

**Migrant Dreams**  
**Documentary as Cultural Resistance for Social Change**

Min Sook Lee

Supervisor: Deborah Barndt

July 31, 2014

Report of a Major Project submitted to the  
Faculty of Environmental Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master in Environmental Studies

York University, Toronto,  
Ontario, Canada

---

Min Sook Lee

---

Deborah Barndt

## **Foreword**

I made a documentary fifteen years ago that I still haven't finished making. I didn't realize this until I starting writing this paper - but its become clearer to me that the process of creating doesn't obey spatial or temporal boundaries. Fifteen years ago I made a documentary about migrant Mexican men working in Canada called El Contrato. It was the first feature documentary I'd ever made. I had no formal training in filmmaking and was largely unfamiliar with documentary as a form. Somehow I made a watchable film and in the subsequent years El Contrato has been used as a tool for discussion and political engagement on migrant worker issues in Canada. With this project, Migrant Dreams, I am able to revisit the political and creative goals of my first film through a self-reflexive process that takes me back to the beginning but with a new set of questions that are explored in this paper.

## **Acknowledgements**

I'd like to thank my supervisor, Deborah Barndt, for her joy, political acumen and intellectual expansiveness. I'd also like to thank the migrant women who co-created a political/cultural and social space for this project to evolve. The support of Evelyn Encalada Grez was particularly critical to this project and I'd like to thank her for her wisdom and persistence of vision. Finally I'd like to thank my partner John, and my daughters Song Ji and Luna for filling my dreams.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
MAJOR PROJECT	5
THE MIGRANT WORKER PROGRAM	12
WOMEN IN THE PROGRAM	17
MIGRANT WORKERS AND THE TYRANNY OF CITIZENSHIP	19
THE ROLE OF POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY	24
THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PRODUCTION - A TRUE TALE	32
DOCUMENTARIANS IN ME	44
INTERRUPTING OTHERNESS	49
THE GOOD VICTIM	54
MATERNAL NARRATIVES	62
CRITICAL VIEWING AND POLITICAL APPLICATION	64
CONCLUSION	72
BIBLIOGRAPHY	74
APPENDICES	79

## INTRODUCTION

In the past fifteen years I have worked as an independent documentary filmmaker with broadcasters such as CBC, Global Television, TVO and History Television. My documentaries have also travelled to festivals across the world and played on television screens in over 100 countries. Generally the topics I have addressed reflect social issues I am interested in: gay cops, migrant workers, toxins in baby products and reunification in Korea. I count myself lucky. I've been able to produce documentaries about social issues with the support of a decent budget and relatively distribution. But in recent years funds for independent documentaries that tackle social issues have disappeared and the kind of programming that passes under the guise of documentary is more akin to reality television with its manufactured drama and contrived storylines and characters. I realized I needed to make a shift in order to continue working on content I believed in. And so I enrolled in the Masters of Environmental Studies (MES) program at York University. The two years at MES has afforded me a unique opportunity to reflect on my approach towards documentary, a chance to deepen my critical analysis of my own work and to develop a work-in-progress manifesto of my current principles and practice. This process has led me to seriously question the process behind my practice, review my goals and externalize and act on an interiorized dialogue I've been engaged in throughout my life. In truth it has been an absolute privilege to be able to read about documentary theory and social justice and to then apply it in reflection to my own lived experience.

I work in a medium that can have a powerful impact on society and I'm interested in understanding how documentaries can create social change. This major project has afforded me the space and support to think about the ways in which our goals need to be enmeshed in our process; to review the kinds of messages we create in documentary storytelling; and to make explicit the economics of production and the critical ways in which diverse audiences read, respond to and make use of documentary texts.

### **MAJOR PROJECT**

MIGRANT DREAMS is a short documentary that takes you into the world of women who have left home to work in Canada. The film runs 11 minutes and was shot in a house in Grimsby, Ontario where twenty-two Mexican migrant women live. The women speak about the dreams and challenges that motivated them to work in Canada; their families left behind; the difficulties and joys they experience during their work term in Canada; and the bittersweet nature of the temporality of romance for transnational workers.

I produced MIGRANT DREAMS to create a social justice text that can be used as an organizing tool for the broad and growing social movement that is mobilizing for migrant worker justice in Canada. This short is part of a larger feature documentary I am in the midst of producing which I hope to release by the end of 2015.

In making this short documentary I have worked closely with Evelyn Encalada Grez, a founding member of Justicia for Migrant Workers (J4MW), a non-profit, volunteer driven collective of racialized young activists that works in solidarity with migrant workers in Canada to build awareness and change on migrant worker rights. J4MW's work is transnational in scope and "considers the context of sending countries, Canada's complicity in benefitting and creating poverty in the Global South" (J4MW website). As frontline activists who come from diverse communities, J4MW has been leading the fight to create spaces for worker-led resistance. Grez has worked with me as a translator and ally and her support has made this project possible. My relationship with Grez spans almost two decades. We worked together on a documentary I filmed in 2001 titled *El Contrato*, which looked at the lives of Mexican migrant men in Canada. Without Grez, it is doubtful I would be able to build intimate relationships with the Mexican migrant workers in the Grimsby house. Grez has known some of the women for over a decade and has visited their homes in Mexico and met their extended family. This project has benefited from the trust Grez has built with many of the Mexican migrant women featured in this documentary.

Originally I framed Grez out of the picture. As I continued into production and reflected on my own process and practice through the lens of my Plan of Study I realized that part of the story I wanted to share through this documentary

project was the ways in which activists can build alliances with migrant workers. I am interested in organizing for political change. I don't want my documentary to be received as 'entertainment' to be reviewed in a film festival catalogue and then shelved in an archive only to be dusted off when PhD candidates complete their arcane thesis research destined for publication in peer-reviewed journals that boast a readership of eleven. I reviewed my original choice to limit Grez's involvement to behind the camera and realized that my goals needed to be interwoven into my process. My stated intent is to create a media text that can be used in the political movement for migrant worker rights. By working with Grez, I had intimate access to the everyday work of a frontline advocate. The opportunity to chronicle the organizing work of a J4MW activist was right in front of me and I'd been unable to see it! This project has pushed me to review creative choices, collapse lines between subjects and 'authors' and question how I, as a documentary filmmaker, tell stories. I'm still evolving my process and believe the feature film that develops out of this short documentary project will be more emphatically about the work that activists like Grez engage in.

Central to the work of this project is the ways in which it can critically engage with diverse audiences to produce political change. J4MW works amongst a broad network of allies and organizations on the struggle for migrant worker justice: migrant workers, unions, academics, food justice groups, anti-poverty groups, immigrant rights organizations and legal support centres. At times the

goals and strategies of the different groups conflict and political tensions can override broader goals. My previous documentary, *El Contrato*, has been a useful tool for each of these organizations and I hope this short and the feature that develops out of it can also be of some political use within the movement for migrant worker rights.

I spent six months informally meeting the twenty-two women in the house before filming with them. During the filming period five women actively participated in the documentary through lengthy interviews and permitted myself, and the all-female crew, to chronicle their daily activities. Prior to filming I had meetings with all the women in the household to discuss the documentary project with them. The production process was often an admixture of filmmaking, socializing, advocacy and social service support work. Each time we arrived at the house I found half the visit was taken up with driving women to medical clinics, pharmacies or shopping for second-hand household items that were needed back home, delivering supplies or addressing labour related matters. We never arrived empty handed. Very early on it became clear to me that the women needed warm winter clothes, solid shoes, gloves and other personal items. I began a clothing drive within my social network and throughout the winter season the car would be loaded with camera gear and bags of warm clothes. One of the highlights of our production period was our 'spa-weekend'. We brought two acupuncturists, a massage



therapist and a facial therapist who engaged the women in assorted health care treatments.

The visits to the medical clinics or hospital emergency rooms were the most difficult as it enraged me that accessing healthcare was such a daunting challenge for many of the women. There were barriers of mobility, linguistic barriers and most importantly structural, labour-related barriers workers faced. Most of the women didn't want to take time off work to visit a clinic because they didn't want to be labeled unproductive by their employers and possibly risk losing their nomination in the program for the following year. Many of the women have been coming to the same farm for years by the request of their employer. When some of the women did speak to a specific female employer about their medical condition, I was disturbed to learn that this employer, who spoke broken Spanish, was their translator on trips to the clinic. Not only did the women have to put up with poor translation for medical concerns, they were in the uncomfortable position of having to disclose their private medical issues to their boss.

***February 2013  
Beamsville, Ontario***

*Angelica looks out the window and breaks out into a big smile that almost reaches her eyes. Snow! There was a heavy snowfall during the night. The world is covered in thick cotton-bats of snow. She hastily shrugs on a thin coat and dons a hat. By the time she reaches the front door she's already woken up some of the other women in the house in her excitement. Angelica runs outside to jump into the snow. Brrr! It's cold. She throws the miraculous*

*material into the air and is surprised when small granules cling coldly to her fingers. The stuff stays cold while it melts. Amazing. She shakes her head in wonder. Seconds later Angelica is posing on the porch of the house with her two close friends, Wendy and Teresa. They smile for the camera. Captured. A moment of brightness. They could be friends on vacation - taking a break away from the family.*

*Back inside the house, someone has turned music on. A bouncy love song sweeps the room and Angelica and her friends, buoyed by the snowfall and the crisp morning air begin dancing. A silly moment. The women dance in pairs and call out to others in the house to come join them!*

*The camera follows Angelica as she falls onto the sofa to take a breather. She pulls out her small digital camera to flick through the recent snapshots. We see her smiling face as she looks at shots of herself frolicking in the snow.*

*Then we see her face crumble. She has started looking at older pictures.....shots of babies and young children staring up from the monitor.*

*Tears pool into a trickle down Angelica's face as she lifts a hand to her mouth to stifle a sound. The music has shifted and we're now listening to a ranchero love song of heartbreak and longing. The camera pulls out to reveal Wendy and Teresa have also taken a seat. Each woman grips a small cell phone, staring as if lost, at pictures of family members. Wendy wipes the tears from her eyes with the sleeve of her T-Shirt. Teresa looks away - out the window*

*onto the highway at the passing cars. The snow stares back. Cold and unshaken.*

We are in a non-descript house that sits on the side of Highway 65, just minutes away from the town of Beamsville, Ontario. Cars zip by anonymous radio towers that dot the skyline. Twenty-two migrant women from Mexico live inside the house. Angelica is one of them. They work in nearby greenhouses planting and picking flowers. Fifteen of the women are crammed into bunkbeds in four bedrooms on the second floor. Seven of the women sleep in metal cots that are lined alongside each other in the basement where blankets hanging from ropes are used as makeshift walls. One of the bedrooms on the second floor has a walk-in closet and an en-suite bathroom. The four women who share this room lucked out. The other 18 women share 2 bathrooms. There is one dryer and two single-load washing machines in the basement. The line-up for laundry is perennial and the race to the bathroom can be cut-throat.

For the next six months Angelica will have to navigate life living and working cheek-to-jowl with strangers. She's in Canada on a temporary contract for a minimum wage job most Canadians don't want to do. Planting flowers in greenhouses falls into the category of a '3D' job: dirty, difficult and dangerous. The pay is low, the work dreary and repetitive and if employers can't find reliable workers the financial loss can be enormous. Angelica has been coming here for four seasons. She is one of an estimated 300,000 migrant workers who

work in Canada. Of the workers in the agricultural stream, approximately four percent of the workers are female - about sixteen hundred women. (Hennebry 2012) Within the Mexican migrant community, most of these women are single mothers or widows, a criteria of the program. They've chosen to work abroad to support their families back home. It's a conflicted choice. On the one hand you are poor and can't afford to feed your family so you leave them to find work in a foreign country. On the other hand the work separates you from your family for extended periods of time. So your children grow up never knowing who you are. And you eventually become a stranger to the ones you love.

