

ARTICLE

More Menial than Housemaids? Racialized and Gendered Labour in the Fruit and Vegetable Industry of Canada's Niagara Region, 1880–1945

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ONTARIO WOMEN “WOULD FEEL that they were lowering themselves irremediably if they undertook canning factory work,” reported officials of the War Emergency Training Programme in 1943. “For many years the seasonal canning factory workers, many of whom were ‘imported,’” the officials explained, “have been looked upon as more menial than housemaids.” To remedy the wartime labour shortages and thus to ensure the essential production of foodstuffs not only for Canadians at home but also for Canadian and allied soldiers at the front, the officials urged churchmen “to preach basic equality of human beings, humility and the danger of bigotry.”¹

Who were these “imported” workers in the fields, orchards and canneries of Niagara that so derogated cannery work in early 20th-century Ontario? Today, when Ontarians, especially in Niagara, hear of “imported” seasonal agricultural labourers they tend to think of workers – most of them male – brought to Canada under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programme from the Caribbean and Mexico. But that programme is relatively recent: it was introduced only in 1966. Southern Ontario growers and canners, however, have relied on “imported” labour since the turn of the 20th century. In Niagara,

1. “Report for Ontario Farm Service Force,” Toronto, 14 February 1943, Farm Training, Department of Labour, RG 7-16-0-146, Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO). For a discussion of voluntary food production, conservation and service on the home front during World War II see Ian Mosby, *Food Will Win the War: The Politics, Culture and Science of Food on Canada's Home Front* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).

before World War II, “imported” workers were composed of two main groups: first, non-British immigrants – primarily women and girls – from the Buffalo area, and later from southern Ontario; and second, Aboriginal families from southern Ontario reserves. In one important respect these workers resembled the seasonal agricultural workers who were imported to Niagara after World War II: both groups were racialized. Up to 1945, their description as “imported” referred less to their origins from beyond Canada’s borders than to their place outside the perceived racial boundaries of the communities where they worked for up to six months a year.² Many residents of Niagara saw eastern and southern European immigrants as well as Indigenous workers as inherently suited for menial labour due to their supposed racial inferiority.³ Such racial classification restricted their access to full year, better paid jobs through discriminatory hiring practices. When state officials spoke of the need to preach about the danger of bigotry and the basic equality of human beings, they were addressing the labour-recruitment problems resulting from this link between the racialization of seasonal workers and the resultant degradation of agricultural labour in Niagara. Otherwise, officials rarely spoke out against bigotry until after World War II.

That their contemporaries paid very little attention to them was a reflection of the racialization of seasonal workers from southern and eastern European origin. The current tendency of Canadians, including some scholars, to understand racialization exclusively with reference to people of colour, also helps to hide some of the pre-World War II “imported” workers from history. Seasonal workers of southern and eastern European origin, whom we would today perceive as white, were seen as members of distinct and inferior races before World War II. Their labour was devalued as a consequence of their racial classification and growers and canners recruited them for that very reason – these workers became “cheap.”

That so many of these “imported” workers were women increased their invisibility. During the first half of the 20th century, male seasonal workers overshadowed female workers both because they were more numerous, and because, as Donald Avery has shown, they toiled in a greater number and geographically more dispersed economic sectors such as the wheat harvest, mining, lumbering, and railroad construction.⁴ In the Niagara region – known

2. On the post-World War II Department of Citizenship and Immigration’s view of both immigrants and Aboriginal people as “marginal and foreign groups,” see Heidi Bohaker and Franca Iacovetta, “Making Aboriginal People ‘Immigrants Too’: A Comparison of Citizenship Programs for Newcomers and Indigenous Peoples in Postwar Canada, 1940s–1960s,” *Canadian Historical Review* 90, 3 (September 2009): 427–446.

3. L. O. Kennedy, Superintendent, Women’s Division, Ontario Employment Offices to H. C. Hudson, General Superintendent, Employment Service of Canada, 23 October 1936, Canning Factories, Canners 1936, Department of Labour, RG 7-1-0-358, AO.

4. Donald Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada’s Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896–1994* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995).

as “the garden of Canada” – however, female agricultural and cannery workers comprised a notable sector of the work force.

Although both immigrant women and Indigenous workers were racialized, the invisibility of Indigenous seasonal workers had distinct colonial origins. As Robin Brownlie pointed out in an earlier issue of this journal, the colonial construction of the “indolent, improvident Indian,” and of Aboriginal women more specifically, as idle “non-workers and non-participants in the capitalist economy,” helps to explain why scholars have said relatively little about Aboriginal people’s paid labour.⁵ Paige Raibmon believes that observers, including labour historians, have failed to recognize Indigenous people as workers because they “inherited the powerful colonial binary of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ and accepted the mindset that Indians belonged to the former category, workers to the latter.”⁶

Another distinctive feature of the racialization of Indigenous women was its sexual dimension. An anxious preoccupation with their sexuality indicated how deeply and lastingly fears about the degeneration of the allegedly superior white race through miscegenation permeated Canadian culture well into the 20th century. Widely held racial stereotypes of Indigenous women as immoral and sexually promiscuous led non-Aboriginal Canadians to blame these women for interracial sex and convinced them of the urgency of taming Aboriginal sexuality.⁷

5. Robin Jarvis Brownlie, “‘Living the same as the White People’: Mohawk and Anishinabe Women’s Labour in Southern Ontario, 1920–1940,” *Labour/Le Travail* 61 (Spring 2008): 41–68. Brownlie was building on Rolf Knight’s pioneering work *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Indian Labour in British Columbia, 1858–1930* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1978).

6. Paige Raibmon, “The Practice of Everyday Colonialism: Indigenous Women at Work in the Hop Fields and Tourist Industry of Puget Sound,” *Labour Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 3, 3 (2006): 25–26. See also John Lutz, “Gender and Work in Lekwammen Families, 1843–1970,” in Mary-Ellen Kelm and Lorna Townsend, eds., *In the Days of Our Grandmothers: A Reader in Aboriginal History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 216–251. For an overview of the scholarly treatment of Native labour in the late 19th and early 20th centuries see Steven High, “Native Wage Labour and Independent Production during the ‘Era of Irrelevance,’” *Labour/Le Travail* 37 (Spring 1996): 243–264. For studies of the racialization of seasonal workers from a variety of backgrounds see Vic Saztewich, *Racism and the Incorporation of Foreign Labour* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), and Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996). Julie Guard offers a fascinating example of the complex relationship between aboriginal and working-class identities from 1960s Niagara in her “Authenticity on the Line: Women Workers, Native ‘Scabs,’ and Multi-Ethnic Politics of Identity in a Left-led Strike in Cold War Canada,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15, 4 (Winter 2004): 117–140.

7. Jean Barman, “Taming Aboriginal Sexuality: Gender, Power, and Race in British Columbia, 1850–1900,” *BC Studies* 115/116 (Autumn/Winter 1997/1998): 237–266; Sarah Carter, “Categories and Terrains of Exclusion: Constructing the ‘Indian Woman’ in the Early Settlement Era in Western Canada,” in Kelm and Townsend, *In the Days of Our Grandmothers*, 146–170; and Joan Sangster, “Native Women, Sexuality and the Law,” in Kelm and Townsend,

During the two world wars, a radically different group of workers entered the seasonal agricultural work force: a great many of them middle-class Anglo-Canadian girls and women, most often labelled farmerettes.⁸ The farmerettes were recruited by the state to fill the labour shortages created by the wartime expansion of fruit and vegetable production and by the departure of immigrant women for more lucrative employment in other sectors. In sharp contrast to the degraded “imported” workers, these “daughters of Canada” – as state promotion of victory bonds described the farmerettes and other women who took jobs during wartime – “inspired the manhood and ennobled the womanhood of Canada by their labours of love and sacrifice in the days of the nation’s anguish.”⁹

After 1942, Japanese Canadians deported from the Pacific coast – men, women, and children – formed another racialized group channelled into Niagara’s fruit and vegetable industry. Labour shortages in such sectors as agriculture and lumbering convinced federal officials that “dispersal” offered the best solution to solving Canada’s “Japanese problem.” The racialization of this group was implicit in their placement in localities and occupations where they would not “compete seriously with white workers.”¹⁰ As we shall see, the inclusion of Japanese Canadian men among seasonal agricultural labourers, gave rise to anxieties about sexual transgressions against the farmerettes. Thus, if Aboriginal women, and to a lesser extent southern and eastern European women, were viewed as dangerous because they fell outside the racial boundaries of the community and purportedly lured white men to engage in interracial sex, white women, who signified the boundaries of the dominant group, were ostensibly threatened by sexual advances from the non-white Japanese Canadian men.¹¹

The authority of viewing people of colour as outside the racial boundaries of the Canadian nation was evident in the census of 1941 that assigned racial designation of most children through the father, but underscored the extent to which people of colour could not be assimilated, assigning children to the

In the Days of Our Grandmothers, 301–336.

8. Third Annual Report of the Trades and Labour Branch, Department of Public Works (1918), Ontario, Legislative Assembly, *Sessional Papers*, vol. 51, part 4, no. 16 (1919), 16. High school and private school students, at home married women, teachers, business women and university undergraduates accounted for 90.7 per cent of the recruits.

9. *Toronto Daily Star*, 3 November 1919.

10. Carmela Patrias, *Jobs and Justice: Fighting Discrimination in Wartime Canada, 1939–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 39.

11. Margaret Strobel, “Gender, Sex, and Empire,” in Michael Adas, ed., *Islamic & European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 345–377. For a discussion of women as the boundary and metaphorical limit of nations see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 2003), Chapter 10.

“black, yellow, or brown races,” if either their fathers or their mothers belonged to those “races,” and describing children of mixed “white and Indian blood,” regardless of the gender of the Aboriginal parent, as “half-breeds.”¹²

By comparing “imported” workers and “daughters of Canada” in Niagara’s fruit and vegetable industry between 1880 and 1945, I hope to shed light on a little-studied sector of Canada’s workforce. The willingness of the state and growers to improve working conditions generally deemed perfectly acceptable for “foreigners” and “Indians,” for the benefit of farmerettes, illustrates the workings of a racialized hierarchy in Canada’s labour market with great clarity. At the same time, the limits on wages even for the privileged farmerettes demonstrate the depth and endurance of gender-based inequality in the work force. This study often considers field and processing work together, since seasonal workers engaged in both phases of seasonal agricultural work in Niagara. Some Niagara canneries, moreover, also grew their own fruits and vegetables.

