

# Foreign Farm Workers in Ontario: Representations in the Newsprint Media

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## **Introduction**

Seasonal offshore workers from Mexico and the Caribbean have been coming to Ontario for decades to help local farmers bring in the harvest. In many Ontario communities “the Mexican invasion of the local supermarket has become a part of the social landscape, as has the image of Mexican men riding their bicycles along rural roads (Basok 2002: 3).” As consumers, these workers have left an additional imprint on Ontario. In 1995 alone, they contributed \$33.6 million to Ontario’s rural economy (Greenhill and Aceytuno 2000: 10). However, unlike tourists, the labour of these seasonal visitors is essential component of the Ontario farming industry.

According to the workers’ multiple roles as labour and consumers, and as strangers and helping hands, one can expect the public perception of foreign farm workers to be varied and highly contested. This report examines the representation of foreign farm workers in the Ontario daily newsprint media between the years 1996 and 2002. The survey investigates, in particular, different narratives associated with offshore workers and how these narratives relate to particular temporal, economic, and political contexts.

The results reveal a set of complex and dynamic representations of foreign farm workers in Ontario. Public discourse represents foreign farm workers not only as new consumers and friendly customers, but also as labour that competes with locals for their jobs, as exploited workers, or as threat to local culture. The analysis below presents these narratives in detail and interprets them in light of economic and cultural theory.

## **Literature Review**

The Commonwealth Caribbean and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (or “offshore program”) regulates the recruitment of foreign farm labour for Ontario’s harvest season. The offshore program was part of a series of steps responding to the supposedly “‘special’ nature of farming in Canada (Wall 1992: 264)” that justified the exclusion of agriculture from labour protection legislation. While the offshore program officially aims to improve the economic prosperity of both Canada and the migrant workers (Greenhill and Aceytuno 2002), the program also reflects processes of racialization and the unequal treatment of non-European groups. As late as 1963, Canadian immigration officers described “‘Negro’ males from the Caribbean as childlike, indolent, lazy and stupid (Satzewich 1991: 136),” while Caribbean women were depicted as immoral and sexual. Although workers were desperately needed in the Ontario farming industry, public discourse at that time suggested that Caribbean workers are biologically not suited for the climatic conditions of Canada, and that create ‘racial problems’ in Canadian communities. Therefore, these non-European workers could only be admitted as temporary workers and under strict mobility and employment constraints (Saltzewich 1991: 145-180).

Since its first inception the offshore program has grown continuously. In 1998, Ontario farming operations recruited 5,233 workers from Mexico and 6,937 from the Caribbean to work primarily as fruit, vegetable and tobacco pickers, but also in greenhouses, nurseries and canning factories. Simcoe, Tillsonburg, St. Catharines and Leamington

each attracted more than 1,000 foreign seasonal workers in 1998 (Basok 2002: 33-37). The majority of migrants are married men from poor households, with little education and often supporting large families. While Mexican workers primarily join the program to secure an income, Caribbean workers also see the offshore program as an opportunity to gain work and life experience (Basok 2002: 137-8).

Basok (2002) argues that foreign farm labour has become a structural necessity for the Ontario horticulture industry. Offshore workers enable agribusiness to expand and capture large profits. In the 1990s, the greenhouse vegetable industry registered particularly large gains (Basok 2002: 69-85). Although foreign workers are not necessarily cheaper than local labour (after costs for housing, transportation and bureaucracy are factored in), Ontario horticulture farmers benefit from the fact that foreign farm workers are “unfree” (Satzewich 1991, Basok 2002), and live in constant fear of expulsion from the program and deportation. Like feudal serfs, they are chained to the job by the program’s condition to stay with a single employer, which forces migrants into overtime, accept substandard working and housing conditions, refrain from engaging in political activism, and, not least, to comply with these conditions. Paternalistic relationships that subordinate foreign workers to their employers makes migrant labour readily available at command, for inconsistent hours and on holidays during the harvesting season (Wall 1992, Basok 2002).

In the analysis below, we examine how the constraints of workers’ freedom and their working conditions have been legitimized on the ideological level in order to ensure the relatively smooth functioning of this labour regime. This ideological legitimization is a discursive process, and draws on the cultural and symbolic representations of Mexican and Caribbean farm workers, their jobs, and their ambivalent relationship to Canada and their families in Mexico and the Caribbean. While the offshore program initially brought workers to Canada that were at that time frequently perceived as racially inferior (Satzewich 1991), we hypothesize that now migrant workers are represented in such a manner that portrays them as particularly suited for their strenuous work tasks and the transnational lifestyles they are forced into.

The literature suggests that within the discourse of migrant work, multiple images and narratives coexist (e.g. Crespi 1997). One such narrative is that foreign farm workers are not part of the local community and the cultural landscape of Southern Ontario. This narrative is not only rooted in the fact that workers return home for a period of three to five months annually, but also in the tendency of foreign farm workers to live on the farms, to speak little or no English and to be largely excluded from social participation in rural communities. Contact with the local population is usually limited to occasional and impersonal visits to grocery stores, banks and pubs. Smart (1997: 149) found striking parallels between the situation of Mexican workers in Ontario and Alberta in that foreign farm workers “live in social isolation apart from the host community.” Due to little available leisure time, lack of transportation, and English deficiencies “The presence of Mexican seasonal workers in the community is known but not felt (Smart 1997: 149).” Images of foreign farm labour in these communities are therefore likely to be shaped by indirect information and discursive processes rather than first-hand personal experience.

In the context of California, Mitchell (1996) shows that the absence of migrant labour from the popular imagination of rural landscape reveals ideologies of racial and cultural exclusion. While migrant workers are not completely ignored in public debate, they are represented in a light that devalues their economic contribution. Through the representation of migrant workers as naturally suited labour supply and their denial of the status of active subjects, migrant workers were de-humanized and objectified as labour power (Mitchell 1996: 83-109). These deeply ideologically embedded processes of representation legitimized the exploitation of migrant workers.