### **THE MIGRANT WORKER PROGRAM**

Low-waged foreign workers have emerged as a growing and controversial workforce in Canada. In the age of neo-liberal globalization, the 'structural violence of savage capitalism' has delivered a surplus/deficit relationship between the global south and it's richer counterparts of the global north. (Binford 2003) Binford describes this as a "complementarity of interests between poor countries with unambiguous labour surpluses created, exacerbated and transformed under neoliberal reforms, and wealthy ones with sectoral labour deficits, especially in low-waged, unskilled and semi-skilled occupations."

There is a messy, and bureaucratically byzantine assortment of migrant worker programs in Canada, from the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program to the

Temporary Foreign Worker Program (which is divided into four categories depending on skill levels) to the Live-In Caregiver Program. The proliferation of these programs begs the obvious question: when a country's dwindling birth rate and ageing population consistently reproduces labour shortfalls in key sectors, shouldn't the human resource lacuna be addressed through expanded immigration programs? Instead of opening citizenship pathways, the Canadian government has actively been battening down the hatches, as though an invasion were imminent.

Without public discourse and with little public scrutiny (until recently), Canada has taken steps to become a nation of guest-workers. In 2002, there were just over 100,000 foreign workers here. Within one decade that number has tripled to 300,000. (Faraday, 2012) Canada now accepts more foreign workers into the country than we do immigrants. The gateways into Canada have been redrawn. In 2008, for the first time, the number of temporary foreign workers in Canada exceeded the total number of permanent residents admitted in the same year. (Walia, 2014)

Migrant workers in Canada come from a diverse range of home nations - over eighty in all (Gross, 2014). Workers who enter through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) enter with contracts that range from six to eight months. SAWP workers are mostly drawn from Mexico, Jamaica and other nations in the English-speaking Caribbean due to existing bilateral agreements established in the 1960s that facilitate and co-manage the process from

procurement to containment to eventual evaluation. The Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) is primarily responsible for the increased number of migrant workers as it operates without any bilateral agreement to narrow the list of sending countries. Most of the sending countries that fulfill the low-wage jobs through the TFWP are the struggling economies of the world; on the streets of Leamington you will meet workers from Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Peru, Guatemala and Brazil. There is no shortage of labourers lining up for these jobs; this allows the employers to deliberately pit workers from one country against others as a routine tactic to manage worker compliance. This is a classic 'divide & rule' tactic, and its ethos is often internalized by the workers themselves. It is common to hear migrant workers from one country deriding the 'laziness' or other perceived deficiencies of workers from another country and espousing their 'industriousness' as seen and reportedly praised by their employer.

The money earned in Canada is a source of survival for not just the individual worker, but usually a large network of family back home. This intensifies the importance of the job and underscores the competition amongst workers within the program. It also means the worker will make many sacrifices, accommodations and concessions in order to retain the minimum wage job Canadians elect not to perform. Until recent government changes, workers admitted under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program were allowed to stay in

Canada for a maximum period of four years. Now workers are restricted to two-year terms.

This workforce is constructed as 'permanently temporary' (Faraday 2012) and their precarious status excludes them from enjoying the same set of rights and privileges Canadian workers do (Basok 2002, Sharma 2006). There are few pathways to citizenship. Temporary workers are designated as permanently foreign. They are brought into the country on short-term contracts, tied to a single employer who exercises virtually unchecked power over every major aspect of their lives from housing, transportation, access to healthcare and in many cases social interactions in Canada. The relationship with their employer has been described as paternalistic and feudal (Basok 2002, Preibisch 2007). The workers are expected to work long hours, sometimes under difficult conditions where exposure to pesticides and other chemicals is common and if workers balk or protest work site conditions, they are threatened with deportation. Repatriation is routinely used by employers to control, and contain worker agency. Deportation or dismissal from the program are very real consequences of speaking out and advocating for labour rights.

Many workers have described the system to me as a form of 'slavery'. Noé Arteaga organized a mini-strike against an employer who refused to give medical access to an ill worker and was fired and repatriated back to Mexico. Says Noé: "It's modern day slavery. You are tied to your employer and if you

don't like what is happening there are thousands of people ready to take your job. They dispose of the workers, just like they did to me.” (McMurtry 2013, “Modern Day Slavery”, [canadiandimension.com](http://canadiandimension.com))

Why are there thousands of people willing to make the long journey to work far from home in sub-standard conditions? There is a myopic pseudo-fatalism that seems to occur when people talk about migrant workers. I've often heard Canadian employers or others who support the program argue that the programs are beneficial for the workers because they are able to 'escape' poverty and make money in the rich Canadian economy. Some employers have even likened the program as a form of development aid for Third World workers. In this logic, poverty is framed as some kind of pathological disease. The reality of course is that poverty is a social, political and economic construct and there are concrete laws, policies and organizations that produce and entrench poverty. Globalization and neoliberalism, the modern form of western capitalism that dominates the world today has had a significant impact on the development and underdevelopment of countries that are sources of migrant labour.

Mexico stands as a singular example of a country that embraced neoliberalism with devastating results. The impact of neoliberal processes of privatization, deregulation and trade liberalization on the Mexican economy can be measured in statistics like these:



- In 1982 Mexico began to implement IMF structural adjustment programs. Between 1982 and 1996, real wages decreased by 80% (Nadal, *The Micro-economic Impact of IMF Structural Adjustment Politics in Mexico*, 1999)
- Since signing the North America Free Trade Agreement in 1994, the percentage of the Mexican population living in poverty has changed from 58.5% to 79%. Poverty is defined by the Mexican government as living on less than \$7.30 per day. (La Jornada, Nov. 27, 2000)
- In 1982 at the beginning of the Latin American debt crisis, Mexico's foreign debt stood at \$78 billion of which \$57 billion was public debt (the rest was owed by the private sector). In 1997, after 15 years of debt reduction and structural adjustment programs mandated by the IMF and World Bank, Mexico's debt was \$170 billion of which \$99 billion was public debt. The average annual growth rate of foreign debt was 5.7% while the economy grew by 1.8% annually. (Nadal, *The Micro-economic Impact of IMF Structural Adjustment Politics in Mexico*, 1999)

David McNally contextualizes the global realities succinctly:

“..the plight of the migrant workers from the Third World exposes a dirty secret about capitalist globalization: while constraints on the movement of capital are being eased, restrictions on the movement of labour are being systematically tightened. It's not that global business does not want immigrant labour to the West. It simply wants this labour on its own terms: frightened, oppressed, vulnerable. The fundamental truth about globalization - that it represents freedom for capital and unfreedom for labour - is especially clear where global migrants are concerned.” (McNally 2002, p. 137)

## **WOMEN IN THE PROGRAM.**

When it comes to migrant workers most people never think of women labourers. Women are often written out of the picture. But the reality is that women comprise the quickest growing segment of the population of migrant workers in today's global economy. As Marjan Wijers notes:

“Women are often in the paradoxical situation of being responsible for the family income, while not having access to well-paid jobs nor the

same opportunities for legal labour migration as men. As a consequence, the number of women migrating is increasing dramatically. Nearly half of the migrants worldwide today are women, although in official policies women are almost exclusively seen as dependents of male labour migrants". (Wijers 1998, p.71)

Migrant women workers in Canada are part of the feminization of international labour migration (Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2010). Compared to their male counterparts, migrant women rely more heavily on their migrant work as a source of income because most are single mothers who have limited job opportunities in their countries of origin due to gendered inequalities. Female migrant workers face many unique challenges that their male counterparts do not. Gendered discrimination, sexual harassment at work or in the migrant and non-migrant community and gendered expectations in their countries of origin are just some of the issues migrant women face. Migrant women are often reminded by their employers of their disposability and they are tasked with working twice as hard in order to justify their presence in a traditionally masculinized program.

In general the foreign worker program is competitive, but women face the additional pressure of knowing there are fewer opportunities for them in Canada and fewer alternatives in their home communities. While family separation is difficult for male workers, female migrants, many from rural communities, have to live with the social stigma associated with the gendered expectation that they should be staying at home being 'proper' mothers. At the same time, it is support from grandparents and extended family members that makes it possible for women to leave. Migrant women are often powerful

economic agents of change within their own households. Their earning power accords them new privileges and yet their gender strains to hold them accountable to old ways of 'being' (Pratt, 2012).

## **MIGRANT WORKERS AND THE TYRANNY OF CITIZENSHIP**

Nations are fragile in their abstract quality. They are imagined communities (Anderson 1981) that require perpetual reinscription through cultural and formalized measures to legitimize their far-reaching material powers. One of the tools used by nations to cement their legitimacy is citizenship which can only be bequeathed to a limited number of individuals. Within the rubric of citizenship there are a set of attendant rights and responsibilities. The expectation is that members will fulfill obligations that benefit the nation, some as extreme as dying for the nation. In turn the members will benefit from the privilege of belonging to the nation. Migrant worker programs not only fulfill an economic function but can be seen as 'nation-building projects' in that they define what it means to belong by concretizing the identity of those who don't belong, thereby circumscribing the migrant as 'permanently foreign' in the imaginary of Canadian identity. (Sharma, 2001) The migrant worker, frozen in their 'foreign-ness' is a social construction that clarifies the domestic qualities of the Canadian worker and legitimizes differentiated sets of rights and privileges along citizen/non-citizen lines. (Sharma, 2001) Restricting the fundamental labour and human rights of migrant workers is an ideologically driven extension of the tyranny of citizenship. Citizenship is, among other

things, about membership privilege. Citizens enjoy fundamental human and labour rights. These are denied to non-citizens. Migrant worker programs make it possible for all citizens to be potential employers of non-citizens. These programs create a nation of citizen-tyrants (Walzer, 1983) who control a population of people who are theoretically here on a short term basis but often stay indefinitely, have few political or welfare rights, and are not potential citizens.

A modern nation state like Canada needs to simultaneously celebrate a heritage but deny history. Acts of genocide, like the deliberate starvation of native people (Daschuk, 2013) that laid the groundwork for the political construction of Canada have to be conveniently erased while the traditions of English and French colonialists are celebrated as rebellions against imperial powers. Racist immigration laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act are dismissed as 'history' but the same history celebrates Sir John A. Macdonald, the country's first Prime Minister who described Chinese people as an 'inferior race' who needed to be driven out of the country: "it is a matter of so great importance that it will engage our attention, and that of every public man in this House, to discover how we can admit Chinese labour without introducing a permanent evil to the country by allowing to come into it, in some respects, an inferior race, and at all events, a foreign and alien race". (House of Commons Debates, 12 May 1882, at 1471-1477 , Sir John A. Macdonald)

Concomitant to the economic structural realities that match Canada with sending nations is an ideologically driven internal panic for 'order at the border' (Sharma 2001) that reprises xenophobic definitions of 'Canadian-ness' defined in contradistinction to 'foreigners' whose entry and mobility within the borders require vigilant social and economic policing. Borders are existential (Sharma 2001) and concretizing them is a hefty piece of work as borders are essential to nation states. No nation imagines itself as global in scope. There is an inside and an outside. Policing the borders, locking down the borders, is about reinforcing the idea of an 'us' inside and a 'them' outside. If borders become porous and uncontrolled, then the security of the national identity is threatened and a national neurosis can set in - an identity crisis of a sort. Migrants within the borderlines threaten the national identity - unless they are policed and monitored and have arbitrated a specific and limited set of civil, political and welfare rights that demarcates their non-citizenship status like the mark of Cain on their forehead.

There are however border passes that are freely given to those who can afford it. Aziz Choudry describes it this as "immigration apartheid" in which the global (often Western) educated elite are mobile, but "of those who are able to leave their home countries at all, the overwhelming majority of migrants are temporary, non-status, exploitable, and often underground/ "illegal". (Choudry 2008)

For Canadian employers, the migrant workers are ideal because the program divests the workers of their humanity and delivers them as the permanently flexible and pliant workforce. A feature of their lives is their deportability. This allows citizen bosses to wield the power of citizenship over the non-status worker. Brought into Canada without a family and isolated from any community, these workers do not need days off for birthdays, dental appointments or familial obligations --- all the ordinary commitments that are part of the network of relationships that inform our humanity and give our lives meaning.

