

Journey to Niagara-on-the-Lake

Gu Xiong

The history of Migrant workers in the Niagara-on-the-Lake region spans over fifty years. As it is right now, many people come from Jamaica and Mexico to work on various fruit farms in the area. Document film as a major component of my Interior Migrations project, Yu, Scott and I have been to Niagara twice now to film the daily lives and interview people on various farms. When we were there last summer we mostly conducted interviews and with this most recent trip we returned to document the daily lives and routines on the farm.

On August 22nd we departed from Vancouver and LA on 6:00am flights and arrived in Toronto at 2:00pm. We rented a Ford SUV at the airport and started the next leg of our journey to Niagara. It took us three hours to get there. We arrived at the Applewood Bed and Breakfast where we stayed of the duration for our trip. As we drove in I noticed there was farmland completely surrounding us. The owner of the establishment was Jane Andrews, she has been helping the community of migrant workers in the area for over 30s years. Through her and her organization we met 12 people to conduct individual interviews with. After our trip last year, we went to Jamaica to film interviews with three of the 12 workers in their homes.

The purpose of this trip was to document worker’s daily life, from daybreak to nightfall. We chose to go in August specifically because it was the end of the production season, a very busy time on the farm and for the migrant workers who are preparing to head back to their homes. In order to get approval for interviews, we had to first go through farm owners, Jane introduced us to three farm owners, hereafter referred to as A, B and C. A, originally from Switzerland, immigrated to Canada in the 1970s. He is an independent farmer and is not part of the corporation of Vineland Growers Co-operative farms. He thinks scientifically and effectively about his farming, and has built up a network of people to buy directly from his farm, relationships he has kept for 50 years. He works hard to avoid waste and has developed many ways to make sure his products are successful right from growth. A was a very open-minded person; he had no problem at all with our filming migrant workers on his farm. Usually the approval process from the farm owner was a long painful process, but not with A.

B has owned the largest farm in the region since the 80’s, each year making it bigger and bigger. When I asked him exactly how big his farm was he simply said “big.” Last year when we visited his farm we spoke to his daughter-in-law, D, who allowed us to interview farm workers and shoot footage on his land. This year, E (B’s brother) let us film the fruit packaging process. We finally met B through E, and B asked us what we were doing here? I told B, we are working on an art project about migrant workers and their memories of family while apart from them for long amounts of time.

The third farm owner we met, C, is a Chinese Canadian who immigrated to Canada 18 years ago. C and his wife were university professors in Beijing China and three years ago they bought this farmland, from a man who wished to retire. After C signed the contract, he worked on the land with his pickers for three months; he wanted to know the whole process before he started to run the farm. I found this interesting, not all people would choose to do this hard work. His farm is 30 acres. B’s workers live on C’s Farm because C has an extra house on his property. C was supportive of our documentation.

The salary migrant workers made on Canadian farm from 1 day was equal to what a lot of jobs would play for 2 weeks in their homeland.

On the 24th, before daybreak we started to shadow the workers morning preparation for their 12 to 14 hour workday. We began at their house on C’s farm. After breakfast they dressed in their work clothes and boots and climbed into several stripped down cars without doors or even roofs on some. It took them around 15 minutes to drive to B’s farm. After we shot their morning departure to work, Jane connected us with E so

we could film in the packinghouse and see the packaging of fruit for sale. E, a young 50 with a sense of humour, allowed us to come in to film, and showed us around. He showed us the machine that formed the boxes—it punched a two-dimensional planar object into a container. He showed us the process of approving fruit, if there was one blemish on a peach it was unusable, if the size was too small, it was unusable—everything had to be uniform. They would give the peaches that didn’t pass the test to another factory to be made into jams and other preserves. In years past, they would just throw out the fruit that was imperfect, but that has recently changed. When I saw the walls and walls of piled fruit boxes I imagined a replica of Niagara Falls made out of these fruit boxes. Then E brought us to meet B and the other workers in the packinghouse. This was my first time meeting B, he looked around 50, being fit and healthy, but he was over 60. He had three kids and only one was continuing the family farming work.

We then moved around the building documenting workers. Half of them are women from Mexico and the other half are local people from the region or students working a summer job. We were in the packinghouse for three hours. It was my first time witnessing the journey of commercial consumable fruit from farm to table. Because the fruit are so fragile they cannot be stored for a long time but have to be at the market as soon as possible. After being picked, the fruit arrives at the house via truck; the first stage of packaging is washing. The fruit is put on a conveyer belt and sent through the washing water tunnel for 20 minutes. Then they are brought into the house on a large tray where they are agitated a certain way so the smaller pieces fall down and the larger ones remain. Then the fruit that passed the size test is moved along another conveyer belt where workers examine them and put the unblemished ones in boxes. Once a box is full it is sent on another belt and put directly into a truck for shipment. The speed the fruit gets to a market is very important. The shorter the time it takes to get the fruit to the market the more valuable it is and less waste occurs.

All of the migrant workers in the packinghouse are from Mexico, they all speak Spanish to each other and they all eat lunch together. Their lunch is all Mexican food. One woman shared a taco with me; it was very good and spicy. Because of the language barrier, I couldn’t communicate very well with them. At this time, I really thought about how language is a real barrier for migrant workers on the farms and in local communities.

Most women were around 35 – 50, most of them already have families and are working to support them, how can they learn English in their spare time? Their situation reminded me of the first time I came to Canada, when I didn’t speak the language and I lived in culture shock for years. As I learned more English I became more and more comfortable when I could express my thinking and feelings. People paid more attention to me and my art work though my ability to converse with them. Year by year I fit more and more into mainstream culture. This is a lifetime practice, there is no short cut or easy route, it is extremely hard but is learnt slow when done everyday.

I think more about when I first came to Canada, that feeling you possess when you don’t speak the language because you cannot speak out, you cannot understand and you cannot get rid of the feeling as if you are on the bottom of society. You are totally dependant on your intuition to try to do the right thing. Sometimes you know what you want to say, but you cannot speak with the right words or form the right sentence. I remember when people tried to teach me to pronounce the T, H and L sound, it took so long to feel right in my mouth. I think about working in an environment that is foreign, you know what your work is and what needs to be done, but that is not all you are, you are a human and not part of a machine. The adjustment is hard; it is a big struggle and takes a long time. Some workers on B’s farm have worked for 30 years in the region and have become a huge part of the local community.

The following days we followed the workers from day break until they went to sleep. We wanted to really understand their daily routine and we followed them for over 12 hours straight one day. We started in the kitchen where they were eating breakfast. The following days we followed the workers from day break until they went to sleep. We wanted to really understand their daily routine and we followed them for over 12 hours straight one day. We started in the kitchen where they were eating breakfast and saw them get dressed for the farm, putting their socks and boots on then they all climbed into the cars and drove to the peach field. The morning was a hustle getting ready for their long day and they are