



# MORE THAN CHEAP LABOUR

The lives of Filipino workers in Alberta as shown in their photos

By TADZIO RICHARDS

**“T**HAT’S CONNIE,” says Marco Luciano, pointing to his laptop, at a photo of a Filipino woman holding a blond toddler in one hand and a vacuum cleaner in the other, in an upscale house in Edmonton. “She’s a caregiver [a live-in caregiver, a nanny],” he says. “I asked her, ‘Do you mind if I spend a day with you and just hang out and help out?’ We asked permission from her employer, including taking pictures of their children. They were pretty cool about it; I showed them the pictures afterwards,” he says. “I saw how she worked. She did the laundry. Then we went outside to the park with the kids. And that’s when I saw the other caregivers—there’s a whole bunch of brown women hanging out in the park. It’s really striking, these women taking these white kids to the park. It becomes a social gathering for them, because they’re isolated at home, they synchronize their playtimes so they can chat.

*A portrait of Connie Monana, a live-in caregiver. Marco Luciano calls his photo series “A Day in the Life of a Nanny.” Caregivers, he says, “are invisible workers and replacement parents.” By Marco Luciano*

“These caregivers take care of kids, they cook, they clean, they do everything; they’re domestic workers so that these middle-class Canadian workers can be part of the workforce,” he says. “It’s often cheaper for Canadians to get a caregiver from the Philippines than a [spot in a] private daycare centre.”

Luciano is the director of Migrante Alberta, a primarily Filipino advocacy group founded in 2013 to address issues faced by migrant workers—defined as workers participating in Canada’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), which includes the Live-In Caregiver program and the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. We’re sitting on stack chairs in the Orange Hub, formerly the site of Edmonton’s MacEwan University West campus and now a city-owned site for non-profit groups. It’s August 2020, the COVID-19 era. Luciano wears glasses and a flat cap, a disposable blue mask over his face. On his laptop is a draft of *Kwento’t Litrato: Stories of Filipino Migration in Alberta*, a collaboratively authored book that emerged from documentary photography workshops for migrant workers held in Edmonton and Calgary in 2019.

## “Instead of making the bad low-wage jobs better, employers’ preferred solution was increased access to the Temporary Foreign Workers Program.”

—MARK THOMPSON

He scrolls through more photos taken by migrant photographers. “We applied for a grant [from the Community Initiatives Program, which was cut by the UCP government in 2020], we got approved, so we tried to make it happen,” he says. “We have a friend, Nwel Saturay, who is a professional photographer [originally from the Philippines], and with him we designed workshops where learning photography—using a DSLR, for example—is integrated to telling stories. And so these amateur photographers were shooting what migration means to them. That’s the project—to give a voice to a large group of migrant workers, not only to the Filipino community but to other faces and stories behind the statistics.”

“The day-to-day story of a migrant worker is not really something that many people know,” he says. “So those are the stories we are trying to portray.”

“MIGRATION HAS become the defining story of the 21st century,” wrote *New York Times* journalist Jason DeParle in his 2019 book

on the political and economic impact of migration from developing countries such as the Philippines to wealthy countries such as the US. In Canada, for a story with global resonance, it’s notable that words such as “invisible,” “disposable” and “expendable” recur in articles about and interviews with migrant workers. They participate in the TFWP under a work permit that allows them to live and work in Canada for a set period of time. A 2013 *Tyee* series titled “The Invisibles,” by journalist Krystle Alarcon, opened with: “They hand you a soothing cup of Tim Hortons, pack frozen beef in factories, pick blueberries and apples on... farms, serve fast-food meals and wipe tables, excavate mines... and raise your kids as if they were their own. [Migrant workers] have become ubiquitous while remaining all but invisible.”

In Alberta, the vice-chair of Migrante Alberta, Jay Zapata, told me that for migrant workers it’s tacitly understood that “if you get sick and you can’t do the job, [employers] will just send you home [to your country].” Employers see migrant workers as “disposable,” he says. “That’s how it is.”

