



Original Research Article

## Striving toward a peasant identity: The influence of the global peasant movement on three women farmers in Canada

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### Abstract

As diverse actors work through disparate food movements seeking to tackle the causes and effects of the global food crisis, Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) call for strategic alliances between progressive and radical trends in the food movement to transform our current food system. They identify the relationship between the National Farmers Union and *La Via Campesina* (LVC) as an interesting example of alliances across class. This paper focuses on the process of alliance formation by exploring the subjectivities of three of the authors who identify as women farmers and have had opportunities to learn from and engage with peasant movements through their participation in courses, encounters and organizing spaces of LVC. These farmers' goal of striving toward a peasant identity reveals the influence of peasant-to-peasant processes (PtPP) on their conceptions of possible futures. Simultaneously their experiences expose tensions and struggles of living the peasant way as women farmers in the Canadian context. Through a collective case study we explore how radical peasant movements facilitate re-peasantization and the restructuring of our ways of relating with the earth and each other in the global North. Based on this analysis we deepen our understanding of how PtPP can foster South-North solidarities which have the potential to grow radical movements toward food system transformation.

**Keywords:** Women farmers; re-peasantization, food movement solidarity; Popular Peasant Feminism; coalition identities; La Via Campesina; Canada

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## Introduction

As diverse actors work through disparate food movements seeking to tackle the causes and effects of the global food crisis, Holt-Giménez and Shattuck (2011) call for strategic alliances across difference to transform our current food system. They argue that alliances between progressive and radical movement actors<sup>1</sup> are necessary to effect transformative change. They point to the National Farmers Union (NFU), a founding and active member of La Via Campesina (LVC), a global peasant organization, as an interesting example of alliances built across class. Despite the class differences between Canadian farmers and peasants, the NFU shares LVCs political position against neoliberalism and considers itself part of the broader peasant movement that seeks food system transformation through agroecology and food sovereignty. (National Farmers Union [NFU], 2021). As a founding and active member of LVC, the NFU has been a part of building a global peasant movement for many decades, building international solidarity through exchange opportunities for Canadian farmers since the 1970s. This collaboration laid the groundwork for their co-founding of LVC in the 1990s.

Re-peasantization has been identified as an important mode of resistance to the globalization of industrial neoliberal agriculture, and an avenue of growth for agroecology and food sovereignty movements (Desmarais, 2008; van der Ploeg, 2010, 2012; Val et al., 2019). Within LVC, reclaiming the peasant identity as a positive signifier of collective knowledge and power, rather than its colloquial pejorative meaning, has been a deliberate act of resistance (NFU, 2021). LVC uses an intentionally broad definition of peasant, defined as “people of the land,” to facilitate the building of coalitions across geographies based on shared struggles (Edelman, 2013; Desmarais, 2008). Desmarais, identifies the construction of a collective peasant identity as one of LVC’s most important accomplishments. This shared identity is not a given, but a complex process and a powerful political achievement in the context of globalization (Desmarais, 2008). Some NFU members have “rediscovered” or reclaimed their identity as peasants. As such, re-peasantization in Canada is embedded in the collective history of LVC that many NFU leaders helped construct through collective organizing (Desmarais, 2008).

Val et al. (2019) describes the pedagogy within LVC movement organizing spaces as peasant-to-peasant processes (PtPP) that are responsible for “the collective (re)construction of subjectivities” (p. 882) toward the emergence of what they call *agroecological peasants*. They describe the agroecological peasant as a “particular peasant emergence in the twenty-first century”. They define this emergence as a historical and political subject that is “agroecological, organized and antihegemonic” (p. 879). Rosset et al. (2019) argue that *agroecological peasants* are the central subjects who will lead the transformation of our food system by materializing agroecology and food sovereignty. We explore in this paper how re-peasantization is further

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<sup>1</sup> Progressive actors are explained by Holt-Giménez and Shattuck as those that work within the current political and economic system to advance alternatives to the agri-food model, and radical actors are those who work for food system change by advocating for anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist structural reforms under the umbrella of food sovereignty.

facilitated in Canada through the transformation of subjects through PtPP. We do this through the exploration of a case of how three young women farmers, from non-farming backgrounds, came to strive toward a peasant identity and thus join the global peasant movement. We deepen Val et al.'s (2019) analysis of PtPP by sharing reflections from farmer authors with experiences in PtPP to understand how they have led to subject transformation.

In the Canadian context, this analysis is timely because researchers and activists have identified an emerging trend of young people, especially women, identifying themselves as first generation farmers interested in ecologically sustainable farming methods (LaForge et al., 2018). These authors describe first generation farmers as an important demographic because of the low percentage of farmers in the Canadian population (1.7 percent), a continuing decline in farmers, an aging farmer population, and the low percentage of farmers with a succession plan (8 percent) (LaForge et al., 2018; Statistics Canada, 2017). These new farmers present an opportunity to build the agroecology and food sovereignty movements in Canada. By deepening our understanding of the transformative potential of PtPP we can better understand how progressive actors, such as new farmers interested in ecological farming, can be radicalized through joining solidarity networks built between farmers in the global North and peasants in the global South.