A second narrative that may intersect with the objectification and marginalization of foreign labour is that of race and national origin. Basok (2002: 125) recorded the reception of Mexican migrant workers in Ontario communities: "There are many people who look down on us, don't think we are worth anything ... People ... think all Mexicans are drunks." Another of her respondents remarks: "Here we go to Zeller's [and Canadian Tire -- adds his room-mate] and they stare at us to make sure we won't steal ... they all stare at us with fear. There are some pubs where we are not allowed. Because I like dancing, I used to go to pubs when I first came over, but women don't even want to dance with you. And they are rude (Basok 2002: 125)." In Alberta Smart (1997) reports that seasonal workers are frequently accused of theft, although they only have minimal contact with the local community.

In this analysis we follow the discourse of seasonal workers from Mexico and the Caribbean through the Ontario newsprint media. We expect that the narratives of race and naturally suited labour also appear in local media reports. However, we also anticipate to unveil parallel, contradictory, and continuously changing narratives that produce a multi-dimensional and dynamic (Crespi 1997), rather than a singular and static, discourse of foreign farm labour.

## **Research Design**

Newspaper coverage reflects and often shapes discourses that express anxieties about social change and economic uncertainties (Beck 1992, Crespi 1997, Fowler 1991). The most prominent recent example involving migrants is probably the coverage of Chinese migrants and their depiction as human cargo, boat people or a human avalanche (Hier and Greenberg 2002). Due to the popular media's proximity to public discourse, we chose to analyze Ontario's daily newspapers to investigate the discourse of foreign farm labour.

Newspaper contents analysis often focuses on sensational key terms (Hier and Greenberg 2002) to decode the authors' attitudes toward people and events. In addition, to such key terms, we examine the narratives presented in newspaper stories more closely to extract more complex and elaborate ideas and images that relate to the perception of offshore farm workers. The press, however, rarely speaks with a single voice (Crespi 1997). Accordingly, discourses perpetuating in the newsprint media are complex and multi-faceted, and the analysis below revealed no single image of foreign farm workers and the offshore program. Rather, various authors and newspapers represent different perspectives within a dynamic debate. We attempt to reveal these dynamics by presenting

multiple, often contradicting, viewpoints. In addition, we focus on particular events or themes to examine the given narratives in their particular temporal, geographical, political and economic context.<sup>1</sup>

### **Method**

Our survey concentrated on Ontario daily newspapers that are electronically accessible through the web-based search engines *Newscan*, *EBSCO*, *Elibrary*, *CBCA*, *Canadian Newsdisc*. Our sample covers the five-year period between January 1, 1997, and May 6, 2002. For some newspapers, the electronic archives do not reach back as far as January 1997. In these cases only those issues were surveyed that were electronically accessible. In addition, we included a special series about migrant farm workers published in 1996 in the *Simcoe Reformer*. Table 1 depicts the sample profile.

Table 1: Newspapers Included in the Search by Number of Articles

NEWSPAPER	YEARS SEARCHED	NUMBER OF ARTICLES
Beacon-Herald (Stratford)	Nov. 2001-2002	0
Brantford Expositor	2002-1998	13
Brockville Recorder and Times	2000-2002	1
Cambridge Reporter	1997-2002	0
Chatham Daily News	1998-2002	12
Cornwall Standard Freeholder	1998-2002	0
Daily Miner and News (Kenora)	Nov.2001-2002	0
Daily Observer (Pembroke)	May 2000-2002	0
Globe and Mail	1997-2002	1
Guelph Mercury	1997-2002	7
Hamilton Spectator	1997-2002	23
Kingston Whig-Standard	1998-2002	3
Kitchener-Waterloo Record	1997-2002	3
Lindsay Daily Post	May 2000-2002	0
London Free Press	1998-2002	9
National Post	1997-2002	2
Niagara Falls Review	1998-2002	7
North Bay Nugget	1998-2002	2
Ottawa Citizen	1999/01-2002	3
Ottawa Sun	1999-2002	5
Owen Sound Sun Times	1998-2002	2
Packet and Times (Orillia)	May 2000-2002	1
Port Hope Evening Guide	1998-2002	1

<sup>1</sup> Critics may ask why gendered representation are not addressed in the analysis below. We found that only one article (Welch 2000e) identified through our the search talks about female workers employed in a cannery. While we recognize that representations masculinity are probably important in the construction of the image of the migrant worker, we also feel that we do not have the direct evidence that warrants an in-depth discussion on this topic.

Sarnia Observer	1998 –2002	1
Sault Star	1998-2002	1
Simcoe Reformer	Dec. 1996	13
St Catharines Standard	1998 – 2002	20
Sudbury Star	1998-2002	1
Times-Journal (St Thomas)	July 2000-2002	0
Timmins Daily Press	1998-2002	1
Toronto Star	1997-2002	12
Toronto Sun	1999-2002	1
Welland Tribune	1999-2002	3
Windsor Star	1999-2002	33

We selected articles, editorials, letters to the editor and book reviews based on a search on the keywords: labour(er/s), worker(s), farm, migrant(s), seasonal, temporary, fruit pick(ing/er/s), and transient. After examining the contents of these articles we accepted only articles dealing with foreign farm workers or directly related issues. If an article made reference to previous articles, we used these articles if they address relevant issues of foreign farm labour.

## **Narratives and Themes of Representation**

### ***The Economy***

The economy narrative entails that foreign farm labour is needed because it is necessary for the economy to flourish. An article in *The Ottawa Sun* (Gray 1999) reported:

Every apple, every pear, every peach is money to the province's producers, but they can't cash in unless the fruit is picked and shipped in optimum condition.

