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‘Escaping’ managed labour migration: Worker exit as precarious migrant agency

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Introduction

Wearing only a thin sweater, Oscarⁱ silently slipped off the farm one day after work in late October. He had reached his tipping point. He felt that he had put up with his employer’s harassing behaviour for long enough. The last straw was not getting paid for work that he felt forced to do. He didn’t feel that it was worth the effort to complain to the boss and he felt no strong connection to his co-workers. He originally came to Canada on a temporary work visa to work with his father on a cattle ranch in Southern Ontario. But the difficult working conditions pushed his dad to make the decision to return to Guatemala before the end of his contract. Three weeks after his dad’s departure, Oscar felt he could no longer endure work on the farm, as there was no one else he felt he could trust. It was simply time to go. Oscar didn’t care that he was taking a risk. As a temporary foreign worker from Guatemala, he of course knew that he was bound to his employer and that he could not legally find work elsewhere in Canada. But with no access to assistance for what he felt were serious workplace violations, he decided to move on and try his luck elsewhere. ‘Well, look. I just wanted to escape from a place where I was mistreated,’ he explained to me later. ‘One only wants freedom. You understand me? It doesn’t

matter, it really doesn't matter what it costs, what you want is to be free and to work freely without someone forcing you to do something you don't want to do.'

He had taken note of the directions the employer had taken when he first brought Oscar to the farm from the airport, and he decided to retrace the 40-kilometer journey back to the 401ⁱⁱ by foot. The resulting 5-hour hike to the highway was cold and dark. The whole way he clutched the phone number of his cousin's friend in Montréal, a random stranger he hoped could help him once he explained the situation. When he finally reached a payphone at 3AM, he called this man, who promptly drove 6 hours to pick him up.

When he arrived in Montréal, Oscar found a support network of fellow Latinos. When he first arrived, they helped him with food, shelter, and showed him around the city. They helped him to find under-the-table work as an industrial cleaner – a job he held for nearly 2 years, until a Canadian Border Services Agency workplace raid resulted in his forced return to Guatemala.ⁱⁱⁱ

This article is concerned with conceptualizing how exit from state-managed temporary labour migration may be understood as an act of refusal toward poor working and living conditions and a precarious relationship to the state. As Oscar's story demonstrates, deciding to quit their state-approved employer can be an important episode in migrant farm workers' personal biographies of work and migration. Oscar's depiction of exiting his employment, and by extension Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), offers a provocative window onto workers' aspirations to be free, and for a life unmoored from geographic and labour market constraints. A yearning toward freedom animates Oscar's dramatic first-hand description of leaving his state-

approved employer. Oscar's decision to leave the farm lays bare how this impulse can provoke some workers to renounce the influence of state policies and employment practices that hyper-regulate everyday life as a migrant farm worker in Canada. For workers who choose to quit their employment, this decision represents both an immediate rejection of 'unfree' labour relations and an embrace of the unpredictable possibilities associated with life for a migrant after leaving state-managed labour migration. At the same time, however, as Oscar's story demonstrates, deciding to escape the farm and pursue work and life opportunities in Canada without any formal citizenship status aggravates the material conditions of precarity. By engaging with the 'escape narratives' of four migrant workers from Mexico and Guatemala working on Canadian farms this article seeks to better understand the everyday agential practices that workers engaged in state-managed labour migration schema may have at their disposal. While escape can provide a means for workers to claim a space of belonging in everyday life, it also weakens migrant workers' formal citizenship ties to the Canadian state, thereby intensifying workers' insecurity.

Circulatory agricultural labour migration

As the patterns and dynamics of labour migration from low-income source countries to high-income host countries increase in complexity (ILO, 2015), it is ever more crucial to understand the life experiences of migrant farm workers engaged in circulatory labour migration. Over a decade ago sociologists began to document a global trend toward an increase in temporary and circulatory labour migration through a marked 'resurrection' of such programs in wealthy nations (Castles, 2006; Ruhs and Martin, 2008). Emblematic of this trend is the Obama-era debate over comprehensive immigration reform in the United States that included a bill that

would have produced a nation-wide temporary foreign worker program aimed at workers in ‘low-skilled’ jobs, including in agriculture (Bauer, 2013). It is telling that, while this reform was not enacted, temporary legal migration to the US from Mexico has been quietly increasing in the past 20 years, and in recent years has surpassed the number of undocumented entries (Massey, Durand, and Pren, 2015).