Trevilla Espinal et al. (2021) argue that a transition to a more equitable and just food system must consider feminist contributions. Val et al. (2019) name popular peasant feminism (PPFem) as the way in which rural women's groups within LVC are using PtPP to collectively identify "how patriarchy manifests itself in their territories, in order to disarticulate the mechanisms of oppression and move toward more just gender relations" (p. 885). They argue PtPP have facilitated the formation of PPFem subjects who push for actions which build a post-patriarchal, post-capitalist vision of agroecology. PPFem is described as "a construction from below, signaling our demands and our shared struggles" at the intersection of class and gender (Graciele Seibert, 2017, p. 7). As women farmers in Canada, authors have shared struggles with peasant women and acknowledge differences in class. We explore how they negotiate these shared struggles and differences.

We ask: How did three young women, first generation farmers, from the global North come to strive toward a peasant identity and thus join the global peasant movement? Within this broad question we ask:

- a) How do these authors navigate shared struggles and class differences in their identification as peasants? and
- b) How do they attempt to enact a peasant identity in Canada?

To answer these questions, we first outline our conceptual and theoretical framing and methodology for this research. We then discuss farmer authors' experiences, followed by conclusions.

## Conceptual and theoretical framing

Peasants are a large, culturally diverse, heterogeneous group including the rural poor, small scale farmers, landless agricultural workers, hunter gatherers, and fisher people who have been historically marginalized (Edelman, 2013). LVC has been working towards reclaiming the peasant identity as a positive descriptor of collective knowledge and power to produce food and build community (Desmarais, 2008; NFU, 2021). For example, La Via Campesina, meaning “the peasant way,” is an affirmation of an agrarian lifestyle, the peasant mode of production and the peasant identity. This challenges historical and contemporary discourses that conceptualize peasants as “less than,” in need of development, and in need of modernization. LVC represents a global peasant movement which is “reasserting the right to farm as a social act of stewardship of the land and food redistribution against the destabilizing and exclusionary impacts of the neoliberal model” (McMichael, 2006, p. 412). It is important to note that many peasants are not involved in political movements. This paper focuses on the political conceptualization of the peasant identity within LVC. We understand this as a coalition identity<sup>2</sup> that was intentionally constructed/reclaimed to build solidarity across difference (Desmarais, 2008). Carastathis (2013) describes coalition identities “as internally heterogeneous, complex unities constituted by their internal differences” (p. 942). Following Crenshaw (1990), she argues that identities can be conceived as coalitions, either active or potential. Within an identity category, such as peasant, there are different intersections with other identities related to, for example, gender or sexuality. Peasant identity then, can be conceived as a coalition between male and female peasants, for example. Emphasizing intersectionality *within* identity categories opens possibilities for “political alliances that cross existing identity categories” (Carastathis, 2013, 942).

Accompanying the political peasant movement there has been a resurgence of peasant agricultural practices across the globe, including in the global North (van der Ploeg, 2010, 2012). Peasant modes of production are characterized as co-production, “the interaction and mutual transformation of human actors and living nature” (van der Ploeg, 2014, p. 4). This co-production has also been called agroecology. Agroecology is a set of farming approaches that focus on regenerating soil fertility and managing pests without relying on external chemical inputs (Gliessman, 2015). What sets peasant modes of production apart from capitalist modes is skepticism, or rejection, of the market as the primary organizing principle for food production (van der Ploeg, 2014). Instead, peasant agriculture values non-commodity relationships and strives towards autonomy and the preservation of a “self-governed resource base that allows for co-production” (van der Ploeg, 2010, p. 3). The mutual relationship with local ecology and the emphasis on working with local fertility found in peasant modes of production are a contrast to capitalist modes of production that have an extractive relationship to the land and wherein daily

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on coalitional politics and identity politics see Crenshaw (1990) and Carastathis (2013).

choices are based on a profit motive (van der Ploeg, 2010). Many peasants continue to engage with the capitalist system through participation in territorial markets, and off-farm work. Although off-farm work was once understood to be a sign of the transition out of peasant agriculture, van der Ploeg (2012) argues it should be understood as pluriactivity, a strategy to support the continuance of a peasant livelihood.

The recent spread of agroecology across the globe has been called the agroecology movement. As a movement its goals include empowering the peasantry, supporting peasant autonomy, revaluing Indigenous knowledge, reducing dependence on agrochemical inputs, and aligning agricultural production with natural ecosystems (Astier et al., 2017). This movement advocates for holistic food system change including ecological, economic, political, and social transformation toward more equitable relations among food system actors (Altieri, 2009; Gliessman, 2015). The goals of the agroecology movement align and intertwine with global peasant movements toward food sovereignty. Popularized by La Via Campesina, food sovereignty is a concept that represents a movement to focus/centralize control of land, water, seeds, and production decisions in the hands of those who are producing food, rather than ceding control to global market forces (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2010). LaForge et al. (2018) describes agroecology as the praxis of the food sovereignty movement. In other words, agroecology describes the ways in which one enacts and reflects on, practices toward the goals of food sovereignty. Val et al. (2019) contend that it is through peasant-to-peasant processes (PtPP) that “agroecology is built and legitimized as a field of existence possibilities for peasant lifestyles” (p. 878). Said another way, peasants are the social carrier of agroecology (van der Ploeg, 2012). Val et al. (2019) argue that PtPP lead to the emergence of the collective identity of *agroecological peasants* through a process of (re)construction of subjectivities.

