

# Mexican Migrant Farmworkers in Canada: Death, Disposability, and Disruptions during COVID-19

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This essay focuses on Mexican migrant farmworkers employed in the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. During this time, Mexican workers became essential yet expendable while their agricultural employers reaped the material rewards as an essential industry. Through the lens of racialization and structural vulnerability, I explicate how the Mexican and Canadian states facilitated the continuation of capital accumulation in agriculture through the subjugation of Mexican workers. I seek to contribute to the nascent literature on the pandemic in relation to temporary-labor migration programs, Mexican migrant workers, and the racialization of workers to produce a tractable and cheap labor force.

**Keywords:** Canada, COVID-19, essential workers, farmworkers, Mexican migrants, racialization, Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, structural vulnerability.

Este estudio se enfoca en los jornaleros agrícolas mexicanos empleados en el Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales (PTAT) durante la pandemia de COVID-19 en Canadá. En este periodo, los trabajadores mexicanos se volvieron esenciales, aunque prescindibles, mientras que sus empleadores agrícolas cosecharon beneficios materiales como parte de una industria declarada como esencial. A través del marco de la racialización y la vulnerabilidad estructural, explico cómo los Estados mexicano y canadiense facilitaron la continuación de la acumulación de capital en la agricultura mediante el sometimiento de los trabajadores mexicanos. Este estudio busca contribuir a la literatura incipiente sobre la pandemia en relación con los programas de migración laboral temporal, los migrantes mexicanos y procesos de racialización para la obtención de una mano de obra barata y manejable.

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**Palabras clave:** Canadá, COVID-19, migrantes mexicanos, Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales, trabajadores agrícolas, trabajadores esenciales, racialización, vulnerabilidad estructural.

## Introduction

Mexican migrant workers have been boarding airplanes to Canada to work in greenhouses, processing plants, and fields since 1974 through the federal government's Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP); (Basok 1999, 2002; Binford 2013; Hennebry 2012). Migrant workers' seasonal contracts are shaped by several factors, including where they work, who they work for, the work itself (e.g., crop picking, nursery work, packaging), the market, and fluctuations in the local weather (Encalada Grez 2018). Within the context of the pandemic, the SAWP became an indisputable example of structural vulnerability and racialization that drives profit and sustainability of the Canadian agricultural industry.

In this article, I adopt a lens of racialization to contextualize the contrast between migrant workers as a workforce essential to Canadian agriculture, the majority of whom are Mexican, and their remaking as an expendable and sacrificial labor force during COVID-19. My analysis is based on diverse research methods comprising document analysis and interviews with migrant farmworkers and community support workers, along with autoethnography as an extension of two decades of community-engaged research with the Mexican migrant community and their families. I argue that COVID-19 marked a pivotal moment in the history of Mexican farm labor in Canada, one that has bolstered the power of states and the agricultural lobby to safeguard a temporary migrant-labor regime that normalizes the devaluation of Mexican lives. This research aims to contribute to emerging literature on the racialization of workers during the pandemic, the functions of guest-worker programs, and existing studies of Mexican labor migration within North America during this critical time.

This essay is organized as follows: The first section situates the effects of the pandemic on temporary foreign-worker programs in the Global North and in the context of Canada within emerging literature on the subject. The management and functions of the SAWP are then explicated, with an emphasis on the preference for Mexican workers. Next, I describe the research methodology on which this analysis is based. Due to the challenges of the pandemic and the difficulties of accessing migrant workers in isolated rural areas, research methods had to be adjusted. I then assess the pillars of vulnerabilities of the

SAWP as pandemic minefields, with an emphasis on racism and the tying of migrant workers to one employer. I also discuss the maneuverings and interventions of the Mexican and Canadian governments, along with Canadian employers, to manage the crisis. Lastly, I assess the impact and response among Mexican migrant workers and tie my observations to the ongoing devaluation of Mexican lives as a function of racialization—logic that sustains Canada a settler-colonial state.

### **The Effects of the Pandemic on Migrant Workers**

The season of 2020 proved to be the most difficult for migrant farmworkers to traverse due to the multifold crisis induced by COVID-19. The pandemic intensified the hazards and precarity of their worksites and living spaces, with the virus spreading rapidly across farms, particularly in the province of Ontario, where the majority of migrants are concentrated (Grant and Weeks 2020; Grant and Blaze Baum 2020; Wright 2020; Martin 2020). Tragically, three Mexican farmworkers were the first to die from COVID-19 on the Canadian farms that employ migrants from the Global South (Mojtehdzadeh 2021; Ministry of the Solicitor General 2021). Simultaneously, concerns over food security akin to times of war (Chapman and Miller 2020) focalized the importance of migrant farmworker programs among the government, media, general public, and agricultural industry alike after decades of obscurity and indifference within mainstream Canadian society (Hastie 2020).

