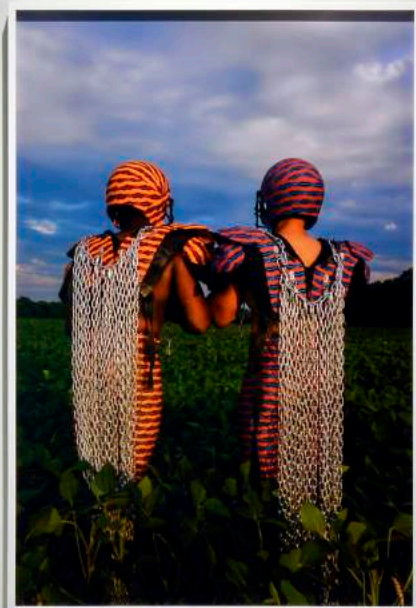
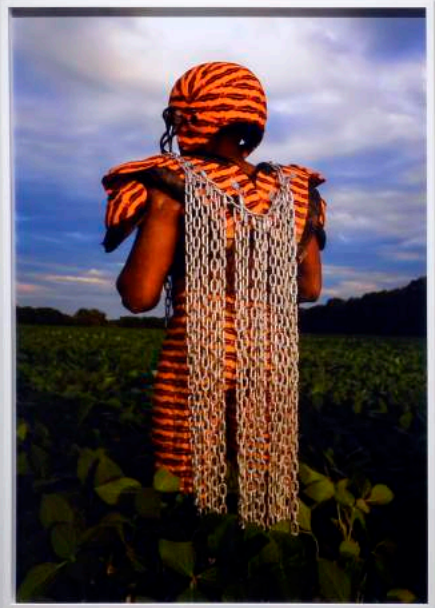
beyond economics; We cannot look at the numbers without addressing the emotional baggage you carry with you to survive in a place so far from home. While some like Cohene, Zhang, Mohamoud and the other artists in the exhibition have the talent to create art that challenges beliefs, sheds light on issues, and questions histories, others can come to the exhibition with an intention to unlearn and relearn, and a willingness to challenge and interrogate any biases and preconceptions they may hold.

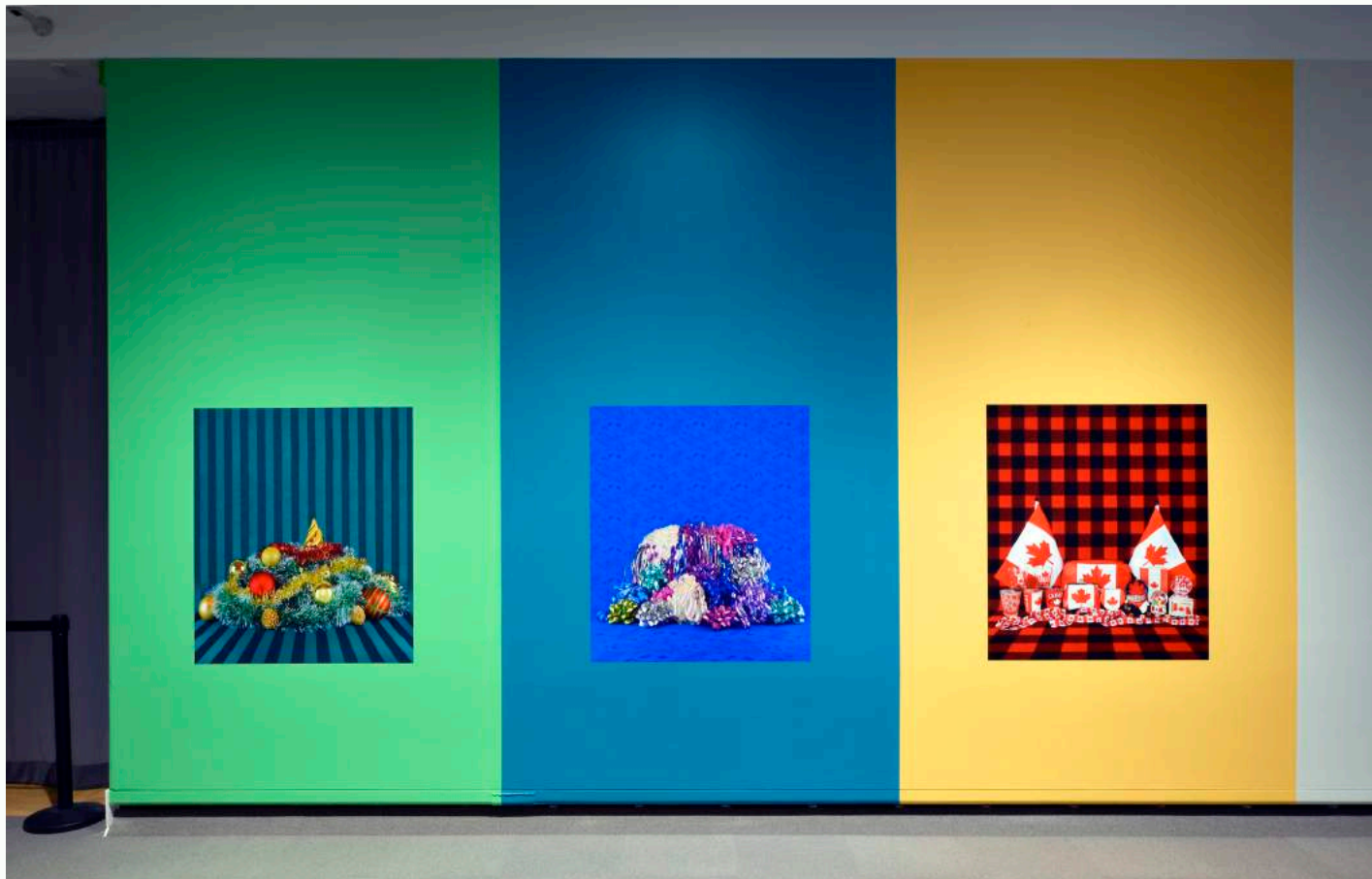
**Zviko Mhakayakora** (she/her) is a Zimbabwean designer, creative manager, and curator. She holds a BDES in graphic design from OCAD University and a diploma in general arts and science in design from Algonquin College. She enjoys researching and interrogating how contemporary art and design can be used as tools to challenge issues linked to the effects of colonization. Zviko serves on the board at DesignTO.



Aleesa Cohene, still from *All Right*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

DIASPORAHAHA





Shellie Zhang, *Means of Exchange* (\$37.89), 2019, *Means of Exchange* (\$31.94), 2019, *Means of Exchange* (\$76.30), 2019. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Don Hall.

## Migrant workers are the present and future of low-carbon care work

—Maya Menezes

In December 2016, as Donald Trump’s inauguration loomed, migrants living in the U.S. began to flee for their lives on foot. With their infants in their arms they trudged through the waist-deep snow at Roxham Road, a country road turned unofficial border crossing between New York and Quebec. Organizations like Black Lives Matter and Solidarity Across Borders worked double time, sending legal teams, providing food and warm clothing, preventing police brutality, and talking to the media. Canadian headlines were vicious. Words like “line jumpers” and “illegals” were used regularly on the news.