Until recently, most Canadians claimed ignorance of the presence of migrant workers in the country because in truth they never actually see them. Migrant workers are employed in rural work sites far from urban cores where the literal fruits of their labour are consumed. Even if you lived in the rural community, you might not 'see' the migrant worker because they are housed in accommodations on the farm that are purposely set far away from main roads and usually behind greenhouses.

This year temporary foreign worker programs have been the subject of intense scrutiny and debate stemming from reports that Canadian employers are 'abusing' the system by replacing Canadian workers with foreign workers. There has been a very loud and vigorous national debate about the merits of the temporary foreign worker program. Xenophobic and protectionists voices

cry for the closure of the program spouting the fear that ‘Canadian jobs’ were being overrun by foreigners. Others blamed the migrant workers for depressing Canadian wages. The federal government has been swift to react. Key changes have been made to the program such as limits to the number of foreign workers allowed on one job site, limits to the terms of stay for migrant workers and increased fees for employers to participate in the program. Pointedly, the federal government put a moratorium on hiring foreign workers for the food and service industry. This particular focus on the restaurant industry highlights how visibility of the program makes its politically and culturally vulnerable.

The controversy began with reports of Canadian workers being replaced by migrant workers in banks and mines; however it swelled and peaked when it was revealed that restaurants like McDonalds and Tim Hortons were hiring workers through the temporary worker program. There is a correlation between the scale of the public pushback against the program and the sudden visibility of the migrant workers. Migrants in farms and greenhouses can be forgotten, sight unseen. But when the workers are serving coffee in sites that are like second-homes to the mainstream Canadian consumer, a new set of interior borders have been trespassed; the psychological border of cultural Canada has been punctured. It’s hard to think of anything more ‘Canadian’ than Tim Hortons, the small town institution that litters the roadways of Canada’s cultural landscape.

Despite their abstract quality, nation states exact a totality of power over the modern citizen that is unmatched. Constructing national identity is a decidedly cultural project. It involves flags, anthems, state owned and controlled media, national sport teams, sponsorship and promotion of cultural content that impart deep, core imaginative and personalized associations with the nation state. Artists and media makers are key authors of national identity.

Documentary is considered Canada's national art form. By using the nation's 'art form' to look at the lives of migrant workers I am deliberately wielding the nation's pen to rewrite the nation's story.

#### **THE ROLE OF POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY**

The short documentary *Migrant Dreams* is a means to explore the nuanced complexities of migrant women's lives in Canada as they stand at the crossroads of gender, race and citizenship. But the project is not just an exploration; it's conceived as a tool for advancing the struggle for migrant worker rights. Documentaries are potent cultural tools we can use to build social change. As a filmmaker, I am interested in the subversive potential for art to transform and re-imagine society, the revolutionary potential of art. "One of the foremost tasks of art" writes Walter Benjamin, "has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later." By this Benjamin is suggesting 'later' is a revolutionary society. (Benjamin 2008, p. 237)



Culture is a tool that can be deployed to influence the exchange of power between the dominant and less dominated groups in a society. Gramsci's theory of hegemony outlined how culture is central to the construction of consent that confers authority to the knowledge, ideology and value systems of the dominant class. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony underscores the role film and media play in manufacturing consent from those whose material realities are circumscribed by dominant power hierarchies. *Migrant Dreams* is a counter-hegemonic narrative that presents the lives of migrant women in contradistinction to the mainstream proto-narratives that are commonly produced about immigrant and migrant women in Canadian media. As much as culture is used to reinforce dominant power relations, culture can be a powerful tool used to destabilize power hierarchies. And more importantly, the role of the arts is not only a way to counter and critique dominant value systems, but to imagine and articulate alternate ones (Kelley, 2003). Challenging power through counter-hegemonic cultural production is alone not enough, it needs to work in concert with the struggle for economic and political power.

When I was in high school I took on obnoxious political stances, partly ill-informed and largely motivated by a desire to see drastic change. With the cynical gaze of a seventeen year old I saw humanity's failings and decreed people didn't know 'what was best' for them. In my 20's I worked as the News Director for a left-leaning, campus radio station, CKLN. The news I

programmed, with the support of a fleet of like-minded volunteers, was 'radical', hard-hitting and a strident critique of the economic, political and social system that governs this world. We covered the stories that were not covered by mainstream press and were unabashed about positioning ourselves as advocacy media; we were radio for the people by the people. The volunteer programmers who kept our listeners locked to 88.1 on the FM dial were an extraordinarily diverse lot: former political prisoners from Kenya, psychiatric survivors, anti-poverty activists and high school students who fought white supremacist gangs in the Toronto schools. We were autonomous community media that presented an alternative perspective to the commercial drivel. Our programming was a respite from the homogenous drone of 'corporate media' The revolution needed activist media to radicalize audiences and I saw my job as creating a space for the untold stories.

There was something beautifully homespun in our radio broadcasts. Our news media presence was unpolished and passionate. We included the 'ums' and 'ahs' and allowed our guests to go on at length about topics - unheard of in most media outlets where condensed opinions, AKA 'clips', form the bulk of reportage. And indeed we did report on underreported stories before they hit the mainstream - like the CIA's involvement in cocaine cartels in Central and Latin America or the lobbying efforts by pharmaceutical companies to cover-up health studies that showed links between aspartame and brain cancer. And when the Oka Conflict flared up, we were one of the first media outlets

broadcasting the story from the point of view of the Kahnésatake people. There were interesting tensions in our position. We put ‘the people’ on lofty grounds, but sometimes we didn’t trust the people enough to negotiate contradictions and so we often produced ‘radical’ stories that lionized or demonized - sometimes forgetting to humanize. We were championed by a small sliver of activists and dismissed by many.

Eventually I grew tired of preaching to the converted. I saw our media as disconnected from wider society and I wanted to be part of broader social change. I also began to privately suspect that we didn’t invite opposing voices because we were afraid to entertain the idea that our ‘enemies’ might have a rational point here and there. I recognized that my clique of activists preferred to stay ‘pure’ within our own circles but as much as we talked about the ‘power of community’ what I often saw first-hand were the divisions and pitfalls of community. No one could really define what ‘community’ meant, or who the ‘people’ actually were. ‘Community’ was a vaunted word but misunderstood. And more problematically, the political purism that defined our politics meant that everyone was suspect. And even in this exceedingly élite cadre of approved political purists, there remained staunch divisions that would at regular intervals cleave the ‘community’ apart. Charges of oppression and privilege were regularly leveled at members within the highest pedigree of the purity pyramid. No one was innocent and thus everyone guilty. This tore

the 'community' apart and the media we created could be jingoistic, poorly researched and lacking intellectual rigour.

This inspired my move into television documentaries. I construed television as a 'pulpit for the people' and I saw documentaries as an opportunity to take a social issue and open portals of support in untapped communities by using the power of documentary storytelling. My approach was grounded in propaganda. I wanted to manipulate media for my cause. Leni Riefenstahl was evil and I was good. I was like the photographer who lionized Ché Guevara in that iconic photo. Yes there was Ché the fallible man full of foibles, but I wasn't interested in him. I needed the hero for the 'long revolution'. Like Flaherty I needed romantic, fabled characters who fit my pre-set agenda.

Even though I'd left my radical radio station, many of the attitudes and ideas I'd developed on the 'left side of the dial' stayed with me. My targeted audience changed. I set out to create stories for the ill-informed and misguided masses.

By the time I made my first feature documentary, *El Contrato* - a look at migrant Mexican men's lives in Canada, I was convinced my task was to manipulate audiences to join my political movement. *El Contrato* condemned Canada's migrant labour program by exposing stories of abuse, advocating for justice and appealing to audience's emotional empathies. The storytelling approach and production choices I made with *El Contrato* were all guided by my

political agenda. I couldn't entertain complexity or contradictory storylines in the frame. It was necessary for me to create sympathetic characters out of the Mexican migrant men who appeared in the documentary. I didn't actually film any scenes that showed my characters in contradictory poses, but if I had, I am not sure I would have used them as I'd likely be afraid of alienating the audience. I walked into the documentary with a very clear idea of who the audience was, what I wanted them to feel and the journey I wanted to take them on. I articulated very clearly to myself that the typical viewer was your average TVO viewer - read: 'white, middle-class and liberal hearted'. I felt my job was to educate, move and hopefully mobilize viewers into action that would support the rights of migrant workers. For me, documentary was an act of propaganda, deliberate romanticism and illumination of hidden truths.

I am now nearing 50 years of age and I've been patching together a living as a documentary filmmaker for fifteen years. My views of documentary have changed significantly. I see the form as an uneasy and measureless mixture of journalism, art and advocacy. I've always mistrusted the 'art' aspect of the process, reflexively deriding art as a bourgeois pastime that had no revolutionary merit. My view mirrored this quote from Frank Lloyd Wright: 'Art for art's sake is a philosophy of the well-fed'. I've finally come to understand the value of the aesthetic and it took a cantankerous old Marxist theorist like Herbert Marcuse to bring me round to appreciating the revolutionary potential of the aesthetic form. For Marcuse, the aesthetic form can be revolutionary

because they defy bourgeois tastes and sidestep their limitations; they present an alternate reality in which the present value system of capital and pedigree are not confronted but made obsolete.

In An Essay on Liberation , Marcuse suggests that humans could hone a 'biological' need for freedom by adopting an 'aesthetic' interpretation of reality which would liberate them from the repressive constraints of modern capitalism. For Marcuse, capitalism uses popular culture such as concerts and mainstream ballads to anesthetize and condition people into traps of conspicuous consumption. Marcuse identified avant-garde art movements like surrealism or sub-cultures like hippies and the Black Power movement as sources of liberation and a reimagining of what society could look like. Here the chains of servitude could finally be broken. These radical approaches to art focused on form, process and viewer absorption as well as content. Marcuse is echoed in the writings of African American historian and activist, Robin Kelley. Kelley writes in "Freedom Dreams" of the power of the imagination to transform society. Kelley describes surrealism as 'an international revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought'. Kelley explains: "The surrealists not only taught me that any serious motion toward freedom must begin in the mind, but they have also given us some of the most imaginative, expansive, and playful dreams of a new world I have ever known." (Kelley 2003, p. 5) Kelley likens surrealism to social movements like radical feminism.

T.V. Reed's book The Art of Protest highlights the use of avant-garde theatre in the performative politics of the Black Panther party, the role music played in the civil rights movement and how poetry was positioned as central to the formation of political identity within feminist movements of the 1970's in North America. Instead of looking at political art as marginal to a social movement, I believe that we would not have political movements without political art.

Kelley (2003) writes that the best social movements don't just fight oppression they 'enable us to imagine a new society'. According to Kelley it is a central task of social movements to imagine a future, and cultural production is a key tool in realizing this goal. "In the poetics of struggle and lived experience, in the utterances of ordinary folk, in the cultural products of social movements, in the reflections of activists, we discover the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born". (Kelley 2003, pg. 10)

My approach towards Migrant Dreams has been grounded in a series of oppositional cultural strategies that challenge dominant modes of production, narratives and representation. Documentary production and distribution is controlled by a small handful of media oligarchies. I've worked in the broadcast industry and am familiar with the narrow band of programming 'choices' commissioning editors will consider as fundable. The band is so narrow that using the word choice feels contestable. The creative storytelling

voice is equally limited. Increasingly, filmmakers are pressured to deliver 'content' that is familiar to fiction audiences. Documentaries today are constructed and marketed as thrillers delivered in tightly-paced three-act structures that torque tension and overvalue character development. *Migrant Dreams* controverts the decontextualized and personalized narrative favoured in mainstream story structures by insisting on expanding the frame to include the stories of family members left back at home and the circumstances that constrain workers to seek work abroad.