Subjectivity describes “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to her world” (Weedon, 1987, p. 32). We use a post-structural feminist lens to understand subjectivity and subject transformation because it challenges the idea that identity is stable. Through this lens, identities are instead, socially embedded, constructed, and continually being reconfigured through relations and in response to societal discourse and language (St. Pierre, 2000). In post-structural feminism, identities are understood as symbolic social categories that subjects claim, enact, transform, and/or resist over time.<sup>3</sup> Subjects are also constrained or disciplined by these categories through the language we use and the discourses that shape what is possible within them (Butler, 1992). For example, who is allowed to identify as a farmer or not, and what it means to be a farmer changes depending on cultural context, societal discourse, and cultural practice. Subjects can and do choose to resist, to change cultural practices and challenge discourses and narratives (Butler, 1992). However, as we explore in this paper, for someone who identifies as a farmer, it is not a simple choice to identify as a peasant, but involves a

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<sup>3</sup> Importantly, subjects inhabit multiple identities that intersect. For further information see Crenshaw (1990) and Butler (1992).

transformation of her subjectivity—her sense of herself in relation to the world. We ask, “How is it that we become available to a transformation of who we are, a contestation which compels us to rethink ourselves?” (Butler, 1995, p. 131). To understand this transformation, we explore PtPP.

Val et al. (2019) describes PtPP as a “horizontal process of collective training and promotion of agroecology” (p. 881). Authors describe the transformation or reconfiguration of subjectivities as occurring in PtPP through the facilitation of an environment of trust in which different ways of being can be expressed, and through which, “doing, living, and producing locally are integrated into broader political discourse with mutual feedback” (p. 879). In other words, subjects form relationships of mutual respect, express common or disparate epistemologies and ontologies, and engage in praxis that connects their daily actions as producers of food to political discourse. Drawing on the work of Val et al. (2019) and Rosset et al. (2019), as well as our collective experiences, we characterize the pedagogy of PtPP as emphasizing the development of personal relationships through spending time understanding each other’s experiences. These relationships build solidarity for collective action.

An important medium for PtPP are encounters, meetings, exchanges, courses, and convergences<sup>4</sup> organized by various member organizations of LVC.<sup>5</sup> These various ways of engaging, exchanging, and coming together are the loci for PtPP (Val et al., 2019). These vary in length from several days to two weeks. To create a common understanding through listening and empathy, meetings at these events begin with conversations, giving space to each organization to share their experiences and priority areas of work. Following this sharing is a phase of engagement in collective analysis of common threads to generate ideas for collective action. These processes facilitate dialogue across differences that “tie together different knowledges, territories and experiences” (Val et al., 2019, p. 881). This process is called *diálogo de saberes* (dialogue of knowledges) where peasants, activists, and intellectuals express, discuss and name concepts they collectively create based on their experiences (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014).

Importantly these events are participatory, often collectively organized by forming committees/teams of participants on the first day that have rotating responsibilities for various aspects of the experience. These responsibilities range from cooking, creating *sociodramas*,<sup>6</sup> planning *mysticas*,<sup>7</sup> and creating meeting agendas, to building and maintaining infrastructure. Events also include regional tours of farms and movement spaces including agroecology schools, land camps, and marches. This structure creates opportunities for informal socializing that

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<sup>4</sup> Encounters, meetings, courses, and convergences will be referred to in the paper as events, unless specifically referenced in a quotation.

<sup>5</sup> Because of the regional organizational structure of LVC these events could involve member organizations within a region or between regions. For example, NFU participates in North American regional events with member organizations Quebec, U.S., and Mexico as well as in international events in various other regions.

<sup>6</sup> *Sociodramas* are collectively created group skits whose purpose is to illustrate issues and/or learnings important to the group.

<sup>7</sup> *Mysticas* are collectively organized rituals that allow for the expression of spiritual/cultural traditions of the participants. They typically occur each morning and often include poetry, music, dance, or other arts.

facilitates relationship formation while people share accommodations, exchange seeds, and cook together.

Of particular importance to this case are the farmer authors' experiences with Popular Peasant Feminism (PPFem) within LVC. PPFem<sup>8</sup> emerged through PtPP, collectively constructed over many years beginning with demands by women in LVC for more representation and power in decision making (Desmarais, 2008; Graciele Seiber, 2017). This PPFem has been most strongly articulated in the written form by *Campesinas* from Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones Campesinas (CLOC). Within LVC, CLOC represents women from eighteen countries in the Americas and has 400 delegates from peasant, rural, Afro-descendant, and Indigenous organisations (Graciele Seiber, 2017; Pena, 2017). Delegates articulate PPFem as an action-oriented approach that focuses on a) transforming relationships between humans and nature; b) ending patriarchal relations in the family, community, organizations, and society; c) valuing women's productive and reproductive work; and d) increasing access for women to land, education, transportation, and health services (Graciele Seiber, 2017).