Contemporary figures reveal how this increasing drift toward circular migration plays out on American farms. In 2017, the US Department of Labor approved applications to fill 200,049 agricultural jobs for workers on temporary agricultural work visas (H-2A visas), a 21% increase from 2016 and a 43% increase from 2015 (Office of Foreign Labor Certification, 2015, 2016, 2017). This is not a development that is limited to the US context. There are predictions that a similar movement toward entrenching circulatory agricultural labour migration could take place in a post-Brexit UK, for example. An exclusive report published by the *Guardian* on September 5, 2017 describes a leaked Home Office report suggesting that UK immigration policy post-Brexit could include an employer-driven guest worker regime that would include an option for time-limited 2-year working visas for farm workers. Currently, agricultural employers in the UK are actively lobbying for the creation of a new seasonal agricultural immigration scheme to replace a dedicated farm labour force from the EU whose demise is inevitable due to Brexit (Consterdine and Samuk, 2018). For an industry that represents approximately 11% of the global migrant workforce (ILO, 2015), these gradual shifts toward state-managed circulatory migration could denote an important transformation in how work and migration are experienced for migrant farm workers globally in the years to come (Martin, 2016).

Canada represents an attractive case study for understanding the lived experiences of migrant farm workers from the Global South employed seasonally in the Global North. Currently, Canada's TFWP has two streams for importing agricultural labour to work in Canadian horticulture. The Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) has been continually in use since 1966 with the incorporation of a bi-lateral agreement with Jamaica. This program, which is currently administered by Employment and Skills Development Canada (ESDC), has since included agreements with several other Caribbean countries as well as with Mexico. The program is responsible for pairing eligible workers from these participating countries with Canadian farmers. SAWP contracts range from 6-8 months in length, to match the seasonal nature of Canadian agricultural work. Workers are recruited by local Ministries of Labour in their countries of residence. In 2002, Canada introduced an additional agricultural stream to the TFWP. Within this stream, farmers may recruit workers from any country. In the case of Guatemala, worker recruitment is handled by a non-governmental intermediary. Unlike the SAWP, worker contracts within the additional agricultural stream of Canada's TFWP are not restricted by length of time, a particular benefit for greenhouse operators and secondary agricultural processors, such as meat plant and vegetable packing operators. In the five decades since its inception, Canada's migrant agricultural worker program has become a central instrument of capitalist accumulation in Canadian horticulture (Basok, 2002; Preibisch, 2010). The program's current importance for Canada's agri-business is underscored by a 47% increase in the number of migrant farm workers admitted to Canada over the past decade (IRCC, 2015). There is a broad consensus among scholars that restrictions placed on workers' formal citizenship status that constrict workers' freedoms in the realms of labour circulation and production facilitate the everyday control of workers, and are thus key to the program's success

(Hennebry and Preibisch, 2010). These restrictions include: employer-specific work permits; an obligation that workers dwell on employer property; the inability of workers to migrate with their families; the requisite that workers return to their home countries immediately after their contracts are terminated; and broad controls on access to social programs, such employment insurance and English as a Second Language instruction (Nakache and Kinoshita, 2010; Ramsaroop, 2016; Thomas, 2016).

‘Escape’ as precarious agential action

The constraints to workers’ rights listed above hinge on migrant farm workers’ lack of access to permanent residency and formal citizenship status in Canada (Nakache, 2013; Perry, 2012; Sharma, 2006). Immigration controls are, therefore, crucial to the production of a particular class of worker over whom employers may exert excessive forms of control (Anderson, 2010), including in areas not directly related to production, such as housing (Perry, 2018a). In the Canadian literature, the notion of ‘precarious status’ has been employed as a way to examine the intersections between restrictive immigration controls and the rise of labour market flexibilization and precarious work globally (Fudge and MacFail, 2009; Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard, 2009; Vosko, 2006). Of course, temporary foreign workers are authorized to reside and work in Canada for the duration of their employment contracts. However, the notion of precarious status applies to these workers in so far as their authorization to be in the country is contingent on the needs and desires of a third party (their state-approved employer), and in so far as their access to rights and entitlements is restricted due to their state-imposed temporariness. The precarious status concept thereby helps to locate how migrant workers’ experiences of

vulnerability are shaped by multi-layered forms of insecurity that are situated within political, historic and geographic structures of power (Paret and Gleeson, 2016; Reid-Musson, 2014).