Jason Foster, an associate professor of labour relations at Athabasca University, says this is not entirely an unfair allegation. “The structural problem with the TFWP is that it inherently views these workers as expendable [and easily replaced],” he says. “That’s the basis upon which the program is built and that’s where the problems of the program exist. The workers are left being quite vulnerable.”

In a report for the Parkland Institute at the University of Alberta, *In The Shadows: Living and Working Without Status in Alberta*, Foster and Luciano wrote a scathing assessment of the TFWP in April 2020. “Canada’s approach to migrant labour has never been a well-thought-out plan,” they write. “It has been a series of hasty, reactive, shortsighted decisions where the long-term consequences are not considered and the human costs are invisible.... It is long overdue to ask ourselves what role migrant workers should play in our labour market [and] that we consider the consequences of our decisions on those most affected—the migrant workers themselves.”

By “long overdue” they mean decades.

Back in 1973, federal legislation introduced a legal framework for temporary migrant labour in Canada.

This was a legal first. Migrant workers were allowed into the country to do a set job for a set period of time, but “for the most part,” writes academic researcher Salimah Valiani, they did “not enjoy the basic rights and entitlements accorded to permanent residents: family reunification, rights protection under various levels of legislation, mobility rights and eventual access to citizenship.”

This was a departure from years prior, in the “waves of migration following the Second World War,” when policy analysts saw “permanent migration and the accompanying legal status of permanent residency” as a benefit to “society as a whole,” writes Valiani. “Due to the socially accepted notion that workers should migrate along with their families, workers were able to settle with the crucial support of spouses and other immediate family members.” Permanent migration was then understood as a “cornerstone of Canadian immigration policy since Confederation.”

The 1973 legislation was a crack in that cornerstone. The key change was limiting access to permanent residency—a legal status that entitles a person to social benefits and requires them to pay taxes, though they can’t vote or run for political office. Over time, argues political economist Nandita Sharma, this policy change grew into a systemic shift “away from a policy of permanent immigrant settlement towards an increasing reliance on temporary migrant workers.”

That shift wasn’t immediately apparent. For example, mass migration from the Philippines to Canada didn’t really ramp up until 1992. That year—after years of protest against the old domestic worker program, which didn’t allow for permanent residency—the federal government’s new live-in-caregiver program finally established an automatic right for caregivers to apply for permanent residency after working here for 24 months.

In the Philippines, where roughly one in five people live in “extreme poverty” and income inequality is among the worst in the world, the government has promoted migration since the 1970s. About one in seven Filipinos goes abroad to work and the money they send home accounts for 10 per cent of the country’s gross domestic product. Many Filipino migrants go to the Middle East, to countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—known as “guest worker states” for the high percentage of temporary foreign workers—where social benefits are minimal and there’s no path to citizenship or family reunification. In the words of *Globe and Mail* international affairs columnist Doug Saunders, Canada’s live-in caregiver visa (as it was then known) “carried a guarantee of eventual pathways to permanent residence and family reunification,” which, along with higher wages than could be earned

in the Philippines, were preeminent among the “good reasons to come to Canada.”

Still, despite growth, Canada’s temporary foreign worker programs remained relatively small, with niche streams for farmworkers, caregivers and high-skilled jobs such as university instructors, artists and technical experts. But in 2002, after what critics called “aggressive lobbying” from the fast food, hospitality, meatpacking and other industries, the Liberal government bundled the programs together under the newly formed TFWP, which now included a “low-skilled workers” category. Officially, “the intended purpose of the expanded program was to serve as a ‘last resort’ for employers facing labour shortages,” write Foster and Luciano. “An employer had to obtain a Labour Market Opinion from the federal government to be eligible to hire migrant workers under the program, and the process was supposed to evaluate whether a labour shortage existed.”

In reality, says Mark Thompson, a professor emeritus at UBC’s Sauder School of Business, the federal government “argued that the low-skilled program was needed to solve a labour shortage because ‘Canadians won’t do this work.’ [But] the shortages it was supposed to meet were actually the result of government and corporate policies that made a number of jobs with low wages and poor working conditions unacceptable to most Canadian workers.... Instead of making the jobs better, employers’ preferred solution was to lobby for increased access to the TFWP, thereby ensuring wages remained low and working conditions unchanged.”

