

Migrant Dreams

Director's Note – Min Sook Lee

For Canadian employers, low-wage migrant workers are a permanently flexible and pliant workforce. A feature of their lives is their deportability. Citizen bosses can wield the power of citizenship over the low-wage, 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.

Migrant workers programs have created two-tier set of labour and human rights in Canada. The programs themselves are contestable. They manage migration and subvert immigration. The programs legislate a system of labour apartheid in Canada and invite abuse in the form of wage exploitation and the control of workers bodies through schemes that look a lot like human trafficking.

There is a growing body of scholarship and an assemblage of media reports on low-wage migrant worker exploitation and loss of freedom within Canada's foreign labour programs. But little is known about the conditions under which workers choose to confront the constrictions on their labour and human rights engendered by the inequities within the program. I've come to consider migrant workers as people in constant resistance. I'd like to develop on an idea generated by the anthropologist, James Scott, that the 'weapons of the weak' are wielded in everyday forms of resistance – be it in the form of passive non-compliance, subtle sabotage, evasion or deception – and understand how migrant workers engage in covert and overt forms of resistance in small, unremarkable ways that nibble away at the structural and legal chains of control embedded within the labour program.

Speaking out about the migrant worker program can invite some dangerous attention. Having been threatened with a million dollar libel suit for a doc I made about the treatment of migrant workers back in 2000, I understand how real the stakes are. And how litigious the employers are. But for the workers, participating in these documentaries pushes the stakes even further. They risk possibly being identified as a trouble maker for speaking out by agreeing to be on camera. Why do workers participate in my documentaries? The answer is complicated, an admixture of personal and political reasons. A dominant and recurring reason I come across is that workers do it because they are sick of it. They concede their own individual circumstances may never change, but by participating in documentaries, by telling their stories – perhaps there will be change for another worker down the road. This to me is a critical act of resistance. And in fact, workers are resisting all the time, in small and grand acts of resistance. Fighting back through work stoppages, protests, civil claim suits, human rights inquiries and criminal charges. And fighting back by insisting on their humanity.

Migrant labour programs are critically altering the demographics of our country; a country that was built on immigrant labour, ambition and sacrifice. They are tied to immigration programs and are used to build what citizenship and non-citizenship looks like in Canada. So as much as

this is a doc about migrants in Canada, it is most emphatically a doc about how the Canadian state protects and builds the idea of a 'Canada'.