PPFem advocates for new relationships between nature and humans that “value peasant agriculture, question the exploitation of the earth, land, and water grabbing, and extractivism” (Graciele Seiber, 2017, p. 8).<sup>9</sup> It advocates for a more harmonious form of food production that pushes against “the conception of nature as a dead space, a space without life,” as such, it works to “rescue and create new forms of living that were lost with the entry of capitalism” (Graciele Seiber, 2017, p. 8). PPFem also calls for an end to patriarchy where, for example, “the man is considered the boss of the family, the one who makes decisions, defines what to do, the one who receives and manages the financial compensation, when it is the entire family who does the work of production” (Graciele Seiber, 2017, p. 8). PPFem advocates for shared responsibility for care work to reduce women's workload including cooking, housework, and care for children and seniors (Trevilla Espinal et al., 2021; Graciele Seiber, 2017). Closely related is the need to recognize and value women's work and knowledge. In production work “women are considered assistants, secondaries, an appendix” (Graciele Seiber, 2017, p. 8). PPFem calls for the recognition of women's knowledge and work in production and reproduction of food, medicines, seeds, family, and community. PPFem identifies how this work generates value, not only through generating income, but “food and medicine produced in the home generates more value than what is achieved by selling it” (Graciele Seiber, 2017, p. 9). PPFem advocates for the growing of food for family use rather than purchasing it or selling it. It emphasizes a different form of richness or wealth (rather than economic) that this choice generates.

PPFem is described as popular because it was constructed by working class people in a collective way. It explicitly engages with class and gender in the production of inequalities

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<sup>8</sup> The form of popular peasant feminism discussed here has emerged in PtPP processes within LVC. For discussion of other popular peasant feminisms see the writings of Janet Conway (2017) and Renata Motta (2021).

<sup>9</sup> All quotes from Graciele Seiber (2017) and Trevilla Espinal et al. (2021) are translated from Spanish to English by Kerr.

encountered in the daily lives of *Campesinas*.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, “it is not a proposal that arrived from outside, of a particular intellectual thinker, or of a particular current of thought” (Graciele Seiber, 2017, p. 8). Responding to interest in PPFem from other LVC member organizations, *Campesinas* in CLOC advise that women “should construct their own concept within their own organizations and within their own region...with feet on the ground, constructed from below” (Graciele Seiber, 2017, p. 9). Recognizing the different social, political, economic, and cultural contexts experienced by the farmer authors in Canada and *Campesinas* in Latin America, we hold up PPFem as a model to learn from and to understand how we can contribute insights from situated feminist struggles.<sup>11</sup>

## Methodology and positionality

This qualitative research takes the form of a collectively developed case study of subject transformation of the three farmer authors.<sup>12</sup> To develop this case study, each farmer author participated in one to three individual open-ended interviews with Kerr. Farmer authors were asked to recall memories that stood out to them during their experiences in PtPP and reflect on how these experiences influenced them. Conversations were audio recorded, and notes were taken by Kerr, compiled into an outline, and sent to the rest of the authors to review. Authors then met as a group to identify themes. The farmer authors then wrote short reflections focussed on their experiences related to these themes. While Kerr took on the bulk of the writing, all authors were involved in editing each draft of the paper. Co-authorship was explicitly chosen to break down the barrier between researcher and subjects of research and create conditions for dialogue where knowledge could be co-created.<sup>13</sup>

All authors identify as white settler women. Kerr identifies as a scholar, and the others identify as farmers. Kerr initiated the case study after attending a LVC course with Richan in Cuba in 2017. Richan has worked on farms across Canada for eight years and operated a small-scale vegetable farm on rented land for four years, selling through a Community Supported

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<sup>10</sup> *Campesina* is an identity category used by rural women in Latin America to describe themselves. It roughly translates as peasant.

<sup>11</sup> This recognizes critiques of academic studies that use theoretical frameworks developed in one context and apply them to another. In this case, given the participatory nature of PtPP and farmer authors’ participation in convergences where PPFem is collectively formed, we discuss how these experiences have influenced farmer authors’ subjectivities.

<sup>12</sup> In this paper we present the first phase of a longer research process as we analyze our own experiences as white settlers learning through PtPP. Recognizing the limits of analysis from our white settler perspectives, in the next research phase, we intend to engage peasants in the global South as co-collaborators.

<sup>13</sup> When “we” is used in this article it represents our collective analysis. Since Kerr does not identify as a farmer, the statements that refer only to the farmer authors use “farmer authors/they.”



Agriculture (CSA)<sup>14</sup> and a farmers' market. She is currently working a non-farm job to be able to purchase land to farm. Initial dialogue for this case study occurred while Richan & Fenton were farming together in 2018. Fenton has worked on farms across Canada for over ten years. She coordinates urban agriculture for a food justice organization and has held various leadership positions in the NFU since 2015. Sproule joined the case study after informal conversations with Kerr about her experiences with the women's delegation of LVC in Brazil in March 2020. Sproule has been farming for sixteen years, works for a food justice organization and has held various leadership positions in the NFU for over fourteen years. Both Fenton and Sproule are active in transnational organizing networks with LVC.

## Results

We see our experiences with PtPP as reminding us that “what [we] cannot imagine stands guard over everything that [we] must/can do, think, live” (Spivak, 1993, p. 22). Experiences with PtPP, visits to the global South, and especially engagement with PPFem have changed how we think of ourselves and our work, and what we imagine to be possible in the future. We understand these transformative learning experiences not as isolated incidents, but as remembered moments that are embedded in authors broader involvement in the social networks created by the NFU and LVC. We first discuss elements of the PtPP that led farmer authors to strive toward a peasant identity including: how *Diálogo de saberes* led to moments of dissonance which uncovered engrained assumptions; and how relationships developed through in-person dialogue and informal socializing. We then discuss how farmer authors navigate shared struggles and class differences in their identification as peasants, especially in relation to PPFem. This section includes how they were attracted to the peasant identity and pushed toward it by their exclusion from and rejection of the gendered capitalistic farming identity. Lastly, we discuss how farmer authors attempt to enact their peasant identity in the Canadian context.

