

**Women's Flexible Labour in the NAFTA Food System:  
Stories of Spatial and Temporal Migration**

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## Conversations across borders

As we sat on the hay wagon, with our lunch spread out before us, Irena proposed a Mexican toast: “Arriba, abajo, afuera, adentro....!” She moved her cup of cranberry juice to mimic the words “Up, down, outside, inside” as we swallowed the juice, and learned four words of Spanish at the same time. Irena, a Mexican farmworker, has learned a bit of English over the eleven years she has been coming to southern Ontario to pick vegetables from June to October. But not enough to really converse with Wanda, the Loblaw’s cashier, who had brought her two daughters along for a visit to the farm. So we exchanged a few words of Spanish and English, as we exchanged our mixed spread of Mexican and Canadian food, an array revealing various cultural histories and fusions, from the President’s Choice dips and cheeses that we brought along to almond chicken and rice made by Irena the night before after 12 hours working in the fields.

The “Up, down, outside, inside” toast is perhaps a good metaphor for the Tomasita Project, a cross-border research venture that traces the journey of the tomato from the Mexican field to the Canadian fast food restaurant, and focuses on women’s experiences within the various stages of food production, distribution, and consumption. The “Up and down” metaphor frames not only the tomato’s journey but also the power relations (varying interactions of nation, class, race, and gender) upon which the food system is built as well as the contrasting perspectives of what Richard Falk (quoted in Brecher et al, 1993, ix) calls “globalization-from-above,” or the corporate view of multinationals who control the tomato’s transformation as opposed to “globalization-from-below,” the views of the women workers whose hands move it along its journey.

“Outside and inside” dynamics are also reflected in the project’s methodology, combining corporate research and *global* analysis (outside) with the gathering of life histories of women workers in specific *local* contexts (inside); I try to connect them conceptually through the concept of the *glocal*. “Outsider/insider” can also refer to the different relationships to the food system we have as women academics compared to the women who work inside the system (thus acknowledging not only our power within the research process but also the ‘epistemic privilege’ the women workers can claim as they ‘know’ their experience in a way we can never know). I agree with Ruth Hubbard and Margaret Randall (1990), that insider/outsider are not clean and neat categories, as we constantly shift between them from one moment, category, and relationship to another.

While it has been easier for the women academics in the three NAFTA countries to meet and talk with each other (Antonieta and I, for example, have been together at several conferences like this one), connecting the women workers themselves is more complicated, because of differential privilege, time, and resources. Still we have tried to find ways to make those links. Wanda, the Canadian cashier, has taken a keen interest in the project, digesting a photo-story on Tomasa, a tomato worker in Mexico, and commenting on any article I pass her. While it would be harder to get her to Mexico to meet Tomasa, I figured she could at least meet Irena, a Mexican working in the fields only two hours from her home north of Toronto.

There are both differences and similarities in the experiences of Wanda, Irena, and Tomasa. Their most common ground, as Wanda suggested, is that they are all “trying to survive” as women workers in the globalized economy of the 1990s. And they are forced to move to find work in the food system, as they struggle to feed their families in increasingly hard times. Tomasa gets picked up in the early morning by a truck that takes her an hour from her village to pick tomatoes at an agribusiness in Jalisco, Mexico; Wanda drives her car an hour into Toronto where she scans tomatoes at a Loblaw’s supermarket check out lane; and Irena is brought by plane annually to southern Ontario to pick and pack the local tomatoes we eat in the summer.

### **Theoretical frames: an outside view**

I’d like to use three interrelated theoretical frames for comparing the experiences of these three women and their roles in the food system:

- 1) the “distancing” which is central to global food production,
- 2) the “feminization of labour” which is often synonymous with the “feminization of poverty,” and
- 3) a “flexibility of labour” characterizing the restructured economy, involving both spatial and temporal migration, and featuring women as central actors.

#### *Distancing*

Brewster Kneen (1993, 39) first coined the concept of “distancing” as the dominant logic of the current food system, capturing not only the increasing distance between production and consumption, but also the distancing from natural products and processes inherent in biotechnology, processing, preservation, and packaging. Ecologists have used the concept to illustrate the deepening separation of humans from nature, and political economists have expanded on Marx’s original notion of alienation to analyze the disconnection workers in agribusiness and the retail sector feel from the ‘fruits of their labour.’ I’d like to focus here on the distancing of food system workers from their own roots, home bases, and cultural practices as well as their resistance to this disconnection.

