



Book Review

Harvesting freedom: The life of a migrant worker in Canada

By Gabriel Allahdua

Between the Lines Press, 2023: 224 pages

Reviewed by Noura Nasser

In “Harvesting Freedom,” Allahdua shares a captivating memoir uncovering the exploitative nature of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) he participated in. Through his autoethnographic account, and a keen call to action, he reveals Canada’s food production complexities and farmworkers’ challenges. Allahdua’s assertion that “Difficult roads sometimes lead to beautiful destinations” (p. 45) encapsulates the book’s essence, metaphorically highlighting migratory difficulties and the numerous barriers and systemic inequalities within the SAWP.

In the preface, Dunsworth sets the backdrop of the book, exploring intertwined histories of “slavery, indenture, imperialism, capitalism, and international relations,” (p. xvii), as he meticulously presents a rich body of literature on migration, labor, and historical studies shedding a strong light on the ongoing legacies of colonialism and racial capitalism in Canada’s agricultural worker program. Employing a collaborative writing approach, Dunsworth also incorporates oral history, as Allahdua takes the lead in telling his St.

Lucian and global story. Such thoughtful partnership underscores Dunsworth’s engagement with knowledge as a force for societal change in theory, pedagogy, and writing.

Starting with his moving poem “I am many things,” (p. ix), Allahdua skillfully weaves a tapestry of his diverse identities. But a revisiting of the same titular poem, (p. 163) compellingly depicts his transformative journey he undertook as a migrant farmworker to an inimitable champion of migrant justice.

The book is structured into three parts unfolding into 25 chapters. Part One describes Allahdua’s history in St. Lucia, Part Two explores his entry into the SAWP, and Part Three focuses on his fight back and activism. From his own background as a child of enslaved African and indentured Indian parents to his disillusionment in Canada, the narrative delves into colonial histories, racial capitalism, and agriculture. Allahdua shares memories of education, family, and community, but as he learns more about Canada’s

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DOI: [10.15353/cfs-rcea.v10i3.656](https://doi.org/10.15353/cfs-rcea.v10i3.656)

ISSN: 2292-3071

subtle and toxic benevolence, his idealized image of Canada crumbles.

In Part One—Chapter 8 in particular—Allahdua’s love for agriculture shines through as he proclaims, “Agriculture has always been my passion. I live it, I see it, I breathe it, I sleep in it, I dream it” (p. 43). Amidst his efforts to build his livelihood centered around agriculture, the destructive hurricane emerged, shattering his stability, and thwarting his entrepreneurial pursuits. In the wake of economic uncertainty and the pressing need to support his family, Allahdua makes the challenging decision to join the farmworker program.

In Part Two, Allahdua critiques the SAWP exposing its contradictions and the enduring state of “permanent temporariness” for migrant farmworkers (Hennebry, 2012). The program’s intensification of the production cycle limits workers’ choices and support, confining them to rural Ontario’s greenhouses. Harsh conditions, including deportation risks and surveillance, foster competition through the variable “piece rate system” (p. 73). Unfortunately, the program also hinders Allahdua’s motivation deepen his passion in agriculture, by denying him valuable learning opportunities. However, there is also a dialectic of hope and resistance. Chapter 13 illustrates solidarity, resourcefulness, and Scott’s concept of “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1989: 35), which proliferate among bunkhouse-dwelling farmworkers, as they prepare meals together. Allahdua reveals some discreet yet potent solidarity economies via *susu* or partner systems, rooted in the Black Radical Tradition that foster mutual aid and social support networks amongst the farmworkers (Shenaz, 2023, p. 224-225).

In Part Three, Allahdua uses his signature teaching style to outline twenty injustices linked to Canada’s SAWP. He emphasizes achieving equal treatment and status for everyone, echoing the request for equity with

earlier white immigrant groups. The book also analyzes the demanding manual work in local food production, triggering a reassessment of migrant labour programs and the dismantling of racial-capitalist systems.

Harvesting Freedom’s concluding chapters and epilogue highlight awakening moments like the climate emergency and COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating injustices faced by racialized bodies. Chapter 18 shows white supremacist practices that limit migrant farmworkers’ mobility and lead to criminalization, seen in cases like DNA swaps in a rape investigation and anti-loitering bylaw enforcement. Allahdua also acknowledges Indigenous lands the “Harvesting Freedom Caravan” traversed through during its month-long campaign, thus, strengthening coalitional solidarity, and creating solidarity through conversations with Indigenous leaders.

Dunsworth and Allahua urge readers to critically examine the underlying causes of non-white, non-Canadian labour reliance on unsustainable agricultural systems. Dunsworth draws on his earlier research linking this reliance to events of “hyper-consolidation of agriculture,” characterized by the dominance of large-scale capitalist farming operations in Canada (Dunsworth, 2022).

Connecting the past and present to reimagine food systems, the authors explore ethical and political dilemmas in the SAWP, exposing gaps in Canadian perceptions of racial capitalism, migration, labour, climate, and food. In Chapter 23, Gina Bahiwal, formerly a migrant vegetable packing worker, joins forces with Allahdua, to deliver a historical testimony against Canada’s temporary foreign worker program. Bahiwal notably advocates for reproductive rights and courageously exposes the prevalent violence that women endure in such programs. Other books, such as Deborah Brandt’s *Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail*, elevate gendered

migrant voices. Although *Harvesting Freedom* does not center such voices to the same extent, and reasonably so, it does bring to the fore the pursuit of “Status for All” which remains an ongoing struggle in North America, the UK, and Europe.

Overall, this work makes significant contributions to sociology, anthropology, geography, labour, and critical food studies. Allahdua seamlessly integrates

“field” stories, explaining the intricate macro-political economy of food alongside his personal experiences. The book is a compelling and essential read, suitable for both undergraduate and graduate courses. It will undoubtedly stimulate rich classroom debates and serve as a tool for human rights groups advocating for policy changes in labour, migration rights, and sustainable agriculture.

Noura Nasser is a social scientist working on the intersections of food, place, and race. During her MA in an interdisciplinary programme at Concordia University, she worked with racialized individuals in Montreal’s Little Burgundy to narrate food stories, racialization, and diverse food practices in the wake of mainstream “food desert” narratives that deny people’s food autonomy and dignity. From here, she extends her work to other regions of the world particularly, the Middle East, to explore migrant domestic workers’ fight for recognition and placemaking via food placemaking efforts in the city margins. Currently, situated as LSE’s sociology department, she is doing her PhD research on migration food stories, power struggles and meaning making in the city.

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