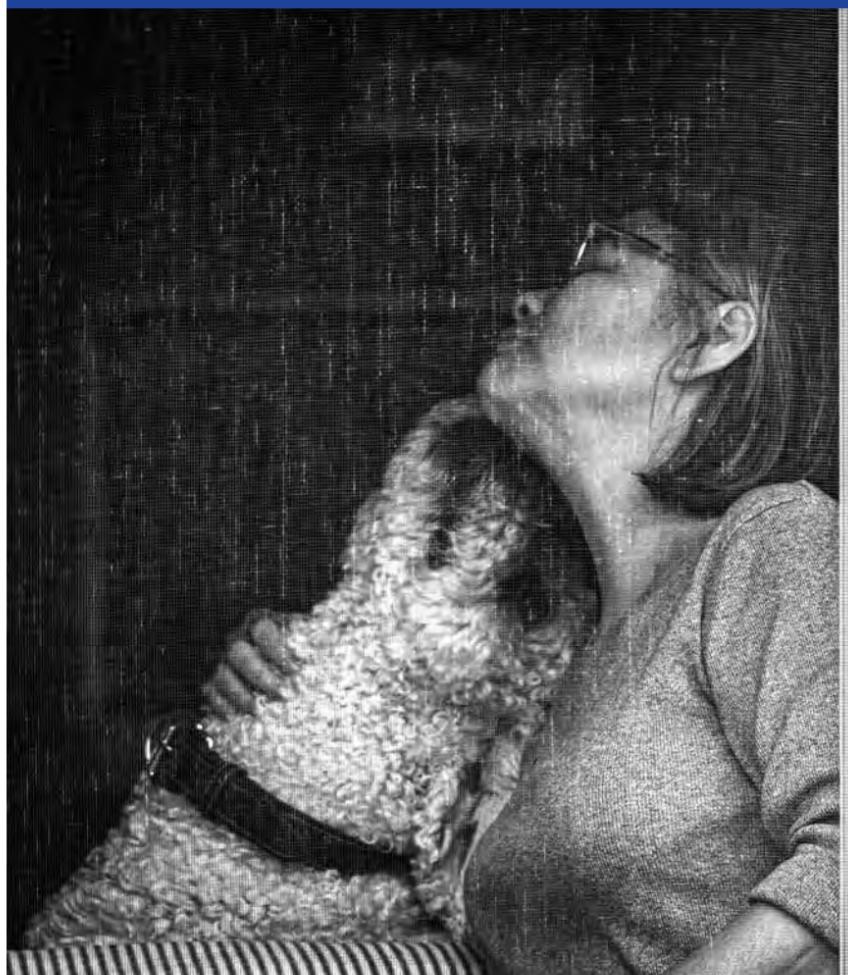
In 2006 Stephen Harper’s Conservative government expanded the TFWP, making it even better for employers, particularly those servicing the oil and gas boom in Alberta. For example, for designated “occupations under pressure,” the Harper government shortened the time that jobs had to be advertised on a national job bank—from six weeks to seven days—before a migrant worker could be hired. According to economist Jim Stanford, TFWs “accounted for almost 30 per cent of all net new paid jobs created in Canada between 2007 and 2011.”

As opposed to the high-skilled TFWs, these new temporary workers were primarily coming from “developing nations such as the Philippines, India, China and Mexico,” write Foster and Luciano. “The new class of migrant workers were more vulnerable than the high-skilled workers, and lower levels of education, language and cultural barriers, and poverty made the new arrivals less able to resist employer mistreatment, [in part because] low-skilled workers’ permits specified the employer, meaning they could not legally switch jobs and were essentially ‘tied’ to a specific employer.”

