



The transnational agricultural care chains of migrant farmworkers: land, livelihoods, and social reproduction

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews with seasonal agricultural workers employed in Canada from Jamaica and Mexico, this paper focuses in on the experiences of a Jamaican farmworker who remits funds to pay a neighbour to farm his land (or the land he leases) while in Canada, and who participates in regular long-distance discussions with family members and neighbours back home about the upkeep of the farm. The concept of a “transnational agricultural care chain” is proposed here to capture a series of personal links between people, located, at least temporarily, in different countries, who tend to the crops and farmland as a practice that entails asymmetrical relations of obligation to care for others. Agricultural care chains form part of a strategy to get by and possibly even advance the economic and social standing of one’s family under difficult economic conditions. Land access, as a co-constitutive sphere of production and reproduction, is another important factor in the livelihood strategies of rurally-rooted migrants, but the significance placed on land must be understood in connection to the uneven processes of global capitalism, histories of colonialism and, in the case of Jamaica, plantation slavery. The paper concludes with a reflection on how transnational agricultural care chains as paradigmatic of the contemporary food system are relevant to political and conceptual discussions around food sovereignty.

Keywords Transnational agricultural care chains · Migrant farmworkers · The temporary foreign worker program · Social reproduction · Livelihoods · Rural surplus labour · Food system · Jamaica · Canada · Mexico

Sitting in a restaurant in the Clarendon Parish of Jamaica in early 2023 with Lewis and Barry (pseudonyms), two Jamaican men I’ve interviewed and stayed in touch with over the past four years and who are employed as seasonal agricultural workers on a farm in Nova Scotia, Canada, one of them explains to me the importance of land (and home) ownership as we discuss their reasons for joining the guestworker program: “Having the land alone is a promise”, he says, and the others at the table nod in agreement. We talk and eat lunch together in a small group, with Barry’s wife, Victoria, who also works elsewhere in the Caribbean but as a caregiver and in the tourism industry, and my research assistant, Georgette McGlashen-Miller, from the University of West Indies at Mona and a children’s book author. Farmworkers

come to Canada on a temporary basis under two federal programs that allow employers to hire foreign nationals in positions not filled by Canadians: the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) and to a lesser extent, the low-wage and primary agricultural streams of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP). In 1966, the SAWP was established as a government-to-government contract labour program between Canada and Jamaica, and in the 1970s, it became part of the TFWP. Since its founding, the SAWP has grown to include Mexico and other Caribbean countries, as well as women starting in 1989—who make up a small percentage of migrant farmworkers in Canada.

Exploring what it means to say that land is “a promise”, this paper argues that access to and caretaking of land in their home communities as a site to farm or to build a house—along with other uses and meanings—is an understudied aspect of migrant farmworkers’ experience (Borras et al. 2022), and particularly meaningful in Jamaica connected to its history of slavery, British colonialism and a plantation economy. It is also an important component of farmworker household livelihoods that include both productive

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and social reproductive labour (Goffe 2017; Besson 1999; Clarke 1953; Weis 2004). The concept of livelihood is employed here because it captures both unremunerated and paid labour and suggests an overlap between productive and reproductive spheres of activities—the lines between which are messy and changing, particularly in rural contexts (Smith 2020). Additionally, this paper argues that migrants' monetary remittances and long-distance WhatsApp conversations with family and neighbours across national borders and at long distances, help provide, among other things, agricultural labour and “care” for crops and land. These spatially stretched social relations and asymmetrical obligations to care for others constitute a *transnational agricultural care chain* somewhat different from the domestic work usually examined in the global care chain literature.

In their home parish Barry and Victoria farm potatoes, plantains, yam, and corn on two small plots of rainfed land that they lease. Unlike his colleague, Lewis, who had previous work experience as a builder back home, Barry was a farmer prior to signing up for the SAWP. During the eight months of the year when Barry works as a migrant farmworker in Nova Scotia along with other seasonal migrants from Jamaica and Mexico, and his wife, Victoria is also abroad, they pay a neighbour back home to farm their land. When Barry and Victoria are in Jamaica, the couple take turns managing the produce and looking for the best price with higglers (vendors) and exporters to sell. At our lunch, when I ask where their produce gets shipped, they tell me to Canada and the United States. All of us at the table respond to this statement by laughing, and I interpret this to mean we were recognizing the absurdity of the situation. In the past, their remittances also paid a relative to live with and care for their daughter in their absence. She is now a young adult working in the tourist industry in Jamaica.