Together with countries across the world, Canada swiftly closed its borders with the onset of the pandemic, upending long-standing immigration policies (Triandafyllidou and Nalbandian 2020; Yeoh 2020; García-Colón 2020; Reynolds 2020; Macklin 2020). Temporary labor-migration programs that countries from the Global North relied upon for low-skilled labor were realigned around notions of essential work and essential workers (Neef 2020; Isaac and Elrick 2021). Anna Triandafyllidou and Lucia Nalbandian assert, “the pandemic has inverted previous hierarchies of more and less desired (and disposable or not) migrant workers” (2020, 1). Low-skilled or unskilled migrant workers were prioritized over the formerly coveted high-skilled workers (e.g., mine managers, dentists, architects) in a time of widespread border closures in many countries of the Global North. Greg Bird observes that low-skill occupations<sup>1</sup> within

1. The Canadian government utilizes the National Occupation Classification (NOC) system to group jobs according to education, experience, and duties to determine labor market demand for immigration planning. The NOC C and D

the hierarchy of temporary foreign-worker programs in Canada primarily pertain to the “maintenance and reproduction of the life of the nation (food services, agriculture, care work, etc.)” (2018, 100). Unsurprisingly, nascent literature on the effects of the pandemic on the labor market have focused on meatpackers (Reid, Ronda-Perez, and Schenker 2021; Rowland et al. 2021; Stull 2020; Ramos et al. 2021; Mitaritonna and Ragot 2020; Martin 2020a; Alcaraz et al. 2021), care workers (Pandey, Salazar Parreñas, and Sabio 2021; Gardner, States, and Bagley 2020; Nasol and Francisco-Menchavez 2021; Aoun 2020), and farmworkers (Tagliacozzo, Pisacane, and Kilkey 2021; Lusk and Chandra 2021; Handal et al. 2020) in diverse parts of the world. Strikingly, im/migrant workers in these reproductive sectors and devalued-skill category are disproportionately from the Global South (Bird 2018; Chartrand and Vosko 2021).

The triadic nexus of work, immigration status, and racialization is an undeniable condition for the heightened vulnerability of essential workers during COVID-19 (Tuyisenge and Goldenberg 2021; Statistics Canada 2020b; Bouka and Bouka 2020). The pandemic has been more deadly through governments’ haphazard and many times nonexistent interventions to protect workers in life-sustaining sectors, consequently reinforcing assumptions about whose life is valued and whose life continues to be sacrificed for capital accumulation (Bird 2018). In this regard, the framework of “racialization” is particularly instructive in centering the utility of race to construct cheap and exploitable labor from the Global South to the Global North, a process that has been constitutive of colonization and the making of the current global order. Adrian A. Smith, a legal scholar, explains that “racialisation occurs by virtue of its perpetuation through and effects on migration processes and relations leading to the production of migrant labouring bodies, Global South-North relations and the impacts of capitalist accumulation on a global scale” (2016, 2123). Racialization is certainly a complex and historical process. Edna Bonachich, Sabrina Alimahomed, and Jake B. Wilson assert that “through the racialization of labor, capitalists seek to maximize their profits by employing works of color for lower wages than their White counterparts, or sometimes for no wages at all. Moreover, capitalists are able to force workers of color to live and labor under much inferior conditions” (2008, 343). Smith (2013) and Bonaich,

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categories pertain to occupations that are considered low skill, with migrants having limited pathways for permanent residency, whereas high-skill workers have more opportunities to secure their stay in the country as residents. See Government of Canada 2021.

Alimahomed, and Wilson (2008) also point to the direct connection of racialization to “unfreedom” that binds racialized labor into conditions of inferiority. The pandemic has conspicuously foregrounded racialization within temporary-migration schemes such as the SAWP.

### **The Farmworker Program and the Importance of Mexican Migrants**

In the 1960s, the Canadian government overhauled its immigration regime by introducing new pathways for labor migration in agriculture. The Canadian government appeased the farm lobby’s concern for labor shortages among citizen workers by establishing the Caribbean SAWP through a Memorandum of Understanding with the Jamaican government in 1966. Henceforth, it was gradually extended to eleven other Caribbean nations, with Mexico entering the program in 1974. This program is seen as a “model” (Basok 2007; Gobierno de Mexico 2020b; Verma 2001) for controlled labor migration and a “triple-win” for migrants and participating states (Silverman and Hari 2016, 93). Canadian employers are thus granted a vast labor pool to segment their labor force in accordance with race, nationality, and gender, along with the quantity of workers. Kerry Preibisch explains that “the liberalization of source countries deepens the scope of employers to seek out what they perceive to be the most ‘willing’ and ‘reliable’ workers” (2010, 421). Decades later, in 2002, the Canadian government introduced the Agricultural Stream program (AgStream; Chartrand and Vosko 2021; Government of Canada 2019) as a pilot project that now operates in tandem with the SAWP, extending employers greater flexibility to engineer a tractable labor force through the recruitment of workers from anywhere in the globe, with the preference for disciplined and economically disadvantaged workers from low-income countries in the Global South.<sup>2</sup> Sending states, in turn, are invested in securing contracts and do so by competing with other participating countries through the priming of their nationals to abide to the dictates of Canadian employers (McLaughlin 2010; Valenzuela Moreno 2012). This

2. There is also a significant presence of an undocumented agricultural labor force in rural Canada, although not to the same degree as in the United States. Undocumented farmworkers in Canada are usually denied asylum seekers, students, or tourists who overstayed their visas, and they are dependent on recruiters to match them with both employers and housing in exchange for part of their wages. Some, however, supply their labor informally in other worksites aside from the ones for which they are authorized through the programs in which they participate. The exact number of undocumented workers and hours are understandably unknown.

competition induces a race to the bottom, with some workers more willing to “humillarse” than others, as a Guatemalan worker indicated (WhatsApp communication with author, 2017). An array of countries from the Global South account for 20 percent of agricultural labor in Canada, and they are concentrated in primary agriculture that generated \$62.4 billion CAD in cash receipts in 2018 (Statistics Canada 2020a). The majority of migrant workers are from Mexico, at 51 percent, with the principal route facilitated by the SAWP (Statistics Canada 2020a); hence, this program is the focus of my analysis.