#### **THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PRODUCTION - A TRUE TALE**

To make a living out of making documentaries full time in Canada you need to navigate a complex funding scenario that is dominated by corporate broadcasters. Until I started teaching, my primary source of revenue came from my television documentary work which I subsidized by doing smaller films with non-profit agencies. The smaller projects ensured I didn't have to work as a 'director-for-hire' on commercial gigs like home reno shows. As an independent producer/director who sells programming to broadcasters, you start curtailing your programming concepts to what the market will buy. From a core, foundational starting place you have already compromised the story you are telling for the sake of selling it. What I've done in the past is juggle my interests with what might get licensed by the broadcasters - toxins and baby products, gay cops and reunification of families in Korea are some of the



subjects I had the privilege to focus on through my documentary lens. But most of the programs that aired these documentaries no longer exist. I feel like a marooned survivor who has managed to eke out a living on a small island that is about to be engulfed by unrelenting waves pushed forth by mainstream cultural currents. Dry land has almost disappeared and the waters are rippling at my ankles. Shifting my work into teaching documentary has given me a lifeline. I can work in the media and I don't have to answer to the broadcast masters. The following tale is a precautionary one for anyone who tries to sort out that uneasy relationship between commerce and art.

The email was short. It read: "*Are you in town? Do you have time on Tuesday for a quick chat in the morning?*" On the surface it read like an unassuming message. Who sent it is what matters. I'd just been messaged by a Senior Director of Factual Content at Shaw Media.

I don't ordinarily have coffee with Senior Directors like this individual. She's up there in the power ladder. Pretty much the boss of all 'unscripted' programming for Shaw which includes their flagship TV station: Global Television and 19 other specialty channels, including Food Network, HGTV, Slice, National Geographic and Showcase. When I have made documentaries for History or Global, my contact has always been with one of the commissioning editors for the stations. These production executives report to her. To suddenly get an email, out of the cold, from the big cheese made me

wonder. I replied that I was free and from then on her assistant emailed me back to coordinate the meeting.

I didn't think to ask why this Senior Director wanted to meet. I just assumed it was work related and expected the best, or at the very least a meeting that would lead to positive opportunities. Over the years I've done a lot of work with Shaw Media. They own Global Television and History Canada, these two channels have commissioned four of my documentaries in the past six years.

When I arrived on Tuesday morning at 9 AM, an assistant escorted me into the penthouse suite of Shaw Media's glass building which sits like a frontispiece in the heart of the city's downtown. I had to be escorted to this floor because there was no public access. As soon as I got off the elevator I could see a stunning view of the city. Windows wrapped around the entire floor. Wall to wall windows overlook the city's skyline. The décor was pseudo-night clubby, with low sunken white leather sofas, geometric carpets, angular lampshades and lounge chairs. A private coffee and drink bar offered cappuccinos and other concoctions. I was in the exclusive seat of power & privilege.

The Senior Director walked in. I gave her a friendly hello and almost made a move to give her the standard industry 'hugz' which are hollow, light embraces more for public displays than private connections. But there were no witnesses here. She visibly stiffened at the slight move I made towards her and delivered

a strained 'hello' and then made a beeline for the cappuccino bar announcing her need for a coffee.

When she finally settled in front of me in one of those hipster lounge chairs I was more than curious. What on earth did this woman want?

First the requisite small talk. I talked about diapers and crazy schedules. I asked her how she was doing and she said it was a crunch time for her. The months of May and June are when advertisers make decisions about where to spend their dollars. She relayed that 85% of a broadcaster's revenue are raised during these two critical months. She was in the midst of looking at numbers and she said this was a high-pressure time for her. Then we paused. I waited for her to continue.

The Senior Director grimaced. She looked evenly at me and said: "Min Sook, the reason I've asked you to come in here today is to talk to you about a petition you signed against the show Border Security". My eyes must have grown wide. I was stunned. Inside my heart started hammering. The petition she was referring to was a public letter protesting a television show known as Border Security. The show is billed as an insider's look at the work of the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) tasked with "*keeping Canada safe from threats of all kinds, big and small*". The producers of the show tout the exclusive access they enjoy from the CBSA on 'Canada's frontline'. A few months ago the show drew public ire when one of the show's camera crews

shadowed CBSA agents as they carried out an immigration raid at a construction site in Vancouver. The agents apprehended eight men who didn't have proper papers and took them to a detention centre. While the men were being held in custody, the show's producer gave the detainees waivers to sign which assigned the show legal permission to use their faces and images on television.

When the news broke that a reality television crew filmed an immigration raid a small and vocal group of activists with No One Is Illegal (NOII) organized protests against the series. Their slogan: "Deportation is not entertainment". The activists created a petition critiquing the ethics of how the raid was filmed and calling for the cancellation of the show. Cultural producers in the country were approached and asked to sign onto the petition. I received an email from one of the organizers and unhesitatingly agreed to put my name forward.

Border Security's promotional tagline invites viewers to see 'life on the front lines of national security'. The not so subtle subtext is clear. There is a war on and we have to fight to protect our borders from infiltration of foreign evil.

Each episode features hyper-vigilant border guards in action. The spin is that they are searching bags at the airports looking for drugs and other contrabands, culling through flight lists to identify unwanted visitors with criminal backgrounds and they're stopping suspicious vehicles at border crossing to 'get to the bottom' of inconsistent stories. Trigger words like 'terrorist', 'drugs'

and ‘pedophiles’ are the kind of language used to justify and even celebrate these guardians at the gate.

The point of view of the series is firmly entrenched from the border guard’s perspective. Invariably, the majority of the people they stop and search are poor, people of colour and non-status. What is achieved is a widespread, blanket criminalization and stigmatization of these groups of people.

Individuals who are stopped, searched and questioned are not allowed any air-time to share their story or their perspective of the encounter. The assumption is that all searches are legitimate, all suspects guilty until proven innocent and all guards operate with appropriate judgement calls.

Force Four Productions received permission to film their series as ‘embedded’ TV crews with CBSA directly from Vic Toews, who was the federal Minister of Public Safety during the time of production. The agreement between Force Four and CBSA states that CBSA staff can approve and shut down filming, will accompany all crews on location and CBSA staffers will review all rough footage and have final say on episodes. In a letter to Toew’s office the producers of the show claimed the program would be “a valuable opportunity to promote important messages about Canada’s commitment to border security and to give profile to the Agency as a professional and effective law enforcement organization.” (DiMenna 2013) The production agreement signed by Toews establishes that: “CBSA would enjoy de facto executive production authorities,

and, as such, would identify scenarios, sites and storylines, as well as provide active engagement in, as well as oversight and control of, all film shoot.”

(Lupick 2013) The agreement clearly crosses the line between state sponsored propaganda and independent media to fuse a new zone of government controlled messaging in the guise of entertainment.

The premise of the Border Security show - that our borders need to be vigilantly guarded and protected to ensure ‘bad people and bad stuff’ are not seeping into the country - feeds into the right-wing, anti-immigrant politic currently espoused by the Harper government and one that has a long history in Canadian immigration policies. Racist and xenophobic immigration policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act or the ‘none is too many’ anti-Semitic policies that closed the border gates to Jewish immigrants during World War Two. In today’s post 9-11 political climate, and economically unstable times, building and feeding border-panic is not that difficult. In short, the series Border Security is a propaganda tool for Harper’s right wing, anti-immigrant agenda.

I sat in front of the woman who had licensed this travesty of a television show for Canadian broadcast, absolutely stunned. I was completely blind-sided and unprepared to discuss the petition and my position in the political controversy surrounding the series. An irrational tinge of fear and panic pulsed through my body. This Senior Director is a powerful woman. She is in some ways my boss. She can green light a license for me that feeds my family and builds my career.

In the world of Canadian documentaries the broadcasters are the power brokers. A broadcast license is the only trigger for other sources of funding - be it monies from Telefilm Canada, Rogers Documentary Fund or the Hot Docs-Shaw Documentary Fund. The extraordinary power broadcasters hold over documentary financing has had an impact on the kind of stories that are being told and the way they are told.

The Senior Director explained that she was 'disappointed' that I hadn't approached her about the petition and spoken to her before signing it. She claimed there was 'a lot of misinformation' out there about the show and she wanted me to have 'all the facts'. She went on to praise the production company behind the show and assured me that the people behind this 'documentary' show were just like me. They cared about social issues and adhered to an ethical code of conduct.

I replied that my signing the petition wasn't a personal statement against her, but was in fact a political point of view I was entitled to express. I also pointed out that she and I didn't have a close relationship and in-person meetings with her were not regular occurrences. Given this reality, the idea of my contacting her in advance to notify her of my choice to sign a petition was unlikely and I didn't need her approval to sign a letter of protest that I stood by. But more importantly, I said to her that I hadn't come to this meeting prepared to debate my political opinions and wouldn't do so in such a context. I confessed

that I had honestly looked forward to this meeting thinking that perhaps it might lead to some sorely needed work.

And so the meeting proceeded. In that ever so polite Canadian way, the Senior Director never outright threatened or demanded I take my name off the petition. Instead she insisted that I had signed a petition against her and the team which I'd worked with. She advised me that I wasn't fighting some faceless corporate entity. I replied that she didn't speak for herself as an independent artist, but was in fact representing the interests of a corporation.

The Senior Director was concerned because protestors were framing the show as racist. She said the immigration raid that had sparked the controversy had not been staged for the cameras and the CBSA officers were wholly unprepared to take eight migrants into custody. She downplayed the sensationalism of the production by insisting the raid was just a few CBSA guys who went to the site looking for one particular individual and ended up having to take seven other men into custody. She said she'd viewed the footage and the agents were surprised to find that many migrants on the site and had to fumble around for handcuffs. I replied that the show's premise itself was problematic because it criminalized migrants and people without status. And yes there was a racialized element to this story because most of the people they detain and question are poor, non-English speaking people with brown skin. I added that



the program feeds a 'border panic' that leads to the growth of anti-immigrant sentiments in this country.

The Senior Director remarked that her political direction came from no one, that inferences of her chomping on cigars with the Minister of Public Safety Vic Toews were ludicrous. She stressed that in her entire time at her position she had never been given a political directive. I countered that oftentimes political orders don't have to be direct, they can be communicated in more diffuse ways. The conversation continued for some time before I finally said: "We all know this town is full of dying documentarians. Every other day there is another shop closing its doors. It's a difficult time to make documentaries. I know I have a strong professional relationship with Shaw and many of my docs have been commissioned by you. If I've jeopardized our relationship because I've signed this petition then I'm willing to accept that because I support the petition and stand by it."

It was at that point that the Senior Director seemed to backtrack. She made some kind of jokey comment that she was used to dealing with opinionated documentarians. The meeting ended in a false collegial tone. The Senior Director chided me for suggesting I'd be penalized in any way for signing a petition. "Sign all the fucking petitions you want Min Sook, that's why we love you". I walked out feeling exhausted and mindfucked. The meeting had lasted just over an hour.

I believe the Senior Director's original intent was to intimidate me and pressure me to change my position on the series. Near the end of our meeting the Senior Director looked directly at me and said " this show is not going to be canceled, we're going for another season". I thought it strange that she felt the need to tell me this and later when I thought about it I realized that perhaps she felt she was talking directly to one of the key organizers through me.

The Senior Director had called me into the office because she was panicking. A small band of noisy, underfunded protestors organized with No One Is Illegal (NOII) managed to seize the national stage by drawing attention to the questionable ethics of the production practice of a morally repugnant show. The timing of my meeting with this Senior Director was a high-stakes time for broadcasters. June-July is when advertisers decide which markets they want to invest in and controversial broadcast content is a red flag for risk-adverse advertising executives. The show had become controversial due to the protests. NOII's frontline organizing had had direct impact.

This meeting is a stark illustration of the political economy of production. Documentary programming is largely controlled by a small band of broadcasters who assign a low economic value to documentary content but continue commissioning a few titles justify larger government funding requirements and to cash in on the prestige 'serious' documentaries bestow on their benefactors.

Documentaries don't have commercial marketing muscle, they are the award winning 'cadillacs' that allow broadcasters to showcase shiny trophies in glass boxes that glitter their front lobbies. Documentaries proffer a tinge of dignity amidst an otherwise motley program grid of reality television featuring ex-wives of rock stars and bounty chasing hunters in heat.