These interconnected movements of agricultural produce, capital, and labour to and from Canada and the Caribbean are a paradigmatic example of the global food system of late capitalism, unevenly structured through histories of plantation slavery and colonialism. The ways migrant farmworkers develop and implement strategies to maintain and possibly advance the socio-economic standing of their households—that is, their reasons for joining the ranks of the SAWP, and their strategy of prioritizing land and for some, creating a transnational agricultural care chain—must be contextualized within late capitalism and post-colonialism or “coloniality,” the “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 36). In his work on the SAWP and Mexican migration, anthropologist Binford (2013) foregrounds the underlying structural causes of labour migration and critiques overly positive narratives about remittances. Official and scholarly narratives which celebrate remittances as

a pathway for developing rural economies often overlook the long-term reliance on remitted income and the myriad costs to migrant families and communities, including the emotional and physical hardships they face (Binford 2003; Delgado Wise and Covarrubias 2008; Fitting 2011:182-7; D'Aubeterre et al. 2020; Lewis and Kirton 2015; Wells et al. 2014). Research on rural migration from the Caribbean and Mexico has investigated the role remittances play in agricultural production on farms back home revealing that in some cases migrant earnings help purchase farm inputs (such as labour, seed, land, etc.) or contribute to the monetization of farm labour, while in other cases, labour migration has been connected to the abandonment of farming or loss of agricultural knowledge (Carvajal Gutiérrez and Johnson 2016; Fitting 2011; Garni 2013; Hull 2007; Ishemo et al. 2006; Thomas-Hope 2017). However, I suggest that the care chain lens is a helpful addition to this body of research and that transnational agricultural care chains are likely a phenomenon found among non-SAWP migrants as well.

After a brief discussion of research methods, the SAWP and key insights from research on the program, the paper explores the entangled concepts of social reproduction, rural households, and livelihoods in discussing the importance of land and transnational agricultural care chains. Anchored around the experiences of Barry and Victoria, this paper draws on additional interview materials with both Jamaican and Mexican seasonal agricultural workers.

Methods

The main arguments of this paper are based on a research trip to Jamaica in February 2023 along with interviews and ongoing conversations conducted in-person in Nova Scotia and via telephone and WhatsApp with 10 Jamaican and Mexican farmworkers (in English and Spanish), five of whom were re-interviewed several times over a period of four years. One of these interviewees was a woman. In this paper, I also refer to two interviews conducted by my research colleagues, Catherine Bryan and Jason Ellsworth.¹ During my visit to Jamaica, I interviewed the spouse (Victoria) of a farmworker and two adult children of seasonal agricultural workers. Farmworkers were recruited at Farmers' Markets and through emails to farm owners asking them to share information about the research with their employees or for permission to visit their farm. Interviewees were not

¹ My interviews and trip to Jamaica are part of a larger research project with my colleague Catherine Bryan and collaborators Anne Galvin and María de Lourdes Flores Morales. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Board at Dalhousie University. I also worked with colleagues Catherine Bryan, Karen Foster and Jason Ellsworth in a related project for the Mobile Lives Forum (see Fitting et al. 2023).

compensated for their participation, but if I was speaking to them in person, I invited them to lunch or bought them a coffee. Unlike one-off interviews with a set interview script, this research also entailed keeping in touch with interviewees and placing value on informal conversations, check-ins about family and life, and even sharing a meal together or a visit to their home region.

Contextualizing guest worker programs

The Canadian seasonal agricultural worker program (SAWP)

Most seasonal agricultural workers in Canada are employed in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia with only around 2.6% in Nova Scotia (Employment and Social Development Canada 2020). Despite this relatively low number, the province has seen an increase in recent years. In 2010, 957 positions were approved in Nova Scotia under both the SAWP and the primary agricultural stream of the TFWP (Statistics Canada 2018). In 2021, this number increased to 2,412 positions (Statistics Canada 2022). The SAWP has been heralded by the Canadian government as a model guest worker program that balances the needs of both employers and workers—a position that has been supported and bolstered by various international organizations (Binford 2019; Hennebry and Preibisch 2012). The high rate of migrant farmworkers who return to Canada year after year, including to the same farm, has been cited by government officials and employer groups as proof that the SAWP “works to everyone’s benefit” (Binford 2013, p. 8). However, at different moments, the program has also garnered increased public and media scrutiny, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic and in a critical report by the United Nations in 2024.² The SAWP restricts labour mobility in Canada because farmworkers are only permitted to work for a single, designated employer for the duration of the season and are therefore vulnerable to super-exploitation and the threat of deportation.³ It is one of the few temporary migrant labour programs in the country that does not permit transition to permanent residency or citizenship. A smaller number of migrant farmworkers are employed through the agricultural stream of the TFWP, and although it is technically possible to become a

permanent resident, in practice, it is very difficult for them to meet the conditions required.⁴