It is easier to make visible hitherto hidden seasonal workers from the pre-1945 period than to make their voices audible. Government and Royal Commission records, the reports of social reformers, and newspaper accounts provide conclusive evidence of the conditions of their labour and their importance to the fruit and vegetable industry. Letters some of them wrote to foreign-language newspapers, oral histories from the 1970s and 1980s, and rare descriptions of resistance against conditions prevailing in Niagara’s fruit and vegetable industries, occasionally enable us to hear from the workers themselves.

I

UNTIL THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY, the production and processing of fruits and vegetables were performed by local workers. Canneries and evaporators (which prepared dried fruit) were small-scale and dispersed. In the absence of rapid transportation it was necessary to establish the canneries in close proximity to the fields and orchards. Canneries operated for up to seven months of the year. A few male can-makers worked in the winter as well. The local workers who processed the fruit and vegetables were primarily women and girls but also included some men and boys. They sorted, cut, pitted, and washed fruits and vegetables, placed them in cans and bottles, which they then capped and labelled. Children as young as eight worked in the fields, the canneries, and in the basket-making factories on which the farmers relied.¹³ The women and children (and some men) who made up most of the vegetable and fruit pickers were also local. Although they toiled in the fields and canneries for long hours, because it was essential to pick, pack, and process the fruits

12. Patrias, *Jobs and Justice*, 9.

13. Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital in Canada*, vol. 5, Evidence, Ontario (Ottawa: A. Senecal, 1889), 891.

and vegetables at their peak, at least they did not have to travel far to work. Nevertheless, limited as they were to a narrow range of occupations by their age, gender, and limited skills, these workers were vulnerable to exploitation. Their working conditions were harsh, their hours long, and their wages low.

Workers who could obtain other kinds of work stayed away from canneries. According to a Grimsby canner, farmers in his area were sufficiently well off that their daughters were not willing to work as pickers or in the canneries. This canner's employees were the daughters and sons of local "mechanics and laboring men." There were few other employment opportunities for women and adolescents in Niagara's rural small towns and villages. The Grimsby cannery owner believed that in the 1880s women and girls who were unwilling "to go into service," found work in canneries preferable.¹⁴

The nature and duration of agricultural and food processing work in Niagara was one reason for the limited appeal of such work. In the fields and orchards of Niagara agricultural labourers engaged in planting, weeding, hoeing, tying up grape vines, pulling and washing vegetables, and picking berries by stooping or bending over and fruits from the trees while standing on ladders. They worked in the rain and in the heat of the sun, from dawn to dusk. They also packed fresh produce, making sure not to bruise or damage it in other ways. The growers paid the workers by the piece. Given the low piece rates, this system placed great pressure on workers in fields and orchards. Piecework also meant that when the season was dry and the harvest not abundant the work was even less lucrative than usual. In the canneries, extreme pressure and exceptionally long hours were also the norm. To prevent spoiling, the preservation of fruits and vegetables had to be carried out quickly after they were picked.

When state regulation to protect working women and children was introduced in Ontario in the 1880s, it was limited to canneries and did not cover field work in the fruit and vegetable industry. Eric Tucker believes that the persistence of the mid-19th century view of agricultural labourers as potential smallholders whose interests coincided with those of their employers, primarily small farmers, helps to explain the exclusion of farm workers from legal protections.¹⁵ The view that agricultural work was fundamentally different from industrial work was another reason for the exclusion of farm workers. Factory laws which governed hours and conditions of work were introduced in the 19th century to protect workers from dangers of a new type of labour. Farm work, which on family farms was performed by the growers' family with the help of only a few hired workers, did not appear to present the same kind of ill effects. After all, not only in the fields and orchards, but even in packing sheds, such work was performed outdoors, in nature. The hours of employment

14. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital in Canada*, 847–849; 890–891.

15. Eric Tucker, *Administering Danger: The Law and Politics of Occupational Health and Safety Regulation in Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 112.

in Ontario canneries, by contrast, were deemed unlawfully long. The fines imposed on those who disregarded such protective legislation were so low, however, that employers regularly contravened the regulations. In 1895, the Ontario Shops Regulation Act was amended to set the minimum age of boys in factories at fourteen. An exception was made for the canning industry, presumably because of pressure from cannery owners.

There were occasions even in the 1880s when Niagara growers and cannery owners experienced labour shortages. But the labour problem grew far more serious by the early 20th century, when the canning industry expanded and changed. As the Niagara Peninsula became increasingly industrialized, its villages and towns were linked by electric railway lines. Horse-driven wagons were gradually replaced by motorized trucks. Canning plants no longer needed to be located close to farms.

II

AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY – during Canada’s second Industrial Revolution – Ontario’s fruit and vegetable industry was transformed by mechanization and consolidation. Although inside the canneries hand labour persisted alongside moving belts and machines such as apple peelers and corers, mechanization was significant. As a result, the processing of produce was considerably faster and could therefore be carried out on a much larger scale. Cans were now produced in specialized factories, rather than in individual canneries. Markets for the canners expanded as electric railways linked the growers and cannery owners to cities and main railway lines. Cold storage at the point of production and refrigerated railway cars preserved the fruits and vegetables.¹⁶ Contemporaries hailed such innovations as indicative of Niagara’s economic development and modernization; the increase in employment opportunities pleased many commentators.¹⁷ They did not consider the ways whereby mechanization increased pressures on cannery workers. Just south of the border, however, where such modernization had begun earlier, American social reformers found that women who stood for hours by moving belts to pick out damaged produce, leaves, and dirt before the produce was canned, complained of dizziness and eye strain, as well as exhaustion by the end of the day.¹⁸

The consequences of these industrial changes were not without costs for local growers. The expansion of canneries, “which practically insure a market,”

16. *Globe*, 28 July 1900.

17. *Niagara Falls Review*, 10 November 1914.

18. Consumers’ League of New York, “Behind the Scenes in Canneries,” in David J. Rothman and Sheila M. Rothman, eds., *The Consumers’ League of New York: Behind the Scenes of Women’s Work* (1930; New York: Garland, 1987), 12.

initially encouraged growers to expand production.¹⁹ Canneries did not offer prices as high as markets for fresh fruits and vegetables, but initially they were more secure. Soon, however, the consolidation of canneries created tensions both with independent canners and with local growers. Large canning corporations such as Canadian Canners were taking over smaller operations. Such consolidation was done in the name of benefiting consumers by offering lower prices and improved standardized products.²⁰ In fact, canners combined to gain control over the industry by eliminating competition, keeping prices high by limiting production. Once they obtained control, the large canners closed many of the smaller canneries, leaving fewer options for growers seeking to sell their produce. Growers complained bitterly about large concerns forcing them to sell their produce at such low prices that they had little opportunity for profit. In 1915, for example, Dominion Canners of Niagara Falls threatened growers that unless they committed to growing as many tomatoes as the canners required and at the price they set, they would not open their canneries at all in the coming season.²¹ As early as 1908, moreover, rumours circulated in Niagara that the large combines were pressuring groceries to buy canned goods exclusively from them.²²

The combines' efforts to become sole suppliers of groceries threatened to undermine the main strategy of growers to free themselves from the domination of large canners: "home canning." Instead of selling unprocessed produce, individual farmers canned fruits and vegetables on their farms and marketed the product. While the reliance of many Niagara growers on this practice suggests that they saw it as more profitable than selling unprocessed produce on the market, they faced enormous difficulties in competing with the large canners. Because companies such as Canadian Canners purchased cans in bulk, large producers such as American Can offered them cans at lower costs than to home canners. Given that the cost of cans comprised more than the costs of the produce and the labour combined, this gave the large canners a tremendous advantage.²³ Other costs for the canners were rates of municipal taxation and the costs of water. Here too corporations had the advantage. Shuttered cannery buildings were useful to the large producers in their negotiations with municipal governments. Canners used the threat of removing production to those plants in order to force taxes and utility costs down.²⁴

19. *Globe*, 24 June 1908.

20. *Globe*, 21 March 1903.

21. *Globe*, 10 March 1915.

22. *Globe*, 28 January 1908.

23. Canada, *Royal Commission on Price Spreads: Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, No. 41, (29 December 1934), 3400.

24. Simcoe Canning Co. Rebuilding program, 1935, Office of the City Clerk, St. Catharines, RG 343, Box 21, Folder 1, Brock University Library Special Collections and Archives.

Thus, not only could the large canners set the price of fruits and vegetables that they canned themselves, as well as the wages of their employees, they also squeezed the home canners to lower the costs of production any way they could, and this in turn meant that the wages of pickers and cannery workers employed by the small canners were especially low.²⁵

As the fruit and vegetable industries expanded, women continued to make up the largest number of workers. Indeed, the region relied more heavily on female labour than any other agricultural area in Canada.²⁶ Although economic need drove women workers to the fields, orchards packinghouses and canneries, the rationale offered for their low wages at the turn of the 20th century countered that reality by claiming that women and adolescents worked for frivolities and luxuries. "Deep down in every woman's heart," wrote the *Globe*, "slumbers the desire for a sum of money which she can use for her special purposes of her own, and this means that wives and daughters who are not given a personal allowance resort to all sorts of little schemes to earn one." That desire was especially pronounced in the country, where "the personal allowance is almost an unknown quantity." There women added to their savings from selling eggs, butter, and chickens and picking fruit.²⁷ Such explanations of the reasons behind women's engagement in paid work were used to rationalize women's low wages by implying that as secondary earners they and their families did not depend on these wages.

III

THE EXPANSION AND CHANGE of fruit and vegetable production in Niagara were responsible for the sector's growing reliance on non-British immigrant and Indigenous workers. At the very beginning of the 20th century, however, the number of immigrant women and children in Ontario's Niagara region was small. Despite the fact that with the introduction of cheap hydro-electricity the industrialization of Niagara was under way, at this stage of development the region attracted primarily male immigrants to work on the building of new transportation lines, hydro generating stations, new factories, housing, sewers, and sidewalks. Most of them had come to Canada on their own, because they were sojourners who took seasonal employment wherever they found it to earn money quickly and intended to return to their homelands with savings. Consequently, women of Italian and Polish descent were first "imported" to Niagara from the Buffalo area.²⁸

25. *Royal Commission on Price Spreads*, No. 41, 29 December 1934, 3393.