Authors writing in this area are explicit in their use of precarity as a conceptual bridge connecting the experience of insecure citizenship status to the established literature on the political economy of contingent work (Goldring et al., 2009; Paret and Gleeson, 2016). What is under-theorized in this literature, however, is how rescaling precarity to include people's experiences of citizenship can bring within its purview the micro-spaces of migrant workers' everyday lives (Reid-Musson, 2017). The labour control faced by migrant farm workers in Canada extends beyond the point of production, generating unfree labour relations that produce "multi-dimensional forms of vulnerability beyond the workplace" (Strauss and McGrath, 2017, 202). The significance of broadening the scope of precarity becomes clearer when considering how the perpetual threat of removal shapes migrant farm workers' lifeworlds (Basok, Bélanger, and Rivas, 2014; De Genova, 2005). Employers may repatriate or blacklist workers from Canada's TFWP for any perceived transgression, including joining a union (Vosko, 2016). Being continually at risk of involuntary repatriation results in workers' inability to make even the most short-term life plans, accentuating the uncertainty that permeates workers' daily lives. These are qualities that for Ettliger (2007) capture the essence of a precarity-infused life (Butler, 2004), thus highlighting the quotidian sense of insecurity that lies at the heart of state-managed circulatory labour migration regimes.

This rescaling of precarity underscores how institutional forms of agential action to challenge exploitative labour conditions are limited for migrant agricultural workers (Heine, Quandt, and

Arcury, 2017). The uncertainty and unpredictability that characterize the conditions of migrant farm workers' lives in Canada may, however, support forms of agency that are themselves uncertain and unpredictable. Challenging precarious status may thus entail workers engaging in self-determination over areas of life that do not directly involve employment, but which aim to gain autonomy over other areas of social life (Buckley, McPhee, and Rogaly, 2017; Reid-Musson, 2017; Seo and Skelton, 2017). This point is crucial to understanding workers' decisions to exit state-managed managed labour migration, characterized here and by research participants themselves, as instances of 'escape'.

Within current migration research, the theme of escape features most prominently in the 'autonomy of migration' literature. The main thrust of this scholarship is to highlight the inherent conflict between migration and attempts to control migrant mobility (Scheel, 2013; Sharma, 2009), thus forefronting questions of agency and political citizenship. For authors in this area, escape is nearly synonymous with mobility itself, and is conceptualized as an everyday agential resource that migrants may employ in the pursuit of not only economic self-interest, but also of autonomy and happiness (Bojadžijev and Karakayali, 2010; Rygiel, 2011). In contrast to analyses that prioritize migrants' collective resistance and claims-making practices toward the state (Tungohan, 2018), escape is characterized as a mode of social change that originates in the banal ordinariness of everyday life. The theoretical framing of escape as an ordinary yet powerful agential practice can help to elucidate how mobile practices that take place outside the realm of the visible may influence the emergence of oppositional migrant worker subjectivities.

The interpretation of escape as imperceptible everyday politics is one that overlaps with the comparatively limited characterizations of escape that appear in contemporary discussions of

work and employment. Contemporary theorizations of escape in this context are conceptually rooted in the concept of organizational exit, first introduced by Albert Hirschman a half century ago. Hirschman (1970) conceptualized exit, described simply as an individual decision to leave a group, as one important way that individuals may take action aimed at improving their satisfaction in relation to a given organization. Though scholars of work have rarely measured exit as a response to exploitative employment conditions, contemporary case studies have examined how quitting employment may be a way for workers to contest precarious forms of work (Alberti, 2014; Ham and Gilmour, 2016; Sexsmith, 2016). Much of the workplace literature that conjures escape as an oppositional form of agency is concerned primarily with theorizing escape as an everyday form of resistance against the corporatization of daily life (Cederström and Fleming, 2012: 58; Fleming, 2014). This approach to understanding escape is germane to an analysis of worker agency in the context of state-managed labour migration regimes, the very structure of which is contingent on the near total institutionalization of workers' everyday lives (McLaughlin, 2009).