The existing research on guest worker programs like the SAWP importantly advances our understanding of how they affect workers and their families, providing insight into activities and processes connected to social reproduction. As Griffith et al. (2018, p. 226) explain, in such programs, “the legal employment of foreign nationals—involves the complete separation of productive and reproductive labor and the close coordination of the workers’ time to the employer’s demands. It is, therefore, one of the more extreme forms of wage labor.” Research demonstrates how the costs of social reproduction are largely shouldered by the household and community back home in the global south, such as caring for ill, injured, retired, and no-longer-employed, workers. In effect, they subsidize the receiving economies of wealthier nations (Griffith 2018; Hennebry 2010). Guest worker programs designed to place the burden of social reproductive costs on home communities are the outcome of the uneven development of capitalism, shaped by colonial histories (Binford 2013) and connected to processes of racialization (Binford and Preibisch 2013; Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2013) and racial capitalism (Hjalmarson 2022; Walia 2021). In Canada farm work is “among the most gendered and racialized occupations, highly segregated by sex, race, age, and citizenship” (Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2011, 101). Seasonal farmworkers are racialized with attributes ascribed to different nationalities by the Canadian government and employers: some nationalities are viewed as being better at—or showing a preference for—certain on-farm tasks and as more or less likely, or able, to complain. Distinctions made about farmworkers from different countries draw on racial and national stereotypes. Canadian employers have the ability to “country surf” looking for the hardest working labour force and workers who are perceived to be less likely to complain (Preibisch and Binford 2007). Two key differences between Mexican and Jamaican workers are that the former may not be able to communicate in English and are less likely to have family living in Canada. One Jamaican interviewee mentioned that his employer hired Mexican workers for the season after a group of Jamaican workers complained about their living and working conditions. He explained that the Jamaican employees “banded together in a way and, you know, had a conversation with the boss... and there’s twenty of them that didn’t get brought back. [So

² See sections on migrant workers, <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g24/120/97/pdf/g2412097.pdf>.

³ In 2019, Canada introduced the Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers to enable immigration officers to grant open work permits to at-risk migrant workers in abusive situations. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/work-canada/permit-temporary/vulnerable-workers.html> See also: <https://theconversation.com/why-the-open-work-permit-for-migrant-workers-is-an-inadequate-solution-238537>.

⁴ Immigration for agricultural workers is now allowed for “non-seasonal workers” which excludes the SAWP. See the policy here: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/foreign-workers/agricultural/agricultural.html> and <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/agri-food-pilot.html>.

they brought in] Mexicans instead of Jamaicans” (Interview, Canada 2022).

In connection to this, the Canadian farm sector benefits from a form of unfree labour entailing the coerced productivity of the SAWP employees (Thomas, M 2016). It is unfree in the sense that farmworkers are tied to a single designated employer and are deportable; they are not able to circulate freely in the labour market (Allahdua 2023; Sharma 2006; Thomas, M 2016; Weiler et al. 2017). Employers expect migrant farmworkers in Canada to perform tasks at higher levels of productivity than is expected from local residents (Basok 2002; Binford 2013; Fitting et al. 2023). In Nova Scotia, for example, migrant farmworkers work longer hours than the legislated full-time workweek and interviewees reported a typical workday on farm is 10–11 hours. One migrant farmworker put it to us this way: we “work harder, faster, longer” than our Canadian counterparts (Interview, Canada 2022).

Another important insight is that the research demonstrates how the translocal—and often transnational—relations of social reproduction involved in migrant farmwork can reinforce and reconfigure gender roles and expectations not only while working abroad, but in migrants’ households and communities back home (Bastia and Busse 2011; McLaughlin et al. 2017; Preibisch and Encalada Grez 2013; Schmalzbauer 2015; Thomas 2020). Migration research on gender and parenting (focusing here on Latin America and Jamaica), emphasizes the toll on parents, both abroad and back home, as well as the reconfiguration of gender relations (for example, Bastia and Busse 2011; D’Aubeterre Buznego et al. 2020; Dreby 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Fernández Kelly 2005).

A final point to highlight from the existing research on the SAWP is that migrant farmworkers are essential to the operation of Canadian farms—part of the social reproduction of Canadian society, and briefly recognized during the Covid-19 as “essential workers” (Encalada Grez 2022; Macklin 2021; Vosko and Spring 2022). In fact, migrant workers are now central not only to the operation of large, “industrial” farms, but to smaller, more environmentally sustainable, organic, and socially conscious farms (Fitting et al. 2023; Weiler et al. 2016).⁵ Despite their importance to the operation of Canadian farms, popular narratives and advertisements for local and family farms often exclude racialized migrants working in agriculture (Encalada Grez 2018).

The role of guest worker programs in contemporary capitalism

The implementation of neoliberal policies and trade agreements have favoured agricultural production for export markets over regional or national production, cuts to rural subsidies and price supports in the global south, and an increased dependency on agri-food imports globally. Caribbean economies organized around key agricultural commodities central to the British Empire, such as sugar, underwent important transformations during the wave of independence that followed WWII (Mintz 1986; Rhiney 2016). While agriculture and manufacturing were principal sectors of the economy during the region’s long colonial period, in the mid to late 20th century, tourism was promoted as a way to attract foreign exchange, modernize, and reduce poverty (Thomas et al. 2018). With the rise in the price of oil and other commodities in the 1970s, along with growing debt, Jamaica secured loans with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund which came with conditions to cut state spending and agricultural subsidies and open the market to agri-food imports (Thomas et al. 2018; Rhiney 2016). Similar to elsewhere in the Caribbean, Jamaica went from an agricultural producer to an agri-food importer with tourism playing a major role in its economy. Jamaica imports around 80% of the total food commodities (Barry and Gahman 2020).⁶