Over the past fifteen years, the number of channels interested in licensing independent documentaries with substantive content has almost disappeared. Documentary filmmakers are on thin ice. The small slice of the pie that we are allotted has become increasingly bitter. My meeting with this Senior Director is just a footnote in how commonplace it is for broadcasters to take editorial positions and use their influential positions to pressure independent producers/directors to tow the corporate line.

Creatively and politically the meeting has motivated me to research alternate funding sources and to explore new production paradigms. I'd like to be truly independent of the traditional ties that bind in the commercial documentary market.

## DOCUMENTARIANS IN ME

MIGRANT DREAMS is a piece of art and cultural resistance with the best of intentions: to challenge dominant hierarchies, to suggest imaginative and new ways for framing social justice stories and to co-create a space with migrant women for their stories in the mediasphere.

My interest in looking at the role documentary can play in social movements requires me to locate my own work within a historical and theoretical nexus of practice and principles that inform the work of artist/activists. The history of documentary is rife with authorial agenda. I think I've been guilty of all the sins ascribed to documentarians from the early days of the medium. I've been a propagandist, a romanticist and a strident purist; always with the best intentions of course - to change the world. In my past practice I can see refracted reflections of Grierson (the Propagandist), Flaherty (the Fabulist) and Vertov (the Purist) - the unlikely trinity of documentary messiahs.

John Grierson, often charged as being the 'father' of Canadian documentary described the form as a 'creative treatment of actuality'. In documentary, Grierson saw a tool for educating, influencing and molding the opinions of the masses. In his own words (Grierson 1966, p.147) "I look on cinema as a pulpit, and use it as a propagandist". In North America, propaganda carries a negative connotation stemming from its association with those who have historically opposed the dominant western capitalist view. The original coinage of the

word was neutral, and in fact socially-positive messages related to public service could be its purview. In Latin America, propaganda is interchangeable with “information” as it is assumed that the presentation of all information stems from a subjective point of view or political perspective. Grierson himself studied propaganda and he applied a genteel authoritarianism to his approach. In a 1944 speech he said: “You can be “totalitarian” for evil and you can also be “totalitarian” for good.” (From Grierson to the Docu-soap: Breaking Boundaries, Ed., Izod, Kilborn and Hibberd. 2000, p. 85) Grierson believed in the power and judicial authority of the state to know what was best for people. (1966) Fittingly, Grierson was responsible for the creation of the National Film Board of Canada - a state run agency mandated to support documentary production. A fan of Walter Lippmann’s work, Grierson saw the leader’s job was to both ‘censor and propagandize’ information for the good of the people. In this context, Grierson’s usage of the word ‘propaganda’ is less about manipulating messages to justify state crimes and more about expounding information that would better society.

Robert Flaherty, director of “Nanook of the North” (1922), was an adventurer, a fabulist and a businessman. He worked in the northern regions of Canada for a natural resource company prospecting for iron ore and during his time up north he gained the confidence of an Inuit man named Watallok who shared stories and information about the region and community. Flaherty used that information to publish a book titled: “My Eskimo Friends: Nanook of the North”.

Years later this experience translated into Flaherty's documentary, financed by a French fur trade company, featuring the story of an Inuit hunter titled "Nanook of the North". He famously said: "sometimes you have to lie to tell the truth". The pressing question is 'whose truth?' and 'in whose service?' Flaherty's film was a highly staged portrait of an Inuit man's hunt for survival in the Arctic. Re-enactments were used to build a romanticized picture of a 'noble savage' whose culture was 'captured' for the civilized world to peer at. Flaherty disregarded facts for romance and racist stereotypes. The man who was presented as Nanook did not go by this name, his real name was Allakariallak. Although Allakariallak's tribe used rifles to hunt, Flaherty coached his 'social actors' to use the more traditionally 'authentic' harpoons, a conceit that put their lives in danger. In one scene Nanook is shown as childishly wonderstruck by a gramophone, supposedly a cultural innovation he'd never encountered - but in reality Allakariallak had come across gramophones before. The wife who was depicted in the film as Nanook's wife was in fact two women, both of whom were Flaherty's common-law wives with whom he parented children that he never acknowledged. Flaherty's film was a massive hit in the cultural and news circuit of the day and he was commended for creating a humane and nuanced portrait of an Inuit hero. For Flaherty, reality was a stage and people were puppets with which to create a false memoir of the life of 'exotic' people for the colonial gaze.

The choice to fictionalize reality for the sake of dramatic impact and to impart insight is not in and of itself a problematic choice. Flaherty purported to represent the real - authenticity unfiltered - to an audience that didn't have the storied practice of filtering for authenticity. Film and media audiences of his time were not the 24hr mediacentric viewers of today. He employed a disingenuous and dishonest façade in presenting his films because the re-enactments and fictive elements masqueraded as otherwise. Today, documentary filmmakers like Errol Morris, Clio Barnard and Joshua Oppenheimer have burrowed new fictive-like genres within the expanding cinematic envelope we call documentary. But during the era of *Nanook's* release, the documentary format was received as journalistic and weighed heavily towards reportage. Within this historical period positivism predominated and western notions of 'objectivity' prevailed in the world of documentary, so Flaherty's film was received as 'truth'.

In 1922, the same year Flaherty released '*Nanook of the North*', Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov launched a politically motivated documentary movement with the group Kino Pravda (Film Truth). Founded with his brother Mikahil and his wife, Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's group issued manifestos attacking counter-revolutionary western cultural influences and the 'poison' of fiction film which he variously referred to as 'film-moonshine', 'film-vodka' and a 'hellish idea' invented by the bourgeoisie to 'entertain the masses'. Kino Pravda strove to create proletarian cinema that captured truth,

‘fragments of reality’ through camerawork that largely eschewed manipulation, staged scenes or rehearsed actions. Vertov’s doctrine preached that ‘proletarian cinema must be based on truth - fragments of reality - assembled for meaningful impact.’” There was to be no manipulation, no interaction with the people documented on film, no permission requested to film and no deception. In the Marxist ideology of the time, the western scientific notion of the ‘truth’ also prevailed. The camera was a technocratic conduit of truth whose all seeing eye would capture reality as it unfolded, unmolested by the ministrations of mortal intervention. Unique camera positions caught, in unguarded moments, the movement of people on the streets, in the markets & taverns and in the schools. Interestingly, Vertov’s most famous film ‘Man With Camera’ has some obvious staged shots that break the rules of Kino Pravda. As well, Vertov never addressed the narrative function editing plays in constructing story and manipulating reality. ‘Man With Camera’ is a significant cinematic feat in large part because of the extraordinary editing of Elizaveta Svilova. Svilova used techniques like parallel montages to insert tension and dramatic arcs in what would otherwise be visual flotsam. Kino Pravda set out to affirm the Russian revolution through cinematic ‘truth-telling’.

Kino Pravda heavily influenced the cinema verité documentary movement of the 1960’s that tasked itself with discovering truth through reality. The construction of point of view in editing that is a common feature of verité storytelling is the quiet truth that often goes unspoken when verité films are



discussed. The original filmmakers who embraced verité implied they were delivering reality without manipulation. In practice, a filmmaker who sits for a year in an editing suite to construct a ninety minute story out of 300 hours of footage is not presenting unmediated reality. Those 300 hours reflect subjectively driven decisions about when to shoot, who to shoot and what angles to use during the shooting process. Verité filmmakers take creative license to tell a story that reflects reality as they saw it - taking great temporal, spatial and even factual liberties. Audience reception to verité storytelling has changed with the maturity of the genre, advances in technology and the implosion of the mediasphere in our personal lives.

## **INTERRUPTING OTHERNESS**

*When my daughter Song Ji was three years old she taught me something startling about interrupting Otherness. We had installed a little bird feeder just outside her bedroom window so that we could watch the different birds come by and pick seeds. I thought it was a beautiful way to watch the birds close up. They'd fly right next to the window, wings in mid-air, pick a few seeds and fly away. I used to hold Song Ji up to the window with the curtains drawn back so we could watch the birds in action. But Song Ji never seemed to enjoy this. And finally one day, after another attempt by me to create a bird watching moment, I asked her why she didn't like watching the birds. She said: "I don't want them to look at me".*

All forms of cultural production that address a lived experience outside of the artist's own are mediations of forms of representation. (Alcoff, 1991) And every representation is a constructed set of meanings that purports to suggest reality but in essence questions reality itself. (Hall, 1997) There is no neutral art. I am interested in the dialogue around the politics and ethics of representation because as a documentary filmmaker I spend a lot of time telling stories about the lives of other people.

The political pitfalls of representation are legion. bell hooks eloquently addresses the dangers in misrepresentation of 'others' which ends up reinforcing oppressive scripts and dominant ideology: "No need to hear your voice when I talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority." (hooks 2008, pg.84) I don't want my documentary to continue the 'imperialist project' of representing others. Instead of presuming to speak for others, it's necessary to build a context in which a dialogue can take place that builds space for the subaltern to create a 'countersentence' that writes alternative narratives. In practice we are "speaking *with* and *to*" rather than *for* others.

One of the ways I engage in this process is to eschew the formal interview and

favour extended conversations wherein I engage in active listening. By participating in a dynamic dialogue with the migrant women I countered the unidirectional current of 'information gathering' that frames formal interviews. Within this setting, the role I am playing is multiple and relational. In one sense I am a container for the womens' direct life experiences, in another I am the amplification conduit; I am receiving what can sometimes be traumatic narratives with the goal of sharing these stories with a wider public. My pedagogical goal is to create a space for dialogue and build broader social awareness about personal experiences that can be understood as private manifestations of public histories and public politics.

As a filmmaker, as an immigrant woman of colour, I play an active role in constructing the narrative that the migrant women choose to share. Dori Laub, a holocaust survivor, writes about the co-creative role of the listener to oral testimonies of trauma in the article "*Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening*": "Bearing witness to trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener.... Testimonials are not monologues, they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time." (Laub 1992, p. 70-71) Although Laub is writing about trauma and oral testimonies, I believe his reflection on the active role a listener plays in the construction of narratives is relevant to the posture I take in listening to the personal stories that migrant women choose to share with me. Notably, Laub's ability to enter, reclaim and reconstruct a moment of

trauma with his subjects is attributable to his own personal history of holocaust survival.

When it comes to ‘destabilizing Otherness’, it is making transparent the machinations behind the construction of the Other. “Others are constructed - by those who do the Othering, by those who reflect upon the Othering, and by the Other’s own representations of themselves” (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1996, p.91). We need to make transparent the political underpinnings of these questions: ‘why am I the person to tell this story?’, ‘how am I telling it?’, ‘what cultural assumptions do I bring to this story?’ and ‘how does my political-social location impact the story telling?’ These questions frame my approach in the production process and influence the material viewers engage with in the finished edit.

To paraphrase Foucault: ‘What difference does it make who is producing the art?’ Indeed it makes quite a bit of difference. The tradition of high art studied, financed and celebrated in the west is Eurocentric, rooted in colonial constructs of power and enforces a stereotyped identity of ‘the other’ within essentialist, racist and hegemonic tropes. In his seminal work, Orientalism, Edward Said identified the cultural and political legacies interwoven in the romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East produced in western culture as an extension and elaboration of Western imperial power. Writes Said:

“My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient’s difference with its weakness....As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge (Said 1978, p. 204).

Storytellers are located with social identities that have epistemological impact on our ways of telling a story, our lens and our authorship. The approach requires communication and trust. My production choices also reflect this approach. The Migrant Dreams production crew is primarily an all-female, non-white crew. It is uncommon for women of colour to be seen working independently on productions in full control of the budget and creative process. When the migrant women meet myself and the women I work with there is a palpable shock of recognition.