Where are those migrants now? Today, thousands of migrants work in long-term care homes in Quebec, helping to fill the high demand for workers there. But underfunding and privatization in long-term care homes have led to some of the most devastating outbreaks of COVID-19 in the country, accounting for 64 per cent of all COVID deaths in Quebec.

In the first six months of the pandemic, hundreds of Quebec’s nurses quit their jobs. When Quebec Premier Francois Legault begged for people to sign up to become “guardian angels” – his term for health care and long-term care home workers – Ze Benedicte Carole, an asylum seeker from Cameroon, began volunteering in a long-term care home. In May, when she contracted COVID from residents at her work, she was told by a provincial health-care worker that she couldn’t get a test because she didn’t have a medicare card. “When we die at the front lines, we’re called guardian angels,” she told the *National Observer*. “But when we need to be treated on equal footing, we’re not guardian angels. We’re nobody, we’re invisible.”

The past year of the pandemic has shown us what kind of work is truly essential to our collective survival: that which is done by nurses, cleaners,

produce pickers, grocery store clerks, childcare providers, and teachers. All of this work provides what everyone deserves: food, shelter, education, safety, and health care. But this work is underpaid and undervalued, and as a result many Canadians don’t want to do it. In Canada, as in many wealthy countries, this critical work is disproportionately done by migrant workers, admitted into the country on temporary permits or staying without documentation at all. And instead of arming these workers with what they need – permanent residency, fair wages, and labour regulations – we have been clapping for them from our balconies at a scheduled hour, as they march to their deaths.

It’s not a sustainable situation; it never has been. In the coming years, pandemics are predicted to become only more common thanks to humans’ environmental destruction. It’s too late to keep tinkering with the status quo. It’s time to completely overhaul the way we value those who do the most vital, life-giving work.

### Who are Canada’s care workers?

There are roughly 25,000 migrant live-in care workers working in Canada today, according to a Migrant Rights



Network report released in October 2020. This number doesn't even include migrants working in long-term care facilities, as personal support workers, nurses, occupational therapists, custodians, educational assistants, or support staff. This number would balloon if those workers were accounted for.

Canada's agricultural sector, too, is highly dependent on Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) because they make up over 20 per cent of the sector's workforce, according to an April 2020 Statistics Canada report. When COVID hit North America and migrants were barred from re-entering the country to return to work, Canada's entire agricultural sector fell to its knees overnight. The outcry was so swift and unequivocal that you may not have even caught it in the news when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau quickly reversed his decision.

If migrant workers are the people keeping us alive through catastrophes like COVID-19, then why are we so quick to exclude and dehumanize them? This exclusion looks like an impossibly complex, punitive, and high-stakes immigration system.

Live-in caregivers, for example, typically come to Canada on closed work permits tied to one employer. To apply

for permanent residency, they need two years' work experience – but if they are fired or quit they cannot work elsewhere. They also live in the homes of their bosses, who hold the fate of their citizenship in the palm of their hands. This makes it incredibly difficult for migrant caregivers to change employers or escape abusive bosses – many have reported wage theft during the pandemic. Migrant farmworkers, too, have their visas tied to their employer, meaning they can't change farms once in Canada. Many live in horrific conditions, are paid unlivable wages, and extorted for thousands of dollars. Justicia 4 Migrant Workers has reported stories of workers being threatened with deportation for standing up for their labour rights, losing limbs to machinery, and being trapped in cyclical abuse at the hands of people in control of their pathways to safety.

These immigration systems aren't simply archaic or bureaucratic; migrant workers' exclusion is deliberate. In the 1960s and 1970s, Canada started giving out temporary work permits designed to allow Canadian employers to hire migrants for specific jobs, without giving those workers access to permanent residency. It takes a massive amount of money and effort to set up and maintain a system that allows Canada to maximize the exploitation of

migrant workers' labour while minimizing the protections that the state must provide them. This money goes toward enforcing arbitrary and punitive borders at every point-of-access to public services. Whether it's transit cops demanding to see your passport, traffic police demanding your work permit, or being asked to prove your permanent residency when reporting a sexual assault, migrants are constantly policed and surveilled. Last year, the Migrant Rights Network reported that police officers across Canada make over 10,000 phone calls a year to immigration enforcement. We spend billions on policing the people who keep our children cared for and our elderly safe, instead of welcoming our community members as full citizens.

Unpacking the extent to which our understanding of borders, policing, and xenophobia have warped the way we value care work, and those who carry it out, is a massive undertaking. But it's one we must prioritize if we are to un-make the mess we're in.

### **Against scarcity, toward abundance**

While I was a migrant rights organizer in Toronto, the number one training we did was to educate migrants on how to access services like health care – which they have a human right

to – without fear. At the same time, the number one question I was asked by the media was, "but do you think *these people* should get access to services Canadians barely have access to?" These journalists argued that we had *no other option* than to deport, exploit, incarcerate, and exclude migrants, because Canada doesn't have enough money to do anything else.

For too long, we've been sold a carefully-constructed political narrative of scarcity, and been told that its only logical solution is austerity and policing. This lie has permeated deep into what we believe we're fighting for and against, but when you follow the money, it starts to dissolve. I've already explained to you that Canada's regime of border policing is incredibly expensive. We know that the money to build a better world exists – it's just not being put to the right use. Right now, it's tied up in police budgets and rich people's tax havens.

Nationwide, we spend roughly \$15 billion on all levels of policing – municipal, provincial and federal. This excludes the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and government offices like Immigration and Customs. The average cost of incarceration of a human being in this country between 2015-2016 ranged between \$51,830 and \$203,670 per person. Most folks in our prisons are non-violent poor

people who are struggling to live and can't afford to make bail.

Canada is also home to the fifth most ultra high net wealth individuals on the planet. Due to and since the beginning of the global pandemic Canada's 20 top billionaires raked in \$37 billion in additional wealth, according to a September 2020 report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA).

So how do we free up this money, and put it toward the urgent task of providing life-saving necessities for everyone in Canada? The answer is two-pronged. First, divest from the systems that cause death and destruction, like policing, prisons, and resource extraction. Second, invest in building a fair and safe world for all: health care, food security, affordable housing.

The CCPA calls for a one-time emergency wealth tax, and recurring annual wealth tax. It's a clear, ethical, and economically sound solution we should have acted on at the beginning of this crisis. This type of tax is popular with the public – of 1,660 Canadians polled by Abacus Data, 79 per cent supported the idea of a 1 per cent wealth tax on fortunes of \$20 million or more – but it is, of course, unpopular with the ultra-rich and the politicians they bankroll.

## **Migrant workers are building our collective futures**

At 3 degrees of global warming, hundreds of millions of people will be displaced as rising seas swallow coastal cities. We are on track for 4 degrees of warming in our lifetime. The debate we are having is no longer about if we can stop global climate change. We are debating who deserves to survive, and the answer must be nothing less than all of us. Migrants are our community members. Always have been, always will be.

The pandemic has helped us see that caring for each other is not just necessary, and not just morally right – it's also good for the planet. In contrast to higher-paid and -valued jobs like resource extraction or financial speculation, which pursue relentless growth for growth's sake, care work is low-carbon work that builds the foundation of a new, more sustainable, and more just world.