As petty commodity and subsistence farmers in rural areas confront more challenging socio-economic (and in many cases, environmental) conditions, there have been new and accelerated waves of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003; Araghi 2009a, b; Bernstein 2010, 2014; Li 2009; McMichael 2009, 2013; Ploeg 2020). In effect, while capitalist restructuring and neoliberal policies have undermined small producers’ access to land and other needed resources, many are also simultaneously excluded from full incorporation into waged employment or processes of proletarianization. As has happened in the past, there are forms of dispossession without the “prospect of labour absorption” (Li 2009: 69). Rural and “rurally-rooted” people (Borras et al. 2022) join the labouring classes not as fully employed or employable workers, but as surplus labour and vulnerable workers involved in a range of activities from informal to illegal, waged to unwaged, from piece work to migrant work at different stages of the life cycle. This is not the linear, inevitable march toward proletarianization and urbanization once imagined by earlier agrarian scholars; rather, as Bernstein has suggested, the agrarian

⁵ See also Gray (2014) and Guthman (2004) on alternative and organic farming in the United States.

⁶ Additionally, like in many farming communities around the world, the average age of farmers is getting older in Jamaica and many farmers do not have succession plans. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, the average age of farmers was 65 in 2015 (Burrell 2016).

question today is in fact a question of labour and its “forms of differentiation” shaped by “oppression along intersecting lines of class, gender, generation, caste and ethnicity” (2004, 204–5). Similarly, anthropologists of labour highlight how contemporary capitalist restructuring expands the “multiplication of the proletariat” creating and remaking social relations of production (Carbonella and Kasmir 2014).

As a structural feature of capitalism, the creation of the relative surplus labour population is a regionally uneven and ongoing process; but as Tania Li warns, we should avoid the “residual functionalism sometimes embedded in the concept of the labour reserve” (Li 2009, p. 70). She argues, “There is another dynamic, however, that is potentially more lethal: one in which places (or their resources) are useful [to capital], but the people are not so that dispossession is detached from any prospect of labour absorption” (2009, 69). In the case of countries in the global south that have become importers of staple foods and exporters of labour, such as both Jamaica and Mexico, a key rural resource “useful to capital” is labour available for wealthier, more industrialized countries like Canada— but typically only as temporary guest workers. Guest worker programs are designed to encourage circular and temporary labour migration while simultaneously placating anti-immigrant sentiments, creating the “ideal” immigrant (Hahamovitch 2003; McLaughlin 2010; see also Barber 2008)—that is, people who arrive to work, but are largely ineligible for key forms of state support, and although vital to entire economic sectors, are temporary, deportable, and socially isolated.

Canadian immigration policy has a history of explicit racism, blocking the immigration of free Blacks to Canada in the early 20th century, for instance, followed by less explicit but effectively restrictive practices (Hjalmarsen 2022). In the case of Nova Scotia, the province has a historical and on-going relationship with Jamaica, connected to politics of the British Empire. In the late 1700s, the British sent more than 500 Maroons—formerly enslaved Jamaicans, both freed and fugitives from plantation slavery, who settled independent communities in mountainous interior of the island, including the Clarendon, Trelawny and St Anne parishes— to Nova Scotia, another part of the British empire, in the hopes of quelling unrest and rebellion. Although the Maroons petitioned the British to leave the province due to their hostile and unwelcome treatment, leaving for Sierra Leone in 1800, some families stayed behind contributing to the cultural and economic life of the region (Government of Canada 2023).

Transnational agricultural care chains

In agriculture, care entails a sequence of activities that are carried out by the migrant farmworkers and members of their households to ensure the maintenance of crops and land (and its soil), that have been shaped—like global care chains— by larger structural shifts in the global economy. Although care work is a form of social reproductive labour, not all types of social reproduction entail care work. Social reproduction is often employed as an analytic tool for exploring how social relations under capitalism, as a system driven to create surplus value through the exploitative relation of capital to labour, are maintained at different scales and temporalities: such as, in the maintenance of capitalism and related institutions; the reproduction of labour power and sustaining the workforce; the often (but not necessarily) unpaid “non-productive” labour of caring for dependents such as children, the elderly and ill; and the biological reproduction or procreation of children. As Cindi Katz explains, “Social reproduction is the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life. It is also a set of structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension” (Katz 2001, p. 711). The concept has temporal and spatial implications, briefly touched upon below, and encompasses daily and long-term tasks in the replication of society over time.

Feminist work has shown that the control over women’s (and non-normative) sexuality and the devaluation of domestic labour have been fundamental to the expansion and reproduction of capitalism (Federici 2004; Mies 1982; Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999; Vogel 1983). In addition to pointing to the ways productive and reproductive labour are mutually constitutive, recent feminist social reproduction theory draws our attention to how exploitation in the creation of surplus value intersects with other forms of oppression (Bhattacharya 2017, p. 14).