In her article “Choosing the Margins as a Place of Radical Openness”, bell hooks sees the margins not as ‘a site of deprivation’ but ‘a site of radical possibility, of resistance’. While shooting I am reminded how my own marginality allows me to bridge experiences with migrant women workers so that the production experience is horizontal as opposed to vertical. As a woman of colour they receive me as an ally, a sister. There are moments of bonding that we are able to experience beyond culture, language and status which inform the filming process. However I still exercise privileges that the migrant women are denied: I am a Canadian citizen, speak English and work in a field that allocates me a degree of freedom and personal affirmation that their work does not. And possibly most importantly to me, I am able to live

with my children. Nevertheless, the migrant women and I do share other identities and in the broader context of Canadian society, I slip in and out of the margins. By locating myself politically I can explore how being on the margins gives me an 'edge' that hooks recognizes:

“This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us with an oppositional whole view - a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity.” (hooks 2008, p.83)

I position myself on the margins as a third-wave feminist, bi-sexual, immigrant, working-class mother of two who is a survivor of childhood abuse, a recalcitrant artist and an educator. I embrace the margins because it has been a source of strength and political resilience for me. But I also take advantage of my privileges to strategically move my political, personal and creative agendas forward. In that pursuit, I challenge myself to resist simple storytelling and deconstruct essentialist constructs such as 'the good victim' in narrative arcs.

## THE GOOD VICTIM

*Late Sunday Night,  
Beamsville, Ontario*

*Betty, a young woman whispers into the phone --- she is talking with her mom in Mexico. A long river of tears falls from her eyes as she asks. 'Is the baby sleeping?'*

*Betty has just left her nine-year-old son and her fifteen-month-old baby with her mother in Mexico in order to work in Canada. The pain is unbearable. She was still nursing and her body hasn't quite readjusted to the separation - it's only been a few weeks since she left. Betty has been working in Canada for seven years. The last time she was here she was sent home early because she*

*was pregnant. The boss suspected she got pregnant in Canada, but Betty insisted she arrived pregnant. She tried to hide her condition because she was afraid of being sent home early. But it's hard to hide something from co-workers who work and sleep by your side. Soon people began a gossip campaign about Betty and eventually someone told her boss. When the boss found out Betty was told she was no longer wanted. The boss drove Betty to the airport, gave her \$100 and sent her back home before the contract was over. Betty had been working on that particular farm for 4 years. Back home in Mexico the baby's father walked away and Betty was left with a new mouth to feed and no job. She did everything she could to get back into the program and she considers herself extremely lucky to be in Canada. She says: "I have to make an effort to keep going because the children's fathers are not there for support. My only hope is to make an effort to work hard and finish my work well."*

I noticed that during my shooting and editing stage foremost in my mind was a tension between what I wanted to achieve and the material I gathered. One of the challenges I have is that I need to contain or neuter my protective instinct that drives me to create 'good victims' or subjects who can be deemed worthy of empathy. Betty can be interpreted as the 'good victim' if you were to learn just this part of her story. But Betty's story is more complicated and broadening the frame to admit conflicts that transmute Betty's sympathetic status is critical to interrupting Othering.

Containing complexity in order to manufacture comic book style heroes only creates one-dimensional storytelling and works against my larger goal by falsely presenting an Other that is wholly knowable and oftentimes wholly predictable. In his book 'The Documentary Subject', Michael Renov questions documentary's appropriation of the Other by using the Other in a "totalizing quest for knowledge" (Renov 2004, p.148) Renov cautions against the documentary practice of presenting 'totalized visions' of truth. By doing so we negate the

messy humanity of our subjects and construct them as ‘knowable’ Others. We also alienate viewers from our subjects because no one can identify with a wholly knowable subject, they are icons and not ‘ordinary’ people.

In the past I would have felt responsible for creating a ‘sanitized’ version of migrant women’s lives. Mindful that the majority of media coverage of migrant women is racist, dismissive and denies the women their own agency, I have felt it was necessary to create counter stories to challenge the extant myths. Spivak also argues for “strategic essentialism” by marginalized groups in deliberately selecting what and how they present themselves to a broader and prejudiced public. (Spivak, 1987)

Betty’s story for example brought out my instinctual desire to control the ‘social script’ of my film. She was kicked out of a farm because she was pregnant. The boss found out because the other workers on the farm gossiped about Betty and told the employer. Not only did Betty’s co-workers expose her pregnant state to the employer, they also ridiculed and harassed Betty for becoming pregnant. Betty’s account of the oppression she felt at the hands of her fellow workers paints a complicated picture of hierarchy and social control within the migrant women’s community. It has often reminded me of the kind of social policing that takes place within prisons.

I wasn’t sure viewers could handle that kind of complexity without inserting



their own stereotypical assumptions of migrants within the frame and ultimately absolving the program and the larger political system from any culpability in Betty's circumstance. I considered editing her story out so that viewers only learned about how the employer fired Betty upon learning of her pregnancy. But I had to be honest with Betty's story. One of the main sources of pain and humiliation for her was the way in which other workers treated her. She viewed the employer as having acted decently. Yes the employer fired her, but at least the employer drove her to the airport and at least the employer gave her one hundred dollars in cash - Betty viewed these gestures as small acts of kindness. I disagreed with this analysis and saw once again how the employer was given a free pass and how the larger structure of the migrant labour program in essence hides the acts of violence perpetrated by the state. But simplifying Betty's story would also have stripped away a reality of the social world created by the migrant worker program. The migrant women are policed most often, on a daily and micro level, by each other. Betty and other women who have been targeted by their co-workers tell me that they can and do find ways to fight back against abusive employers, supervisors or recruiters but if they are bullied and abused by their own housemates, then this is unbearable. It can often be the conflict with each other that creates the most strife. This reality has shifted the narrative structure and deepened the storytelling to build a much more complicated picture of the ways in which oppression inhabits migrant women's lives.

I don't want to participate in adding to the glut of suffering as spectacle in the public sphere, suffering that leads to a kind of permanence of suffering, a 'naturalness' of suffering in the person suffering and an apathy to suffering in the person viewing the suffering. The ways in which the suffering of black bodies was broadcast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina is a case in point. In her essay 'Othering the Other: The Spectacle of Katrina for our Racial Entertainment Pleasure', Mariana Ortega describes the racist media coverage of devastated New Orleans as an 'exhibition of the otherness of the other' which made 'already vulnerable bodies even more vulnerable'.

More pointedly, Susan Sontag wrote:

"To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more - and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize." (Sontag 2003)

The mass circulation of suffering parables in popular media has created a curiously empty and apathetic echo in the large chamber of public horrors that exhibits sufferings for all to see. I am not interested in creating testimonies of suffering that victimize the participant, retrench their victimhood and absolve the spectator from their complicity in the larger structural power lines that implicate all of us as social & political actors in today's globalized economy. I don't want to create an experience of empathy that absolves the viewer from action.

In the past I have purposefully created storylines that spoke to universal experiences in an attempt to create empathic connections between the viewer and the people in my documentaries. I wanted viewers to care about the people in my documentaries and hoped that empathy would lead to political action. I now question this causal chain, or at the very least I am mindful that empathy can lead to nothing but self-affirmation of liberal 'good-heartedness' on the viewers' behalf (I care/I cried so I must be a good person). Empathy can be achieved through a kind of 'imaginative identification' with the hardships faced by the migrant women. Pratt argues that this kind of empathic identification is never benign. If the viewer listens to a migrant woman's story and puts herself in the storyline she is appropriating the story and lives of migrant workers and incorporating them into a familiar frame - her own and ends up learning little about the complex specifics about the migrant women in the film and fails to 'enter into a relationship with those who give testimony'. (Pratt. Pg. 80).

Anne Cubilié argues that ethical witnessing requires messy storytelling. It is fragmentation and incompleteness that are "integral to the act of testimony, as (this) refutes the possibility of building complete narratives and solid truths" which run the risk of allowing readers to use these traumatic experiences to complete their own personal narratives in cookie-cutter fashions. (Cubilé, 2005)

MIGRANT DREAMS intentionally creates a rich, textured portrait of migrant women in Canada that defies the flattened, one-dimensional representations of migrant women that dominate the media portrayals in mainstream media.

Most of the women in this documentary are the primary breadwinners in their family but they have to carry the double-burden of 'performing' traditional female roles. They often say they have to be both the 'woman and the man' in their family. Sometimes it is a hard adjustment to fit back into the stereotypical female roles in their villages after they have worked abroad. It's like they live two lives. And as mothers they are constantly split, struggling to come to an equilibrium about labour outside the home and parenting.

The women in this documentary are strong, articulate and big-dreamers.

Alejandra declares: ***"I promised myself: 'I will get ahead'. It is a goal I set for myself. It was always my goal to say that if I can manage to get into the Canadian program, then I am going to build my house. And I will do it. I want my kids to get an education and go to school. And I did both these things!"***

One facet of the migrant worker experience some women speak about is how they are able to access a specific corridor of freedom in Canada. Despite difficult working and living conditions, many women talk about how their lives here make them feel like they can breathe.

One of the women in the documentary, Theresa said candidly:

*Compared to being at home... this is entirely another life. Because we are in Canada. And we have our jobs, money and freedom. And so, if we want to go somewhere, for example, to the store, then we go. And back home the women that stay behind. In Mexico, they don't have the same freedom. Here, it is totally different. Totally. This is Canada. And when we say we are going to Canada, it is like a breath of fresh air.*

Migrant women I have met talk about tapping into this constricted freedom they discover during their time here. Yes they experience oppression and contraventions of basic labour and human rights and yes they endure painful separations from their children. But they also find they are able to forge new lives in Canada that would be out of their reach in their home countries.

Patricia Pessar writes:

“Within households, Latin American and Caribbean immigrant women have often been able to use their wages and increased access to state services as leverage to attain more control over household decision-making, over personal and household expenditures, and over spatial mobility.” (Pessar 2005, p.7)

It is a constrained freedom with many facets. On one side, they are mothers who live daily with guilt that they have ‘abandoned’ their children; on another side they are modern ‘amazons’ who stray far from home and whose income supports large, extended families back home; on an oppositional and yet related side they are low wage workers whose very gender labels them as disposable and easily targeted for abuse and yet on another side many are

single women who live and work in a community of migrants that is populated mostly by men and thus they have an opportunity to explore romance even if it is romance that has no future as most of these men are married fathers back home.

Encountering the double-sided experience of migration for women workers has been surprising to me and again, challenges my initial impulse to simplify the picture and tell a story of 'good and bad' arcs that fails to tell more complicated, dense and human stories that provoke, surprise and move viewers. I believe that is the path towards creating critical media that activates the mind and politicizes the viewing encounter.

### **MATERNAL NARRATIVES**

I lost my own mother when I was twelve years old and I think that makes me especially sensitive to the power of maternal narratives. I realized that I started this film project without truly thinking through how the traditional maternal narrative is employed, challenged and redefined through my filmmaking. In the book "Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labor and Love", Geraldine Pratt writes that stories of maternal discourse are both 'easy and treacherous' because they are digestible in traditionally conservative narratives built around family values and women's gendered responsibilities but they can also point the fingers accusingly at the mother and stigmatize her for 'abandoning' her family. Pratt has worked extensively with Filipina domestic migrants in Vancouver and she writes: "Women who speak

publicly about their experiences of leaving their children and the difficulties of reuniting in Vancouver invite their own stigmatization - as bad mothers”. (Pratt 2012, p.79) I am conscious of how complicated the maternal narrative can be and wary of how the women in my film can be judged as uncaring mothers or praised as heroic mothers - for me either judgement is problematic. I myself am not your ‘typical’ mother. During both of my pregnancies I was actively filming documentaries - I even travelled to North Korea in my third trimester and returned shortly after I gave birth. I am a working mom and that means I am not at home nurturing my children around the clock. My partner is the stay-at-home parent. I remember when both my children were newborns I was often filming or attending some kind of work engagement and when I met other new moms I felt guilty and vaguely inadequate that I wasn’t at home nursing my children. So I’d rush home each night and make up for my absence in the emotional and psychological ways I could. I did this even though intellectually I knew I was not abandoning my children and I could politically critique the sexist framing of motherhood roles.