As research participants' narratives of escape will demonstrate, the characterizations of escape derived from these sets of literature are helpful when considering migrant farm workers' decisions to exit their employment, and by extension state-managed labour migration.

Methods

The stories of worker exit presented in this article emerged from a broader study that examined how temporary foreign workers in Canada engage in mobile practices, in particular internal

secondary migration, on arrival to the country. This research project was conducted in partnership with the Immigrant Worker Centre (IWC) in Montréal, an organization that advocates on behalf of TFWs in the province of Québec (Choudry, Hanley, Jordan, Shragge, and Stiegman, 2009). Methodologically, the author's intention was to develop methods that could prioritize the voice and lived experiences of workers themselves, and hence to approach participants as 'knowers', rather than as victims of circumstance. This is a methodological approach that is gaining currency among scholars of both labour migration (Perry, 2018b) and precarious employment (Mirchandani et al., 2018). The data associated with this research was collected from interviews that the author conducted with 32 TFWs who had moved inter-provincially on arrival to Canada. Participants of this study included both women and men from the Philippines, Guatemala, Mexico, Bangladesh, Trinidad and Tobago, and Tunisia. The sample included farm workers, fast food counter attendants, hotel cleaners, as well as meat and fish processing workers. The recruitment strategy comprised of two stages. First, the author reached out directly to TFWs who were associated with the IWC who had had the experience of moving internally within Canada. Second, snowball sampling was employed, engaging with participants' social networks in order to access sufficient numbers of workers who had had the experience of geographic relocation within Canada, a recruitment method often used to access difficult to reach populations (Browne, 2005). In addition to these interviews, the author also interviewed worker advocates across the country (n=22), federal and provincial government officials (n=8), and TFWP employers (n=5).

Given the author's interest in documenting TFWs' movements within Canada, fieldwork extended across the country, and included interviews with workers in the Northwest Territories,

British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Québec, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. Given how workers' mobile practices can result in their transitioning from TFW status to undocumented status, several participants had been deported either prior to the interview or at some point during the research process. Several interviews were, therefore, conducted with workers who were no longer in Canada, including with workers in Guatemala, Mexico, the United States, and the Philippines. Every attempt was made to conduct interviews in person, and during fieldwork the author followed workers geographically, moving between Québec, Ontario, and Alberta. In the event that in-person interviews were not possible, interviews were conducted over the phone or via Skype. Given migrant workers' well-documented use of communication technology and social media as a way to maintain transnational relationships (Paragas, 2009), for this study the incorporation of mobile forms of communication was a natural fit.

Interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours. During the interviews, workers were asked about their personal histories related to state-managed labour migration, with a particular emphasis on their stories of internal migration within Canada. During the data analysis phase, the theme of exiting from employment, and by extension the TFWP, surfaced as an intriguing conceptual leitmotif. The exit narratives as told by four migrant agricultural workers from Mexico and Guatemala are highlighted in this article. The smaller sample size allows for a more intimate portrayal of workers' experiences, providing an opportunity to develop a rich description of worker exit from state-managed labour migration, an event often described by participants themselves as instances of 'escape'.