### *Diálogo de saberes*

We identify a process of transformation that began with *Diálogo de saberes* (Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014) where farmer authors encountered new discourses, knowledges, and people. These encounters with new discourses were not only with peasants from the global South, but also within the NFU and with Indigenous leaders from Canada who were part of LVC events. Fenton shared that her move toward a peasant identity was initiated by “learning about other ways of

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<sup>14</sup> Community Supported Agriculture is a system where people purchase a share of the harvest at the beginning of the season and receive/pick-up a box/basket of harvest at regular intervals throughout the growing season.

knowing and learning by example how to move into better relations with the land and with my community.” We identify participating in face-to-face dialogue as important in this transformation.

Farmer authors identified moments of dissonance with their worldview when they encountered novel ways of understanding the world. Richan explained: “When I joined the NFU, I learned about agroecology, LVC, and that small holders were actually feeding the world. It was a revelation to me that small scale growers were powerful agents, building resilience in their systems and networks that the global corporate food systems couldn’t replace.... This challenged what I had been fed in university: that these alternatives would never be enough, the industrial ag model was the only way to feed the world.”

In these moments of dissonance, language used to define identities were contrasted and unexamined assumptions were brought to the surface. Sproule remembered: “It wasn’t until I was there, faced with other people who all identified as part of the peasant struggle that I even thought about it. That first youth convergence in Argentina was very eye opening for me. Trying to identify where the language of peasant farming and the language of the family farm that we use in the NFU converges, but also the differences...conversations challenged things I didn’t realize were deeply engrained like private property ownership.”

Fenton agreed and added: “Learning from movements like the MST [Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra]<sup>15</sup> in Brazil started to show me that private land ownership is not necessary for building a strong movement for food sovereignty and agroecology. Because of these experiences, many of us in the NFU are now deeply engaged in exploring alternative land tenure models and collective/cooperative farming models.”

The way PtPP challenged implicit beliefs in the necessity of private land ownership and inspired these farmers to explore alternatives provides a powerful example of the radicalizing potential of the praxis within radical trends in the food movement (Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011).

As farmers were exposed to other ways of knowing through PtPP with Indigenous peoples, they were confronted with their entrenchment in Western productivist discourse. Fenton explained: “When we invited Indigenous leaders from Canada to be guests at the LVC international conference in Basque country, they pushed back against how we were understanding agroecology. They pushed us to recognize we were using a productivist, extractivist framing in our approach.”

This is an example of how *diálogo de saberes* created moments of dissonance that forced farmers to confront how capitalistic discourses of production and extraction intertwine with settler colonialism and continue to displace Indigenous people and their ways of being and knowing. These experiences led to an understanding that deconstructing our own ways of thinking was critical to building relationships of solidarity with Indigenous peoples in our own territories as well as with those from the global South.

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<sup>15</sup> Or the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil.

Farmer authors spoke of how their encounters with PPFem built their understanding of feminism and influenced their conceptions of agroecology. For example, Richan explained how she hadn't previously considered the idea of "farming as reproductive labour rather than productive labour, and the fertility of soil as central to this work". She pointed to how learning this language brought into contrast the language of "cash cropping" that reinforces extractivist narratives around farming in Canada where land is "mined for profit." Through learning the alternative language of PPFem, she began to notice how extractive language is used uncritically by farmers in Canada without recognizing what kind of relationship it represents. Learning the language of PPFem shifted her understanding of agroecology from a farming technique to a way of living. Farmer authors explained how they now understood that, by fostering nurturing relationships with land through their investment of labour, land reciprocates support for them and other life forms in exchange.

### *Acting in relationship*

We identify in-person events as important in building relationships, understanding alternatives, and connecting our lives to other actors in the food system. Sproule explained that "seeing agroecology in action from soil to community to policy brings clarity to our own sense of identity and goal of building something together." As Fenton explained, reading about migrant worker struggles did not have as much impact as hearing from workers directly:

At my first LVC meeting, issues I had read about and understood in a very theoretical way, suddenly became very real when I was hearing stories from migrant workers face-to-face. That meeting really feels like a turning point in my life. I began to understand how my experience and lifestyle as a privileged urban white kid in Canada was inextricably linked to the experience of others in the food system. I realized that it wasn't enough to grow organic food for rich people; if I wanted to make a real difference, I needed to engage in this movement to completely reclaim and reimagine our food system.

She explained further: "when we go to these places and learn about harm being done to people, face-to-face, we have a moral imperative to change our actions; we can no longer be complicit." This is an example of how the pedagogies of PtPP engage actors in conversations with each other that bring to light mutual feedback between local practices of disparate geographies and larger political discourses (Val et al., 2019). She understood her actions to be in relationship with the struggles of these actors. This understanding initiated a change in her approach to farming and her joining of the peasant movement.