#### *Feminization of labour and of poverty*

While there has been considerable attention to the centrality of female labour (increasingly young and non-white) in the new global economy (Mitter, 1986), particularly in manufacturing and export-processing or free trade zones, there has been little comparison of women’s labour in all sectors of the food system, from production to consumption, from agribusiness and food processing to the commercial and retail sectors. The Tomasita Project has attempted to link studies by women academics in Mexico, for example, that analyze the increasing number of married and single women in salaried agribusiness (Barron, 1999; Appendini, 1995) as a response to the need for more family members working to survive as well as an exploitation of traditionally lower

paid women workers, with studies by Canadian feminist scholars (Reiter, 1991; Kainer, 1999) that reveal the dependency of the dominant service sector (such as supermarkets and restaurants) on part-time, low-wage female labour, with limited opportunities for unionization. It is clear that the architects of global restructuring (multinational corporate executives as well as the managers of the producers and retailers they contract) have built the increasingly globalized food system on historical and cultural practices of sexism, racism, and classism, relegating the poor, people of colour, Indigenous Peoples, and women to the most marginalized tasks in the food chain (Lara, 1997; Martinez-Salazar in Barndt, 1999).

### *Flexibility and migration*

Mexican scholar Sara Lara (1994, 41) suggests that the expansion of the agro-export industry in Mexico, facilitated by NAFTA, deepens a basic North-South contradiction between “negotiated flexibility” and “primitive flexibility.” Transnational corporations, primarily in the north, as well as privileged sectors in the south, employ skilled workers managed through “negotiated flexibility” while the labour intensive processes of agribusinesses, for example, remain in the south and exploit women, children, and Indigenous peoples, the most flexible workers in the rural labour market, through a “primitive flexibility.”

Flexible labour is central to post-Fordist just-in-time production practices adopted increasingly world wide, and in the NAFTA food chain, this flexibility is both spatial and temporal. Agricultural production has always depended on migrant labour, particularly during peak season harvest times, but internal as well as international migration has increased since NAFTA. And migration, in the form of commuting, is also a phenomenon in the north, not only in the agricultural sector, but also in the service sector. Finally, the migrant labour force is increasingly female. For most of these women workers, part-time work in the food system is combined with part-time work in other paid jobs or the informal sector, as well as the relentless unpaid domestic work of caring for their families. Flexible labour strategies have forced these women to continually reorganize their time, or movement through days, weeks, and months, in new ways, as seasons begin and end, and shifts expand and contract.

### **Three Women\*/Three Stories: An Inside View**

The three women who can help ground this discussion of distancing, the feminization of labour and poverty, and flexibility and migration work in different sectors of the tomato food chain. But none of them is actually typical of the women workers in their sector. This may be just as well, because they thus remind us that there are very real differences within each sector, and no one case can encompass the reality of all women workers. Tomasa, for example, is a 70-year old field worker, while the majority of women agricultural workers in Mexico are between 15 and 24, the heartiest, and most desirable when there is an oversupply of labour (Barron, in Dabat, 1994, 272). Tomasa

is a local mestiza peasant, while a majority of tomato pickers are Indigenous peasant families, including women and children, migrating from the poorer states. Irena, the farmworker brought to Ontario to pick our summer vegetables, is also not typical; she is almost 50, while the official cap for these temporary workers is 35 . And Wanda, the supermarket cashier, is also older, with 25 years seniority as a part-time worker, giving her much more choice of her working hours than the younger majority, often high school and university students.

Vignettes of the three women will make the proposed theoretical frames come alive and may even blur their boundaries, while allowing us to know these women a bit, to be able to consider the similarities and differences of their working and living conditions.