We have precious few years left to limit global warming and mitigate climate catastrophes. We gutted the social institutions and devalued the migrant labour that could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives in a pandemic – we did this both months

before the crisis began, and steadily for decades prior. We cannot afford to make the same mistakes again. The time is now to move toward an economy based on the valorization of care work, public ownership of our social institutions, strong unions, solidarity cities, and status for all. It's not only what will begin the repair of our disintegrating social fabric; it will prepare us for the looming climate crisis.

It will take nothing short of a revolution. Sector by sector, in the streets, in our homes, in our hearts and minds, we will breathe life, through sheer force of will, into the world we must build in order to survive. As a favourite community organizer of mine once said of massive social movement wins in times of shock and revolution, "There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen." We deserve a world where police wither away, and are replaced with care workers entrusted with health, well-being, and safety. We deserve a world without billionaires, where all members of society are paid fairly and treated with dignity.

As my comrade Syed Hussan said in another article in *Briarpatch*, at another moment in our history, "The work of first becoming aware of, and then removing the blockages in our imaginations has to happen in multiple

avenues of our lives at once. It is possible; it is certain. Freedom is coming."

We all rely on lifegiving and live-sustaining care work in one way or another. We deserve a society that values those who provide care work as well as all of us who access it.

It is possible; it is certain. Freedom is coming.

**Maya Menezes (she/her) is an organizer and campaigner based in Tkaronto. She is the program director at The Leap and works with organizations and revolutionary collectives north and south of the medicine line. She does not believe in borders, is in solidarity with land defenders, and her spice of choice for eating billionaires is garam masala.**

# Decoloniz- ing Relations on Treaty 4 Territory

**Indigenous people, immigrants, and settlers in Regina's Decolonizing Relations group discuss land, labour, and solidarity.**

Both *Briarpatch Magazine* and the MacKenzie Art Gallery are based in Regina, on *Treaty 4* territory. This is the land of the nêhiyawak (Cree), Anihšīnāpēk (Saulteaux), Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda Peoples, and the homeland of Métis Nation. We take our responsibilities to the people of this territory seriously. So when we began planning the writing that would accompany *Human Capital*, we wanted to hear from the people who live on Treaty 4 territory about their own experiences with migration and work.

One of the activist groups working to build solidarity between Indigenous people, racialized immigrants, and white settlers in *Treaty 4* is Decolonizing Relations. Over the past couple years, the group has been campaigning hard to change the name of Regina's Dewdney Avenue. The street is currently named after Edgar Dewdney, the Indian Commissioner and lieutenant governor of Saskatchewan who oversaw the starvation campaign against the Plains people and the execution of Louis Riel and eight other warriors of the North-West Resistance. The group has proposed the street's name be changed to Buffalo Avenue, to honour the importance of the buffalo to the region for millennia before colonization.

Members of Decolonizing Relations see Canada's treatment of migrants as continuous with its homegrown colonialism. "Canada not only practices colonialism at home on stolen Indigenous lands, it also practices it in the Global South," Florence Stratton, who organizes with the group, explains.

"Canadian corporations invest in these countries, not for the benefit of the citizens of the countries, but for the benefit of a small number of wealthy Canadians who own a lot of capital," she says. "Currently Canada is a superpower in the global mining industry, with 75 per cent of the world's mining companies headquartered in Canada. In 2018, the Canadian mining industry contributed \$97 billion to Canada's gross domestic product. To borrow a line from Tyler Shipley's new book, *Canada In The World*, 'Canada is making people's lives miserable around the world.' And that is why migrant workers come to Canada."

To mount a strong challenge to the forces of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and racism, we'll need to form connections between Indigenous Peoples, racialized immigrants, and white settlers, like Decolonizing Relations is doing. For this roundtable, *Briarpatch's* editor Saima Desai asked some of the members of Decolonizing Relations three questions:

- **What is your relationship to land on Treaty 4 territory?**
- **What kind of work have you done here?**
- **And what does "decolonizing relations" mean to you?**

## PARTICIPANTS



**Joely BigEagle-Kequahtoway** is a writer, fashion and textile designer, visual artist, and co-founder of the Buffalo People Arts Institute. She comes from a long line of buffalo hunters and is Nakota/Cree/Saulteaux from the White Bear First Nations, a signatory to Treaty 4. She has degrees in civil engineering from the University of Calgary, and in mathematics from the First Nations University of Canada.



**Yordanos Tesfamariam** has made Treaty 4 territory her home since her immigration in 1998 from Eritrea. Since 2004, her work and community activism have involved working on issues affecting youth, women, seniors, and families of immigrants and refugees.



**Mirtha Rivera** was born in the capital city of Santiago, Chile. She came to Saskatchewan as a political refugee in 1975, after the military coup of September 11, 1973. She is active in social justice struggles and queer rights.



**Lisa Odle** is the mother of three twenty-something children. She lives in a biracial marriage and is currently coordinating the Righting Relations Regina Circle. She is the anti-racism coordinator of the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan and sits on the board of the Regina Multicultural Council.



**Florence Stratton** is a community activist who lives with gratitude to and in solidarity with the Original Peoples of Treaty 4 – nêhiyawak, Anihšīnāpēk, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda – as well as with the Métis Nation whose homeland it is.

## DISCUSSION

### SAIMA DESAI

What is your relationship to land on Treaty 4 territory?

### JOELY BIGEAGLE-KEQUAHTOOWAY

I was born in B.C., but my mom and dad are both from White Bear First Nations in Treaty 4, and I moved back to Saskatchewan when I was about three. I never really had a connection to the land because I was raised in urban settings, but when I was about 14, my mom took us back to White Bear. It was then I started to understand more of what it meant to be connected to the land.

When you talk about being connected to the land, and you look at the map of Saskatchewan, it's all treaty land. There's not one single white point on the map because it's all different colours according to Treaties 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10. We signed treaties to keep the peace between Indigenous Peoples and settlers. But if there was ever a time where we Indigenous Peoples said, 'You know what, the treaties have never been upheld so we want to cancel them. We want to nullify them, we want to sever ties' – what would that mean for everybody else? Would that even be plausible at this point?

Growing up, I didn't know that my mother went to residential school. I wasn't taught about the reservation system, the Indian Act, treaties, the pass system, or the fact that my people were starved and were not allowed to vote until the 60s. When I started to find out about what happened to my ancestors, I was angry. I was really angry. And I wished that everybody would just go home, and that we were just left to live again on the land like my ancestors had for millennia. Since then, I've been trying to come back from that mindset, and trying to find a balance within my community – welcoming different people to the community and not always feeling like I had to be in defensive mode.

The questions I am left asking are: how do we share this land peacefully, like the treaties say? How do we share the land peacefully, but also sustainably, so there are enough resources for everybody?

### YORDANOS TESFAMARIAM

I've lived in Treaty 4 territory since 1998, and my brother and I originally came from Eritrea. Like Joely, I grew up in the city back in Eritrea. Only once have I visited the place where my grandfather and grandmother originally came from.

