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Alternative food networks face both challenges and opportunities in rethinking the role of precarious employment in food system transformation. We explore how alternative food networks in British Columbia, Canada have engaged with flexible and precarious work regimes for farmworkers, including both temporary migrant workers and un(der)paid agricultural interns. Based on in-depth interviews, participant observation and document analysis, we find that alternative food actors often normalize a precarious work regime using a moral economy frame. This framing describes precarious farm employment as either a necessary challenge in the transition to sustainability, or merely involving a few individual “bad apple” farmers. Further, this framing involves an aversion to “one-size-fits-all” regulation by the state in favor of consumer-driven regulation of labor standards. Our analysis suggests that a moral economy framing can obscure systemic inequities in precarious farm employment and dampen the impetus for structural change through collective food movement organizing.

m Las redes alimentarias alternativas enfrentan tanto desafíos como oportunidades para repensar el papel del empleo precario en la transformación del sistema alimentario. Aquí exploramos las redes alimentarias alternativas en Colombia Británica, Canadá, y cómo se han involucrado en regímenes laborales flexibles y precarios para los trabajadores agrícolas, incluyendo tanto trabajadores migrantes como internos agrícolas impagos o pagados por debajo del salario mínimo. Nuestros hallazgos, basados en entrevistas a profundidad, observación participativa y análisis documental, indican que los actores en las redes alternativas a menudo normalizan un régimen laboral precario utilizando un enmarcado narrativo de economía moral. Este enmarcado describe el empleo agrícola precario ya sea como un desafío necesario en la transición hacia la sustentabilidad, o bien como algo que sólo involucra algunos agricultores que serían

alternative food networks, farm labor, migrant workers, moral economy,
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Industrial agriculture has been critiqued for its dependence on poorly paid farm-workers hired under conditions of high risk and weak social protections, in what

(Alkon 2013; Cairns et al. 2015). Consequently, proponents of local and organic food generally associate hired farmworkers with industrial and “unnatural” forms of agriculture, which they envisage as being in sharp opposition to AFNs (Alkon 2013). Farmworkers complicate the traditional agrarian narrative based on private property relations and historically white-centric racial relations because they do not own the land and are often racialized as non-white (Minkoff-Zern 2014).

Thus far, what is known about precarious farmworker employment stems mainly from research on “conventional” modes of agriculture (Barndt 2008; Binford 2013; but see Gray 2014; Holmes 2013). While proponents of popular “locavore” initiatives claim that small and organic farms directed toward localized markets promote better labor conditions, scholars have called into question the empirical basis for this assertion (Cross et al. 2008; Harrison and Getz 2015). Further, on many organic and urban farms, other farm laborers commonly work for no wages and with min-

do not address basic material or political realities such as interns' extended medical fees in the event of workplace illness or injury, or migrants' exclusion from participating in critical decisions that affect their lives in Canada.

In our study, some participants' framing of a moral economy of farm labor proposes voluntary human goodwill as a way to mitigate workers' and employers'

Agricultural work poses a wide range of hazards, including exposure to agrochemicals, dust, bacteria and sulfur, motor vehicle and machinery accidents, animal-related trauma, musculoskeletal injury from repetitive motion, and extreme temperature variation (Murphy and Lee 2009).

Amidst dominant food system trends toward agricultural intensification and global integration, along with alternative farming modes that emphasize more localized, sustainable production, a key challenge faces industry and the state: ensuring a farm workforce that is prepared to accept certain wages and working conditions, while simultaneously balancing international concerns over human and labor rights. Temporary farm labor migration schemes have become an increasingly favored option for governments in the global North facing pressure to ensure farmers' access to a low-cost farm workforce, with new countries introducing such schemes and increasing popularity among countries that have long facilitated temporary labor migration. Nation-states face pressure to weaken labor regulations and cheapen hired farm labor; lower farm labor costs make it possible to keep food prices low. Because the general minimum wage is theoretically based on the cost of food and workers' social reproduction, governments can justify suppressing the minimum wage for all workers and thereby subsidize capital accumulation writ large (Barnetson 2012).