Migrant workers are often depicted as a matter-of-fact feature of modern horticulture. This idea dominates the perception of economic change and restructuring, whereby large farming operations are increasingly forced to employ cheap labour to stay in business.

When Robert Taylor's father ran the family orchard, growers drew labour from neighbouring farms. / Back then, neighbours anxious to earn some extra spending money for Christmas lined up for the opportunity to help harvest Georgian Bay apples. / “But the days of the small family farm are over. These days farmers are busy with their own large scale operations or they have jobs off the farm to make ends meet,” said Taylor. By the time Taylor took over the operation of Oaklane Orchards in Clarksburg in 1972, the foreign migrant program had been bringing in workers from the Caribbean for five years. (Avery, *The Owen Sound Sun Times* 1999).

The necessity of migrant workers for economic survival is expressed in typical quotes from growers, such as: “‘Our industry wouldn't survive without them.’ (Avery, *The Owen*

*Sound Sun* 1999).” In a similar vein, foreign farm workers acquire the status of an insurance policy:

Jim Cleaver, a Simcoe-area apple grower, said he views foreign labour as an insurance policy. "We buy it to get the crop off," he said. "We have too much money involved to gamble. These men are there every day, do the job and want to do the job (Smith, *The Simcoe Reformer* 1996a).

Within the economy narrative, migrant workers are de-humanized and treated as economic input factor. In a business report about the 2001 peach crop profit margins of growers:

McGuigan said there also appears to be good demand for peaches and prices currently are “respectable” from a grower standpoint. Like several of his neighbours, McGuigan is employing offshore workers to assist in harvesting this year's fruit crops. “I have 12 workers from Jamaica on the farm this summer,” he said (Boughner, *Chatham Daily News* 2001).

The special situation of agriculture, in combination with the generally tight labour market in Ontario, is used to justify the existence of the offshore program:

Ironically, Ontario's thriving economy is largely to blame for the worker shortage, says an agency that matches farm workers and employers. / People who previously settled for a few months of work at a starting rate of about \$7 per hour are now often able to secure higher-paying, full-time jobs, said Andrea Proctor, co-ordinator for the Farm Labour Pool Niagara. / Many agricultural operations -- grape growers, tender-fruit producers and greenhouses -- will be forced to look overseas for more workers to get them through the crunch, said Proctor (Downs, *The St. Catharines Standard* 2000).

Opinions of growers and government officials presented in the press evoke the impression that offshore labour serves pure economic survival, rather than profit making, of Ontario farms. Quotations indeed suggest that growers prefer Canadian workers over off-shore labour (although they are represented as claiming the opposite in the farmfare debate below):

Gary Cooper, a Simcoe area orchard operator who has been president of FARMS for five years, said the program is only a supplement to the labour needs of farmers. / "It acts as a safety valve when there's not enough reliable Canadians to work," he said. [...] / While most farmers would prefer to hire Canadian, there has been a chronic shortage of agricultural workers who are willing to work the entire season (*The Brantford Expositor* 1999b)

According to the same article, however, Cooper employed 84 offshore workers himself -- hardly the number one would expect of a “safety valve.”



The narrative that foreign farm workers simply replace Canadian workers who have better job opportunities is not uncontested. A parallel narrative creates a binary between Canadian and Mexican workers, suggesting that the two groups are not interchangeable labour, but that there are qualitative differences. This counter narrative argues that Mexican workers are actually better workers than Canadians. The same article from which the previous quote is taken also represents this narrative:

The Mexicans perform a variety of tasks, working from spring until the crops are off in October. “They're good workers,” Linda (the wife of Bill Reid) says. “They pick, prune, hoe, they do whatever has to be done.” Bill Reid says Canadians he's hired in the past would pick an average of 50 quarts of strawberries a day. The Mexicans, by way of contrast, will collect upwards of 200. And they're “tickled pink” to work as many hours as they can (McCaffery, *The Sarnia Observer* 1999).

The Canadian author of an article in *The Toronto Star*, who worked a summer alongside Jamaican offshore workers and subsequently resolves the dualism between the Jamaican and Canadian workers by simply accepting their differences.

As tons of apples flew delicately into the bins, spirited discussions of every aspect of life in Canada and Jamaica echoed throughout the trees. When passionate disagreement flared too close to confrontation, there was one phrase that dispelled the tension: "You be you. me am me." / The courtly grace and effectiveness of this phrase never ceased to amaze me. This ability to acknowledge and even to honour valid differences while remaining friends is the mark of truly civilized people (Morrissey 1997).

While this romanticized image of difference may appeal to the liberal ideal of human equality, it creates the conditions for ignoring the structural disadvantages, imposed by the offshore program and the condition of “unfreedom” (Basok 2002, Satzewich 1991) confronted by the Jamaican workers.

As part of a series in *The Windsor Star*, labour reporter Mary Agnes Welch (2000b) published a comparison between the employment characteristics of Canadian autoworkers and off-shore farm workers, aiming to demonstrate the differences between Mexican and Canadian labour (Table 2). This comparison clearly dismisses any attempt to present the offshore and local labour as interchangeable.

Auto worker in minivan plant	Migrant worker in greenhouse
* Hourly wage: \$26.75 plus cost of living allowance.	* Hourly wage: \$7
* Working hours: Six 7.5-hour shifts a week, plus voluntary overtime on Sunday.	* Working hours: In peak season, up to 12 hours per day, six days a week and a half-day Sunday.