I had left my children in the competent care of my stay-at-home partner. I have an ideal child-care scenario at home. One parent committed full-time to our children and one who works. Yet I still felt guilty. I can’t imagine what it must feel like for a migrant woman to leave her children for extended periods of time, sometimes with loving grandparents but other times with caregivers who are not fully trusted. This is a reality they must negotiate and I don’t want

to go through the empty steps of ‘putting myself in their shoes’, but I do feel it is important for me as the filmmaker to keep these complicated routes of maternal longing, guilt, desire and dreams in mind when I make this film. Keeping in mind my shifting and subjective relationship to the documentary content helps me navigate the multifarious ways in which diverse audiences can and have related to the film.

### **CRITICAL VIEWING AND POLITICAL APPLICATION**

MIGRANT DREAMS has been exhibited in a variety of different contexts - in a labour arts festival, at a food sustainability conference and at a formal art gallery. Each viewing encounter generates multiple readings of the same text. Within each ‘audience’, there is heterogeneity and diverse interpretations ranging from an admixture of preferred, oppositional and negotiated readings (Hall, 1980). The screenings have been organized within a context of political and cultural organizing that expands on the ideas in the film. The Toronto Youth Food Policy Council followed a screening of the film with a panel discussion featuring Chris Ramsaroop, a member of J4MW; Jenn Pfennings, a farmer and employer of migrant workers; and Ed Dunsworth, an academic/agricultural activist. At the Windsor Art Gallery, Migrant Dreams played alongside other art projects that addressed issues of citizenship, race and belonging. Whenever possible, the venue screening the film also makes a series of action sheets available. The accompanying material provides further



political and economic context to the film and also directs viewers to the websites of a range of political and civic organizations that are engaged in the movement for migrant worker justice.

Many Canadian viewers expressed surprise at how candid the women were about their lives. I think the traditionally understood narrative of an impoverished migrant travelling abroad to support their family at home and enduring exploitative treatment at work whilst making great personal sacrifices overall is a common story that has been oft told and threatens to be a cliché. One television programmer even told me she was suffering from ‘migrant worker fatigue’! I wanted to make sure the story I told about the lives of migrant women was more than one that is largely predicated on the victimhood status of the migrant women. The women in my film did speak about great poverty and hardship, but they also showed humour, joy, resolve and selfishness. They were rounded and uncontained in their representation, not flattened into cookie-cutter bites of convenient consumption. Alejandra talks about having a romance with a migrant man in Canada who has a family back home in Mexico. She reveals her attachment to him but also acknowledges the bittersweet reality of loving another person in the migrant worker program, she has no expectations from him when she is in Mexico and doesn’t expect the relationship to go beyond the specificity of time/place of the program. The romantic rules of engagement for migrant women are temporal and site specific. Alejandra says ruefully: “What happens in Canada stays in Canada”

and she says her romance is a 'Canada love'.

I found it interesting that every time I've played this film to Canadian viewers many would laugh at this line from Alejandra. I'm not exactly certain why they find this so funny, but this particular line always elicits a big laugh. I think the laughter stems from viewers being surprised at recognizing a cliché normally associated with frat-boy antics, spoken by an older migrant woman. I don't think migrant women are sexualized as subjects but as objects. The familiar narrative is that of the migrant woman sexually harassed by the lewd supervisor; the victim in the fields. But the equally real story of migrant women as randy, provocative and lusty agents of sexual engagement is absent.

I've had different reactions with audiences of migrant women. Alejandra's cousin, Milagros, reacted strongly, not with humour but more with recognition and a shade of anger. Milagros remarked that Alejandra should have followed the rule and not divulged the story of her love to outsiders. Milagros felt that Alejandra exposed too much and this story of stolen intimate love should have been kept within the community of migrant women. There was also a suggestion that Alejandra's relationships choices could in fact jeopardize her employment at the greenhouse. In diffuse and direct ways migrant women are told their 'moral conduct' is monitored by employers and SAWP program administrators. Some employers will post notices in employer provided housing which set boundaries on who is a permissible guest in the house and curfews

that limit the women's mobility. Women are sensitive to being seen as 'immoral' by their employers and thus unemployable. Another woman, Theresa, who appears in the basement scene where women joke about how the wives of their lovers should be grateful to them for 'keeping their men warm', was moved to tears by the short doc. For Theresa, having her story reflected back to her was an emotional and unexpected encounter.

Possibly the largest obstacle to screening this film is building pathways from screening to political action. When I show the film to Canadian viewers I want to incite action across the political spectrum - from public acts of protest to community organizing to legislative action that challenges the laws that support the program to political action that destabilizes the economic power of those who profit directly and indirectly from the program. Susan Sontag observes that testimonies of trauma and pain must be positioned to lead to radical political dissent. In her book 'Regarding the Pain of Others' she wrote:

“So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent- if not inappropriate- response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may- in ways we might prefer not to imagine- be linked to their suffering, as the wealth as some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark.”  
(Sontag 2003, p.91)

My previous documentary on migrant workers, *El Contrato* played a narrow role in building the migrant worker justice movement in Canada. It's difficult for

me to gauge just what kind of role it played, but I'm aware that many activists have told me that my documentary was a gateway into the world of organizing for migrant worker justice. The film is included in the syllabus of a diverse range of courses taught in Canadian universities. Community organizations like Justicia For Migrant Workers have often used the doc as a teaching and mobilizing tool.

Did El Contrato instigate the kind of large-scale national change I had hoped? No. There were small casualties: Denton Hoffman, General Manager of the Leamington-based Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association resigned; Father Frank Murphy, the Catholic priest who was sympathetic to migrant workers was relocated to another church; the representatives from the Mexican consulate who appeared in the documentary lost their posts and so too did Gabe Mancini, the greenhouse Supervisor who offered his casual racist observations to the camera. But no laws were changed and the program remained intact. There were however stronger commitments from the United Food and Commercial Workers Union to establish multiple migrant worker centres throughout rural Ontario. It is hard to know if this support from organized labour was connected to the film or not. The UFCW's primary migrant worker coordinator, a union 'lifer' certainly secured himself a job for life. And the Mexican government did open up a satellite office in Leamington to better service the workers in the region. Prior to the film's release, the consulate was staffed with five people who worked out of the Toronto office. These individual changes amount to

pebbles being thrown in a lake. Small ripples spread out into wider ones but eventually the surface resumed its glassy stillness. The people who were removed were simply replaced by more of the same kind. The deeper question here is how much can education processes or cultural products in themselves instigate change without being linked with multi-sectoral organizing that insists on a historical context.

Hopefully this short documentary will also be used by community groups from diverse sectors: food justice, migrant worker justice, labour organizations and immigrant rights groups that have coalesced together in the movement for migrant worker justice. This political movement is comprised of distinct communities who are tasked with the job of negotiating the messy dynamics that rise out of coalition movements. Broadly put this movement is comprised of labour activists, immigrant rights activists, environmentalists and food activists. Race and class are key signifiers of power and position within these movements. For example, Alkon and Agyeman note that the food movement is 'predominantly white and middle-class' which itself is a kind of 'monoculture'. This results in social change strategy that favours the positionality and privilege of the dominant voice in the movement. Thus the food movement's emphasis on 'buying organic' is unrealistic and alienates the movement from connecting with those outside its socio-economic berth. (Alkon and Agyman 2011, pg. 3)

Art can problematize the struggle for social change and simultaneously present alternative frames with which to mobilize for change. In her seminal article

“Coalition Politics: Turning the Century”, Bernice Johnson Reagon warns against looking for comfort in coalition work. Writes Reagon: “You don’t get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You cant’ stay there all the time ” (Reagon, 1981). Its possible and necessary to have a messy exchange of views and strategies that acknowledge power and difference in move towards change and action.

Lately I’ve been thinking a lot about what it takes to create media that incites social action. This leads me to question what kind of media does the opposite? What kind of media leads to apathy, political inaction and support for the status quo? In ‘The Empire of Illusion’ Chris Hedges describes how American culture has replaced literacy with imagistic storytelling that venerates vapid celebrities and revels in the spectacle of a consumer-driven narcissism that functions to support and normalize the enormous human rights abuses and ecological devastation wrought by the current system of global capitalism that dominates the socio-economic and political systems of our world. Hedges cites trash television programming, Hollywood blockbusters, celebrity-gossip media sites and ‘reality’ productions as part of a mass media engine that works to create an illusory reality that traps viewers into a kind of political paralysis.

Writes Hedges:

“The flight into illusion sweeps away the core values of the open society. It corrodes the ability to think for oneself, to draw independent conclusions, to express dissent when judgment and common sense tell you something is wrong, to be self-critical, to challenge authority, to grasp historical facts, to advocate for change, and to acknowledge that

there are other views, different ways, and structures of being that are morally and socially acceptable. Those who slip into this illusion ignore the signs of impending disaster. The physical degradation of the planet, the cruelty of global capitalism, the looming oil crisis, the collapse of financial markets, and the danger of overpopulation rarely impinge to prick the illusions that warp our consciousness. (Hedges 2009, p.52)

As politically engaged artists we can promote oppositional and critical cultural literacy in our audiences. We have a responsibility as cultural workers to pay attention to the impact of our storytelling and to critique our methodology. Film screenings need to contextualize the migrant worker program and offer space for strategies of resistance to be articulated. The film is an opportunity to engage viewers in critical, self-reflexive viewing so that their own representational constructions are made apparent to them. As opposed to being an end to itself, the film is a catalyst for collective analysis, self-reflexivity, and application to one's specific context including exploration of actions.

Just as creating nation states and legitimating their spheres of power are imaginary acts, so too is resistance. Here I think the role of the artist is to help visualize and redraw the lines of the real. Instead of 'seeing' the migrant workers as alien and foreign, storytelling that invites viewers to 'see' the migrant women in their totality or as agents of change is part of this creative resistance. Storytelling that defies the ahistorical and decontextualized presentation of migrant women's lives interrupts the 'normalization' of their status as global have-nots. This one media text works on multiple levels. I

suggest an effective use of it is pair the film with a follow-up discussion of decoding questions that move people towards a process of 'conscientization', which in the Frierean sense, is the development of individual and collective critical consciousness to prepare people to act for social change. (Freire, 1970)

## CONCLUSION

The central question I began with remains: how is art used as a tool for political action? In exploring this simple question I've raised other ancillary ones that question authorship, subjectivities, representation, the political economy of production and modes of viewing. Its clear to me that making political art is as much about the process as it is about the distribution and use. To that end, I think it's critical to build relationships with diverse communities who are engaged in interlocked struggles that address justice for migrant workers: unions, environmental organizations, food sovereignty activists, feminists, immigrant and refugee rights organizations, anti-globalization movements and those in the anti-border movement. The documentary has the potential to build the dialogue between disparate movements and to mobilize memberships on specific actions. Alone, the film's impact is limited. In the hands of activists - the film's power is ripe with potential.

Aside from mobilizing migrant worker allies, the film is also a tool for engaging migrant workers from diverse communities in a shared struggle for justice.

When migrant workers come into Canada, they often experience their struggles



as individual struggles. The film draws out some of the commonalities of how women encounter the migrant worker program and this can lead to identifying the systemic nature of the program's oppressive policies. As stated earlier in this report, this short documentary is one part of a larger feature documentary that I'm still in the midst of shooting. The feature documentary focuses on how women in the program are fighting back in myriad ways. My hope is that by chronicling migrant worker led resistance, other workers will use the film to co-create their own subversive responses to a program predicated on submission and exploitation.

The process of making this documentary has drawn me into a collaborative and constantly evolving relationship with J4MW. I am not a member of J4MW, but I have been privileged to film alongside their members for this project. It's allowed me to appreciate the tensions, challenges and opportunities that emerge out of this relationship. Despite moments of mistrust or conflicted strategies, this collaboration presents itself as a creative, and possibly revolutionary moment of change. As a filmmaker its not easy to constantly question your process and your political choices. But investing my goals of political change into the process of filmmaking means I'm thoroughly engaged in the eventual political transformation of my own being. And that is dangerous territory indeed.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcoff, M. Linda. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique*, No. 20, University of Minnesota Press (Winter, 1991-1992): 5-32.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso Books, 2006.

Barndt, Deborah. *Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail*. Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

Basok, Tanya. "Free to Be Unfree: Mexican Guest Workers in Canada." *Labour, Capital and Society* 32 (2), 1999. pp. 192-221.