‘Decidimos escaparse la finca’^{iv}: Narratives of escape

The verb ‘escaparse’ (Spanish for ‘to escape’) was used by each of the research participants to describe their experiences of exiting their jobs. The use of this word offers a window of understanding into how citizenship precarity as described above shapes workers’ subjective experiences of work and daily life. Nicolas, a migrant justice activist associated with the IWC and former migrant farm worker himself, described how the verb ‘to escape’ was the most accurate way to describe the act of migrant farm workers leaving their place of employment. Nicolas, who had himself quit his employment some years prior, described how the use of the verb ‘escaparse’ was significant for three interrelated reasons. First, he explained how the verb ‘to quit’ (‘dejar’ in Spanish) seemed to imply labour mobility, namely the ability to leave one workplace to find work somewhere else, which did not adequately represent these workers’ experiences. Second, the use of the verb ‘escaparse’ encompassed how workers were evading the threat of deportation that would be associated with confronting the employer directly with a resignation. Third, Nicolas explained that the verb incorporated a repudiation of the social and personal constraints associated with unfree labour relations, and instead represented a reassertion of personal control.

In addition to Oscar’s vignette presented in the introduction, the escape narratives from three research participants: Esteban, Isidro, and Iván, are presented below.

Esteban

Esteban, a 25-year-old man from Guatemala, came to Canada to work on a farm in 2008 in order to provide financial support for his wife and one baby daughter. In the four years that he had been coming to Canada he did his best to send home remittances twice a month. Esteban did not have a high-school diploma, and before coming to Canada worked as a farm worker back home in Guatemala.

Like many agricultural workers from Guatemala engaged in Canada's TFWP, Esteban was working on 2-year contracts. At the end of every two years he would return home for a short amount of time in order to visit his family and renew his work permit and visa. Esteban worked in the same large greenhouse operation in rural Alberta for the duration of his tenure in Canada. At the time of research, he had recently begun his third 2-year contract in this same place of employment. Esteban felt that this was a bad workplace. First, his employer insisted on keeping workers' passports in the farm office. Second, in his most recent contract he was required to do piecework, and he claimed that this had drastically reduced his capacity to earn a living. He claimed to often be working for less than minimum wage.

He had made complaints a number of times to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the body that at that time controlled labour migration recruitment to Canada from Guatemala. He asked to be sent to another workplace, but was unsuccessful. The IOM advised him to discuss his situation with the Consulate General of Guatemala. After three months in his new contract, he and two of his co-workers decided to sneak off the farm in the middle of the night and take a bus to Montréal, which was over 3000 kilometers away, to discuss their situation

with consular officials and to connect with fellow Guatemalans, as they had heard that there were fellow countrymen working in Québec.

On arrival in Montréal Esteban connected with IWC, who were able to retrieve his passport and those of his co-workers. They spent several months couch-surfing and unsuccessfully looking for work in Montréal. The Guatemalan consulate offered no help. The three workers eventually paid someone to take them across the international border into the United States. At the time of the interview Esteban was working in a Korean restaurant in New York City and undertaking his high-school equivalency. His goal was to save enough money to return to Guatemala permanently.

Isidro

Isidro, an unmarried man from Guatemala, was 32 years old at the time of our interview. He came to Canada in 2003 when he was 24 years old to work on a vegetable farm in rural Québec. Isidro described his workplace conditions as particularly poor. He claimed that during working hours the employer did not provide access to bathroom facilities and described worker dormitories that were overcrowded and dilapidated. He described how the daily stress associated with constant micro-surveillance eventually resulted in his becoming too ill to work in the fields.

When he started to feel sick he asked his employer to take him to the doctor. The employer refused. In defiance of his employer, Isidro went to the hospital on his own and was treated by a doctor. In response to Isidro's workplace transgression, the employer accused him of causing

problems and threatened to involve the Guatemalan consulate, which Isidro felt was a coded deportation threat. The employer did contact the consulate, and Isidro claimed that consular officials called him on his cell phone in order to tell him to stop causing problems on the farm or else he would be sent back to Guatemala. Over the phone, Isidro expressed anger toward these consular officials for siding with the employer. He claimed that they responded by telling him to just relax and get back to work. Isidro went back to work, but after two weeks the consulate called him back and accused him of continuing to cause problems. They told him to stop working immediately and to pack his bags. They were sending him back to Guatemala the following day.

Isidro did not want to return to Guatemala, and instead of waiting to be taken to the airport, he packed his bags and left the farm immediately after the phone call. He contacted an acquaintance in the nearby town and got a ride to Montréal, where he connected with friends from Guatemala who helped him to find a place to live. He stayed in Montréal for five years and worked odd construction and restaurant jobs. He was eventually granted refugee status and at the time of our interview was working in construction in Calgary, Alberta.