People are always asking me, 'How did you come to Regina and why did you choose Regina?' It wasn't actually a choice. My aunt moved to Canada from Italy, and at that time she was given a choice to live anywhere in Canada. But she didn't have any family members living in Canada, so when they asked, "What part of Canada do you want to go to?" she said, "Anywhere." For anybody who said "Anywhere," they sent them to Saskatchewan. My aunt sponsored my mom, and she came here in '93. So that's how I'm connected to the land – it's a family tie that I have here.

When I was first coming to Canada, I knew I was coming to white country. It was only four or five years later, in a sociology class in university, that I actually started learning about Indigenous Peoples. Prior to that I believed that Canada was a white nation – which is what ongoing colonization has done to Canada. Since I came to Canada in '98, it's still the same – the representation of Canada and the people in power are all white settlers. But in recent years, I came to learn more and more about Treaty 4 territory and the treaty relationship.

#### **MIRTHA RIVERA**

Even though I grew up in a city, I always had my own lands, my own herbs, my own things in the backyard. So I have that connection because

my Indigenous grandmother from over there in Chile, she made sure that I knew how to plant, and what to plant when. She taught me how to predict storms by looking at the birds – things like that.

When I came to Canada, I came as a political refugee from Chile. I didn't have any idea where I was coming to, and I didn't have a choice. I was just put on a plane and told, "You're going to Regina, Saskatchewan," which I wasn't able to pronounce because I didn't speak English. And then they put me and my three-year-old son in a hotel room. Not speaking the language, not knowing anybody, I started going outside. I almost froze to death, because it was November, and where I came from it was summer.

Coming to Canada was a really painful experience, because I was cut off from my land in Chile. My roots were over there, but my body was over here. I had to build myself up from that. My idea was to find people like me, people who would understand and respect what nature was giving us. So I was lucky to find friends who are Indigenous, and they taught me a lot. There's not much difference between what I learned from my grandma and what the teachings are here.

I came to Canada without knowing, really, what the definition of racism is, and how racism affects people.

Then one day on the bus, somebody insulted me by calling me a "stupid Indian." I didn't understand the language, but I understood. That person spat on the floor beside me and my child. I suddenly became really aware that I was not welcome by a certain group of people. Others would warn me – I'm going to be really blunt – that "Indians" were all thieves, were all criminals, all carry knives, and will kill me for anything they wanted from me. When I was growing up, my mother called me an Indian as an insult, when I did something wrong. I guess that's why I became closer to Indigenous people, and learned really fast what racism and discrimination was – even though it was at work all the time, I didn't initially see it.

#### **SD**

What's your relationship to labour on Treaty 4 territory? What kind of work have you done here? How has that been impacted by your identity as an Indigenous person, a settler, an immigrant, or a refugee?

#### **YT**

In high school in Canada, my first job was working as a housekeeper. After that, I worked at the Regina Immigrant Centre, the Regina Open Door Society, and now at the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan. So my identity, as an immigrant, has shaped the work I choose to do. And I use the

word *choose* because not many immigrants have the luxury to choose what work they do. They need to work because they need to feed their families.

There are countries where people can get their professional credentials from their home country accepted, but often Canada doesn't accept credentials from other parts of the world. And that breaks my heart in a lot of ways because, especially for parents with kids to feed, they will do any job they can find. Eritrean immigrants in particular, often don't get to choose what work they do. A lot of them work in cleaning, like my mom.

The more I work with immigrants, the more I think that in a lot of ways, immigrants and Indigenous people are connected – and that the one thing that connects us more than anything else is colonization, because all of us have been impacted by colonization. But, a lot of times, the powers that be don't want Indigenous Peoples and immigrants to connect.

Immigrants are working to put food on the table; Indigenous people are going through their own struggles. But we don't come together to share our knowledge, because we are pitted against each other. Indigenous people might say, "Well, immigrants are taking our jobs." It's divide and conquer. The only one who wins is the colonizer, and capitalism is the key. If immigrants here in Canada are not going

to do the work, Canada will take the work somewhere else where they can get cheaper labour, right? Capitalism does not put people first, it puts profit first. And we are the victims of it.

### *JBEK*

Growing up, we didn't have a lot of money. Everybody had to work, including myself. And so that meant doing chores around the house, but also things like picking glass bottles from the ditches. I also used to go pick vegetables in Lumsden Valley. But I wasn't old enough to work legally, so I remember waiting in the car while my parents went in to collect my pay, because I think I was like 12. It was just something I knew was a part of what I did to help our family to live.

A while ago, my daughter worked at Tim Hortons. And she told me, "I don't think I'm being treated right. I don't think it's good pay, I don't like the hours, and people are getting hurt at work. I think I'm going to quit." So she quit. She could afford to do that because she had the resources, and at the time my family had money. But I think of the people who kept working there – who may have been immigrants, who may have had people who were depending on them bringing home an income, both in Canada or in another country. And so they may have stayed at that job through all the

bad working conditions, the low pay and long hours.

A lot of people don't think about the conditions and pressures that immigrants work under. I've had to argue with some of my relatives who are racist – especially after 9/11, there was a lot of prejudice against Muslims. Indigenous people can pick up the same racist talking points that are put out by white nationalists. What's needed to change that is education.

### *SD*

What does "decolonizing relations" mean to you?

### *MR*

We chose the name Decolonizing Relations for our group because I don't really like the word "reconciliation." When it's an abusive relationship, what are you going to reconcile?

Before we can even think about reconciliation, we need to have difficult conversations about the truth of what's happening to Indigenous Peoples. We need to face all these issues that are separating us, and be able to speak our own realities and not compete. The mentality that most of us are raised with is, "My pain is bigger than your pain. My experience is worse than your experience." That's what capitalism does – it makes you compete.

And you just keep on surviving. And I'm tired of being a survivor – I want to be alive. It's been so good to be in this group, because in Decolonizing Relations, we don't compete – we listen and speak from the heart. We don't avoid those difficult conversations – when we see somebody not understanding, we go there, we take the time. We confront our own and each other's prejudices – but we do it with kindness.

### *YT*

Like Mirtha said, I feel that we have jumped over truth in our eagerness to get to reconciliation. It's so uncomfortable to hear the truth, that non-Indigenous people would like to move into reconciliation right away. But we need to sit with that discomfort and say "What's going on right now, and what can we do about it?"

For me, what was mind-blowing was learning about the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. I thought, "This is happening right here in Canada, and there is no outcry?" And when Colten Boushie was killed, I read the racist things the farmers posted on Facebook about him, and felt the same way.

To me, "decolonization" is stronger than "reconciliation," because the word reminds us that Canada's colonization is still ongoing, and it tasks us with ending the ongoing genocide of Indigenous Peoples.

To the question of how immigrants and Indigenous Peoples can work together: it's up to all of us to build relationships, to see each other as human beings, and to respect each other.

### *LISA ODLE*

Many newcomers, and many settlers who have been here for a long time, do not know about Indigenous Peoples and do not understand their value systems, their different ways of seeing the world. And yet, Indigenous Peoples have so much in common with a lot of other newcomers, who are also products of colonialism, and who themselves have lost land and language and ways of living as a result of capitalism. And when I see Indigenous Peoples working diligently to hold on to their spirituality, their ways of living, their traditions, their language, the respect they have for their Elders – I think that's something that newcomers can learn from. And once we start to learn from each other, that division that colonialism creates between us will lessen. We're able to learn the truth about each other and see that we really have more in common than not.