The political economy of precarious farm labor is bolstered by a deep-seated but contradictory moral economy. Legislation that enables problematic farm labor arrangements in North America like Canada's Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) has been partially justified through moral arguments in favor of preserving "family" farms, based on the ideology of agrarian exceptionalism. Symbolically, family farms are seen as upholding a set of cherished rural social relations, and yet these social relations have long depended on deep class divides. For instance, 19th century farmers in New York's Hudson Valley "fueled their own agrarian dreams" by hiring low-wage apprentices (Gray 2014:30), a precursor to un(der) paid internships in our study. Apprentices justified their self-exploitation on the basis of "training"; Gray points out similarly constrained dreams of better futures among Mexican farmworkers in the Hudson Valley today. On a material level, family farms are portrayed as an antidote to agribusiness concentration of farmland and other resources (Kelsey 1994). Programs like the SAWP, however, are often available to so-called family farmers and agribusiness alike, which can nullify any role they might have in mitigating the concentration of corporate ownership and associated societal impacts. Moreover, farmworkers' experiences contrast with stereotypes of farmers—whether or not they are "family" farmers—as inherently virtuous.

Precariousness has typified farm employment regimes throughout North American history. What is new, however, is the seeping of precariousness into efforts explicitly premised on creating socially just alternatives to dominant modes of agriculture.

Drawing on the specific context of AFNs in British Columbia, Canada, we consider the experiences of migrant and intern farmworkers in tandem to assess how AFNs

engage with forms of labor precariousness affecting “their own” members (i.e. interns), as well as people they perceive as network “outsiders” (i.e. migrants). Two questions guided our research and analysis: How have alternative food networks

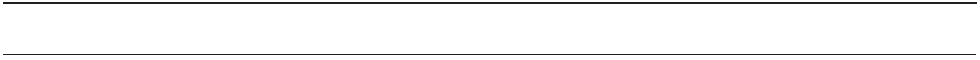
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The SAWP is the predominant agricultural stream of Canada's larger Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Farm employers successfully lobbied for the establishment of the SAWP pilot in 1966, claiming that amidst increasing global

After the SAWP was introduced to BC in 2004 with 47 Mexican migrant farmworkers (Preibisch and Otero 2014), the program expanded massively in this province; in 2013, BC employers hired approximately 5100 SAWP migrants out of 6300 farm workers hired in the province through all agriculture-related streams of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (ESDC 2014).¹ Most BC SAWP workers are young, married, male, and from Mexico, although some are also from Caribbean countries (Preibisch and Otero 2014). Part of migrant farmworkers' wages are automatically deducted to pay into state social benefits schemes such as the Canada Pension Plan, but they often face legal and practical constraints to accessing these benefits (Preibisch and Otero 2014).

An unknown but much smaller proportion of BC farmworkers are un(der)paid farm interns. Although BC labor law specifies that formal interns must be paid at least the minimum wage unless they are completing an internship as part of an accredited educational program, un(der)paid internship arrangements in BC are often informal and "under-the-table". As such, there is presently no standardized system for enumerating the extent of agricultural interns as part of the labor force, or for ensuring the fairness of the exchange or stipend. Similarly, there is no accountability mechanism for ensuring that informal intern accommodations meet provincial standards or any criteria established internally by the sustainable farming community. While no rigorous statistics exist on the extent of un(der)paid farming internships in BC, a directory that connects aspiring apprentices with farmers called Stewards of Irreplaceable Land (SOIL) reported 61 BC farm apprenticeship hosts in 2013 (SOIL, personal communication, 2014). Many internships are also arranged informally between farmers and interns without any intermediary organizations. Some un(der)paid interns have low integration into social protections granted to those doing comparable farm work. For instance, they may lack access to special EI benefits that are intended to protect people from the risk of poverty.