26. George V. Haythorne and Leonard C. Marsh, *Land and Labour: A Social Survey of Agriculture and Farm Labour Market in Central Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1941), 220.

27. *Globe*, 31 July 1909.

28. Methodist Church (Canada), Department of Evangelism and Social Service, St. Catharines

By the time that food and vegetable processing was being modernized and concentrated in Niagara, areas that had industrialized earlier, notably Buffalo and some smaller towns in its vicinity, had a larger pool of immigrant women. Groups of women and children, or among the Italians frequently entire families, moved from the city to farms owned by New York state canneries for the growing and harvest seasons. Cannery and growers provided them with lodgings, fuel, and farm produce, free of charge. Thus, although the wages they earned were low, their daily expenditures were lower than in the city.²⁹

As Virginia Yans-McLaughlin explained in her study of Italian immigrants in Buffalo, immigrants from southern Italy, in particular, preferred work in the fields and canneries over factory work in the city because whole families could work together. They believed that the maintenance of the family unit at work protected the moral purity of women and girls. Factory work was shunned because it removed women from familial patriarchal control. Although men did not always accompany women and children, because family units worked together agricultural and cannery work was believed not to jeopardize the family's well-being and women's respectability.³⁰ Cindy Hahamovitch points to long slack periods in industries such as garment, hat, and paper flower making, which employed large numbers of Italian immigrant women, as the reason for such women engaging annually in agricultural work. They were joined by casual male labourers. Undertaking such work was not worthwhile for most immigrant men, who held steadier, more remunerative factory jobs in Northeastern American cities.³¹

Whatever their motives, by the time that demand for cannery workers exceeded the supply available in Niagara, Italians and Poles from Buffalo journeyed all over New York state, in family and kin groups, to perform such work.³² They readily incorporated Niagara into their migration arrangements, paying scant attention to the Canada – USA border. Because the Canadian census enumeration occurred during the fruit and vegetable harvest season, the manuscript censuses for 1911 and 1921 offer us glimpses of Buffalo-area workers in Ontario. Most visible among them were Polish-born women. Their ages ranged from 13 to 70 and all were naturalized Americans. The women

District, *Report on a Limited Survey of Religious, Moral, Industrial and Housing Conditions*, (1915?), 26.

29. *Report of the Immigration Commission, Immigrants in Industries*, Part 24: Recent Immigrants in Agriculture, Vol. II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 487–519.

30. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880–1930* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), Chapter 7, “Like the Fingers of the Hand: Patterns of Work and Family Organization.”

31. Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labour: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870–1945* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 30–31.

32. Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community*, 184.

were housed in dormitories next to canneries in St. Catharines, Beamsville, and Stamford.³³

Haudenosaunee people from the Six Nations Reserve, many of whom travelled to pick fruits and vegetables in Niagara, were another important source of labour for growers and canneries. Ella Claus, born on the Reserve in 1912, remembered that her closest friends and their families went to the berry farms and fruit farms around Niagara. “They went in May and maybe didn’t come back until late September because they picked fruit, or sowing or planting.”³⁴

The migratory character of seasonal agricultural workers appears to have contributed to their low status. Mae Ngai and Gunther Peck have examined such racialization of workers in the early 20th century in the United States. There, racism pushed Mexican railway workers into seasonal work on “extra” gangs, whereas Irishmen and native-born “Americans” tended to work year-round. The Mexicans’ resulting transiency in turn reinforced their racialization.³⁵

The status of female agricultural workers was further diminished because their more established contemporaries believed that transience undermined patriarchal control and domestic order. They questioned the respectability of women who left their homes and domestic duties to engage in farm and cannery work. American reformers were critical of these female agricultural workers of Italian origin. Although they noted that long and arduous labour undoubtedly contributed to the women’s disinclination to give much attention to their quarters, the American investigators observed with disapproval that the women were “poor housewives” and “inferior cooks.” In the eyes of their American critics, the clothing of female labourers of Italian origin accentuated their status as outsiders. “The older women have been slow in adopting American customs as to dress,” they wrote. The handkerchiefs or shawls they tied over their heads, their loose, ill-fitting dresses, and their bare feet indicated the women’s low rank. Even the young women and girls who had been born in the United States and who dressed similarly to “American working girls” earned the disapproval of American observers for their taste in “flashy colours.”³⁶

33. See, for example, *Canada Census (1911)*, Lincoln County, St. Catharines, Lake St. Canning Factory; Lincoln County, Niagara (Virgil), 14; *Canada Census (1921)*, Lincoln County, District 36, 9–10.

34. Beth Brant, *I’ll Sing ‘Til the Day I Die: Conversations with Tyendinaga Elders* (Toronto: McGilligan Books, 1995), 54–55.

35. Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects, Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 132; Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labour: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in The North American West, 1880–1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 167–168.

36. *Report of the Immigration Commission*, 501, 502, 510, 515. For an analysis of attempts to assimilate both immigrants and aboriginal peoples to dominant family ideals, gender codes, and capitalist values in post-World War II Canada see Bohaker and Iacovetta, “Making

North of the border, press reports about cannery workers referred to female migrants' dubious character and conduct more obliquely. A 1905 article in the *Toronto Globe*, for example, suggested that if more suitable arrangements could be made by canners, "respectable women with grown up children" would consider employment in that sector.³⁷ Rather than being concerned with the welfare of the Italian, Polish, and other immigrant workers, the author would have preferred not to "import" such women because these itinerant "foreign" and "Indian" women fell outside the boundaries of "respectable" womanhood.

On both sides of the border, critics seemed oblivious to the fact that employers in the fruit and vegetable industry preferred such female employees precisely because "their freedom from household duties" permitted them to work longer hours.³⁸ The time and energy these women would require to feed themselves, keep their quarters clean and launder their clothes, did not enter into the employers' calculations. Because these workers had come some distance from their home, moreover, they were less likely than local workers to abandon their work mid-season.

The authors of an early 20th-century survey of cannery workers in Niagara, commissioned by the Methodist Church, were seemingly alone in empathizing with and acknowledging the human rights of the Italian and Polish women who came to Niagara from south of the border. These investigators identified the primitive accommodations provided by canners as responsible for the difficulties of female workers who wanted to keep their persons and clothing clean. Ignoring employers' desire to monitor female seasonal workers in light of their suspected lax morality, researchers for the Methodist Church also questioned the right of the employers to limit freedom of movement by confining women to bunk houses after eight o'clock in the evening.³⁹

The most chilling evidence of the marginalization of these "foreign immigrants" in Niagara is offered by a newspaper report about the death of two and the injury of five female workers when a Hamilton, Grimsby, and Beamsville Electric Railway car struck a dray transporting about a dozen women workers. The women were all Poles, brought to Beamsville from the Buffalo area to work in the local cannery. "It is impossible to learn their names," wrote the *Globe* in 1918, "which are known only to the factory which employs them."⁴⁰ Their invisibility is a reflection of their marginalization. The local paper, the *Beamsville Express*, did list the names of the young women and girls who died in the accident as well as those who were injured. Contemporaries, however, do not appear to have been very interested in these outsiders who lived near

Aboriginal People 'Immigrants Too.'"

37. *Globe*, 12 July 1905.

38. *Report on a Limited Survey of Religious, Moral, Industrial and Housing Conditions*, 26.

39. *Report on a Limited Survey*, 25.

40. *Globe*, 23 July 1918.

them for only part of each year and did not engage much with the surrounding communities.

IV

ABORIGINAL WORKERS OCCUPIED a place below that of “foreign” women in the eyes of Niagara residents of British descent, despite the fact that their willingness to work in the fruit and vegetable industry was crucial for its survival. In 1906, for example, a year when crops were plentiful and labour scarce, the press credited “Indians” from the Grande River reserve for saving Niagara fruit farmers.⁴¹ A 1922 Ontario Agricultural College thesis, “Planning and Managing a Fifty Acre Fruit Farm,” written with the object of “solving some of the more frequent problems that come up in the practice of fruit growing,” explained the benefits of employing “Indians” on fruit farms. “The quality of their work” was “excellent,” the thesis explained, “because from long experience they have become expert.” It also claimed that because “the Reserve” was their “base of subsistence,” they were willing and able to work seasonally in the fields and orchards. Moreover, they were supposedly “content with inferior dwellings.”⁴² These graduate students did not consider that, owing to racist hiring practices, Indigenous people were not in a position to insist on better housing as a condition for undertaking seasonal labour.

Possession, Mazo de la Roche’s 1923 novel, offers a more detailed exploration of how some established English Canadian residents of southern Ontario viewed the “Indians” who came annually to work on fruit farms.⁴³ The novel’s central character, Derek Vale, a young architect from Nova Scotia, learns about the lowly rank of the “Indians” when he inherits from his uncle a farm called Grimstone on the shore of Lake Ontario. When Derek is dismayed to discover that the dilapidated shack at the end of his garden houses the Indigenous workers, his uncle’s housekeeper explains the racial hierarchy among seasonal workers. She tells him that the locals “have a prejudice agin (sic) us here because we have always employed Indians.” According to her, accommodations at Grimstone are far superior to those provided on other farms. On some farms, she tells Derek, the “Indians” sleep in the barn.⁴⁴

De la Roche is not without empathy for the poverty and marginalization of Indigenous people. Her observations about the racism of some of the novel’s white characters are unmistakably critical.⁴⁵ Indeed, the socialist poet Dorothy

41. *Globe*, 24 July 1906.

42. M.S. Nelles and W.B. Cody, “Fifty Acre Fruit Farm,” MA thesis, Ontario Agricultural College, 1922.

43. Mazo De la Roche, *Possession* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1923).

44. *Possession*, 60, 47.

45. *Possession*, 66, 145–148.