<p>* Time off: Roughly six weeks a year, including plant shutdown, public holidays, paid absence allowance and SPA weeks.</p>	<p>* Time off: Varies, but most take several days off upon their return to Mexico before tending to their own land, sharecropping or taking factory jobs.</p>
<p>* Benefits: Extended health, dental, vision and prescription benefits; a progressive pension plan; additional unemployment benefits; child care and tuition bonuses.</p>	<p>* Benefits: Ontario Health Insurance Plan for the duration of their contract; Canada Pension Plan.</p>

Source: Welch 2002b

### ***Crime, Inferiority and Savage Workers***

Our newsprint media search revealed the most citations of migrant workers in the context of accidents and crime. Frequently, foreign farm workers are isolated in these reports and the migrant worker’s country of origin is almost always revealed. Typical headlines include: “Migrant worker jailed for assaulting girlfriend (*The Brantford Expositor*),” or “Mexican worker dies in bunk: Cause of death unknown; foul play not suspected (*The St. Catharines Standard*).” An implication of this type of reporting is that foreign migrant workers are discursively associated with criminality, physical aggressiveness and unlawful behaviour.

For example, *The London Free Press* crime reporter published an article on sexual assault charges of a Jamaican farm worker. Immediately following the report of the crime, the article discussed the farm workers program, implying that there is a structural connection between workers recruited under the offshore program and criminal behaviour (Beaubien 1999). In a similar vein, after a Mexican farm worker died of natural causes, *The Niagara Falls Review* reports the death as if it is unusual for foreign farm workers not to die of the causes of violence behaviour within the group: “Police say that at this time it appears the man died of natural causes and no foul play is suspected (*The Niagara Falls Review* 2001).”

In addition, offshore workers are often represented as strangers who are less deserving than local people. In a public dispute, the author of a letter to the editor in *The Hamilton Spectator* defends the record of a Niagara winery which won 25 medals in international competitions for its wines. And the author adds:

All this from a winery which was not forced out of Winona and does not drop wine barrels in any creek and which does employ 15 full-time and other part-time staff who live in Niagara, not Jamaica (Warren 1999).

The author does not consider it necessary to specify why Jamaican workers are less deserving of employment than locals, or why grapes picked by people who live in Niagara make better wine than grapes picked by Jamaicans.

While this type of blatant labelling of foreign workers as inferior was common in the news reports we surveyed, we found even more frequently the opposite image of the

foreign farm worker as naturally suited for the task of fruit picker. Often, this image is embedded in a narrative of the orchard being the workers' 'natural' habitat. One article, for example, articulates this image in a suitably poetic manner:

Of course at that time of morning, outside is dark with barely a glimpse of the sun in the eastern sky. One of the first things you can see is your breath as you wish out loud you were back in bed. But it's the cold that puts the colour in the apple, Stevens instructs. / By seven, the work begins. / Bathed in dew, the early morning sunlight gives the red ripe Empire apple the appearance of a jewel waiting to be plucked. / The delicacy of the operation is obvious as you watch them place the apples first into the bushel basket, then into the large bin - - 20 bushels to the bin. [...] / Tony Rice [...] [a]t 41 years old he's been coming up to Ontario to work for 18 years. And every year he leaves his wife and kids at home because he needs to make money. / He's quiet but his weathered face and leathery hands scream his years of hard work. / But he's gentle with every one of his share of the 2 million McIntosh, Red Delicious, Crispin, Empires and all the apples that pass through his care. / He faces his annual separation from his family philosophically. / "In life we just got to do some sacrifices and this is one of them." (Gray 1999, *The Ottawa Sun*).

Other articles use more sober language to make the same point. The workers' natural quality of "having soft hands" means increased profits for growers:

The offshore workers are said to "have soft hands," a reference to the fact that the fruit they handle is rarely damaged [...] If inspectors find too many apples bruised, they'll grade an entire truckload as cider apples which means the farmer gets \$3 a bushel instead of \$11 (Fitzgerald 2001)."

In conjunction with the depiction of foreign workers as better suited labour for fruit picking than Canadians, migrants are often portrayed as enjoying this type of work and the lifestyle that comes with it. The following excerpt, for instance, paints a romanticized image of the migrant worker as an enthusiastic individual, who happily manages the separation from their families:

Last year, hundreds of workers took part in the Labour Day weekend event which was supported by area businesses at Queenston Heights park. [...] In addition to free food, games (including cricket) and door prizes, Baker [a 66-year-old fruit picker from Jamaica, who has been returning for 26 years] says the main attraction is the chance to get together with other workers for the day. / [...] For Baker, it's time to get back to work. He hops on his bicycle and heads off through the orchard, winding his way back to his fellow workers. / His enthusiastic approach to his work seems to say, 'See you again next year' (Glantz, *The Niagara Falls Review* 2000).

To the treatment of workers as primitive workers who enthusiastically apply their natural talents in the orchards, plantations, and greenhouses, the press adds a narrative of farmers

being emotionally attached to their workers.<sup>2</sup> For example, *The Simcoe Refomer* reports the approach of local farmer Bozek to his foreign employees:

To make them feel more at home, he and wife, Mary mark their [offshore workers'] birthdays with cakes and provide them with land for their own vegetable gardens. The men also have use of the farm van to make their weekly shopping trips to town. / "It's not a landlord-tenant relationship," said Bozek. "It's more of a friendly atmosphere." (Smith 1996c)

In return for this generosity, workers comply with the demands of their work tasks. The same article continues:

Employer attempts to make them feel comfortable don't go unnoticed, and they make the work day run more smoothly. / "The boss takes us out to dinner and treats us well," said Alfonso Brown, one of the Cairns' employees. "And he always writes to us in the off-season."