### *FLORENCE STRATTON*

Decolonizing relations means keeping Treaty 4 in the spirit of intent in which it was signed by First Nations: a nation-to-nations agreement in which First Nations land was to be shared with immigrants or newcomers, so that all

peoples benefit. Decolonizing relations means implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, with special reference to the requirement that national settler colonial governments seek Indigenous communities' free, prior, and informed consent before approving resource development projects on their land. And thirdly, decolonizing relations means Land Back. Canada is Indigenous land, it has not been decolonized.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Saima Desai** is the editor of *Briarpatch Magazine*. She's a settler living on Treaty 4 territory, and her family is originally from Gujarat, India.

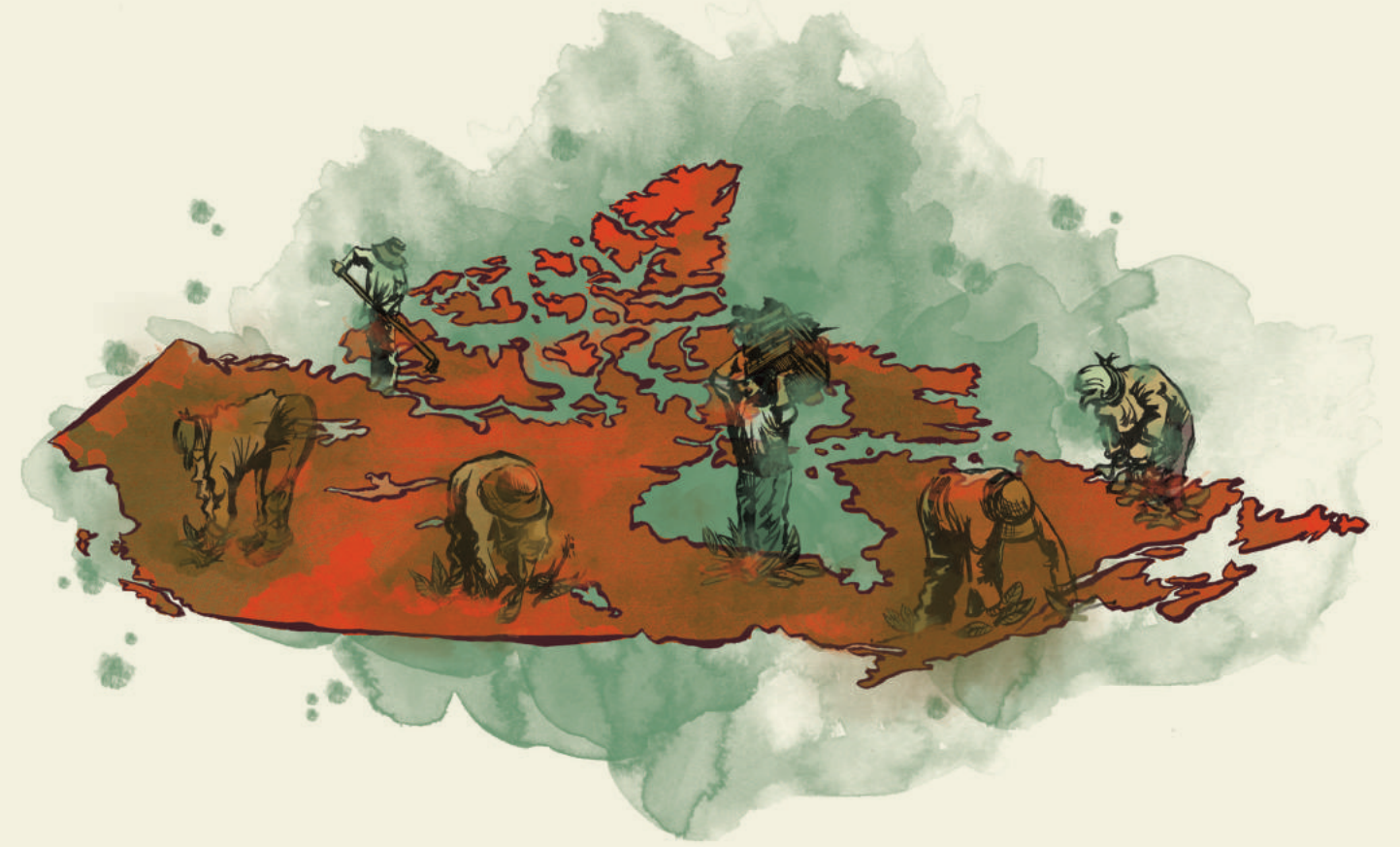


Image by Emily McGratten

# The Cost of Managed Migration



# The Cost of Managed Migration

—Gwendolyn Muir

*This article originally appeared in the March/April 2016 issue of Briarpatch*

Ana Maria sits across from me in the empty dining hall of the hotel where she works. Starched white table cloths lay folded over dozens of square tables. Her hands cup a cloth napkin that she folds back and forth.

“It wasn’t until 2010 that I became interested in going to Canada. I was left without work and I saw it as a way to survive, to support my three daughters [as a single mother], and so I made the arrangements. Recruiters brought me to a farm to discuss going to Canada and they said I would have to wait, as there were others already in line.

“They spoke about what people in Canada did: planting, picking fruit or flowers. I had to leave a deposit. They gave us an account number, where we had to transfer the money; the only proof we had was the payment receipt of 10,000 quetzales (C\$1,806).

“Recruiters would call us together for meetings at different places – in town, at the gas station, or in the homes of the organizers – and would share

information that couldn’t have been true, because they always said we would travel in one month, then in another month, and another, and this was repeated until it had been over a year. It never happened. We were a big group, maybe 25 people, so imagine that, at Q10,000 each.

“Afterwards, ACADEC [another recruiter] appeared, and again I saw the potential for a better life. Here in Guatemala, when you see something that might improve your life, to live with a little more economic stability, to support your family, you take it. So I went to their offices, to a big farm where they had meetings and spoke about work in Canada.

“Everything seemed in order: we got passports, did tests, gave them all of our papers. They brought us to a clinic where we did a blood exam. We even had to pass a two-week training on Canadian farming, where they gave lectures and spoke about agriculture, how to plant and so on, giving us all kinds of information and testing us about the work we would do. We got a diploma at the end, to certify us. The training cost was Q2,000 (C\$361). They said it was the price to prepare us to work in Canada.

They even took our measurements for what they said would be uniforms and equipment. This also had a cost. Everything had a cost.”

## Privatizing labour

Every year, migrant workers are selected through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) to fill more than 80,000 precarious, poorly paid agricultural, landscaping, and “lower-skilled” positions in Canada. Of those, over 6,000 workers are Guatemalans who are employed for low-waged work in Canada.

Guatemalans have become the largest incoming agricultural workforce for Quebec. The most recent statistics available show that, in Quebec alone, over 65 per cent of farms employ Guatemalan workers. However, thousands of others from that country who have paid recruitment organizations to secure their employment in Canada have never arrived.

The recruitment of Guatemalan workers to Canada has become an industry unto itself.

The sourcing of Guatemalans for work in Canada began in 2003, under a program formerly known as the Guatemala Low-Skill Pilot Project.