Livesay (1909–1996) viewed de la Roche's early writings, including *Possession*, as expressions of her concern for the "disinherited."⁴⁶ Yet the novel's pages are replete with colonial stereotypes about the supposed racial characteristics of "Indians." Her references to their unreliability as workers, their slyness and dishonesty, and their semi-civilized state are especially telling for the purposes of this study.⁴⁷

Possession also suggests the persistence of the colonial construction of Aboriginal sexuality as a racial and class marker even in 1920s Ontario.⁴⁸ As Sarah Carter, Jean Barman, and Joan Sangster, among others, have shown, the sexual independence and flexible marriage practices of Indigenous women led European colonizers to construct racial stereotypes of these women as sexually promiscuous and morally weak. Consequently, their engagement in the fruit and vegetable industry represented a threat to some of the settled, respectable citizens of Niagara. De la Roche's description of Derek Vale's infatuation with Fawnie, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the Sharroes, the Aboriginal family in his employ, is strikingly similar to perceptions of Aboriginal female sexuality identified by feminist histories of colonized societies.⁴⁹ "What was there about her? Some odd barbaric charm.... She was oriental, like some strange, sweet fruit that allured, even though one knew it were poison."⁵⁰ Fawnie also fancies Derek, and in sharp contrast to the presumed innocence and passivity of English Canadian women at this time, she seduces him. She is soon carrying his child.

Full of desire and wracked by guilt, Derek moves Fawnie from the shack that houses her family into his home. His white neighbours express their outrage by subjecting him to a charivari under the cover of night. They stone Derek's house and amidst catcalls and laughter shout at him "Where's your fancy girl? ... Bring out your squaw! ... Let's see your squaw baby." Pressured by his neighbours' attack, Derek marries Fawnie, but she is not easily "domesticated." Derek's disapproving housekeeper and staff leave the farm. Fawnie, "half-civilized" herself, has lax standards of cleanliness and order, and allows her son – named Buckskin by Derek – to grow without discipline.⁵¹ Most significantly, marriage does not tame her sexuality. When Derek's brother visits

46. Joan Givner, *Mazo de la Roche: The Hidden Life* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), 75.

47. *Possession*, 66, 71, 156.

48. See Sangster, "Native Women, Sexuality and the Law."

49. For a discussion of the images of colonized women and their sexuality see, for example, Sharon W. Tiffany and Kathleen J. Adams, *The Wild Woman: An Inquiry into the Anthropology of an Idea* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1985), and Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

50. *Possession*, 137.

51. *Possession*, 98, 229.

and beguiles her by playing the piano, she thanks him by embracing him and kissing him on the lips just as her husband walks into the room. Eventually she leaves Derek and Buckskin, for a man of mixed parentage who has been a member of the Sharroes' fruit-harvesting group. Fawnie does not return to Derek until the end of the novel.

One indication of contemporary fascination with cross-race sexual encounters was the focus of some of *Possession's* reviewers on the forbidden love between Fawnie and Derek. "The main interest of the story is along other lines than the strawberries crop," wrote the *Globe*. It concerns "the attractions of one of the Indian girls, Fawnie, a daughter of a chief and the descendant of Tecumseh," into whose "meshes" Derek Vale "fell a victim." In keeping with the perception of Aboriginal women as sexually unrestrained, the seventeen-year-old berry picker is the perpetrator, and the educated, adult farm owner the unwitting victim of her feminine guiles. For marrying Fawnie, Derek is a "strange social misfit."⁵²

V

THE GREAT EXPANSION of food production for domestic and foreign markets during World War I created shortages of farm labour. By offering some of the immigrants who normally worked in Niagara's fields, orchards, packinghouses, and canneries better paying and steadier employment elsewhere, the war may also have depleted the ranks of seasonal labourers. The Ontario and federal governments stepped in to find alternative sources of labour for growers and canners. They mounted a campaign to recruit female university and senior high-school students, teachers and young business women (or clerks) – most of them also female. Implicitly differentiating them from "foreigners" and "Indians," the press in Niagara and elsewhere referred to these women as "of good class," "educated," and of "good home training."⁵³ The Ontario press gave the government their "hearty co-operation."⁵⁴

Such a "good class" of women could clearly not be housed in the type of quarters offered "foreigners" and "Indians." The federal and provincial departments of labour called upon the YWCA to take charge of special camps for the young women. In Grimsby, for example, the YWCA camp's sleeping quarters were made up of an old colonial house and tents. The house had a veranda with hammocks and tables and chairs, which served as a gathering place for the women. There was also a sitting room in the house with a large fireplace. In the dining room, a converted, white-washed barn, cooks prepared breakfast

52. *Globe*, 14 June 1923.

53. *Globe*, 4 January 1913; *Toronto Star*, 19 July 1918. Although officials employed a variety of names for different groups among the Farm Service Workers (FSW), in these pages, all female FSW are described as farmerettes.

54. Ontario, *Sessional Papers*, 1917, no. 16, 52.

and dinner, but the “girls” were responsible for washing up after dinner and preparing sandwiches for lunch if they required them. When they finished their exhausting outside work, “daughters of Canada” were not expected to clean their quarters. The camp’s hired staff did so.⁵⁵

Many of the farmerettes purchased regulation uniforms of bloomers and middy tunics.⁵⁶ In all likelihood the uniforms were designed not only to foster an esprit de corps, but also to guarantee that the young women appeared respectable, unlike “imported” workers. Although officials would have preferred uniformity, they recognized that some farmerettes did not want to incur the expense. All wore a serge badge with the words “Ontario National Service Workers.”⁵⁷

Many inducements were offered to the “true daughters of Canada.” They were embraced by Niagara communities. They were encouraged to participate in community leisure activities, and local people drove them around the countryside on their days off. The low wages offered, and the hard work involved in fruit picking, often acknowledged in state-sponsored publicity designed to attract middle-class women to the fields and canneries, were countered by an emphasis on the health benefits of outdoors work and Niagara’s many recreational offerings. Lending dignity to work in the fruit and vegetable industry was another way of rendering it more appealing. Articles in the press now described such agricultural work as a “national service” and “a vocation for women,”⁵⁸ and called upon the women’s patriotism to draw them to the fields, packinghouses, and canneries. In the hope that they would return for the following season, wartime officials rewarded the farmerettes at the end of their service with certificates attesting to their service and with public celebrations. At the Toronto War Gardens Vegetable Show in the Toronto Armories, for example, farmerettes drove a tractor, and presented musical parodies of experiences in farmerette camps.⁵⁹ The Department of Labour supplied Ontario’s largest daily newspapers with material about the camps, including humorous poems and songs about farmerette life.⁶⁰ In the first pageant designed to mark the contributions of women to war work at the Canadian National Exhibition, farmerettes marched proudly attired in their uniforms, drove farm machines or travelled on floats representing their work.⁶¹ A relatively

55. *Globe*, 15 September 1917.

56. *Globe*, 15 September 1917.

57. *Globe*, 18 July 1918.

58. *Globe*, 4 January 1918.

59. *Globe*, 14 September 1918.

60. Ontario, *Sessional Papers*, 1917, 52.

61. *Globe*, 9 July 1918; 29 August 1918.



Farmerettes working in a field, 1917–1918, Grimsby, Ontario.
Grimsby Museum

new medium, the Canadian silent film, “When Nature Smiles,” documented their contributions.⁶²

However proud the farmerettes themselves were of their work in the fruit and vegetable industry, they were unwilling to perform this work for patriotism and praise alone. That is why they preferred to be placed by public employment bureaus. “Canadian daughters” had faith that the state would defend them against unjust treatment. Indeed, wages were generally higher among workers supervised by the government.⁶³ Confident in their membership in the body of the nation, the women were also willing and able to take matters into their own hands. The University of Toronto “girl students” who planned to pick fruits in Niagara in the summer of 1918, for example, met in the University’s physics building to plan their strategy of improving working conditions in the fields and orchards. A committee composed of representatives from each of the camps where the farmerettes had lived and worked in the previous summer prepared resolutions that they now presented to the wider group. The Toronto *Globe’s* description of their meeting, “where the clicking of knitting needles mingled with talk of summer days,” suggested not anger at their treatment, but calm confidence in their rights. Refusing to accept the

62. Clips from the film formed part of the exhibition “The Town that Fruit Built,” March–November 2015, Grimsby Museum.

63. Ontario, *Sessional Papers*, 1918, 21.

excessively long hours imposed by the growers, the women insisted on a nine-hour day, with an hour for lunch, and half-days off on Saturdays. They also demanded that workers returning from their arduous outdoor work be freed from having to perform housework after hours. Finally, they called for such “sanitary necessities” as bathing accommodation and tent flooring. Having obtained the group’s approval, their representatives organized a meeting with growers to present their demands. Initially the growers refused, but when the majority of the young women announced that they would not go back to the farms, the growers decided to reconsider their demands. In the absence of additional reports about the outcome of this protest, it is not possible to say if all the farmerettes’ demands were met. What is clear, is that their racial designation, class confidence, education, and knowledge of English permitted them to improve their working conditions in ways that were not open to women who depended on seasonal farm work for their own and their family’s livelihood.⁶⁴ The paternalistic state was engaged in ensuring the welfare of these “daughters of Canada.” Not being dependent on their summer wages, the farmerettes were in a position, ironically, to demand reasonable hours, living accommodations, food and a “living wage.”⁶⁵

On occasion, farmerettes even resorted to strikes to obtain their demands. The summer of 1918 was so dry that there were fewer berries, these were harder to pick than usual, and earnings were low. Unrest spread among “fair farmerettes all over the Niagara fruit belt.” They went on strike or threatened to do so. On 30 July 1918, for example, 35 high-school girls between the ages of seventeen and twenty struck a farm near Winona demanding a dollar-and-a-half a day. Although the women’s branch of the Ontario Government Employment Bureau found that the girls were not doing enough work to earn that amount of money, the farmer agreed to the girls’ demands, fearing that his fruits would spoil.⁶⁶

Some growers grumbled that only those girls who came to Niagara to have a good time rather than to work were unable to earn their keep. The young women’s protests, however, did not dissuade most growers and canners from seeing them as desirable employees. Indeed, in comments to a *Toronto Daily Star* reporter, they commended these “girls” on the manner in which they expressed their discontent: “if things don’t suit they call a meeting and ask their boss to attend and we straighten things out among ourselves.”⁶⁷ Niagara growers promised that they would not insist that the farmerettes work for more than nine hours a day. Wartime demand for produce may well have made the growers more flexible regarding wages and working conditions.