Iván

Iván was 41 years old at the time I conducted this research. He had taken college-level courses in book-keeping before coming to Canada in 2003. Though he was from a rural area in the Mexican state of Guerrero, Iván had never worked as a farm worker. The four horticultural seasons that Iván spent working in Southern Ontario were his first experiences of agricultural work. He

claimed that his circulatory transnational migration during these years (8 months in Canada followed by 4 months in Mexico) resulted in the dissolution of his marriage.

Iván spent his first three years in Canada working in a large tomato greenhouse operation near Windsor, Ontario. During this time, he developed a reputation as a worker who regularly complained about difficult working conditions. After three years his greenhouse employer did not invite him back, and in his fourth and final year the Mexican Ministry of Labour sent him to work on a vineyard near Niagara Falls.

When Iván arrived at his new workplace he was not happy about the working and living situation. He reported that worker housing was congested and ramshackle, and that dormitory water was contaminated and not fit to drink without boiling. He described how the employer only allowed workers to have visitors on Sunday evenings and required that workers solicit permission to leave farm property. According to Iván, the employer only granted this permission on Sundays prior to the weekly headcount at 3PM.

Iván's co-workers warned him not to complain as the employer would send him back to Mexico if he did. In spite of this warning, Iván decided to complain directly to his employer, knowing that he would be fired. He was immediately repatriated to Mexico. When he arrived in Mexico City, Iván presented himself to Ministry of Labour officials to discuss what had happened. Ministry officials told him that he was a troublemaker and that if he wanted to return to Canada he would have to wait in line behind 1,200 other recruits.

During this time a Canadian travel visa was not required for Mexican tourists. Since Iván had become estranged from his wife he decided to take what little money he had saved on the vineyard and bought a plane ticket back to Toronto. Iván has remained in Canada and has been working odd jobs for the past 10 years.

Discussion

Escape as it is conceptualized here is first and foremost a response to precarious status and unfree labour relations. For Esteban, Isidro, and Iván the primary motivation for escaping the farm was sparked by coercive employer practices and particularly poor working and living conditions that are commonly associated with state-managed labour migration and which creep into the nebulous legal realm of ‘labour trafficking’ (Beatson, Hanley, and Ricard-Guay, 2017). This convergence of employer and immigration control include practices such as having passports withheld by their employer (Esteban), being denied access to basic health care (Isidro), and not being allowed to leave worker housing without employer permission (Iván). These exploitative employer practices go beyond the employment standards violations that are typical of precarious forms of work, such as violations related to unpaid wages, and instead lay claim to the more intimate realm of workers’ everyday rhythms and mobility (Reid-Musson, 2017). For these participants, feeling precarious went beyond worries about economic stability and well-being, and instead related to workers’ perceptions of self-worth and an inability to express self-determination in daily life. In the words of Nicolas from the IWC:

You feel like someone's object. Like a lot of times you hear employers talk of 'MY' workers, like 'my little Mexican' or 'my little Guatemalan' – like they can do whatever they want with you.

The act of leaving the farm, and by extension the TFWP, provided workers with a means of enacting a basic form of worker agency otherwise denied migrant farm workers as a result of policies that deprive them of the right to labour mobility while in Canada. Escaping the farm therefore offered workers an opportunity to decide the fate of their own lives independent of the needs of their employers and of the Canadian state. For these participants, escape is an act of refusal that rejects the accepted norms of power that govern the control of racialized and transnational labour. In their refusal to inhabit the narrow terms of their contractual agreements to both the state and to their employers, workers are claiming a space of belonging that belies the precarity of their formal citizenship status. On the one hand, workers are enacting citizenship by carving out a space where new beginnings are possible (Nyers, 2015). On the other hand, their rejection of formal status as temporary resident, however precarious this status may be, produces the material conditions for increased precarity (Goldring et al., 2009).