The foundation for the program had been laid eight years earlier, when Canada signed the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), a multilateral free trade agreement that created the framework for privatizing international trade in services. GATS facilitated the deregulation of migrant worker programs in Canada, making bilateral agreements obsolete. Workers could be granted temporary entry into Canada with a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA), which reinforced the power of employers by privatizing the insourcing of migrant labour.

In the early 2000s, the Quebec-based Foundation for the Recruitment of Foreign Agricultural Labour (FERME) began to seek out ways to hire agricultural labour from countries outside of those already participating in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) – specifically, from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. By 2003, FERME and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Guatemala formally partnered to recruit workers to Canada. Their alliance marked the beginning of the deregulated TFWP.

An intergovernmental organization promoting “orderly migration for the benefit of all,” the IOM administered the recruitment and management of Guatemalan workers for Canada

for a decade, until accrued corruption charges from the Guatemalan state forced it to leave the Central American country in 2013.

Even before the IOM's expulsion, however, new recruitment organizations had already started to pop up in Guatemala: in 2009, FERME's private recruitment counterpart in Guatemala City, Amigo Laboral, began processing the majority of workers going to Canada. Another local development organization, ACADEC, began recruiting workers the following year. In the wake of the IOM's disappearance from Guatemala, five new recruitment organizations surfaced in 2013, profiting from the high demand for out-migration to Canada. Of the seven organizations currently recruiting labour from Guatemala, four are run by former IOM staff.

## Creating precarity

Two powerful processes – one economic, the other discursive – uphold the recruitment of migrant workers.

As pointed out by social justice organizer Harsha Walia, the category “migrant worker” is created and reinforced by a system of precarity, whereby employers hire workers who will always be excluded from permanent and protected labour. Migrant

workers who are categorized as “low-skilled” are tied to their employer, paid minimum wage or less, and have no channels to access permanent residency. Typically, they do not have full access to labour protections, social services, or benefits. The risk of immediate deportation acts as a barrier to organizing against their exploitation.

The TFWP model of managed migration also depends on the discursive “othering” of migrants: it is the supposed “foreignness” of workers that legitimizes their precarity, despite living and working on the same territory as Canadians.

Canadian border-enforcement practices and the apartheid of mobility are founded upon lawful colonial violence: they depend on the ongoing dispossession and displacement of Indigenous peoples, and take shape through immigration categories that divide and commodify particular groups of people, constantly positioning migrants of colour as temporary and “out of place.”

In contrast to the myth of the benevolent, tolerant Canadian mosaic, Canada's immigration regulations have always functioned to produce precarity and impose lawful dispossession onto racialized groups: from the banning and regulation of

“non-preferred” – that is, non-white – races in the 19th and 20th centuries to the creation of the first migrant worker program in 1966 (around the time that possessing particular racial criteria became eliminated as a requirement for immigrating to Canada).

Changes to the TFWP in 2014 have nonetheless placed temporary migrants under even more precarious conditions: policies such as the “four in and four out” rule, shorter stays in Canada, and increasing application costs put workers arriving through the TFWP low-waged stream in a more vulnerable – and temporary – position than ever, particularly

### **FOUR IN AND FOUR OUT RULE**

*The “four in and four out” rule came into effect on April 1, 2015, effectively blocking workers who have been returning to Canada for four years or more from returning to work in Canada. Workers are required to leave Canada for four years, and then may reapply to the program. This legislation further impedes workers from organizing for better conditions or being able to access social benefits and has been called “one of the greatest mass deportation orders in history” by migrant justice organizers.*

due to the burgeoning for-profit industry that has come to comprise Canadian managed migration.

## Promises of a better life

Why are so many Guatemalans signing up with recruitment agencies? A milieu of widespread poverty, insecurity, and displacement in Guatemala caused by years of imperialism, state violence, and the expansion of foreign agribusiness and mining projects (with over 88 per cent of mines in Guatemala being owned by Canadian corporations) has positioned migration as a vital means of survival for hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans.

Many rural labourers migrate seasonally to coastal plantations or work in neighbouring countries – usually Mexico or the United States – as undocumented workers. As rumours of legal and “secure” out-migration to Canada have spread, however, there has been a growing demand for obtaining employment here.

Recruiters present work in Canada as an assured, safe option with “little to no possibility for labour discrimination or abuse.” Allegedly “free from risk,” the lawful structure of the TFWP is used as the basis to promote the program, as well as to justify training costs for producing the “qualified”



and “disciplined” workforce required for “legal work” – despite the fact that the TFWP legally subjects workers to a system of labour apartheid, whereby workers are deportable, disposable, bound to a single employer, and denied access to the benefits and labour protections into which they pay.

### **The recruitment industry**

Recruiters, meanwhile, hold power over work access, controlling what information is available to workers and determining what individuals must do – and what they must pay – to secure work in Canada. Requirements vary among employers and recruiters, giving rise to rampant fraud and misinformation; according to interviews with workers and agencies, many organizations demand payments simply for taking workers’ names.

Workers have reported an array of abuses from recruiters, from outright fraud and the overnight disappearance of agencies to the misrepresentation of jobs or immigration requirements, the withholding of information and documents, and extensive pay deductions.

José, a worker from Santa Rosa, Guatemala, says, “Recruitment is a bad game, because you don’t know [if

you’re really getting a job or not], and you can never know if it’s true or a lie.”

Guatemalan workers have reported paying fees ranging from Q2000 to 80,000 (C\$367 to \$14,688), depending on the length of trainings, the desired job sector, or the level of corruption of the labour broker, with some brokers promising workers access to permanent residency once in Canada for a premium fee. Many workers who have paid these fees never leave Guatemala.

Samuel, a worker from Guatemala City, asserts: “[Recruiters] should stop charging money. People have paid too much money ... brokers are charging upwards of Q25,000 to 30,000 (about C\$4,590 to \$5,500) just to put workers on a waiting list.”

As Canadian employers go shopping for recruiters to satisfy their labour preferences and profit margins, agencies are increasingly competing in a “race to the bottom” to send a cheap, disciplined, and specialized workforce to Canada. This leaves workers to shoulder ever-growing recruitment costs, despite the fact that, according to Employment and Social Development Canada, these costs should be covered by employers.

Canadian jobs, meanwhile, are presented as exalted positions only for the most moral, qualified, and obedient (“good”) workers. To be considered for a Canadian contract, workers must have “good moral character,” a pristine legal record, strong mental and physical health, an obedient work ethic, proven agricultural expertise, and the capacity to withstand extreme weather, as well as family in Guatemala to ensure return.

One worker states, “Agencies carry out an exam on your ability, to see how well your brain works and how your hands move.... [You also] need the mentality to go [to work in Canada], and the physical ability to do it.”

Recruitment is also overtly racialized and gendered according to sector. Recruiters classify workers according to their height, weight, age, gender, regional climate, and racial and physical characteristics.