64. *Globe*, 10 November 1917; 30 July 1918.

65. *Toronto Daily Star*, 13 February 1918.

66. *Globe*, 6 August 1918.

67. *Toronto Daily Star*, 19 July 1918.



Farmerette tent, 1917–1918.

Grimsby Museum

However, the growers also identified these young women as members of their own community, and believed that as “daughters of Canada,” they deserved every consideration. In early 20th century rural Niagara, then, the “race” and middle-class status of most farmerettes trumped purely economic concerns. Just as the racialization of “imported workers” derogated their work, it added value to the labour of the farmerettes and, in turn, their willingness to engage in seasonal agricultural labour despite their membership in Canada’s dominant racial group raised the standing of the women themselves.

Growers, initially reluctant to sign contracts with the farmerettes,⁶⁸ decided that they were more valuable workers than Indigenous people and “foreigners.” In so doing, they revealed their deeply embedded racism. “They are slower pickers than the Indians,” a *Toronto Daily Star* correspondent learned, “but their work is better as the fruit is cleaner and less damaged.”⁶⁹ The *Star’s* informants seemed indifferent to the circumstances that drove Native workers to pick as much fruit as possible to maximize earnings, even if they damaged some of it in the process. Most farmerettes, who did not depend on earnings from their summer work, could afford to work more slowly and treat the fruit with greater care. A Niagara fruit farmer contrasted the performances of the farmerettes and the “foreigners” as fruit harvesters. He pronounced the “foreigners” most unsatisfactory. “They are dishonest in their accounts, and carry away fruit as well.”⁷⁰ Many of the farmers believed that the farmerettes’

68. *Globe*, 30 November 1918.

69. *Toronto Daily Star*, 13 February 1918.

70. *Globe*, 30 August 1920.

labour added special value to their fruits. They sent it to market bearing the sign, "Picked by the National Service Girls." By implication the involvement of "foreigners" and "Indians" not only debased work in the fruit and vegetable industry but also diminished the value of its products. Their role in the industry was thus not advertised.

The willingness of employers and civil servants to accommodate "daughters of Canada" underscores the rigidity of racial classification at this time. "Imported" workers were apparently undeserving of similar consideration. Their racialization permanently diminished the value of their labour. But the growers knew that such minority workers did not willingly accept this state of affairs. That is why the growers would not state publicly that they hired the farmerettes for nine-hour days. They feared that knowledge of such a concession would "upset labour conditions throughout the fruit district."⁷¹

Indigenous seasonal workers also protested against the conditions that their more privileged counterparts found so objectionable. However, little evidence remains of such protests before 1918. The 1922 Ontario Agricultural College thesis on fruit farms reveals that Indigenous workers did not hesitate to back their demands for higher wages by withdrawing their labour. If their demands were refused, "an entire gang" would "decamp within a couple of hours, leaving the grower in a serious predicament regarding the crop." The co-authors describe such behaviour as "a strike without warning" and see it as evidence of the "clannishness" and "unreliability" of "Indians."⁷² From the adverse comparison between Aboriginal pickers and farmerettes we know that they employed other modes of resistance as well. Thus, for example, they refused to pick berries from scattered patches because such work would have prevented them from earning a decent wage.⁷³ Their postwar protests suggest that "imported" workers also expressed their discontent by short, local work stoppages. Given the growers' vehement response to protests by "foreigners" in their employ after the war, the emphasis on the measured protests of the farmerettes may have been yet another way in which to distinguish these "daughters of Canada" from their "imported" counterparts.⁷⁴

But the employers' admiration of "Canadian" farm labourers had its limits, especially if these labourers were female. Despite describing the supposed financial advantages that the farmerettes offered over "foreign" women and "Indians," farmers appeared to fear that excessive praise would make them too expensive. To explain why the women continued to be paid less than men,

71. Unnamed document of negotiations with growers, beginning 1 November, "Employment Female, 1918-1919," Correspondence of the Deputy Minister of Labour, Department of Labour, RG 7-12-0-10, AO.

72. M.S. Nelles and W.B. Cody, "Fifty Acre Fruit Farm," MA thesis, Ontario Agricultural College, 1922, 14.

73. Ontario, *Sessional Papers*, 1917, 56.

74. For a discussion of protests during the interwar years see below.

a male participant in the Conference of District Agricultural Representatives at the Ontario Agricultural College, who otherwise applauded the women's efforts, declared that "they cannot be said to be as good as men without qualifications." "Women can't handle the heavy ladders and baskets," he explained.⁷⁵

VI

WHEN WORLD WAR I ENDED, Niagara employers hoped that women like the farmerettes would continue to work for them. The previously cited thesis about planning and managing small fruit farms made clear that their "race" was the greatest attribute of English Canadian middle class "girls," teachers, and others. If these young women are employed, the authors explained, "the standard of society in the community is not lowered as it would be by the bringing in of foreigners."⁷⁶ By replacing "imported" workers, these women could preserve the racial integrity of Niagara communities.

Some farmers even expanded the production of fruits because they believed they now had access to a reliable work force. A Fenwick area farmer credited the farmerettes' "demonstration of what they could do, especially along the lines of picking fruit," with convincing him to undertake large-scale cultivation of strawberries, raspberries, cherries, and pears.⁷⁷ Niagara grape-growers condemned the practice of paying piecework to pickers, and "went on record as favoring a fixed wage by the day or by the hour, as they felt that the latter arrangement would result in better packed and more carefully picked grapes."⁷⁸

As during the war, they continued to promote the non-economic attractions of working in the fruit and vegetable sector to recruit college girls, teachers, and "girls" from many branches of the business world.⁷⁹ To this end they advertised the enticements awaiting fruit pickers and packers: carefree outdoor existence; benefits to health; spiritual uplift; wonderful scenery; friendships formed; motor rides in the cool evening; boating; swimming; dances; and impromptu entertainments. When seasonal agricultural work was promoted this way, the low wages it garnered appeared less important.⁸⁰ The time spent by pickers and cannery workers in Niagara appeared more like a vacation than work. An assumption underlying such promotion was that only women – whose stay in the workforce was supposedly temporary – could take advantage of such an opportunity. Seasonal agricultural labour in Niagara was thus gendered work. Whether promoters acknowledged it or not, however, such promotion was

75. *Globe*, 18 July 1918.

76. Nelles and Cody, "Fifty Acre Fruit Farm," 15.

77. *Globe*, 26 July 1921.

78. *Globe*, 17 June 1921.

79. *Globe*, 7 June 1921.

80. *Globe*, 26 July 1921.



Canadian Cannery #7 Employees, Grimsby, Ont. C. 1920.
Grimsby Museum

built on assumptions about class as well as race. Only women who were not dependent on the income from farm work could adopt such an attitude toward seasonal labour. Their ranks generally excluded non-British immigrant and Aboriginal women.

Even after World War I ended, federal and provincial governments continued to assist growers and canners to recruit seasonal labour through employment offices and by maintaining some of the camps that served farmerettes during the war.⁸¹ Housing many of the workers, however, now fell to the growers. Niagara growers became so convinced of the worth of women as harvesters of fruit and vegetables that they did their utmost to provide them with excellent conditions: comfortable housing, with bathrooms and laundry facilities, and excellent cooked meals. Their experience with the farmerettes presumably taught them that they could expect efficient work only when working conditions were favourable. *Globe* reporter Nancy Durham concluded following a visit to three new camps that “the days of hardship for women workers in Ontario at least, are past.” She wrote optimistically about the likelihood of harvesting fruit becoming a remunerative and permanent occupation for women. In her assessment, the experience of the farmerettes during the last few years of the war completely overshadowed that of the immigrants and Indigenous people who had toiled in Niagara under far less favourable conditions since the turn of the 20th century.⁸²

81. *Globe*, 30 August 1920.

82. *Globe*, 30 August 1920.

Such improved accommodations were deemed unnecessary for “imported” workers. As the Ontario Agricultural College thesis on managing fruit farms explained in 1922, “suitable dwelling according to class” had to be erected to accommodate summer help. For “Indians and Pollocks,” two-roomed summer shacks were adequate, for “National Service girls or high school boys,” however, “a more pretentious house is usually required.”⁸³

The Ontario government extended the provincial Factory Act in 1919 to end the employment of children in the “desiccation of fruits and vegetables” in canneries, “thus eliminating entirely the legal employment of child labour in any factory in Ontario.” They also reasserted the prohibition of night work by female workers which had been lifted during the war. Government officials believed that women workers required this type of state protection because they would be unable to recover from fatigue by sleeping during the daytime in their crowded homes, that they would contract various ills in the absence of exposure to sunlight, and that “serious moral dangers” were “liable to result from the necessity of travelling through the streets alone at night, and from the interference with normal home life.”⁸⁴

Yet the Farmer Labour government elected in 1919 agreed under pressure from the Liberals to exclude farm workers, along with domestics, from the protection of its newly-enacted minimum wage legislation.⁸⁵ As the promotion of the “healthful character” of work in orchards and vegetable fields in labour recruitment literature suggests, the expansion of commercialized farming and the growing distance between growers and labourers had not changed this impression by the mid-20th century. The belief in good relations between farmers and farm labourers was evident in the comments of Walter Rollo, Ontario’s first minister of labour, on the amendment that excluded domestics and farm workers from the Minimum Wage Bill: “If all domestics were used as well in the city as they are on the farms,” he argued, “there would be no need for a Minimum Wage.”⁸⁶ Lobbying by farmers who, squeezed by canning corporations, argued that they could not afford to pay pickers higher wages, must also have contributed to the exclusion of farm workers from protective legislation. Eric Tucker suggests that in the second half of the 20th century, the reliance on “unfree labour” such as Displaced Persons and seasonal and temporary workers from abroad, contributed to this exceptionalism.⁸⁷ The analysis of minority workers in Niagara’s fruit and vegetable industry reveals

83. Nelles and Cody, “Fifty Acre Fruit Farm,” 16.

84. “Memorandum for Dr. William Jacques Re: Night Work;” File: Employment – Female, 1918–19, Department of Labour, AO; *Globe*, 19 June 1919.