We identify the conversational and collaborative nature of meetings and informal socializing that occurs while people share accommodations, cook together, and eat together as important in forming relationships that enable us to act in genuine solidarity. Relationships of

mutual respect formed and reinforced through collective organizing in PtPP are also key to envisioning and validating alternative visions and pulling farmer authors into the peasant movement. Fenton shared, “Connecting through these in-person, especially North-South exchanges, helps us connect on the basis of shared humanity.” As Cassia Bechara, the coordinator of international affairs for the MST, writes, “being together to debate, exchange experiences, talk about our limits and challenges as women in the struggle is fundamental.” (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurales Sem Terra [MST], 2020). Sproule shared:

My continual involvement with peasant movements has given me validation for my anti-capitalist work. Having women peasant role models has been vital to shifting this point of view.... It is the connection through solidarity and exchange that has been integral in envisioning a more just world through collective struggle and care of one another...the normalizing of brutality and exploitation in a capitalist society is not something we have to be part of, this lie of capitalism and comfort.... Most importantly, I have a community, which I didn't feel I had before.... Farming alone can be very isolating.... If we ask ourselves what it is we are seeking about this [peasant] identity. For myself, a lot of it is personal. I have had a lack of intergenerational connection, I feel this is a void in my life.... I am attracted to this idea of wisdom sharing across generations through food and the strong family connections, strong social values.

Peasant role models were important in shifting her point of view and offering the possibility of more just relationships of collective struggle and care. Relationships developed through PtPP offer entry into a community, creating a strong attraction to the collective peasant identity. We identify dialogues, relationships, and collective organizing with women peasants as especially influential to farmer authors' transformation.

### *Navigating class differences*

We discussed what it means to identify as a peasant in the current Canadian context, where calling someone a peasant would be considered, by many, to be an insult. Farmer authors spoke of their experiences with PtPP as humbling reminders of their own privilege and collective power to act to effect change. Fenton explained how PtPP helped her, “to recognize my privilege to make choices, and to more deeply analyze what to do with my privilege.” Understanding class differences influenced how they felt comfortable identifying and led to a choice of *striving toward* rather than claiming the peasant identity:

Fenton: It's about striving to move beyond my deeply engrained white North American ideals of private property, economic success, individualism, and domination over the land.

Richan: It is a different way of thinking about wealth, and experiencing what it means to have wealth without money.

Fenton: This means trying to live within the means of what the land provides. Within this lifestyle the cost of living is low precisely because you are living off the land that feeds you. Some people might think of this as a sacrifice, but when you start to realize that when the land sustains you, you receive so much more. Striving toward peasant identity means continuing to develop a two-way relationship with land...there is a focus on thinking about responsibility and belonging to land.

Sproule: This sense of sacrifice comes from the fact that those with privilege in our Canadian culture can choose not to struggle, there is a very comfortable life that can be achieved without living this struggle.

This conversation reflects that choosing a peasant identity or not is a choice that the farmer authors have the privilege to make, that others in marginalized subject positions are not afforded. Striving toward this identity, rather than claiming it, represents a recognition of their privileged positions in being able to choose this lifestyle. For example, Fenton asked, “Can we call ourselves peasants if we have a choice whether or not to rely only on the land for our survival?” Sproule added: “It is important to recognize and remember that peasants are being murdered and kidnapped every day for defending their land and their politics. We have to be careful to not romanticize this idea. Maybe we all want to be peasants, but we have to recognize the privilege that we do come from, and the differences there.... We are seeing the best version of it and not having to go through actually living under the hand of violence or oppression that peasants have to live through.”

While embracing the goals of PPFem, farmer authors recognize their class difference. Most women in Canada have relatively equitable access to transportation, education, and health services, whereas many *Campesinas* do not (Graciele Seibert, 2017). While farmer authors have all struggled with access to land, they do not face all or the degree of struggles that *Campesinas* face.

By striving toward this identity, as something to be valued, they join the movement to reclaim this identity and therefore act in solidarity with those who are persecuted for their peasant identity. Acting from a place of privilege, *striving toward* this identity works to change the discourse around the peasant identity and value the ways of living it represents. Hence, they hold up a peasant identity tentatively, with the purpose of revaluing the ways of living that it embodies. This includes valuing a less extractive more harmonious relationship to the earth and the non-economic wealth that comes from this relationship to land and community (Graciele Seibert, 2017). In striving toward this identity, the farmer authors see themselves as part of the global movement to reclaim the peasant identity as a positive signifier of collective knowledge and power to produce food and build community. In this way they join in coalition with peasants in the NFU who identified as peasants before them, as well as peasants in the global South who have always identified as peasants. While striving toward the peasant identity authors continue to

identify as farmers. In this way they challenge and push to renew discourses of what it means to be a farmer in Canada.

### *Identifying shared struggles and exclusion*

Farmer authors' experiences with PPFem exposed and forced them to interrogate gendered, extractivist language and practices of agriculture in Canada. Answering the call to develop regionally situated conceptions of PPFem that emerge from the ground up (Graciele Seibert, 2017), we identify and discuss how patriarchy manifests itself in our region and how it constructs the farmer identity in Canada as male gendered. PPFem helped farmer authors understand how they were being excluded by the farmer identity. This created a push toward the peasant identity. We discussed how, within discourse and social practices in Canada, women's farm labour is not recognized, and women farmer identities are often erased. Sproule shared: "Recently, I saw an article featuring a farm I had spent a long time working on. My mentor was identified in a photo caption as 'his wife' after the name of the male farmer. [laughter] I laugh because it seems ridiculous, but unfortunately, this unconscious bias still exists. Men are the face of the farm, even though the women are the backbone. It was so frustrating to see that caption; that farm would fall apart without her." This erasure of women's work in farming echoes PPFem's identification of how women are considered assistants in production rather than integral to it (Graciele Seibert, 2017). In Canada, persistent narratives of farmers as male heads of households have subjected women to the position of farmers' wives, rather than farmers themselves.