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**TOP LEFT:** Mila Carino and her daughter. Carino migrated in 2007 to work in a Banff hotel, and her children came a few years later. By Eric Dizon **TOP RIGHT:** Pastor Eric Rivera Dizon, the photographer's husband, at the keyboard, worshipping with a member of his Calgary congregation. By Lovella Penaranda-Dizon **BELOW:** Nanay Mirabel Javier is an advocate for the social inclusion of seniors. Simultaneously, says Jay Zapata, she mourns the passing of her husband, Tatay Mike Javier. By Jay Zapata



**ABOVE:** The photographer lost his status in 2017. He worked in fast food and tried to get permanent residency. He says migration is less about achieving a dream and more about surviving. By Edward (not his real name) **BELOW:** The photographer is a gerontological social worker whose photos explore how the lives of older adults in the immigrant community can be "vivid, cheerful, beautiful, full and vulnerable." By Qianyun Wang





**TOP:** Joss Tarzona-Miranda came to Canada as a TFW in 2008; she now owns Bem's, an Edmonton restaurant, with her husband. By Cynthia Palmaria **BELOW LEFT:** A Filipino worker in a retirement home in Cochrane, with a family photo on his cellphone in the foreground. Many migrants are separated from families for years, connecting mainly through technology. By Kim Gabrido **BELOW RIGHT:** An undocumented worker, Lynn, photographed her children at home. By Lynn (not her real name)



Items in a "balikbayan box," a box of gifts for relatives in the Philippines. The box can take a year to fill and exemplifies "the value of generosity in Filipino culture." By Len Jerusalem

In 2013, at the height of the boom, Alberta had 77,000 TFWs, the most in the country. The Alberta Federation of Labour filed an Access to Information request and found that in 2012–2013 the federal Ministry of Employment and Social Development issued hundreds of permits allowing employers “to pay TFWs less than Albertans [for jobs in] hotels, gas stations, truck stops, casinos, ski lift operations, convenience stores, greenhouses, industrial farming operations, feedlots, nurseries and various occupations in restaurants.”

Allegations that migrant workers were “taking jobs from Canadians” led to some disturbing moments, says Luciano. “You saw pickup trucks with bumper stickers saying ‘Fuck Off, We’re Full,’ driving around Alberta. There was a backlash, not just against the program but against the workers; it created racial tension.”

In response, then-federal-minister Jason Kenney introduced a phased-in cap—down to 10 per cent—on the number of TFWs an employer was allowed to hire. The move angered fast food franchise owners in Alberta but polled favourably in several provinces, including strongly in Ontario, where Conservatives needed to do well to win the 2015 federal election (which they lost). In 2016 the Justin Trudeau Liberals kept the cap (with some grandfathered exemptions at 20 per cent) but ended the Conservatives’ “four-in, four-out” rule, instituted in 2011, which had allowed TFWs to work in Canada for four years but then barred them for another four years.

The cap and the “four-in, four-out” rule made it harder for many employers to renew permits for TFWs already in Canada. Many of those workers had large debts, incurred for permits, flights and expenses just to get to Canada. Community advocates had campaigned against the “four-out” rule, says Foster, but by the time it was dropped, “we had a year’s worth of workers who were affected by it.”

The low-skilled workers already had few options for permanent residency—mostly limited to provincial programs such as the Alberta Immigrant Nominee Program, which had few openings and strict requirements as to the skills and education needed for acceptance. “The vast majority of migrant workers did not end up becoming permanent residents or citizens,” says Foster. “And so either they left and went home, or, as we know, many of them have stayed with a lack of status.”

Estimates from community advocates range from 10,000 to a high of 50,000 undocumented workers living and working right now in Alberta. Luciano puts it at the higher end. He’s taken pregnant undocumented mothers to hospitals in Edmonton to give birth (and then helped them deal with the medical bills, because they don’t have healthcare),

and organized the distribution of food and basic supplies for undocumented workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The undocumented migrants are the most creative people I’ve ever met,” he says. “They work, they have a place to stay. They have cash jobs, often way below minimum wage, so \$10, \$9 an hour, but they take it because it’s still a lot more than what they’ll make back home. A lot of them are cleaners. I know a bakery that hires undocumented workers. Anywhere they cannot be seen, so they work at night.”