All interns interviewed were either Canadian citizens or on a student visa. We considered un(der)paid interns as those working at least part-time for a whole farming season, which excluded tourists on shorter-term farm homestays. While their motivations for undertaking internships vary, interns often highlight the importance of learning agricultural skills. Un(der)paid internships have become an increasingly important part of labor and farmer-training strategies in AFN contexts. For that reason—rather than for comparability on the basis of their quantitative prevalence in the labor market—they provided a window for comparison with SAWP labor regimes. Compared with migrants, farm interns are less constrained as far as entering freely into an internship, asserting their workplace interests on an individual basis and leaving a position. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in this study, un(der)paid farming internships exemplify how an employment relationship can be deeply embedded in a community of ethically driven sustainable



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We found that members of AFNs in BC—including employers, farmworkers, and community-based practitioners—tended to frame both un(der)paid internships and migrant farmworker employment as unproblematic, as an unavoidable challenge amidst efforts to create sustainable food systems, or as merely involving a few “bad apple” farm employers. A prominent narrative within this frame empha-

idea that farmers are to be celebrated, and particularly those farmers engaged in

observed BC members of AFNs describing un(der)paid agricultural internships. One farmer, who had shifted from using stipends to paying his interns minimum wage, expressed concern that many intern hosts were citing morally laden defenses to justify possibly exploitative labor arrangements. For him, an internship risked being exploitative if there was a stark contrast between how much time an intern contributed to the productivity of a farm and that intern's financial compensation, particularly if the intern's labor was essential to the scale of a business. He observed:

I think that there is sort of a maxim being repeated among a lot of small-scale farmers, "that I can't afford to pay minimum wage to my employees, and that I shouldn't have to afford it because I'm in some sort of special situation, I'm doing something for the good of the planet and therefore [we shouldn't have to pay minimum wage] ...". We just don't buy into that line of reasoning.

Proponents of both SAWP and intern farm work arrangements pointed to the large number of intern applicants, along with their enthusiasm and gratitude for the experience, as indicative that the arrangements were ethically sound. Several of the interns we interviewed, for example, highlighted their own autonomy and enthusiasm for entering into an opportunity they felt was fair, educational, and personally meaningful. Some reported that the housing-working-learning structure of the internship made it considerably more affordable than a formal farm-training program. Employers of migrant farmworkers also tended to characterize their labor arrangements as a fair "give-and-take" dynamic involving mutual gratitude and economic gain; more broadly, they contrasted the opportunity for migrants to work in Canada with poor workplace conditions and low wages in Mexico.

"... a prominent narrative theme we observed was the juxtaposition of farmers

weight to their later response when we asked whether they could feasibly hire paid farmworkers: “There is no way we could afford to hire people.” Another farmer who had employed migrant farmworkers for nearly a decade commented candidly on most BC farmers’ dependence on a “cheap source of wages”. In light of the SAWP’s growth in BC, he felt that removing the program would “cripple agriculture”. Locals would be unwilling to work at prevailing farm wages, and consumers would reject the increased food prices ensuing from higher farm-worker wages.

Still, the popularity of un(der)paid internships and WWOOFing among locals and tourists who tend to be young and relatively affluent throws into question the ap-

The implicit, unspoken nature of such exchanges, however, means that boundaries may be ambiguous in terms of how much, and what kind of labor is adequate to reciprocate the opportunity. The case of an intern who was initially given unclear information about the weekly commitment, and subsequently asked to sign a “contract”

As a way to contest the apparent naturalness of undervalued, under-recognized farm labor, AFN efforts to improve the social standing of farmers serve a critical function. Yet, some AFN members' idealization of farmers as inherently moral and honest (especially small-scale, local and organic farmers) can stymie critical discussions about flexible and precarious farm work regimes. Elevating local farmers to the status of "rock stars" perpetuates the idea that problematic farmworker employment merely reflects inevitable and anomalous cases of individual "bad apple" farmers with insufficient moral fiber (see Hennebry 2010). Idealizing farmers or fixating on high-profile cases of migrant abuse, which tend to evoke public and media attention, both elide systemic issues at hand: precarious farmworker regimes involve weak accountability mechanisms and unreliable channels for farmworkers to assert their own interests.

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The moral arguments we observed regarding the status quo of un(der)paid intern or migrant farmworker arrangements appear to short-circuit engagement with the state. Rather than focusing on pathways for addressing farm labor concerns through traditional or farmworker-driven monitoring/enforcement mechanisms, the moral economy framing proposes state disengagement and individual consumer surveillance as the "natural" next steps.