Influenced by PtPP and PPFem's call to value peasant agriculture over forms of agriculture that are focused on extraction and profit (Graciele Seibert, 2017), farmer authors began to question growing trends within the fringe movement of small-scale ecological farming in North America that they call the "rock star farmer" model. This approach promotes the idea that a system developed by one person can be universally applied to achieve success anywhere. Richan explained, "They promote extracting as much value as possible out of a small piece of land and they focus on a few high value crops to survive." Because of their exposure to PtPP, farmer authors identified these models as didactic, formulaic, and colonial. Richan explained that unlike peasant models, these models are missing relationships with land. While they do encourage ecological farming, these models fail to challenge problematic discourses of value extraction for profit. Fenton also noted that within the "rock star farmer" trend: "It is mostly white men who are writing these books and going on speaking tours about their 'silver bullet formula,' while their partners, often women,<sup>16</sup> stay at home and kept the farm going. We continue to hold up white men running profitable, productivist/extractivist farm businesses as the 'ideal' to strive towards." Here we emphasize how gendered aspects of the farmer identity in

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<sup>16</sup> We also recognize the heteronormative nature of the "family farm" narrative in Canada.

Canada intertwine with extractive narratives and are held up as models to duplicate toward success.

Farmer authors shared that identifying as farmers has been a struggle. Their identification has been questioned by others when, for example, their farm businesses were not in operation, or they were not employed in farm work. Sproule gave an example: “I was questioned by others because I am not a registered farm business.... Even though, I continue to grow food on various scales and raise animals to feed my family, during periods when my farm business is not running, I have felt self-conscious about whether or not I have the right to identify as a farmer...having my farm business running and gaining capital for myself is what I need to say confidently that I am a farmer.”

Sproule identifies the dominant discourse defining farmer identity as entrepreneur. Richan added, “I have always felt like an imposter, never truly feeling like I was a ‘real’ farmer because I had to work jobs off the farm in order to afford to farm.” Richan’s comment shows how farmer identity can exclude those who work off-farm out of economic necessity. This illustrates the subject position of farmer in Canada as couched within the discourse of capitalist production and tied to discourses of productivity, entrepreneurship, and profit. Sproule also recognized her continued vulnerability to these discourses, “Sometimes I will find myself saying, ‘I am getting back into farming’, but actually I have been doing it the whole time, I just haven’t been making money from it.”

Finding the subject position of farmer to be exclusionary, difficult, and partially undesirable, farmer authors were pushed away from the farmer identity that excludes them and toward a peasant identity. Farmer authors' move towards peasant identity recognizes how it enables certain kinds of knowledge and action not possible from other subject positions. The peasant identity allows these women to produce food without making a profit. It creates a sense of belonging to a community and includes pluriactivity as a part of the peasant lifestyle. Richan shared: “After farming and learning about what it means to be a peasant, it feels more accurate to strive for the peasant identity than the farmer identity. I don’t own land; I don’t make a profit from my agricultural work.” As they learned through PtPP and reflected on their own practice, the peasant identity began to resonate with their lived realities more than the farmer identity.

### *Enacting alternatives*

Identifying as a peasant is an explicitly anti-capitalist orientation, which contrasts with the model we operate within in Canada. Working within a capitalist paradigm creates contradictions between actions born out of necessity of survival within this system, and actions meant to build alternatives in spite of it. As Vibert et al. (2022, this issue) explain, “everyday acts of worldmaking and resistance are vital to defending and renewing the place-based knowledge and practice that forms the ground for structural transformation” (p. 13). Farmer authors see peasant farming as a way to enact their values toward building alternative futures. Fenton explained “I

was looking for a way to live that reflected my values, but also sustained me economically, but in a way that didn't contribute to the destruction of the planet." As Desmarais (2008) explains, LVC is a "transnational movement defined by place" in which actors use "connections among themselves thus forged to reinforce their identity, through the use of a constant referent: the routine of their everyday lives grounded in planting and harvesting" (p. 141). These actions are used to "imagine and to present an alternative present and future: an alternative modernity" (Desmarais, 2008, p. 141). In other words, actions in farming ground and reaffirm the collective peasant identity and form the foundation for structural transformation. While enacting peasant farming in the Canadian context, farmer authors reaffirm their "peasantness" essential to their membership in the collective peasant identity.

We discussed how moments in the global South helped farmer authors challenge how they were enacting their values through their practices and how easy it is to fall back into entrepreneurial models of farming. For example, Richan shared a memory from Cuba where she realized how entrenched she was in the entrepreneurial/capitalist thinking in her farming practices, "I remember a moment, at the farmers' market, the vegetables for sale were unwashed and ugly!" She realized then that she had been exhausting herself, "trying to compete with grocery store standards...[and] being held to those standards of having perfectly washed and graded vegetables, with strict packaging, labelling, and presentation expectations." For her, those "dirty vegetables...opened the possibility of passing on some of the processing labour to customers." The ways in which farmer authors changed their approach to farming, constitutes daily acts of resistance to the capitalist system they live within.