Care work typically refers to a range of activities and relationships that promote the physical and emotional well-being of people “who cannot or who are not inclined to perform these activities themselves” (Yeates 2004, p. 371); it often includes emotional labour and may be motivated by affection or a sense of obligation. Care work is associated with women’s unpaid domestic labour but it may also be paid. Indeed, care labour migration proliferated as women in the global south migrated for work as cleaners, nannies, caregivers and sex workers to the global north (Hochschild 2000). “Central to the processes of contemporary global capitalism,” care labour migration is “a means of reorganizing social relations and reproduction in multiple sites, sharing some similarities in the organization of social reproduction and gender divisions of labour, and connected through the transnational social networks of migrants and migration

industries.” (Barber and Bryan 2014, p. 30). Arlie Hochschild’s concept of global care chains or “a series of personal links between people across the globe based on paid or unpaid care” (2000, 131) connects individual household decisions and strategies to larger shifts in the global political economy. Three different categories of women and their households are interlinked and dependent upon one another but in unequal ways, shaped by experiences of class, gender, race, ethnicity and nationality: the women who migrate for work, the women who employ them, and those who are left behind and take care of the children and other dependents. Migrant women often perform double or triple duty as employees who produce surplus value in receiving states and as income earners to support their households back home while parenting at a distance (Barber and Bryan 2014; Barber and Lem 2018). Researchers employ the concept of the global care chain to examine gendered work as migrant domestic workers, caregivers, and in other professions such as hospitality workers who are expected to perform emotional labour (Bryan 2017).⁷

Care labour is performed in the service of others, and while paid in some examples like those discussed above, it is often an asymmetrical obligation or responsibility. In this sense, care extends to other living things, such as animals, the land, soil and plants. Indigenous understandings of land as nested in relations (Stiegman and Pictou 2023) and the work of feminist scholars, such as María Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) ethics of care informed by permaculture, foregrounds how we as humans “are embedded in a web of complex relationships of interdependency in which personal actions have consequences for more than ourselves and our kin” (146). Indigenous teachings, aspects of agroecology, and an ethics of care informed by permaculture decenters humans while also acknowledging and remaining committed to our specific obligations to others (de la Bellacasa 2017, 129; 145). Inspired by these approaches, the notion of an agricultural care chain presented here is meant to include how land, and its soil as a multispecies living world⁸ are embedded in relations of interdependency. Understanding agricultural practices of tending to crops, land, and soil as biosocial practices and relations, challenges modernist

binaries of nature and culture (Haraway 1997; see also de la Bellacasa 2017; Gutiérrez Escobar 2022). In this way, the concept of agricultural care chain is meant to acknowledge agriculture as a practice within a web of relations and the specificity of human obligation in asymmetrical relations of responsibility or obligation.

When I read back the notes and transcripts from my interviews and conversations with seasonal agricultural workers and relatives who farm in their home countries, I began to see their farming as a web of asymmetrical relations of obligation, stretched across great distances, to care for others. For example, Barry and Victoria, practice land fallowing to help restore the soil’s nutrient balance and discourage pests. They lease two plots of land in a mountainous region of Clarendon parish to farm themselves during the SAWP off-season and compensate a neighbour to farm while they are abroad. Barry and Victoria also invite their neighbours’ cows to feed on this land because it “helps” the land, and in turn, helps the cows (and their owners). Barry explains:

The land isn’t level, so machinery couldn’t work on it. I farm by hand or with my tools and in pieces. So, one piece is farmed for three years, and then I let it rest for two, three or four years. I don’t farm the whole one and a half acres—or the two plots of one and a half acres each, all at once. I also let cows feed on it—they feed on the grass on my land after I’ve removed all the produce. [Do your neighbours pay you in some way for that?] No, I don’t expect payment for it from my neighbours—it helps the land to have the cows there feeding and it helps the cows too. (Interview, on WhatsApp 2023).

These agricultural practices can be seen as a form of asymmetrical relations of obligation to care for the soil, land, and neighbours, both human and animal. However, although such agricultural practices form part of a care chain and are arguably a form of “care”, they are not always or necessarily environmentally sustainable practices. Just as an example, in this particular case, Barry and Victoria avoid chemical pesticide sprays on yams but sometimes use them on potatoes and corn. Their practices of care do not always or necessarily follow the principles of agroecology to reduce “dependence on high agrochemical and energy inputs” (Altieri and Toledo 2011, p. 588).⁹

⁹ Agroecology’s core principles are “recycling nutrients and energy on the farm, rather than introducing external inputs; enhancing soil organic matter and soil biological activity; diversifying plant species and genetic resources in agroecosystems over time and space; integrating crops and livestock and optimizing interactions and productivity of the total farming system, rather than the yield of individual species (Gliessman 1988).” (Altieri and Toledo 2011, p. 588). The potential connections between transnational care chains and

⁷ Rhacel Parreñas (2000) demonstrates how Filipina migrant women employed as domestic women are simultaneously “escaping their gender roles in the Philippines, easing the gender constraints of women who employ them in industrialized countries, and finally relegating their gender roles to women left behind in the Philippines” (2000, 570).

⁸ As Puig de la Bellacasa illuminates, soil is created through the slow temporality of geological processes or what Stephen Jay Gould refers to as “deep time” (2017, 172). Soil is more than an “input for crop production or other human needs. A more soil-attentive mode of care might also reveal other ways of experiencing time at the heart of productionist relations [...](188).