Enacting labour mobility 'from below'

Extending the location of precarity from the realm of employment to that of citizenship status opens the door to better understanding how precarity is an enduring feature not only of migrant farm workers' economic lives, but also of the more mundane daily conditions affecting workers' sense of everyday belonging (Ettlinger, 2007; Worth, 2016). In keeping with the conceptual themes that animate the autonomy of migration literature, participants' narratives of escape

accentuate how this struggle takes place at the convergence of migrant workers' experiences of migration and the formal attempts to control their mobility (Sharma, 2009). Thinking of escape as an expression of agency 'from below' punctuates how exit in the context of precarious status may provide a quotidian means for workers to challenge exploitative working and immigration conditions. Workers' lack of formal citizenship status can therefore be a "highly dynamic axis on which migrants' agency... is produced, regulated and spatially negotiated" (Buckley, McPhee, and Rogaly, 2017, 153). While escape does not directly make demands of the state, it can provide workers with a dignified means of refusing unfree labour relations and a life overtaken by work (Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Jones, 2012), thereby providing a channel for expressing autonomy in the face of everyday precarity.

For participants, the choice to escape was a simple one: either stay and tolerate unacceptable conditions, or refuse to participate in an exploitative arrangement and take their chances elsewhere. When reflecting on his decision to confront his employer in spite of certain repatriation, Iván forcefully accentuated this sense of escape as agential practice: "It is one thing to complain, another thing is to do something about it!" Isidro's response to deportation for having sought out medical attention provides another salient example of this expression of autonomy in spite of the precarious social relations that circumscribe participants' lives in Canada. In the words of Isidro:

I felt hopeless and sad because I didn't expect that. I was aware that there was nothing I could do. I packed my bag and hid it under the bed. My bag stayed hidden there for a few hours and then I escaped from the bunkhouse.

Isidro's description of his last moments on the farm accentuate how the precarities of work and immigration status infiltrate workers' lives. In that moment, Isidro realized that refusing to return to Guatemala and fleeing the practices of control that dominated his life in Canada were his only means of challenging these relations of power. In his words: "My only option was to grab my things and go." Far from a rejection of work and connection to society, however, escaping the farm offered participants a means to disrupt the inherent antagonisms of Canada's TFWP while simultaneously trying to improve their conditions of work and life. In the words of Isidro:

I wanted to take advantage of the situation and to not lose the big opportunity to be in Canada, a country where the future will be better for me economically, from the perspective that one day I could provide better opportunities for my people, for my children and my family. If I go back to my country I will live in poverty.

Isidro's account reveals how by leaving the farm and by extension Canada's state-managed labour migration regime, workers are both refusing a life of precarity and embracing an unknown future where an embrace of hope and chance may reveal a happier and more desirable life (Steinberg, 2016).

Workers' aspirations to be free are underscored by participants' descriptions of throwing themselves toward the "startling unexpectedness" of new beginnings and unpredictable possibilities, to conjure the work of Hannah Arendt (Arendt, 1958, 178; Jackson, 2008). This is evidenced from how participants conveyed their stories of escaping the farm. Esteban for

example described his decision to clandestinely leave his workplace in the middle of the night as a voyage of personal discovery. While all three workers were afraid of getting caught and sent back to the farm or deported to Guatemala, Esteban described this bus ride as an ‘adventure’. He had never travelled outside of Guatemala before, and expressed his excitement at being able to see so much of Canada. He excitedly described the 3000-kilometer bus trip from Alberta to Québec that he and his two friends undertook as a life-changing step into a volatile future. He took great pleasure in reminiscing with me about this time of his life. With a laugh, he said: “we didn’t know anyone or anything. We were throwing ourselves toward an adventure!” For his part, Oscar described his life in Montréal as a life less socially alienated. He said: “It was so much better. Much more freedom. When you work, you feel like it is your own work.” When I asked him to describe what escape from the TFWP meant for him, Oscar described taking pleasure in activities that were inaccessible to him in the program, for example the simple everyday indulgences of walking to the grocery store or going to the movies with friends.