The alternative culture of modernity, forged by peasant farming is one that does not assume that all food producers will enter the market and be guided by its logic (McMichael, 2006; van der Ploeg, 2010). Fenton explains, "if the goal of farming is profit, farmers spend more time on efficiencies and less time on investing in the land and community." By participating less in the market economy, developing more autonomy from the market, and creating networks of support in local communities, we see farming as more sustainable, economically, and ecologically. We spoke about how, currently, in many parts of rural Canada, there are no local options for consumers to take their money out of the capitalist system. This is where farmer authors see their role in recreating community. Farmers' markets and community supported agriculture became their way to create community by connecting with others through food. Richan explains: "I made a conscious choice to grow food as a way to create community. I mean that feeding my community is the goal of growing food, making money is not the primary motive guiding my choices." Fenton added "Yes, growing food is actually the tool I want to use to recreate community, but also to feed myself...the land supports you. When you give labour, it gives back, it sustains you. Farming is a lifestyle not a job."

This desire to create community applies not just to human community, but also to finding connections with the land. For Richan, agroecology is importantly reciprocal with land: "It is a way to put energy into something that gives back. You put in your labour and you see things grow." Peasant agriculture allows for development of non-commodity relationships with land



and community that authors had not previously considered. The peasant way involves building co-dependence in communities where community members support the building of food sovereignty. Fenton offered that everyone in Canada would need to be a part of building these alternatives ways of thinking about land and community, “This vision recognizes agroecology as a lifestyle, where farmers and consumers are buying into health of the local environment, landscape, and the atmosphere, and recognize this as their health as well. Rather than health being a product that they buy at the store, or at the gym, what would happen if community members took their money out of the capitalist system, rejected consumerism, and began investing time, energy, and money into local land?”

Farmer authors spoke about several alternative models of community supported agriculture (CSA) they had learned through their involvement in the NFU and LVC. They spoke about alternative models for regional farmers’ market governance and pricing, as well as co-operative farming and land trusts. They spoke of one model wherein bartering was used rather than money, and another model that involved CSA members in collaborative decisions around food prices and farmer salary. Richan shared how she now often barter the food she grows for other goods and services. For example, she traded a weekly CSA share for a home cooked meal at her neighbours’ house on very busy delivery days. Although these ideas may not be new to some readers, the point we make here is that it is *because* of farmer authors’ experiences in PtPP that they were exposed to different ways of farming than they had encountered in Canadian discourse. This sparked a change in their practices that collectively work to building alternatives in the Canadian context. While farmer authors continue to navigate how to enact peasant agriculture in the Canadian context, their relationships with others in the collective peasant identity reinforces this goal and acts as motivation to continue farming. Fenton explains, “I don't think that I ever would have developed this level of political consciousness...if I hadn't been given that early opportunity to engage with LVC. I probably would not even still be farming now, ten years later.”

## Conclusions

This research explored how three young women, first generation farmers, from the global North came to strive toward a peasant identity and thus join the global peasant movement. We highlighted how their move toward a peasant identity was facilitated by PtPP through *Diálogo de saberes*. Encounters with diverse experiences and ways of knowing led to moments of dissonance that uncovered and challenged implicit assumptions. We identified in-person dialogue, collective organizing and informal socializing at events organized by LVC as important in forming relationships of care and collective struggle with peasants based on their shared humanity. These elements were also crucial in connecting farmers’ actions to the struggles of other actors in the food movement and spurring a recognition that growing organic

food for rich people wasn't enough. This is an example of how PtPP can radicalize progressive actors in the food movement.

Their encounters with PPFem and relationships with peasant women were powerful in attracting them to the peasant identity and way of life. Although they recognize their relative privilege when compared to *Campesinas*, they act in solidarity with them by holding up the peasant identity as the ideal to strive toward. PPFem helped them understand agroecology through a feminist lens and to identify their exclusion from a gendered capitalistic farming identity in their own region. This exclusion created a further pull towards the peasant identity. Farmer authors' move toward peasant identity recognizes how it enables certain kinds of knowledge and action not possible from other subject positions. The peasant identity allows these women to produce food as a way to build community. We have demonstrated that for farmers in the global North, PtPP can expand conceptions of possible modes of production and ways of living and influence how they understand themselves in relation to land. This influences how they enact agroecology and food sovereignty through their farming practice.

We see PtPP as a powerful tool that can and is being used to build understanding and alliances between various food movements. *Diálogo de saberes* among actors in food movements can be powerful in promoting shared understanding needed to build solidarity. For example, Fenton's experiences in encounters with migrant farm workers was transformational in her understanding of how her actions were linked to their struggles. As Klassen et al. (2022, this issue) explain, bringing members of migrant farm worker organizations in direct communication with organic farmer associations was successful, if partially, in creating empathy for farm worker struggles. The pedagogies of PtPP, specifically their emphasis on relationships, dialogue, and collective action, show potential for building strategic alliances between organic farming movements and migrant worker movements.

Toward the goal of building alliances between progressive and radical trends in food movements, we see value in building more opportunities for farmers to engage in PtPP with peasants internationally. Based on the experiences of the farmer authors, PtPP have allowed them to better negotiate and act to resist patriarchal and capitalistic discourses of farming in Canada. These experiences have helped them to understand how to act in solidarity with global peasant movements and have given them a sense of belonging to a collective struggle.

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