The Mexican and Canadian states manage the SAWP through a bilateral labor-migration governance structure involving ministries, administrative bodies, and legislations. Every year the Memorandum of Understanding between Mexico and Canada is renewed, as in the case with other SAWP-participating countries, and labor recruitment is based on Canadian-employer need and demand (Preibisch 2010). In Canada, the SAWP is a federally established program, but then subjected to diverse provincial jurisdictions in the realm of health and labor. In Mexico, migrants are recruited by the Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social (STPS)<sup>3</sup> through set criteria such as rural residency, responsibility for immediate dependents, agricultural work experience, and age (between twenty-two and forty-five years old) (Relaciones Exteriores, n.d.). SAWP contracts can span from five weeks to eight months within a year. Most workers in the SAWP are men, yet the STPS started to recruit women in 1989, and they have since remained a numerical minority within a highly masculinized labor force (Preibisch 2004; Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2010). Philip Martin outlines that within the timeframe of 1974–2017 a grand total of 351,869 Mexican workers have participated in the SAWP, with many returning seasonally every year until retirement (2020b, 102).

Through the SAWP, workers are assigned a designated employer, fly with all the paperwork on hand, and have their housing prearranged by their employers, usually on their work premises. In their contracts, migrant workers are guaranteed equal treatment as Canadians, decent housing, and access to health care. The Mexican Embassy and consular offices are tasked with protecting the rights and servicing their nationals (Valenzuela Moreno 2012). In Mexico, the SAWP is run as a social-welfare program for impoverished and struggling rural communities, particularly throughout the 1990s, as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, now

3. The Mexican Ministry of Health and Ministry of Foreign Affairs also oversee the program in Mexico.

“modernized” as CUSMA [Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement]) eroded rural livelihoods through deregulation and dumping of agricultural products, including the principal staple, maize. The incapacity of Mexican cities to absorb and secure a living wage for destitute farmers and the rural working class became a stronger push and pull to migrate across borders. Stephanie J. Silverman and Amrita Hari state that, during this time, “the Mexican state actively encouraged workers to migrate temporarily and to send home their earnings, likewise remittances became the significant source of income for many poorer Mexican families” (2016, 93). Remittances contribute an important source of income for the national economy.

Since 2001, Mexicans have become the preferred migrants within the SAWP, displacing the primacy of Caribbean workers. Mexicans also dominate the ranks of the H-2 program and undocumented labor for agriculture in the context of the United States, demonstrating the significance of Mexican labor to transnational agricultural labor markets within North America. In the Canadian context, Preibisch and Leigh Binford (2007) attribute a shifting demographic of migrant labor to factors such as the closure of tobacco farms where Caribbean workers were a historical majority and racism and biases over the suitability of racialized bodies for diverse aspects of agricultural work. However, Karla Valenzuela Moreno rightly points out that Mexican workers are subjected to particular racist assumptions on



Image 1. A greenhouse in the Windsor-Essex region, Ontario, with a racially prejudiced Mexican caricature. Photo Credit: Author.

the part of Canadian employers, who label them with characteristics that render them highly exploitable and therefore more desirable, specifically “características consideradas como ‘mexicanas’ son la sumisión, la resistencia al trabajo físico, y las largas jornadas laborales” (2018, 60). In the wider community, Mexican workers also report racism and disdain in the rural townships in which they work on the part of the local (White) population, such as being seen as “bichos raros” (Encalada Grez 2018, 28; see image 1). Mexican workers are commodified based on their productive value and consequently dehumanized as solely just-in-time workers who can be recruited and disposed of at the whims of Canadian employers without any accountability.

### **Conducting Pandemic Research with Migrant Farmworkers**

This article is part of ongoing transnational research about migrant farmworkers and the pandemic. The following analysis is based on the early stages of this examination (specifically, between March 2020 and May 2021), and due to ensuing difficulties of face-to-face engagement with migrant workers, the research methods were adapted accordingly. Face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and *convivencia* (Encalada Grez 2018) in the farms and local communities where migrant workers live and work were not possible due to strict university research protocols aimed at safeguarding research participants and researchers from COVID-19. Migrant workers were also inaccessible due to their employers’ orders that prohibited visitors on the farms and imposed curfews on workers’ mobility in the rural townships in which they live and work. As a researcher, I had to abide by the health-authority orders prohibiting travel outside of one’s immediate region. Reverting to interviews through online platforms such as Zoom was also not always possible due to workers’ lack of knowledge of these tools and lack of computers, laptops, and access to a stable internet connection in rural zones. Moreover, many migrant workers lacked the time to partake in interviews due to long work hours and not being able to rely on a private space outside of their usual overcrowded housing. In fact, many workers have shared that they have had to work more since the pandemic started to compensate for a shortage of labor. All in all, during the pandemic we have had to become more flexible and creative with data gathering, particularly with a population that is impacted by a very tangible digital divide.

Despite these obstacles, I was able to build on two decades of transnational ethnographic research and advocacy with migrant



workers and their families between Canada and Mexico to guide my research and recruitment. Document analysis, autoethnography, and interviews with migrant workers and the community workers who have been supporting them during this critical time were all quite instructive to triangulate themes and findings. For formal and semi-structured interviews, I recruited migrant workers through my existing networks in the Canadian provinces of Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta. My research participants included workers in Mexico who were unable to return to Canada as result of the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Community workers from diverse provinces were also recruited, and they assisted me in recruiting more migrant workers within their networks. In addition, I formally interviewed four migrant workers over WhatsApp and conducted a focus group of an additional five migrant workers through Microsoft Teams and five community workers through Zoom. The names of the research participants have been changed, though some preferred to maintain their identities.