***Tomasa, tomato worker***  
***From Gomez Farias to Sayula, Mexico***

Agricultural work in Mexico has always depended on migrant labour, but women's participation as salaried workers in agribusiness has increased in the 1990s, due to several interrelated factors. First, the fruit and vegetable sector has expanded with NAFTA, and large domestic producers such as Santa Anita Packers have become primarily export-oriented (80% tomatoes head north, with 100% greenhouse production for export). Mexico's almost wholesale adoption of the neoliberal model, pressured by structural adjustment in the 1980s and NAFTA in the 1990s, has meant privatization of ejido lands, reduction of small producer credits and food subsidies, and the expansion of monocultural cash crop production, affecting both the environment and the organization of work. Peasant and Indigenous communities have suffered the most, and their traditional family wage economies now require three or more members working to survive. While women's participation in paid work outside the home has become necessary and thus more accepted, domestic chores have not lightened and remain a female domain.

Survival for workers like Tomasa has meant combining strategies of the wage economy and the subsistence economy, picking tomatoes for a large agribusiness while still producing some of their own food on a nearby rented plot. And given the seasonal nature of agricultural work, she has had to seek other income-producing activities during off season such as making and selling straw mats.

The daily wage of 28 pesos (just over \$5) is clearly insufficient, even with both Tomasa and Pablo working as foremen for Santa Anita Packers. Their large family (nine of their 16 children are still alive) remains an economic asset as they receive remittances from their two sons working in the U.S., as well as support from other children working in the area. Migration 'al norte' is central to their survival as it is to most Mexican peasant families. Tomasa and Pablo and their family fit Lara's definition of "primitive flexibility," filling the need for unskilled seasonal labour. But they don't have to move as far for work as the even more marginalized Indigenous families, who end up in horrendous migrant labour camps around the tomato plantation, and follow harvests from one production

site to another (now on the move for food most of the year, and thus torn from their own home bases and possible subsistence production). Tomasa must rise at 5 A.M. to make lunch and be on the truck by 6 where she stands up for the hour-long trip to the fields. When she returns at 2:30 PM, she may accompany Pablo to the *milpa*, where they still practice the more ecological rotational method of planting corn, beans, and squash (the three sisters in Indigenous agricultural practice), using minimal chemical inputs, in sharp contrast to their agribusiness employer who sprays fields massively and regularly with an ever-changing array of pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. This field yields more than enough corn, which we found stacked in their kitchen, to feed the family for a year. While she used to make tortillas from scratch, during the harvest season she often buys ready-made tortillas, rather than rise at 3 A.M. to make them.

Her connection to the corn they grow in their milpa is quite different than her connection to the tomatoes she picks at the plantation. Though she may bring some home for domestic consumption, she realizes that “the tomatoes don’t stay here,” (except for the second rate ones kept for the Mexican market) but go off on big trailer trucks, which “come from far away and go far away, we don’t know where.” (Personal interview, 1997) In this sense, she reflects on the distancing of production from consumption, and typifies other agribusiness workers, most of whom have little sense of where the fruits of their labour end up.

***Irena, migrant farmworker***  
***From Miacatlan, Mexico to Wilsonville, Ontario***

Irena has a broader view of this process because, like the tomatoes, she, too, is moved farther north to meet the demands of a more privileged foreign market. Her rhythm, however, follows the seasonal production of vegetables in Canada, where she is hired under the FARMS program to pick tomatoes during our harvest season. Building on a Canadian government sponsored program for Temporary Agricultural Workers set up for Caribbean off-shore workers in 1966 and expanded to include Mexicans in 1974, the FARMS (or Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services) program is considered the *creme de la creme* of migrant worker schemes in North America. While it clearly exploits the asymmetry between Mexico and Canada in terms of wages, it provides a quick way for Mexican workers to amass an income, earning in one hour at minimum wage more than they would in one day for similar work back home. Because these temporary migrant workers migrate alone, they are ‘freed’ from family responsibilities for those few months, have minimal costs, and can work long hours.