The narrative of the "natural," happy and well-liked orchard worker is disrupted by counter narratives that seek to expose the brutality of the offshore program. A series in *The Windsor Star* reports on the harsh working conditions:

When Jose Lopez came to work in Leamington's greenhouses in 1990, his first boss treated him shabbily. He was strict, expected superhuman speed and refused to provide the Mexican workers with adequate medical care, says Lopez. / [...] Lopez's skittishness -- his outright paranoia -- is shared by many workers and it means lingering pockets of mistreatment are downplayed and details are scarce. / [...] "They're fearful of reprisal," said Rev. Frank Murphy, a Leamington priest who works closely with migrant workers. "Don't ask too many questions or your name just won't get on that list (Welch, *The Windsor Star* 2000a)."

Other authors humanize the image of Mexican and Jamaican workers by drawing attention to the difficulty of being away from home in a different cultural setting:

[...] Mexicans are put off by the reserved culture of the North despite the best efforts of the Tequila Sunrise (served in local bars): "There are no scandals here, no dances in the street; says one 40-year-old Mexican vegetable picker. "In Mexico, we have more freedom of personal behaviour. People are used to drinking in the street. Here they put you in jail if you fight in the bars. People are more calm, more reserved." (Jimenez, *The National Post* 2001)

Other authors emphasize the economic situation in Mexico and the Caribbean, which puts the migrants into a desperate situation that is subsequently exploited by local growers. In exceptionally brutal situations, the newsprint media even rallies behind the migrant

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<sup>2</sup> Since these workers are unfree, as Basok (2002) and Satzewich (1991) demonstrate, we were enticed to draw a parallel to a family who is emotionally attached to their pet, but does not grant it any independent decision making power.

workers. For example, when two workers died in a traffic accident in 1999 involving a drunk Canadian driver, an article in *The Hamilton Spectator* implied that the 5-year sentence is too short for all the hardship and pain the driver caused among Jamaican co-workers, and family and relatives in Jamaica (Diebel 1999). An editorial in *The Branford Expositor* (1999a) also acknowledged the magnitude of the tragedy and demanded an even higher sentence. An editorial in *The Hamilton Spectator* (1999b) also expresses concern about the light sentence and raises the question of racism:

Suppose this drunk driver had killed two young men from suburban Ancaster instead of two migrant farm workers from Jamaica. Does anyone else wonder if the outcome would have been the same?

Blatant racism is acknowledged and condemned in the local press. One particular incident that occurred in 2000 attracted disproportionate public attention. *The Hamilton Spectator*, for example, reports:

Police say migrant farm workers in the Delhi area have been subjected to so many racist attacks by local youths that some are too afraid to go into town. Sgt. Robert Bermuhler says Haldimand-Norfolk OPP have received a number of complaints from local farmers who say their foreign workers have been harassed, threatened and subjected to racial slurs. / "One (farmer) called and said 'my workers are afraid to go into town ... They don't want to be harassed.'" (*The Hamilton Spectator* 2000)

However, these reports of racism do not trigger public outcries, and only rarely draw letter to the editor. Some voices that contributed to this debate suggested that racism cannot be tolerated because migrant workers are a vital economic asset to the community, not because they have a fundamental right to equality as human beings. Condemning the racist behaviour on the side of a Delhi resident, Sergeant Rob Bermuhler of Cayuga OPP is quoted:

"That's why we've gone public," Bermuhler said. "They're an important group to us economically and we want them to know they're welcome." (Harries, *The Toronto Star* 2000)

### ***Social Mobility, Good-Life and Consumption***

The third narrative focuses on social mobility, increased potential for consumption and a better life that foreign farm workers create for themselves and their family in Mexico and the Caribbean. The idea of social upward mobility suggests that the offshore program offers a unique chance for poor foreign families to achieve middle-class status. For example, *The National Post* published an article with the following excerpt:

German Gonzalez has been coming to Canada to pick tomatoes at Great Northern Hydroponics, an industrial tomato operation, for three years [...] He realizes that the \$15,000 he earns in eight months here is a paltry sum in Canada. But in his

hometown of Apan, in Hidalgo State, his earnings translate into a priceless gift: social mobility. His children began life as working class farmers; now two are in private school, one is a pilot and another is studying law. He has also managed to build his own home (Jimenez 2001).

An important element in this discourse is that migrant workers need to earn Canadian money to send their children to school. For example after following migrant worker Francisco Baes back to Mexico, *The Windsor Star* labour reporter Welch (2000d) writes:

In a country where college is costly and government scholarships are doled out based, in part, on the number of light sockets in the student's house, Baes [a migrant worker] is shepherding two of his sons through university. One son, who barrels through the living room in his hospital gear, is studying to be a surgeon. Another is taking applied languages at the college in Tlaxcala, the state capital. / How many more years will Baes apply to work in Canada? / "Until my sons are finished school," he answers evenly.

A picture in *The Simcoe Reformer* underlines this narrative. It depicts two children sitting on the lap of their mother as recipients of the money earned by their father as an offshore worker (Figure 1).



FAMILY TRADITION: Robin Cunningham hopes his grandchildren, such as newborn, Amelia, (held by her mother, Natalie) and four-year-old Ali will have the advantage of higher education, something not available to all Jamaicans. Students must qualify for high school and it costs their parents about \$150 CDN per term -- a fortune to many families. Even then, access isn't easy for those living in the country; some students board at school. (Staff Photo by Elaine Smith)

Source: Smith 1996d, *Simcoe Reformer* Photo]

Some articles report on the workers' tendency to spend a portion of their incomes on consumer goods for their families. An article in *The Toronto Star* opens with the following passage:

George Mash grimaces as the pointer on the luggage scale arcs past the 32-kilogram mark. The Air Canada agent hands him an empty box, and Nash moves to the side of the check-in counter to fill it with items from the overweight carton that bears his address in the Jamaican countryside. / As the 42-year-old labourer rips open the carefully sealed container, its contents come spilling out: 14-inch TV, pressure cooker, light

bulbs, a bottle of cod liver oil capsules... / All around Nash, in Terminal 1 at Pearson International Airport, dozens of men grapple with airline weight restrictions and bulging boxes and suitcases crammed with the fruits of their labour (Infantry, *The Toronto Star*, 2000).

