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Migration, Mobilities, and Changing Political Landscapes

Crossing the Finca Border: Migrant Farmworkers and Transnational Home-Making in Canada

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While Canada is often praised for its inclusivity and multiculturalism, since 2008 its immigration policies have become increasingly exclusionary (Bhuyan, Jeyapal, Ku, Sakamoto, & Chou, 2017). The Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), for instance, is used to recruit migrant farmworkers classified as 'low-skilled', barring them from pathways to permanent residency. In 2023, more than 70,000 migrant farmworkers lived and worked in Canada -- the highest yearly number since the TFWP was introduced in the 1970s (Statistics Canada, 2024). Despite working under restrictive work permits that grant employers significant structural power, migrant farmworkers engage in multiple processes in order to cultivate a sense of home in Canada. I focus on the experiences of workers from Guatemala. In the last five years, the number of Guatemalan migrant farmworkers in Canada has more than doubled (Statistics Canada, 2024), indicating an emerging demographic shift. I draw on interview and participant observation data collected in Guatemala and Metro Vancouver. Interviews were conducted with current and former migrant farmworkers who had worked in British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. Findings are analyzed through a transnational framework which highlights how migration shapes social worlds in ways that are mediated and restricted by broader structural forces, such as policy and legislation (Barber, 1997). I argue that migrant farmworkers in Canada cross multiple borders: the noncontiguous borders between Canada and Guatemala, and the invisible but palpable borders of the fincas (farms) where they live and work. Crossing finca borders involves forging relationships and engaging in social exchanges with Canadians. My findings reveal that moving across borders does not only involve the corporal crossing of clearly defined boundaries -- it also includes the social activities by which people bypass or circumvent borders that, while more covert, still regulate their everyday lives.