## “McDonald’s, Tim Hortons—those are not temporary jobs. They’re permanent. They’re classified as temporary because it’s cheaper for employers.”

—MARCO LUCIANO

THE *KWENTO’T LITRATO* PROJECT AIMED to increase public visibility of migrant workers—in a broad, relational understanding of their lives. “It’s really telling the stories not just of being a migrant,” says Luciano, “but also the process of becoming a migrant. And when they’re lucky enough to become a permanent resident, it’s also the process of reunification with their families.”

Most of the 22 participants in the three-day photo-documentary workshops—in Edmonton and Calgary in spring 2019—were from the Filipino community, the fastest-growing racialized group in Canada, according to the 2016 census, with nearly 800,000 Filipinos in the country, including over 175,000 in Alberta. Workshop participants ranged from undocumented workers (such as “Edward” and “Lynn”), to live-in caregivers, permanent residents and younger Filipinos born in Canada to migrant parents.

“We told people, ‘You don’t have to be a great photographer or have a fancy camera,’” says Jay Zapata. “We want to give them the skills, but skills are the secondary part of the program. It’s the story behind the photographs that’s most important. We want to magnify our lives.”

Zapata came to Calgary in 2008, sponsored by his wife, who migrated first as a caregiver and got her permanent residency. Along with his work at Migrant Alberta, he’s a peace officer at a Calgary jail. In the photography workshops, he says, “First we discussed, what’s the purpose of taking pictures? Why are we doing it? And then of course we discussed some ethics about taking pictures and

sharing on social media. What stories did we want to show? We talked about racism, discrimination, unfair labour, the hardship, our contributions [to society]—from the immigrant youth experience to seniors, the aging immigrants, which is my subject.”

“My father-in-law is living with us and is suffering from dementia,” he says, talking about the man in one of his sensitive black-and-white photos of elderly Filipinos. “Getting older in Canada is different than getting older in the Philippines. In this country life is very individualistic and back home it’s very communal. For these people that are aging, and isolated, plus the weather factor, it’s really a struggle.”

Photographs from *Kwento’t Litrato* were exhibited at several galleries, including Edmonton City Hall in 2019 and Arts Commons in Calgary for a month in February 2020. “When they told us it’s going to be in Arts Commons,” says Len Jerusalem, a former caregiver and now a social worker, “it was like ‘Wow!’ It’s nice to get that support and be able to raise awareness that we have issues too. Because [people say], ‘Filipinos take all the jobs at McDonald’s or Tim Hortons or the hospitals.’ I hear that a lot. But they don’t know the choices we had to make, the things we had to give up to come here to wash someone’s toilet or wash someone’s bum. They don’t know that story—leave your family, your kids, to work here for years. It’s a lot of sacrifice.”

Jerusalem’s photos show a “balikbayan box,” a box of gifts “filled with household items, school supplies, anything you can send to family or friends in the Philippines,” she says. “It takes a long time, sometimes a year, to fill that box. It’s something every migrant can relate to. But it’s not just about the items; those items look ordinary, like just toothpaste, but it’s meaningful to that giver and receiver. It doesn’t compare to love, but I guess it’s what you can do to represent that.”

Separation from family, and the attempt to maintain connection, is a theme in many of the photos. Kim Gabrido, whose mother first came to Canada as a live-in caregiver, shot photos of Filipino workers in a retirement home in Cochrane, with the workers in the background and pictures of relatives in the Philippines displayed on a cellphone in the foreground. “I got separated from my mom when I was 2,” he says. “In the Philippines I came from a very poor family background. Me and my dad used to go from the farm to the city once a month to talk to her on video, on Skype or Facebook. As technology [got better] the connection between me and my mom got stronger; she could call us while she was working as a nanny. I wanted to show that, our experience. That’s why I decided to put [cell phones] into the photos.”

“I finally reunited with her when I was 16,” he says. “I’m 19 now. Three years of having my family whole.” He laughs. “It’s a weird experience, having a mom lecture you.” Asked what he’s doing now, after graduating from high school, he says he takes online classes in web design and works at Subway. “I send money to my cousin in the Philippines,” he says. “She’s becoming a pharmacist. I help her pay for it.”