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Many participants who were involved in AFNs as farmers or volunteers with food system sustainability organizations expressed a strong belief that the various layers of state structures at work in the BC food system—municipal, provincial, federal and transnational—have been dismissive or even hostile to their concerns while favoring agribusiness. Some cited the provincial government's stance on farm internships as an instance of "one-size-fits-all" regulation that did not accommodate the sustainability-oriented innovations AFNs were attempting to make. For instance, one participant whose co-operative farm hires unpaid interns offered the following commentary about agricultural housing regulations as a barrier to the farm's food security potential:

The Agricultural Land Commission Act says that habitation on farmland must be justified by agricultural needs ... We've done a study that says we need 39 workers here. And that kind of implies 13 three-person households. Either that, or we bring in a bunch of [migrants] before we fully realize the food potential here.

As another case illustrating strains between AFNs and formal farm labor regulations in 2013, two interns sought and received retroactive back-wages from a BC organic farm where they had interned through an informal labor exchange arrangement based on their apparent stated interest in purchasing the farm. Many in the organic farming community voiced sympathy for the employers, even offering to fundraise for their legal costs. Referencing the legalistic approach the interns took, one small-scale farmer expressed:

It almost sounds like sabotage ... I can't imagine doing that to someone—quasi-intending to buy a farm, and then coming back to seek back-wages. It breaks the sense of trust in the organic farming community; [the interns] exemplify the attitude that it's okay to kind of try to work outside the system until you decide you don't like something, then to revert to legal or state recourse.

This grower gave voice to the tensions between operating a farm business within an informal, trust-based moral economy and workers' inalienable, state-based social protections. For instance, while BC interns have access to provincial public health coverage, some intern employers (or "hosts") do not register their farms with the provincial body that offers insurance for other forms of on-the-job injuries or disease. One respondent who employed interns felt that this lack of attention among farm employers to the risks of farm work reflected commonplace "wishful thinking" (i.e. that no adverse events would occur necessitating insurance) and, less commonly, an "ideological opposition" to bureaucratic tax requirements.

Amidst AFN actors' disinclination to address social protections for interns, some interns themselves expressed that formal protections were not necessary, that their work was low risk, and that they were ultimately responsible for undertaking any occupational risks. However, a woman who interned at an urban farm with her husband while they lacked stable housing described becoming more concerned in retrospect about a potential absence of worker's compensation in the event of an injury:

We didn't sign any waivers saying that we were holding our own liability ... It made me think, "Holy f***. What if I would have gotten really hurt or something?" I don't think there was much coverage there for me ... I'm sure they would have just said it was my own fault, I've done something wrong. And we were on ladders, we were using power tools, we were working in the extreme cold and then the extreme heat. There was lots of room for dangerous things to happen.

For their part, some of the migrants we interviewed described having to "look out for yourself", not out of voluntarism, but because of the absence of support from state entities such as SAWP Consulates. One employer of migrants felt that the growth of the SAWP in BC had not kept pace with resources available to enforce regulations and standards. He added: "I mean, I guess you just hope that people are, at the end of the day, honest enough and humane enough to do a good job of things. But, as I said, you're always going to have a certain percentage that are not."

An activist with the Okanagan-based group Radical Action with Migrants in Agriculture (RAMA) noted that on more than one occasion sustainable food proponents had encouraged RAMA to develop an "ethical employer certification". The proposed label would offer economic rewards to employers who voluntarily engage in migrant labor practices deemed ethical. Members of RAMA were, however, averse to singlehandedly spearheading such a label. Besides the tremendous amount of volunteer resources that would be required to develop a certification system, they were concerned that promoting the economic

interests of farm employers might undermine RAMA's relationships with farmworkers, and that a label would not address structural and racial injustices they asserted are systemic in the SAWP.

For some of the farmers we interviewed, direct marketing relationships served as a way to communicate with customers about their employment of either migrant farmworkers or interns. They noted that this open line of dialogue provided an important venue to justify the "true cost" of labor-related price premiums to consumers, or to respond to queries about their hiring of farmworkers through the SAWP. Indeed, several AFN participants and farm employers suggested that consumers themselves ought to be partly responsible for the surveillance of ethical labor practices, both through in-person, trust-based "know-your-grower" interactions and social media monitoring.