Reporters also unveil evidence of consumption within the workers' living quarters, not only at the site of the airport:

[A]ll live rent-free in two large bunkhouses the Colasantis have built on their property, in front of a duck pond and maze of bushes. The dorm rooms are crowded with DVD players, VCRs, cameras and portable stereo systems (Jimenez, *The National Post* 2001).

Likewise, *The Simcoe Refomer* reports about the level of consumption farm workers have been able to achieve in Jamaica:

The extra income helps them to purchase some of the consumer goods most North Americans take for granted. After nine years, their standard of living is princely compered with that of other local Jamaicans. The Browns dress in Canadian casual wear and have a television, a VCR, a refrigerator, a sewing maching, and a 35-mm camera, all shipped or carried back from stores in Tillsonburg or Delhi. Music is one of Brown's joys and he adds to his collection of cassettes each summer (Smith 1996b).

This article is accompanied by a picture of Mr. Brown standing in “Canadian-style” clothes in front of his motorcycle in his native Jamaica (Figure 2).



Source: Smith 1996b, *Simcoe Reformer* Photo]

The mentioning of high-end luxury items, like DVD players, VCRs, cameras and portable stereo systems, as well as some everyday consumer products, like refrigerators and sewing machnies, suggests that the work in Canada enables migrant workers to achieve ‘Western’ levels of consumption. While this may be an extreme position, the discourse of social mobility, good-life and consumption generally presents the acquisition of consumer goods as an element of upward mobility, and as a part of the effort among the workers to improve the lifestyle of their families in

Mexico or the Caribbean. In a letter to the editor of *The Windsor Star*, Denton Hoffman (2001), General Manager of Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers, defends the practices of growers and the wages paid to farm workers:

Their wages are above minimum wage and are thousands of times more than they can make at home; it helps workers better the lives of their families, including sending children to college.

The off-shore program is presented as a win-win situation. The workers can pursue their dream, while Canadians can feel good that they enable poor families in Mexico and the

Caribbean to help themselves. This idea is expressed in an article in the *Simcoe Refomer* which presents the off-shore program as a form of foreign aid:

Fred Bozek, a Delhi tobacco farmer, said the work done by Jamaicans is almost a form of foreign aid, one that reaches the grass roots level. / "We're changing the Jamaican economy in the boonies (with the income farm wokrers earn)," he said (Smith 1996a).

In sum, the discourse of upward mobility, good-life and consumption thus legitimizes the offshore program.

### ***Landscape and Spaces of Representation***

Seasonal farm workers are usually absent from the popular imagination of rural Ontario landscapes. They are not given the status of active agents who shape the agricultural landscape (Mitchell 1996). Some articles that we reviewed pointed precisely to this problem of invisibility in local communities. *Windsor Star* labour reporter Mary Agnes Welch (2000c), for example, unveils that migrant workers are generally kept separate from the village community. Regarding a festival in Leamington she observes:

There was a rockin' big party in the town's back yard this summer, complete with dancing, a blaring stereo, spicy food and some patriotic hollering. / The town barely noticed. / Hidden in the parking lot behind St. Michael's Church, hundreds of Mexican migrant workers gathered on the third Sunday in September to celebrate their country's independence from Spanish colonial rule. [...] / Much like the Mexicans themselves, the four-hour festival barely registered beyond St. Michael's property line.

According to the author of this excerpt, Mexican migrant workers are not accepted into the imagination of village landscape. This particular view is confirmed by a report about the need to establish a special ministry program to bring Mexican migrant workers in contact with the local community of the town Newmarket. A parish social minister is quoted as saying: "The outreach aspect here is that people deserve to be included in the community and not just used and ignored (*The Welland Tribune* 2001)." On the other hand, the above analysis suggests that, at least in the print media, migrant workers are far from ignored, and multiple, overlapping and often contradictory impressions of migrant workers coexist.

While perhaps not invisible, the language used in most newspaper articles suggest that Mexican and Caribbean workers are not perceived to be part of the local community, but rather to be a separate and foreign element. For example, in accident and crime reports foreign farm workers are often described as "Mexicans," "Jamaicans" or "Trinidadians," without any further specifications of their personalities.

Where migrant workers are indeed incorporated into the imagined landscape is outside the villages as bicycle riders on country roads. As the quote by Basok's (2002) in the



introduction demonstrates, bicycle-riding Jamaican and Mexican farm workers belong to the visual scenery of agricultural areas across Southern Ontario. For many Ontario residents, these images are the main, if not only, visual evidence of the presence of foreign migrant workers.

The image of the bicycle-riding migrant worker as a feature of the agricultural landscape of Southern Ontario is strengthened by reports in the newsprint media of bicycle accidents, road safety training, and used bike donations. For example, most newspapers in our sample reported in 2001 about two Mexican cyclists who collided close to Windsor that resulted in one death, or the 1999 death of two Jamaican workers who were run over by an impaired driver. After these spectacular accidents, newspapers announced that Niagara on the Lake offers bicycle safety training for offshore workers, and the Building Bridges Through Bicycles program in Leamington won the Peter F. Drucker Award for Canadian Nonprofit Innovation. University of Guelph student Lopez-Bastos was featured in the Guelph Mercury for organizing a bicycle drive that would benefit migrant workers.

Rather than erasing migrant workers from the imagined landscape of Southern Ontario, they are incorporated into this landscape as a distant image that may be viewed when passing by in a car. They are not depicted as integral members of the living community that residents (other than farmers) would actively engage with.