To gauge government and employer responses to the pandemic, together with migrant workers' experiences, I drew primarily on document analysis research. I reviewed gray literature in Canada and Mexico, such as news-media stories, government reports and websites, and advocacy organizations' social media, press releases, and community reports.

Autoethnography has gained significant prominence during the pandemic due to limitations of ethnographic methods (see, e.g., Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2020; Markham and Harris 2021) and subsequently has informed my findings. Describing autoethnographic research, Juanita Johnson-Bailey observes, "While sharing and reflecting on personal experiences, the researcher, who is using their personal episodes to tell, is scaffolding the autobiography by involving and speaking to the social, political, and cultural environment in which the life stories unfold" (2021, 10). In his study of the US-Mexico border, Miguel Avalos explains that "ethnographic and autoethnographic writing are concrete expressions of C. Wright Mills' (1959) notion of the sociological imagination. To write autoethnography is to practice the sociological imagination insofar as the writer-ethnographer connects their biography with their society's history" (2021, 3). In my role as a community-engaged researcher with migrant workers, I documented their experiences and sense making of the pandemic as they shared over the phone or through videoconferencing. This enabled me to better comprehend the social context that structured their lives during this time. Additionally, as a member of an organization that was at the forefront of the

civil-society response aiming to protect migrant workers' rights during the pandemic, I had conversations with other community support workers, gathered images shared by migrant workers during the height of the pandemic of their housing and quarantine conditions, and strategized and met with diverse government officials online around the problems experienced by migrant workers. This data supplemented my understanding of the social and political context of the pandemic. Though limited as a rapidly adaptive research project for an unprecedented global crisis, these data and findings humbly aim to contribute to incipient analysis of the multifaceted implications and significance of the pandemic to temporary foreign-worker regimes, the agricultural industry in Canada, and the ongoing subjugation of Mexican migrant workers as an essential yet expendable labor force.

### **Constructed Vulnerabilities as Pandemic Minefields**

The SAWP offers a relatively safe and legal route to work in *el norte* for Mexican workers and campesinos needing to support their household incomes, yet this state-managed migration scheme has long been scrutinized for the legally permissible marginalization and subjugation of the labor force. From a labor and human-rights perspective, the SAWP is upheld by pillars of vulnerability that impact the lives of migrant workers. Vulnerability can be understood in accordance with legal scholars Malcolm Sargeant and Eric Tucker's conception of "layered vulnerability" involving migration factors, migrant characteristics, and receiving-country conditions (2009, 52). In addition, in their study of migrant farmworkers in Southern Italy during the pandemic, Serena Tagliacozzo, Lucio Pisacane, and Majella Kilkey's (2021) differentiation of structural (system domain) and systemic vulnerability (interconnections among systems) is particularly applicable to discern the ways that fixed pillars of the SAWP have served to intensify the hazards inherent to this farmworker program in Canada. Below, I briefly discuss the major pillars of vulnerabilities that are mutually reinforcing and have served as minefields for the lives of Mexican migrant farmworkers from the start of the pandemic.

First, migrant workers are subjected to diverse forms of "immobilities" as part of their controlled labor mobility in Canada (Reid-Musson 2017). Principally, they do not have the labor mobility to leave their designated employers if they are unagreeable to the terms of labor and housing. Although they have all the legal paperwork at hand and travel by plane to Canada, their mobility is

constrained by the terms of their contracts, rural location, isolation, and lack of transportation. If they are fired with or without due cause, they are immediately repatriated/deported without any process of appeal. In fact, as soon as their designated employer terminates their contracts, their social insurance number, health care, and housing are all terminated, leaving workers with no other recourse but to leave, while many others are waiting to take their place.

Second, migrant workers are bound to a legalized disposability or “deportability” as a mechanism of fear and control (Binford 2019; Basok, Bélanger, and Rivas 2013; Vosko 2018). Jorge, who was a participant in the two-year AgStream program, relayed that he could not counter when complaining about abuses due to his economic necessity: “Se están aprovechando de mi estado de vida . . . se aprovechan de nuestras necesidades” (Focus group, June 2021). Migrant workers who are from struggling rural communities must acquiesce to the terms of employment to maintain their contracts and return to Canada. In the SAWP, for instance, workers leave Canada with an envelope with an evaluation from their employer that they must present to the STPS to demonstrate if they were recruited or named back. An unfavorable assessment means that they can lose their work in Canada altogether, and in this way, their employer is their *de facto* immigration broker. Being tied to one employer and having a closed work permit that prohibits labor mobility (and even the right to obtain training and education) is the crux of migrant workers’ vulnerability within the SAWP. In this way, employers are structurally and legally granted control over workers to the point where they can even dictate the intimate, social, and sexual lives of their workforce. For example, employers are known to impose “farm rules” with curfews, and workers have indeed been sent back to Mexico for engaging in intimate relationships (Encalada Grez 2019; Preibisch 2004).

Third, migrant farmworkers confront one of the most dangerous, albeit lax, industries in terms of labor rights and enforcement, which adds to their structural vulnerability (Fairey et al. 2008; Tucker 2012; Vosko, Tucker, and Casey 2019). Low wages, dangerous work, lack of overtime pay, limited health-and-safety protections and enforcement, and ineligibility for collective bargaining and unionization render migrant farmworkers vulnerable to legally and historically embedded coercion and disenfranchisement in the industry. Although workers are entitled to health care and workers’ compensation in the provinces in which they work, numerous studies and community organizations’ observations point to inadequate access, even with severe injuries and ailments (Barnes 2013; Caxaj and Cohen 2019; Narushima and Sanchez 2014; Hennebry, McLaughlin, and Preibisch



Image 2. Farmworkers' substandard housing in Leamington, Ontario, provided by their employer for the year. Photo Credit: Chris Ramsaroop, Justice for Migrant Workers Facebook group, October 20, 2020, 10:30, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10164428584275346&set=pcb.10164428589440346>.