With certain attributes requested for specific jobs, classification has come to distinguish which workers – and regions – are “more suitable” for which kinds of employment. For example, sociologist Kerry Preibisch points out that Canadian employers consider Jamaican workers more suited to fruit tree picking, while Mexicans

or Guatemalans are preferred for field harvests. This plays out on a regional level as well: taller Ladino workers (Ladino refers to those of predominantly European descent or identifying as white in Guatemala) from Santa Rosa are primarily recruited for chicken catching, while Indigenous Kaqchikel workers from Chimaltenango are most commonly found in vegetable harvesting; some employers request people “from cold regions ... who can tolerate the cold,” who, according to recruiters, may more easily “adapt” to Canadian seasons.

As one agency explains, “There are demands for specific kinds of people: the employer tells us that he needs someone between the age of 25 and 30, who measures 1.7 metres, for a chicken farm, so we need someone who is tall; but, if it is to cut cabbage, lettuce, or broccoli, we need someone who is shorter and a different age, and that is where worker classification comes in.”



## RECRUITMENT TRAINING

*Training programs based on agricultural work requirements – such as specialized agricultural training, language classes, and observational testing to evaluate workers’ capacity for compliance and diligence – have become commonplace. Three agencies run “model Canadian farms” in removed rural areas of Guatemala, where workers pay to carry out voluntary agricultural labour while being observed and trained. As described by one agency with over 275,000 members across Guatemala: “We, in a visionary way, ask workers to think that what they’re doing here [in the training centre] is what they’ll be doing in Canada.... We try to make sure that everything is in order, that everything [is done] obediently: personal hygiene, eating habits, listening and receiving orders, everything ... we have people from all over Guatemala and it is growing everyday.”*

With no limit to essentialized demands, employers go so far as indicate the dress, marital status, and family structure of the workers they are seeking. One agency comments: “There are farms [in Quebec] that ask that women come only from rural areas in Chimaltenango, wear their traditional Indigenous dress, be single, and

without commitments.” (“Without commitments,” in this sense, typically refers to being without children or family obligations.)

## The cost of a job

Many workers take out substantial loans to meet recruitment costs, borrowing from family members, banks, or labour brokers, often leaving their home or land as a collateral in the hope that they will be sent north.

One worker explains, “I mortgaged my house to be able to take a loan out at the bank because that was what the bank asked me to do. I had to have a security deposit in case I wouldn’t be able to pay, for the bank. So that the person I paid the money to [for recruitment] wouldn’t have any problems. Right now I am barely making any money ... on top of loan payments, [I can’t even cover] the costs of my kids’ education and support my family.”

Workers return to Guatemala at the end of their contract without any guarantees to be rehired in Canada the following season. To be recalled, they must be “named” by their employer as a “good” worker. Recruiters then manage which candidates will return and which become permanently blocked from the program.

The blacklisting of workers is arbitrary and widespread. One recruiter notes, “We had to block 400 workers for protesting [against their work conditions].”

Workers who speak out against dangerous or racist working conditions are often singled out as “troublemakers” and deported to Guatemala. Still, according to many workers and agencies, they have been excluded from work in Canada for situations outside of their control: an early end of the season in Canada, suffering from an accident at work, or having to tend to a sick family member in Guatemala. Recruiters have cited “low productivity” and “bad behaviour” as common reasons for blocking workers from returning to Canada.

With limited options at home, Guatemalans nonetheless continue to seek employment opportunities in Canada and organize to reinstate their status as temporary workers, as seen with the Guatemalan Association United for Our Rights (AGUND), a group of blacklisted Guatemalan workers who have denounced program and agency abuses, and are fighting for the right to return to work in Canada.

Meanwhile, new recruiters continue to surface in Guatemala, promising to provide Canadian employment.

## “They have always been lies”

Migration management institutions in Canada and abroad are increasingly attempting to control the mobility of “foreign” (read: racialized) peoples. Employers are satiated with access to precarious labour, while governments and migration “experts” market their discriminatory and exploitative policies as “for the benefit of all.” Meanwhile, a growing sector of for-profit agencies capitalizes on the already limited claims to movement of workers driven into debt by the hope of working in an imagined Canada.

Under managed migration, workers remain perpetually positioned as displaceable and disposable by employers, recruiters, and the Canadian state. The very structure of the TFWP creates possibilities for exploitation and deepens relations of domination, while the dispossession of workers is presented as lawful and even charitable.

As Ana Maria tells me, “This situation happens because people are desperate. You believe you’ll be able to recuperate the money you invest because obviously you can make a lot more money in Canada, salaries are better than here, and so you make deals to be able to get this money and pay for the paperwork, and be part of the group that might travel.

And if you don’t have the money, if you don’t have cash, they accept loans, they accept cars, payment agreements, or you take out credit at the bank and leave your property as the guarantee. Or you turn to money lenders, with high interest rates, who charge even more, and so you are left much more indebted, with more problems.

“My economic situation has gotten worse and so I’m always looking for ways to get some more stability, to recuperate my home, to have a more steady job, because I have three daughters, you know, that’s why I’m always fighting.

“I’m still looking for opportunities to work in Canada, but, well, they have always been lies, always. Yet here we are, thank the Lord, standing up and moving forward, each day an opportunity to rise up little by little. Perhaps I’ve been looking in the wrong places. This is what happens: you believe so deeply that you look in the wrong places.”



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# Unbordering

**The borders in our imagination  
prevent us from building  
real worlds without borders**

**—Syed Hussan**

# On Borders

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## I

Borders exist at the periphery.  
Denying, allowing entry, exit.

## II

Borders exist within the nation state.  
At schools.  
At the health clinic.  
At work.  
Wherever immigration status allows,  
denies entry.

## III

Borders extend beyond  
the periphery.  
Europe, U.S., Canada interdict –  
migrants and refugees are turned  
away hundreds of miles  
from their/our shores.

## IV

The border is the gate, and the  
borderlands.

*“A border is a dividing line.  
A narrow strip along a steep edge.  
A borderland is a vague and  
undetermined place created by the  
emotional residue of an unnatural  
boundary. It is in a constant state of  
transition. The prohibited and  
forbidden are its inhabitants.”*

– Gloria E. Anzaldúa

## V

Borders are not closed  
or open.  
Goods move.  
The rich move.  
Men. Cis. White.  
Able bodied – move differently.  
As do webs of Others.

Your body is allowed in.  
Your dignity is not.  
Your family is not.

## VI

Everyone has immigration status  
Citizen.  
Resident.  
Refugee.  
Worker.  
Undocumented.  
Each of us are bordered.

## VII

The enforcement of the border  
is collective. It is the nurse.  
The teacher. The employer.  
Allowing, denying entry.  
It's the journalist, the labour  
leader, the activist.  
Asserting us, asserting them.

## VIII

Borders exist because we  
cannot  
have not  
imagined / produced  
a world without borders.  
The borders in our imagination prevent  
us from building real worlds without borders.

## IX

Borders cause suffering.  
Borders cause pain.  
Borders kill.  
Borders kill.  
Borders kill.

## That world beyond

I. She is another. A world. A world of worlds.

II. Here, accumulation of profit is abandoned. There are no wars. No rich, no poor.

III. The past has been made just in the present for the future.

IV. Liberation is collective. All of us.

V. Life is valid, valuable, and loved. All of life.

In this world, without wars, social oppression and strife, all Life would have enough to eat. A home to live in. A place to play. All languages would be welcome, most forms of expressions celebrated. In this world, a world where many worlds coexist, there would be no forced migration, no mass extinction. You would only go because your heart desired, or your community did. Borders, as we know them, would wither away.