**C** OVID-19 DELAYED THE release of *Kwento’t Litrato* until 2021. But the pandemic, in its way, also raised awareness in the general Canadian public. Outbreaks at long-term care facilities exposed an “ongoing crisis of care,” not just for elderly residents but also for workers at those facilities—often migrant and racialized minority women doing jobs that are low paid, short staffed and mostly part time. At the start of the outbreak many of those workers held two or more jobs at different care facilities—a situation that increased the risk of virus transmission.

Outbreaks in Brooks and High River at the JBS and Cargill meatpacking plants—factories that do 70 per cent of the beef processing in Canada—revealed the extent to which food supply chains in Canada are reliant on immigrant workers. At Cargill, for instance, where over 1,500 cases of COVID-19 were linked to the plant, some 70 per cent of the workers are from the Philippines (many originally TFWs, though most are now permanent residents).

Since 2013 the number of TFWs in Alberta has declined—from 32,000 in 2018 to fewer than 13,000 in 2019. In October 2020, aiming to “make jobs available to unemployed Albertans,” the UCP government announced an agreement with the federal Liberals to reduce or eliminate the number of jobs that Alberta employers could offer to TFWs in sectors such as food services, retail trade, construction and transportation. Premier Jason Kenney tweeted that the TFWP was “effectively shut down” in the province. But, at the same time, the government press release also said, “These changes will not impact employers recruiting for select occupations in the agriculture, technology and caregiving sectors that heavily rely on temporary foreign workers....”

This was little consolation for workers in some of those sectors. Since the start of COVID-19, according to “Behind Closed Doors,” an October 2020 report authored by several national caregiver-advocacy groups and endorsed by Migrant Alberta, many live-in caregivers have been stuck in “virtual prisons”—overworked, unable to leave their

employers’ houses and subject to abuse. Instead of having to wait two years in a state of vulnerability, said the report, permanent residency should be given to caregivers as soon as they arrive in Canada: “Permanent residency immediately gives workers the ability to leave a bad job and make a complaint without fear of reprisals. Permanent residency means that workers can work in any sector, including in healthcare, where workers are sorely needed.”

That kind of policy should be extended across the TFWP, including to low-skilled workers, says Luciano. “The jobs that migrant workers are taking here are not temporary jobs,” he says. “Working at McDonald’s, working at Tim Hortons—those are not temporary jobs. Those are permanent jobs. They’re classified as temporary because it’s cheaper [for employers]; it’s cheap labour.”

“I’m personally not into mass migration of people coming here as migrant labour,” he says. “I’d rather see Canadians working, but with a living wage and a unionized situation, so that when migrant workers are actually needed, they can come here but be on the same playing field, with the same wage as everybody else and the same access to rights as everybody else.”

The federal government made a step in that direction in late 2020. Responding to what Bloomberg News called “the economic damage from a dramatic drop in immigration” during the pandemic—from a net increase of more than 190,000 temporary residents in 2019 to a decrease of 18,221 in the first half of 2020, along with a 60 per cent decline in permanent residents—Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino announced that Canada would increase the number of permanent residents welcomed into the country in the next three years, including granting that status to some TFWs already here. “We have a unique opportunity to take a look at the talent and the experience which is already within our borders—which includes workers, students, asylum seekers,” he told *The Globe and Mail*. More pathways to citizenship would be coming, he promised, though he left the details of reforms to a future announcement.

Questions and concerns remain, says labour professor Jason Foster. “Policymakers are only paying attention to the interests of employers,” he says. “And that’s why these policies bounce around all over the place and are sometimes contradictory. We still have never really asked ourselves: What is the role of temporary migrant labour in our economy? How do we make it fair and safe? I mean, ultimately, if we think we need these workers on a long-term basis, we should be creating an immigration stream so that they can actually become permanent residents.” ■

*Tadzio Richards is an associate editor at Alberta Views.*