In their home communities, some migrant farmworkers hire neighbours to tend to crops in their absence by watering, weeding, and fertilizing them. Depending on the timing, these workers also harvest the crops and transport them to the regional market or exporter. This was the case with Barry and Victoria, whose remittances not only maintained their house and supported their daughter's schooling but were earmarked for paying farm labour. In addition to keeping in touch with their daughter regularly and parenting from a distance, their frequent telephone and WhatsApp calls included conversations with those working the land. During my most recent interview with Barry, he mentions receiving reports about the farm every day from Victoria in Jamaica (because they speak on the phone every day); but when she's abroad working, Barry speaks directly to the neighbour he hires as a farmhand. The sense of achievement he has, as well as the constant checking in about his farm, are clear in our conversations. When I ask, "Do you talk about your farm back home and how your crops are doing with other migrant workers in Nova Scotia?" he proudly answers, "well, yes, I do!"

Farmworker interviewees repeatedly articulated how "Everybody juggles [different jobs], especially if you have responsibilities to others" (Group Interview, Jamaica 2023). What interviewees refer to as "juggling" different jobs or income-generating strategies is documented by researchers in rural areas around the globe as routine combinations of on-farm tasks with self-employment, petty commodity production, and off-farm wage labour. This farmworker experience of juggling connects to the closely interwoven concepts of livelihoods, households, and social reproduction, which require some clarification. As a concept, livelihoods helps capture pluriactivity or the myriad activities and shifting strategies undertaken by rural and rurally-rooted people; it helps depict the ways rural households often combine unpaid labour (such as unpaid domestic work, unpaid subsistence farming) and remunerated craft production or petty-commodity production (like selling crops) simultaneously or at different times.

While social reproductive labour includes domestic work connected to the household as a somewhat private space distinct from public workspaces that emerged historically with the expansion of capitalism, urbanization, and gender hierarchies—as feminists have shown, and what Maria Mies referred to as "housewifization" (1982)—in many rural areas of the global south, *households* are not distinct spaces delineated to the degree sometimes imagined or discussed (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen 1999; Smith 2020).¹⁰

agroecological practices, intentional or not, is a topic too larger for this paper, but a promising area for further reflection and research.

¹⁰ Bhattacharya (2017) importantly notes that the historical appearance of a sphere of production (public) and reproduction (private),

Simply put, while households are generally seen as units of consumption in high income countries, in the global south, they are units of consumption and production. When hard boundaries are assumed between productive and reproductive labour, and between work space and domestic space, the complexities of rural livelihoods and gendered labour are missed: for example, in the Caribbean, women have a long history as traders and higglers, as well as farmers, even if unacknowledged in policy and planning in the region (Barry et al. 2020).

While the boundaries between production and social reproduction are of course more complex in urban settings as well, unlike their urban counterparts, rural and peri-urban households may also grow inexpensive food for an urban labour force (or at least typically on a larger scale than urban gardens and backyards) and provide a home-base with self-provisioning options in the off-season for migrant family members and those who become ill or age-out of their employment.

Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999) find parallels between the subsistence work of rural peasant farmers and the (urban-focused discussions about) housework that often falls to women, in the sense that they are both affected by a similar capitalist logic: subsistence work is devalued and treated as endlessly flexible or exploitable. Subsistence work is exploited by capital not through wages but by "what is taken from them free of cost or very poorly paid for" and is a precondition for the on-going accumulation of capital (1999, p.11). Unwaged and uncompensated labour also generate surplus value.

Research on global "householding" importantly foregrounds the work of making and maintaining households as a dynamic process—*household-ing*—over the life course and examines the ways migration shapes this process, including when households are dissolved and reconfigured.¹¹ As social institutions where resources are managed and allocated, households may include relations based on affection and altruism as well as be sites of undervalued labour and

does not make it a clear, neat division and Gavin Smith challenges the assumption that (rural) households are private spaces of social reproduction alone (2020). Based on his work in rural Peru and Spain, he explains: "While all workers have to defend the conditions they faced in the site of their work— what some people call the sphere of economic production— these rural people were also dependent for their survival on the simple reproduction of their conditions of life— their homes, their land, their tools, and the social relations in which they were embedded— what some people call the sphere of social reproduction. The reproduction of their working bodies and the production of commodities could not (and cannot) be neatly separated..." (Smith 2020).

¹¹ "The term *householding* is used to capture the formation and continuity of the household as an ongoing, always unfolding process involving interconnected relationships and actions within and beyond the household as a social institution and physical space." (Huijsmans 2014, p. 314).

potential exploitation (Douglass 2014, p. 313). Households are, of course, configured in distinct ways across and within societies—they can multi-generational or female-headed, as often the case in Jamaica, and constituted through social relations which combine both productive and reproductive labour and spaces.¹² Households might not always entail co-residence and can be constituted by spatially stretched kin relations within the same town or across rural and urban spaces—ie. translocal or even transnational (Smith 2020; Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018).¹³

In order to better understand why some farmworkers create transnational agricultural care chains as part of their livelihood strategies, I turn now to the multifaceted meanings of land as “a promise.”