The newsprint media also represents foreign farm workers in reference to particular places, in order to give them distinct identities. For example, a writers often differentiate between the space on the farm and the space in the community. Within these two spaces, farm workers assume very different roles. On the farms, workers are depicted as irreplaceable labour. For example:

“Without migrant workers, we wouldn't have a fruit and vegetable industry in Ontario,” says Alex Just, 41, who has been using migrant workers for about 11 years (Egan, *The Ottawa Citizen* 1998).

In the context of the community, multiple images coexist. On the one hand, migrants are perceived as undesirable and out-of place. One article featured the complaints of Kingsville residents about Mexican migrant workers living next door. The long-time residents wanted city council to remove the migrant workers:

"Ten migrant workers living in a residential neighbourhood is unacceptable," said Pitkin, the head of the guidance department at Harrow District Secondary School. / "Migrant workers by their very definition are transitional. That home should be used for people who are going to live there and stay there. We want to develop relationships with our neighbours." / Mayor Pat O'Neil said the home belongs to a Kingsville-area produce grower who uses the home to house the workers -- mainly Mexicans -- who tend his fields. / "The issue is not that there's migrant workers in a residential neighbourhood, but that there's 10 people in the home,"

O'Neil said Sunday. [...] / O'Neil said if it's determined that the home is being used illegally, the municipality will take steps to make sure the bylaws are enforced (Stewart, *The Windsor Star* 2001).

In a later announcement, the newspaper reported that the accommodation of the ten workers is legal and in agreement with local zoning ordinances.

On the other hand, migrant workers are depicted as consumers in the space of the local community. In this context they are clearly seen as a desirable group. For example:

Much of the combined \$90-million in salaries [of migrant workers in the Simcoe area] is pumped back into the local economy. According to Cooper [president of FARMS], Christmas comes twice to Simcoe, once in December and another in September. / "He's absolutely right," says Al Schott, owner of Schott's Home Hardware. "There's been years when the economy wasn't worth a darn and the difference between us winning and losing was the migrant farm worker." / On Fridays, there are no fewer than 100 migrant workers in his store at a time between 5 p.m. and closing. They buy mostly televisions, stereos and tools, which are much cheaper than they are at home. / And that's good news for Rob Lall's cargo company. He ships stoves, freezers, TVs, stereos, bicycles and toiletries in more than 500 jam-packed crates to the Caribbean each fall (Fitzgerald 2001).

A similar picture emerges for Simcoe. The Christmas-comes-twice metaphor, which is also used in this article, expresses the strength of the spending power of the foreign workers: "They say Christmas comes twice a year in Simcoe and some say September sales exceed December sales," says farmer Schuyler (Infantry 2000)."

The argument of consumer power is often made in defence of migrant workers in more antagonistic debates. For example, after two men in Delhi were charged for racially motivated assault, *The Hamilton Spectator* published an article noting that only a small group of individuals harass the migrants. The author explains that an inclusive environment is a necessity to tap the spending power of migrant workers.

There's no doubt the workers are avid consumers. Friday night is shopping night in the area's urban centres. Clothing, footwear and appliances are favoured goods among the workers, who send them home by ship. The area's retailers count on the workers to spend their money. / "The migrant workers are very important to business," said Darryl Harriott of Jack's Smoke Shop on Main Street in downtown Delhi. "It's nice to have a busy summer because winter can be slow." (Prokaska 1999).

### **Example Farmfare**

In September 1999, Ontario's Social Service Department proposed to extend the welfare-to-work program (called Ontario Works) by sending welfare recipients to work in the horticulture sector. The public debate revolving around the issue of "farmfare" presents

an interesting case for the purpose of this analysis because it directly juxtaposes foreign labour with Canadian workers and welfare recipients.

A Marxist interpretation of the off-shore program is that foreign farm workers constitute a class of unfree labour (Satzewich 1991, Basok 2002). With the attempted creation of farmfare, the Social Service Department sought to expand this class to welfare recipients. This measure was to be justified under the Ontario Works requirement that ‘able-bodied’ welfare recipients train, work or lose their benefits. However, farmers reported that welfare recipients are not as disciplined as foreign farm workers. As Canadian citizens they are able to resist substandard working conditions, may refuse participation, and lack the pressure exerted by the strict regulations of the offshore program (Basok 2002: 47-57).

The attempt to push unemployed urban residents into seasonal farm work has been tried throughout the postwar period. Similarly, the perception that welfare recipients are ill-suited for farm work has been an ongoing narrative. In 1958, for example, a representative of the South-western Ontario Field Crops Association complained that local workers “could be classed as casual workers, they were an extremely poor type. [...] These workers were also difficult to manage and there is no doubt that many of them had criminal records. This poor calibre of men resulted in a large turnover (Satzewich 1991: 151).”

The rhetoric in the newsprint media supports the view that foreign farm labour is indeed a structural necessity as argued by Basok 2002 and Satzewich 1991. Some reports evoke the impression that Ontario residents and welfare recipients are unwilling to work in the fields, and therefore “Farmers are often forced to hire migrant workers, many from Mexico and the Caribbean, to help with the annual harvest (*The Kitchener-Waterloo Record* 1999).” Reports sometimes quote farmers who would rather like to see the wages stay in Canada than benefiting offshore workers:

Meaford farmer Rob Gardner, who has been using offshore labour to pick his apples for more than a decade, supports Harris’ suggestion that workfare recipients be sent to help out in Ontario orchards. / “They’re welcome here. It’s strenuous work, but if they are ready and able to do it, we can use them... we would be glad to see the money kept in Canada,” he said (Mallan 1999, *The Toronto Star*).

Often the employment of foreign workers over local welfare recipients is justified through the lack of skill-acquisition and the seasonal character of the work. Some commentators reject farmfare on these grounds: “The welfare workers would not learn a skill that would provide them with regular income (Tylor, *The Kitchener-Waterloo Record* 1999).”