85. *Globe*, 26 May 1920.

86. *Globe*, 26 May 1920.

87. Tucker, “Farm Worker Exceptionalism: Past, Present, and the Post-Fraser Future,” in Fay Faraday, Judy Fudge, and Eric Tucker eds., *Constitutional Labour Rights in Canada: Farm Workers and the Fraser Case* (Toronto: Irwin Law, 2012), 33–42.

that earlier in the century the invisibility of farm workers' lives – because most of them belonged to marginalized groups – did so as well.

In the absence of such legal protections, despite the stated intentions of Niagara growers, the farmerettes' wartime gains soon disappeared. By the years of the Great Depression, when high unemployment led workers to compete even for seasonal jobs, the toil of workers in the fields, orchards, packinghouses and canneries stretched out to as many as sixteen hours a day, up from the nine-hour days that the farmerettes had secured during the war.⁸⁸ Wages, moreover, were lower than in any other industry in Ontario.⁸⁹ In both fields and canneries wages declined during the 1930s.⁹⁰ In the canneries, moreover, which fell under the jurisdiction of Ontario's Minimum Wage Board, the Board's determination that some of the wages were illegally low had little effect because of laxity of record keeping. Despite the stiff competition that home canners faced from large companies, they were not the worst offenders. E.D. Smith, one of Ontario's largest canners, was paying the lowest wages in the province.⁹¹

Small wonder then that in years when fruit and vegetable crops were bountiful, growers again encountered difficulties recruiting sufficient labour to harvest their crops. The growers remained committed to their plans to engage high school students, especially female ones, during the summer. But this group was too small to satisfy the growers' needs. Moreover, students returned to school before the end of the agricultural season. Niagara's peach harvest took place roughly between mid-August and mid-September. The canning of peaches and other fruits happened even later. Increasingly, therefore, growers and canners relied once more on "foreign" women and Aboriginal pickers, whose options for better jobs disappeared at the end of World War I, and on newly arrived immigrant women, thousands of whom came to Ontario between the two world wars. According to the Superintendent of the women's division of Ontario's Employment Office, since cannery work "is necessarily damp and unpleasant ... it was impossible to get anyone but the foreign women to consider it."⁹² Oral testimony from the interwar years reveals that necessity drove "foreign" women to engage in this work: "If it wasn't for the fruit farms in Niagara-on-the-Lake, I don't know what I would have done. I made good money as soon as I arrived in Canada working out there in the

88. Canada, *Royal Commission on Price Spreads: Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, No. 41, 29 December 1934, 3389.

89. *Royal Commission on Price Spreads: Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, No. 40, 28 December 1934, 3281.

90. Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads* (Ottawa 1939), 377.

91. *Report of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads*, 377.

92. L. O. R. Kennedy, Superintendent, Women's Division, Ontario Employment Offices, to H. C. Hudson, General Superintendent, Employment Service of Canada, 23 October 1936, file: Canning Factories, 1936, Ontario Employment Offices, Department of Labour, AO.

orchards. Then when the tobacco was ready some of us worked down in Delhi and made even more. By winter the majority of us found some indoor work and then with a little luck we finally got steady indoor jobs and didn't have to work 'here and there.'"⁹³ During the Great Depression, however, "practically all women" were grateful for the work, and even unemployed men, many of them immigrants, joined the women's ranks. The dominance of immigrant women in this sector reinvigorated the conviction that such women were "more suited to the work."⁹⁴ By placing "foreign" women in seasonal agricultural work, state officials reinforced their racialization. Haudenosaunee families from the Six Nations Reserve, including middle-aged men and women, young girls and boys and even babies, also continued to migrate to orchards on the western shores of Lake Ontario, arriving when the fruits began to ripen in April, and at times staying until December, "helping with the planting, hoeing and weeding."⁹⁵

As marginalized workers came to dominate the field again, seasonal agricultural workers faded from public view once more. Nevertheless, we do have some information about their situation. The 1934 Royal Commission on Price Spreads investigated the fruit and vegetable industry. Moreover, poor wages and working conditions, as well as labour unrest in this sector between 1935 and 1937, attracted the attention of David Croll, Ontario's Minister of Labour and Public Welfare.

Complaints from constituents were one reason behind the state's investigation of conditions in the canning industry. An employee of Canadian Cannery in Grimsby, Ontario, signing herself "Labourite," for example, wrote to the Department of Public Welfare complaining that her employers who promised to increase cannery workers' pay upon the visit of a wage inspector, refused "because Premier M. F. Hepburn sent in word" that the existing hourly rate "was enough."⁹⁶ Owing to the scarcity of work during the Depression, such complaints were rare.⁹⁷ A successful organizing drive among sugar beet workers by the communist-led Agricultural and Cannery Workers Union in the Windsor area, the constituency of David Croll, probably also drew official attention to seasonal labourers. Croll asked his deputy minister, J. F. Marsh, to notify canning factories that violations of the Factory Act must cease.⁹⁸ Marsh

93. Geraldine Voros, "The Hungarian Ethnic Group: A Focus on an Ontario Community," MA thesis, McMaster University, 1975, 51.

94. L. O. R. Kennedy, Superintendent, Women's Division, Ontario Employment Offices, to H. C. Hudson, General Superintendent, Employment Service of Canada, 23 October 1936, file: Canning Factories, 1936, Ontario Employment Offices, Department of Labour, AO.

95. *Toronto Daily Star*, 28 June 1930.

96. Labourite to David Croll, 16 October 1936, Cannery, 1935-37, AO.

97. L.O. R. Kennedy, Superintendent, Women's Division, Ontario Employment Offices, to H.C. Hudson, General Superintendent, Employment Service Canada, 23 October 1936, Canning Factories, 1936, Department of Labour, AO.

98. David Croll to J. F. Marsh, 28 September 1936, Canning Factories, 1936, AO.

summoned the province's fruit and vegetable canners to inform them that they would have to comply both with the Factory Act and the Minimum Wage Act, keep their premises and equipment up to certain standards, and enable employees to keep their persons clean.⁹⁹

The Canning Industry Committee responded that the only provisions of the Factory Act that would create difficulties were the restrictions on women's working hours, especially the prohibition of night work. They claimed that the shortage of labour, the lack of adequate space to accommodate more workers, and the desire of the workers themselves to work long hours necessitated that women be allowed to work 10-hour shifts, to a maximum of 72 hours a week, and until 11 o'clock at night.¹⁰⁰ Expressing doubts in the reasoning of the canners, the Department of Labour's chief inspector pointed out that Canadian Canners' shuttered factories could be reopened to accommodate more workers.¹⁰¹

Foreign-language newspapers linked to the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), whose base of support was strongest in certain immigrant communities, were also attentive to the condition of seasonal agricultural workers during the depression. Their goal was to convince the workers to join communist or communist-led organizations. In 1934, the CPC began a campaign to organize seasonal agricultural workers in the Agricultural Workers Union (later Agricultural and Cannery Workers Union) in Niagara. It formed part of the Workers Unity League, a radical trade union organization set up by the Red International of Labour Unions. Organizing such unorganized workers as seasonal agricultural labourers, the unemployed, and women, was an important aim of the Workers Unity League's work.¹⁰² A St. Catharines local was established in May 1934.¹⁰³ After 1935, when the CPC altered its policy, promoting a Popular Front against fascism among labour organizations and all left-wing organizations, the Party continued to pay special attention to women workers in order to encourage such collaboration.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, seasonal

99. James F. Marsh to H. J. O'Hara, 30 November 1936, Canning Factories, 1936, AO.

100. Canning Industry Committee to Minister of Labour, 26 November 1936, Cannery, 1935–37, AO.

101. J. R. Prain, Chief Inspector, Department of Labour, to J.F. March, Deputy Minister, Department of Labour, 23 September 1936, Canning Factories, 1936, AO.

102. Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1996), 62–63; Bryan Palmer, *Working Class Experience* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 253–254; John Manley, "Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism and the 'Third Period': The Workers' Unity League, 1929–1935," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 5, 11 (1994): 162–194.

103. *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 24 May 1934.

104. See Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920–1950* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), Chapter 5, and Stephen L. Endicott, *Raising the Workers' Flag: The Workers' Unity League of Canada, 1930–1936* (Toronto: University of

agricultural work in Niagara, which employed so many unorganized immigrant women, received more extensive coverage in communist publications.

As part of their organizing efforts, foreign-language communist newspapers solicited letters from “worker correspondents” about conditions in Niagara’s orchards, fields and canneries. Limitations of language restrict the examples used here to letters that appeared in the *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, the Hungarian-language communist newspaper. Fortunately, Hungarians comprised a substantial group in Niagara and many of the women were seasonal agricultural labourers. Because the majority of Hungarian immigrants to interwar Canada were peasants and workers, with only the most rudimentary education, they required prompting and guidance to submit letters to the newspaper. That guidance – at times heavy-handed – influenced both the subjects and the tone of the letters. Topics the paper’s editors deemed worthy of attention included: working conditions, cutbacks in wages, the difficulty of work, unemployment, “slave-driving” practices, and bad housing conditions. One set of guidelines, reflecting the sectarianism of the Third Period (1930–1935), asked aspiring correspondents to consider whether “the traitorous A. F. of L. or social fascists” were active in their workplaces, and whether the workers were fighting against “Canadian fascists and their cronies the Hungarian fascists.”¹⁰⁵ Although some of the resulting letters can only be described as propagandistic, others contained information and understanding of the predicament of Niagara’s “imported” workers that could not be found in the mainstream press. At times, therefore, such communications offer rare glimpses of Niagara’s canning industry from the perspective of workers.

A 1934 letter by a Niagara fruit picker entitled “Immeasurable Wealth and Misery in St. Catharines,” illustrates the excesses of some of the material submitted by worker correspondents. It describes fruit packers saving blemished fruits, deemed unsuitable for the market, to take home to their children. In their hunger and eagerness to get the rotten fruit, the hungry children “stomp on each other,” and the fruit infects them with such contagious intestinal diseases as “stomach typhus.” Meanwhile, the “sacrosanct,” “undeserving” children of “upper class ladies, live off the fat of the land.” Ironically, writing in the wake of the deaths of millions during the Soviet famine of 1932–33, the *Munkás* writer contrasted conditions in capitalist Canada with those in the Soviet Union, where he claimed that workers and their children got their share of everything produced. The writer closed by urging male and female comrades to organize so they could overthrow the system that offered the working class nothing but hunger and misery, creating a Soviet Canada.¹⁰⁶

A letter from a female reader conveyed the desperation of foreign-born women to obtain cannery work during the depression. Because so few places

Toronto Press, 2012), Chapter 9.

