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Visit to the Workers Museum Op-ed

### Workers Museum: the Precarity of ‘Guest’ Work

When I read in the syllabus that our class would have a day trip to the Workers Museum, I expected to learn about the struggle of workers and unions for their rights in South Africa. What I did not expect, was to walk into a building where not so long ago, thousands of ‘zombie’ labor migrants were housed under conditions almost as inhumane as the prisoners at what is now the Constitution Hill Museum – which I visited a few weeks ago. Learning about the exploitation of African migrants, whose sole purpose was to provide cheaper labor while enjoying less protections than the ‘natives’, hit very close to home.

As a Mexican American from the borderland, I am very familiar with the *Bracero* Program, – officially the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement – the guest worker scheme under which over 4.6 million Mexicans were brought to the United States as agricultural workers in a time of war and perceived labor shortages. Just as the Malawians, Zimbabweans, and Mozambicans that were brought to work for Johannesburg’s Sanitation Department, people that look and sound like me – many of them with my same last name – were deemed as nothing but disposable *braceros* (which translates to ‘those who use their arms’).

While back home I learned of the situation of ‘guest’ workers by reading about it, at the Workers Museum I was able to truly engage and empathize with the stories of the men that inhabited those walls. By walking the same dark hallways as they did decades ago and touching the cold concrete surfaces where they slept, I tried to imagine how it feels to be not a person with rights, but cheap labor. Something that really caught my attention was that the windows into the workers’ rooms were painted in white. While our tour guide Belinda did not address this, I found a small sign in the corner of the useless wooden-framed glass that explained that this was done by the Compound Managers “so that compound dwellers could not see the world outside... [as] yet another example of the control exerted by the compound over the lives of migrants”.

Whether it is picking grapes in California or cleaning septic tanks in Gauteng, what has been the take-away of this experience and the subsequent reflections, for me, has been the lived consequences of global capitalism and nation-state regimes and how they shape work and the those who do it. The relative protections that come with citizenship and the accumulative nature of capital, have created a need for importing people with the same efficiency as local workers but at a lesser market value. The exploitability of these mobile and racialized bodies seems to be the rule in an age of ever increasing border controls and the ageing of the West. Although the compound that now makes the Workers Museum stopped housing migrants in its hostile and inhumane conditions, migrant workers in this country and around the world, continue to be pushed into precarious conditions for the sake of economic advantage; both inside and outside compounds.