2016). Migrant workers often keep illnesses and health issues to themselves rather than bring them to the attention of employers because they fear it could result in not being named back or being repatriated prematurely before the end of their contracts.

Four, cramped and poor housing conditions are a major issue that researchers and activists have been denouncing for decades (Tomic, Trumper, and Aguiar 2010; see image 2). Housing conditions are substandard and inconsistent across Canada, with migrant workers expected to live in cramped bunkhouses, trailers, and sometimes in garages intended for equipment and not human beings. Local health authorities are tasked with enforcing housing codes, but these codes are limited for migrant workers. For example, they are not designed with the same standards as Canadian workers working in the oil and gas industry (Strauss, Pennell, and Walker 2020), and inspections tend to occur before workers arrive, when housing units are empty.

The fifth pillar of vulnerability is the issue of the lack of citizenship. No matter how long migrant workers have been working and living in Canada, according to Jenna Hennebray (2012), they are "permanently temporary." They are not eligible for permanent-residency status because the Canadian government considers their labor "low" skill. Migrant farmworkers are essential workers but

unwanted as citizens due to Canada's restrictive racist and classist citizenship regime. They are the denizens of the global economy that cannot enact citizenship rights in the places in which they live and work.

Combined, all of these conditions constitute the basis of a structural discrimination that has been criticized for recreating a modern system of labor bondage in Canada's agriculture that subjugates racialized peoples from low-income backgrounds into a system of racial-labor apartheid (Paz Ramirez 2013; Sharma 2006; Walia 2010) and "unfreedom" (Basok 2002; Smith 2015). None of these processes or programs are new. Instead, they have been refurbished with new technocratic state policies for the same purposes: to construct a cheap, disposable, and disenfranchised labor force to serve the White Canadian settler-colonial nation at the expense of Black and Brown peoples. A Jamaican migrant farmworker, after years of arduous work in greenhouses in rural Ontario, shared with me that "systems of oppression are like new cellphones, the same function but in updated versions" (Focus group with Jamaican workers, July 2017). Since the inception of Canadian Confederation, racialized im/migrants have been utilized for their labor and subjected to legalized marginalization while being denied full material and social benefits from their work. Historically, land and citizenship status were granted to European settlers in the early years of confederation, yet racialized migrant farmworkers are currently subjected to systemic racism that structures their everyday lives in Canadian rural townships and farms.

Taken together, all of these pillars of vulnerability have created a minefield for Mexican migrant farmworkers since the start of the pandemic. In this context, the state plays a central role in creating and facilitating the socio-legal exclusion and exploitation of racialized workers through the engineering and maintenance of the SAWP. Moreover, the Mexican state became a compliant labor broker of its peoples, with limited leverage as the economy worsened, resulting in an incapacity to offer a safety net of support for those who need it most. Workers and their families depend on this work, and the pandemic made their employment in Canada even more urgent. Early in the pandemic season, the decision to continue migrating was made between the reality of starvation and debt, and the more imminent possibility of death in Canada. As Teodoro Martinez, a Mexican farmworker from the film *El contrato* says, "They tell you do this, and you go running, but you don't know what you are running to even if you are running straight to the slaughterhouse" (Lee 2006). His phrase foreshadows the pandemic seasons to which I now turn.

### **The Pandemic: Narration of the Unfolding Crisis**

When COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, many migrant workers were already in Canada, as the season for the SAWP commences every January after the holiday season. In March 2020, Justin Trudeau, the prime minister of Canada, urged Canadians scattered throughout the globe to return “home” and announced an abrupt closure of borders to non-Canadians and nonpermanent residents on March 18, 2020, at midnight (Staples 2020). Alarm set in among migrant farmworkers waiting to leave for Canada and their employers who were expecting them for diverse stages of production. Armed with the power of lobby and political influence through various associations and federations across Canada, such as the Ontario Vegetable Growers Association and the British Columbia Fruit Growers, Canadian farm employers rallied around the problem of labor shortages and the importance of food security to sway the government to exempt migrant farmworkers from the announced restrictions.

In a matter of two days, the Canadian federal government responded by declaring migrant farmworkers essential workers and allowing them to enter the country in the same way as citizens and permanent residents. Migrant workers would be required to quarantine for fourteen days in their farm housing, and employers were responsible for paying their wages during this precautionary period. Furthermore, in April 2020, the federal government allocated \$50 million CAD to Canadian growers with \$1,500 CAD intended to be invested toward each migrant worker employed to ensure their safe quarantine (Kirkup 2020). The Canadian government thus reaffirmed its role as a labor broker for the agricultural industry, and it was evident that border restrictions would not jeopardize capital accumulation and production for Canadian agribusiness. On the Mexican side, the STPS, along with key government offices in the country, stopped operating at capacity due to the pandemic, and many SAWP workers were left behind in Mexico for the season due to delays with their required paperwork and visa processing. As a result, a total of 22,130 Mexican migrant workers arrived in Canada in 2020 compared to 26,407 the previous year (Gobierno de México 2020a).

In the province of Ontario, where the majority of SAWP workers work and live, the government-imposed mandate to quarantine in farm housing meant workers were confined in overcrowded housing that became hotbeds for the spread of COVID-19. Public-health directives to maintain physical distancing could not be followed in housing units that had been inadequate and substandard for years.