“Having land alone is a promise”

When asking seasonal agricultural workers about remittance use and their work back home, the importance of land becomes apparent “as a promise” for the future. These workers come from rural and peri-urban communities in Jamaica and Mexico where land provides a site to build or improve a house and to farm, along with other important uses and meanings, such as providing access to additional resources like water, firewood, healthy soil, as a space for childcare and socializing, and connected to a sense of dignity (see Borrás et al. 2022).

Often approached with an overly production-centred focus as Borrás et al. (2022) argue based on research with migrant farmworkers from Myanmar—land has multiple meanings and is part of the co-constitutive spheres of production and social reproduction. As they put it, migrant workers “produce or access things of use value and exchange value” like food, water and wood—“not only to reproduce labour power but to reproduce one’s self as a human being more generally” (Borrás et al. 2022, p. 330). Anthropologists, Indigenous and STS scholars point to how despite the capitalist logic of reducing nature to a resource, land is more than just a means of production or property; rather, viewed as “biosocial”, land is a culturally-mediated articulation of biology and socio-political history (Gutiérrez Escobar 2022; Escobar 1999). Land used for agriculture, for example, involves the entanglement of humans with non-humans like plants, insects and soil “in both the cultivation

of crops and the making of agricultural socialities, knowledges and practices” (Van Dooren 2009, p. 375). Indigenous perspectives and scholars highlight the ways land is embedded in a web of relationality or “all my relations” (Stiegman and Pictou 2023). Indigenous understandings of land view it as “identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library” (Kimmerer 2013, p. 17).

The statement that “land alone provides a promise” has several interwoven meanings for my interviewees. As “a declaration or assurance that one will do a particular thing or that a particular thing will happen,” [...] “usually with respect to the future” (Oxford Languages), land is discussed by migrant farmworkers as an assurance to oneself and one’s family that they will own or lease property to build or maintain a house and farm as a kind of safety net. In this sense, the promise reflects an obligation to others, particularly one’s children. Land is a safety net in that it enables the possibility for some self-provisioning—the possibility to grow food for supplemental income and to consume—and provides the location for a house with backyard plot or for farming for when migrant workers return and retire in their communities and to eventually bequest to their children.

The temporal component of land as a “promise” for migrant farmworkers importantly signals that social reproduction is possible in the future. The activities, strategies, and struggles to maintain what is often the last remaining means of production for themselves and their children is a key aspect of social reproduction for many rural residents and rurally-rooted migrants in Jamaica and elsewhere. Based on his research in rural Peru and Spain, Gavin A. Smith argues that “the livelihoods people need to defend necessarily include both what we would call the labour process narrowly defined and also elements of the means of production and associated social relations that are needed for them to pursue that labour process. This effectively modifies the arena of what we would call ‘social reproduction’ and, therefore, the politics associated with it.” (Smith 2020; translation provided by Smith).

For rurally-rooted migrant workers, particularly in contexts of coloniality, access to land and the ability to self-provision contributes to a sense of dignity in migrant workers’ lives and livelihoods. In Jamaica, the significance of land must be understood in relation to the history of plantation slavery, which “acted as a colossal constraint on peasant development, repeatedly blocking peasants’ access to land, forcing many to seek wage labour, limiting access to capital and credit, inhibiting the innovation of appropriate technology, and dominating state expenditure.” (Weis 2004, p. 38). Enslaved peoples and their descendants challenged the colonial system of land title in Jamaica (Besson 1999) which, as

¹² See for example, Gavin Smith’s notion of confederated households and Eleanor Kofman’s concept of global householding.

¹³ In other words, rural household members may reside (or cook, sleep, bathe, and socialize) in more than one physical building or structure, and the building may be in an adjacent or separate location from their farmland. Additionally, residents may consider farmland as a component of the household, as arguably is the case with the milpa (intercropped corn fields) in parts of Mexico (Fitting 2011).

Galvin (2021, p. 39) succinctly explains, has shaped rural residence and landownership in the countryside today:

Enslaved people and their descendants ‘assimilated and overturned’ colonial laws regarding land inheritance based on primogeniture; they used customary law, whereby land inheritance was expanded beyond male heirs to include all children regardless of gender or ‘legitimacy’ of birth status. They transformed purchased legal freeholds into customary ‘family land’ passed down through oral tradition, symbolically indigenising themselves in their relationship to the landscape (Besson 1999: 33–37; Thomas, D. A 2016). Jamaican state law was shaped by customary law, with squatting on abandoned land being codified as a means of property acquisition under specific circumstances. This land acquisition strategy is still practiced in the present, despite state efforts to ‘regularise’ ownership arrangements to ensure the payment of property taxes.