Women have only been included in recent years (in 1998 there were 150 women out of 5,000 workers), and widows and single mothers are preferred, because they are sure to return home and will endure this temporary sacrifice for their families. Irena has left her children (mostly older) at home with her parents, and for the past eleven years, has spent four months a year on Ontario farms. For the past eight years, she has worked at the same farm, because the farmer has asked her back again and again. The FARMS program clearly meets a need for Canadian farmers; as Basok (1997, 4) argues,

“agriculture in Ontario is characterized by vulnerability related to competition from abroad and instability related to season and market price fluctuations,” and temporary migrant workers are ideally suited to the need for seasonal workers “willing to work long hours during peak season for low remuneration.” While official contracts stipulate eight-hour work days, workers may agree to work overtime, without overtime pay; and for women like Irena, every hour spent here earning money for her family is time well spent. So she works 12 hour days six and half days a week, and even boasted of working a few years back for 19 hours a day; “I cleared \$1,000 in two weeks,” she justified, as that might be almost a year’s salary for a Mexican farmworker (personal interview, Wilsonville, 1999).

Many migrant workers are ignorant of their rights, though Irena is aware of inequities, such as the fact that Canadian workers are paid more; she still receives only minimum wage, after eleven years. While they do get health care and pension payments, they do not get unemployment insurance, overtime or vacation pay, are not covered by the Occupational Health and Safety Act, and are not allowed to unionize. Nonetheless, they are willing to put up with these inequities, long hours of gruelling work, social isolation, and often substandard housing conditions because they know it is temporary and lucrative (Basok, 1997, 5).

Ironically, while they have moved great distances to take advantage of this program, once in Canada, they rarely move beyond the fields and packing houses. Irena, for example, has come to Canada for 11 years, but had never visited Toronto, which is two hours away from the farm where she worked. On their half-day off, the farmer takes the workers shopping in a nearby town. The farmworkers are totally dependent on the farmer not only for transportation but also for permission to leave the premises, and thus live almost like indentured workers. This *patron* relationship is central to the program: they dare not displease their farmer/boss or he may not request their return the following summer. Wall (? , 269) suggests that this paternalistic relationship, where migrant workers are housed on their employers’ property, and may depend on them for translation, filling out forms, transportation, communications home, etc., also makes it difficult for workers across farms to develop any solidarity around their common situation, let alone form some kind of workers’ organization. This paternalism often incorporates classist, racist, and sexist behaviours. “Flexibility” thus takes on a much broader meaning in this context, as workers not only change countries, and work from dawn to dusk, but endure poor labour relations because they know this is temporary and the economic gain is their primary motive.

I found myself wondering how women like Irena, then, survived during their eight months back home in Mexico. So in December, 1997, Antonieta and I visited Irena in Miacatlan, an hour from Cuernavaca south of Mexico City. There we saw some fruits of her 12 hour Canadian work days: appliances such as a TV, sewing machine, stereo and building materials for adding rooms to her house for her children and their families. But any notion that her cushy Canadian job might allow her to relax for the rest of the year was shattered, as we learned that she worked five days a week as a live-in domestic in Cuernavaca, taking care of a middle class Mexican’s children. And when home on the

weekends, she made and sold tamales in the street. This combination of work in the informal sector, piecing together part-time jobs, is the norm for most Mexican women. And, as with Tomasa, this patch work of jobs is a family affair; her two older sons contribute to the family earnings as migrant farmworkers in the north as well, one slipping in illegally to the States, and the other to Quebec, also through the FARMS program. The economic crisis of recent years has increased the gap between a small minority of wealthy Mexicans who have benefitted from the neoliberal entrenchment and the poor majority, making the family wage economy central to their survival.

I was struck by how Irena's survival depended upon work in different parts of the food system - picking tomatoes in Ontario, cooking meals in Cuernavaca, and selling food in her village - and how all of these jobs took her away from her own land and family. Yet I've also been intrigued with the way she maintains her own cultural culinary practices during her short annual stay in Canada. While she identifies little with the tomatoes she picks for our tables, she resists the distancing from her own plot and kitchen at home, bringing herbs, spices, even canned milk, to be able to reproduce her favourite meals, and the farmer has allowed her to grow hot peppers and coriander in small plots around their trailer. Food, ironically then, has both distanced her and has provided some comfort and connection to her roots.