Basok, Tanya. "Mexican Seasonal Migration to Canada and Development: A Community-Based Comparison." *International Migration* 41(2), 1999.

Basok, Tanya. "Post-National Citizenship, Social Exclusion, and Migrants' Rights: Mexican Seasonal Workers in Canada." *Citizenship Studies* 8(1), 2004. pp. 47-64.

Basok, Tanya. *Tortillas and Tomatoes: Transmigrant Mexican Harvesters in Canada*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 2002.

Becker, Carol. "Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art." in *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, & Social Responsibility*, edited by Carol Becker, 113-129. New York & London: Routledge, 2004.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Penguin UK, 2008.

Berger, John. *Art & Revolution*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1969.

Binford, Leigh. "Migrant Remittances and (Under)Development in Mexico." *Critique of Anthropology*, 23.3 (2003): 305-36.

Binford, Leigh. "Social and Economic Contradictions of Rural Migrant Contract Labor Between Taxcala, Mexico and Canada." *Culture & Agriculture* 24.2 (2002): 1-19

- Bruzzi, Stella. New documentary. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Chakravorty, Spivak Gayatri. "In other worlds: Essays in cultural politics." New York: Methuen (1987).
- Choudry, Aziz. "Neoliberal Immigration and Guestworker Programs." International Migrant Alliance Founding Assembly. YMCA, Hong Kong. June 15, 2008. Address.
- Cubilié, Anne. Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights. Fordham Univ Press, 2005.
- Daschuk, James. Clearing the Plains: Disease, politics of starvation, and the loss of Aboriginal life. Vol. 65. University of Regina Press, 2013.
- DiMenna, Hilary. "FTW Friday: Exploitative "Border Security" Episode Won't Air". This Magazine blog. (May 2013) <http://this.org/blog/2013/05/10/ftw-friday-exploitative-border-security-episode-wont-air/> (accessed June 2013)
- Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of the Earth. New York: Grove, 1963.
- Faraday, Fay. Made in Canada: How the Law Constructs Migrant Workers' Insecurity. Metcalf Foundation. 2012
- Freire, Paulo. "Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans." Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum (1970).
- Grierson, John. Grierson on Documentary. Univ of California Press, 1966.
- Gross, Dominique M. "Temporary Foreign Workers in Canada: Are they Really Filling Labour Shortages?" CD Howe Institute Commentary 407 (2014).
- Hall, Stuart. Culture, Media, Language. London: Hutchinson, 1980.
- Hall, Stuart. Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. Birmingham: England: Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973
- Hedges, Chris. Empire of Illusion: the End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle. New York: Nation Books, 2009.
- Hennebry, Jenna. Permanently Temporary?: Agricultural Migrant Workers and Their Integration in Canada. Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2012.
- hooks, bell. "Choosing the Margins as a Place of Radical Openness." In The Applied Theatre Reader, edited by Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, 80-85. London: Routledge, 2008.

House of Commons Debates, 12 May 1882, at 1471-1477 , Sir John A. Macdonald  
Izod, John, Richard W. Kilborn, and Matthew Hibberd, eds. From Grierson to  
the Docu-Soap: Breaking the Boundaries. Indiana University Press, 2000.

Justicia For Migrant Workers. Mission Statement.  
<http://www.justicia4migrantworkers.org/index.htm> (accessed June 10, 2014).

Kelley, Robin DG. Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination. Beacon  
Press, 2003.

Kellner, Douglas. Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics  
Between the Modern and the Postmodern. London: Routledge, 1995.

Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening." Testimony: Crises  
of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (1992): 57-74.

Lupick, Travis. "Harper Government is "de facto" Executive Producer of Border  
Security Reality TV Show". Straight.com. (March 2013)  
<http://www.straight.com/news/363486/harper-government-de-facto-executive-producer-border-security-reality-tv-show> (accessed April 2013)

Marcuse, Herbert. *An Essay on Liberation*. Vol. 319. Beacon Press, 1969.

Marcuse, Herbert. The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist  
Aesthetics. Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.

McNally, David. Another World is Possible: Globalization and Anti-Capitalism.  
Arbeithen Ring, 2006.

McMurtry, Alyssa. "Modern Day Slavery." Canadian Dimension. (April 2013)  
<http://canadiandimension.com/articles/5247/> (accessed June 2014)

Nadal, Alejandro. "The Micro-Economic Impact of IMF Structural Adjustment  
Policies in Mexico." The Development Group for Alternative Policies. (eds)  
(1999).

Ortega, Mariana. "Othering the Other: The Spectacle of Katrina for our Racial  
Entertainment Pleasure." Contemporary Aesthetics 2 (2009).

Pessar, Patricia. "Women, Gender, and International Migration Across and  
Beyond the Americas: Inequalities and Limited Empowerment Report for the  
Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in Latin  
America and the Caribbean. UN Population Division, Mexico City, (2005)

Pratt, Geraldine. *Families Apart: Migrant Mothers and the Conflicts of Labour and Love*. U of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Preibisch, Kerry, and Evelyn Encalada Grez. "The Other Side of El Otro Lado: Mexican Migrant Women and Labor Flexibility in Canadian Agriculture." *Signs* 35.2 (2010): 289-316.

Preibisch, Kerry. "Patterns of Social Exclusion and Inclusion of Migrant Workers in Rural Canada." Ottawa: The North-South Institute (2007).

Preibisch, Kerry. "Local Produce, Foreign Labor: Labor Mobility Programs and Global Trade Competitiveness in Canada." *Rural Sociology* 72.3 (2007): 418-49.

Preston, Sheila. "Ethics of Representation." In *The Applied Theatre Reader*, edited by Tim Prentki and Sheila Presto, 65-69. London: Routledge, 2008.

Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Coalition Politics." *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1981): 250-57.

Reed, T.V. *The Art of Protest*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Renov, Michael. *The Subject of Documentary*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

Sharma, Nandita. *Home Economics: Nationalism and the Making of "Migrant Workers" in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006

Sharma, Nandita. "On Being Not Canadian: The Social Organization of "Migrant Workers" in Canada\*." *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 38.4 (2001): 415-439.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2003.

Preston, Sheila. "Ethics of Representation." In *The Applied Theatre Reader*, edited by Tim Prentki and Sheila Presto, 65-69. London: Routledge, 2008.

Vertov, Dziga, Translated by Kevin O'Brian. "The Factory of Facts and Other Writings" *October* (1978): 109-128

Walia, Harsha. "Transient Servitude: Migrant Labour in Canada and the Apartheid of Citizenship." *Race & Class* 52.1 (2010): 71-84.

Walia, Harsha. "Why Everyone Should Care About the Temporary Foreign

Worker Program.” The Mainlander. (June 2014).  
<http://themainlander.com/2014/06/23/why-everyone-should-care-about-the-temporary-foreign-worker-program/> (accessed June 26, 2014).

Walzer, Michael. Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality. Basic Books, 1983.

Wijers, Marian. “Women, Labour and Migration: The Position of Trafficked Women and Strategies for Support.” In Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition, edited by Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema, 69-78. Psychology Press, 1998.

Wilkinson, Sue and Celia Kitzinger, ed. Representing the Other: A Feminism & Psychology Reader. Sage, 1996.

## APPENDIX 1

### MIGRANT DREAMS PARTICIPANTS

Wendy Yolanda Péna Armenta

Selene del Carmen

Angélica Maria Solano Carmona

Clicería Sanchez Flores

Evelyn Encalada Grez

Teresa de Jesus Reyas Gutiérrez

Beatriz Sanchez Huertas

Teresa Velasquez Leonardo

Teresa Valencia de Los Angeles

Victoria Guadalupe Meneses

Cresensia Sanchez Meza

Isabel Sánchez Nonato

Isabel Trujillo Pedroza

Matilde Mata Rosas

Amparo Huerta SiFuentes

Yvonne Franco Valencia

## APPENDIX 2. ACCOMPANYING ACTION SHEET

### JUAN ARIZA, HAMPSTEAD SURVIVOR. RIGHT TO STAY CAMPAIGN

On February 6, 2012, a horrific collision near Hampstead, Ontario killed eleven men, and left three others critically injured. Juan Ariza, 35, was one of those survivors. The Peruvian native had only been in Canada three days when the Hampstead tragedy changed his life forever. He had been recruited to Canada as a migrant agriculture worker. Ever since the tragic collision, Juan has been recuperating in a nursing home in London, Ontario.

With the help of the *Right to Stay* Steering Committee, Juan would like to build a productive life in Canada. That is why he came here to begin with. He has applied for permanent residency in Canada based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. To grant him permanent residency would be in the best interest of his children. To return him to Lima would result in inhumane hardship for Juan and his family, particularly given his medical condition and the lack of supports available to them in Peru.

Please provide your support for Juan's *Right to Stay* in Canada by signing the petition at [www.change.org/right2stay](http://www.change.org/right2stay) and tell Jason Kenney, the federal Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, that he should do what is right and fair and allow Juan's application for permanent residency.

For more information contact  
Naveen P. Mehta,  
General Counsel and Director of Human Rights, Equity & Diversity.  
United Food and Commercial Workers Union  
naveen.mehta@ufcw.ca



## APPENDIX 3 – ACCOMPANYING ACTION SHEET

### TELL LEAMINGTON’S MAYOR TO STOP RACIALLY STEREOTYPING MIGRANT WORKERS!

Every year over 6,000 migrant workers come to the town of Leamington to work in the greenhouses and fields. Their labour is wanted, but their presence in town is unwelcome. The Mayor of Leamington recently called on police to ‘crack down’ on ‘lewd’ behavior by Jamaican migrant workers in town. John Paterson said Jamaican migrant workers have been making inappropriate comments to women that make them feel uncomfortable. "Not to be bigoted, not to be racist, not to be anything, it is directly related to some of the Jamaican migrant workers that are here," Paterson said.

Rather than dealing with individual instances of harassment, the Mayor’s comments reinforce racialized stereotypes and further stigmatize the workers in town who are already disparaged for using public facilities like libraries or from simply walking the streets of the town. Leamington town council is set to introduce a loitering by-law to deter people, namely migrant workers, from gathering in the streets.

Contacts for you to write to speak out against the racism against migrant workers in Leamington:

Mayor of Leamington  
mayor@leamington.ca

HRSDC Minister Jason Kenney  
jason.kenney@parl.gc.ca  
HRSDC jointly oversees the migrant worker programs in Canada with Citizenship and Immigration (CIC).

CIC Minister Chris Alexander  
chris.alexander@parl.gc.ca  
CIC jointly oversees the migrant worker programs in Canada with HRSDC  
**For more information**  
**[justicia4migrantworkers.org](http://justicia4migrantworkers.org)**

## APPENDIX 4 – ACCOMPANYING ACTION SHEET

### JUAN ARIZA, HAMPSTEAD SURVIVOR. RIGHT TO STAY CAMPAIGN

On February 6, 2012, a horrific collision near Hampstead, Ontario killed eleven men, and left three others critically injured. Juan Ariza, 35, was one of those survivors. The Peruvian native had only been in Canada three days when the Hampstead tragedy changed his life forever. He had been recruited to Canada as a migrant agriculture worker. Ever since the tragic collision, Juan has been recuperating in a nursing home in London, Ontario.

With the help of the *Right to Stay* Steering Committee, Juan would like to build a productive life in Canada. That is why he came here to begin with. He has applied for permanent residency in Canada based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. To grant him permanent residency would be in the best interest of his children. To return him to Lima would result in inhumane hardship for Juan and his family, particularly given his medical condition and the lack of supports available to them in Peru.

Please provide your support for Juan's *Right to Stay* in Canada by signing the petition at [www.change.org/right2stay](http://www.change.org/right2stay) and tell Jason Kenney, the federal Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, that he should do what is right and fair and allow Juan's application for permanent residency.

For more information contact  
Naveen P. Mehta,  
General Counsel and Director of Human Rights, Equity & Diversity.  
United Food and Commercial Workers Union  
naveen.mehta@ufcw.ca