More common, however, is the depiction of foreign farm labour as more qualified and motivated than local farm workers. Ironically, this representation of foreign farm workers contradicts the image of the “savage” worker, who cannot be allowed to stay

permanently in Canada because of climatic conditions or 'cultural differences' (Satzewich 1991). In the context of the farmfare debate, foreign workers are portrayed as skilled, professional and reliable. A letter to the editor of *The Kingston Whig Standard* makes the states:

Why import workers from Mexico and the Caribbean when there are workers in one's own backyard? [...] These people are professional, seasoned workers who are used to moving from area to area, crop to crop. They work fast and hard, and then they go back home. There, the money they earn might support their families for a year. / [...] Farmers do not need a bunch of unwilling amateurs to harvest their crop (Byline, 1999)

Canadian workers, on the other hand, are depicted as unwilling and/or not suited for the job:

Agricultural work is hard labour. Rose Charles, 56, wouldn't mind the work if she didn't have a back injury; she likes to keep busy. She laughs, however, at the idea that people might have to take an agricultural job or forfeit their welfare. "They can't make people do that kind of work." (Hepfner, *The Hamilton Spectator* 1999)

The same article quotes the civil rights spokeswoman for Hamilton-based Women Against Poverty:

"(Workfare) sounds a lot like slavery to me. Some of these people barely have enough to eat and picking food is hard work. You need to be healthy." ... [I]t's difficult, she said, for the minimum-wage workers to get out to the rural areas and get enough food in their stomachs to sustain them throughout the long days (Hepfner 1999).

Obviously, Canadian and foreign workers are held to different standards. This double standard is most clearly revealed in passages when the foreign workers and welfare recipients are directly juxtaposed to each other. For example, an editorial in *The Hamilton Spectator* states:

[Reforming work fare] is not as simple as idleness or laziness. Farm labour can be brutally hard, hot work. Most farmers -- and the migrant workers they use now -- have grown up doing it. / An inexperienced "city mouse" dropped into the high-pressure situation of a working farm at harvest time may simply be unable to cope -- and risks serious injury or worse. Farms are still among the most dangerous workplaces in this country. / As well, even with training for participants, we doubt farmers can be assured of their productivity. Missing part of the crop or mishandling the harvest could cost a farmer thousands of dollars. Tobacco, fruit and produce have to be picked at the right moment. The crop that's missed may never be harvested; the fruit that's bruised may never be saleable. / Migrant workers, on the other hand, want the jobs and know that productivity is the only way to be rehired next year (*The Hamilton Spectator* 1999a).

This passage illustrates how the narrative of the “naturally” suited foreign workers is intertwined with the economy discourse. One in isolation is insufficient to make a coherent argument for or against the use of foreigners or welfare recipients to bring in Ontario’s harvest. Only through the combination of multiple narratives is a compelling argument constructed. The narrative of social mobility has no use in this argument and is therefore omitted.

In a similar vein, the rhetoric of racial inferiority would even be counterproductive. It usually does not enter the debate either. In one occasion, however, it was turned on its head, when Ed Segsworth, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, is quoted for suggesting that foreigners may be biologically more suited for working in the fields: "They are not used to being out in the hot sun all day whereas the migrant workers from the warmer climates are (Boyle, *The Hamilton Spectator* 1999)."

Of course, the newsprint media also features voices that do not participate in the juxtapositioning and labelling of welfare recipients and foreign workers. For example, in a letter to the editor of *The Toronto Star*, the Canadian co-ordinator of United Farm Workers of America points out that the removal of labour standards for agricultural workers disadvantages both foreign and Canadian workers:

We [...] plead to the MPPs of Ontario to re-establish basic Human rights for farm workers! / Without these basic rights re-established, it will continue to be very difficult to find able bodied Canadians to consider agriculture as a career (Raper 1999).

Although farmfare is no longer discussed in Ontario politics, the debate of the contradiction between high unemployment rates and the importing of foreign workers continues to smolder. In this debate, the same arguments circulate. For example, a recent article in *The Windsor Star* writes:

But you don't have to go that far afield to see the problem. Here in the greater Windsor area, with an 8.5 per cent unemployment rate and more than 14,000 people listed as job seekers, at least 3,000 migrant workers -- the best paid in North America -- are flown in annually from Mexico and the Caribbean to do the field and greenhouse work Canadians consider demeaning. / Yeah. But who in their right mind would work in the hot sun for \$8-an-hour plus free accommodation and other benefits? Far better to sit home and wait for a job that offers the big bucks. I can hear that argument now. (Henderson 2002).

## **Conclusion**

Our analysis of the representation of foreign farm workers in Ontario’s newsprint media revealed that this medium does not project a singular, one-sided image of foreign farm workers. Rather, the images are multi-faceted, complex and often contradictory. Based on the literature on discourse analysis we expected to find complex representations of farm labour. However, we did not expect the degree of variation and sometimes contradictory

nature of the images. From this finding we conclude that the coverage of foreign farm labour is relatively balanced and multiple opinions are represented in the newsprint media. However, different narratives are mobilized by writers, depending on the issue at hand.

In addition, our analysis did not permit us to examine under which circumstances the issue of foreign farm workers was ignored in the printmedia. These absences and silences are important to understand the ideological circumstances and political motivations to mobilize certain narratives and images (e.g. Mitchell 1996). Thus, the statement regarding the balanced media coverage of foreign farm labour should not be seen as entirely conclusive.

Several distinct narratives could be isolated within the survey sample of articles on foreign farm workers. These narratives present different interpretations of the offshore program and assign different meanings to the workers, the growers, the industry, the workplace and the rural landscape. In the context of different debates, such as farmfare or workers' protests, parallel narratives are assembled in such a way as to construct a coherent discourse that is consistent with a given ideology and/or political orientation.

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