***Wanda, supermarket cashier  
From Bolton to Toronto, Ontario***

At the other end of the tomato chain, Wanda lives in relative privilege. As she has read Tomasa's story and visited Irena on the Ontario farm, she has recognized more clearly her role in a larger global food system, that exploits her "sisters," as she calls them, even more than herself. But she, too, is forced by the reorganization of the economy, to "migrate" to work and to move through her days and weeks (what I'm calling the temporal migration of shift work) with a flexibility that suits the corporate agenda. In Lara's terms, Wanda might be seen as part of a more skilled labour force, regulated by a "negotiated flexibility," with greater skill and job security, as opposed to the "primitive flexibility" of migrant farmworkers, who must either move seasonally to nearby towns, like Tomasa, or to northern countries, like Irena.

First of all, it's important to recognize that the retail sector where Wanda works increasingly controls agricultural and food production in Canada (Winson, 1993), dictating not only what Canadian farmers produce and how, but bringing foods in from all corners of the world to meet our seemingly insatiable demand for fresh and diverse produce. (The Loblaws warehouse is the epitome of Kneen's distancing concept, receiving daily flights of tomatoes from seven countries). And supermarkets represent, too, the increasingly dominant service sector economy, where most Canadians now work and women workers predominate; as Kainer ( in Barndt, 1999, 176) points out, there are now more people employed in the retail food sector than in auto manufacturing, and most of them are women. Of all the sectors we are studying in the tomato food chain, supermarkets are the only workplaces that are unionized. But recent

negotiations have not been able to stem the (very gendered) tide of increasing part-time positions and lowering wage levels, and some suggest that male-run unions have not been the best advocates for female positions such as supermarket cashiers.

Wanda started as a part-time cashier 24 years ago as she was a high school student, when the irregular shifts actually suited her as well as her employer. Students will take the evening and weekend shifts that older women, especially mothers, try to avoid. Because of her high seniority (third in her store), she now has first choice in her hours. She chooses to work three eight-hour days, because she must commute an hour to work; this “choice” has some contradictions, however: she commutes only because if she requested a transfer to a Loblaws closer to her house she would lose her seniority. And much to her employers’ delight, she “chooses” to work on most weekends, since her two daughters are with her ex-husband then, saving child care expenses.

The most recent collective bargaining of their union, United Food and Commercial Workers, with Loblaws focused on job security, but increased the part-time cohort and lowered wage floors and ceilings, creating a two-tiered workforce (Kainer, in Barndt, 1999, 183). There are now only two full-time cashiers with over 50 part-timers (all women), some of whom were offered buy-offs to eliminate more jobs with higher wages and benefits, while hiring new cashiers at minimum wage and with the requirement to work 750 hours before receiving a raise, with a new cap of \$12.50/hour. Those at the bottom of the seniority list are “lucky to get 4 hours a week,” as Wanda calculates, “so it is year before they get that first increment, and they start paying benefits out to you.” (personal interview, Toronto, May, 1997)

So while Wanda is among the more privileged part-time cashiers, her gendered flexible labour definitely benefits the company. She, in turn, chooses shifts that fit her children’s schedule, and tries to be home for them. But on her three workdays, she must drop them at a babysitters at 7:45 A.M., along with the lunches she has made the night before, and heads down the highway, downing a banana for breakfast in the car. Some women put their make-up on, I’m eating,” she laughs, reflecting an increasing reality that workers in our commuting society eat on the run. She takes one and a half hours to get to work, and an hour to get home, by 6:30 or 7 P.M., often after her children have eaten at the sitters.

Even though she is at the top of the wage scale at Loblaws (\$15/hour, 24 hours a week) and gets child support from her former husband, Wanda must still supplement her income to make ends meet. She used to do babysitting on her days off, and for the past few years has done home order catalogue sales. These jobs reflect gendered aspects of the informal sector economy in the north, where women are picking up home-based child care as the state shirks this responsibility, and homework such as sewing and sales becomes increasingly common. And both are built on the notion of women taking primary responsibility for their families and households, their other area of work, still unpaid.