Lack of personal protective equipment and not being able to properly sanitize their hands throughout the workday was not possible for all workers in the farms. As a result, COVID-19 spread quickly among the migrant workers. An estimated 1,300 workers became ill, and three Mexican farmworkers died in the summer of 2020: Bonifacio Eugenio Romero (May 30, 2020), Rogelio Muñoz Santos (June 5, 2020), and Juan López Chaparro (June 20, 2020) (Ministry of the Solicitor General 2021). Two of the Mexican workers who died participated in SAWP, and one had been working in Canada through other means. Migrant deaths have continued since then, and coroner investigations have not been called by the provincial governments where these tragedies have occurred. Although the Ministry of the Solicitor General in Ontario (2021) produced a report about these tragic fatalities, their involvement stopped short of carrying out a formal coroner's inquest on each death to investigate and penalize those deemed responsible.

The Mexican government responded to the casualties by announcing the pause of the migration of its nationals. The Mexican ambassador to Canada, Juan José Gómez Camacho, explained that this decision was meant to "reassess with the federal authorities, provinces and farmers why this happened, and if there is anything to correct" (Canadian Press 2020). This announcement resulted in confusion and panic among both migrant workers in Mexico and their Canadian employers. However, the Mexican government's warnings quickly changed from pausing the assignment of workers to farms that were not following COVID-19 safety protocols to business as usual; thus the Mexican state also assumed its role as a labor broker through the exportation of their nationals.

### **Pandemic Disruptions in Mexican Workers' Lives**

The COVID-19 pandemic was characterized by three notable moments that reveal the power plays among the stakeholders involved: first, the swift border closures imposed by the Canadian government that threatened this labor flow and the power of the farm lobby to overturn it. Second, in June of 2020, the Mexican government asserted its bilateral leverage as an important player by pausing the migration of its nationals to press for better protections and safety protocols at the farms. Third, the second pandemic season, beginning in January 2021, presented a new set of obstacles for workers, as they were required to secure PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests before being allowed to fly into Canada. All of these incidents caused disruptions, delays, and confusion for migrant workers who depend

on labor migration for their livelihoods, particularly in an uncertain and volatile economic context in Mexico. Mexican migrant workers' structural vulnerabilities and their causation of systemic vulnerabilities become undeniably apparent, as presented in the following discussion (see Tagliacozzo, Pisacane, and Kilkey 2021).

Mexican migrant workers had to contend with the abrupt border closures in March 2020. Although quickly resolved by the pressure of the agricultural lobby, a significant number of workers were left behind, with each one representing an extended family unit depending on remittances and wages from Canadian farm employment. Shutdowns and slowdowns of critical Mexican government offices in the first weeks of the pandemic caused delays with the processing of paperwork, flight bookings, and work visas. In my preliminary research, it appears that Mexican migrant women's contracts have been the most affected, as employers opted to secure access to their male workforce over that of women. Sandra, from the valley of Tehuacán, in the state of Puebla, explained to me in a telephone interview (June 2021) that all the Mexican women's contracts were cancelled by her employer in January 2021 due to concerns that they would be bringing COVID-19 with them to the farm. The official she dealt with at the STPS explained to her that fewer women were requested by Canadian employers. She then waited with her work permit, which was paid for out of pocket, to be called to work in the harvesting and packaging of fruits and had no guarantee of work or a livelihood for the rest of the year.

For Mexican migrant workers who were already in the country in March 2020, their lives, and seasons as they have come to know them drastically changed. Workers lost more of their rights and freedoms due to the intensification of farm rules imposed by their employers. Already isolated and constrained in their mobility in rural townships, many of their employers imposed a full-on quarantine and lockdown that forbid them to leave the farm premises. In some rural townships, they were also further stigmatized as the carriers of disease, very similar to the period of the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak in Canada, when workers reported to Justice for Migrant Workers (J4MW) that they were yelled at by local townspeople when they were out in public (Encalada Grez 2009). In the province of British Columbia (BC), the provincial government was more amenable to the pressure of civil-society groups, such as Sanctuary Health, to secure a safer quarantine plan for migrant workers in city hotels before venturing out into rural townships to live and work. By March 2021, the province had spent \$17 million CAD of public funds on this program, a clearly generous subsidy to the agricultural



industry (Logan 2021). However, two Mexican workers working in BC, Erika Zavala and Jesús Molina, made national headlines for being disciplined and sent back to Mexico prematurely by their employer for accepting two visitors from Radical Action with Migrants in Agriculture (RAMA), a grass-roots organization based in Kelowna, BC. The disciplinary action occurred even though they were in the country before the pandemic began and violated no public-health restrictions imposed on the population. In a telephone interview with Zavala (June 2021), she relayed that she arrived in Canada on February 11, and “no tuve ningun problema.” Nevertheless, all changed when the pandemic was officially declared; she shared that “no nos dejaban salir a las tiendas, mientras los canadienses que trabajaban ahí entraban y salían y no traían cubres, nos prohibían salir a la calle.” She also explained that, when local townspeople saw the company’s vehicles out in the town, they would call the farm to denounce the outings of the Mexican employees. Her employer had workers order their food online to avoid their outings to grocery stores, but none could speak English and could only go by the images on the screen, subsequently receiving erroneous orders and items. Zavala and Molina did not have any recourse to turn to except to community support and their very own agency and voices to speak up about their unjust treatment. A GoFundMe page was set up by RAMA and together with allies and other supporters, spread the campaign widely to ensure they received as much as they could to compensate for the wages lost due to their unjust repatriation.