I believe this world will exist. She is struggling to be born.

## Unbordering in the present



Image by Derek Chow

Poetry will let me outline this future world, but I cannot map it into policy. I say freedom to move, to return, to stay; I sense the coordinates and possibilities, but my mind's eye will not always let me chart a course.

Even after decades of immigrant rights organizing, I find myself asking, if hundreds of people start arriving and start accessing health care that they have not paid for, would that community not feel crisis?

In a world of climate catastrophe, as millions flee from rising sea levels, from droughts, from rain – how do we deal with mass migration on a finite planet?

And what if people start moving to a community – freely, of course – but there is just not enough of a sewage system, or enough roads, or enough housing? Would that not cause chaos?

And what of language, and identity? A large group of foreigners could result in loss of language or culture. Wouldn't it import different and contentious notions of gender relations, labour, care, and time? Wouldn't all this create xenophobia, racism, and tension? And wouldn't, in a world with some contested places where capitalism would still reign supreme, any hint of weaker immigration controls just mean colonialism, imperialism, and the flight of the rich with their resources?

And aren't there other, more pressing, more primary concerns?

These questions and criticism have been answered in many ways. In this future world, the one that will surely come, there will be enough resources for everyone. In fact, there already are. Systems won't break, because there won't be mass forced migration. And if we face enormous turmoil, we will quickly create dignified resettlement. And people who aren't precarious, or escaping turmoil will not want to destroy language or culture.

The current mode of bordering, whether in China or Canada, results in immense deprivation of basic liberties for migrant and undocumented people. And there are no 'fair' immigration controls. And we can imagine societies without xenophobia.

And capitalism requires a global supply of labour, which is not possible without immigration controls. To transition away from capitalism, we must erode immigration controls. To erode immigration controls, we must move beyond capitalism. And climate change must also be met with mass resettlement of those displaced, and it can be.

But doubts and criticisms continue to be raised – by others, and by me. The borders in my head, in my dreams, do not allow my imagination to produce a world free of borders, and therefore free of prisons, or patriarchy, or class oppression by the rich.



## On how to get there

I begin not at the level of social structures, policies, laws, regulations, or systems that must transition. Rather I begin by asking a much more fundamental question: how do we – those that believe in this other word but are straining to hear her, as Arundhati Roy asks us to – prepare ourselves to both imagine her, and build up the power necessary to bring her into being?

I begin with the belief that it is not possible for people like you and me – implicated deeply in a colonial, carceral, atomized capitalist system – to develop a collective structure of a transformed world. Not yet. If any one of us does so alone, away from struggles or relationships, we are sure to become authoritarian.

I believe, and I could be wrong, that our task in organizations (as collectives not solitudes), is to transform ourselves into beings capable of imagining and creating a just world. To do so, I suggest the following initial list of interrelated activities that organizations can undertake. Each of these is a process developed and constituted by many movements struggling for freedom, and none of these are my ideas alone. They only have value when they are all undertaken together.



## 1. Listening / investigating

To imagine and birth the world we aspire to live in we must first know where we are. Activists and organizers in large part are unaware of the context in which we find ourselves. Our understanding and therefore our imagination is limited. We speak in broad terms about issues, but cannot articulate how the hegemonic bloc of the ruling class is organizing itself culturally, or materially, or what the primary struggles are of our constituencies. This is a never-ending process. To return over and over to the ground, to place our ears to it, and develop mechanisms for organizations to assemble what's being heard by each member into a real narrative of our collective experience.

## 2. Study

Today, most activists can answer the question, “what is cultural appropriation?” Almost none of us can outline an answer to “what are the effective methods of overturning material appropriation and theft by those who rule us?” Theories of organizing, methods of base-building, specific mechanisms of revolutionary work, questions about fundamental issues – what do we mean by justice

exactly? What is capitalism in 2019 exactly? – are rarely engaged with by many activists and organizers. This must change. Reading, studying from elders, engaging in intellectual discussions have been excluded from political practice, dismissed as the terrain of elites. But without engaging with the specific methods of transformation, how are we to free our imaginations?

## 3. Struggle

Inversely, there are organizations and individuals that over-prioritize study, and ignore the work of collectivizing and/or winning material reforms in the lives of our people. Where ‘organizing’ is a priority, it is done without a focus on imagining just worlds. Rather, collectives, NGOs, and organizations try to create public spectacle in a way that shames or limits a government or corporation into minor reforms. Thus, year after year, decade after decade, the total number of people organized, engaged, and imagining the creation of new worlds does not expand.

## 4. Work

The majority of us spend the largest portion of our life engaged in work. For many of us, this work is alienating; our labour is extracted for profit.

Even if we are in so-called non-profit industries – teaching, arts, nursing, professional organizing – capitalist logic pervades our lives. #BBHMM is trending, and anti-racist educators, artists, and others proudly demand payment. Capitalist work also engenders a particular form of coercive discipline, which has led to us believing that all discipline is coercive. We must instead develop ‘activist discipline’ – where doing a task, showing up, following through is a collective commitment to transformation. As many activists and organizations cannot immediately create alternative forms of economic survival for themselves or their members (though we must do so eventually), it is essential to engage in some work together – growing food, washing dishes, cleaning, creating materials – as a method of producing this activist discipline. It is through the practice of non-capitalist work that we can imagine a world that does not always require migrants, the poor, to be exploited in labour. We must reimagine a world where land does not belong to people, but rather we belong to the land.

## 5. People’s culture

We need our own songs, poetry, dance, ways of relating, loving, caring, and resolving conflict that are constantly expanded and shared. We

need to intentionally produce a common people’s culture beyond carcerality, surveillance, and disposability – a common culture that expands imagination, counters atomization, transforms gender relations, and rejects scarcity. Developing this common culture is collective work – neither separate from ‘organizing’ or ‘activism,’ nor an area of expertise taken on by some as ‘artists’ or ‘educators’ separate from the rest of us.

## 6. Collective identity

An incredible amount of energy in recent years has gone – rightly – into articulating the nuanced and separated experiences of people. We must now do the same to articulate a unifying identity that connects all those struggling for justice, and facing a collective experience of exclusion. The notion of the working class did that for us at one point – perhaps it can do so again. To create a world where we are not divided by culture, or racism, or homophobia, or patriarchy, a world where jingoism does not reign supreme and immigration controls are not asserted, we have to believe in a common identity and practise it with ourselves, and then with strangers.

There is enough, we are enough. These are initial processes. There are likely more. The work of just transition

toward a world without prisons, forced movement, rape culture, and white supremacy is all one and the same. While differences do and must exist between our current projects and campaigns, the collective project of all of us must be to create larger and larger groupings of people who – through their minds, bodies, and spirits – break free from the ideological and material constructions of our status quo world. As we become more and more liberated, these groups of people, together, will eventually be able to first imagine, and then produce the world we all aspire to. The work of first becoming aware of, and then removing the blockages in our imaginations has to happen in multiple avenues of our lives at once. We must all listen, study, struggle, work, build culture, create common identity together.

It is possible; it is certain.  
Freedom is coming.



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