The meaning of land to farm, as well as owning property, reverberates with historical significance. Anthropologists suggest that in spaces of past violence, Jamaicans experience the past, present and future simultaneously or synchronously (Thomas, D.A. 2016; see also Galvin 2021). Furthermore, not only does land ownership resonate because of the history of plantation slavery, but so does the idea of working for oneself, of owning one’s own labour.¹⁴

All the farmworkers I interviewed described their relationship to land, and either farming or building and maintaining their house, with a sense of pride and dignity, and arguably, a sense of contentment. Indeed, social reproductive labour is not always or necessarily drudgery or gendered hardship. Griffith et al. (2018) interviewed Mexican guest workers who had been employed in the United States and Canada, finding that “contrary to many characterizations of reproductive labor, reproductive and productive labor add value to one another and, in the process, serve as sources of happiness, dignity, and social legitimacy to women and men working in jobs that many consider onerous, dirty, smelly, undignified, and poorly remunerated” (Griffith et al. 2018, p. 224). They continue: “Many social scientists have shown that people often work hard at tasks that pay little or involve excessive personal costs because they are part of one’s identity or heritage or they yield social and environmental benefits [Griffith 2009; Moberg 2014].” However, within farming households, there are often age and stage of life differences in how members view agriculture as a livelihood. As is also the case in Mexico, there can be generational differences in attitudes toward small-scale

agriculture and farming can be stigmatized (Burrell 2016, p. 113; Fitting 2011). As one example, a daughter of a seasonal agricultural worker from Jamaica explained to me that although her father inherited the farm, “he didn’t want the farm life for his kids. [Why? I asked] Because it’s hard. It’s hard being in the sun. It’s not a status job. And you don’t make a lot as a small farmer.” (Interview, Jamaica 2023).

Conclusion

Focusing in on the stories of Barry and Victoria, this paper has argued that some migrant farmworkers, along with family members and neighbours, create and participate in transnational agricultural care chains. In addition to engaging in regular conversations about farm issues and decisions back home while employed in Canada, there are seasonal agricultural workers who remit funds to pay a neighbour to farm their land (or the land they lease). Agricultural care chains entail a series of personal links between people, located, at least temporarily, in different countries, who tend to the crops and farmland as a practice involving asymmetrical relations of obligation to care for others. Agricultural care chains form part of a strategy for a dignified livelihood to get by, and possibly even advance the economic and social standing of one’s family under difficult economic conditions. This does not negate the exploitative nature or the physical toll of agricultural work they perform in Canada. As rural or peri-urban residents who farm in countries such as Jamaica and Mexico become surplus or redundant labour they are available to work as guest workers in higher income countries—but often not eligible to stay as immigrants.

The paper also explored the multiple layers of meaning attached to land access for rurally rooted migrants, understood in the context of the uneven processes of global capitalism and histories of colonialism, and, in the case of Jamaica, resistance. As a “promise”, land is an obligation to others and a safety net because it is a space to receive migrants and family members who return or retire and because of the possibility to grow food for supplemental income or to consume. Often central to rural livelihoods, land is a feature of the co-constitutive spheres of production and social reproduction. The idea of “promise” also refers to how migrant farmworkers will eventually bequest the land (and house) to their children. In connection to these ideas, in rural areas, households are not simply units of consumption but refer to a process of householding which combines productive and reproductive spaces and labour. The notion of livelihood helps capture the ways rural households may combine unpaid subsistence with remunerated work and petty-commodity production simultaneously or at different times. Land access may also contribute to a sense of stability

¹⁴ Anne Galvin articulated this point to me in conversation.

and dignity in migrant workers' lives and livelihoods. In the specific context of Jamaica, the significance placed on having land access for household provisioning, especially as land ownership and owning one's own labour, reflects the resistance of enslaved people and their descendants to plantation slavery, which included overturning colonial land inheritance and legally recognizing land claims based on oral tradition and squatting on abandoned land under certain circumstances (Thomas, D.A. 2016; Galvin 2021).

These layers of meanings attached to land—and no doubt there are more—, along with transnational agricultural care chains, connect to core aspects of food sovereignty as a political project and concept, which has been advanced by the transnational peasant rights' group, Via Campesina. Food sovereignty refers to “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (Via Campesina, 2007). An important part of its elaboration by Via Campesina has entailed criticizing neoliberal policies and a narrowly defined concept of “food security” (focused not on the domestic production of food but on importing food for consumption) as well as calling for producers' control over their productive resources, such as land, water, and seeds (Wittman et al. 2010, p. 3). These are criticisms and calls relevant to rurally-rooted migrants in Jamaica and Mexico (and elsewhere in the global south), who are employed as guest workers in the agri-food sector in places like Canada. Yet, at the same time, as Bernstein helpfully foregrounds in his cautionary approach to food sovereignty, there are increasingly fragmented classes of labour in agrarian contexts under contemporary capitalism; he suggests, in some uses, that food sovereignty slips into overly simplistic and romanticized accounts of small-scale farmers as a homogeneous group or unified class undertaking ecologically friendly production (Bernstein 2010; 2014). With this in mind, then, the experiences and strategies of different rurally-rooted migrants, such as the transnational agricultural care chains and prioritizing land access discussed here—with land access providing a place to return with the option of self-provisioning, as access (or ownership) that can be passed on to the next generation, as a space for residence, as a factor in a dignified livelihood and so on— not only resonate with the goals of food sovereignty, but paying attention to them helps avoid the pitfalls of oversimplified or romanticized accounts of rural life and livelihoods.

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