In Ontario, quarantine measures were haphazard, demonstrating the long-standing social abandonment of migrant workers by diverse levels of government in the most lucrative agricultural province. Employers were entrusted and subsidized by public money to assure migrant-worker safety, yet they did not prevent the outbreaks, illness, and deaths in the farms. There was no auditing or enforcement of these measures, despite all the monies invested for each migrant worker. At a time when government inspections were the most needed—particularly in Ontario, which has the majority of labor-intensive farms and had the highest concentration of outbreaks among migrant farmworkers—C. Susana Caxaj and Amy Cohen explained that “federal inspections, normally carried out in person, were modified to be desk-based, a practice which many advocates felt limited the ability of federal inspectors to adequately monitor farm operations and made it very difficult, if not impossible, for inspectors to speak directly to workers without employer involvement or interference” (2021, 58). In a focus group (June 2021), however, Jorge divulged that his farm in BC did have onsite inspections, but he and

his coworkers could not speak freely in the presence of their employer. This reminded me of superficial maquiladora inspections that give employers a pass despite systemic labor infractions.

In June 2021, the Red Cross became entrusted to oversee the quarantining of two hundred migrant workers in local motels and hotels in the Windsor-Essex region, yet workers reported going hungry, with insufficient food, and being left alone without proper care or follow-up (Zoledziowski 2020). Growers in the region attempted to respond to the public outcry by providing food for workers but \$2,000 CAD worth of food was destroyed due to restrictions on contact and conflicting COVID-19 protocols (Schmidt 2020).

Quarantining on the farms offered little protection for workers at Scotlynn Group in the Norfolk region of Ontario. One of Canada's largest newspapers conducted an investigative report on the matter and interviewed three workers from the farm who were quarantining at a hotel at the time:

They described overcrowded living conditions, including small bedrooms with multiple sets of bunk beds; ill workers living with healthy ones; leaky toilets, and showers that only ran hot water; an absence of information on how to access health care; and no PPE to guard against the virus. "We notified supervisors when people were falling ill and they didn't do anything," one worker said. "They treated us like animals." A second worker said employees were not provided with PPE and believes the outbreak could have been prevented had supervisors been more responsive. The third worker said his mental health is deteriorating. "I feel trapped in the hotel room." (Blaze Baum and Grant 2020)

This case of neglect among the Mexican migrant labor force also resulted in the death of Mexican national López Chaparro. His coworkers believed the death could have been prevented with proactive care among health authorities and the employer. One of his coworkers, Luis Gabriel Flores Flores, was particularly vocal and spoke out to media outlets about the hardships during the successive outbreaks at the farm, which consequently cost him his job and being faced with deportation. He counted on the support of the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change network and was able to fight his case in the Ontario Labour Relations Board. Despite his former employer disputing his allegations, the Labour Board sided with Flores Flores and ordered payment for lost wages and damages in the sum of \$25,000 CAD (Goodyear 2020). Flores Flores's insistence on speaking out for justice for himself and his *compañeros* demonstrates that Mexican workers continue to resist and create ripple effects within the migrant justice movement.

The 2021 season presented Mexican migrant workers with additional hurdles and complications. The Canadian government mandated that anyone entering Canada by air undertake a PCR test within seventy-two hours before boarding a plane for Canada to ensure they were negative for COVID-19. This new requirement has posed much difficulty for migrant workers who are predominantly from rural townships all over Mexico. Getting a test has in fact made them more prone to contracting the virus, as they must travel by bus and out of their communities to get the test, and then make their way closer to the airport in Mexico City to remain within the set time frame for the PCR test to be approved by the airlines. Workers living far from Mexico City are particularly disadvantaged as they must arrange for travel, stay in Mexico City, and pay for all of these added costs out of their own pocket. If a worker tests positive, then they are simply cut off from the program, and their costs are not reimbursed. Carlos Sandoval, a community worker, explained that a Mexican worker cried at the airport as he was denied boarding for being one hour over the limit for his PCR test after mobilizing around distance and time to meet the strict test time frame (Zoom interview with author, June 2021). Along the way, workers expose themselves to more people, and their risk of contracting the virus increases as they prepare for their work in Canada during a continuing pandemic.

While employers have been subsidized by the government and have received “nearly a billion of dollars since the pandemic” since the pandemic, according to Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (2020, 11), migrant workers have not received additional pay for being essential workers or reimbursement for all the added costs of PCR tests, national travel, and lodging incurred. Furthermore, the Canadian government’s announcement of a new pathway for residency for essential workers and international students, which opened in May 2021, largely excluded Mexican and other Spanish-speaking workers. The program imposed restrictive language and educational requirements that make it impossible for most migrant farmworkers, who are not fluent in English nor French and do not have an average seven years of formal education (albeit highly skilled in diverse facets of agricultural processing) to qualify (Pren and González-Araiza 2019). Advocates criticized the program as a smokescreen that does not address the conditions of indenturedness that tie workers to a closed contract with one employer (Baylon 2021). In addition, it is a time-consuming and cost-prohibitive application process (Baylon 2021).

The second pandemic season of 2021 also demonstrated uneven vaccine drives for the migrant population. The onus was placed on

workers to absorb all the costs of their protection onto themselves and their bodies rather than such costs being placed on proactive employer measures such as improving working and living conditions. Karla Vazquez, a community worker in Alberta, updated me through WhatsApp in the spring of 2021 about the reluctance on the part of employers to prioritize vaccinations for workers, who were also being denied time off from work if they needed to recover from any side effects from the vaccine. A Mexican farmworker employed in that province shared his concern over the lack of access to vaccines for a news story in *Rabble*: “If we get sick, operations at the farm might stop. We want to work but we also want to be protected from COVID and go back with health to our families” (Nash 2021).