105. *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 29 March 1935; 20 July 1935.

106. *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 26 July 1934.

offered work for women, she wrote, large groups lined up at dawn at a Hamilton cannery's door to ensure that they could get in.¹⁰⁷ Other women relocated to be close to fields, orchards and canneries during the agricultural season, with the hope that they could work in more than one type of operation in the food and vegetable industry. Given the hardships of the Great Depression, milk and vegetables supplied by some growers free of charge may have provided added incentives for such workers.¹⁰⁸ Others still remained in town, but waited on designated corners early in the morning to be picked up by farmers' trucks, or walked or bicycled long distances to fields and orchards.¹⁰⁹ Pointing to working women's special difficulties without questioning the division of labour in working-class homes, the *Munkás* noted that long working hours in the canneries meant that married women could not go home in time to tend to their children's needs.¹¹⁰

A worker correspondent from Crowland, signing herself "Pioneer," the name borne by Hungarian members of the CPC's youth movement, appealed to women specifically when she described workers at the Canadian Cannery number 50 cannery in Fonthill. Although they wore laminated aprons and rubber boots, she wrote, their clothing was nevertheless wet through from the steam and the water on the cannery floor. Exposure to cold September drafts from windows kept open to relieve the great heat generated by washing and boiling fruits, vegetables and cans thus made them susceptible to catching colds. Piecework prevented the women from earning a living wage. "Pioneer" explained that what made such unacceptable working conditions possible was the great power imbalance between the "bosses" and the workers. The bosses deliberately increased the workers' vulnerability by recruiting more workers from neighbouring Welland than they needed.¹¹¹

Unlike mainstream newspapers, submissions from the *Munkás'* worker correspondents paid attention to the ethnicity of the workers. Their letters suggest that the workers' ability to transcend ethnic divisions because of their shared status as "foreigners" sometimes helped collective action in this sector. A participant in a short strike at the Canadian Cannery plant in St. David's, for example, explained that the female workers who struck for higher wages were organized roughly by ethnicity. The main groups, Russians (probably

107. *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 20 July 1933.

108. William Gadsby to the Deputy Minister, Department of Labour, 15 October 1937, Strikes and Lockouts, Department of Labour, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC).

109. Author's interviews with John Durley, Welland, November 1986; Steven Bornemissza, Welland, November 1986; Pearl Kalynuk, Welland, December 1986; Violet Smagala, Welland, December 1986; Henry Radecki, *A History of the Polish Community in St. Catharines* (Project History, 2002), 28, 29; Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains: A History of Armenians in Canada* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 258.

110. *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 27 November 1930.

111. *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 25 September 1934.

Ukrainians), Hungarians, Romanians and Italians, each elected one representative to present the women's demands to management. In this strike the women were victorious.¹¹²

Amidst circumstances that so strongly favoured employers, not surprisingly, many "imported" workers hesitated to protest against the long hours and low wages paid to seasonal workers. But anger at some measures introduced in this employers' market pushed them to overcome their caution. In June 1933, for example, when a canner threatened to lower their earnings of ten to fifteen cents an hour by requiring that they pay for the gloves and knives they used at work, the women walked out, barricading the cannery doors to prevent the entry of strike breakers.¹¹³ We do not know the outcome of this strike. In general, however, such strikes were short.¹¹⁴ They were more likely to succeed in the case of smaller canneries whose owners feared that the produce would spoil if the workers stayed out too long. Larger Niagara canners, however, such as E.D. Smith, had ready access to strike-breakers during the depression.

The reactions of growers and the public to strikes by minority workers were patently different from their response to similar protests by farmerettes during World War I. When a strike for higher wages broke out among cherry pickers on an E. D. Smith farm in Jordan, for example, the farm manager hastened to discredit the strikers by pointing out that they were "foreign." According to "those in close touch with the affair," reported the *Globe*, the strike was not a mere "flare up" but was deliberately planned by outside agitators. Shortly after the strike broke out, the paper added, "two alleged agitators" believed to be from either Hamilton or Toronto, "arrived and addressed the strikers in a foreign tongue, later leading them in the singing of the Internationale." After all, editorialized the paper, E.D. Smith was noted for "its fairness to its employees, many of whom have been a lifetime in the company's employ." In fact, according to the Royal Commission on Price Spreads, E. D. Smith paid lower wages to its workers (with the exception of the most steadily employed ones in its jam factory) than any other employer in this sector.¹¹⁵

The Provincial Police rushed to the scene of the trouble and the strikers were fired. The police stayed on the next day, when the strikers were replaced by a group of pickers from the company's Winona farm. The strike-breakers reaped the benefit of the strikers' protest, when they were paid eight cents a basket, instead of the six cents paid before the strike.¹¹⁶

112. *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 5 July 1937.

113. "Striking Women Workers Erect Barricades," *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 15 June 1933.

114. "Cannery Workers – Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario," 1932/10, Microfilm reel 2763, vol. 353, file 139; "Cannery Workers – St. Catharines, Ontario, 1933/6, Microfilm reel 5-2765, vol. 355, file 54, Strike and Lockout files, Department of Labour, LAC.

115. *Report of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads*, Ottawa, 1935, 377.

116. *Globe*, 11 July 1935; 12 July 1935.

A Hungarian participant in the strike who was also a “worker correspondent” for the *Munkás*, F. Buday, concluded that only coordinated action by farm workers could improve their wages and working conditions. He urged other Hungarian immigrants to publicize any strikes in the region and to resist efforts to recruit them as strike-breakers.¹¹⁷ Although Niagara’s agricultural workers engaged in a number of other struggles to increase wages during the Great Depression, despite the CPC’s efforts they were unable to sustain the Agricultural Workers Union.¹¹⁸

VII

THE EXPANSION OF CANADA’S economy during World War II, as during World War I, once again led to serious labour shortages in the fruit and vegetable sector. According to C. E. Kidder of Canadian Cannerymen, women of foreign descent, who had earlier worked in Niagara’s canneries, refused to come back to their old places because their husbands and brothers were making such good wages in war production in factories that they no longer needed to work outside their homes. Kidder’s observation revealed how little he understood the economic situation of working-class women and families. As we have seen, the women who worked in the fruit and vegetable industry had done so because they and their families needed their wages. The war intensified such needs, when many men of non-British origin enlisted in the armed forces. Oblivious to such considerations, Kidder informed a journalist from the *St. Catharines Standard* of his disappointment at women’s refusal to work even after a representative of Canadian Cannerymen visited them to make a personal appeal.¹¹⁹ The resulting article elicited a letter from two female workers. Signing themselves “two willing workers,” the women explained that had wages for seasonal labourers kept up with the rising prices of canned foods, they would be more willing to work for eight or nine hours and then “come home and look after two or three children.”¹²⁰ Two weeks later another correspondent, signing her or himself as “a foreigner,” gave voice to immigrant and minority resentment at being relegated to cannery and farm work. “Who’s working of the women in the canning factories or the farms if it isn’t a foreigner?” “How many of you English,” the letter inquired, “are working in these places?”¹²¹

As during World War I, Niagara cannerymen and growers sought state assistance with recruiting seasonal agricultural workers. Their desire may have been encouraged by a new militancy among cannery workers. The employees

117. *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 25 July 1933.

118. *Kanadai Magyar Munkás*, 25 September 1934.

119. *St. Catharines Standard*, 3 September 1941.

120. *St. Catharines Standard*, 12 September 1941.

121. *St. Catharines Standard*, 27 September 1941.

of Campbell's Soups in Toronto, for example, many of whom were women of Ukrainian descent, showed such tenacity in demanding recognition of the United Packinghouse Workers that Ontario premier Mitchell Hepburn paid to bring busloads of tomato growers from Kent and Essex counties to Toronto, to process the tomato crops.¹²²

The Ontario Department of Labour responded to the employers' appeal by organizing the National War Service, in co-operation with the Department of Agriculture and Education and the Department of Labour in Ottawa. It reintroduced strategies that had worked well during World War I, such as recruiting high school girls to work in Niagara's fruit and vegetable industry by offering them credit on their high school exams if they stuck to their jobs in Niagara for eight weeks. It also relied on the YWCA to supervise Farm-Aid Camps which housed the workers.¹²³ YWCA employees took charge of some of the camps and ensured that young women were properly housed. Each camp also had a cook-supervisor, who ensured that the farmerettes were well-fed. Because Farm-Aid camps were neither numerous nor large enough to house all the farmerettes, the growers themselves also established private camps. These were smaller than the government camps. The farmers paid for equipment and supervision in these camps. When the two types of camps together proved unable to accommodate agricultural workers, either the growers themselves or their neighbours put the workers up in their homes.

By World War II, employers in Ontario's agricultural sector had learned that no matter how much they were willing to improve the conditions of employment in fields, orchards, packinghouses and canneries, English Canadian girls and women would be unwilling to make careers of such seasonal work. That recognition may explain why the recreational possibilities of Niagara's Farm-Aid Camps received more attention than farm work itself. Sometimes participation in the National War Service was described as "holidays without pay."¹²⁴ The educational benefits of seasonal agricultural work were also publicized: it would help develop a "real love for the soil," and a more "sane and wholesome outlook on life."¹²⁵ As during World War I, the farmerettes were incorporated into the communities where their housing was situated. On Saturday nights the farmerettes attended movies in town. Dances, or "frolics," held at local high schools for the farmerettes and farm cadets provided additional entertainment. In Winona pamphlets promoting seasonal agricultural work encouraged the farmerettes to attend local churches, and even to take over the duties of church choirs.¹²⁶ The selection of "farmerette of the week,"

122. Patrias, *Jobs and Justice*, 79.

123. *Hamilton Spectator*, 23 May 1941.

124. *Globe*, 15 July 1941.

