

From invisibility to accountability: Rethinking Canada's responsibility toward migrant workers

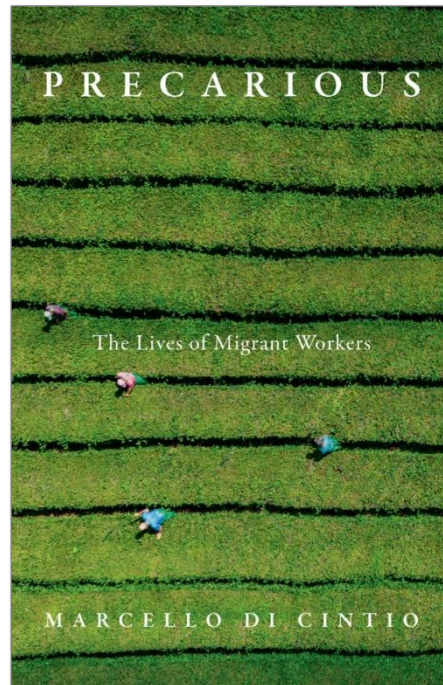
Book review by

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Review of *Precarious: The Lives of Migrant Workers*, by Marcello Di Cintio. (2025). Published by Biblioasis. Available as paperback and eBook; 342 pages. Publisher's website:

<https://www.biblioasis.com/shop/new-releases/precocious-the-lives-of-migrant-workers/>



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In *Precarious: The Lives of Migrant Workers*, Marcello Di Cintio offers a deeply researched and powerfully narrated account of the structural

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vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers in Canada. Through a combination of investigative journalism, historical analysis, and intimate biographical portraits, Di Cintio challenges dominant narratives of Canadian benevolence and exposes the systemic conditions that render thousands of workers “permanently temporary.” At a time when labor shortages and food insecurity dominate public debate, this book provides a timely and necessary examination of the human cost underlying Canada's economy.

The author situates contemporary migrant labor within a long historical trajectory, tracing the origins of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) to 1966 and examining the evolution of the Temporary Foreign Worker

Program (TFWP). He carefully unpacks the bureaucratic architecture that governs migrant employment, including labor market impact assessments (LMIAs), employer-specific work permits, and federal oversight mechanisms. While the extensive use of institutional acronyms may be challenging for readers unfamiliar with immigration policy, the author succeeds in demonstrating how these administrative structures function as instruments of dependency and control. For newcomers to the topic, keeping a reference list of acronyms may enhance readability, but for practitioners and scholars, this technical detail reinforces the book's analytical rigor. A central theme of *Precarious* is the contradiction between Canada's self-image as a humanitarian nation and the realities faced by migrant workers. Di Cintio revisits the United Nations Special Rapporteur's report describing Canada's temporary labor system as a "breeding ground for contemporary forms of slavery" (Obokata, 2024, p. 5) and documents how closed work permits, employer-tied status, and limited mobility constrain workers' ability to report abuse (Obokata, 2024). The author describes this system as a "cruel lottery" in which workers' safety and dignity depend largely on whether they are assigned to a benevolent or exploitative employer.

The book's emotional strength lies in its biographical portraits. Di Cintio presents stories of workers from diverse national contexts, situating their individual experiences within broader political and economic histories. One recurring theme is the painful trade-off between income and family separation, exemplified by a worker's statement: "I will do the suffering, and I will do the distance from my family, because I'll get a better income" (p. 50). These accounts reveal how migration is often a strategy of constrained choice rather than genuine opportunity. Several narratives explore gender and sexual identity, including the story of a lesbian couple and a nonbinary worker navigating gender transition within the context of migration and marginalization. These chapters demonstrate Di Cintio's commitment to portraying the diversity of migrant experiences, and they invite readers to approach the text with openness

and empathy. For readers with lived experience in LGBTQ+ communities, these accounts carry particular resonance, underscoring how multiple forms of vulnerability intersect in precarious labor systems. The emotional impact of these stories is considerable; moments of sadness, resilience, and quiet courage are interwoven throughout. For sensitive readers, the book may be difficult at times, yet this discomfort serves an important ethical function: it prevents detachment and reinforces moral engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic occupies a significant place in the narrative, revealing how overcrowded housing, limited health protections, and economic vulnerability intensified existing inequalities. Di Cintio documents how many workers were deemed "essential" without being adequately protected, reinforcing their perceived expendability within the labor system. These chapters resonate strongly with ongoing debates about workplace safety, public health governance, and employer accountability. One of the book's most compelling contributions is its analysis of migrant invisibility. *Precarious* encourages readers to reconsider everyday interactions and recognize migrant labor as foundational rather than peripheral. From a policy perspective, Di Cintio avoids simplistic explanations based on individual misconduct. Instead, he emphasizes structural failure, arguing that exploitation is embedded in the design of regulations rather than resulting from isolated "bad apples."

Di Cintio suggests that a Canadian prime minister may one day apologize for the treatment of migrant workers, drawing parallels to other historical reckonings, before wryly noting that such an apology would first require acknowledging that migrant workers exist. His final reflection—that "by diminishing the dignity of our most precarious workers, we diminish our own" (p. 309)—offers a powerful moral framework. For readers with professional experience in agriculture, immigration, or public service, *Precarious* may resonate particularly strongly. The book exposes the dissonance between institutional ideals and operational realities, challenging policymakers, employers, and citizens alike to confront uncomfortable truths. It also complements academic research on labor precarity

and financial vulnerability, offering qualitative depth that enriches quantitative and policy-oriented studies.

Overall, *Precarious: The Lives of Migrant Workers* is a meticulously researched, ethically grounded, and socially urgent work. It invites readers to

move beyond passive awareness toward informed responsibility. In doing so, Di Cintio contributes not only to public discourse but to the ongoing project of building a more just and inclusive society.



Reference

Obokata, T. (2024, July 22). *Visit to Canada—Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including, its causes and consequences*, Tomoya Obokata (A/HRC/57/46/Add.1). United Nations.
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