Overall, there were a range of failures involving guidelines, enforcement, and the demarcation of the roles of responsibilities among stakeholders, from local health authorities to provincial and federal government bodies. These failures should be read in line with Tagliacozzo, Pisacane, and Kilkey’s (2021) framework of the “interplay” between the preexisting structural vulnerabilities of the migrant farmworker population and the systemic incapacity of mitigating hazards for this precarious labor force in the context of COVID-19. These failures also point to the continuity of devaluing Mexican migrant workers’ bodies and lives, more so than a lack of cooperation or enforcement.

By the end of 2020, the Canadian government announced that it would expand the SAWP and facilitate the migration of more farmworkers to Canada, yet the pillars of the program and these labor-migration schemes remained the same. In actuality, the pillars of vulnerability underpinning the SAWP were further secured in a time of crisis that could have garnered a wider opening for change. On the scale of North America, Mexican farmworkers are held captive in a fortress that suppresses their rights and further entrenches their utility as an expendable and disposable labor force. However, this story also continues with Mexican migrant workers’ diverse forms of resistance, in which they have engaged for decades, together with advocacy efforts among the migrant justice movement in Canada.

### **Conclusion**

The pandemic seasons have been historical moments in the trajectory of Mexican migrant farm labor to Canada. First, these seasons have been the most strenuous for workers and their families due to the more tangible imminence of death and illness. Tragically, three Mexican farmworkers died due to COVID-19, and the virus—along

with fear—spread rapidly across the farms, especially in the province of Ontario, where most SAWP workers are concentrated. However, the risk to these workers' lives was mitigated by the urgency for Canadian wages to maintain their families while the Mexican economy continued to worsen since prepandemic times. Second, the pandemic made migrant workers visible within mainstream Canada in an unparalleled manner since the inception of the SAWP. Third, the urgency to feed the country during a time of lockdowns and uncertainty of global supply chains officially established migrant farmworkers as “essential,” and the government prioritized their entry into the country.

In many ways, the pandemic offered a political opening for structural changes to eradicate migrant farmworkers' long-standing vulnerabilities that became minefields of risk, illness, fear, and anxiety during the pandemic. Contrarily, the pandemic bolstered the power of states and the agricultural lobby to safeguard a temporary migrant regime that normalizes the depreciation of Mexican lives. The Canadian state reinscribed its historic role in facilitating capital accumulation for agriculture, and the Mexican state maintained its role as a labor broker of its nationals in a particularly weakened position of leverage amid worsening economic conditions. Mexican workers' and their families' reliance on Canada deepened, and obstacles or disruptions to their participation in the SAWP were more adverse than ever, including the calculated move on the part of the Mexico to pause this controlled migration in order to force stronger safeguards for their benefit. *Necesidad* augmented the disciplining of Mexican workers to acquiesce to the conditions of their employment and to skew the imbalance of power between Canadian-citizen employers and noncitizen workers.

Paradoxically, Canadian farm employers became the principal beneficiaries as an “essential industry” and reaped millions of dollars of government funding (Vosko and Spring 2021; Migrant Workers Alliance for Change 2020), while Mexican migrant workers' lives were reinforced as sacrificial, expendable, and disposable. In contrast, Mexican workers were excluded from a new pilot project for permanent residency for essential workers due to restrictive language and education qualifications set by the Canadian government, along with prohibitive costs and limited time to apply. Mexican workers were also excluded from direct government support, such as reimbursement for the mandated PCR tests, transportation to and from these testing clinics within Mexico, and, in many instances, being denied pandemic-relief benefits in Canada when they had to go in and out of quarantine as the pandemic seasons unfolded. Those denied

boarding a plane to Canada were forgotten and abandoned, as usual, by the states and employers who oversee this guest-worker program.

The endurance of the SAWP and its inherent vulnerabilities that seem like indestructible pillars uncover the complicity and power of states to enable capital accumulation through an ongoing differentiation and hierarchy of peoples. In the context of the pandemic, racialization has surely pronounced itself as a preexisting condition of risk, death, and organization of a cheap and disposable labor, particularly evidenced through the experiences of Latinx and Black workers. Although not comprising a race due to a plurality of lineages and identities, Mexican workers' bodies, labor, and lives are homogenized, discriminated, and commodified by the Canadian state and their employers as such. The pandemic has flung open a window to observe and comprehend processes of racialization within a particular juncture of crisis. Hence an analysis of guest-worker programs that integrate workers from the Global South as low skill yet essential prompts further analysis on how capitalism makes and remakes race to delineate between those who should live and those who could die.<sup>4</sup> In the configuration of North America, Mexican migrant workers' dehumanization through racialization serves the imperatives of the multibillion-dollar agribusiness in the region. In Canada specifically, their exploitation is a continuation of the settler-colonial project that has conscripted racialized others to build and feed the nation while being relegated to its very margins. We must also resituate the seemingly contradictory maneuverings and interventions of the state to align with capital as its very quintessence in prepandemic and pandemic times. This story continues, and Mexican workers and their families *luchan para sobrevivir y salir adelante*; and many also organize to demand structural change that first and foremost centers the value of their lives.

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4. See Agamben 1998 and his concept of "bare life" and reworkings of Michel Foucault's reworkings of bio-power.

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