125. *Globe*, 30 July 1941.

126. *Globe*, 18 July 1941.

and the crowning of “Miss Farmerettes” every summer in different parts of southern Ontario were new ways to celebrate female agricultural workers and encourage their continuing participation in food production.¹²⁷ Greater emphasis on symbolic, unpaid recognition for the women’s work may also have been the result of wide acknowledgement that volunteers were unlikely to find the work itself appealing. “Female alderman” Cuff, of St. Catharines, for example, expressed the need to acknowledge the farmerettes’ contributions to the war effort. Without giving a thought to the women who habitually worked in the fruit and vegetable industry, she maintained that only a deep sense of patriotism could offset the exhaustion caused by such work. She recalled from her own experiences during World War I, the hard work, insect bites, sunburn, and blisters that characterized seasonal agricultural employment in Niagara.¹²⁸

Despite the promotion of the non-monetary benefits of volunteers’ involvement, the Department of Labour sought in principle to ensure that the wages and working conditions of the National War Service were satisfactory. A special committee undertook to communicate sources of dissatisfaction from workers to growers and sought to settle difficulties. Growing acceptance that the state had a role in providing for the unemployed, moreover, influenced the government and employers in Niagara’s fruit and vegetable industry. Each year between 1942 and 1945 farmers contributed to an insurance fund to be used to cover the costs of housing and feeding seasonal workers during slack periods because of poor weather or insufficient crops. The Interdepartmental Committee even advised Ottawa to offer a bonus to farm workers so that they would not be tempted to abandon agricultural work for more lucrative jobs.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, each year from 1941 to 1945 National Service Workers demanded higher wages. On occasion, moreover, they did not hesitate to take advantage of the nation’s great need for their labour to strengthen their demands by striking.¹³⁰ As during World War I, English Canadian women were determined not to work for what they viewed as “slave” wages.¹³¹ When growers refused the workers’ demands, their crops were left to rot.¹³²

The new attempts at fairer compensation, however, did not succeed in attracting sufficient seasonal labour to tend, harvest and process Niagara’s crops during the war. Such efforts were seriously weakened by the continuing exclusion of agricultural workers from the protection afforded most other

127. See, for example, *Globe*, 27 July 1942; 28 July 1945.

128. *St. Catharines Standard*, 24 July 1942.

129. Minutes, January–November, 1942, Interdepartmental Committee on Farm Labour, Department of Labour, AO.

130. *Globe*, 24 July 1943.

131. *Globe and Mail*, 29 July 1943.

132. *Globe and Mail*, 24 July 1943.

workers by legislation recognizing their right to bargain collectively with their employers, during and after the war.¹³³

The state's decision to bring Japanese Canadians who had been expelled from the west coast to provide workers for the fruit and vegetable industry is indicative of the reluctance of other workers to take these jobs. As one of the government Placement Officers indicated, officials of the War Emergency Training Programme were well aware that racism was a key reason for the labour problems in this sector. They must have suspected, therefore, that Japanese Canadians were unlikely to be welcomed by Niagara residents. Meanwhile, officials in charge of finding jobs for Japanese Canadians east of the Rocky Mountains were also acutely conscious of the difficulties they would encounter. The officials acknowledged that these workers were being placed "in industries where we have found it utterly impossible to find suitable labour."¹³⁴ The vehemence of reactions in Niagara, despite the great shortage of labour, surpassed such conventional expectations. The reeve of Port Dalhousie threatened to drive Japanese Canadians off the town's pier into Lake Ontario.¹³⁵ In Beamsville, using the tactics of the Ku Klux Klan, a cross was burned on the lawn of a farm employing Japanese Canadians. Niagara residents invoked the threat of "unfair competition," an accusation levelled at Japanese Canadian fishermen and berry farmers in British Columbia for many years prior to World War II. Instead of welcoming the experience of some Japanese Canadians in fruit and vegetable production in British Columbia, locals felt threatened by it. "The presence of Japanese," some argued, "tends to lower the rate of wages and standard of living in the community." In the midst of war, such reasons for Japanese exclusion were at least as adamantly espoused as security considerations.¹³⁶

Like Indigenous workers, moreover, Japanese Canadians represented inchoate sexual danger to some Niagara residents. The protection of female workers – in this case the farmerettes – was one of the rationales offered for opposition to their placement in the region. "There's a farmerette camp on the Tregunno farm," pointed out Reeve Sheppard of Niagara Township to R. F. Clarke, manager of the St. Catharines office of the National Selective Service, "would you or I want our daughters at that camp?" Clarke responded that his daughter "went to school with Japs," and he would therefore not be opposed. Charles Daley, Ontario's Minister of Labour, who represented Lincoln in the Provincial Parliament, however, agreed with Sheppard. "I do not see how you

133. Tucker, "Farm Worker Exceptionalism," 37–38.

134. J. Macdonald, Japanese Placement Officer, Unemployment Insurance Commission, to A. MacNamara, Director, National Selective Service, 30 October 1943, Department of Labour, RG 27, vol. 6444, file 23-2-3-7-1, pt.1, LAC.

135. *St. Catharines Standard*, 11 May 1945.

136. *St. Catharines Standard*, 11 May 1945.

can put farmerettes on the same place with Japs even if you keep the camps apart. They'll be working together on the same farm."¹³⁷

Federal officials, who controlled Japanese movement and relocation during the war, must have assumed that the racism directed at Japanese Canadians and the constraints placed upon them by the state, would dissuade those newly-arrived in Niagara from protesting against the jobs they were assigned. In some instances, however, young Japanese Canadians became convinced that open resistance was their only way to escape agricultural labour. At one Niagara farm, Dick Ujiye, who had owned a dry cleaning business in Vancouver, was assigned to drive the fertilizer wagon. He decided that he was no farmer and talked with other Japanese Canadians about moving to the city. The conditions of the Japanese deportation from the B.C. coast, however, prohibited such a move. The RCMP sent an officer who spoke Japanese to check up on the Ujiye family because "they claimed that Dick was an agitator." The policeman reported Ujiye to the farm owner and he was fired. Now he was in a position to move to Toronto. Most of the other Japanese Canadians waited until restrictions on their movement were lifted at the end of the war to leave the Niagara Peninsula.¹³⁸

VIII

AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II, then, Niagara's canners and growers once again faced difficulties in finding seasonal workers. English Canadian women spurned seasonal agricultural work, not only because of the long hours, low wages, and seasonal nature, but also because racialized workers generally performed it. The derogation of minority workers degraded the work as well. Only the intense patriotism of World War I and World War II, combined with the state's active intervention, succeeded in overcoming the aversion of English Canadian women for a few years. Confident in their supposed racial superiority to "imported" workers who habitually performed this undesirable work, these "daughters of Canada" demanded improvements in housing, hours, and wages as the conditions for undertaking jobs in fields and canneries. Despite the costs that such improvements would entail, their employers, and the state officials who helped with labour recruitment, acceded to the women's demands because they felt ties and a sense of obligation to them. The desire to rid their communities of racially undesirable elements was even more important to them than economic gain. Anxiety about miscegenation, expressed by perceptions of Aboriginal women as sexually dangerous, was the sharpest indication of the apprehension that the presence of "imported" workers elicited among Niagara's English Canadian inhabitants. The gulf that divided

137. *St. Catharines Standard*, 11 May 1945.

138. Addie Kobayashi, *Exiles in Our Own Country: Japanese Canadians in Niagara* (Richmond Hill: Nikkei Network of Niagara, 1998), 58, 37.

this dominant group from racialized “others” was so deep that when very few English Canadian women were willing to engage in seasonal agricultural work, growers and canners did not think to recruit minority workers by extending to them the improvements that English Canadian workers demanded and obtained. Their unspoken assumption was that primitive housing, low wages, and long hours were appropriate for such racially inferior workers as immigrant women and Aboriginal families.

Because they had few alternatives, such racialized workers returned to Niagara farms and canneries during the interwar years. In those few instances when minority workers protested by striking for higher wages, shorter hours or better working conditions, their employers blamed such protest on “foreign agitators” and refused to negotiate with the workers. They expected “imported” workers to be tractable, and assumed that no Canadian activists would encourage them to protest against the conditions of their employment. Growers dismissed strikers, hired strike-breakers, and called for police intervention to keep them away. The seasonal or temporary engagement of workers in this type of agricultural labour discouraged efforts to establish labour organizations among them during World War II, when labour shortages combined with energetic organizational drives enlisted large numbers of formerly unorganized urban, industrial workers in labour unions. Even Niagara’s cannery workers, who were not excluded from labour standards legislation by the state, were neglected by unions which were among the most effective defenders of minority workers against discrimination. Small wonder then that when state officials, who recognized that “bigotry” was an important reason for the scarcity of agricultural labour during World War II, called on clergy to preach against it, their call was unheeded.

Left to their own devices, minority workers who could, withdrew from seasonal agricultural work. After the war, growers and canners, and the state acting on their behalf, were thus once again forced to seek new sources of labour. They turned to refugees and new immigrants who committed to working in agriculture to gain admission to Canada, but left such pursuits as soon as they could. Since the 1960s Niagara’s fruit and vegetable industry has relied on temporary foreign workers who are not free to move within the Canadian labour market to seek jobs advantageous for them. To ensure a reliable, cheap and compliant seasonal work force, their contracts tie them to specific employers in this sector.¹³⁹ Farm work is amongst “the most gendered and racialized occupations in Canada,” because it remains at the bottom of the occupational ladder and among the most dangerous types of work. Ironically, in contrast to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, seasonal farm work is today highly masculinized. Women from the global south who seek such employment face great obstacles, in part because they continue to be perceived as questionable mothers and as sexually available both in the sending

139. Vic Satzewich, *Racism and the Incorporation of Foreign Labour*.

countries and in migrant communities in Canada. Because they believe that women are suitable for only certain types of farm work, Canadian employers and civil servants place additional obstacles in their way.¹⁴⁰ In the absence of proper legal protection, migrant farm workers – both women and men – remain exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation and exclusion.

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140. Kerry Preibisch and Evelyn Encalada Grez, "The Other Side of *el Otro Lado*: Mexican Migrant Women and Labor Flexibility in Canadian Agriculture," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35, 2 (2010): 289–315.