As a front-line worker in the supermarket, Wanda experiences the 'distancing' of food in a way quite different from Tomasa or Irena. Cashiers have direct and intimate contact not only with the customers but also with an increasingly sophisticated and controlling technology. While technology has contributed to distancing in other jobs within the tomato chain, this change is most dramatic at the consumption end, in supermarkets and fast food restaurants. The electronic cash register combined with scanning technology not only offers the company an instantly updated inventory to facilitate buying and restocking, but also monitors every move of the women who scan the barcodes and punch in the product lookup codes (PLUs) on fresh produce such as tomatoes.

Wanda showed us a weekly report of her productivity, which calculated to the second, how much time she had spent scanning, tendering, and in 'idle time,' how many items she had sold and how much money she had gathered. While cashiers in the past might know more about the food they sold, their scanning contact now limits them to a quick swipe and a beep; fresh produce require more consciousness as the PLU number on the sticker must be punched in, and sometimes must be checked with the computerized illustrated inventory. Either way, their relationship with food gets reduced to a number, as Wanda poignantly illustrated when we visited Irena and the farm, and she quickly identified the peppers, eggplants, and tomatoes by their PLU numbers: 4711 for red sheppard peppers, 4603 for Sicilian eggplant, etc. But a contradiction here is that cashiers are nonetheless introduced to a lot of new foods and, through conversations with customers, too, may learn a lot about them. But there is not much time for chatting, the quota of 500 items per hour to be scanned.

### **Inside and outside, up and down: three women/three concepts**

NAFTA, as one more pillar in the neoliberal model that is increasingly being applied hemispherically, is built on an historical asymmetry between the United States, Canada, and Mexico, and on historical inequities within each of those countries that have marginalized poor, peasant and working class, Indigenous and people of colour, and women workers. Tomasa, Irena, and Wanda, while not the most exploited in their own contexts, nonetheless represent in their paid work as well as household work the increasing *distancing* between production and consumption of food and a *flexibility* based on both spatial and temporal migration, contributing to a deepening *feminization of labour and of poverty*. All must move a certain distance to work to feed their families, whether it's Tomasa riding a truck to a plantation an hour away from her village, Wanda driving her car to a supermarket away from her suburban home, or Irena flying from Mexico to work in Canada as a summer farmworker. They must also move through time, adjusting their monthly, weekly and daily schedules to the demands of either seasonal agricultural production or of just-in-time production of the retail commercial sector. Southern agribusinesses and northern supermarkets alike depend on the flexible labour of women workers, who must piece together paid jobs in both the formal and informal sectors with their unpaid domestic work.

While Wanda may appear to have the most privileged position of the three, owning a house and a car, she still must supplement her income. And both Tomasa and Irena have extended families to help with child care, and grown-up children to contribute to the family wage. Still, Irena most poignantly reflects the sacrifices that Mexican women, in particular, must make in order to survive, migrating for four months a year to work in Canada, then migrating to a nearby city when in Mexico, ironically to support the family that she must leave behind in both cases.

On her return from visiting Irena on the Ontario farm, Wanda wrote me a nine-page letter reflecting on the visit. She was struck by the sacrifice that Irena made for her family, prioritizing their needs before personal comforts. Yet Wanda also makes sacrifices, as a part-time food worker, to be at home for her children a few days a week, and to work on the weekends that they are with their father. She recognizes the differences but also the similarities: "we're all just trying to survive." Survival in Mexico is a different challenge than it is in Canada, to be sure, but those who control the global economy have given women ever deepening and expanding pressures to be flexible enough to move not only across borders, but through days and months and years, to meet corporate demands.

*\* The three women whose stories are featured in this paper are given pseudonyms to protect them and their jobs. Interviews were carried out with Tomasa in Jalisco, Mexico, on Dec. 11, 1996; April 24 and 26, 1997; July 5, 1999. Irena was interviewed on various occasions in Wilsonville, Ontario in August and September, 1997; September, 1998; September, 1999; and in Miacatlan, Morelos, Mexico in December, 1997. Wanda was interviewed in Toronto, Ontario, on May 13, 1997; and in Bolton, Ontario, on Oct. 3 and Oct. 24, 1997. Special thanks are due to Lauren Baker, Stephanie Conway, Sheelagh Davis, and Karen Serwonka for their collaboration in interviewing and transcribing, and to Antonieta Barron, who shared the interviewing with Irena. The research has been generously supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council and by the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, Toronto.*

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