Packing their bags and leaving the farm in search of better work opportunities and a life free from invasive immigration controls provides an everyday chance for workers to act on the aspirational desires that originally motivated their decisions to come to Canada. In their refusal to inhabit the narrow terms of their contractual agreement to the state and their employer, workers are thus claiming an everyday space of belonging, however insecure and unpredictable this space may be. Placing themselves outside of the reach of their employers and of the state is a way for workers to both refuse institutionalized precarity and carve out an autonomous life that is at once meaningful and imperceptible to institutional mechanisms of power (Scott, 2009; Sharma, 2009). Escaping the farm thus poses an analytical challenge to the more traditional

understanding that visibility is central to social and political subjectivity (Nyers, 2015; Wilcke, 2018).

Escape and increased precarity

While escape provided an everyday means to refuse poor working conditions and an uncertain relationship to the state, the elusive character of escape imbues this agential practice with uncertainty and unpredictability, and as such corresponds to notions of precarious status discussed above. Workers' resorting to escape in an effort to improve their everyday life situations produces an unavoidable pathway to deepened insecurity and status-based precariousness (Goldring et al., 2009). While participants reported an increased sense of self-determination after exiting the TFWP, they all discussed the difficulties of building a life without formal status, however precarious, while in Canada. The vignettes above demonstrate how increased autonomy in daily life came at the expense of increased precarity with regards to formal citizenship status and employment stability. In the ten years since leaving his employment, Iván has had trouble maintaining regular work, and was even deported to Mexico at one point (he has since returned and is in the process of regularizing his status). For his part, Isidro managed to sustain a modest livelihood in Montréal by working in restaurant kitchens for five years. While he eventually became a permanent resident and moved to Alberta for better employment opportunities, he described how during these uncertain years in Montréal he felt like a second-class citizen. Esteban quickly got frustrated with a life undocumented in Montréal and instead sought out opportunities in the United States, and Oscar was ultimately deported after several years of working odd jobs. The data presented in this article is, therefore, consistent with

predictions from the literature on how TFWs, in searching for efforts to improve their situations, will inevitably find treacherous pathways out of relatively stable status (Goldring et al., 2009).

Conclusion

An examination of workers' first-hand descriptions of 'escaping the farm' provides an opportunity to better understand the responses available to migrant workers affected by status-based precarity. This article narrows in on the mundane yet extraordinary events surrounding workers' decisions to leave their state-approved employment and to seek a better life in Canada outside of state-managed circulatory labour migration. In so doing, this research contributes to conceptualizations of precarity, and of precarious status in particular, that are beginning to recognize its effects not only on workers' economic survival, but also the more ordinary daily conditions surrounding workers' sense belonging and personal autonomy. With a focus on the agricultural components of Canada's TFWP, this article reveals how the act of 'escaping the farm' offers workers an opportunity to decide the fate of their own lives independent of the needs of their employers and of the Canadian state. For the participants whose narratives are highlighted above, escape provided an everyday means to refuse poor working conditions as well as the coercive immigration and employment controls that accompany life in Canada's TFWP. In their refusal to accept the terms of their contractual circulatory labour migration agreements, workers claim a space of belonging that contradicts the precarity of their formal citizenship status. In carving out a space in which they may perform autonomy and self-determination in daily life, however, this rejection of contingent citizenship status intensifies the precarious material conditions governing workers' relationship to the state. This contradiction raises questions that lie beyond the scope of the present research, and which could be addressed in

future studies. In particular, is it possible to draw a connection between migrant workers' everyday agential practices and their participation in collective forms of resistance and formal claims toward the state? By pinpointing this relationship, if it indeed exists, it may be possible to locate escape along a continuum of agential responses to precarious status whereby invisible and visible forms of social and political subjectivity may operate in concert toward a more just society for migrant workers.

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ⁱ With the exception of one participant (Iván), who spoke in English during our interview, all participant quotations have been translated from the original Spanish.

ⁱⁱ Highway 401 is an important provincial highway that runs through the Province of Ontario. It begins in the East at the border with Quebec and ends in the West at the border with the US at Detroit, Michigan.

ⁱⁱⁱ Incorporating insights from the qualitative method of interpretive biography (Denzin, 2001), the writing of this vignette emerged from an analysis of data collected through a personal narrative-style interview and subsequent field notes.

^{iv} ‘We decided to escape the farm.’