Such proposals for ethical employer labeling and consumer surveillance form part of an AFN moral economy of consumption (Goodman 2004; see also Brown and Getz 2008). To a large degree, affluent eaters in the global North define the consumption standards that underpin this economy and how surplus value from AFN food production is distributed. Our results resonate with Galt's (2013:341) study of community-supported agriculture (CSA) in California. He argues that the moral economy "cuts both ways economically" for farmers: while the ability to commodify members' sense of social embeddedness in a CSA enables farmers to capture economic rents, it increases farmers' sense of obligation to CSA members to the extent that they engage in self-exploitation.

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In contrast to the proposals we heard favoring consumer surveillance, it is clear that individual consumers are ill equipped to assume the systematic monitoring or enforcement of social protections for farmworkers. Farm business owners also maintain a great deal of gatekeeping power in shaping information that is presented to the public through venues like social media and farmers' market conversations. Moreover, a dependence on face-to-face interactions would present a barrier to scaling up trust-based monitoring relationships (Wittman et al. 2012). Still, precedents exist for monitoring and certified labeling driven by farmworkers themselves, as in the case of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida. In addition, as part of their institutional food procurement practices, some US-based colleges are adopting the Real Food Challenge, which includes specific criteria pertaining to food workers, including a living wage, the right to a grievance process, and safe and fair working conditions.

With regard to some employer participants' aversion to "one-size-fits-all" farm labor regulation, our concern is that there may be a trend in which some AFN actors' resistance toward state bureaucracy translates into a belief that formal systems of accountability are no longer necessary or desirable. A moral economy framing is thus used as an anti-political ideology to legitimize the neoliberal status quo of agricultural exceptionalism for farm labor in BC: leave it all to individuals and hope for the best. While the status quo undoubtedly provides opportunities such as education for interns and jobs for migrants, it simultaneously

limits the possibilities of hired farm work as a dignified, socially protected livelihood.

Moreover, this anti-politics acts as a barrier to the transformation of food alterity in BC into a food *justice*; that is, a collective, cohesive, organized, and sustained movement (Snow et al. 2004) to enact or defend against food-related social change. Our study suggests the moral economy may be used to normalize precarious and flexible employment relationships, thereby stifling the impetus for people to collectively organize toward more equitable and emancipatory structural conditions in the food system.

AFNs and food movements in North America have articulated a vision of transforming the food system through human-intensive and ecologically based agriculture. Because precarious jobs are founded on denying basic protections allotted to other workers, such as wages and insurance coverage for work-related injury for interns, precarious hired farm employment hinders progress toward food system transformation. In this paper, we explored how AFNs in BC have engaged with precariousness affecting two groups of farmworkers: SAWP migrants and un (der)paid interns. Future research in BC should consider the position of immigrant farmworkers within this moral economy, along with more in-depth life histories and quantitative demographic information for farm interns. Alternative food repertoires that narrate precarious farm employment through a moral economy frame serve, effectively, to obscure the need to address structural conditions that create flexible and precarious work regimes. Many AFN participants are conscious of and critical of these practices within their own networks, and they are actively working to transform the frame in order to address systemic farm labor injustices and support more egalitarian movement building. In our BC report on good farming jobs, we highlight policy solutions that AFNs and others can support (Weiler et al. 2014). An opportunity for all AFNs to address precarious employment in the food system would be to support migrant justice campaigns for full immigration status and associated rights on arrival, or at the very least a route to citizenship for migrant farmworkers.

Our study complements the emerging body of research suggesting that precariousness has become a feature of hired work not only in so-called “industrial” agriculture, but also amidst efforts to realize more socially just and ecologically sound alternatives. Further, our findings point toward the ways precariousness is now shaping farm employment both for those who are marginalized in society at large and excluded from alternative food efforts (i.e. migrants), as well as those whose social location typically accrues greater privilege and who constitute alternative food “insiders” (i.e. interns). Farmworkers are exempted from basic labor protections and citizenship rights on the basis that agriculture is an exceptional industry. These findings present an opportunity to rethink the role of precarious employment in agriculture. Acknowledging the continuities between alternative and “mainstream” food systems can be useful in challenging how precariousness becomes normalized in privileged, supposedly prefigurative spheres as well as the dominant agricultural contexts in which most farmworkers are employed.

Failing to meaningfully involve farmers and farmworkers themselves in developing systems of accountability for labor practices can generate new forms of racial

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